

Building Stories in Museum Exhibitions: Curatorial Power, Anthropology, and Representations of Latin America Artisans and Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract:

In the context of two internship projects, one at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in the United States and the other at the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia (MUUA) in Colombia, this article contrasts how artisans and indigenous communities of Latin America are represented in exhibitions. I build on the Study Up and Critical Museum Studies perspective to analyze the colonial roots of museums in both countries and how they are perpetuated or confronted through current exhibition-making. By methodologically collecting ethnographic and archival records, this essay questions the exercise of curatorial power and the role of anthropology, the anthropologist, and subaltern groups.

Key Words:

Museum exhibitions, curatorial practice, cultural representations, Latin America, museum internships, Study Up, coloniality, reflexivity.

Construindo Histórias em Exposições de Museus: Poder Curatorial, Antropologia e Representações de Artesãos e Povos Indígenas da América Latina

Resumo:

No contexto de dois projectos de estágio, um no Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), nos Estados Unidos, e outro no Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia (MUUA), na Colômbia, este artigo contrasta a forma como os artesãos e as comunidades indígenas da América Latina são representados nas exposições. Baseio-me na perspectiva do Study Up e dos Critical Museum Studies para analisar as raízes coloniais dos museus em ambos os países e a forma como são perpetuadas ou confrontadas através da atual produção de exposições. Através da recolha metodológica de registos etnográficos e arquivísticos, este ensaio questiona o exercício do poder curatorial e o papel da antropologia, do antropólogo e dos grupos subalternos.

Palavras-chave:

Exposições de museus, prática curatorial, representações culturais, América Latina, estágios em museus, Study Up, colonialidade, reflexividade.

Construir historias en las exposiciones de los museos: Poder curatorial, antropología y representaciones de artesanos e indígenas latinoamericanos

Resumen:

En el contexto de dos proyectos de prácticas, uno en el Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) en Estados Unidos y el otro en el Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia (MUUA) en Colombia, este artículo contrasta cómo los artesanos y las comunidades indígenas de América Latina están representados en las exposiciones. Me baso en la perspectiva de Study Up y Critical Museum Studies para analizar las raíces coloniales de los museos de ambos países y cómo se perpetúan o enfrentan a través de la creación de exposiciones actuales. Mediante la recopilación metodológica de registros etnográficos y de archivo, este ensayo cuestiona el ejercicio del poder curatorial y el papel de la antropología, el antropólogo y los grupos subalternos.

Palabras clave:

Exposiciones en museos, práctica curatorial, representaciones culturales, América Latina, prácticas en museos, Study Up, colonialidad, reflexividad.

Introduction

This article examines how representations of Latin American artisans and indigenous peoples are built through exhibition-making practices in two museums: the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in the United States and the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia (MUUA) in Colombia. By means of internships, I went behind the scenes and co-curated an anthropology exhibition in each museum, which enabled me to explore the historical and everyday mechanisms of representing subaltern groups.

First, I depart from the “Study Up” theoretical perspective proposed by Laura Nader (1972) to place the approach of my research. I then argue the feasibility and relevance of a museum internship to Study Up and describe the specific advantages and challenges I faced to acquire museum access through internships. Likewise, I highlight the conceptual lenses of Critical Museum Studies and my research questions. I make explicit my positionality and how this acknowledgment is helpful to understanding the scopes and limits of both my interpretations and internship products.

The second part of this article reflects on issues in exhibitions vis-à-vis the concept of colonialism in two frameworks: global south and global north in the Americas. Placing the specific institutions I interned in within each country’s historical museum context, I analyze how the museum’s mission, vision, and exhibition practices are confronting or perpetuating the colonial roots of museums. I outline the steps of the internship project at the MUUA to create an exhibition about Ráquira pottery and the practicum at the NMAI to design an exhibition proposal about the Mesoamerican ballgame.

Finally, I detail the methods used to record information and describe the findings. For each case study, I propose an understanding of curatorship/curator, explore the concept of collaboration, and reflect on the role of consultations. Primarily, I discuss the influences of the anthropological discipline defining the conceptual backbone of each exhibition and the tensions I had when co-curating archival and ethnographic material. I wrap up this essay by pointing out curatorial horizons when building stories of *cultural traditions* for museum exhibitions.

Conceptual Perspectives: Bridging “Study Up” with Critical Museum Studies

Study Up and museum access

As an attempt to understand power relationships while questioning disciplinary preferences towards which anthropologists have leaned, Laura Nader (1972) outlines a perspective focused on “studying up.” Through a hierarchical reference, her proposal seeks to study powerful people and institutions (up) shaping events that affect society the most. Within this stream is Marcus (1983) literature review and discussion of the concept of elites. One alternative pointed out by Marcus, encompassing Nader’s thesis, describes

elites as “the classic vision of ruling class, which controls, through complex and largely hidden processes, the institutions that in turn organize the general population” (p.12). Even though defining the relationships between the mechanisms and people upwards may be difficult due to historical contexts and conceptual ambiguities, underlying ideas of authority, exclusivity, and inequality in society pervade a call for studying up. Therefore, identifying power institutions and people is the first step.

Following this call, different studies have inquired about the social contexts of the Americas. For instance, Martínez-Novo (2006) explains through Elena, an NGO¹ director, the class identity and ethnicity of the Mexican upper class, and Fernández-Salvador et al. (2022) take the Banco Pichincha in Ecuador to discuss how its corporate culture and internal organization simulate a microcosm mirroring Ecuadorian society. In the United States, the work of Ho (2016) on Wall Street investment bankers, Rollins’ reflections (1985) on employers of domestic workers in the Boston area, and Vaughan’s ethnography (1996) of NASA² space flight engineers favor this “Up” approach.

Museums have also been interrogated regarding power and social inequalities. Early in the 20th century, John Cotton Dana, in his manifesto “The Gloom of the Museum” (1917), criticizes the development of such institutions in the US as a method for reproducing power, European models, and class distinctions. As a museum pioneer, Dana challenges museum elitism by proposing educational reforms from within. “At a time when many museums functioned as private clubs for America’s elite,” Kern (2016, pp. 271-272) praises Dana’s game-changing vision to democratize art museums (p. 283).

Exploring the museum institution and fueled by the prominent role of museums in displaying understandings of subaltern groups through anthropology exhibitions, I place the analyses of my internships within Nader’s perspective. Among the museum activities, I paid attention to the work of anthropologists-curators in exhibitions of Latin American indigenous and artisan groups, especially during the co-preparation process of two exhibitions. This attention would likewise trigger further understandings of the “down.” Study Up builds on a “reinvented anthropology” (Nader, 1972, p. 292), for it challenges the classic frames of anthropology by circling back the gaze upon the people (who), mechanisms (how), and contexts (where) defining subaltern groups, which have become the predilect subjects of the discipline.

To approach an empirical study of museums, an internship gives a particular research opportunity to cope with what Nader (1972) describes as the most usual obstacle (p. 302) for studying up: access. Museum access and the possibilities of an internship for studying up can be analyzed through three categories: orientation, agency, and reciprocity.

