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Museum Orientalism: East versus West in US American Museum Administration and Space, 1870-1910. Part One.

By Logan Ward

Abstract: Recent social justice and decolonial movements have led museums in Europe and North America to address the role they have historically played in maintaining imperial and white-supremacist hegemonies. Although museum scholarship has produced some important work on the history of museums as imperial, racist institutions, few scholars, if any, have attempted to understand the specific ways that Orientalism informed the early formations of the modern, encyclopedic museum of the West. Inspired greatly by Saidian Orientalism, this article describes and interprets how “East versus West” thinking and scholarship incorporated two early US American museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The East-West division influenced how both museums came to organize their administrations between experts on art history and experts on “the Orient.” Furthermore, Orientalized juxtapositions, a feature of Hegelian art historical theory popular at the time, formulated how museums organized their exhibition spaces. By following the museum’s gallery program, visitors enacted the evolution of civilization from Orient to Occident and envisioned the differences between Western and Eastern arts as high and low respectively. This article primarily considers two juxtapositions: Greco-Roman traditions versus Egyptian traditions, and European paintings versus Oriental (East Asian) decorative arts. Part one of this article argues that the representational nature of both Orientalism and universal survey museums warrants critical consideration of “East versus West” thinking in such museums and reviews the first two decades of these two museums’ histories regarding Orientalism as thought and a discipline, focusing on their endeavors with the ancient Middle East and Egypt.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Museum Studies, Decolonization, Universal Survey Museums*

Introduction

In the year 2021, it seems inevitable that when visiting a museum in Europe or North America, one will encounter art from all over the world. According to recent data from the Themed Entertainment Association, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) and the Art Institute of Chicago rank among the most visited museums in North America.ⁱ While these two museums are geographically far, their models are similar. They are both “encyclopedic” or “universal survey” museums, meaning that they collect, display, and teach art without geographical or material limits. These museums’ audiences are made up heavily of tourists, making them global representatives of what a “good” museum looks like.ⁱⁱ

This model of museum is so common in Europe and North America today that it may feel mostly inconsequential to the average visitor. However, in its specific historical contexts, the universal survey museum imitated Roman displays of war trophies, attesting to imperial victory. As a foundational example, in the late 18th century, the Louvre’s architecture and display centered Greco-Roman traditions and envisioned the triumphs of the modern French nation-state while relegating Asian and African objects to obscure spaces.ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, art history centered around Western civilization came to represent the greatest achievements of *all* humanity.^{iv}

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to examine the role of Orientalism, or the division between and juxtaposition of Eastern and Western cultures, in the late 19th century formation of US American museums. I focus on two museums: the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), and the MET. They were not only two of the earliest US American museums, but also two of the most prolific in solidifying a Euro-American version of the European museum archetype. I describe chronologically how these museums embraced Orientalism and

Orientalizing art historical narratives in order to convey how “East versus West” thinking strengthened in these museums over time.

Orientalism incorporated the US American museum in two specific ways: administration and space. Museums built connections with European, Euro-American, and Japanese Orientalists and Orientalist institutions. This consequently brought Orientalist scholarship into the museum. Museums divided their administrations to distinguish Orientalist expertise from Western art expertise. This further encouraged the East-West binary in museum interpretation. Simultaneously, Hegelian art history and Orientalism combined as museums taxonomized galleries into comparative spaces between “Western” and “Oriental” things. The museum embodied two primary juxtapositions: Greco-Roman versus Egyptian civilizations, and Western painting versus “Oriental” crafts. Space conveyed an Orientalized representation of the world that positioned the US and Europe as inheritors of high civilization and proliferators of fine art, while representing Asia, Egypt, and the Middle East as *other* to these ideals.

The Representational Connection between Orientalism and Museums

Orientalism is basically a style of thought that positions the West or “Occident” and the East or “Orient” against each other as opposing worlds. The “Occident” is primarily constituted by Western Europe and colonial states that arose from Western European empires such as the United States and Canada. The “Orient” is a mixture of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Through Orientalism, the West appears as modern, rational, scientific, strong etc. while the East appears as antiquated, superstitious, spiritual, weak etc. Such juxtapositions situate the West as the superior entity against a supposedly inferior “Orient.”

