COLLECTING WOMEN'S ART AND NATIVE AMERICAN ARTIFACTS: ISSUES FOR MUSEUM CURATORS

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Egalitarianism is quite possibly the education buzzword of the eighties. Egalitarianism is belabored in the literature of late that it seems inconceivable that any person or institution with any degree of social responsibility has not yet acted to realign the programs and policies of our biased past. Yet many major social groups still remain disenfranchised in the current American cultural scenario. This commentary addresses the predicament of two of those groups — women and Native Americans. While seemingly unrelated, both groups share a common dilemma: their voices, their opinions and their expressions are not yet respected in the realm of art and history museums. Women consistently find little or no value placed on their artistic expressions, and Native Americans find their values and wishes utterly violated. While focusing on the plight of these two groups and the roles played by museums in determining the respect and value bestowed upon objects and people, let us not forget that there are many other groups whose work is mistreated or ignored and whose voices are not yet equally respected by those who dictate museum policy.

What exactly is the role of the museum in our society? Definitions of the nature and purposes of museums have been propounded over the years by organizations such as the American Association of Museums, the British Museums Association, the Canadian Museum Association, and the International Council of Museums. Indeed, it seems that the role of museums has been well defined with considerable input from many formidable sources, resulting in a single-minded purpose and rigid standards of acceptance.

The outcome has been, for the most part, the collection and preservation of objects valued by those academically trained in the traditions of white, male Western thought. Perhaps it is time to redefine museum purpose and reevaluate museum policies.

The museum is now generally understood to mean an institution devoted to the procurement, care, and display of objects of aesthetic, historical, or scientific interest (Meyer, 1979). And therein lies the problem. Who decides which objects are “of lasting interest and value”? And what is the criteria for making those decisions? Ultimately, the task falls on the museum personnel, and the criteria being used, in my mind, is highly suspect.

The role of the curator is the acquisition of specimens, chosen carefully, for preservation and display. Curators ask (or should ask), “Is the specimen useful?” (Lewis, 1976). The question is valid, but what criteria is being used to select a group, reflecting limited values and limited tastes.

Museums house collections of objects, and the conspicuous consumption of objects (such as art) that are not necessary for basic subsistence is a sign of status and honor (Metcalfe, 1983). Perhaps our museum collections are the result of “cloistered virtue,” a term I borrow from Chalmers (1973). Consider the background of those responsible for deciding what is and what is not collected. Curators, trained predominantly in the academic tradition of universities, usually aspire to become museum directors. Directors in turn hire, train, and direct curators to perpetuate the dominant academic traditions in which they too were trained. Boards hire directors to perpetuate the collection, a body of objects gathered to reflect the dictates of the same dominant academic tradition, and, in a linear fashion, a particular culture is preserved! With only a small amount of reflection, it should become increasingly obvious how “cloistered virtue” could easily be an inherent result of intellectual or cultural inbreeding.

Museums are “important cultural resources” said Joseph Veach Noble, as Director of the Museum of the City of New York (Fromme, 1981). Indeed they are, but have we asked ourselves lately, “just exactly whose culture these resources are important to?” In The Art Museum as Educator, A.Z. Silver (1978) states that museums exist for the things we put in them, and they change as each generation chooses how to see and use those things. Yet if we look at two major issues involving museums today, we might begin to think they are seriously lagging behind in dealing with what the current generation considers important. So obvious are these disorders, it would seem that curators have been intellectually and culturally inbred.

Let us consider the Native American first. Treated in a brutal and unjust manner from the time Europeans set foot on this continent, Native American culture has, to a great degree, been erased from the face of the earth ... except in museums. In museums we have preserved the culture of the American Indian (by our definition, not theirs). But why? It is, as the museum manuals say, “for the increase of knowledge and for the enlightenment of the people” ... and/or to create collections “essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose” (Lewis, 1976). These are, no doubt, noble goals, but what are the criteria? There are eighteen thousand Indian skeletons housed in the Smithsonian (Hill, 1988). EIGHTEEN THOUSAND! Is this collection of objects a sign of status and honor? How would we feel if the Vietnamese kept eighteen thousand American skeletons in cardboard boxes in a warehouse? Surely we would consider it an ethnocentric atrocity. Can you imagine remains of American soldiers on display in a Vietnamese historical museum? Dare I ask what you would think of the people who dictated that museum policy?

Consider for a moment this outlandish scenario: Somehow the Japanese bid on and purchased the Constitution (yes, the original), the Declaration of Independence, and the Liberty Bell. Objects obviously sacred to American culture, now to be displayed in a museum in downtown Tokyo. Outrageous? Most certainly! Yet our museums are full of objects sacred to the American Indian. We call it art, we call it history, we call it culture. Who conditioned us? Who gave us these conditions? Can you imagine remains of American soldiers on display in a Vietnamese historical museum? Dare I ask what you would think of the people who dictated that museum policy?

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Perhaps we overstep our bounds when we separate artifacts from the culture that created them. Perhaps our ethnocentricity roars too loudly when we decide what from another culture is or is not art, is or is not of value. Applying our value system to objects from another value system seems to be the basis of the white, patriarchal, Western aesthetics of the academically trained. And with the introduction of the word patriarchal, let us segue with a look at this issue facing curators - women. We can begin with a look at this issue by listing the statistics used in an opening speech at the 1989 Women's Caucus of Art Conference in San Francisco, California.

