

Spectres in storage: the colonial legacy of art museums

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In 1985, when I arrived in the United States to pursue graduate studies in Binghamton University, Donald Preziosi was in the process of formulating his discourse on the art museum. This thought kernel expanded into a lecture series that Preziosi delivered at Oxford University in 2001 and which was compiled into an influential, innovative, and poetic treatise titled *Brain of the Earth's Body. Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity*.¹ It is with intense nostalgia that I remember those graduate seminars with Preziosi, from seven to ten at night, in a class with five or six peers, listening to him systematically dismantle the edifice of art history through a Socratic mode of questioning. In each seminar Preziosi would introduce a concept, a series of images, or a case study that would position us, budding art historians, in an anamorphic relationship to the discipline of art history. We learned to crane our minds to elisions and assumptions, to be attentive to the frame rather than the center. Three decades hence there is a proliferation of museum studies programs in academia of which I am a participant. In my undergraduate course on the art museum, I try to bring a self-reflexive turn to the material, emulating Preziosi's seminars. For instance, when introducing the subject of museum ethics, I use a strategy of staging mock trials of specific controversies, those in which the colonial legacy of the museum resurfaces in the accusations leveled at one another by the contending parties. In the following paragraphs I discuss this pedagogical strategy and its intentions.

Some ethical issues facing art museums

Ethical questions dog all aspects of museum practice, from that of collecting to conservation to curating. These practices cannot easily be regulated because, as Barbara Hoffman observes, 'the art museum, a hybrid of charitable corporation and trust, presents truly singular problems for museum professionals and trustees.'² This complicated financial structure determines the responsibilities of museum personnel as well as the practices of the institution. What methods can educators

¹ Donald Preziosi, *Brain of the Earth's Body. Art, Museums and the Phantasms of Modernity*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

² Barbara T Hoffman, 'Law, Ethics and the Visual Arts: The Many Facets of Conflict of Interest', in Gail Levin and Elaine A. King, eds, *Ethics and the Visual Arts*, New York: Allworth Press, 2006, 255.

employ to engage students in an informed and productive debate about these practices?

Take the collecting practices of art museums, a topic that unfailingly generates much animated discussion in the classroom, particularly around controversies concerning the restitution and repatriation of objects. Scholars of museum studies note that the standards and ethics of western museums, in their relations with their counterparts in the developing world, are especially egregious in this area of institutional practice.³ For instance, André Malraux's name is familiar to students of art history as the individual who famously described the art history survey textbook as a 'museum without walls'. Students may be less familiar with Malraux's exploits as a young man. During a research trip in 1923 to study Khmer architecture in Cambodia, then a French colony, Malraux, in need of money, deliberately flouted laws prohibiting the disturbance of archeological sites by carving out stones from the Bantei-Srei temple near Angkor. He was arrested and made to hand over the loot⁴ to the French colonial government, but his misbehavior in the Orient did not obstruct his stellar rise in the world of high culture.⁵ Had Malraux despoiled a work of western antiquity, I am certain the repercussions to his career would have been more severe.

In this paper, I argue that the ethical imperatives and contemporary status of the art museum in western countries, as one of the principal keepers of public trust, is compromised by the colonial and imperial legacy of this institution. And I suggest ways in which the subject can be tackled in the classroom without compromising its complexity. The colonial enterprise proved a double-edged sword for western museums. Colonial domination provided western nations access, through warfare, wealth, or diplomatic privilege, to cull objects from all over the globe for their museums. Yet paradoxically, the accompanying ideology of colonialism instilled European notions of history, values about art, and concepts of the nation and modernity within colonized societies, thus laying the foundations upon which demands for the restitution and repatriation of historical and cultural objects have been, and continue to be, formulated in the post-colonial era.

³ Some examples include, Tom Freudenheim, 'Museum Collecting, Clear Title and the Ethics of Power', in Levin and King, *Ethics and the Visual Arts*; Andrew McClellan, 'Restitution and Repatriation', in *The Art Museum. From Boullée to Bilbao*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 233-68; and Saloni Mathur, *India by Design. Colonial History and Cultural Display*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.

⁴ The word 'loot' (from the Hindi term 'to steal') entered the English language during the colonial period. See Mathur, *India by Design*, 133.

⁵ Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 282.