First, by *orientation*, I refer to the guidance and general institutional resources given by the museum. A curator was mainly the person who oriented me on how to perform assigned tasks while regulating what was feasible, approved, and expected. Being an intern

1 Acronym for Non-Governmental Organizations.

2 Acronym for The National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

also facilitates getting to know other staff and behind-the-scenes work. In sum, to catch a glimpse of the internal practices and normative discourse within an institution. At all events, the staff embodies an *orientation role*.

Second, most internships leave room for interns to propose rather than mindlessly repeating a series of work steps. Much as it is not horizontal, this bidirectional learning is presupposed; that is to say, the collaboration door is opened. Final results will vary based on institutional priorities, the number of duties, and staff willingness, among other variables. Despite institutional guidelines, however, the intern has *agency* on how the work is done. In my two internship positions, I chose bibliographical references, suggested the objects for display, and selected the points discussed in meetings with my mentors. I was given access to human and technical resources to inform my decisions while exercising *agency* in fashioning topics to address and the stories I wanted to highlight for a museum exhibition. The former point connects to the final concept: reciprocity.

In hindsight, final products make access(es) a prerequisite in the internship's chain production. At the core of Nader's call for studying up is the discomfort and indignation of the social scientist preceding actions for more democratic outcomes. With introspection of one's tasks, agency, and position within the academic field of knowledge, internships become relevant learning opportunities to address longstanding issues and propose new routes or at least bring up critical issues in institutional actions, which I define by *reciprocity*. Then, final products may express *reciprocity* both with the host institution and society.

To navigate my participation, I had as a beacon a starting question: What is entailed by interning in two public museums of two different countries with Latin American indigenous and artisan material culture as a meeting point? I will unfold the development of this question throughout this article in my attempt to study up.

Access through internship admissions was different for each country. In the United States, my selection criteria targeted prominent institutions with Latin America ethnographic or archaeological exhibitions, 2023 summer opportunities, and positions to participate in exhibition or research departments. These aspects led me to apply to three museums in the United States through their website portals, of which I received admission to the National Museum of the American Indian, one of the twenty-one museums of the Smithsonian Institution. I question how the variables of nationality, professional experience, cultural knowledge, formal education, motivation essay, and recommendation letters could have altogether facilitated my admission.

In Colombia, I sought opportunities in four prominent museums holding Colombian archeology and ethnography collections and exhibitions. Unlike the process in the United States, there were no publicly published museum internship opportunities in Colombia. I relied on my academic and professional network to contact anthropology curators and achieve a selection through peer approval [academic intellectual authority]. Despite the enthusiasm expressed by three out of the four curators for having me, the main barrier to access came from the bureaucratic state apparatus surpassing the curator's agency. This was true for the non-university museums affiliated with the Colombian nation-state. I argue that the public research emphasis sought by the Museo Universitario Universidad

de Antioquia may have facilitated my final admission. I wonder, however, how unconscious filters and advantages triggered successful connections.

I applied to internships both in my host and native country to increase my chances of admission. Finally, leveraging the fact that the internship offer at the NMAI was virtual, I embarked on a second on-site internship at the MUUA in Colombia. In sum, I interned at both the NMAI and MUUA from June to August 2023.

Critical Museum Studies and representation practices

The DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) principles enacted by the American Alliance of Museums in 2018 are the main guidelines and most current references adopted by several museums today in the United States. Furthermore, academic and non-academic articles such as Murawski (2019) and Olivares and Piatak (2022) cite them to advance a conversation about the future of museums in the United States. The twenty-two times the word *change* is used throughout the sixteen pages of the report contrasts with no references to the word *colonialism* or *imperialism*. This can be interpreted in two ways. The assumption of change dismisses key political debates unfolded in the academic realm, or they highlight several museum issues while not implicitly excluding decolonial principles. In this regard, a portion of US-based scholarship concerned with changes in museum representation engages in greater depth with the concept of race. Murawski's *Interrupting White Dominant Culture in Museums* (2019) pinpoints white supremacy as preventing liberation struggles. Likewise, Olivares and Piatak's *Exhibiting Inclusion: An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Museum Participation* (2022) claims that the lack of non-white professionals in museums mirrors the lack of new representations in exhibitions. Both articles take conceptually the Critical Race Theory assumed by scholars such as Porchia Moore or Robin Kelley. In up-to-date museum insights (Augustat, 2021; Snickare, 2022), there is a common understanding that the modern anthropology museum decontextualizes material culture once the objects are moved from their original place and new meanings are given through collecting, labeling, and displaying by the dominant group, in general, and the modern scientific authority, in particular.

Recognizing this artificial component in the museum exhibition has enabled discussions and occasionally redesigning representational practices since the second half of the twentieth century. As a consequence of the end of modern European colonialism after the Second World War, the "ontology crisis" (Augustat, 2021, p. 285) and "post-colonialist turn" in the humanities and social sciences (Snickare, 2022, p. 148) galvanized criticism in anthropology museum practices. Nevertheless, it is naïve, simplistic, and synchronic to think that the official end of the colonial political project abolished colonialist practices where anthropology museums worldwide were embedded or that, from that moment on, these museums sought to change. The Critical Museum Studies perspective states that the anthropology museum's aim should no longer be to pursue a "more accurate" historical account through collecting tangible goods but instead, to identify colonial foundations to

repair wrongs (Von Oswald, 2022) and strengthen indigenous community engagement (Augustat, 2021).

In this regard, it is relevant to first identify the current state in various anthropology museums of former and contemporary empires. What can we then analyze from current indigenous representations in the anthropology museum? Von Oswald (2022) argues that focusing on external representations in museum exhibitions gives an incomplete picture because it may provide a facelessness and a missed opportunity to grasp the broader network that starts by looking at who is doing what job and how it is done. This is precisely a limit that Nader's perspective (1972) tries to overcome. Under the light of Study Up and the Critical Museum studies perspective, I question: How do the MUUA and the NMAI anthropology museums with large Latin American archaeological and ethnographic collections perpetuate and/or confront colonial roots through practices of exhibition-making? How does the Smithsonian-NMAI represent Latin America indigenous groups in their exhibitions? And, how does this compare to the representations of indigenous peoples and artisans in the exhibition department of the MUUA in Colombia?

To undertake this study, it was crucial for me to reflect on my positionality. After obtaining a bachelor's in anthropology, working for almost three years as an archaeologist in different regions of Colombia enabled me to get acquainted with different realities both of Colombia's social context and the disciplinary field. Sometimes, I was puzzled by the lack of accessible archeological content to the general public. Most of the time, I was puzzled by how little archaeologists —like who I was becoming— reflected on the treatment of what we call “archeological objects” after fieldwork, downplaying the work with local communities and cultural heritage institutions. This attention led me to research anthropology museums through summer internships.

