

The Colonial Duality of the Curatorial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the social aspects of colonialism in relation to history, theory, and politics of the curatorial world. By questioning the “modern Integration” of the museum and its core concepts of colonialism (ethno-psychological, the feminist theory, the race theory, and geography) we can then dive into the development of the museum and how it functions as a corporate spectacle. I then introduced a work of art (*Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, by Robert Duncanson) to dissect how these previously mentioned intersectional theories influences the politics of the curatorial and colonial discourse. With unraveling the birth of the museum, we can then question its position within the colonial concept of slow violence.

Keywords: Colonialism, Museum, Aesthetics, Orientalism

The public museum, is “an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value” (Oxford Dictionary). The environment in which today’s modern museum operate, have changed significantly today—from landscapes, buildings, object, and most importantly, its multi-sensory experiences (installation and performative arts). Of course, the term museum is used flexibly however, the commonality are the objects of interest that challenges distinct issues and relationships (artists, curators, and the audience) in society. The museum culture from a social perspective is filled with emotional satisfaction, cultural stimulation, and an overall sense of public awareness. While these characteristics are true, we must also consider the museum as a business. The museum much like any other educational institutions, have social strategies that aims to evoke certain responses from the audience. Overall, by operating through social analysis, the museum challenges and reconstruct the social developments of society. Since art is a reflection of society it is only fair to say that the configuration of art and society functions as a continuous loop with causes and effects based on independent variables such as the audience, artists, and the space in which a specific work is presented. Viewing art is not the only purpose of a museum, but to show them in its “truest” form. However, there is a huge contradictory of this democratic statement since the objects are attributed to various meanings and values.

Before the birth of the museum the relationships of the museum were once private collections by the royal, the church, and the aristocratic. The museum has now become a public modality, fully accessible to all; while having a utilitarian incitement towards democratic based learning. Despite the intersecting fields of

ethnography, archeology, science, and biography, the joined collectivism of the museum classifies and dissect society in a scholarly manner. Though many artists from polarizing parts of the world can attest to the effects of colonialism through iconographical and iconological significances in art—there are not much thought on how these works are exhibited, by whom, for whom, and for what purpose. To understand the structure in which the museum and curatorial projects lie, we must first understand the ideas that birthed the space historically, theoretically, and politically.

Colonization is a Western experience adjacent to Europe, amongst the greatest source of civility, cultural, linguistic, and economical advancements. Countries attributed to colonial order were European colonies such as the French, British, German, Russian, Spanish, and later the Americas—then came the development of what author and Scholar Edward Said calls, Orientalism. The concept of Orientalism is not imaginary but is ideologically constructed as a material that forges civilization and culture through colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. According to Said, “Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. [...] (it) is a style of thought upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (often) “the Occident” (Said 2). In understanding the Orient or the Other we must understand the need for the distinction between the Orient and the Occident. The relationship between the orient and the Occident is a dynamic of power in which the Occident recognizes the histories, customs, and culture of the Orient to be much greater than and in return—often challenging its reality through a configuration of power, domination, and hegemony. Due to this comparative historical relationship

between the West and the East, the structure of Orientalism became about using myths, and fabrications through political, social, and cultural discourses. Said believes that the Orientalist discourse is closely related to the political socio-economic institutions to further its' agenda. In relation to the museum, the European-Atlantic power presents itself in a scholarly form, filtering the Orient through social consciousness.

Said states:

“After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies” (Said 6).

Said believes that by using educational institutions through theory and practice is a mere investment to proliferate Orientalism into society. By using analytical distinction between the “civil” and “uncivilized” one gets to redefine what it means to be worthy and unworthy through learned behaviors. It is true that certain ideas are more influential than others to build a system in which cultural hegemony is at work. The mere space of these ritualistic and unconscious acts by society are therefore dependent on the strategic flexibility of the Oriental's superiority. This flexibility questions the types of circumstances in which the estimates of power are being used to execute the curatorial context and if it is dependent on the detachment of exclusive social and political entities, towards social accessibility in a non-coercive way.

