

Interpreting Hybridity: A Decolonizing Analysis of Museum Interpretation Strategies

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to determine the ways in which museums engage in decolonizing practices through their interpretation of hybrid material culture. A case-study based design was implemented in order to explore the interpretive methods of hybrid materials in exhibitions across two institutions. Semi-structured interviews with staff and a document analysis of online exhibition materials presented the qualitative data for analysis. The findings delineate that within the given case studies, hybrid materials are prevalent and the interpretive strategies surrounding them are just as diverse. These interpretive strategies include shifting vocabulary, live-interpretation and comparison-based presentation. This study builds upon decolonization-based literature and offers additional insights for museums pursuing the goal of decolonizing their spaces. Such work aids in combining the theories of museology and material culture theory through a decolonizing lens. This research is limited in scope given minimal literature that bridges hybridity and decolonization, the diverse missions and values instituted by museums towards decolonization and the inherent specificity of a case-study design.

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

*No one today is purely **one** thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.* – Edward Said¹

Said's quote communicates the inherent malleability and transience of cultural identity. This concept of identifying with multiple social and cultural markers proves personal for Said being that he was born in Jerusalem, raised as a devout Palestinian Christian, educated in British and American schools in Cairo and later worked as a literary critic of Western culture, thus constantly situating himself within the liminal boundaries of national and cultural identifiers.²

James Cuno evokes the life and work of Said in his text, *Who Owns Antiquity*, in order to delineate the relationship between cultural identity and archaeological materials. Cuno notes that identity is not static but rather akin to a set of flowing "currents", continuously mixing and overlapping.³ As such, surface level markers like national affiliations are simply a starting point to begin to understand an individual as opposed to a summarizing endpoint. Cuno expands this viewpoint by stating, "Culture is not a homogenous attribute, nor is it static. It perforce interacts with other determinants of social perception and action."⁴ The counter-perspective of this flowing model of personal identification is the rigid proclivity to align oneself along national boundaries. Contrary to both Cuno and Said's beliefs, national identity represents a narrow vision of society that opposes globalization and cosmopolitanism. The rigidity and

¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1993). 336

² James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 121.

³ Cuno, 122.

⁴ Cuno, 136.

shortsightedness of national identification is emboldened by its intangible nature.⁵ Cuno introduces the ideology of Benedict Anderson to explain this view. Anderson claims that nationalism is imagined being that it represents a romantic idealized concept that, despite not knowing every individual in a given country, one is bound to the other based solely on the idea that they share the same citizenship status.⁶ Because of this, nationalism itself poses a problematic model for attempting to understand the identity of a particular person or object as national ideals are merely a representation of the idealized vision of the hegemonic structure in a given locality. Nevertheless, such forms of personal identification remain an integral facet in how individuals view one another through ideological lines and surface-level identifiers.⁷

News sources regularly report on the ever-growing division and social compartmentalization that continues to proliferate in society. For example, Grace Sparks of CNN edited a piece in 2019 that explored the growing partisan divide between United States citizens. She stated, “Polling shows that the US is as divided on party lines as it’s ever been [...] Only 6% of Americans think the divisions will decrease, and the divisions aren’t just skin-deep.”⁸ Sparks’s statement is not just a contemporary one but rather represents a sentiment that was present in 2016 through a jointly authored article by Joel Achenbach and Clement Scott of the Washington Post. In a piece titled “America is really more divided than ever,” the two authors related national identity to the concept of *cultural cognition* which indicates “that people are tribal when it comes to certain issues, such as climate change, gun control, abortion and evolution. People

⁵ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 130.

⁶ Cuno, 130.

⁷ “Why Identity Matters”, (The Critical Media Project, 2017-2020) Accessed March 2020, <https://criticalmediaproject.org/why-identity-matters/>

⁸ Grace Sparks, “The country is as divided as it’s been in recent history. Impeachment will likely make it worse”, (CNN, 2019), <https://www.wptv.com/news/national/the-country-is-as-divided-as-its-been-in-recent-history-impeachment-will-likely-make-it-worse> Accessed August 2019.

tend to trust the news sources that confirm their beliefs. Those beliefs become statements of identity and community loyalty.”⁹ Social theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx define this as a form of *social alienation*, i.e. a “condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment.”¹⁰ In doing so, individuals often limit their exposure to differing ideologies. This is most evident in constructs such as bi-partisan politics, ideas of racial superiority and xenophobic othering.¹¹

Museum visitors face this complex landscape of social identity each time they enter a museum as various identities are on display at any given time. As public institutions, museums carry the expectation of providing an equal experience to all visitors. Mike Murawski (former Director for Public Programs and Education at the Portland Art Museum) communicates however, that this public status is often conflated with being “above the political and social issues that affect our lives — embracing a myth of neutrality.”¹² Conversely, Murawski propagates that museums are not neutral and have the potential to be “socially-engaged spaces in our communities, acting as agents of positive change.”¹³ Every decision that leads to the development of interpretive displays and exhibitions thus comes with insight into the mission

⁹ Joel Achenbach and Clement Scott, “America is really more divided than ever”. (The Washington Post, 2016). https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/america-really-is-more-divided-than-ever/2016/07/17/fbfebec6-49d8-11e6-90a8-fb84201e0645_story.html Accessed August 2019.

¹⁰ Robert Ankony, “The Impact of Perceived Alienation on Police Officers’ Sense of Mastery and Subsequent Motivation for Proactive Enforcement”(Dr. Robert Ankony, 2015). <https://www.robertankony.com/publications/impact-perceived> Accessed May 2019.

¹¹ “Why Identity Matters”, (The Critical Media Project, 2017-2020) Accessed March 2020, <https://criticalmediaproject.org/why-identity-matters/>

¹² Mike Murawski, “Museums are not Neutral”. (Art Museum Teaching, 2017). <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2017/08/31/museums-are-not-neutral/> Accessed May 2019.

¹³ Murawski, n.p.

and values of a museum. Cuno's work adheres to this stance as he notes, "Separating out any one determinant [of cultural information] is a choice, a statement of one's priorities in determining one's own identity, and of course determining the culture – and limitations – of another's."¹⁴

Many museums have objects that embody the connections between cultures, and thus multiple identities, in the form of hybrid material culture.

One may look to Salman Rushdie's text, *Satanic Verses*, to gain a broader understanding of the intermixing between cultures. Rushdie's work explores the so-called satanic verses in Quranic scholarship. These verses center around the prophet Mohammad's instruction to revere three pre-Islamic goddesses in addition to Allah.¹⁵ Rushdie's work constructs an entire novel of this encounter, which he describes as celebrating,

hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. M \acute{e} lange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it.¹⁶

Although Rushdie describes a piece of literature, he communicates the artistic potential that is made possible when humans cross paths.¹⁷ Intermixing and hybridization, however, are not always embraced; so much so that certain Islamic scholars issued varying *fatwas*, Islamic legal opinions, against Rushdie as orthodox Islam deems these verses to be influenced by the devil, thus attributing the namesake satanic.¹⁸ Cuno argues that, while such situations may be widely contested, historical accounts of human interactions are vital to understanding the diachronic exchange of cultural ideas, traditions and artistic forms. He states, "Works of art are

¹⁴ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 136.

¹⁵ Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses". (Brill. Studia Islamica) No. 87 (1998), 69.

¹⁶ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 142.

¹⁷ Cuno, 141.