The colonial past haunts the postcolonial present

To sensitize students about the complexities of restitution and repatriation, a subject that is complicated by the politics of imperialism and globalization, I assign teams of students to research specific controversies in which the colonial legacy of the museum resurfaced in the accusations leveled at one another by the contending parties. Below, I unpack one such controversy – between the Musée Guimet in Paris and the Bangladesh National Museum.

The Musée Guimet holds the preeminent collection of Asian art in France. Sometime between December 2007 and January 2008, the Musée Guimet's negotiations with the unpopular and non-democratic government of Bangladesh for the loan of some 300 national art treasures, for a large-scale exhibition in Paris, were terminated. The cancellation of a major exhibition, that had been approximately two to three years in planning, occurred in the wake of protests and acrimonious accusations from sections of the Bangladeshi public. This public, which included art historians, artists, some museum officials, and other members of Bangladesh's intellectual community, was one that was highly sensitized to colonial politics. For as Gayatri Spivak notes, through a history of 'decolonization from the British in 1947 and liberation from West Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh had to go through a double decolonization.'⁶

The public protest in Bangladesh was spurred by rumors that the finest examples of the small nation's artistic heritage, culled from five museums in that country, were to be transported overseas with paltry insurance coverage. The fact that some objects were of the terracotta medium and extremely fragile was further cause for agitation. Both the Bangladesh government bureaucrats at the National Museum and the personnel in the French embassy refused to engage the public in a dialogue to allay their fears and dissipate rumors. Instead, seeking to circumvent the increasingly vocal and visible groups of protestors, representatives of the two governments worked secretly to transport a shipment of objects at night, in vehicles disguised as commercial vans. One shipment of forty objects was flown to Paris. Before a second set of crates could be shipped, the protestors discovered the ruse and arrived at the scene. The art objects remained on the airport tarmac while the controversy brewed. The dramatic unfolding of events was of course avidly reported in the national and international media in both the formal and informal channels.⁷

⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Teaching for the times', in Bhikhu Parekh and Jan Nederveen Pieterse, eds, *The Decolonization of Imagination. Culture, Knowledge and Power*, London: Zed Books, 1995, 194.

⁷ The numerous news media online articles and blogs I accessed in May 2008 on the Bangladesh-Musée Guimet controversy are no longer functioning. The following are representative examples of these sites that have been archived and can currently be accessed. Joachim Bautze, 'Bangladesh highlighted at the Guimet Museum', Readers' Opinion, *News*

These media reports picked at the scab in the relations between formerly colonized nations and former colonial powers to expose an outpouring of rage, resentment, fear, and blame, festered by the trauma of colonization. The Bangladeshi argument was articulated in anti-colonialist rhetoric; the cavalier attitude of French officials smacked of their imperialist past. The damage to their reputation prompted officials at the Musée Guimet to cancel the show. The production of a 310-page catalogue publication for a non-existent exhibition represented a considerable financial loss for the museum, not to mention the futile investment of time and effort on the part of museum staff. The Musée Guimet threatened to sue the Bangladesh government for breaking their contract and initially obstructed the return of the forty objects that had been shipped before the show was cancelled. The rumour that the Musée Guimet's collection included many of objects of unknown provenance further exacerbated the anxiety of the Bangladeshi officials involved in the controversy. Those forty objects were only returned to Bangladesh a full year after the show's cancellation, in December 2008.

On the Bangladesh side, the losses were far greater: two rare and beautiful sculptures dating from c.600 CE were stolen while the crates of the second shipment waited on the airport tarmac for the stalemate between Paris and Dhaka to be resolved. These were later found at a site near the airport, smashed to pieces. A top level official from the Bangladesh Ministry of Culture resigned his post; several lower level employees associated with the transportation of the objects were fired; and the incident was responsible for one death, by massive stroke, of the Bangladesh ambassador to France who had been a strong proponent of the exhibition.

Imagining alternatives to the art museum institution

To analyze the volatile rhetoric in controversies such as the one described here, undergraduate students would have to become acquainted, through seminar readings and discussion, with the scholarly discourse generated by the terms, 'culture,' 'nation,' and 'post-colonialism'. But even prior to this, students would have to become knowledgeable about the history of art history and its twin, museology. Every few years the art history survey textbook becomes incrementally thicker as the panoptic eye of the discipline pulls into its purview hitherto hidden

