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Curatorial Practice and the Power of Perception: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* and the Newly Reinstalled British Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

By: Lillian Beeson

The relationship between museums and the way the public perceives object displays and their related histories is a very intimate and interdependent one. Museums will inevitably present objects in ways that show biases, be it intentionally or unintentionally. In her 2000 book, art historian Elizabeth Boone discusses how humans define and determine history. She states that a historical event can figure “strongly in so many separate and conflicting histories, that it meant so many different things to different peoples, and that it was a fundamentally different event in each of their histories.”¹ The reason people have different and sometimes contradictory views on a historical event is that they think and perceive through the lenses of their own background, culture, and narrative. Recognizing that different people can have a diverse range of perceptions of the same event emphasizes the fluidity of history and the way it is presented. As public institutions charged with the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage, how have museums been presenting history? Moreover, which histories have they privileged?

Many American museums struggle to be or become inclusive educational institutions that serve diverse audiences. Yet, museums continually exclude minority histories, objects, and people. Instead, they traditionally prioritize narratives crafted for and by affluent white America (cisgender, heterosexual, white men in particular). Some institutions, such as the National Museum of Women in the Arts (opened 1981) and the National Museum of African American

History and Culture (opened 2016), were created specifically to educate the public about and to serve as spaces for underrepresented communities. Still, most American museums adhere to established perspectives that do not engage with minorities or women. Siloed institutions that provide historical interpretation on these underrepresented groups are symptomatic of this problem; their very existence is a result of museums catering to white America and excluding the histories of minorities and women by default. This does not negate the importance and value of institutions that champion underrepresented groups. Rather the need for such institutions arises from the exclusion of those groups in traditional museum settings. Some museums, however, have utilized museological critique and revisionism by creating exhibitions that recognize how their presentation of objects can promote a biased view of history. Through that acknowledgement, such exhibitions call for changes to become more inclusive.

Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* is one such exhibition. It was held from April 2, 1992 to February 28, 1993 in Baltimore at the Maryland Historical Society (hereafter MHS in this essay, now named the Maryland Center for History and Culture). The exhibition was a collaborative effort between the MHS and The Contemporary, a nomadic museum that does site-specific projects. The Contemporary invited installation artist Fred Wilson to create a work engaging with a selected cultural institution in Baltimore. He chose the MHS. Wilson's piece, an exhibition, ultimately investigated the museum's representation (or lack thereof) of people of color (particularly African Americans and Native Americans). This approach was especially poignant in the early 1990s, when racial tensions grew in response to the beating of Rodney King, the murder of Latasha Harlins, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Wilson created *Mining the Museum* to investigate how museums, knowingly or unknowingly, craft narratives through object

presentations and how these narratives frequently exclude minority groups, their histories, and cultures.

To reveal the museum's biased presentation of objects, Wilson examined the contents of the museum's collection, what was displayed, and how it was displayed. He studied how the museum's interpretation of an object was in turn presented to its visitors. He further considered what was not being displayed, why it was excluded, and the consequences of its exclusion. Following his analysis of the museum's treatment of its collections, Wilson rearranged selected objects in new ways to startle visitors and make them question traditional displays. Thusly, his installation prompted visitors to revise their previous perceptions of the collection and question how the museum's interpretation may affect public understanding of those objects and their greater cultural context.

An example of this shift in presentation is the section called "Metalwork 1793-1880" where repoussé silver was displayed alongside iron slave shackles. By placing these objects in the same display case, Wilson commented on the acquisition of wealth by Euro-Americans through slavery as well as the stark contrasts between the enslaver's lifestyle and the lived experiences of an enslaved African American. Similarly, "Cabinetmaking 1820-1960" juxtaposed 19th-century chairs of rare woods and fine carving with a whipping post. While this whipping post, created around 1885, was never used on slaves, it naturally brings that imagery and history to the forefront of viewers' minds. Once again, Wilson demonstrated that beautiful craftsmanship is not unsullied, that it is culpable to the enduring subjugation of minorities in the United States. In the aforementioned displays, Wilson gathered objects created in the same country, at about the same time, and in the same medium to comment on how museums selectively represent history. His assemblages revealed how those selections willfully ignore

objects that explicitly recall slavery and America's history of racism, only to favor narratives that emphasize beauty, wealth, and the material success that was achieved by white America.