The academic complexity of the museum as a colonial construction of theory, language, anthropology, race, and history “theses about mankind” are all instances where the development, revolution, and cultural personality is fabricated and challenged (Said 8). In developing the modern museum, the distinction between “humanists” and political knowledge is dependent on the conscious and unconscious members of society. The birth of the museum by Tony Bennet exclaims, “If under feudal and monarchical systems of government, art and culture forms a part, (...) of the ‘representative publicness’ (...) with the development of new institutions and practices which detached art and culture from the function and enlisted it for a cause of social and political critique (Habermas 1989) (25). This enabled society to digest the re-modification of culture “in accordance with a governmental logic”. In the mid-nineteenth-century, the reconceptualization of the museum space and the public sphere of the colonial discourse influenced an unequal distribution of power through psychological and sociological differences.

The nuanced elaboration of difference played a huge role in the exchange of power as it is dependent on the iconoclastic interpretation of art and literature. Looking at the museum as a “contact zone” helps us to reconceptualize the museum as a “cultural source that might be deployed as governmental instruments entailing a significant reevaluation of earlier cultural strategies [such as Orientalism]” (Bennett 28). The “contact Zone” is where the population becomes one — where one might civilize themselves by imitating appropriate forms of ‘class’ exhibited. Anyone who is categorized as the Other or the Orient is subjugated to the didacticism of cultural and social behaviors through political hegemony. Not only the public sphere of the museum is differentiated but also incorporates strategic reordering of the objects to magnify the political domains through a “democratic form of public representativeness” (Bennett 33). The reordering of the contact zone then relies on the psychology of art, the space itself, in accordance with the objects structure, classification, and geography. Jan Mukrovsky: *The semiology of Art*, dissects the aesthetics of art in relation to social interpretation. However, I would like to touch on two elements, space, and rhythm. Mukrovsky states that, “the aesthetic is a matter of the whole collective, not just the individual” (200). The sociology of art depends on many elements including the idea or intent behind the space (contact zone). As a historian, one may contemplate the work of art and how well it fits with the space however, “the ratio of the category of space and time has changed in the course of the development of art” (Mukrovsky 201). The principle of the museum is therefore seen as a contact zone that represents the performative arrangement of political entities. In correspondence to space, it also plays a huge role in the history of architecture in which the development of the art is dependent.

Would we then consider the contact zone as a form of art configured with its own ideas and motifs, socially and/or politically? According to Mukrovsky, “today, aesthetics cannot exist without historically situated material” (202) and so —hypothetically, if the museum functions as a form of art, would the intent of its' origin be its' ideas reflected in an outwardly form? Would the contact zone be deemed a semiology of structure, division, and classification? Much like art, the museum functions as a sign that serves a purpose. Mukrovsky states, “Without society there would probably be no signs. The most fundamental function of the sign is the communicative function. A percept is incommunicable, that is, it cannot be identified with the meaning of a word; and yet a percept itself contains sign elements” (204). Anything can become a sign, including the museum as a contact zone that transform the undeveloped into civility. The museum is reshaped

into a social institutional model while using objects as instructional tools.

Bennett states:

“The visitor at such museum is not placed statically before and order of things whose rationality will be revealed to the visitor’s immobile contemplation. Rather, locomotion—and sequential locomotion—is required as the visitor is faced with an itinerary in the form of an ordered things which reveal itself only to those who step by step, retrace its evolutionary development” (43).

The relationship between the audience, the sequential display of collections, and the museum space displays the principle of classification linear to the Occident. By using the space as a binding agent to society, the linear plan of each work exhibited gives the impression of history in a rational and linear path to social progression. Not only the contact zone is used as a tool for self-regulation, but it also performs as a transparent space to quickly highlight the Other. The power of the museum as a contact zone is highly rigorous as it impedes itself as a permanent display of power by rationalizing its disciplinary contents as beneficial to society.