From Bangladesh, 07 October 2007 <http://www.bangladesh-web.com/view.php?hidRecord=172547> ; Naeem Mohaiemen, 'Tintin in Bengal or Musée Guimet Controversy', *16 Beaver*, 03 December 2007 <http://16beavergroup.org/articles/2007/12/03/naeem-tintin-in-bengal-or-musee-guimet-controversy/> ; Othithi, 'FAQ on the Musée Guimet Controversy', *Rumiahmed Wordpress*, 18 October 2007 <https://rumiahmed.wordpress.com/2007/10/18/musee-guimet/> ; Olivia Sand, "Masterpieces from the Ganges Delta", *Asian Art. Newspaper for Collectors, Galleries and Museums*, 08 April 2012 <http://asianartnewspaper.com/article/masterpieces-ganges-delta>

cultural traditions or practices with the ‘imposition of a distinctly Eurocentric chronology’⁸ upon culture and history. In Preziosi’s words, ‘the brilliance of this colonization is quite breathtaking: there is no “artistic tradition” anywhere in the world which today is not fabricated through the historicism and essentialisms of European museology and museography, and (of course) in the very hands of the colonized themselves.’⁹ A fitting example is the exhibition catalogue for the cancelled Musée Guimet show that is comprised of an almost equal number of scholarly contributors from Bangladesh as from the international community.

In the following paragraphs, I briefly recapitulate some of the classroom discussion around terminology. The term ‘culture’, with reference to restitution and repatriation, provokes two questions: first, whether culture is circumscribed to material objects or whether it includes intellectual property as well (philosophical systems such as yoga, or styles of walking like that of the zoot-suiters of the 1920s), and second, ‘can culture be owned’? Advocates of cosmopolitanism, such as the philosopher Anthony Appiah, argue that, “a great deal of what people wish to protect as “cultural patrimony” was made before the modern system of nations came into being, by members of society that no longer exist.”¹⁰ And continuing in this vein, Appiah concludes: ‘... it is the value of cultural property to people and not to peoples that matters.’¹¹ Appiah advocates that we recast ourselves as ‘stewards’ rather than ‘owners’ of culture, with the understanding that good stewardship of culture requires deep appreciation based on knowledge and a relationship to objects that may be considered peculiar to those unfamiliar with the values of the society that produced the cultural item. The problem with Appiah’s universal humanism is that it depoliticizes culture. In an analysis of one of the most violent civil conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India in recent times, historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta shows that culture is all about desire and claiming ownership. The visual symbols of culture, or even mere legends about their existence, may arouse passions that justify acts of murder and destruction in their defense.¹² As Edward Said characterizes it, culture ‘is a source of identity and a rather combative one at that.’¹³ Note that this identity is not necessarily congruent with historical, ethnic, or religious affinities. In the Bangladesh case, the images in question were of Hindu deities but the passions expressed in their defense were by a Muslim population.

⁸ Preziosi, ‘The Museum of What You Shall Have Been’, in *Brain of the Earth’s Body*, 118.

⁹ Preziosi, ‘The Art of Art History’, in Donald Preziosi, ed, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 514.

¹⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, ‘Whose Culture Is It Anyway?’, in *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006, 119.

¹¹ Appiah, ‘Whose Culture’, 121.

¹² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ‘Archaeology and the Monument: An Embattled Site of History and Memory in Contemporary India,’ in Margaret Olin and Robert S. Nelson, eds, *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, 233-57.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, xiii.

The abstract concept of the 'nation' and the institutions it spawns arouses deep affinities in millions of individuals despite the fact that the nation has trampled, deformed, and cannibalized cultures and communities within its own boundaries and monopolized their resources. The uniformity in the heritage industries of nations throughout the world drives home Preziosi's point that 'art history makes colonial subjects of us all.'¹⁴ This drive toward sameness, when every country is required to establish museums and participate in heritage spectacles, requires great effort and expense in the production of ideological propaganda because the nation is essentially an artificial, arbitrary entity that needs to be shored up with symbols and invented traditions.¹⁵ Defenders of the nation state concept, however, argue that the boundaries of the nation afford some protection to weaker states from the encroachments and appropriations of stronger entities in the international arena.¹⁶

The term 'colonialism' implies a situation of economic and political hegemony sustained primarily through ideological and cultural domination. Over the long term, this situation may result in the devaluation, erasure, and reinterpretation of the culture of the colonized. 'Post-colonialism' interrogates colonial ideology, studying how it has structured and is shaped by current epistemological systems. Post-coloniality, therefore, 'is not a signal for an end to struggle, but rather a shifting of the struggle to the persistent register of decolonization.'¹⁷

My two objectives in helping students acquire some literacy about these terms are first, to articulate informed positions in the debates and controversies around the ownership of art objects – whether these cases date back to the nineteenth century, as in the Elgin marbles or whether they are recent, as in Bangladesh's demand for the return of objects from Musée Guimet. A second objective is to initiate the process of imagining alternatives to the art museum. Such a project would be particularly applicable to countries of the South where the institution of the museum is not yet entrenched and is unlikely to become so in the near future given the huge financial investments that underwrite their construction and maintenance.

