

# Simultaneously Worlds Apart

## *Placing National Diversity on Display at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts*

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Many readers may remember visiting museums when they studied history at school. We descended, half-dazed, from the overheated school bus and were quickly ushered into hushed galleries where an earnest guide described iconic national works of art. We learned what it meant to be part of the nation, not just by reading textbooks or by memorizing speeches, but by engaging with materials that embodied its ideology, values, and spirit.

Today we live in a world on the move. In 2013, 232 million people, or 3.2 percent of the world's population, were international migrants (United Nations Information Service 2014). When you combine that with the growing numbers of internal migrants, particularly in places like India and China, it becomes clear that mobile lives are increasingly common, although not by choice for the vast majority. Creating successful multicultural societies and a global community that can respond to global problems is the challenge of the day. So if museums in the past helped create national citizens, do they now help create global citizens too? How is the nation displayed in relation to the globe and what is it about the countries and cities where museums are located that helps explain their curatorial choices?

To answer these questions, I visited museums in Europe, the United States, Asia, and the Middle East. I talked with museum directors, curators, and policymakers about the paintings, iconic objects, and benefactors that define their collections. No museum I visited told an entirely national or global story. Instead, the nation always reared its head in depictions of the cosmopolitan, and cosmopolitanism always came with something of the national (Zubrzycki 2006; Daugbjerg 2013; Macdonald 2013). Rather than seeing these as competing, I think of cultural institutions as falling along a continuum of cosmopolitan-nationalism whose two constantly changing parts mutually inform and transform each other (Levitt 2015). In fact, in some cases it is by recognizing and representing the nation's internal diversity, and thereby redefining the national, that some institutions connect to the cosmopolitan. Where a museum is located along this spectrum arises from the intersection between national and urban cultural politics and the globalization of culture, an encounter that not only transforms museums but to which they are important contributors.

In this chapter, I explore these questions by focusing on the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston. The MFA opened its new Art of the Americas Wing in November 2010 with great fanfare. The addition, which cost approximately \$504 million and took nearly ten years to complete, includes four floors with fifty-three new galleries (Shea 2010). The wing is laid out so that visitors can grasp the storyline whether they enter on what the museum calls the foundation level (and others call the basement) or on the ground floor—that American art was never made just in the U.S.A. But the nation-state still plays the starring role in the MFA's story. The resulting display is more diverse, but that diversity is spread across the exhibition, never adding up to what feels like a critical mass. Work by Native American, women, Latino, and African American artists is salt-and-peppered throughout—subtly there but spatially segregated. Visitors learn what constitutes America more clearly, a more nuanced and differentiated view looking inward, but they don't learn much about how that changes things when they look out—how international influences have shaped the country's understanding of its position in the world. The MFA, therefore, falls closer to the national side of the cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum.

The museum's collections, funding, history, and curatorial expertise as well as its role in the national museological distribution of labor go a

long way in helping to explain these choices. But how the MFA puts the nation and the world on display also reflects Boston's cultural armature—its social and cultural policies, demography, history, and institutions. Long-standing ideas about community, equality, and the collective good continuously echo in the ways things get done at the museum. Particularly important is the urban and national diversity management regime or how racial, ethnic, or religious difference gets talked about, measured, regulated, and ameliorated and whether it is seen as a problem or an opportunity. Finally, the MFA's choices also reflect how the United States sees itself on the global stage and what its future aspirations are—where the nation is in the arc of its nation-building and global claims-staking projects and the kinds of citizens it believes it needs to get there (Levitt 2015).

#### MUSEUMS AND NATION BUILDING

Ever since the leaders of the new French Republic opened the doors of the Louvre to the French people, museums have played an important role in imagining and creating nations. To grow strong, new nations needed to perform themselves well enough so that complete strangers would claim the knowledge and rituals on display as their own. What got included in the collection and who created it sent clear messages about what groups belonged and what the nation stood for. But connection and belonging generally stopped at the national border. Because the nation was defined in opposition to other nations and ethnic groups, people who were out of place—such as immigrants or religious minorities—were not likely to see themselves represented or, if they were, not without serious biases (Duncan and Wallach 2004; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; T. Bennett 1995; Macdonald 2011).