As a young social scientist, pursuing a master's degree at a US university made me analyze more deeply the role of my social class, racialization, and nationality in the work at an anthropology museum. For the purpose of my graduate internships, I noticed how my identification as a middle-class mestizo³ Colombian facilitated interactions with museum curators and, on the other hand, how, through this acknowledgment, I established the position in work done for anthropology exhibitions.

The first point of contact to share my academic museum interests always implied giving information about who I was. I chose to identify as someone born, raised, and educated in Colombia and underscored my academic peer status (anthropologist) to open a dialogue. I repeatedly noticed that being a Colombian representative, international graduate student, and young professional granted me extensive access, support, and flexibility in my internships.

In the specific projects I conducted, I was intentional about how my nationality, racialization, and class could intersect with the narrative I was designing for the museum

3 I refer to the mestizos who were the people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry born in the parts of Spanish America. It is an identity that merges European and Amerindian physical and cultural heritages. Mestizos, criollos, mulatos, zambos, among others are terms that come from ethno-racial system of *castas* that evolved during the Spanish Empire.

exhibition. “Colombian”, as another imagined community (Anderson, 2016), is far from being a monolithic homogenous group. As a mestizo, I recognize the historical alignment of Colombian mestizos with the white dominant society and the privileged position that those from the upper and middle classes formally educated as anthropologists (we) have had speaking on behalf of subaltern groups like indigenous peoples and artisans. Exhibitions in museums are not a place of exception. In the two internships, I, aware of being a mestizo with the power to do an exhibition of groups racialized as indigenous (NMAI) and indigenous and mestizos (MUUA), sought to include consultations with people represented. Although it was not possible for technical reasons such as time and resources, I proposed and discussed it with my mentors. Likewise, I strove to have strong prose and clearly defined themes to make the information accessible. Conscious of wrongdoings in museological exhibitions to not perpetuate them, some of my struggles in designing an exhibition were having a creative chronological time, choosing non-essentialized ideas of subaltern groups, and critically approaching official discourses reproduced in anthropology and mirrored in museum anthropology exhibitions.

Anthropology exhibitions: Changes throughout and within a museum concept in the Americas

Global South and the MUUA as a case study: Colombian nation-state, political elites, and anthropology

The political context shapes the possibilities of representations in museums, fostering or preventing discussions. Emerging Latin American nation-states in the nineteenth century had to grapple with how they imagined themselves as communities (Anderson, 2016) and, from that moment on, how not only indigenous peoples but subaltern groups in general, including artisans or peasants, would be depicted and included or not in the nation-state. González-Casanova (1965) coined the concept “Internal Colonialism” to pinpoint the perpetuation of colonial Spanish domination in the new organization of society brought by independence movements of old colonies in Latin America.

As in Colombia, after reaching political independence in 1819, the incoming mestizo ruling class set as a “national priority” (Botero, 2006, p.102) the creation of a national museum in the national capital, Bogotá, for scientific dissemination. The mission was shaped by the vice-president of the republic, Francisco Antonio Zea, and the secretary of the interior, José Manuel Restrepo, who were both politicians and scientists. They envisioned the National Museum of Colombia replicating the Museum of Natural History of Paris and, consequently, imported scientists to the country. The museum was then inaugurated in 1823, and scholars got involved in research-based undertakings bolstered by the government.

The mestizo political elite was either the country’s intellectual elite or they chose the European intellectual leaders to launch scientific developments in Colombia and raise new local academic elites. It is explained in terms of a boomerang effect: the political elite

legitimizes intellectual elites that likewise will legitimize the national project through Western scientific epistemology. The aforementioned is traceable in both the creation of the Gold Museum in 1939 (having its antecedent in the National Museum) and the birth of the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia in 1970. Both have the French ethnologist Paul Rivet as a central figure.

Rivet, the founder of the Humankind Museum of Paris and co-founder of the Ethnological Institute in Paris, was invited by Eduardo Santos, the president of Colombia, to work in Colombia in the 1930s. He encouraged the president to acquire a gold work collection for an emerging Gold Museum in Bogotá. The Bank of the Republic, a state institution, purchased several gold artifacts (Plazas, 2021; Museo del Oro, 1978), and the Gold Museum, which is now recognized as the most important anthropology museum of Colombia (Archila, 2014, p. 3070), was officially created in 1939 with the acquisition of the Poporo Quimbaya.

Rivet was also a key figure for Colombia's anthropology and archaeology disciplines in terms of theory, fieldwork, laboratory techniques, and museum exhibitions. He established the National Ethnological Institute in Colombia, which provided formal training in the principles of the discipline to Colombian pioneer anthropologists like Alicia Dussán and Graciliano Arcila Vélez. Similarly, the institute was a bridge to gather foreign scientists working around ethnological topics like the Austrian anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, with whom Rivet became close friends and held continued academic dialogue (Laurière, 2010). Dussán and Reichel-Dolmatoff married and worked together. This couple designed the Gold Museum's museography script and physical layout in 1968 (Botero, 2006). On the other hand, Arcila Vélez created a university anthropology museum in 1943 that was integrated by a university resolution in 1970 into what is now the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia-MUUA (Universidad de Antioquia, 2015, p. 19)

The management of indigenous material culture labeled as Colombian heritage has slowly but steadily taken shape from the independence era in the elite's hands by means of laws, decrees, academies, and institutions (state apparatus). Notwithstanding the political turns, the aspiration of nationhood headed by mestizo political elites is consistent and will be reflected in the creation of the National Museum of Colombia, the Gold Museum, and the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia (MUUA).

In my internship at the MUUA, I asked my mentor about the history of the institution, in particular, and the presence of other university museums in Colombia, in general. He introduced me to three publications: *Códice. Boletín Científico y Cultural*—the MUUA journal—and its issue N.28 (2015), the MUUA anthropology collection catalog *Colección de Antropología: Herencia, Patrimonio y Memoria* (2014), and the anthropology exhibition catalog *Los Rostros de Antioquia* (2017).

Founded in 1970 under a university decree, the MUUA (Photograph 1) is a five-story facility affiliated with the Extension Center of the Universidad de Antioquia and located within its main campus in the city of Medellín, department of Antioquia, Colombia. The museum mission is “difusión y reinterpretación del patrimonio, desde su

identidad y valor como museo de una universidad pública”.⁴ This museum has become an educational complex with permanent and temporary exhibitions, workshops, lectures, a journal, teaching resources, and cooperation agreements to foster research projects with their collections. The MUUA holds the largest collection of pre-Hispanic pottery in Colombia, manages and safeguards four types of collections: anthropology, arts, natural sciences, and history, and displays permanent exhibitions of natural sciences collections in the *Francisco Antonio Uribe Mejía* gallery and anthropology collections in the *Graciliano Arcila Vélez* gallery. The exhibition outlined during my internship would be laid out in the four external walls of the fourth floor’s corridor, a reserved space for temporary anthropology exhibitions.