In India, museums are throwbacks from the colonial era. My experience of working at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi in the early 1980s was that of a stifling government bureaucracy. Much has remained unchanged into the twenty-first century, as attested in an article, written in 2004, on art museums in

¹⁴ Preziosi, 'The Art of Art History', 514.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, ed, *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁶ Geeta Kapur, 'Globalization and Culture: Navigating the Void', in Masao Miyoshi and Fredric Jameson, eds, *The Cultures of Globalization*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998, 192.

¹⁷ Spivak, 'Teaching for the times', 188.

India by cultural critic, Rustom Bharucha.¹⁸ Although the weak presence of museums in a developing nation or a minority community may be viewed as a lack – signaling the underdeveloped status of the region – this very lack of a vibrant museum culture in countries of the South better positions them to imagine and realize alternatives to the art museum. With a 200-year-old history, the art museum institution in the West is an entrenched network of vested interests and hierarchies where, despite the vigorous institutional critique of museums that has been ongoing among the avant-garde artistic community since the 1920s and among scholars in the humanities since the 1990s, change can occur only at an incremental pace.

I argue that there is an ethical imperative for countries of the South to break out of the mould of the West's ghostly double by imagining alternatives to the art museum. Without a concerted effort to decolonize the imagination, the existing museum institution will merely replicate itself all over the world, the Louvre in Abu Dhabi being a good example of this phenomenon. Many of the cultural theorists who have contributed to the discourse on decolonization – Said, Spivak, and Kapur among others – advocate the necessity to reinvent Western disciplinary structures to accommodate alternative perspectives on culture, politics, and history. The task is not simple, given the high stakes of the heritage industry, and the solutions are not self-evident. As Said notes, the process requires 'inventive excavations'.¹⁹

What kinds of 'inventive excavations' can students in museum studies undertake in order to imagine alternatives to the art museum? I point them to the research of scholars such as James Clifford and Moira Simpson. In the early 1990s, Clifford compared and contrasted four Native American cultural institutions in the North-West region of the American continent. Two of these, a museum of art and an anthropology museum, adhered to the established paradigm of museum culture, whereas two alternative tribal museums focused on concerns of the local community, 'oppositional politics, kinship, ethnicity and tradition.'²⁰ Striking among the differences that Clifford noted between the two sets of museums were their modalities of historical narration. The art and anthropology museums covered a wide sweep of history of the native peoples and their colonization by white settlers. The tribal museums' narration was tethered to the perspectives of ancestors of community members. In the art and anthropology museums, objects were presented as possessing a universal aesthetic and historical value for humanity. In the tribal museums the significance of objects was connected to their function or their identification as the possessions (or former possessions) of families or groups

¹⁸ Rustom Bharucha, 'Beyond the Box: Problematizing the "New Asian Museum"', in Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera, eds, *Over Here. International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004, 124.

¹⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 312.

²⁰ James Clifford, 'Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections', in Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp, eds, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 225.

within the community. The administration of these museums differed as well, with the former employing professionals and the latter, members of the community who were invested in the histories and the objects. However, as Clifford warns, 'no one escapes the market, technology and the nation state.'²¹ Therefore, 'no purely local or oppositional stance is possible or desirable for minority institutions. On the other hand, majority status is resisted and undercut by local, traditional community attachments and aspirations', necessitating a 'constant tactical movement from margin to center and back again.'²²

Aboriginal communities in Australia as well have twisted the box of the museum to accommodate their cultural values. In the West, the art museum is a prominent participant and trendsetter in cultures of display, continually manipulating space and technology to increase public access to special objects of aesthetic and historical value. Aboriginal groups, however, are interested in restricting access to the objects and knowledge special to their communities. Simpson notes: 'the more sacred and significant an object, image or story, the more it is shrouded in secrecy.'²³ While preservation and conservation are pivotal to museum practice, aboriginal communities are unconcerned about preservation. Anthropological museums in Australia, in their obsessive drive to collect every aspect of Aboriginal culture, including human remains, have come to signify death among Aboriginal communities. Through the incorporation of performative media, including story-telling, music and dance, and the inclusion of commercial art centers, Aboriginal communities recast museums as places for the living rather than spectres of death.