Edward Said explained that the “Orient” as it appears through Orientalism is not a geocultural reality, but actually a Western *system of representations* of Asia.^v In other words, the

“Orient” is the Western idea, image, or vision of Asia. Eurocentric biases based on Western religious values and social norms informed these images. Such visions then validated European beliefs about Eastern inferiority and Western supremacy. Thus, thought and representation reproduced one another. Said called this process by which European interpreters imagine, create, or make representations of the “Orient,” *Orientalization*.

Supporting Orientalism as a style of thought was Orientalism as a European scholarly discipline. The discipline encompassed all things related to the study of “the Orient.” In the 18th century, European rationalism transformed Orientalism into a taxonomic, scientized, and secularized study of the Orient, focused mostly on ancient religious texts. European imperial expansion into Asia made it more accessible to scholars in any discipline. But, these studies were often highly edited, overly reliant on personal observation, and primarily compared the Orient to the West.^{vi} Field study demystified Orientalists’ visions of the Orient, and many viewed the modern Orient as degenerated from its glorious, classical past.^{vii} In the 19th century, modern education spread Orientalist literature, and Orientalism incorporated evolutionary theories like social Darwinism.^{viii} Thus, Western domination over the Orient became scientifically valid and historically inevitable.

While Orientalism in its many modes developed, German philosopher and aesthetician Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770-1831) theory of art history also developed. Jean-Yves Heurtebise recently interpreted Hegel’s Orientalism, particularly his views of Chinese civilization as “child-like.”^{ix} Hegel periodized the history of art into three distinct developmental eras – the early period Symbolic, the middle period Classical, and the later period Romantic. He relegated the arts of Asia and North Africa into the earliest “symbolic” category. To Hegel, these cultures and their belief systems were not able to achieve his idealized “absolute idea,” of human

expression.^x He theorized that these cultures could not fully distinguish between the spiritual and material, nor completely understand the “universal spirit.” Hegel mostly ceases to consider Asian civilizations beyond this era, and continues his narrative with the Classical period that emphasized Greece and pre-Christian Rome, when and where art became more realistically representational, getting closer to his ideal of self-realization through art.

At their core, museums are institutions for representing people through objects. Universal survey museums distinctively attempt to represent the entire world under one roof. In addition to Eurocentrism, Western modern understandings of knowledge problematize universal survey museums’ representational missions. The assumption that knowledge was unified, objective, and something to be transferred from expert to novice predicated modern museum pedagogy. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill described how modern museums believed that properly arranging objects into specific disciplinary frameworks revealed universal truths.^{xi} This process of “museography” actively framed Western modernity. As Donald Preziosi asserted, by arranging objects in specific ways, museums were “disciplining modern populations to construe history as the unproblematized or even natural evolution or progression of styles, tastes, and attitudes from which one might imaginatively choose as one’s own.”^{xii} Visitors were to receive museum representations as absolute, and particular hegemonies seemed natural.

Orientalism and museums both created representations, construed them as universal, and used them to convey knowledge about people. Art historical theories like Hegel’s similarly assumed the distinction between Western and Eastern cultures and peoples. But, the relationship between these forces remains undiscussed. Said referenced museum displays as an Orientalist pedagogy but omitted any in-depth discussion.^{xiii} By the time that major universal survey museums like the MET and the MFA formed in the US, Orientalism was well-established as a

modern discipline, and its binaries were similarly formulating art historical theory. These contexts indicate that Orientalism likely played an important role in the formation of US American universal survey museums.