Photo 1. Facade of the Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia

Source: Photograph taken by Manuela Pérez©

For my internship project, I developed a draft for a temporary exhibition about the Ráquira pottery tradition from the Boyacá department in Colombia. The activities for this project were divided into three steps: identifying sources and collections, writing the exhibition script, and selecting objects. I had the mentorship of the chief curator of the anthropology collection, whom I name in this article under the pseudonym “X.”

I first identified the bibliography sources related to the Ráquira pottery. Apart from online reports published by *Artesanías de Colombia*, the search was limited to physical resources available in the main library of the Universidad de Antioquia and the MUUA’s documentation center, as indicated by X. After reviewing twelve sources from an initial search, I selected three books, three journals, and one graduate-level thesis for careful reading. Through a template, I

4 Dissemination and reinterpretation of the heritage from the museum’s identity and value as belonging to a public university.

developed the museological script. I primarily spent most of my time creating the texts or labels and finally selected pottery objects from the MUUA's Ráquira collection.

Global North and the NMAI as a case study: Defining the US self and building an understanding of native peoples through Latin American indigenous materiality

Regarding the subjects represented, the understanding of “the indigenous” in the Western World has been historically shaped by the modern anthropology discipline under which modern museums were organized. By following an evolutionist/unidirectional approach, indigenous communities were first presented as a savage testimonial of a previous stage before Western civilization and their allegedly inevitable extinction. The first museological practices in the US were organized under such anthropological basis in the late 19th century (Sturge, 2007). To order and exhibit indigenous objects while presenting them represents an opportunity for the empire to materialize its political, economic, and cultural project. Ultimately, material culture refers to people, and indigenous objects and narratives about them provide ideas about “the Other”. Consequently, Snickare (2022) even questions if Western institutions should continue displaying stories of others. The latter is associated with the conflicts of exhibiting indigenous material culture in museums.

Building on Lonetree (2012), taking a decolonial perspective in anthropology museums implies first discussing the issues of colonialization in the United States concerning the role of indigenous communities in general and an indigenous community in particular. In her book *Decolonizing Museums. Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Lonetree uses the concept of “genocidal act” to highlight that colonizing operations have triggered an indigenous demographic decline and destroyed indigenous people’s culture via assimilation projects that still prevail. Colonizers violently dominate indigenous persons materially, culturally, and symbolically. Analyzing those historical facts that she calls *hard truths*, *truth telling*, and *difficult legacies* should be explicit in exhibitions rather than implicit or abstract, with confused intentions as she critiques some spaces in a review of the NMAI exhibition hall (Lonetree, 2012, pp. 73-122). Lonetree’s argument is immersed in what Patrick Wolfe (2006) defines as “settler colonialism.” Wolfe calls the *logic of elimination* to the relationship between genocide and settler colonial structure, and he asserts that the ultimate purpose of elimination is access to territory. In this sense, the orientation to the understanding of colonialism in the museum setting and subsequent handling through anthropology exhibitions contrasts with the Colombian case previously described.

Prior to my internship at the NMAI, the internship coordinator mailed me two books entitled *Spirit of a Native Place. Building the National Museum of the American Indian* (2004) and *Do all Indians Live in Tipis? Questions and Answers from the National Museum of the American Indian* (2018), along with a map of the three NMAI facilities. These official initial publications introduced me to the museum’s mission, history, and organization. As stated in *Do All Indians Live in Tipis?* (2018), the NMAI’s goal in its exhibitions is to “allow Native people to tell their own stories about their histories, rich cultures, and contemporary lives”

(p.2), which aligns with the museum mission “In partnership with Native Peoples and their allies, the National Museum of the American Indian fosters a richer shared human experience through a more informed understanding of Native peoples.”

Founded in 1989 under the enactment of a U.S. Congress law, the National Museum of the American Indian has three branches: a facility on the National Mall in Washington D.C. (Photograph 2), opened in 2004; the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, opened in 1999; and the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, opened in 1994. The NMAI has its roots in the latter facility, which was named after the wealthy founder of the Museum of the American Indian. Heye, a well-off banker, collected and exhibited archaeological and ethnographic objects of indigenous peoples in his native New York. The nationalization of this extensive anthropology collection after his death, the museum’s affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, and the creation of two new facilities enlarged opportunities to disseminate knowledge about native life and open discussions about collections management and indigenous (self) representations in a national and hemispheric scale. Apart from physical exhibitions, as of December 2023, eleven online exhibitions are available on the NMAI’s website. The *Great Inka: Engineering an Empire*, presented in English and Spanish, provides representations of Latin American indigenous peoples from prehispanic times. Following a focus on Latin American indigenous topics, the exhibition outline drafted during my internship intends to be the first of several steps to develop a temporary exhibition proposal at the NMAI or any affiliated Smithsonian institution.



Photo 2. Facade of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Source: Photograph taken by Jorge Arcia Durán

For my internship project at the NMAI, I developed an exhibition idea about the indigenous ballgame in the Americas. The activities were divided into three steps: creating a bibliographic database, identifying Smithsonian locations and desirable consultations with living indigenous communities, and contrasting museological practices. Throughout the internship, I had the mentorship of the curator of the Latin American and Caribbean Collections in the Collections Research and Documentation department, whom I name in this article under the pseudonym “Y”

I was given the flexibility to narrow the topic of the indigenous ballgame regarding geographical area, time, and indigenous communities. Based on an initial bibliographic survey, I decided to choose the Mesoamerican region from pre-Hispanic to contemporary times, especially considering living indigenous communities. As in the MUUA case, all the archival information reviewed came from academic sources. However, unlike the MUUA case, there was no restriction regarding the source from which the information would be retrieved.

Additionally, based on the kind of envisioned ideas for the exhibition, I selected relevant Smithsonian-affiliated institutions in the United States where the exhibition could be displayed beyond the NMAI. Moreover, I pinpointed living indigenous communities playing “variants”⁵ of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ballgame in four current Mexican states, with whom initial consultations may be sought.

Findings and analyses

Data from both internships was collected using qualitative methods. Primarily, I took advantage of the ethnographic method at the MUUA.⁶ From modern ethnographic historiography, my practice at the MUUA was less idealized, since I was not entering an unfamiliar culture. I returned to a known urban scenario in Colombia and specifically interacted with peers: anthropologists and anthropology students whose activities revolved around cultural heritage in a language (literally and figuratively) and in an institution that was not new to me. Similarly, my interaction distanced from classic ethnographic work in terms of holism because my ambition was not to cover the whole museum community or departments, nor did I restrict my everyday interactions to museum-affiliated people.

Although there was a familiarity with the norms and values of both the culture and the museum, the development of museological practices in exhibitions was unknown to me. Taking an inductive approach, I undertook fieldwork to get involved in the on-site design of an exhibition script at the MUUA so that I could deepen my understanding of curatorial practices. Ethnographic records were taken throughout the internship and divided into five sections: (1) actions and opinions held with my mentor, (2) curator

5 This is the word found in the literature review.

6 I refer to the foundations of the ethnographic method established by the dominant US and British anthropology academics in the 20th century. A review of those pillars was taken from Guber (2001).

background and work on exhibitions, (3) MUUA's museological practices in exhibitions, (4) reflections from personal questions in different internship stages, and (5) material culture for display.