What's more, not everything on display was "of the nation." By displaying artifacts from other lands, countries showed that they were powerful enough to collect and control the world beyond their borders (McClellan 2003). While early on these materials were displayed taxonomically, they were later grouped into evolutionary sequences with the nation generally occupying the highest rung. Visitors learned that other cultures made clothing, tools, and artwork, but that theirs were better. Museums, therefore, not only created nations but justified their

imperialist projects. They exposed visitors to a certain kind of knowledge based on a certain set of values. The ordering and reordering of objects, or their spatial positioning, and their contiguity, or position in relation to each other, legitimized particular social and political hierarchies, privileging some ways of knowing while excluding others. Culture and identity could be represented as simple, factual, and real. The museum's content (or its collection) and form (or how these objects are arranged in space) work dialectically to socialize visitors into "official" and unofficial narratives. The trained visitor arrived ready to exercise a particular kind of gaze and to internalize a specific kind of "truth" and Western-centric cultural ranking (Sherman 2008; McClellan 2003), often uncritically imbibing the official storyline without recognizing its alternative.

These hierarchies stubbornly persist. They are reflected today in the distribution of what museum curators jokingly refer to as "real estate." How the square footage in a museum gets carved up sends clear signals about what its priorities are. Even museum architecture reflects these assumptions. Think of the grand staircases we ascend to enter some of the world's great museums. The polished stone makes visitors feel they are entering a temple of wisdom where sacred, unquestionable truths are safeguarded for posterity. Think of museums' elegant, high-ceilinged entrance halls. The symbolic messages of Western superiority and triumphant progress are embedded in the blueprints.

Great changes, however, are underway throughout the museum world driven, in part, by widespread migration and by the heightened cultural contact between diverse groups it brings about. How should museums respond to the increasing diversity of their nations? In countries where museums depend on private donors and visitor numbers to survive, how will they attract future generations of visitors and benefactors? How will museums balance the competing imperatives of nationalism and cosmopolitanism?

My research treats cosmopolitanism as an empirical question. Did the museum professionals I spoke with think their work contributed to creating cosmopolitans and, if so, in what ways? As Saito (2011) proposes, our conversations revealed three broad components that do not necessarily come together. For some people, cosmopolitanism was an idea or ethos. For others, it was a set of skills and practices that we need to engage with different people and experiences. For others, it was a political project—what would a cosmopolitan world look like, and what we

would have to do to create it? Cosmopolitan values and skills generally included such things as curiosity, tolerance, empathy, listening, critical thinking, and being open to interact with different people and experiences. Human rights, democracy, and gender equality were also mentioned, but by no means by everyone.

Not everyone is able or willing to sign on to creating a more cosmopolitan world. Citizenship status, class, and gender are just some of the factors that make cosmopolitanism more accessible and appealing to some than to others. Nor is the idea to agree on a standardized shopping list of “universal” values. In fact, rejecting understandings of cosmopolitanism that don’t match our own is a distinctly unc cosmopolitan stance. Rather, my work revealed that cosmopolitanism might be best understood as recognizing the importance of having a respectful, constructive conversation about what our common ground might be, having the openness and skills to participate in that dialogue, and then, based on that conversation, taking steps forward to create a more just world.

The cultural and heritage sectors are frequently sites where the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism get negotiated. UNESCO World Heritage sites, international music compositions, and world literary festivals are just some of the places where these struggles play out (Levitt and Nyiri 2014). Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006) argue that we are witnessing a transition from national to cosmopolitan memory cultures. Institutions such as Holocaust memorials and museums take us beyond collective memories framed as belonging to particular national or ethnic experiences to those framed as “the global” or “of humanity,” where the central message is “Never forget.”

But Sharon Macdonald (2013) and Mads Daugbjerg (2013) write that cosmopolitan and nationalistic portrayals are often deeply intertwined. The reinvention of the Danish battlefield Dybbøl as a site of peacekeeping rather than a site of conflict, argues Daugbjerg (2009), relied on Danes’ perceptions of themselves as a nation of tolerance and humanitarianism. He uses the term *cosmopolitan nationalism* to remind those who celebrate the cosmopolitan ideology of contemporary museums and heritage that are often framed from a nationalist perspective. Geneviève Zubrzycki (2001) also uses the term *cosmopolitan nationalism* to describe how intellectuals and activists promoted a new version of the Polish nation. They were not just cosmopolitans, because they embraced “Polishness” as a meaningful category constructed at “home” and in

the diaspora but that also had broad, worldly horizons. As a result, the nation “is still important because of its affective weight and is important as a frame of action, although it is difficult to ‘do nation-ness’ in quite the same ways in which it was formerly done. . . . It is not so much the nation being displaced or ‘cracked’ by cosmopolitan memory as the nation presenting itself as cosmopolitan through harnessing shared pasts as part of its own” (Macdonald 2013, 215).