Women today
- own 1% of the world's assets
- have 5% of the world's income
- are 38% of all artists
- make up 10% of all art exhibits
- created 4% of all art in museums

The facts speak for themselves - if 38% of our artists are women, shouldn't approximately 38% of our art exhibitions be women? Shouldn't 38% of our collections be made up of objects created by women? Why hasn't this happened automatically? One possible reason is that until the last decade it was very hard to name a woman museum director (Nochlin, 1979), since there weren't many women holding those jobs. Another possible reason is that art is an instrument of social status and control (Metcalf, 1983). The facts listed in the two previous paragraphs say enough about social status and control to make the point plainly. If women aren't in positions to collect objects for museums, then there is no need to worry about the loss of patriarchal control in the process of elevating the status of the women's art. Women artists will continue to develop as the pace of an Andy Warhol film.

In reaction to this situation, a separate museum for women's art has been established - by women. Its purpose is to acquire, research, interpret, and expose for the public the vast achievements of women artists through a strong permanent collection, a changing exhibits program, traveling exhibitions, library resource center, and public programs (Day, 1986). However, even this step is controversial. One critic believes this museum will help to trivialize the position of women as artists, reinforcing their artificial separateness and second-class status. Conversely, "it could be galling to other museums," says founder Wilhlimina Cole Holladay, "reminding them of what they could be doing" (Day, 1988).

But will the National Museum of Women in the Arts really be able to remind "them" of what "they" could be doing? Or will it continue in the traditions of male-dominated society? If women are trained in institutions controlled by patriarchal concepts, it may be difficult for them to consider different values. Langer (1985) states that given the moral and intellectual climate of our times, it is risky to address such issues as sexuality, pornography, sadism, masochism, eroticism, prostitution, rape, lesbian and gay male relationships, cross dressing, and transsexualism. These are the potent topics much of contemporary women's art and criticism seeks to address - precisely the focus that makes it hard for patriarchially educated historians, artists, and critics to respond.

Success (at this point) is still measured by where we are shown, by whom we are published, by where we are invited to speak, and by what grants we have gotten (Langer, 1985). And let's not forget "by whose museum collections we are in." Are curators ready to respond to feminism? Or will they respond like one senior Washington museum official, who asked not to be identified: He thinks that the National Museum of Women in Arts collection is of marginal interest and is being "showcased and glamorized" (Daly, 1986).

Will curators realize that women, as Miriam Shapiro says, "want to be recognized for what they make? They want a history of their own ... they need recognition of their basic sense of value ... to be part of a critical mass that matters" (Day, 1986). I'm afraid it will take a bold curator to defy traditional thinking, and collect the art of, as Joanna Freuh says, "women-as-dangerous-sex" (1985).

Perhaps until the character of our museums change, anything ending up in one will remain, as Lucy Lippard (1984) says, a display of upper-class taste in expensive and doubtfully "useful" objects, chosen by those who are not yet responding to the voices of the disenfranchised. In so doing they perpetuate the prevailing relationship between art and the masses, or the idea that "we who are educated to know what's correct must pass pure knowledge and good taste down to those who haven't the taste, the time, or the money to know what's good" (Lippard, 1984, p. 98). It is possible that this dangerously pompous attitude is the root of many of the problems connected to the museum as it exists in today's society? Perhaps this is the very point at which museum policy makers should begin their reevaluation.

References.


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ART EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF AIDS

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Motivation

The health crisis which in recent years has depleted the ranks of the art community, has not received much formal notice in art education journals. A continuing stigma remains attached to AIDS due to its appearance among gay men and IV drug users. Many people pretend it is not there. My own life has become consumed by it, due to the illness of many, many friends and associates. For nearly two years, because of the enormity of the crisis combined with relatively little action on state and federal levels and the mounting grief and loss in my own life, I began to feel that art education is a silly field contributing very little to society in general and contributing nothing to end this awful disease. I decided, despite my advanced age and status at the university, to work on a nursing degree and leave teaching, finger paint and clay to other people. In nursing, I found an advancing technological approach to treating human organisms, not human beings. Wanting to work with people, I switched to social work. In the meantime, I have been volunteering on the National AIDS Hotline, handling diverse crisis calls ranging from suicide threats to education about the virus and its effects. I have also volunteered to spend time with the dying at the Brownlie Hospice, in a move to do something else very concrete. I may still complete my MSW degree to work with PWAs (People with AIDS) as a professional social worker. Curiously, however, this mid-life career crisis has led to a re-evaluation of the importance of art and art education in the lives of every person I know including myself. As with the dying themselves, there seems little time for game playing and intellectual gymnastics. Our human limitations, our financial constraints and the unrelenting, destructive, lethal character of this particular virus, form a metaphor drawing attention to why we do what we do and why it matters.

History

The value of art in the curriculum has been the subject of debate in American schools since the time of Samuel H. Smith and the Massachusetts experiment. When Puritan values were still dominant in this culture, art was part of a child's learning primarily for practical reasons, no different than learning various trades or gaining the skills required to run households and farms. The idea that art is a frill goes back to the days when quilt making and the drawing of patterns for sewing were considered luxuries.