Another Perspective

How Museums Define Other Cultures

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Toward the end of President Reagan’s tenure, the Miami News published a remarkable cartoon by Don Wright, which showed silhouettes of Ronald and Nancy Reagan in grass skirts dancing around what appears to be a sacrificial shrine (fig. 1). Ronald holds a goat over his head, Nancy a chicken in each hand. Ronald says, “What’s the astrologer say to do next, Nancy?” Answer: “Sacrifice the goat, singe the chickens and pound the lizard to powder!”

The cartoon’s images of the Reagans echo, quite deliberately, the popular imagery of the witch doctor. Herbert Ward’s 1890 Victorian travel book Five Years with Congo Cannibals contains a strikingly similar illustration, though drawn without the same satirical intent (fig. 2). It portrays a so-called witch doctor, similarly clothed in sketchy costume, dancing around a fire and holding over his head a fetish figure.

I do not suggest the cartoonist was copying Ward, but both draw upon a stock of deeply held and patently enduring cultural imagery about the “other”—the generalized conception of people on the losing side of the colonial and imperial encounter. Both the figures of the Reagans and the Ward witch doctor, for example, are depicted in classic ballet positions, a similarity that helps exemplify the paradox of representing the other: Difference can only be communicated in terms that are familiar.

Two strategies are used when representing other cultures or their works of art. Exoticizing showcases the differences between the cultural group being displayed and the cultural group doing the viewing, while assimilating highlights the similarities. Whether we are describing a text or an exhibition, otherness is either made strange by exoticizing or made familiar by assimilating.

In exoticizing, the differences of the other are portrayed as an absence of qualities the dominant, often colonizing, cultural groups possess. In the cartoon and engraving, three features of civilized man are missing in the witch doctor character: rationality, symbolic (as opposed to true) animal sacrifice, and an orderly bourgeois sense of propriety. Imagine what little effect the Miami News cartoon would have had if the Reagans were dressed in vestments and placed primly behind a lecturn with a holy book, “sacrificing” only bread and wine.

Both the editorial cartoon and the engraving represent so-called savages as controlled by emotions and unable to calculate rationally. Myth making here is not isolated from real life; it is part of the process whereby our beliefs about other people are shaped. Radio and television news, for example, report that black South Africans belong to tribes when they are in conflict with each other and to political parties when they dispute with the white regime. Likewise, journalists refer to the leaders of Columbia’s Medellin cartel of cocaine dealers as part of a clan of closely knit persons who act in concert. If the other is different from us, one feature of that difference is his identification with social groups that claim his loyalties in ways that impede rational calculation.
Conversely, otherness can also be positively valued. Recent writings about American Indians or definitions of Afrocentricity often romanticize minority and Third World cultures as possessing a less aggressive attitude toward nature and a more group-oriented attitude toward social life. Yet these assertions still embody a depressingly familiar set of beliefs: The other lacks the rationality of modern man, or the other's thought process is circular rather than linear. These images of the other are turned not so much on their head as on their side. Assigning positive values to the other may be novel, but the racial and ethnic stereotypes used to arrive at these conclusions are shockingly familiar.

The image of the other is derived not only from assertions about cultural differences. The use of a ballet pose to portray the Reagans and the African witch doctor was probably not consciously intended; neither was it accidental. Negative images need positive associations to make them work. If familiar devices were not used, the consumers of the image would have nothing onto which to graft cultural, racial, or ethnic differences. The politics of producing the image of the other requires a poetics of difference and similarity. The familiar becomes the bridge through which we understand the exotic.

While all museum exhibits draw on the resources of public culture and popular imagery to produce their effects, none draw on them more than exhibitions of the art and life of the other. And exhibits of exotic art and cultures are as much an arena of discourse about the other as editorial cartoons or travel books. However, because they draw on the authority of museums and the public's goodwill toward museums, exhibitions have a greater legitimacy than forms of popular culture defined as less highbrow. But all forms of communicating about the other use the organizing principles of difference and similarity to produce their imagery. Which of these opposing principles dominates an exhibition's account or image of a cultural other often determines how the other is perceived. Although recent scholarship describes the other as being represented primarily through difference, similarity can be—and often is—used to assert that the people of other cultures are no different in principle than the producers and consumers of their images. Striking differences can then be interpreted as mere surface manifestations of underlying similarities.

Exoticizing often works by inverting the familiar—showing how a well-known practice takes an inverted form among other peoples. The common belief that Africans practice
animism is an example. The anthropomorphic tendency of most Western religious belief is inverted, thus creating the notion that there is a class of people who worship beings created not in their own image, but in the image of nature. That such beliefs have never been documented in a non-Western religion has not stopped legions of writers from describing Africans as animists.