These writers open the door to a more relational review that sees cosmopolitanism and nationalism as mutually interdependent and constantly in conversation with each other. They also drive home how greater worldliness sometimes arises from the recognition and embrace of the diversity within—the redefining of the nation itself as more diverse—which then connects to the diversity without.

Where many of these discussions fall short, however, is that they do not tell us enough about how cosmopolitans are “made”—what Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman (2000) refer to as the little-understood ways in which we actually do multiculturalism, or what Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2007) recognize as the frequent mismatch between cosmopolitanization and the production of cosmopolitan sentiments (see also Kymlicka and Norman 2000). As a result, warns Craig Calhoun (2008, 110), “cosmopolitan theories need to be supplemented by an emphasis on the material conditions and social institutions that make this sort of cosmopolitan inhabitation of the world possible—and much more likely for some than others.” We need to shift away from the cosmopolitan to cosmopolitics (Latour 2004): not simply dreaming of a time when people recognize that they inhabit the same world, but actually taking on the daunting task of seeing how that “same world” can be created.

How then did the MFA, in creating its new Art of the Americas Wing, contribute to these efforts? How is the nation materialized in the objects that were put on display, in their position within the gallery, and in their placement in relation to each other, and what is the subsequent position of the United States on the cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum?

## ART OF THE AMERICAS

According to Elliot Bostwick Davis, the John Moors Cabot Chair, Art of the Americas, curators’ aspirations for the visitor’s experience are

materialized in the physical layout of the Art of the Americas Wing. Each floor has a central core of galleries, where the main storyline is told, and the surrounding galleries are jam-packed with additional materials where visitors can dig deeper and learn more if they choose. “All told,” said Bostwick Davis, “the Art of the Americas Wing represents three millennia of artistic production across four levels of architecture that is intended to tell a story of both/and, through central spine galleries and galleries that surround those, opening up windows, much as one would on a computer screen, to reflect greater breadth, depth, and nuance to the overview represented in the center of each of the four floors.” On two floors, there are even “behind-the-scenes” galleries where visitors learn the backstories about curatorial choices, important donors, and controversies over different conservation techniques.

Each level of the new wing opens with an iconic object or visual aid, placed in and outside the gallery doors, which serves as a sort of shorthand for the chronological period to come. These also symbolically communicate the central message of the exhibition—that American art was always influenced externally, whether by the indigenous artists from other parts of the Americas or by art produced in Europe and Asia.

Outside the door, on the “foundation” or basement level, there is a map of the Americas, indicating transitions in power and control (e.g., in what is present-day Peru, the labels “*Tahuantinsuyo*,” “Viceroyalty of Peru,” and “Peru” capture the change from Incan to Spanish to independent rule). A stunning display of elegantly lit, not-to-be-missed, waist-high ceramic funeral urns greets visitors once they step inside the gallery. The first thing you see, said Bostwick Davis, “are five spectacular K’iché burial urns, produced by the Maya in the southern highlands of Guatemala in about 750 AD.” “These were produced,” she went on, “by a highly sophisticated culture, with its own court rituals and portraiture. We wanted people to see ancient American art and Native American art on their own terms.” The museum also wants people to see that American art never took shape in a vacuum. From the very outset, cultural connections to other parts of the world influenced what the nation created. American art, visitors learn, did not start with John Singleton Copley, or with New England furniture and paintings (Bostwick Davis 2009). Indigenous American materials are its foundation, literally and figuratively in this display, but you must go down a flight of stairs to get to the “beginning.”

In fact, the layout of this foundation level is characterized by a kind of “segregated diversity” that is replicated throughout the wing. Visitors see masterpieces from Central and South America in the core galleries. Scrimshaw, ship models, colonial furniture and paintings, and the foundation from a seventeenth-century Massachusetts home surround these in the adjacent side galleries. We grasp that these objects were produced at the same time, but because they are displayed in separate spaces they seem to have little to do with each other. They are, in essence, simultaneously in worlds apart. The official narrative, as expressed through the choice of objects and how they are interpreted, is that these colonial experiences were intimately connected, but the unofficial narrative, as expressed by their placement in space, suggests that they evolved in parallel universes. The ancient American materials are, as Mukerji suggests elsewhere in this volume, rendered inarticulate or mute because they are displayed on the lowest rung of the spatial hierarchy.