¹⁸ Cuno, 141.

made from encounters with new and startling things, and they encourage us to see further associations and to explore their implications. That is the nature of culture.”¹⁹ The art developed in these situations are often, as Rushdie described, intermingled and hybridized, thus offering a physical representation of cultural exchange.²⁰

Museums such as the Brooklyn Museum in New York possess a wealth of collections that fall into this description of hybrid material culture, specifically, in the form of statuary from the Hellenistic period throughout the Mediterranean.²¹ Through the descriptions on their online catalogue, the Brooklyn Museum offers the following information of an unidentified diorite head of an Egyptian official:



Figure 1.1 *Head of an Egyptian Official*, ca. 50 B.C.E. Diorite, 16 5/16 x 11 1/4 x 13 7/8 in. (41.4 x 28.5 x 35.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 58.30. Creative Commons-BY (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 58.30_SL1.jpg)

During the Ptolemaic Period (332–30 B.C.), when Egypt was ruled by a family of Greek descent named Ptolemy, large numbers of Greeks moved to Egypt, where many served as government officials. We cannot know, therefore, whether this striking head, from an

¹⁹ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 141.

²⁰ Cuno, 142.

²¹“Collection: Egyptian, Classical, Ancient Near Eastern Art”, The Brooklyn Museum <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/collections/5>, Accessed May 2019.

over-life-size statue, represented a Greek or a native Egyptian, especially since its striking features are a blend of Egyptian and Greek styles. The short curls, for example, are a simplified rendering of a Greek hairdo, and the large, deep-set eyes derive from images of Alexander the Great. But the facial modeling, with its folds and furrows, has many precedents in Egyptian art, as does the narrow, sharply outlined mouth. We may see here the beginning of a mixed Greco-Egyptian style, which was soon to disappear when the Romans conquered Egypt.²²

The Brooklyn Museum's approach to interpretation communicates the historical context that led to the development of this artifact, an acknowledgement of the difficulty in discerning the cultural identity of the figure and insight into the standard artistic typologies for both regions and how the two have combined.²³ Understanding that such materials and interpretive strategies are not confined to the Brooklyn Museum, the question stands: in what ways can museums as a whole acknowledge multiple cultural influences in hybrid material culture?

When speaking of sharing authority in museums and the strategies that engage or acknowledge multiple audiences, one must consider the role of decolonization in the museological field. According to TrendsWatch 2019, an edited text developed by the Center for the Future of Museums (a project of the American Alliance of Museums), decolonization is “the long, slow, painful, and imperfect process of undoing some of the damage inflicted by colonial practices that remain deeply embedded in our culture, politics, and economies.”²⁴ This definition operates under the understanding that museums are inherently colonial constructs, being institutions developed on a European model that disenfranchised other localities.²⁵

To combat this reality, the same entity offers the following piece of advice, “Take the lead in truth-telling, even absent national action for truth and reconciliation, by prioritizing

²²“Head of an Egyptian Official”, The Brooklyn Museum, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3647> Accessed March 2019.

²³ The Brooklyn Museum, n.p.

²⁴ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

²⁵ Center for the Future of Museums, n.p

underrepresented history, art, and culture, and including marginalized and absent voices.”²⁶ In regards to collections of hybrid art, this mode of *truth-telling* presents itself in the acknowledgement that multiple cultures are represented and offers the context in which they were in contact. By intentionally, or unintentionally, failing to recognize or highlight the artistic work and influence of certain societies, museums stand at risk of excluding communities that took part in creating the pieces that they exhibit in their spaces. Exclusion in this manner perpetuates colonialist ideologies that disenfranchise communities who are not traditionally favored by the hegemonic powers in society. Said’s works explain the necessity to dismantle these ideological constructs and replace them with concrete facts in human history.²⁷

In short, interpretation in museums matters. Each interpretative element of an exhibition is the result of a specific decision made by museum staff which collectively opposes the alleged notion that museums are neutral localities. Museums can harness their interpretive authority to participate in decolonizing practices. In the context of hybrid material culture, museums may take part in acknowledging the connections between cultures as they are manifested in the items on display. This study is thus situated within ongoing conversations in the museology field that explore colonialist mechanisms within the fabric of museums and the modes in which traces of such historical practices are still in place today. Therefore, a decolonizing lens is employed to uncover, analyze, and discuss the treatment of hybrid material culture in museums. Such work aims to connect bodies of literature between decolonization in museums and hybridized material culture as minimal research bridges these ideas.

²⁶ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

²⁷ James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008) 142.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the ways in which museums engage in decolonizing practices through their interpretation of hybrid material culture.

Research Questions

1. How is hybrid material culture commonly displayed in exhibition spaces?
2. Is such a display in line with subsequent forms of art and archaeology, or is a different methodology employed?
3. To what degree do museums delineate each participating community when noting the creation of hybrid material culture?
4. How can museums develop interpretive strategies that honor hybridized material culture?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study engages with hybrid material culture theory, museum interpretation and current literature discussing inclusive practices in museums in order to determine what constitutes a decolonizing practice in relation to hybrid material culture. As such, multiple disciplines are employed: anthropology, art history and museology, in an effort to holistically engage with the subject of hybridity in museums. Each school of literature aids in providing a framework for understanding and analyzing the role of hybrid material culture in museums today and the modes in which museums may utilize such materials to foster intercultural dialogue to an increasingly diverse range of guests and thus engage with the concept of decolonization.

Decolonizing the Museum

TrendsWatch 2019 classified decolonization as one of the five rising issues in museums.²⁸ The act of decolonization is a response to the inherent existence of colonial structures, by-products of colonial practices, within the museological institution.²⁹ According to the Center for the Future of Museums, “Colonialism is embedded in the collections—in what museums chose to collect, how it was acquired, how it was documented—and in our methods of classification, display, and education. Museums are complicit in colonizers’ continuing control over how the world sees Indigenous people, and what Indigenous people know of themselves and their culture.”³⁰ Furthermore, disenfranchising authorities and hegemonic structures are not limited to history but also contemporary practices as, “[...] colonialism is still at work as corporations and governments extract resources from Native lands and exploit Native lifeways.

²⁸ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

²⁹ Center for the Future of Museums, n.p.

³⁰ Center for the Future of Museums, n.p..

Nations populated by settler colonialism struggle with how to build a society that includes justice for Indigenous people.”³¹ As museums are deeply embedded within colonial structures, they are thus tasked with combating these issues given their cultural role as memory keepers in society.³² The Center for the Future of Museums states, “Museums can help us deal with the dark side of history, not just emotionally and personally, but in a way that helps us build a just and equitable society despite our legacy of theft and violence.”³³ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, a vanguard in advocating for museum decolonization, offers strategies for combating these issues on the local level.

Catlin-Legutko defines decolonization in her 2016 TEDxDirigo talk stating, “Decolonization means, at minimum, sharing governance structures and authority for the documentation and interpretation of Native culture.”³⁴ While her definition particularly reflects the Native American community in and around Bar Harbor, Maine, the location of the Abbe Museum where Catlin-Legutko served as the president and CEO, her definition may be situated in any institution that grapples with issues of colonialism, in both historic and contemporary renditions.³⁵ The continuation of normalized narratives and sanitizing histories out of convenience disenfranchises those who are marginalized by colonial practices and subsequently violates the principal ethics attributed to museums to be stewards of cultural material and historical information.³⁶ Catlin-Legutko finds that by sharing the authority of objects, we may

³¹ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

³² Center for the Future of Museums, n.p.

³³ Center for the Future of Museums, n.p.