Likewise, to systematize archival work, I kept written records of the bibliographic references used, summaries of the chosen literature, maps designed to link subthemes' concepts, and flowcharts elaborated to organize internship steps. Complementing ethnographic and archival work, I conducted a semi-structured interview protocol following parameters provided by Jacob and Furgerson (2012) in conjunction with an informed consent to wrap up my learning experience in exhibitions through an exit dialogue with my mentor.

Adapted to the virtual nature of the internship, methods in the NMAI leaned towards a thorough archival review of academic sources, where I documented the steps to achieve a preliminary archival selection, bibliographic summaries, and conceptual maps and graphs designed to build a database. This database ended up encompassing thirty-five different bibliographic sources and became the cornerstone to define both the themes and subthemes of a Mesoamerican ballgame exhibition and the indigenous communities with whom consultation could be requested.

Comparisons and analyses of qualitative information had a twofold purpose. On the one hand, they were the bedrock of the exhibition script (overarching MUUA internship goal), and the building of a database and future steps for community engagement (overarching NMAI internship goal). On the other hand, they allowed me to identify patterns in the museum discourse and practices framing the representations of indigenous and artisan groups in the exhibitions co-designed.

Museo Universitario Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia

In the MUUA, collaboration in anthropology exhibitions has been understood as the co-creation process of an exhibition among academic peers or subject-matter experts. Scholar authorities are not limited to the MUUA staff, and they can occur at different exhibition stages. Under this understanding, collaborations have guided the production of some permanent, temporary, and traveling exhibitions. Two notable results of collaborations have been the eleven-year renovation of the permanent anthropology gallery "Graciliano Arcila Vélez", which involved the participation of twenty-two social scientists, and the perhaps most well-known and visited temporary exhibition "Falos y Váginas", which was developed among the MUUA curators of the anthropology, art, and natural sciences collections.

Not all MUUA anthropology exhibitions are overseen by MUUA staff. The described understanding of collaborations has enabled interinstitutional and individual alliances around university objectives. So, what unites the work of different collaborators? This question leads to deepening the specific role of a collaborator in exhibitions (curator) and what it entails; in other words, what does it mean to do curatorship in MUUA anthropology exhibitions?

Who a curator is based on what a curator does could be differently conceptualized based on the country, historical time, museum genre, museum size, museum priorities, museum department, linked collection, human resources, and other aspects. The lack of a homogenous definition makes it relevant to analyze how a curator of anthropology exhibitions at the MUUA can be defined through their work (contextual practices). For this purpose, I focus on the activities of the MUUA chief anthropology curator, who was my internship mentor, to propose three key features defining a curatorial role in MUUA exhibitions: research, heritage management experiences, and institutional frame.

First, *research*. The curator mainly addresses what ideas to highlight from the collection in an exhibition through a research process. The research process is at the heart of the curator's role. However, not all research on collections results in exhibitions, since research could also be part of programs forged with university research groups or other museological practices. Along the same lines, I noticed that the MUUA chief anthropology curator does not only "curate" objects for exhibitions but also curates the anthropology collection through his simultaneous roles as registrar, collection manager, and museum mediator, tasks demanded by external requests and internal demands.

Second, previous *heritage management experiences*. Mentorships and the curator's previous professional experiences influence their work in exhibitions. They enabled him to, on the one hand, know the anthropology collection and, on the other hand, know the MUUA as an institution (values, mission, needs, and stakeholders). Mainly, his work at the MUUA cataloging the anthropology collection paved the way for him to envision personal contributions once he reached the role of curator.

Third, *institutional framework*. Sometimes, the development of anthropology exhibitions surpasses the decisions of a curator. As understood at the MUUA, collaboration allows curatorship where *X* does not participate or fully engage. Likewise, some exhibition ideas may be suggested to him or accepted by external curators to be developed as they align with institutional agendas and the MUUA mission. In any case, all proposals are reviewed by the museum committee.

If we consider a pyramidal figure and take a horizontal look, collaboration — as practiced by the MUUA— might be analyzed as a fertile ground to produce more informed museum representations. The purpose of having multiple academic peers is to have more complex, nuanced, and complete exhibitions. Nevertheless, participation based on academic credentials limits the breadth of collaboration. More so, once scholars dismiss the inclusion of non-academic actors in collaborations. Thus, if we take a vertical look, the seemingly broad scope falls short of integrating diverse subjects whose non-academic knowledge would subvert or enlarge disciplinary narratives and that, mainly, could be represented in exhibitions.

In terms of the role of anthropology, it is relevant to explore the limits of the anthropology framework. Acknowledged by the MUUA anthropology curator, the likely unconscious subordination to what and how the discipline approaches material culture represents a downside of the academic formation of the collaborators (most of them anthropologists), limiting an internal dialogue possibility mirrored in exhibitions.

Furthermore, museum anthropology has been a dismissed field, a peripheral area, or conceived as an appendix of the discipline, lacking further reflections to approach museological work. There is a tension in the possibilities of representing subaltern groups in museum spaces revealed by these shortcomings.

For the permanent anthropology exhibition in the MUUA, my mentor explained that there was an intentionality in showing connections between the indigenous past and present. Therefore, the representation of indigenous peoples sought to overcome the long-standing misconception reproduced in museums that froze indigenous communities to ancient times. Paradoxically, in the permanent exhibition, the association of culture to a geographical unit (model) from pre-Hispanic times to the present prioritizes ideas of continuity and stability in the definition of native culture rather than internal change or intercultural exchange. This conceptual thread ends up freezing indigenous communities that are dovetailed within clear geographical borders. The archeological and ethnographic goods are displayed to show such association.

For my internship project, I assumed the role of collaborator and helped co-curate a new temporary exhibition about Ráquira pottery. *X* encouraged me to show the tradition of this pottery style. Ráquira is the name of a town located in the department of Boyacá, Colombia, very well-known for its contemporary pottery handicrafts. Guided by the idea that tradition is a cultural manifestation lasting for a long time, I sought to track this pottery style from pre-Hispanic times and link indigenous communities, which led me to research scholarly authorities.

Arqueología de Sumatarchán, Boyacá (1975), written by the anthropologist Ana María Falchetti, was a key source where I found that Ráquira pottery is associated with the Muisca indigenous peoples (refining my hypothesis). Likewise, the author describes findings of archeological excavations in some parts of the town defining the *Suta Naranja Pulido* typology, which shows characteristics similar to contemporary pottery (p. 232, 254). This typology is furthermore described in *Cerámica y Ceramistas de Ráquira* by Yolanda Mora de Jaramillo (1974, p. 18). Nevertheless, the ceramic shards are scarce, their location does not match the settlement of the current Ráquira town, and there are not only inconsistencies in the archeological record but also a void in archeological data until the documentation of the Ráquira pottery in colonial chronicles.