A History of Orientalism in the US American Museum 1870s

In the year 1870, the MFA incorporated in February, and the MET incorporated in April. Both museums' original missions envisioned themselves as a space for both education and exhibition.^{xiv} The MFA installed exhibitions at the Boston Athenaeum until its first building opened in 1876, and the MET installed exhibitions at several rented spaces until its building opened in 1880.^{xv}

Both museums' founders dreamed of replicating European museum models. The MFA founder and honorary director Charles Callahan Perkins (1823-1886) actively adapted the South Kensington Museum's and the Manchester Art Treasure Exhibitions' practices.^{xvi} In 1866, the Louvre likely inspired New York lawyer and first museum president John Jay (1817-1894), who proposed establishing the MET.^{xvii} In 1872, the MET trustees stated that they hoped to create an institution combining "the functions of the British National Gallery... the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum."^{xviii}

Along with European influence came Orientalism, specifically Egyptology. The MFA acquired its earliest Egyptian objects in 1872 through the Robert Hay Collection from Charles Granville Way (1841-1912). Robert Hay (1799-1863) was a Scottish Egyptologist who formed his collection during his residence in Egypt, 1828-1833. The museum displayed the collection at the Athenaeum, and the exhibition catalogue quoted Samuel Birch (1813-1885) the first Curator of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum. Birch asserted that the collection's "chief

strengths” were its mummies and coffins.^{xi} The catalogue evaluated the 19th dynasty as the “period of Egypt’s greatest magnificence,” described how objects from later periods “show the influence of Greek and Roman art,” and used 10th century coins to remind the reader “that Egypt was finally conquered by the followers of [Muhammad]...” in 622, after which it stops discussing Egyptian history.^x

Unlike the MFA, the MET connected to Orientalism through Anatolia and Cyprus. In 1872, US vice consul J. Abdo Debbas, native to the Ottoman Empire, donated the museum’s first object, a Roman-style sarcophagus from Tarsus.^{xi} In 1874, the MET obtained the Collection of Cypriot Antiquities from Italian-American US consul in Cyprus and the museum’s first director Luigi Palma di Cesnola (also known as Louis, 1832-1904). At first, the museum viewed the Di Cesnola collection as Greek art, but, by 1878, the collection became important to demonstrating the “blending together, as well as possible, the Egyptian customs with the Greek ones,” in Ptolemaic (305-30 BC) material culture.^{xii} Gaston L. Feuardent’s (1843-1893) interpretation of the collection focused on dichotomizing material-visual aspects of each object into either Egyptian or Greek influence.

Acquiring these collections formed relationships between US American museums and existing European Orientalist structures. The MFA not only benefitted materially and epistemically from European excavations in Egypt, but connected with perhaps the strongest regime of imperial knowledge to exist – the British Museum. Likewise, East-West political relations became integral to how museum collections expanded. As officials like US consuls in the Middle East, whether native or foreign, contributed to museums, museums became dependent on international policy in the Orient to grow.

These early endeavors also formulated how the museum would represent the Orient. Egypt was *ancient* Egypt, not modern Egypt. Egyptian history also demonstrated the extent of Greco-Roman power in the Orient, and the Middle East's demise to Islam, after which the museum ceased to discuss Egypt. Cypriot materials presented how Egyptian and Greek traditions *could* and *did* mix, but interpretation focused on separating visual-material qualities between the two, making Orient and Occident parallel categories.

1880s

After the MFA and MET opened their buildings, they began to taxonomize their space according to an Egypt-Greece/Rome binary. In 1876, Perkins explained that the MFA's Hay Collection was to be displayed in an Egyptian Room.^{xxiii} In 1879, Perkins referred to a Greek room and explained that "making the circuit of the rooms on the first floor... a peripatetic lecturer might now discourse upon the history of sculpture in Egypt, Assyria, Greece, and Rome, with examples before him of almost every phase of its rise and decline."^{xxiv} His statement indicates that the museum considered expertise and proper arrangement in its organization. The correct way to arrange objects was to situate each civilization into its own room on the same floor. This arrangement revealed a specific narrative of "rise and decline," in these civilizations, and helped a knowledgeable expert transmit this information to novices. Art history became more than a progression of styles; it taught that lesser civilizations succumb to greater ones, and that even great civilizations fall too.