³⁴ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, “We Must Decolonize our Museums”, The Abbe Museum, <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/we-must-decolonize-our-museums/>, Accessed May 2019.

³⁵ Catlin-Legutko, n.p.

³⁶ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

take part in decolonizing practices.³⁷ A component of sharing authority is allowing stories and narratives that have been told for centuries to gain additional perspectives from historically marginalized parties.³⁸

Organizations such as “Decolonize this Place” followed Catlin-Legutko’s precedent and demanded that museums across the country use their agency to take action against colonial authorities through acts such as repatriating materials that belong to Native communities from museums.³⁹ Decolonizing practices are not limited to the United States, but rather are enacted transnationally.

Alice Procter, an Australian art historian, launched “Uncomfortable Art Tours” in 2013 to directly combat the issue of privileged story-telling.⁴⁰ Throughout her museum tours, Procter specifically highlights the racist narratives that aided in the construction and development of European ideologies and institutions.⁴¹ Procter’s stories delineate the nefarious realities of prominent European figures throughout history and force visitors on her tours to reevaluate the perceptions that they may have for said figures. According to Procter, “It is no longer possible for Britain to present itself as a world power, and people aren’t willing to pretend anymore...They are interested in the stories that aren’t being told.”⁴² This relates to Catlin-

³⁷ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, “We Must Decolonize our Museums”, The Abbe Museum, <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/we-must-decolonize-our-museums/>, Accessed May 2019.

³⁸ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, “We Must Decolonize our Museums”, The Abbe Museum, <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/we-must-decolonize-our-museums/>, Accessed May 2019.

³⁹ “Faxxx”, Decolonize This Place, <https://decolonizethisplace.org/faxxx-1>, Accessed May 2019

⁴⁰ Aditya Iyer, “Alternative museum tours explore colonial loot, biased narratives”, (Aljazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/alternative-museum-tours-explore-colonial-loot-biased-narratives-180915213140176.html>

Accessed May 2019.

⁴¹ Iyer, n.p.

⁴² Iyer, n.p.

Legutko's call for sharing authority and *truth-telling* within museums.⁴³ According to Procter, assuming that Europe was not built on racist practices is falsifying the true historical narrative of disenfranchising colonial practices.⁴⁴ Referencing the supposed neutrality of museums, Procter states, "While museums continue to argue that they are neutral spaces, the fact is that they are not. There is always one side of the story that has been privileged over the other in these spaces, and we need to be more honest and open about that."⁴⁵ While Procter's methodology and incorporation of decolonizing practices may be resituated to other institutions, any starting point to a decolonization strategy should begin with an institution's mission, vision, values and understanding of their collections, audience and stakeholders.⁴⁶

Traveling Culture

As this study focuses on the hybrid conglomeration of cultural motifs, it is appropriate to preface this work with an exploration of literature that describes the manners in which culture travels. James Clifford's text, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, explores this notion of travelling culture. Clifford's work redefines the traditional methodologies of conducting anthropological fieldwork, arguing for an understanding of culture through viewing human interactions as opposed to conducting an extended stay in one particular society.⁴⁷ This model presumes that humans inherently oppose stagnation through everyday

⁴³ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, "We Must Decolonize our Museums", The Abbe Museum, <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/we-must-decolonize-our-museums/>, Accessed May 2019.

⁴⁴ Aditya Iyer, "Alternative museum tours explore colonial loot, biased narratives", (Aljazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/alternative-museum-tours-explore-colonial-loot-biased-narratives-180915213140176.html>

Accessed May 2019.

⁴⁵ Iyer, n.p.

⁴⁶ "Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization", Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

⁴⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997), 1-13.

encounters of travel and interactions with one another.⁴⁸ As such, the manner in which anthropologists and social scientists seek to unpack cultural typologies should be just as organic.⁴⁹ Clifford provides a visual metaphor for his theory through the construction of his text as he relies on a postmodernist collage to intricately tie varying media together, juxtaposing the differing representations of human interaction in a literary format.⁵⁰ This collection of interviews, speeches and short stories forms an alternative perspective to anthropological inquiry by incorporating media that is not intrinsic to the discipline.⁵¹

Clifford's work is primarily concerned with "human difference articulated in displacement, tangled cultural experiences, structures and possibilities of an increasingly connected, but not homogenous, world."⁵² Such instances of human diversity and cultural nuance are present in what Clifford presents as *contact zones*.⁵³ Briefly, contact zones relate to the interactions of human travel, interactions and experiences.⁵⁴ For further context, Clifford looks to Mary Louise Pratt's text *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation*, where she defines contact zones as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict."⁵⁵ It is within such contact zones that hybrid material culture originates as hybridized objects presume previous interactions between individuals and societies from at least two different cultures.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997), 2.

⁴⁹ Clifford, 1-13.

⁵⁰ Clifford, 12.

⁵¹ Clifford, 8.

⁵² Clifford, 2.

⁵³ Clifford, 8.

⁵⁴ Clifford, 1-13

⁵⁵ Clifford, 192.

⁵⁶ Clifford, 7.

When discussing contact between cultures it is important to note that such interactions are not always the result of peaceful human displays of cultural curiosity. As seen in Pratt's definition of contact zones, hybridity may result from inequitable acts of forced migration of one population to another.⁵⁷ As such, hybridity may often represent a contested history of social interactions and thus must be communicated and discussed appropriately.⁵⁸ Clifford notes the difficulty of achieving this balance through the historical terminology employed when discussing this concept. He finds that terms such as acculturation simply refer to a linear trajectory of cultures (Culture A + Culture B = A and B).⁵⁹ Subsequently, the more popular term, syncretism, may give the illusion that two differing cultures are merely transposed over the other equally (Culture A + Culture B = AB).⁶⁰

Museums are key players in propagating the existence of hybridized cultures. Clifford sees museums as contact zones since they inherently present an array of cultures under one roof, thus facilitating diverse interactions for each visitor as they navigate through gallery spaces.⁶¹ Nevertheless, museums have not always lived up to this responsibility and have historically gained the title as a conflict zone instead.⁶²

Early museum displays often relied on the exploitation of those beyond the reach of the hegemonic structure in society, i.e. othered minorities and indigenous peoples.⁶³ Museums continue to wrestle with their contested pasts as descendent communities increasingly call for repatriation from the historical colonial collection and plunder of the material culture from

⁵⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997), 192.

⁵⁸ Clifford, 7.

⁵⁹ Clifford, 7.

⁶⁰ Clifford, 7.

⁶¹ Clifford, 215.

⁶² Clifford, 207.

⁶³ Clifford, 197.

disenfranchised groups across the globe.⁶⁴ As such, there is an increased pressure for museums to facilitate the needs and desires of their diverse communities to appropriately care for and serve as stewards for the materials in their collections.⁶⁵

Clifford's work presents a relationship between the organizational structures of museums and visitors as the gathering of diverse audiences and the museum's facilitation of cultural discovery each foster an increased awareness of cultural phenomena through the contact of differing lifeways, traditions and material forms. Museums, thus, represent a liminal, yet unique locality as they, like their collections, represent an array of identities.⁶⁶ Being both local and global contact zones, museums, from Clifford's perspective, are "sites of identity-making and transculturation [and] epitomize the ambiguous future of 'cultural' difference."⁶⁷

Interpreting Hybridity

In order to understand the treatment of hybridized art in museums, a brief exploration of material culture theory is warranted in efforts to delineate how social theorists parse and analyze material culture. This constructs a foundation for understanding the manners in which museums may interpret these materials to a public audience.