Perhaps the most spatially separate group of objects is the Native American materials from the United States. They are in a gallery at the back of the floor that is easy to miss if you are not looking carefully. A showcase filled with older and contemporary pottery greets visitors—this mixing of space and time is repeated throughout the gallery. Curators wanted visitors to understand that these cultures and traditions are still very much alive today. “Unlike most galleries at the MFA,” the wall text reads, “this one mixes old and new. Many of today’s Native artists feel close kinship to the past and often discuss their works’ connections to traditional art. Much of this recent work addresses the questions of identity and the challenge of finding a balance between continuity and change—of seeking freedom *within* tradition as well as freedom from tradition.” But it is difficult for the untrained eye to distinguish between older and more contemporary objects. Obvious contemporary works are placed at the rear of the gallery, including *Greasy Grass Premonition #2* by David Paul Bradley, which depicts Custer, in Andy Warhol-type repeated stamps, imagining what would become his last stand, and Mateo Romero’s *Tewa Buffalo Dancer*.

The MFA started collecting pre-Columbian art in the late 1800s. The first pieces came into the collection in 1879—the result of a trade between Harvard University archaeologists working in Peru and an MFA team working in Egypt. Still, said Dorie Reents-Budet, curator of the art of the ancient Americas, the collection is weak compared to the

museum's other holdings. Until the new wing became a reality there was no permanent curator because "it's little-brown-people stuff, you know, it's not art. . . . There are still many museums in the United States that have the pre-Colombian collections in the 'Hall of Man,'" reflecting "the nineteenth-century attitude about non-Western cultures as being objects of study, of scientific inquiry into the science of human development rather than art."

A reflection in one of the behind-the-scenes galleries acknowledges this history. "In terms of collecting Native American art," Gerald W.R. Ward, Katharine Lane Weems Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, tells visitors, "this institution was interested in those materials from the time of our founding in 1870 until about 1900 or 1905 in which we amassed a collection, particularly of ceramics but also of other things as well. . . . Then we lapsed into the hiatus of well over fifty years in which there was relatively little interest in Native American or Indian materials. And, really, for the better part of fifty years, the emphasis was on Colonial American art, European art from France, Britain, Italy, and that was the way the museum tried to acculturate its visitors over the years, [until] there began to be an expansion of the canon of what is 'beautiful.' Beginning in 1985, or '84, we began to be much more interested, pursued objects with much more vigor since, and now five different curatorial departments collect Native American materials."<sup>1</sup> But while the MFA is clearly trying, at this point it is very difficult to catch up.

The internationalization of the American art story, or the idea that iconic national objects are in fact quite cosmopolitan, continues on the next level. Visitors are sometimes told this directly, when they read the wall text, but more often they must engage with an additional source, such as an audio guide or the exhibition catalogue, to get the full picture. Paul Revere's iconic *Sons of Liberty Bowl* from 1768 greets them when they enter the gallery. Revere created this silver masterpiece to honor the ninety-two members of the Massachusetts House of Representatives who protested the Townshend Acts, an important precursor to the American Revolution. Along with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the Liberty Bowl is one of the country's most important treasures. What few people know is that the Liberty Bowl is modeled after a Chinese punch bowl. In the second half of the eighteenth century, as North American colonists grew rich from international trade, they

also acquired art and artifacts from the East, including Chinese silks, porcelains, and wallpapers. In fact, said Dennis Carr, assistant curator of decorative arts and sculpture, almost any piece of silver in the last half of the eighteenth century would have been Chinese inspired: “There are very few objects that are purely American or purely Chinese. We are trying to tell a complex story. Great nationalistic objects actually tell a very global story.” The nation is a window for understanding the global, but not the other way around.

A row of chairs, which graced eighteenth-century homes from Boston to Venezuela, also drives the same story forward. “During the 1700s,” the wall text reads, “artistic styles crossed political borders and jumped oceans like never before.” This gallery, the viewer is told, puts these places and styles side by side. “Can you tell the difference between Boston and Philadelphia, New York and Barbados?” the wall text asks. “The point is,” said Carr, “that all of the Americas was going through a colonial experience at this time. It could be Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French, German. . . . Their governments might differ radically, their cultures might be different, but there were also lots of similarities; they were all participating in a new kind of globalized market for goods for the first time . . . I think there is a lot more connection throughout the Americas than the average person realizes or fully understands.” In this case, difference is showcased side by side to drive home that colonial aesthetics and consumer aspirations were similar throughout the region.