The nebulous idea about the root of the **tradition** was repeated in other sources with claims that this pottery style was developed from predecessors a long time ago (Hernández-Guerra, 2006), has an indigenous origin better explained through imprecise accounts from chronicles (Mora de Jaramillo, 1974), and come from “los antiguos” without clarifying who they are (Artesanías de Colombia, 1975). Similarly, these ideas made me question if current non-indigenous artisans sympathize with the idea of an indigenous heritage or if this pre-Hispanic origin has been automatized and become instrumentalized.

I faced conflicts while conducting archival research for the exhibition: On the one hand, the academic sources provided me with arguments to build on an original hypothesis seeking to portray a tradition from indigenous pre-Hispanic legacies. On the other hand, some arguments were vague and undeveloped, and, most importantly, none

allowed me to understand how current living artisans who sustain a Ráquira pottery style think of their craft through the concept of tradition. Regardless of some downsides, and although I will also explore the idea of change and hybridizations in the exhibition, I decided that if the idea of traditional cultural practice and materiality wanted to be shown, the reference to indigenous peoples and some related representations should be mandatory. From this starting point, I began defining the first theme and thread of the museological script.

In hindsight, I wonder whether I continued reproducing an academic normative discourse that needs further reevaluation or inspection of other analytical perspectives and if I could have otherwise introduced tradition in the Ráquira pottery. Finally, the lack of diverse participation of non-academic actors in the co-creation processes of exhibitions led me to ask about a prior step to any collaboration: consultation.

As suggested by *X*, it seems that the lack of involvement of indigenous communities with anthropology museums cancels any foreseeable problem with exhibitions of indigenous topics. I argue that even though indigenous organizations and individuals have donated and/or continue donating objects to the MUUA seeking their preservation, it does not translate into an approval of all museum actions, unneeded attention to have consultations or a consensus of a transferable indigenous agency. *X* recognizes the first of these three points but, in general, asserts that indigenous communities have not presented any complaint to the museum regarding exhibitions, which leads him to infer that the development of indigenous topics in exhibitions has been successfully welcomed.

During our meetings, I repeatedly conveyed the concern for consultations to better portray a narrative in exhibitions and asked for perspectives on repatriations. In both cases, the answer was addressed based on either interinstitutional issues or inter-museum agreements (the state apparatus level). When I inquired about a hemispheric scale, the US was seen as a distanced reality from Colombia in terms of museum development and challenges. Consultations and collaborations sought in the US were explained based on the country's long-standing racism, which was not seen as related to the Colombian mestizo reality, whereas Mexican museology was something *X* pointed out as not only a closer society (Mexico) but also a role model for Colombian museum anthropology. Finally, the lack of positionality statements in museum exhibitions but, even more importantly, the lack of a question about why positionality statements may be important exposes the dominance of a horizontal collaboration model collaboration (Up) and the muting of consultations with communities involved in the creation of a museum script and represented communities in an exhibition.

In the museological script I designed about the Ráquira pottery, *X* —apart from suggesting the idea of tradition— did not make explicit any theme, so I utilized the “Big Idea” concept (Serrell, 2015) to devise a script. There are three components to a “Big Idea”: a subject, a verb, and a so what? It works as a place of departure for the curator to identify the exhibition's backbone, anchoring the selection and development of themes. I define the

“Big Idea,” as follows: La forma y uso de la cerámica de Ráquira continúa y se transforma con base en condiciones histórico-culturales.⁷

Although there have been neither explicit restrictions nor suggestions to present specific ideas in exhibitions (unlike other museums in Colombia), the MUUA exhibitions have as foundations articles 72 and 74 of the 1991 Colombian constitution, which guide the treatment of the nation-state material cultural heritage. It is traceable and consistent to the mission, justifications, and secondary objectives of previous MUUA exhibitions. Throughout the internship, *X* stressed that the exhibitions’ purpose is to show Colombia’s cultural diversity while showing the MUUA anthropology collections. Collections are the basis of exhibitions: “Para que exista la investigación en un museo, y un museo se piense como un laboratorio es porque tienes que tener colecciones.”⁸

The collections of contemporary pottery handicrafts donated by the dismantled Museo de Artes y Tradiciones Populares to the MUUA were intended to be the main focus of the exhibition. Correspondingly, to link both tradition and change while primarily making use of contemporary pottery, I organized themes chronologically: pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary times. I conceived time unidirectionally. Apart from the introduction to the exhibition, I wrote interpretative labels for each subtheme within a 100-word limit. Below, I itemize the interpretative labels for every theme:

The pre-Hispanic era has three subthemes: *Roots*, *Archaeology*, and *A Vessel Universe*. In the first, I called attention to a foundational pre-Hispanic identity of the Ráquira town, interwoven with the pottery work. For *Archaeology*, I approached what arguments the discipline has provided regarding the Ráquira pottery style and some limits of the conclusions due to the hypothetical nature of the discipline. Due to the absence of archeological fragments associated with the *Suta Naranja Pulido* typology in the collections, I proposed to show the book found in the library collections (Photograph 3). For the last subtheme, I highlighted the different kinds of Ráquira pottery vessels with a utilitarian function related to the practice’s origin.

7 The form and function of the Ráquira pottery persists and changes on the basis of historical-cultural events.

8 The possibility of research in a museum and, therefore, envisioning the museum as a laboratory demands the existence of collections.



Photo 3. Drawings of archeological pottery fragments found in Ráquira. Source: *Arqueología de Sutamarchán*, Boyacá (Falchetti, 1975)

Source: Photograph taken by Jorge Arcia Durán

I suggested three subthemes for the colonial era: *Influences*, *Religion*, and *Formal Aspects of the Pottery*. Building on the question “What enabled the continuity and evolution of the Ráquira style?” I consider in *Influences* the changes brought by Spanish colonialism. For *Religion*, I expanded on the influence of Catholicism in the new figures that take place in the style, as well as rituals during the ceramic firing process.

For the contemporary time frame, I suggested three subthemes: *Decorative Handicrafts*, *Little Horse of Ráquira*, and *New Syncretism, Adaptations, and Market Demands*. I consider it relevant to expand on the *Little Horse of Ráquira* or *Caballito de Ráquira* due to its prominent association with the Ráquira town and pottery, and the high quantity and diverse manufacture of this figure in the MUUA collections (Photography 4 and 5). For the remaining subthemes, I suggested questions and a reference, along with contemporary crafts.



Photos 4 and 5. Crafts associated to the *Caballito de Ráquira*

Source: Photograph taken by Jorge Arcia Durán

Lastly, a final reflection comes from the blurred line in archeological and ethnographic objects between value and price. Even though the Colombian constitution in its article 72 defines that the Colombian cultural heritage—a term that encompasses indigenous artifacts stored in a museum—is “inalienable,” which means they cannot enter the capitalist market by being sold or gifted, one of the museum’s duties has been to qualitatively value indigenous objects of the anthropology collections to set quantitative prices. Each museum object becomes an economic asset of the university.