Christopher Tilley is a leading figure in defining material culture theory and understanding how objects shape the world around us. In his edited volume, *Handbook of Material Culture*, Tilley explicates the shifting fashions in which objects become a piece of human cultures. Tilley opens his text by noting the importance of studying material culture as it

⁶⁴ "Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization", Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

⁶⁵ Center for the Future of Museums, n.p.

⁶⁶ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997), 219.

⁶⁷ Clifford, 219.

is rooted in nearly all forms of human cultural activity.⁶⁸ Tilley finds that material culture is primarily concerned with how “persons make things and things make persons,” thus communicating an inextricable link between objects and their subjects, as either the creator or viewer.⁶⁹

Linda M. Hurcombe expands on this definition in her work, *Archaeological Artifacts as Material Culture*, particularly in terms of the relationship between the object and the individual.

She states,

Material culture is thus a set of social relationships between people and things, and above all it is a way of communicating as well as enabling. [...] If words are about verbal communication, material culture is about non-verbal communication. It is that aspect which allows objects of material culture to communicate information about the past activities and lifestyles of individuals and communities even down to their way of thought.⁷⁰

In terms of the specific information that is communicated, Hurcombe notes that material culture “reveals our spending power, it reinforces our sense of gender and age group, it emphasizes the cultural affiliations we hold, and sets them out for people to see our social status.”⁷¹ Both Tilley and Hurcombe acknowledge that objects become imbued with the characteristics and values of those that make them. In relation to hybridized material culture, this logic assumes that multiple perspectives, identities and values are imbued into one object.

Matthew Liebmann, Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University, defines hybrid material culture as “the amalgamation of influences from two (or more) different cultural groups.”⁷² As such, hybrid objects depict the existence of two or more cultures through varying

⁶⁸ Tilley et al., *Collectors and Collecting. Handbook of Material Culture*, (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 2.

⁶⁹ Tilley et al., 2.

⁷⁰ Linda M. Hurcombe, *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture*, (London, Routledge, 2007), 7.

⁷¹ Hurcombe, 3.

⁷² Matthew Liebmann, “The Mickey Mouse kachina and other ‘Double Objects’: Hybridity in the material culture of colonial encounters”, (*Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2015), 15(3), 319.

stylized features and regional mediums.⁷³ This level of cultural integration is dependent on contact between seemingly disparate societies. In both modern and historical contexts, this can occur on account of globalization, cosmopolitanism, appropriation, colonial expansion, etc.⁷⁴ Like James Clifford, Liebmann acknowledges that hybridity does not assume that cultures transfer personal, localized and traditional typologies solely by means of diplomatic exchange, but instead, more often, by contested power struggles that imply an aggressive party and a disenfranchised party.⁷⁵ In his article, “The Mickey Mouse kachina and other ‘Double Objects’: Hybridity in the material culture of colonial encounters,” Liebmann references the words of Homi Bhabha to further contextualize this view,

“hybridization is not some happy, consensual mix of diverse cultures; it is the strategic, translational transfer of tone, value, signification, and position—a transfer of power . . . that changes the very terms of interpretation and institutionalization, opening up contesting, opposing, innovative, ‘other’ grounds of subject and object formation.”⁷⁶

With this contextualization, Liebmann argues that hybridity is therefore not a synonym for cultural blending.⁷⁷ Instead, the act of hybridization involves a process of restructuring cultural norms that subsequently give way to new distinct images. Liebmann, thus, views hybridity as possessing the ability to “shock, transform, and revitalize social life.”⁷⁸ Diana DiPaolo Loren, Senior Curator at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, communicates a similar attitude towards the colonialist nature of hybrid materials. Loren labels hybrid material culture as “constituted in complex colonial contexts, resulting from the adoption and fusing of elements of style, manufacture, material, and meaning from distinct intellectual and

⁷³ Matthew Liebmann, “The Mickey Mouse kachina and other ‘Double Objects’: Hybridity in the material culture of colonial encounters”, (*Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2015), 15(3), 319.

⁷⁴ Liebmann, 319.

⁷⁵ Liebmann, 319.

⁷⁶ Liebmann, 323.

⁷⁷ Liebmann, 323.

⁷⁸ Liebmann, 323.

cultural legacies, which were themselves hybrids.”⁷⁹ With this perspective, Loren’s viewpoint also reflects Clifford’s ideology as both highlight that cultural integration often involves societies with differing levels of cultural sovereignty and agency.⁸⁰ Throughout her work, Loren incorporates the collections at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University as case studies to understand museums’ role in handling and preserving colonial archaeological materials.⁸¹

Her findings center around the concept of the fetishization of art and archaeological materials. For the purposes of her work, Loren defines fetishization as “how we define and categorize an object and its history, how we use it to activate and fix a certain version of colonial histories.”⁸² In essence, Loren is speaking to neo-colonialist practices in which museums and cultural institutions may perpetuate colonial norms by repeating normalized one-sided narratives that are often uncontested in the greater socio-political discourse.⁸³ This understanding produced a prominent paradigm shift in the way that museums present material culture to the public through an increased collaboration with non-museum professionals that aid in democratizing museological interpretation practices.⁸⁴

The jointly authored text *Ancient Muses: Archaeology and the Arts* views objects as continuously needing reinterpretation to audiences with an understanding of how those items

⁷⁹ Diana Loren, D. “Seeing hybridity in the anthropology museum: Practices of longing and fetishization”, (*Journal of Social Archaeology*, 2015), 15(3), 299.

⁸⁰ Loren, 299–318.

⁸¹ Loren, 299–318.

⁸² Loren, 302.

⁸³ Aditya Iyer, “Alternative museum tours explore colonial loot, biased narratives”, (Al Jazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/alternative-museum-tours-explore-colonial-loot-biased-narratives-180915213140176.html> Accessed May 2019.

⁸⁴ Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, “We Must Decolonize our Museums”, The Abbe Museum, <https://abbemuseum.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/we-must-decolonize-our-museums/>, Accessed May 2019.

speak in a given context.⁸⁵ Understanding this context is vital as each audience carries specific “geographic, economic, cultural, historic, political, and philosophical” identifiers.⁸⁶ Christopher Tilley explains in Susan Pearce’s work, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, that attempting to communicate how objects speak requires an ever-changing vocabulary and continuous understanding of a community’s needs and desires when visiting a museum.⁸⁷ He states,

The interpretation of the meaning and significance of material culture is a contemporary activity. The meaning of the past does not reside in the past, but belongs in the present. [...] The archaeologist is not so much reading the signs of the past as writing these signs into the present: construction discourses which should be both meaningful to the present and playing an active role in shaping the present’s future.⁸⁸

It is important to note that Tilley is not discrediting the historical meaning of material culture, but rather that if archaeologists and museum professionals are unable to relate such experiences and meaning in a contemporary context, then the understanding of those historical meanings are lost from the academic record.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, relating ancient or historical contexts to a contemporary audience is neither straightforward nor a standardized practice in museums today.⁹⁰

One such attempt of connecting historical and contemporary audiences is through the use of narrative interpretation, specifically in regard to archaeological materials. In essence, narrative archaeology relates to the act of storytelling within interpretive contexts.⁹¹ Modes of narration such as plot, setting and characters are often used to present a story that the visitor may situate themselves within, which in turn may yield a greater sense of curiosity about a particular society,

⁸⁵ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., *Ancient Muses: Archaeology and the Arts*. (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2003), 3.

⁸⁶ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., 115.