When Harvard graduate Edward Robinson (1858-1931) came into the MFA as Curator of Classical Archaeology in the 1880s, he related similar hopes to complete the museum's collection of sculpture "to present, in an unbroken series, the whole history of the art of sculpture, from its beginning in Egypt and Assyria, through its progress in Greece and Rome, its

course in the Middle Ages, its revival, development, and decline in the Renaissance.”^{xxv}

Robinson’s intended arrangement reveals further Orientalizing influences – Hegelian art history. As the museum applied it, this perspective represented a particularly Orientalized perception of classical art history: Assyria and Egypt begin, but Greece and Rome progress. Like Hegel’s history, this narrative erases other material lineages rooted in Assyrian-Egyptian culture and centers European advancement. The Orient becomes important, but only in its deceased past and only as it relates to the Occident.

The MET seems to have placed the Cesnola Collection within its northern, eastern, and southern halls on the first floor when the building officially opened in 1880.^{xxvi} A review of the museum’s third handbook focused on the Cesnola Collection expressed that the museum’s arrangement grouped the objects “in almost every way calculated to bring out their resemblances and differences,” and demonstrated the “gradual transition from Orientalism to Hellenism in Cyprian Art.”^{xxvii} The author Alexander Duncan Savage’s (1851-1936) interpretation of the collection primarily uses the sculptures to determine when Phoenician or Greek culture predominated in Cyprus. Savage drew a distinction between what he calls Hellenistic – or Greek – and Oriental – including Assyrian, Egyptian, Phoenician-Semitic – influences in Cypriot material culture.^{xxviii} Ironically, he admitted that Greek culture during its early period received many Oriental influences.^{xxix} Savage never degraded the Phoenicians, who he proposed dominated Cyprus before the Greeks, or the perceived-Oriental attributes of the objects. But, he does distinguish an Oriental category composed of a conglomerate of *very different* peoples from a Greek category. And, this history explicitly narrated how Occidental traditions overtook Oriental traditions.

After Egypt came under British occupation in 1882, both the MET and the MFA gained better access to Egyptian materials. At the opening of the MFA building, Perkins lamented that the Egyptian government, then under Isma'il Pasha (1830-1895, Khedive 1863-1879), had halted exports of excavated materials.^{xxx} But, in 1885, the British Egyptian Exploration Fund (EEF) gave the largest donation to the museum “in acknowledgement of the American contributions to the [fund],” and continued to provide objects to the museum well into the 20th century.^{xxxi}

The MET continued to receive Egyptian antiquities from US American officials such as US representative to the International Court in Alexandria Victor Clay Barringer (1827-1896).^{xxxii} Canonical Orientalist literature also entered the museum such as the Napoleonic opus *Description de l’Egypte* (1809-1822) donated by the MET president John Taylor Johnston (1800-1886).^{xxxiii} In 1896, the MET dedicated its fourth handbook to the Egyptian antiquities displayed in hall three, marking the museum’s debut as deliverer of Egypt to the West on par with other European institutions.^{xxxiv}