Another radical change for the museum is the Spanish colonial gallery. Since many of the museum’s most important donors were from New England, the paintings and living room furniture they donated overwhelmingly reflect the New England experience. So how to expand that portrait to include Spanish colonial America? The curatorial term “adjacencies” is key to the answer. Objects are placed near each other so visitors can grasp the connections between them. After Revere’s Liberty Bowl come exquisite, intricately decorated silver chalices and liturgical objects, made in sixteenth-century Bolivia and Peru. Just as the Pennsylvania legislator Timothy Matlack stares out powerfully and majestically from the canvas, so does Don Manuel José Rubio y Salinas, the archbishop of Mexico, painted by the mestizo Miguel Cabrera in 1754. Displays of colonial power and authority, whether captured in crucifixes and communion wafers, or legislation and legal briefs, have a lot in common. By placing silver made in New England in the gallery next to silver

made in Peru, the museum shows that Paul Revere was not the only one making amazing silver masterpieces.

“What is interesting to me,” said Erica Hirshler, senior curator of American paintings, who has worked at the museum for nearly thirty years, “is to see what kinds of real estate is being given to different kinds of art. When I first came here in the 1980s, when we talked about colonial art, we were talking about New England and Anglo culture. We were talking about Copley and his relationship with England. . . . In the new wing, for the first time, we have a Spanish colonial gallery and that is a huge change for us. It sounds like it shouldn’t be, but it is for Boston—a kind of bastion of Anglo culture—to acknowledge that there was a huge colonial presence somewhere else.”

The story of American art’s porous boundaries continues on the third floor where visitors are greeted by John Singer Sargent’s *The Daughters of Edward Boit*. But Sargent, they soon learn, while born to American expatriates in Florence in 1856, spent his childhood traveling throughout Europe. He did not visit the United States until 1876. Sargent’s teacher Carolus-Duran admonished his students to study the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez and Sargent did just that. He made the requisite pilgrimage to Madrid’s Museo del Prado, copying Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* which, Hirshler believes, served as a model for his portrait of the Boit daughters (Hirshler 2009).

Even the way the next main gallery is laid out, in a salon style, hints at America’s connections to the outside world. It tips its hat at the mode of hanging paintings from floor to ceiling that was popular in elegant European homes and at public art exhibitions. All of the works are by painters who were, in some way, influenced by European art. “It is a very outward-looking space,” said Hirshler. “It is about America at that time having almost as much of a cosmopolitan culture as we think we do now.” It’s not that the omnipresent Hudson River School is not represented. It’s just not center stage like it would have been in American galleries of the past. “This is huge,” she said. “We are looking for connections with other places and more and more willing to acknowledge them. We are more willing to see how American art fits within the context of European art instead of only talking about what is American about it.”

“One of the messages of the new Art of the Americas Wing,” summed up Bostwick Davis, “is that the art of the United States and the colonies of New England are intimately connected to the art of the Western

Hemisphere. This wing is very different from every other wing of American art—and there I am referring to the art of the United States—because it displays the art of the ancient cultures of the indigenous Americans (ancient and Native American art) extending back to 900 BC and the prehistoric period for the Native American collections. From there, we situate the art of the United States, which reflects our major strengths in the art of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century New England, within a far more global context. It is a case of both the art of our region, colonial Boston at the core, and that of the broader nation and the Americas.”

But when it comes to showcasing Boston’s diversity or the diversity of the nation at large, one curator admits that “the museum is still behind the curve.” You still have to look hard to find it. How much progress is made, and for whom, can depend on how vocal a particular community is, how much money it has, and whether its immigrant members arrived with traditions of art collecting and museum going.

Newly acquired and long-held objects created by artists of color are sprinkled throughout the galleries, sometimes in the “core” areas and other times in spaces that are prominent and marginal at the same time. Recent acquisitions include a 1965 painting by Argentine avant-gardist Cesar Paternosto entitled *Staccato*, and a 1943 painting, *Untitled*, by the Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam. One gallery features paintings by the Mexican painter Jose Clemente Orozco and the Chilean Roberto Sebastián Matta Echaurren, but they are exhibited in the context of a discussion about the historical influences of internationalism, as the wall text explains: “Many artists from Europe and the Americas, uprooted by war and revolution, gathered in New York City, where they shared ideas, techniques and innovations. The works in this gallery reveal the international nature of modernism in this period, demonstrating the Mexican, Chilean, French, and German influences on the origins of American Abstract Expressionism.”