⁸⁷ Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London, Routledge, 1994), 73.

⁸⁸ Pearce, 73.

⁸⁹ Susan Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London, Routledge, 1994), 73.

⁹⁰ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., *Ancient Muses: Archaeology and the Arts*. (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2003), 114.

⁹¹ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., 15

or foster empathy with the subject matter at hand.⁹² John P. McCarthy, historic preservation specialist and archaeologist, is a prominent advocate for this mode of interpretation in educational institutions.⁹³ Nevertheless, he cautions institutions to not ignore factual data for what they may feel is true about a site, people group or material object.⁹⁴ Institutions must hold one another accountable for the interpretative information that they present and offer concrete avenues to allow one another to openly reinterpret the material culture on display in museums today.⁹⁵ Apart from archaeologists contributing to the development of interpretation strategies in museums, a growing trend in the museological field presents artists as guest curators, thus utilizing artistic modes of reinterpretation to produce alternative perspectives to objects often already present in a museum.⁹⁶ This practice is most notably seen within the work of Fred Wilson.

Fred Wilson is a Brooklyn based artist who has been dubbed a “master of combining similar yet different culturally charged objects in a way that evokes connections between local and global economies and challenges assumptions about history, race, and culture.”⁹⁷ In Wilson’s view, museums propagate the notion of a “seemingly neutral environment in which works of art are displayed[...] The museum space often tells us what we should think about a work of art and artist before we can grasp the significance of the work for ourselves.”⁹⁸ To combat this, Wilson’s work juxtaposes objects in museums’ collections to invite visitors to reimagine their understanding of these objects’ role in society and the relationship with the

⁹² John H. Jameson Jr, et al., *Ancient Muses: Archaeology and the Arts*. (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2003), 23

⁹³ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., 22

⁹⁴ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., 22

⁹⁵ John H. Jameson Jr, et al., 23

⁹⁶ Seattle Art Museum, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors Fred Wilson*, (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum 1993), 4.

⁹⁷ Erica Richard, “The Power of Juxtaposition”, (Art21, 2020), <https://art21.org/read/the-power-of-juxtaposition/>, Accessed April 2020.

⁹⁸ Seattle Art Museum, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors Fred Wilson*, (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum 1993), 8.

museum that possesses them.⁹⁹ Wilson describes the motivation of his work as an interest in “bringing historical information to the aesthetic experience in order to reveal the imperialist reality of how museums obtain or interpret the objects they display. [...] doing so makes clear the complexity of the things on display.”¹⁰⁰ Wilson’s 1992 exhibition, *Mining the Museum*, with the Maryland Historical Society, largely changed the way that museums consult with artists and how visitors engage with art.

The Pace Gallery described this exhibition as follows, “As interventions, or ‘mining,’ of the museum’s archive, Wilson re-presented its materials to make visible hidden structures built into the museum system, and American society as a whole.”¹⁰¹ *Mining the Museum* thus presented compositions such as 19th century silver repoussé vessels paired with iron slave shackles, a white Ku Klux Klan hood as a passenger in a 20th century baby carriage and a slave whipping-post surrounded by an array of antique 19th century Victorian chairs.¹⁰²



Figure 1.2 Installation view of *Mining the Museum* (baby carriage and hood)

⁹⁹ Erica Richard, “The Power of Juxtaposition”, (Art21, 2020), <https://art21.org/read/the-power-of-juxtaposition/>, Accessed April 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Seattle Art Museum, *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors Fred Wilson*, (Seattle, Seattle Art Museum 1993), 3.

¹⁰¹ “Fred Wilson”, The Pace Gallery, <https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/fred-wilson/>, Accessed April 2020.

¹⁰² “Return of the Whipping Post”, (The Maryland Historical Society, 2013), <http://www.mdhs.org/underbelly/2013/10/10/return-of-the-whipping-post-mining-the-museum/>, Accessed April 2020.

While these objects would not have historically functioned together, Wilson's work invites visitors to contemplate the relationship between the juxtaposed images and how one reinforces the other through a reconsideration of social and historical narratives.¹⁰³ *Mining the Museum* laid a precedent for Wilson's work with museums. He continued similar work with his exhibition *Mixed Metaphors* at the Seattle Art Museum and later with an installation at the Museum of World Cultures in Sweden.¹⁰⁴ On each occasion, Wilson approached the galleries from the perspective of an artist and thus paid attention to the ways in which "light, color, and spatial relationships" may be developed.¹⁰⁵ He describes his method as follows, "I trust the visual to communicate my ideas. I try to unlock the meaning of objects by juxtaposing and eliciting a conversation between them that creates an unexpected, but essential, thought."¹⁰⁶ Wilson's work, thus largely resembles Alice Procter's approach to her art tours as both figures purposefully disrupt the normalized colonial narratives that have historically dominated educational institutions.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Wilson's exhibitions fall into Clifford's framework as each display presents a contact zone that inherently fosters interconnections between collections and visitors.¹⁰⁸ Wilson thus situates himself into the discourse of decolonization of museums by purposefully dismantling the colonial practices that perpetuate one-sided narratives of

¹⁰³ "Fred Wilson", The Pace Gallery, <https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/fred-wilson/>, Accessed April 2020.

¹⁰⁴ "Museums and Collections: Fred Wilson", Art21, <https://art21.org/read/fred-wilson-museums-and-collections/>, Accessed April 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Art 21, n.p.

¹⁰⁶ "Fred Wilson", The Pace Gallery, <https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/fred-wilson/>, Accessed April 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Kerr Houston, "How Mining the Museum Changed the Art World", (Bmore Art, 2017), <https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html>, Accessed December 2019.

¹⁰⁸ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1997), 8.

collections.¹⁰⁹ Wilson uses juxtaposition as a mode of truth-telling that elucidates hidden and marginalized narratives in museums today.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

¹¹⁰ Erica Richard, “The Power of Juxtaposition”, (Art21, 2020), <https://art21.org/read/the-power-of-juxtaposition/>, Accessed April 2020.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine the ways in which museums engage in decolonizing practices through their interpretation of hybrid material culture. This qualitative research study utilized a case-study design supported by semi-structured interviews with staff and document analysis of online exhibition materials to address this purpose. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with museum staff that aided in the development or reinterpretation of hybrid art and archaeological materials. The following questions comprised the interview protocol:

1. Can you briefly describe your role in this institution?
 - a. Can you inform me on the particular mission of the institution in regard to how objects are interpreted and presented to the public?
 - b. Does your institution engage with issues of decolonization? (i.e. internal conversations, staff training, policymaking, etc.) For reference, Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko defines decolonization as “at minimum, sharing governance structures and authority for the documentation and interpretation of [Native] culture.”

2. Matthew Liebman defines hybrid art and archaeological materials as “the amalgamation of influences from two (or more) different cultural groups.” Where can visitors find such items in your institution?
 - a. Do you believe that these items are common in museums?
 - b. Is it more difficult to interpret these materials to an audience?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - c. What are common issues that one may come across when attempting to interpret an object that represents multiple cultures?
 - i. Do you have any experience in combating these issues? If so, can you quantify how successful your approach was?

3. Have you found a link between the interpretation of hybrid materials and museum decolonization?

a. Do you think that there is an opportunity to expand intercultural dialogue through such materials?

4. How can institutions improve their displays and methods of interpretations of hybrid material culture?

a. Is there a museological standard to interpretation, or should institutions follow a methodology specifically tailored to their needs and institutional vision?