Endnotes

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- ⁱ Judith Rubin, *TEA/AECOM 2019 Theme Index and Museum Index: The Global Attractions Attendance Report* (Themed Entertainment Association and AECOM, 2019), 93.
- ⁱⁱ In the fiscal year 2019, half of the MET's visitor basis was made up of New York City or New York tri-state area residents, while another half was made up of international and out-of-state visitors. See: "The Met Welcomed More than 7 million Visitors in Fiscal Year 2019," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified on July 10, 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/news/2019/fy-2019-attendance>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Texts* edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 52.
- ^{iv} Duncan and Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," 63.
- ^v Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House Inc., 1978), 2-3, 21-22, 40, 62-63, 115, 202-203, 272-273.
- ^{vi} Said, *Orientalism*, 2, 12, 20-23, 73, 150, 202, 255.
- ^{vii} Said, *Orientalism*, 52, 121.
- ^{viii} Said, *Orientalism*, 206-207, 221.
- ^{ix} Jean-Yves Heurtebise, "Hegel's Orientalist Philosophy of History and its Kantian Anthropological Legacy," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 44, No. 3-4 (2019): 178.
- ^x Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, "Hegel and the Birth of Art History," in *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 24, 26.
- ^{xi} Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Exhibitions and Interpretation: Museum Pedagogy and Cultural Change," in *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 127.
- ^{xii} Donald Preziosi, "Brain of the Earth's Body: Museums and the Framing of Modernity," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Texts* edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 74.
- ^{xiii} Said, *Orientalism*, 165-166.
- ^{xiv} See: James Moske, "Today in MET History: May 13," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified on April 13, 2010, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2010/today-in-met-history-april-13>; See: "Founders and Benefactors," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accessed on July 27, 2021, <https://www.mfa.org/give/founders-and-benefactors>.
- ^{xv} See: "History of the Museum: The MET," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed on July 27, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/history>; See: "About the MFA," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, accessed on July 27, 2021, <https://www.mfa.org/about>.
- ^{xvi} The South Kensington Museum is now the Victoria & Albert Museum; Deborah Hartry Stein, "Charles Callahan Perkins: Early Italian Renaissance Art and British Museum Practice in Boston," *Journal of Art Historiography*, No. 18 (2018): 23.
- ^{xvii} "Note," *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 1 (1871): i.
- ^{xviii} "To the Members of the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 2 (1872): 23.
- ^{xix} *Second Catalogue of the Collection of Ancient and Modern Works of Art, Given or Loaned to the Trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts, at Boston, Now on Exhibition in the Picture Gallery of the Atheneum* (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1873), 4.
- ^{xx} *Second Catalogue of the Collection of Ancient and Modern Works of Art*, 5-6.
- ^{xxi} See: Melissa Bowling, "This Weekend in MET History: November 21," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, last modified on November 19, 2010, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/Features/2010/This-Weekend-in-Met-History-November-21>.
- ^{xxii} "To the Members of: The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 4 (1874): 54; Gaston L. Feuardent, *The Cesnola Collection and the De Morgan Collection: Papers Communicated to the American Numismatic and Archeological Society* (New York: The American Numismatic and Archeological Society, 1878), 4.
- ^{xxiii} "Proceedings at the Opening of the Museum," *Annual Report for the Year (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)* 1, (1876): 10.

^{xxiv} Charles Callahan Perkins, "Report of the Committee of the Museum," *Annual Report for the Year (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)* 4, (1879): 6.

^{xxv} Edward Robinson, "From the Report of Mr. Edward Robinson, Curator of the Department of Classical Antiquities," *Annual Report for the Year (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)* 12, (1887): 12-13.

^{xxvi} "To the Members of: the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 10 (1880): 165.

^{xxvii} Thomas Davidson, review of *Metropolitan Museum of Art, Handbook 3: Sculptures of the Cesnola Collection of Cypriote Antiquities in the East Entrance Hall and North Aisle*, by A. D. Savage, *The American Art Review* (May 1881): 34.

^{xxviii} Alexander Duncan Savage, *Metropolitan Museum of Art, Handbook 3: Sculptures of the Cesnola Collection of Cypriote Antiquities in the East Entrance Hall and North Aisle* (New York: The Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1880), 3-4.

^{xxix} Savage, *Sculptures of the Cesnola Collection of Cypriote Antiquities*, 6.

^{xxx} "Proceedings at the Opening of the Museum," 10.

^{xxxi} Now the Egypt Exploration Society. British author of *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877) Amelia Edwards (1831-1892) and British Museum Orientalist Reginald Stuart Poole (1832-1895) founded the non-profit in 1882; Charles Callahan Perkins, "Report of the Committee on the Museum for 1885," *Annual Report for the Year (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)* 10, (1885): 8.

^{xxxii} For more on Barringer's work and life in Alexandria, see: Kellen Funk, "An American Lawyer in Egypt, 1876," last modified February 11, 2016, <https://kellenfunk.org/field-code/an-american-lawyer-in-egypt-1876/>.

^{xxxiii} John Taylor Johnston and Louis P. Di Cesnola, "To the Members of: The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 16 (1885): 319.

^{xxxiv} Charles Ripley Gillett, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Handbook No. 4: Catalogue of the Egyptian Antiquities in Hall III* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1896).

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