Segregated diversity also characterizes the treatment of materials by or about African Americans. The central folk art galleries contain little produced by African American artists. Outside them, however, in a bridge leading from one part of the building to another, three ceramic works created by and about the black or immigrant experience in the Americas are featured prominently. Visitors must pass them when walking from one set of galleries to another, but they feel as if the works are

in a hallway—highlighted but marginalized at the same time. There is a portrait pitcher of Toussaint Louverture, the former slave who led the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), which was the first successful slave revolt in the Americas; a Face Vessel made by African Americans in South Carolina; and a pitcher by Karl Muller dating back to about 1876, which according to the text, “embodies several nineteenth century American themes: immigration, western expansion, gambling, and beer drinking.” One side illustrates a scene from the “The Heathen Chinee,” an 1870 poem by Bret Harte in which a California miner confronts a Chinese immigrant over cheating at cards.

Curators purposefully decided not to “ghettoize” minority artists. “There is no gallery of African American art or of women artists,” said Hirshler. “We wanted to put the paintings where they would naturally go. Women artists should be in the same gallery as male artists. It’s not helpful to set them apart in a different room. You cannot change the canon unless you integrate the canon.” The result, however, is that in many cases visitors do not realize these artifacts are there—they must actively read the exhibition for diversity because it is not clearly signaled in the wall texts or the spatial arrangements.

In November 2011, the MFA took an important step toward filling one of the most conspicuous gaps in its collection. It acquired sixty-seven works by African American and Afro-Brazilian artists. A small number are displayed near one another in the contemporary galleries, and the museum recently published *Common Wealth: Art by African Americans in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Sims 2015). According to Bostwick Davis, such works “greatly enhance the MFA’s Art of the Americas holdings, allowing us to tell the broader story of American art.”

So where does the MFA fall on the cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum? According to curator of education Barbara Martin, the museum is changing and, taken together, these changes add up over time. “If we effectively communicate the human dimension of the art from each culture and that then cumulatively leads you to those clicks—‘Oh, that’s what I do,’ or, ‘That’s what my grandfather used to say’—that leads you to a resonance across cultures.” In other words, she believes the museum is slowly moving toward the cosmopolitan end of the spectrum.

In essence, summed up Bostwick Davis, the museum is trying. “We are of course limited by the collections, those we care for and the many we acquired to begin to express the art of the Americas in the wing,

about 3,500 in all,” she said. “But the wing is really a statement of our ambitions, as we all realized it would not be possible within the decade we worked steadily on the project to represent the full breadth of the rich artistic expression of the Americas. That said, the galleries reflect a greater range of artists, from those who were indigenous Americans to those unknown to us today, a greater representation of women artists, both young and old, so-called folk artists or who were self-taught, Latin American artists, and artists of color to name a few.”

#### WHY HERE, WHY NOW?

The new Art of the Americas Wing tells a story about how the nation changed in response to its connections to the world. It is not a story about what Americans need to do in response. The wing is pitched high and elegantly; you have to look and listen hard to see and hear the stories of people of color, which are few and far between and, in the case of Native Americans, stand alone in a separate gallery in the basement. What explains these choices?

Part of the idea of telling an “Art of the Americas” story grew out of an institutional restructuring orchestrated by Ann and Graham Gund Director Malcolm Rogers when he arrived at the MFA in 1994 (Mr. Rogers declined my request for an interview). To promote communication across mediums and between the people in charge of them, Rogers combined American Paintings and Decorative Arts and incorporated some of the Latin American materials previously “included” in Europe. He also folded in a collection of ancient American materials, including the K’iché burial urns I have described, which never had a home of their own. Staff slowly came to see these holdings as the basis for their retelling of the American art story because they come from the place where the narratives they wanted to tell begin. These shifts also resonated with the changing demographics of the museum’s visitors. It behooved the MFA to showcase minorities, and Latinos in particular, given their growing numbers in the city and the country at large.

The United States, in fact, is well on its way to becoming a majority-minority country. In 2008, the American Association of Museums launched its Center for the Future of Museums. Its first report, *Museums and Society 2034: Trends and Potential Futures*, illustrated the widening

gap between American and museum visitor demographics (CFM 2008). Before 1970, minorities made up 10 to 13 percent of the U.S. population, but by 2008 the figure had risen to 34 percent and was predicted to reach 46 percent by 2033. Yet only 9 percent of museums' core visitors were minorities. The report, according to founding director Elizabeth E. Merritt, "went viral." It "painted a troubling picture of the 'probable future'—a future in which, if trends continue in the current grooves, museum audiences are radically less diverse than the American public and museums serve an ever-shrinking fragment of society" (Farrell and Medvedeva, 2010, 5).