With prior consent, interviews were recorded for increased accuracy. The .mp3 file of each interview was uploaded into the transcription service, Trint, which allowed for further revisions where necessary. All interviews followed the interview protocol, attached in Appendix A, to ensure consistency in the data analysis process.

Additional data was collected through a document analysis of each exhibition's online materials, including labels, exhibition overview, images, etc. The document analysis was used as supplementary data to information referenced in the interview in order to provide additional visual or textual context to pieces that the respondents mentioned.

Sample

Exhibitions from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) are explored in this study. Both institutions were selected for study based on their exhibitions that currently engage with hybrid material culture.

Two exhibitions were identified from the Met on the basis that each explicitly communicated the presence of hybrid materials either in their title or exhibit overview. The first exhibit, titled *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*, explores the intercultural contact between Taíno civilizations throughout the Caribbean and those of the continental mainland.¹¹¹ Conversely, *Art and Peoples of the Kharga Oasis* offers a lens into the identities of peoples residing in early Byzantine Egypt, a liminal time marked by intersecting Greek, Roman and Egyptian influences.¹¹² While representing cultures at opposing ends of the world, these exhibitions grapple with presenting how humans manage intersecting identities through the material culture that they develop.

Two participants were selected from the Met. Dr. James Doyle is the Assistant Curator for the Department of Art of the Ancient Americas. In his role, he researches the Met's collections of art and archeological materials in North, Central and South America prior to European colonization. Additionally, he conducts archaeological fieldwork and curates special exhibitions.¹¹³ His exhibit, *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*, offers insight into the relationship between hybrid material culture from the context of the Americas.

Dr. Andrea Myers Achi is the Assistant Curator in the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters. Through her work, she aids in developing and organizing exhibitions that engage with the arts of Late-Antique Mediterranean societies. This includes her co-curation of the exhibition: *Arts and Peoples of the Kharga Oasis*.

¹¹¹ "Exhibition Overview", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/arte-del-mar-caribbean>, Accessed August 2019.

¹¹² "Exhibition Overview", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/kharga-oasis> Accessed August 2020.

¹¹³ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

Two members of the Penn Museum staff were consulted for this research study. Jess Bicknell is the Head of Exhibitions at The Penn Museum with a background in museum interpretation. Dr. Sarah Linn is the Academic Liaison in the department for Academic Engagement and works to facilitate discussions between the university and museum. She also aids in developing live interpretation of exhibitions, relating to information provided by student and volunteer gallery guides. As with the Met, this institution was selected based on the wealth of materials that fall into the definition of hybrid material culture, as presented in this study. Given the 2019 renovation of varying galleries, this institution also presented the opportunity to uncover insights into the process of developing and redeveloping interpretative strategies. The Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery served as the primary research focus.

Analysis Plan

The completed interview protocols were hand-coded to delineate common terminology, attitudes and strategies employed throughout the interpretative process. This data was then compared alongside the initial interview questions in order to qualify the relationship between hybrid material culture and decolonizing practices in museums today. The aforementioned research questions were simplified thematically as they related to: Decolonization, Hybrid Collection, Connecting Decolonization and Hybridization and the Future of Interpretation. This streamlined the analysis process so that data across exhibitions could be easily compared and contrasted and thus serves as the rubric for organizing the results for study. As interpretive strategies are specific to the mission, vision and values of each institution, interview responses are subdivided by each institution so that data may be compared between them. Supplementary data was gathered from a document analysis of the main landing pages of each exhibition. Each

additional set of data supplemented points that were mentioned in the interview and are introduced as online data in the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to determine the ways in which museums engage in decolonizing practices through its interpretation of hybrid material culture. As such, all of the data presented here is formulated alongside this original mission. Questions from the Interview Protocol are analyzed thematically under the categories of Decolonization, Hybrid Collection, Connecting Decolonization and Hybridization and the Future of Interpretation.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Decolonization

Dr. Doyle communicated that decolonization is directly tied into his work in curation given the geographic region of North America and the Native populations that reside there. He also noted the responsibility and increased proliferation of museums' engagement with decolonizing practices, stating,

I think all cultural institutions, especially museums, are engaging with these issues on a variety of levels, especially with respect to the arts of Native North America. They are also engaging with the rich discussion around descendant and diaspora communities globally. [In *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*] I made sure to consult with contemporary Caribbean artists and scholars and those advancing claims to indigenous ancestry in the Antilles in order to properly present the material. The inclusion of a painting by Wifredo Lam was also purposefully to start the conversation about the decolonization of Caribbean art that happened in the 20th century and continues to the present. Wifredo Lam was a Cuban artist of Afro-Chinese descent, renowned for using art as what he later called an 'act of decolonization.'¹¹⁴

Hybrid Collection

Both participants were asked where visitors could find hybridized materials at the Met and what strategies were in place to aid in interpreting such forms of material culture. Dr. Achi

¹¹⁴ Doyle. Interview Protocol. 2020.

noted that hybridized materials could be found in the Departments of Greek and Roman Art, Egyptian Art, Ancient Near East Art, Islamic Art, Africa, Oceania and the Americas Arts and Medieval Art. She additionally noted that such materials are particularly common in encyclopedic museums.

Dr. Doyle referenced the exhibit, *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*, as the notion of hybridization was the driving factor for its creation. He stated,

As archaeologists and art historians we like to categorize things as Taíno or Tairona, but, in fact, these terms are umbrella terms used as heuristic tools because the reality is that these objects are “amalgamations.” My point in bringing the visual story of the islands and the coastlines together for the first time was to point this out. For example, flying creatures feature as a theme throughout the region, as do certain materials like greenstone and gold.¹¹⁵

In terms of addressing the difficulty of presenting hybrid materials to an audience, Dr. Achi mentioned the need for increased didactic information, “One needs to first understand the archaeological and historical context of the objects in order to understand their function.”¹¹⁶ Dr. Doyle shared this stance on the importance of context. He noted that it is important to first present a baseline of understanding for the culture that you are presenting. Additionally, one must keep in mind the particular goals of that exhibition. For example, on one hand the goal of an exhibit may be to celebrate one particular culture, yet on the other hand, the goal may be to present the context of surrounding societies. He found that the challenge arises in escaping convoluted storylines that detract the visitor from the culture in front of them. Specifically, within the context and purview of *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*, Dr Doyle employed an interpretative strategy that created a sense of discovery for the visitor. As such, following the exhibition, one would understand the connection between “golden eagle pendants

¹¹⁵ Doyle, Interview Protocol 2020.

¹¹⁶ Achi, Interview Protocol, 2020.

from Panama, jade bird pendants from Costa Rica, and a marble bowl from Caribbean Honduras,” etc.¹¹⁷

Connecting Decolonization and Hybrid Materials

When determining the connection between hybrid collections and decolonizing practices, Dr. Doyle communicated an inextricable link between the two. He found that many geographical localities are inherently tied to colonial enterprises given their contested histories. When referencing the Caribbean societies in the publications for the *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean* exhibit, Dr. Doyle emphasized that “Taíno, Tairona, Veraguas, etc., are only umbrella terms because the colonizers did not record the indigenous ethnonyms in most cases. So, there is power in these unifying terms, especially for contemporary indigenous movements, but expanding dialogue about why these terms exist is an opportunity to discuss decolonizing our glossary.”¹¹⁸

Future of Interpretation

Question 4 of the interview protocol sought to understand how, if at all, museums can improve their interpretative strategies of presenting hybrid material culture and if an industry standard is possible. Dr. Achi noted that the improvement of interpretation of these materials is less about their physical display, but more so in the discussions that take place with both stakeholders and community members tailored in accordance to the institutional vision and all interpretation therein is dependent on the nature of the specific collections held there.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Achi, Interview Protocol, 2020.

