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Exhibition Review: the Brooklyn's American Identities and Native Representation



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The Brooklyn Museum's façade offers a telling sign of its identity and character within the museum world: with tall, Classic pillars and a carved stone face harkening back to the Met and the Louvre, and a new glass atrium and entryway. Smooth large rectangles of glass, with seamless joints, splay out from the base of the Roman columns. Inside, the Brooklyn offers many of the similar themes as the Met, but displayed differently: with more colors, more images, more activity. The exhibition "American Identities" is located in the Brooklyn Museum, on the top (5th floor).

When the visitor arrives on the floor, the elevator lobby contains several interesting items. While not technically part of "American Identities," seeing these objects prior to the exhibition prewarns the visitor of the coming treatment of native peoples in the exhibition. These objects include Yoram Wolberger's Red Indian #3 (Spearman) 2008, David Levinthal's photo Untitled (Cowboy and Indian fighting), and 4 lithographs by James Otto Lewis 1835-36. The panel reads, "The irregular "fins" on the sculpture, that mimic the seams of their mass-produced counterparts, symbolize the continuing proliferation of standardized images of Native Americans and the American frontier. Moreover the lack of detail and the generic character of the warrior underscore the ways in which stereotypes deny historical circumstances and ignore the diversity of Native peoples." However, this work is not done by Native peoples, but of them.

After absorbing these, we continue into 'A Brooklyn Orientation,' the opening room of American Identities. The introductory text panel states, "It was the goal of the organizing museum team (curators, educators and designer) to use this wide array of objects to tell as rich and layered a story as possible about life and culture in the US from the colonial period to the present. In an effort to broaden conventional notions of what constitutes "American" art, we have also include Native American Objects." For those who read this, it prepares them for the works included. For those who do not read wall text, they will simply see the objects located near each other. This room is filled with paintings and photographs of early Brooklyn. The second room, From Colony to Nation, includes Peruvian paintings that were commissioned by Incan aristocracy and represented a proud heritage. These paintings are immediately to the left as the visitor enters the room, and can be easily missed – but they are there. Halfway through this room, there is also a Zuni water jar. The tag details that it was collected by a museum expedition in 1903, by the museum's first ethnographic curator Stewart Culin. Of the 12 Zuni jars that are similar, all were removed by collectors and anthropologists. The descriptive tag notes the

“sweeping red and black feathers alternating with geometric designs that are a forerunner of geometric designs used by Zuni potters today.” It is important that this pot is included in the exhibition, although it is definitely unlike nearby objects and seems to stick out like a sore thumb. The rest of the room contains “objects that were common in early colonial households” and includes furniture and portraits of aristocratic white families or individuals.

The next sections of the exhibit, American Landscapes, Everyday Life and a Nation Divided, discuss the period of American history between the colonies and the Civil War. Notably, there are no native objects in this section, which is interesting given that this period represents a major period of violence towards Native peoples.

Instead we see landscape paintings, a small corner on black American contributions pre-Civil War, and early American ceramics and furniture. Thomas Cole’s painting “A Pic-Nic” symbolizes this disjuncture nicely: white Americans are portrayed in an Edenic natural scene, devoid of factories but also of natives. It shows an attitude of ownership, of appropriation, of Manifest Destiny. Here was an opportunity for the museum to show this side of the story: while the BM attempts to include black histories as well and thus restore a more complete narrative, here it falls down on including powerful stories from native communities.

Halfway through the exhibit, in the Expanding Horizons room, two ornate silver plates are paired: one, a plate commemorating Pizarro from Mexico, and the other by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Here, the museum shows the influences of other cultures on the West’s search for creative inspiration. Also in this room are Orientalist paintings and Asian-inspired ceramics and decorative arts.

The next room, Art Making, continues the theme of examining motivation and inspiration within new movements in American art by displaying sculpture, paintings, furniture, and toys. Included alongside new types of sculpture and a return to “basics” – straight lines and decorations rather than elaborate or classical art styles, is a Male potlatch figure from an unknown Kwakwakawakw artist in late 19th/early 20th century Vancouver, BC. The text accompanying the statue reads, “In the early 1900s this NW Coast potlatch figure would have been called ‘primitive’ art, as if it were simpler version of European-derived art. Its unadorned forms offer a striking comparison with those of the adjacent Angel by William Edmundson, but the Native American artist who carved this figure was following the formal artist tradition of the Kwakwakawakw society. Potlatch figures were placed outside a chief’s large house during a potlatch to emphasize his power.” This text shows a desire to offer a corrective to notions of primitive, as well as providing cultural context to an orphaned object.