The changing face of Boston mirrors the changing face of the nation, but the MFA's visitor profile had not kept pace. The museum's traditional donor base is white, upper class, and aging. Because it is largely privately funded, the MFA urgently needed to recruit a new generation of visitors and donors. This was certainly on the minds of some of the Art of the Americas staff when they thought about their reinstallation. They wanted Bostonians, future board of trustee members, and tourists of color to see themselves on the walls. They wanted to tell stories that appealed to more diverse audiences. One such narrative is that what got made in America is strongly influenced by forces outside the U.S.A.

Boston also plays a very particular role in the national museological landscape in the United States, just as the MFA plays a unique role in Boston's organizational field. Many tourists come to Boston to learn about colonial American history, and the public expects the museum to tell that piece of the national story. The museum's reliance on visitor fees and benefactors' donations limits how much the tales it tells can change. "European art," said Erica Hirshler, "is not being asked to tell a story about European history in this context in the same way that these objects are asked to tell our national story."

Like the city where it is located, the MFA also plays a particular role in the urban museological ecology, with a unique function in the organizational distribution of labor. Few institutions could preempt it as one of the key places to learn about regional colonial history and few look to the MFA to be on the cutting edge of contemporary American art. In contrast, the Peabody Essex Museum, for example, located just north in Salem, Massachusetts, can use its colonial holdings to tell a more global story because visitors do not look to it as the "go to" place to learn about colonial America. "The MFA," said Hao Sheng, Wu Tung Curator of

Chinese Art, “is as global as a museum in New England can be. It still has to meet the expectations of Euro-American visitors.”

Urban cultural policy also affects museum practice. Until 2014, Boston had no office dedicated to cultural affairs or a clear cultural policy. Former mayor Thomas Menino, who was in office for over twenty years, did not make arts a priority. While he supported affordable housing for artists, promoted open studios, and organized art fairs in the early 1980s, the fiscal crisis later that decade, and its 2007 iteration, decimated much of what little municipal support there was. In 2014, the Boston Cultural Council (BCC), one of the few sources of support for arts and culture, distributed \$144,419 to fifty-five grantees (BCC 2014). In stark contrast, in 2015 the budget for New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs was \$148 million, including \$108.5 million for the Cultural Institutions Groups and \$28.5 million for cultural programs.

Since the MFA receives so little direct funding from the city and state, it is all the more beholden to visitors and donors. According to Brooklyn’s Terry Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum, one of the many reasons the American story gets told differently in Boston and New York is because “you have different masters. You have different funders. The people who funded Boston’s galleries funded something very important. There is a level of tradition embedded in those galleries that was important to those funders, and to the director, I’m sure. I think because we weren’t doing something so grand and public, we had a little more flexibility. I think there are a lot of funders that wouldn’t be interested in underwriting what we did [referring to Brooklyn’s reinstallation of its American collection in 2001].”

The kind of national story the MFA tells and how that narrative is linked to the rest of the world also reflects Boston’s cultural armature. The city’s economic and political genealogy and its early position in the geopolitical hierarchy shaped the kinds of cultural institutions it created. Boston’s founders believed they were creating a city that would serve as a model to the rest of the world. Their “city upon a hill” would inspire all of mankind, a shining beacon that would attract “the eyes of all people” upon them (Winthrop 1838). Boston would never be just any city but a place distinguished by its accomplishments, achieved in God’s name, which benefited mankind—a “hub” of the universe, which is still its nickname today.

As the port towns of Boston and Salem grew, so did the visibility of different cultures and, more importantly, different *ideas*. But by

the nineteenth century, many of the former sea captains who were the region's wealthiest individuals had turned to manufacturing. By the late 1820s, a strikingly interconnected, self-referential group of about forty Boston families, known as the Boston Associates, emerged and slowly assumed control of the quickly modernizing city. Like their Puritan forefathers, this group stressed public service. They would go on to create institutions like the Museum of Fine Arts, not as individuals but as a cohesive community that shared economic interests as well as last names. These reflected the conflicting legacies at the city's core: a faith in elitism and the power of high culture alongside an impulse to elevate the masses by introducing them to that culture; an interest in and begrudging respect for cosmopolitanism combined with a sense that America needed to chart its own way and that the city and the nation would be a model to other nations; and a suspicion that people who spent too much time abroad were possibly disloyal (Rennella 2008).