Assimilating strategies are less easy to read. They appeal to the audience's sense of the familiar and natural. They don't stop exhibit goers in their tracks with such thoughts as "What in the world is that?" Assimilating is inherently a more subtle exhibiting strategy than exoticizing. In the so-called primitive or tribal exhibits in fine art museums, art objects are usually isolated from any sort of context. Encased in a vitrine, they are provided with a label that reveals more about the collectors who donated them than about their maker, their iconography, or their history. The governing assumptions behind these displays are that primitive objects mysteriously embody the same aesthetics as modern art forms and that curators and museum audiences are able to appreciate such objects because they are the heirs to a familiar aesthetic tradition whose history encompasses the primitives who make primitive art. What they truly inherit is a capitalist world system that has acquired things from other peoples and transformed them into objects of modern art.

The controversial 1984 MOMA exhibition "Primitive in 20th Century Art" provides us with a classic example of the assimilating strategy. Objects were brought together either because they were known to provide models for modern artists or because they were known to exhibit perceived affinities. For William Rubin, the curator of the exhibition, affinities exist because artists working independently on similar formal problems arrive at similar solutions. This is a pure structuralist interpretation. Considerations of content, such as iconography, or questions about intention and purpose, such as the religious role of an object, or even the examination of the contexts of production and use are omitted as possible factors that influence the final form of the object. History is omitted from consideration. Objects are defined as the products of individuals who accidentally derive their work from a limited stock of available forms. The result is assimilating because cultural and historical differences are obliterated from the exhibiting
Rubin’s exhibit turns the African, American Indian, and Pacific makers of the objects displayed in his exhibition into modern artists who lack only the individual identity and history of modern art. Given the curator’s insistence that context is absolutely irrelevant to the exhibition of affinities between the primitive and the modern, the only place in history allowed for the artists of other cultures and their works is as a footnote to the development of art in the West.

Even Rubin’s decision to retain the word *primitivism* stirs controversy. The sense that so-called primitives are what we once were, our “contemporary ancestors” whose only history is our past, can hardly be avoided. The author Anthony Burgess defines primitivism as the “sense of a stumbling amateur striving towards a hard-won perfection and not quite achieving it.” No matter how Rubin chooses to define his terms, his methods of classification reveal the sense conveyed by Burgess’s definition.

Yet Rubin’s intention is not to exclude primitive artists from the history of art. He simply desires to place primitive aesthetics on a par with modernist aesthetics. In the end, however, he merely assimilates the aesthetics of other cultural traditions into a particular moment within his own tradition.

Other aesthetic traditions take shape in cultural settings outside of such art museums as MOMA. There are, for example, aesthetics that use political or religious criteria in judgments about what is good and bad. In some aesthetic traditions, the experience of viewing an object may be more than just a sensory reaction to the visual, just as aesthetic idioms may be applied to objects and actions normally excluded from the realm of museums.

If Rubin had chosen to examine how “tribal” artists and Picasso used similar forms in combination with other forms, or if he had inquired about how these objects were judged by their users and makers in the context of their creation, he would have produced a more textured and culturally diverse exhibition, while still remaining faithful to his project.

The Pompidou Center’s answer to MOMA’s “Primitivism” exhibition, the 1989 “Magiciens de la Terre” consisted of two entire halls of artworks derived from vastly different cultural traditions, yet the master narrative for the whole exhibition asserted a fundamental underlying similarity in spirit and intent among the producers of such disparate works of art. In this sense, the curators of “Magiciens de la Terre” did no better than the curator of “Primitivism.” By juxtaposing a work by Richard Long with a sand drawing by Australian aboriginal artists (figs. 3, 4), the curators conflated Long’s attempt to return to the elemental with the Australian re-creation of an alternative universe—the “dream time” in which the cultural world was wrested from nature. Given the audience’s lack of familiarity with Australian cosmology and art, the act of conflation becomes an act of assimilation: the Australian artists become echoes of Long. As Yogi Berra once said, “It’s *déjà vu* all over again.” There is, in effect, no substantial difference between the “Magiciens” exhibition’s juxtaposition of Long’s work with the Australian aborigines’ sand drawing and the “Primitivism” show’s juxtaposition of Kenneth Noland’s *Circle* painting with a New Guinea shield exhibiting concentric motifs (fig. 5).