In the Indian context, an example of an alternative to the mainstream art museum is the Jawahar Kala Kendra (named after independent India's first prime minister). The nine divisions in the plan of the art center include an open-air theater, a café, an art and craft gallery, a library, residences, studios, and museums. Designed by a celebrity Indian architect, Charles Correa, the art center charts a secular path between the patriotism of the nation state and the religious fundamentalism that is a constant undercurrent in Indian society. Correa's plan references the basic plan of north Indian temples as prescribed in ancient architectural manuals. It also references the distinctive urban layout of Jaipur that is comprised of nine square subdivisions with one square set at an angle to accommodate the geographical feature of a hillside against which the city was built. By incorporating history and religious tradition into his design for a secular place, Correa acknowledges the persistence of the past and the permeation of religion

²¹ Clifford, 'Four Northwest Coast Museums', 214.

²² Clifford, 'Four Northwest Coast Museums', 226.

²³ Moira G. Simpson, 'Revealing and Concealing: Museums, Objects and the Transmission of Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia', in Janet Marstine, ed, *New Museum Theory and Practice. An Introduction*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 155.

within modernity in India.²⁴ Unlike the government museums in India, which are dimly lit repositories for dusty relics, the art center, a place for dialogue and practice, is of and for the present. The Jawahar Kala Kendra responds to Bharucha's call: 'what we need is not a new museumization of museums, but a new socialization of its radical possibilities.'²⁵

The three examples introduced here present the museum as a fluid concept that constantly adapts to the needs of the communities it serves. To imagine further ethical alternatives to the museum, students would need to acquire a 'transnational literacy'²⁶ in the histories, traditions, and cultural values of specific communal or regional contexts. This, according to Geeta Kapur, 'is a pending hermeneutic task ... to go beyond the historicist argument and into an ethical imaginary — an ethics that does not become constraining law or institutional decree.'²⁷ The intent of this pedagogical approach to the subject of museum ethics is to aid in the decolonization of the imagination by encouraging students to rethink the function of the art museum in cultural life.

This rumination on museum ethics circles back to Preziosi's theory that every aspect of our existence in modernity is pervaded by a museum culture that is continually 'marking the world into the museological and the extra-museological.'²⁸ This marking is ideological, Preziosi explains, because it pivots the museological on a coalescence of aesthetics with ethics.²⁹ That is, the museum presents the objects it deems 'art' as the 'universal standard of measure ... of aesthetic progress and ethical and cognitive advancement.'³⁰ Simultaneously, artist subjects, as producers of these objects, are upheld as the 'paragon of all agency in the modern world.'³¹

The ideological apparatus of the museum in the post-colonial state expands the aesthetics-ethics relationship to include nationalism and religion.³² Therefore, within each societal context, this entanglement of aesthetics/nationalism and ethics/religion, must be identified, unraveled, and grasped fully so that a productive rethinking of the museum, both in terms of concept and design, is made possible. Preziosi's investigative writings on art history and museology provide the tools for

²⁴ Vikramaditya Prakash, 'Identity in Postcolonial Indian Architecture: Re-Covering What We Never Had', in G.B. Nalbantoglu and C.T. Wong, eds, *Postcolonial space(s)*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997.

²⁵ Bharucha, 'Beyond the Box', 133.

²⁶ Spivak, 'Teaching for the times', 193.

²⁷ Kapur, 'Globalization and Culture', 196.

²⁸ Donald Preziosi, 'Collecting/museums', in *In the Aftermath of Art. Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 58.

²⁹ 'In no small measure, the languages of aesthetics and ethics are virtually palimpsests of each other in the day-to-day enterprise of modernity'. Preziosi, 'Collecting/museums', 57-58.

³⁰ Donald Preziosi, 'The Art of Art History', in *In the Aftermath of Art*, 76.

³¹ Preziosi, 'The Art of Art History', 75.

³² Guha-Thakurta, 'Archaeology and the Monument'.

this operation, and thereby uncover the 'ethical content and import of our practice'³³ as art historians and museographers.

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³³ Donald Preziosi, 'Introduction: Subjects, objects and object lessons', in *In the Aftermath of Art*, 2.