This seeming contradiction is no real paradox if we examine the larger picture of the state apparatus. I argue that placing a price tag on each object becomes a strategy for the nation-state to track its cultural belongings and enable museums, which are part of the cultural institutions that safeguard state heritage, to better control their collections in terms of internal management, private donations, and tenure of archeological objects. The latter, for instance, has become an obstacle to developing some exhibitions, as expressed by the chief anthropology curator, due to the time-consuming logistics (e.g., legal documentation) and high costs (e.g., insurance policies) carried by handling artifacts from one museum to another.

Regarding internal management, the possibility that each museum is given a temporal tenure provides them with certain freedom to make decisions over collections. However, as all heritage goods belong to the Colombian nation-state, freedom over collection management is ultimately controlled by the Colombian Institute of Anthropology

and History (ICANH), the state institution responsible for managing archeological collections. The heritage goods are both symbolically and economically material assets of the Colombian nation-state.

The continuous efforts of ICANH on safeguarding anthropological goods throughout museums contrast with its lack of regulations, suggestions, or inquiries to the representations of museum exhibitions using these anthropological goods and the participation of the possible living indigenous communities represented. Is the ICANH function reserved for maintaining the material stability of archeological and ethnographic goods? Is the logic of state institutions focusing so much on safeguarding and researching collections and so little on how the information is produced and conveyed to the non-anthropologist public and living communities represented?

National Museum of the American Indian, The United States

As mentioned for the NMAI, who a curator is varies based on different contexts. Drawing from my interaction with *Y*, I identified three key features defining this/his curatorial role to some extent similar to those described for *X*. Unlike *X*, the most notable difference is that designing exhibitions is not part of *Y*'s current duties. Below, I will elaborate on the characteristics of his curatorship with Latin American collections at the NMAI.

First, *research* (specifically archaeological research). In conjunction with more than twenty years working in museums, *Y* has developed his research career as a university archeology professor. Interinstitutional agreements between museums and universities have facilitated joint research efforts. As a curator, *Y* oversees some research projects with NMAI Latin American and Caribbean collections. Second, *collections management*. *Y*'s main curatorship duty is to care for the archeological Latin American and Caribbean collections at the NMAI's Cultural Resources Center. Apart from research, the former implies cataloging, documenting, and creating new collection accessibility strategies.

Finally, in terms of *institutional framework*, *Y* strives to develop his curatorial work under the umbrella of the NMAI's and the Smithsonian institution's mission. The former was true when discussing collections accessibility for indigenous peoples, and the latter when considering Smithsonian facilities to lay out an exhibition with Latin American content. Regular mentorships to interns and fellows are part of the NMAI anthropology curator's tasks and become institutional strategies to engage students in the curation of international collections. Although the museum departments and their functions are well divided, it does not prevent collaborative work. In fact, I harnessed a fluid cooperation among Smithsonian staff. Leveraging Smithsonian networks was beneficial for managing bibliographic sources, enhancing my understanding of facilities, and discovering valuable resources for my internship project.

In terms of the role of the normative discipline, *Y* acknowledges that one possible downside of archeology has been its enormous descriptive emphasis, contrasting with the lack of explicative frameworks. As a result, the understanding of specific archeological

records has been (by automatization) simplified. The former has boxed indigenous communities and reduced native culture understanding. Amid these tensions, he adheres to the motto of the New Archeology: "Archeology is anthropology or is nothing."⁹ In terms of his NMAI work, it has provided him with the chance to reflect on what is feasible when working with indigenous communities and collections (consultation, collaboration, and partnerships).

Apart from suggesting the ballgame as a topic for an exhibition, *Y* encouraged me to look at bibliographic references describing the game. Most of the information (archeological and ethnographic) was geographically located in what is today Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras and associated the ballgame with religion and social complexity in the pre-Hispanic time. Guided by a prominent initial idea of **the symbolic** function of the ballgame, I sought to expand on the role and meaning(s) of the game in the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica region, which led me to recognize resources by scholarly authorities. *Y* promptly warned me of the analytical dangers of understanding the ballgame only under certain **symbolic** frameworks. He called attention to what and how information about symbolic functions is explained. He additionally guided me to pay attention to contemporary ballgames in the region.

In hindsight, I question how much of my exhibition proposal needs to review how the symbolic function has been interpreted in the ballgame by the anthropological — mainly archaeological— literature and better identify the scopes and limitations of key disciplinary debates to later select what would be worthy of having on a museum exhibition. Doing fieldwork and developing a proposal to work with the identified indigenous communities that practice the ballgame nowadays might re-address and/or nourish the symbolic focus of my exhibition proposal.

One of the most outstanding NMAI achievements has been the prominent role of consultations to forge collaborations with living indigenous communities, which disrupt traditional anthropology museum practices. Acknowledging the distrust of native communities towards museums because such spaces have perpetuated colonial subordination, the NMAI has reflected on better museological practices and work prioritizing indigenous engagement. *Y* hypothesizes that the institution's leadership in indigenous peoples' hands has allowed envisioning this museum as a tool for indigenous agency and self-determination while forging trust. This initiative is not exempted from tensions. Authors like Lonetree (2012) and de la Cadena (2015) argue that some noble intentions fall short of exemplary consultation and exhibition content that truly represents indigenous peoples.

In the case of strengthening this exhibition proposal, *Y* explicitly stated the need for consulting with living indigenous communities, considering who to consult, how to consult, times, interests of different members of an indigenous community, and interests of other involved stakeholders. Once in the field, introducing changes to an original proposal should be anticipated. This way, consultation would move from a formal authorization

9 An aphorism by Willey and Phillips (1958) identifying archeology's need to engage in anthropological theoretical discussions and reflections.

towards a meaningful project. My mentor suggested that even though the steps and stages of consultation for an exhibition project might take longer, the results become more fruitful.

In the museological script I designed about the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ballgame, as with the MUUA's exhibition, I used the "Big Idea" concept (Serrell, 2015, pp. 7-18) to outline the themes and subthemes for a potential NMAI exhibition. I defined the "Big Idea" as follows: Prehispanic worldviews are conveyed through the ballgame in four Mesoamerican sites. Out of 35 book chapters and articles, I quantified that 26 pieces, or 74% of the reviewed literature, support the big idea. By means of the quantitative and qualitative information, I ended up selecting the archeological and ethnographical information associated with the ballgame in 4 Mexican states: Oaxaca with the Mixtec ball linked to the Mixtec indigenous peoples, Sinaloa with the Ulamá or Purechá ballgame, Yucatán with prominent records of the pre-Hispanic ballgame in the archeological site of Chichén Itzá, and the Michoacán state with the Purécha or Tarsaca ball.