The Orient is a highly articulated discipline with techniques far more intricate, intertwined with colonial authorities, organizations, and doxological ideas. The idea of Orientalism is more than a mythological practice but also a linguistic one. Scholarly works such as books, journal and just about all works of literature can and if used, as a form of colonial linguistic pedagogy. It is important that we look at the linguistic sign of Orientalism as a representative function. The linguistic sign can also be articulated that to constitute the different objects and verbal meanings. As Mukrovsky states, “the Ausdrucksfunktion is the expressive function [as it] relates to the speaker. (...) Because of its internal structure, the linguistic sign is very complex. A word in a sentence has many aspects” where each meaning can have various meanings within one context (205-206). In understanding the truth, the expression of the museum is an didactic instruction. In opposition—the “truth” of something is always in question and therefore never literal.

Before we address the colonial linguistics of the Orientalist, I would like to first analyze Robert Duncanson’s *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, 1853, in response to the duality of the curatorial perspective. The African American painter Robert Duncanson was inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 1852, that reframes the literary perspective of the historical and personal experience of the black “mans” lived experiences. Robert Duncanson was prominently known for his production of landscapes however, the panting—Uncle Tom and Little Eva that

was commissioned by James Francis capturing a little girl as the prototype. Duncanson was sent to Europe to study paintings where he gained great status and reputation as well as his home in Detroit and Cincinnati (Cavallo). The desire to create *Uncle Tom and Little Eva* was said to be a quotation of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 1852. The painting evoked what was said in Stowe’s book:

"At this time in our story, the whole St. Clare establishment is, for the time being, removed to their villa on Lake Pontchartrain (...) St. Clare's villa was an East-Indian cottage, surrounded by light verandas of bamboo-work, and opening on all sides into gardens and pleasure-grounds. The common sitting-room opened on to a large garden, fragrant with every picturesque plant and flower of the tropics, where wind paths ran down to the very shores of the lake . . . It is now one of those intensely golden sunsets which kindles the whole sky into one blaze of glory and makes the water another sky. The lake lay in rosy or golden streaks, save where white-winged vessels glided hither and thither like so many spirits, and little golden stars twinkled through the glow(...)."

Duncanson replicated this exact scene adding the literary subject to serve as a political mission. In highlight of the social and political climate of the late eighteenth-century, we can state that there were theoretical discussions around, race, identity, colonialism, along with the social dilemmas of the Oriental performative strategies. The literary subject of Duncanson’s work had become fully awakened as it played a huge role in the power structure of the museums’ hierarchy or what Norman L. Kleeblatt calls the master narrative. In efforts of gaining professional and personal acceptance, Duncanson had to sought access to the status quo by embracing the ideologies of the academics in turn validating the otherness through the African American protagonist framework. In treating this, “the choice of nationalists literary subjects and conservative artistic styles and conservative artistic styles must be read as operating somewhere between resistant affirmation of cultural specificity and total accommodation to the host culture” (Kleeblatt 3). By representing the artistic style in the pictorial form, Duncanson focused on the simple yet highly iconographic interaction of *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*. Through this painting alone, we can see the power dynamic of religion and race at play. The subjects are in an Idyllic landscape with little Eva standing next to Uncle Tom as she points to the sky, alluding to sublime idea of freedom by death. Even though the work was said to hold Eva as the protagonist, what made Duncanson work so powerful is that the protagonist can be shifted to Uncle Tom viewed from an African American identity. Jan

Mukrovsky states, “reality is projected into the intentional objects, but the word also has a relationship to them. Thus, the special scheme of the intentional object is given” (209). Otherwise, the reality of the work can be presented as “fact”, yet the intentional narrative also has its own existence. As we continue to unravel the linguistic aesthetics of Duncan’s work, one can see that the communicative function in art is not always direct—that the linguistic aspects of a work can have a non-communicative meaning separate from the verbal.