That is why, says Dorie Reents-Budet, the ancient American materials are still "in the basement. In another city, like Los Angeles, this stuff would have been on the top floor, but Boston is a Northern European city, not a Latin American one." This is, on the one hand, about "the browning of America, but it's also about getting the white folks to recognize that this is okay. That these folks who are coming from Latin America are coming from these countries with this incredible historical heritage."

Finally, the lack of global focus that characterizes the Art of the Americas Wing says something about how the United States sees itself in the world. The United States, writes Michael Ignatieff (2005) and John Ruggie (2005), suffers from American "schizophrenism": no other country spends so much time promoting human rights and democracy while also supporting rights-abusing regimes, opting out of treaties, and insisting that domestic law always trumps international agreements. The nation's destiny is to spread democracy and to be a role model to other nations. Boston's self-image as the "hub of the universe" that would inspire mankind has the same genealogy. "It is something more than the ordinary narcissism and nationalism that all powerful states display," writes Ignatieff (2005, 5). "It is rooted in the particular achievements of a successful history of liberty that U.S. leaders have believed is of universal significance, even the work of Providential design. For most Americans, human rights are American values writ large, the export version

of its own Bill of Rights,” and America is “the last imperial ideology left standing in the world, the sole survivor of imperial claims to universal significance.” It is no wonder that the MFA falls closer to the “nationalism” side of the cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum. To this day, many Americans still equate globalization with Americanization and simply believe that the rest of the world should come here.

## CONCLUSION

More and more people choose to or are pushed into living lives that cross borders—earning livelihoods, raising their political voices, caring for family members, and saving for retirement in more than one nation-state. They will call many places home: the scattered sites where their dispersed family members live, where they work or study, the places they remember and dream of, and the homes they long to return to and rebuild. Their movements, bringing languages, faiths, traditions, and histories into daily contact, even diversify societies that still insist they are not diverse. And all this unfolds in a world plagued by economic crisis, heightened ethnic and religious strife, and declining social protection.

A world on the move produces opportunities and anxieties, more wealth, and much more inequality, a decentering of power into more loci where power gets concentrated anew. It is no surprise that countries across the world are grappling with how to create citizens who can live successfully in diverse neighborhoods and who actively engage with the world at the same time. To be sure, what happens inside museums alone is not going to solve the problems of integration and immigration. And institutions are constrained by their histories and their collections—they must work within the parameters of what their funding, their origins, and their curatorial expertise and interests will allow. But museums are an underutilized tool in our many struggles for social justice. They can provide a space for finding common ground and for starting some of those conversations that are so difficult to have but are so desperately needed. They have to if they are to remain vital and viable in the twenty-first century.

Despite firm commitments by curators to diversify and internationalize the American art story, the new Art of the Americas Wing at the

Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is still overwhelmingly a celebration of the nation. Visitors expect this from the institution—it has long been its role in the urban and national cultural landscape. Because it is privately funded, it must continue to please its most loyal visitors and benefactors.

Moreover, Boston's cultural armature, and the deeply held values from which it grows, also limits the extent to which the museum can change course. Boston's founders flirted with cosmopolitanism while strongly asserting their position as a role model to the rest of the world. They felt responsible for "civilizing" the teeming masses but strictly forbade them from entering their clubs.

Finally, the MFA's decisions about what objects it puts on display and how they are positioned in relation to each other also reflect how the United States sees itself in the world: as a global leader that is so large and powerful it does not really have to engage with anyone else and, when it does, only on its own terms. Because it believes it lies at the center of the geopolitical universe, its citizens do not need to be particularly globally oriented because, for many, being global means being American. Even when the MFA internationalized the American story, it was a new story about what constitutes the nation rather than a repositioning of its place in the world. Museums are not the only places where this uncosmopolitan stance and narcissism come through.

Reading museums through the lens of materiality, space, and institutions brings into focus several things that have long been hiding in plain sight. As Mukerji and Greenland have also discovered, it reveals the tension between the official, articulated discourse of the museum and the mute, unarticulated parallel story that is expressed in the spatial arrangements of the objects. The reflexive visitor holds these two narratives in tandem and decides for herself how to make sense of the disjuncture between them. Yet I fear that many visitors take what they see at face value and do not notice the alternative, conflicting plots.

## NOTES

1. Gerald Ward, *Behind the Scenes Galleries*, audio text.