Nevertheless, the curators of “Magiciens” could be seen as more egalitarian than the curator of “Primitivism.” They deny that Third World artists and contemporary artists differ in self-consciousness. All, in their view, are equally conscious about the sources and meanings of the art they create; perhaps it would be fairer to say that all are equally naive about the magical and elemental sources of their art. The cost of this egalitarian strategy of assimilation, however, is the elimination of cultural context, motives, and resources from the record.

All exhibitions, in fact all representations of the other, simultaneously exoticize and assimilate, but some museums often emphasize both exhibiting devices within the same
setting. The history of the Smithsonian Institution illustrates this in a grand manner. The National Museum of American History was originally developed out of the National Museum, which was a museum of natural history. Unintentionally but nevertheless palpably, the Smithsonian maintains a nineteenth-century evolutionist distinction between modern cultures and those cultures that are best known and exhibited as part of nature. The latter, primarily American Indians and peoples of the Third World, are then subject to the interpretations and procedures of natural history scholars. In contrast, white middle-class Americans are defined as possessing science and technology and as having cultural and social history exempting them from a similar examination in terms of natural history.

No genre of museum has been able to escape the problems of exoticizing and assimilating inherent in exhibiting other cultures. That includes museums that restrict themselves to examining diversity within their own societies. The same museums that make the products of others into a minor digression in the history of modern art also treat the art and artists of their own traditions the same way. What happens to an artist who moves outside of the Paris–New York orbit? How do so-called "regional" traditions get created in the stories curators tell in exhibitions? Cultural centers and peripheries are determined by museums, not by nature. The only hope is to develop more reflective exhibitions that question their own assumptions. This would have its parallel in the new research in anthropology and history, in what is coming to be called the "History of the Other" or the "Anthropology of the Imaginary," which is less about the examination of people's everyday lives than an examination of how images and ideas about imaginary and unknown worlds come to appear real and even effect what is real. This new field demonstrates how the image of the other is formed partly from images of class, ethnicity, and gender in Western cultures, partly from negation and inversion of Western self-images, and partly from images transmitted by explorers, colonials, and other occupants of cultural and imperial frontiers.

The solution will not be to invent new tropes of representation or new exhibiting devices for museum displays. Every venture into the unknown is based on an analogy with the known. Exoticizing and assimilating are all we have to reach out to the unknown. At best, they enable us to approximate other experiences and to appreciate new forms of art; at worst, they prevent us from truly learning about other cultures and their works of art. The error is not in using these strategies, but in failing to reflect on our own work when making analogies with the other and in treating our works as if they were naturally occurring—as if they did not also carry the unacknowledged baggage of other associations.

Notes

This column is developed from material originally published by the author in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). I want to thank Joanne Berelowitz, Corinne Kratz, Robert Leopold, Steven Lavine, Mary Jo Arnoldi, and Sue Warga for their comments.

1 See, for example, the essays in *Writing Culture*, ed. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). For an excellent account of how European travel writing about the other uses imagery that defines cultures as primitive by reducing them to nature, see Mary Louise Pratt's essay "Scratches on the face of the Land; Or what Mr. Barrow saw among the Bushmen."

2 I differ from the account of how the other is constructed in Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Said stresses the negation of the imputed qualities of the West, while I emphasize the mutual dependence of the tropes of similarity and difference in the construction of any image of the other. I use similarity to refer to what other authors term identity, though both identity and similarity are asserted in the strategy of assimilation, discussed in note 5.


4 For an insightful account of how the identity of the collector tends to dominate the presentation of primitive arts in fine art museums, see Price.

5 My account of Rubin's interpretation of primitive artists shows why I prefer to use the term similarity rather than identity. Even assimilating strategies conclude that similarity, not identity, is modified by critical differences. Rubin's primitive artists, however, are "identical" to modern artists except for those features of modern art they do not have. Thus, his initial assertion of identity concludes with a declaration of difference.


10 The National Museum of American History now includes exhibits on ethnic and racial groups, but it still exhibits them in terms of the master narrative of American history. For example, exhibitions on such topics as black migration and the internment of the Japanese define these people in terms of their relationship to the dominant groups in American society. Moreover, by locating their cultural origins in the National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian presents the message that these groups have escaped from inferior cultural status through migration to the United States.

   The establishment of the Museum of the American Indian does not solve the problem posed by the hierarchy of representations of cultures at the Smithsonian Institution. The master narrative of the museums still asserts the domination of nature over some cultures. The emphasis on fine art in the National Museum of African Art and on the collection in what will be the National Museum of the American Indian only serves to underscore how the aesthetics and history of the dominant culture define the missions of these museums.