Dr. Doyle echoed this idea that institutional interpretive strategies are reflective of both their collection and the audience that they serve. Given the number of bilingual visitors to the Met, Dr. Doyle ensured that online and in-person label information for *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean* was presented in both English and Spanish. This was pertinent given that the nature of the exhibit could serve to connect individuals of Caribbean descent with ancestral populations. As museums progress and improve their interpretive repertoire, Dr. Doyle noted that this area of devoting proper resources to translating and presenting material in accessible languages may aid in connecting visitors to hybrid material culture.¹²⁰

The Penn Museum

Decolonization

Bicknell noted that like other anthropology and archaeology-based museums, the Penn Museum strives to constantly keep decolonizing practices in mind, yet simultaneously understands that it is an ongoing process with different meanings across institutions. In the context of the Penn Museum, Bicknell noted that decolonization is a multi-pronged process that includes aspects such as outreach to source communities and shifting vocabulary. Dr. Linn contributed by stating that the formulation of the decolonization efforts started in the gallery spaces themselves.

With the 2019 renovation, many galleries in the Penn Museum gained the opportunity for not only an aesthetic refurbishment but also a reimagining of the content itself. Bicknell noted that this most prominently affected the Africa, Mexico and Central America and Sphinx galleries. Bicknell commented on how it was important to consult an international advisory

¹²⁰ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

council throughout this process. Such work aids in finding important stories to present to visitors and subsequently ensures that those stories fell within the purview of the Penn Museum to tell.¹²¹ An additional development was the creation of a new style guide to track these changes in methodologies so that it may be used as a reference in future exhibitions. With this guide, aspects such as new vocabulary can be recorded, including the prioritization of an interpretative hierarchy which privileges native names and perspectives of collections.¹²²

Hybrid Collection

Both Bicknell and Dr. Linn found that hybrid materials, as defined in this study, are prevalent throughout the Penn Museum, most notably in the Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery. With a Late Bronze Age occupation, the site of Beth Shean is marked by a vast array of material culture that blends the neighboring artistic styles. These materials include post-lintel structures with Egyptian hieroglyphs and an assemblage of Late Bronze Age sarcophagi. Both Bicknell and Dr. Linn spoke at length regarding the efforts to situate these items within their original context.¹²³

¹²¹ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²² Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²³ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.



Figure 1.3 Beth Shean Sarcophagi Lid. Expedition to Beth Shean (Beisan); Clarence Fisher, 1921-1928

Physically, this includes the replication of a Middle Bronze Age cave burial. Here, the gallery displays casts of human remains and coffins in a traditional layout for that era. By placing the Late Bronze Age sarcophagi alongside the Middle Bronze Age materials, the museum is able to delineate the adoption of Egyptian iconography that came with the Late Bronze Age Egyptian occupation.¹²⁴ Dr. Linn noted that this transition process is explicitly communicated during live-interpretation where gallery guides describe the Late Bronze Age materials as having Egyptian influence. This artistic explanation is supplemented with historical context in tours by explaining the prevalence of Egyptian garrisons at Beth Shean and the reference of additional objects in the museum's collection such as letters from Egyptian soldiers describing the conditions and attitudes of what was a foreign environment.¹²⁵

Connecting Decolonization and Hybrid Materials

As previously mentioned, the Penn Museum views the act of decolonization as an ongoing process that continues to evolve and adapt. In regard to hybrid materials, one connection to decolonization is seen in the name of the galleries. According to both Dr. Linn and Bicknell

¹²⁴ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²⁵ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

the physical place of an object is just as important as the label describing it.¹²⁶ Bicknell noted an immense amount of difficulty when discussing where hybrid materials are located in their institution. For instance, curatorial disagreement might arise when deciding if a funeral stele depicting a Pharaoh found in Beth Shean should be displayed in the Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery or if it should be included in the Egyptian Gallery.¹²⁷ Furthermore, in consideration of this geographic separation of artifacts, Bicknell communicated the intentionality behind the recent inclusion of Egyptian and Nubian artifacts into the Africa Gallery to mark visitors' perception that these objects are still African despite early colonialist ideologies that propagated a separation between these regions and the rest of the African continent.

Additional acts of decolonization arise in complicating normalized colonial narratives. From the context of live interpretation, Dr. Linn notes a strategy of beginning tours in the Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery with a blatant acknowledgement that many of the objects in that space have Egyptian influence. This includes the hybridization of deities like Hathor and similarly attributed Canaanite goddesses and the blending of iconography in burials. Dr. Linn acknowledges that this challenges the traditional biblical narrative that many visitors may be accustomed to associating with this region. Yet, Dr. Linn believes that by expanding the narrative, visitors may find points of relevance to their own lives and experiences.¹²⁸ Both Bicknell and Dr. Linn communicated the necessity of finding a balance between creating these opportunities for visitors to relate to material culture yet not feel overburdened by scholarly arguments.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²⁷ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²⁸ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹²⁹ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

Future of Interpretation

Each interviewee expressed the necessity for a museum or cultural institution to tailor their interpretative strategy for their specific institution's needs and community. Bicknell noted that every step in reimagining the institution's spaces was evaluated on a case-by-case basis.¹³⁰ The Penn Museum aims to reach out to source/living communities, yet museums should continually question which stories are appropriate for them to tell and which communities can offer the best resources for ensuring that those stories are communicated appropriately with a contemporary perspective.¹³¹

Common Denominators

Multiple points of comparison may be drawn when viewing these institutional strategies side-by-side. First, each museum propagated the necessity to understand the goals of the particular exhibition. For the Met, Dr. Doyle noted that exhibitions displaying hybrid materials often have “convoluted story lines” and thus must be handled appropriately.¹³² At the Penn Museum, Bicknell displayed a similar sentiment as she highlighted the importance of understanding which stories are within their purview to display given their community, mission and resources.¹³³

Secondly, complicating traditional narratives stands as a common factor. Within the context of the exhibit *Arte del Mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean*, certain objects were selected specifically “to start the conversation about the decolonization of Caribbean art that

¹³⁰ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹³¹ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹³² Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹³³ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

happened in the 20th century and continues to the present.”¹³⁴ The Penn Museum similarly introduces the issue of decolonization by complicating the normalized biblical narratives of the Canaan and Ancient Israel Gallery with explicit references to Egyptian influences through labels and live interpretation. Each act is blatant and further represents the stance of their institutions combating the alleged neutrality of museums and cultural institutions.

Lastly, both institutions communicate the importance of providing the original context in an exhibition. Dr. Achi propagated this through her advocacy of increased didactics in displays, while the Penn Museum accomplished this through their recreation of a Middle Bronze Age burial site. While these institutions share many methodologies in incorporating decolonizing interpretative strategies to hybrid materials, each institution asserted the importance of developing such strategies in tandem to an institution’s mission, vision, and values.

¹³⁴ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine the ways in which museums engage in decolonizing practices through their interpretation of hybrid material culture. To accomplish this, a case-study based methodology was utilized to analyze three exhibitions across two institutions, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The medium of hybrid art and archaeology was chosen on the basis of the unique characteristic of representing an amalgamation of varying cultural identities in a physical form. Given that the goal of decolonization is partly to share authority with source communities and take part in truth-telling practices, this study sought to uncover the ways in which the interpretative strategies of hybridized material culture follow a similar protocol.