More or less (un)conscious, I designed the thematic structure for the ballgame, similar to the one developed for the Ráquira pottery exhibition. Following a unidirectional timeline, I chose four themes: Mesoamerica (1), Religious Backbone (2), Colonization (3), and pre-Hispanic Ballgame Legacies (4).

First, I tried to identify the pre-Hispanic roots of the exhibition topic. For that purpose, I saw it as important to introduce what unifies and defines a "Mesoamerican region." This section would subsequently approach ideas of a "Pan-Mesoamerican identity," as hypothesized by some archeologists, intertwined with the role of the cultural practice of the ballgame from pre-Hispanic times. I proposed to provide information about remarkable pre-Hispanic locations where the game was played in Mesoamerica and indigenous groups associated with its practice.

To build on the hypothesis of the symbolic function, I considered it relevant to highlight descriptions from the Popol Vuh (a comprehensive book of the Maya culture that describes the world foundation) framing the religious dimension of the ballgame. The role of the twin brothers (Photography 6), ideas of regulation between the overworld and underworld, and the balance of agricultural cycles would be encompassed in a first subtheme entitled *Origins*. In a second subtheme entitled *Key Elements*, I proposed tackling the game's technical elements that articulate its symbolic function by answering five questions: Where was the ballgame played? What was used to play the ballgame? How was it played? Who played it? And when was it played?

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(14) Bowers Museum - In this scene from "Popol Vuh: Watercolors of... | Facebook


Bowers Museum's Post

Bowers Museum
May 14, 2016 · 🌐

In this scene from "Popol Vuh: Watercolors of Diego Rivera," the Lords of Xibalba summon Hunahpu and Xbalanque to play ball. The games are a trap, but the hero twins anticipate this and ultimately defeat the Xibalbans.

Currently on view: <http://goo.gl/7hZ8dy>

Image credit:
Los Mensajeros de Xibalba Invitan a los Jugadores de Pelota (Xibalba's Messengers Send an Invitation to the Ball Players),
Diego Rivera, 1931
Watercolor on paper
"REPRODUCCIÓN AUTORIZADA POR EL INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES Y LITERATURA 2015"
D.R. © 2015 Banco de México, Fiduciario en el Fideicomiso relativo a los Museos Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo. Av. 5 de Mayo No. 2, Col. Centro, Del. Cuauhtémoc 06059, México, D.F.



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Photo 6. Twin Brothers of the Popol Vuh - Watercolor on paper by Diego Rivera, 1931.

Source: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura © 2015

As a result of the significant amount of information from Spanish chronicles and the dramatic effects of the Spanish conquest, I considered it relevant to elaborate on the impacts of Spanish colonization: interrupting, annihilating, and modifying the ballgame practice. Incorporating this theme is relevant to the NMAI's mission because it makes explicit the challenges faced by indigenous communities and the resistances they have

devised, as well as aligning with the NMAI's vision to promote "Equity and social justice for the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere."

Finally, the last section will tackle the legacies of the ballgame in terms of transformations and survivals from pre-Hispanic to contemporary times. I found substantive ethnographic information about the Ulama, the Purépecha, and the Mixtec ballgame: how it revitalizes an ethnic identity, how it is played under special events and days, the game's rules, and the distinctive clothing used to play it. To wrap up the exhibition, I suggested exploring the impacts of ongoing colonization. For example, how the ballgame is presented by tourism in some parts of Mexico today, where ballgame performances might be selling colonial ideas linking indigenous people to exoticism and dead savages. By the end of the internship, drawing from the materiality described in the case studies reviewed, I suggested for each theme relevant objects to be displayed: ceramic figurines, rubber balls, ball playing gear, attire, photographs, sculpture reliefs, and stone disks.

Aware of the thin line between making accessible content and oversimplifying the information, my mentor and I discussed exhibition accessibility and the relevance of the display. For this purpose, he encouraged me to reflect on three key questions: What is the targeted audience? In what Smithsonian institution may the exhibition be relevant? And what kind of objects may be pertinent to have on display? In that sense, I proposed to have this temporary in-person exhibition displayed in a Smithsonian-affiliated institution in the United States that promotes Mexican heritage, either the Mexican Museum in San Francisco or the Museum of Us in San Diego. Both institutions target the participation of large audiences of Latinos and Mexican descendants who now live in the United States. Finally, because of the virtual character of the internship, I missed some discussions that could have been sparked and unfolded if I had experienced the museum internship in person. This limitation may have prevented conversations like those I had with "X" about the economic value of collections.

Conclusions

By examining curatorial practices through internship projects, this essay offers insights into how two prominent museums in the Americas produce cultural representations of indigenous and artisan groups in exhibitions. Drawing from the perspective of Critical Museum Studies, I framed curatorship and curators' work within the museum context of each country (Colombia and the US) to identify dominant colonial legacies, which were differently acknowledged and handled in exhibition-making. I traced them in the patterns of envisioned collaborative processes, treatment of anthropology knowledge, and orientation of exhibition content to nation-state and transnational policies. Notwithstanding differences in the two case studies, curatorial undertakings aligned consistently with each museum's mission. For the MUUA, the focus was on producing an exhibition to showcase a cultural tradition of Colombia using state-owned collections. For the NMAI, the focus was on designing a preliminary exhibition script, mainly built

from academic archaeological sources, before the anticipated consultation processes with living indigenous communities in the Americas.

Creating an exhibition design as an internship product challenged me to work within the scope of the institutions and propose conversations within these limits. As part of my own curatorial involvement, this essay sheds light on the tensions I had when handling archival and ethnographic data to define the exhibition's conceptual backbone and select the material culture to display. This sort of self-critical and reflexive work pointed out several limits of the knowledge produced by scholarly sources, made it relevant to distill the understanding of collaboration, and raised questions about the place of living communities portrayed in the exhibition.

To better understand why some stereotypes of subaltern groups are so enduring, we need to note how authority, exclusivity, and scholarship are expressed and negotiated in spaces like museums and the specific work done in anthropology exhibitions. Under the umbrella of Critical Museum Studies, this attention speaks to a calling of authors focused on critical race theory, sites of decolonization, and community engagement, to mention a few. The work here adds to discussions of anthropology curation in museum exhibitions. Exhibition research and design could become a remarkable arena to readdress neglected demands of historically marginalized groups, rethink possibilities of partnerships, and engage the larger public with more complex but accessible exhibition content.

While I do not define the mentioned Colombian and US cases as representatives of the global south or the global north, respectively (encompassing a defined pattern), I proposed a path centered on studying “up” the production of cultural narratives. It was beyond the scope of this article to study down and sideways. Nonetheless, such qualitative studies would nourish, confirm, or deconstruct the comprehension of specific indigenous and artisan communities represented and provide a more thorough assessment of the stories built for exhibitions. In the spirit of a “reinvented anthropology” (Nader, 1972, p. 292), reciprocity and commitment should resonate with our envisioned work as museum professionals vis-à-vis the long-standing role of museums as powerful institutions of the dominant society.

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