In other parts of the exhibition, Wilson criticized the museum's lack of certain objects in its collection. This was evident in the first display upon entering the exhibition. Here, six plinths flanked a truth trophy – an award for truth in advertising in the shape of a globe. On one side stood three white pedestals with busts of Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson. On the other side, three black pedestals “bore no busts, just brass name plates: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Banneker.”² The absence of the latter three figures was especially poignant in that they were all from Maryland and the three represented historical figures were not. The non-representation of African American figures critical to Maryland's history compared to the inclusion of white figures unassociated with Maryland, exposed the MHS's contribution to a history prioritizing white figures over people of color relevant to the museum's local community.

Wilson further interrogated the lack of minority representation by relaying the untold narratives of African American presence in various objects from the museum's collection. His presentation of *Portrait of Henry Darnall III* by Justus Kuhn underscored this exclusion. Darnall was a third generation Maryland planter. Kuhn depicts Darnall recently returned from a hunting trip, equipped with a bow and arrow. An enslaved male child in a collar stands behind him, holding a dead bird that is presumably the result of a successful hunt. Rather than lighting the painting to emphasize the portrait's subject, Wilson put a spotlight on the enslaved child to shift the viewer's focus. Over the museum's sound system, a child's voice asked, “Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?”³ Wilson's redirection of the viewer's focus confronted one with the living conditions of enslaved African Americans, especially in contrast to the white

enslavers' standard of living. The line "Am I your pet?" is especially effective in this regard, echoing the dog collar worn by the child and thus emphasizes how enslaved African Americans were treated as property and dehumanized. This depiction of an enslaved child's experience underscores the inequity and injustices that African Americans faced and continue to face in the United States. Encountering this within the context of an exhibition reminds viewers that the lack of representation in a museum setting reinforces the erasure of troubling parts in American history and the important role that African Americans have played in this history.

Mining the Museum is significant to curatorial practice because it models a cultural institution showing awareness of its narrative preferences and self-reflecting on those preferences through displays. The installation encouraged museums to scrutinize their own collections, exhibitions, and displays. Through an examination of object presentation, bias recognition, and self-correction, *Mining the Museum* is a powerful case study of the transformative influence curatorial practice can have on viewers' perceptions of objects, the meaning of those objects, and their histories.

Objectively measuring the impact of Wilson's approach is difficult. One would need a comprehensive understanding of each museum's collection and their installations to know where change was warranted and acted upon or not. Regrettably, despite *Mining the Museum's* legacy of revisionist thought, it appears many American cultural institutions have yet to embrace such change. Museums made some progress, however, in representing marginalized groups, though their solutions largely subscribe to outdated approaches that fail at inclusivity and still predominantly promote a white perspective.

Nevertheless, in more recent years, more museums have attempted self-reflective displays. Particularly since the rise of the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements,

cultural institutions began to reevaluate themselves and acknowledge their role in creating a cultural environment that allows for racial hatred to fester. Museums are complacent when they exclude and/or downplay certain peoples, histories, and narratives. In contrast to the museological critique of *Mining the Museum*, it becomes clear that museums still struggle with inadequate representation today, a change that is long overdue. That people need to demand for such changes continually is unfortunate, but it is nonetheless a valuable step towards institutional and cultural growth.

An example of how museums are confronting these issues today can be found in the Tea, Trade & Empire room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recently renovated British Galleries. This room is a microcosm of how a museum can both succeed and fail at displaying objects in ways that promote a more inclusive and deeper understanding of them. Cases dotting the gallery's perimeter hold the most thought-provoking installations. Purposeful juxtapositions reveal untold stories, demonstrating how object placement deeply impacts meaning. One such display case holds a comb case with two turtle shell and silver wig combs, a Wedgwood jasperware antislavery medallion, and a pair of silver tea caddies with a silver sugar box and their oak and rosewood case with boxwood and ebony inlay and silver mounts. The combs hail from Jamaica and were crafted in 1685, when Jamaica was an English colony and the center of sugar production fueled by slave labor. The museum label for these combs notes the use of local natural materials, while addressing its white owner's wealth reaped from the colony's slave labor. Next to the combs is an antislavery medallion dating over a century later (fig. 1). The medallion shows a Black man in shackles kneeling, his hands clasped in a pleading gesture, contained within the words "Am I not a man and a brother?"⁴ On the other side of the antislavery medallion are the pair of tea caddies, sugar box, and their case, all made nearly a half century