The next room and a half are devoted to the Centennial Era: 1876-1900. In describing the Philadelphia Centennial of 1876, exhibition text reads, “Artifacts of the Native American and colonial past were juxtaposed with works of living artists to suggest national progress toward a predestined apogee of Western culture.” This fits with the growth of anthropology, as discussed by Trouillot. Trouillot’s point is

anthropology is defined by and co-constituted by the savage slot. Yet while Native American objects were collected under these circumstances, the Brooklyn's display in the following room heeds Trouillot's call: "We can recapture domains of significance by creating specific points of re-entry into the discourse of "otherness" (Trouillot 39).

The second room of The Centennial Era contains mostly Native American objects but is laid out rather bizarrely. Half of the room contains chairs and a small table with exhibition catalogs, surrounded by classical European busts, sculpture, and painting. Classical chamber music plays softly over a loudspeaker. Meanwhile, the other half of the room is filled with Native objects and images. A painting of a Dakota woman, Handsome Morning, by Harry Edwards, dominates the left wall. In small cases are various objects, such as a beaded Yakama dress, moccasins and pipes in a case about traded objects, and stylized vases and glassware with Native motifs. There is also a case with pots in it, continuing the exhibition's theme of displaying ceramics. On the rear wall is a super-enlarged photo by Edward Curtis of three Acoma women fetching water. Towards the move to the final room of the exhibition, there is a graphic artwork by Osuit Ok Ipeelee depicting four musk oxen. This is the only work displayed as art in the exhibition. Finally, just as the visitor continues, a tv monitor plays on endless repeat early video captured by Thomas A Edison Inc the Buffalo Dance and Sioux Ghost Dance (1894). Nearly invisible in the orange light of the room, there is also a panel beneath the Curtis print about the NAGPRA legislation, its meaning, and the Brooklyn's accommodation of NAGPRA legislation and collaboration with Native tribes. This text purports to have an open, consultative, collaborative relationship with the tribes.

The final room of the exhibition, Modern Life, focuses on more contemporary work. In a section labeled Non-Objective Art, a Grace Chino pot (1989) is displayed as a work of art between Isamu Noguchi and Ad Reinhardt's. The label shares a quotation from the artist, who commented on the skill of the design, "I know the design and I just do it." Knowledge was passed from the matriarch of the Chino family down about creating the striking visual designs. Grace Z Chino, the matriarch, drew inspiration from patterns on ancient pottery sherds and took them to a new physical form of pottery, and "the result is a form of abstraction that embraces tradition as essential to innovation." This is the final inclusion of a Native object, and the end of the exhibition.

Overall, sporadic native objects that are arranged mostly in Mason-like style that Jenkins describes— placed in cases similar to other plates, etc – not in a coherent life display or life group. There is also a case with objects that were traded. These objects, while it is fantastic that there is a move to include othered histories, do not tell any coherent story. There are lots of pots interspersed (but in separate cases) with European-influenced pots. There is only one graphic work that equates with a painting, and the only other works depicting native peoples are from the viewpoint of the Westerner:

Harry Edwards painting the Sioux woman, or Edward Curtis capturing native women about their daily life. Furthermore, the lack of critical engagement with the diasporic and westward push is a major failure of the exhibition. While black Americans are allocated their story, Native Americans here fall to the sidelines in view of American landscape painting that cheerfully deletes all others. The BM is not purporting to tell only a Native American story, but the lack here is akin to deleting slavery from mentions of representations of African-American history. Furthermore, many of the objects included are depictions of native peoples by whites, which means that we are still seeing native people through this veil of representation. Native people, too, are portrayed as historic people but not necessarily as contemporary across popular American media. At the Brooklyn, there are no portrayals of Native people making art NOT about Native traditions, outside of pots and feathers and beads. So while the Brooklyn's exhibition marks an important debut in inclusion of Native art and representation in American universal survey museums, there remains much work to be done. Posted by Beth Harrington at **Thursday, March 04, 2010** Labels: **brooklyn museum, exhibition review, native americans**

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