Multiple schools of literature were consulted in order to lay the framework for this study including art history, anthropology, museology and material culture theory, resulting in an interdisciplinary study centered around decolonization and hybridity. Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko was referenced to offer a baseline of understanding of the role of decolonization in museums. Her ideas of truth-telling and sharing authority, while presented in regard to the Native American community in Bar Harbor, Maine, may be situated across institutions as each museum possesses an opportunity to cede interpretative authority to the cultures represented in their collections. In regard to hybrid material culture, this often includes a minimum of two cultural identities, thus involving multiple communities at once. Alice Procter's "Uncomfortable Art Tours" and Fred Wilson's displays of juxtaposed materials presented additional acts of decolonization. Both individuals complicate traditional narratives by presenting marginalized or hidden perspectives in gallery spaces. Finally, James Clifford's idea of museums as *contact zones* aids in situating the museum as an inherent locality where visitors traverse through varying cultures and social

environments within one space. The presentation of this material, however, is not from an objectivated sense of neutrality but rather represents selective decisions made at the institutions' bequest. As such, museums possess the opportunity to harness their interpretative authority to decolonize the institution by sharing that authority with varying audiences to create an environment of healing and institute "reflection, rethinking, and rebalancing".¹³⁵

In order to understand the relationship between decolonization and the interpretation of hybrid material culture, the following research questions were posed:

1. How is hybrid material culture commonly displayed in exhibition spaces?
2. Is such a display in line with subsequent forms of art and archaeology, or is a different methodology employed?
3. To what degree do museums delineate each participating community when noting the creation of hybrid material culture?
4. How can museums develop interpretive strategies that honor hybridized material culture?

These questions aided in developing the interview protocol that dictated the course of semi-structured interviews with staff across the Met and Penn Museum. The key conclusions from these interactions are as follows:

- 1. Hybrid material culture is prevalent in museum collections.** This study frequently engaged with hybrid material culture as a product of globalization, colonialism and

¹³⁵ "Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization", Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

cultural exchange and thus often represents contested histories with varying connotations. The result of these encounters was the blatant restructuring of artistic typologies that presume that one authority often has superseding power over the author. Dr. Achi expands this notion of hybrid materials as she states, “[...] all objects/artworks represent multiple perspectives, and it is one of the goals of curators to present these perspectives to the audience.”¹³⁶ If one views art through this lens, the work of museum staff expands as all materials necessitate the work of delineating the fact that multiple voices and perspectives exist in the material culture displayed in galleries and exhibition spaces.

2. **Colonialism and museums are inherently linked.** The museological field was founded on the presumption of a colonizer and the colonized, subsequently resulting in an industry that continuously grapples with restructuring and dismantling colonial foundations.¹³⁷ Dr. Doyle expands on this difficulty as he notes that the material culture of certain localities, such as the Caribbean, inherently carry the narrative of colonialism. As such, colonization, and the material culture developed under it, is often contested and represents painful ancestral memories. Museums thus have increased interpretive pressure to not only acknowledge the fact that the items in their collections may have resulted from such an environment, but additionally do so in a manner that is appropriate to their audience and within the purview for them to present.¹³⁸
3. **Decolonization is a multi-pronged process.** The decolonizing approach to museum interpretation is unique to the institution’s audience, mission and stakeholders. As such,

¹³⁶ Achi, Interview Protocol, 2020.

¹³⁷ “Confronting the Past: The Long hard work of decolonization”, Center for the Future of Museums (American Alliance of Museums, 2019), <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/04/19/trendswatch-2019-confronting-the-past-the-long-hard-work-of-decolonization/>, Accessed March 2020.

¹³⁸ Penn Museum, Interview Protocol, 2020.

there is an array of methodologies to implement when decolonizing a collection that may present multiple cultural identities. The work of Fred Wilson dictates that juxtaposing objects is one potential avenue for inviting visitors to reconsider the implications and meanings of seemingly disparate objects. The Penn Museum incorporated a similar methodology with their incorporation of Middle Bronze Age burials alongside the Late Bronze Age sarcophagi, thus allowing visitors to observe the adaptation of Egyptian iconography that followed the Egyptian occupation of Beth Shean. The exhibit *Arte del mar: Artistic Exchange in the Caribbean* adopted an introductory approach to local typologies. In place of a scholarly explanation of which culture influenced the next, this exhibit instead introduces similar forms across cultures, thus allowing visitors to discover the connections for themselves as opposed to blatantly being told that such interconnections are inherently present.¹³⁹

The conclusions drawn here aid in bridging hybrid material culture theory and museological literature that propagates the incorporation of decolonization into the repertoire of museums today. This study has limitations that affect the degree to which these conclusions may be utilized including:

1. Minimal literature on the treatment of hybrid art in museums.
2. Multiple categories of hybrid art, i.e. portraiture, statuary, etc., thus leading to a myriad of interpretative strategies and practices implemented across museums.
3. Differing approaches to museums and decolonizing practices.

¹³⁹ Doyle, Interview Protocol, 2020.

4. Limited case-studies due to the effects of the 2019-2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Future research into the subject could expand the scope to include institutions in multiple countries in order to determine the ways in which regional training and interpretation affect the manners in which hybrid material culture is presented to an audience. Furthermore, additional research may seek to understand if there is a correlation between the country of origin of hybrid material culture and how that same country, or a different one, approaches its interpretation. Nevertheless, this study may offer a foundation in connecting ideas of decolonization within the medium of hybrid material culture, thus filling a gap in an area that has minimal research.

Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Researcher's Statement:

I am asking you to participate in an interview that is part of my graduate thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to determine the extent to which museums engage with decolonizing practices with hybrid art and archaeological materials in their collection. Your participation is voluntary, refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. This interview will be audio taped for my note taking only. I may use your title and name of your institution in my final paper. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me through the information on this document.

Interview Procedures:

- ◆ Duration of Interview: 30 – 45 minutes.
- ◆ Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which museums engage with decolonizing practices with hybrid art and archaeological materials in their collection.
- ◆ Goals of Research Questions:
 1. Determine how museums interpret hybrid art and archaeological materials.
 2. Define the institution's stance on decolonization.
 3. Analyze the relationship between decolonization and the interpretation of hybrid materials.

Guiding Questions

1. Can you briefly describe your role in this institution?
 - a. Can you inform me on the particular mission of the institution in regard to how objects are interpreted and presented to the public?
 - b. Does your institution engage with issues of decolonization? (i.e. internal conversations, staff trainings, policymaking, etc.) For reference, Cinnamon Caitlin-Legutko defines decolonization as “at minimum, sharing governance structures and authority for the documentation and interpretation of [Native] culture.”

2. Matthew Liebman defines hybrid art and archaeological materials as “the amalgamation of influences from two (or more) different cultural groups”. Where can visitors find such items in your institution?
 - a. Do you believe that these items are common in museums?
 - b. Is it more difficult to interpret these materials to an audience?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - c. What are common issues that one may come across when attempting to interpret an object that represents multiple cultures?
 - i. Do you have any experience in combating these issues? If so, can you quantify how successful your approach was?

3. Have you found a link between the interpretation of hybrid materials and museum decolonization?
 - a. Do you think that there is an opportunity to expand intercultural dialogue through such materials?

4. How can institutions improve their displays and methods of interpretations of hybrid material culture?

- a. Is there a museological standard to interpretation, or should institutions follow a methodology specifically tailored to their needs and institutional vision?

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