after the combs and before the antislavery medallion. These silver objects have “views of colonial ports and plantations [that] extoll the exoticism of tea while ignoring the exploitation that devastated these sites.”⁵ Placed in the same display case, these objects become evidence of British imperialism, exploitation, and slavery. Their expansive dating spanning 1685 to 1790, remind the viewer of the persistence of slavery in the eighteenth century, a narrative that is not readily apparent when each object is viewed individually. On the opposite end of the room is a display case with ivory candelabras and a casket. These items were produced in India while under the British East India Company’s rule. The objects, though crafted by Indians using native materials, were made for British consumption. Therefore, they are material evidence of British imperial presence and its effect on resources and labor in the regions they occupied. These two displays demonstrate an awareness that presentation is important in conveying context for objects’ meanings and their cultural and historical implications.

The visual arrangement of the Tea, Trade & Empire room is an acknowledgement that the decorative arts are associated with imperialism, colonialism, exploitation, and racism, which were apparent at the time of their creation and especially today. Nevertheless, not all displays directly address these issues. The teapots are placed in the center of the room in two well-lit cases that form two semicircles facing each other, and the narrative is not focused on questions of colonialism unlike the displays on the perimeter of the room. In March of 2022, I interviewed Ellenor Alcorn, now the Chair and Eloise W. Martin Curator of the Applied Arts of Europe at the Art Institute of Chicago, who oversaw the renovation of the British Galleries while she was a curator in the department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During the interview, I inquired about the use of juxtaposition in the Tea, Trade & Empire room to reveal the dark history of the British Empire. Alcorn stated, “It was important

to expose a direct and uncomfortable history alongside some of our most beautiful and luxurious objects.” With this in mind, the Tea, Trade & Empire room as a whole should be understood as a visual representation of how when these objects were created, their associated issues were sidelined by patrons in favor of their aesthetic quality. The Tea, Trade & Empire room means to communicate the same narrative concepts that the perimeter display cases explicitly state, but on a much larger visual scale.

That being said, the Tea, Trade & Empire room is not a perfect example of revisionist display. I stayed in this room for over an hour, paying close attention to the objects, their labels, their modes of display, and how people interacted with the displays. During that time, many people passed through and admired the teapots, whose display invited people to walk between them. Few visitors, however, looked at the cases along the room’s edges. While some of the teapot labels contextualized the objects, issues of imperialism, colonialism, exploitation, and racism were not addressed. This is particularly alarming when examining the imagery of some of the teapots, such as fig. 2. This teapot’s caricaturizing features warrants contextualization, yet none is given. These issues were broached only in the displays on the perimeter of the room, metaphorically and literally pushed to the periphery.

The displays with objects relating to slavery and India under British rule demonstrate that curators are capable of and willing to bring forth complex and unpleasant histories associated with their collections. The purposeful object assemblages of the room’s periphery fulfill Fred Wilson’s demands in *Mining the Museum*. Although these histories are acknowledged, the layout of the Tea, Trade & Empire room emphasizes aesthetic value first and foremost. Though this emphasis is a deliberate visual metaphor for the often-unacknowledged implications of the teapots (their connection with issues of imperialism, colonialism, exploitation, and racism), this

method of display unfortunately results in many visitors missing this important socio-historical message.

Mining the Museum and the Tea, Trade & Empire room at The Metropolitan Museum of Art speak to the progress yet to be made in cultural institutions, but they are also promising examples of how to implement change. If nothing else, they demonstrate how curatorial practice is a powerful tool that uses different modes of display to shape people's perceptions of objects, their meanings, and their histories. Hopefully these installations will encourage other cultural institutions to question their biases by considering what stories they are telling, privileging, hiding, and ignoring, and to change their modes of display to allow their objects to tell the multifaceted histories they hold.

Endnotes

¹ Elizabeth Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 17.

² Philip L. Ravenhill, "Recent Exhibitions: Mining the Museum Review," *African Arts* 26, no. 3 (1993): 72.

³ Fred Wilson and Halle Howard, "Mining the Museum," *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993): 156.

⁴ This line is eerily similar to the line "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?" which was played over the museum's sound system during *Mining the Museum*.

⁵ Wall text for pair of tea caddies and a sugar box in a case. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Accession number L.2018.36a-g.

Figures



Fig. 1. Josiah Wedgwood, Antislavery medallion, ca. 1787, jasperware, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 2. Chelsea Porcelain Manufactory, Tea caddy, 1745–50, porcelain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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