In clarifying the modes of communication regarding to Duncanson’s work, we can then question the relationship of the art with something external, in need of truth. In a system of values, there is always a possibility to establish a relationship with a work of art, “In other words, it is a matter of a relationship, not of concord, which means that the work of art need not always seamlessly coalesce with our system; indeed, it can evoke antagonism” (Mukrovsky 212). By projecting the self onto the (art) work, the mind unravels a new perspective which gives the work life relating or disrupting societal structures. Duncanson attitudes towards the hegemony of the Other is deeply complex. And that by using the appropriate linguistic texts became a clever and accommodating against the Occident. The paradoxical duality of Duncan’s efforts to assert his identity and the need to please his white leader became a struggle that was unanimously shared among the Orient. Fanon’s book, *Black Skins, White Masks* States that it is dissembling to be in two places at once. That the displacement of the otherness is accounted to not only the lack of self-identity but also the acceptance of the Occident invitation to identity. By enforcing psychological and social authority, “[the] social alignment of self and society or history and Psyche is rendered questionable (...) of the colonial subject who is historicized as it comes to be inscribed in the texts of history, literature, science, [and] myth” (Markmann 12). In other words, the development of society was highly dependent on the ethnographical collections of a large section of humanity as well as the primitive works—designed to extend the colonial narratives diluted in democratic strategies (such as public domain). In relation to Duncanson’s *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, the literary function of the work is different from the image. Although Little Eva is the protagonist, as historians we would want to know whether Robert Duncanson’s expression is linear to his identity. Mukrovsky’s *Semiology of Art* states that the work of art itself, may be in-between—which would support the idea that Duncanson’s work reflects the self and the Other.

In comparison to the Other, if Duncanson’s work spoke to the audience that is a product of colonialism then the work of art would be universal. However,

there are layers that attributes to the relevance of art: the intentional object, the object relation, and the verbal meanings. Looking at the *Uncle Tom and Little Eva*, we can say that the intentional object is Little Eva (as the protagonist) and Uncle Tom, the object of relation. The painting is dependent on the subject(s) in connection to space to create a narrative, pictorially and linguistically. The subject of relation could be true, a lie, an error, or an unconscious intent. As Mukrovsky states, “A lie can also be revealed in a work of art: then it is a matter of Baron Munchausen, a certain way of artistic presentation. Every artistic narrative is normally fiction, and yet we would distinguish between a narrative plot and a fictitious plot, and between a plot that is narrated as fiction” (211). If Uncle Tom is the main subject, then the essence of the artistic narrative changes. The work then becomes a direct confrontation to reality while evoking enmity. This strategic positioning of Duncanson’s work is what makes him such a great artist. He was able to use the communicative and uncommunicative parts of art to speak to his audience.

By analyzing Duncanson’s ability to mask the subject (Uncle Tom) as an objective instrument—I would like to compare his tactics to the museum has its’ own strategic positioning. The mere distinction between Duncanson and the museum is the autonomy of the object (museum) and the other (mankind). There are many instances today where the museum pushes certain agendas against society creating normalization through order and self regulation. Much like the school structure, the museum is used as a learning tool placed in the social category of eminent domain. In teaching the public the social modes of space, language, and body regulation ethno-psychology and surveillance takes place. Edward Said states, “Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (7). By evaluating today’s society in a post-colonial setting, we have seen a huge shift the political and social progressions of museums. Although the public display of the museums have been reorganized and more culturally diverse, curators have exhibited the reinterpretation of ethnographic collections as “early” or “distant” implying Western society as already progressive and civilized using the construct of time. As curators, this type of Slow Violence that continues to perpetuate and exploit society would be a polarizing position to be in if one deems the museum as a tool that could perhaps be used to positively influence society. Moreover, if the museum was intended for categorization by “lying” by omission and social “brainwashing”. Would this mean that curators are in the same position

as Duncanson—to uncover the truth depending on the viewers identity to speak to society? Could “hidden meanings” be a progressive strategy towards radical change in the curatorial world?

The effects of colonialism is deeply rooted in all areas of our society, and so the practice of decolonization in the curatorial field must take on other forms of methods to effectively reconstruct society accordingly. Beyond the object repatriation, the usage of words in exhibitions that can lead to confusion, prejudice, and lack of understanding, many believe that the museum cannot truly be decolonized. Curators practicing decolonization holds the vulnerable experience of the Artists and the Artists work that

should not be presented in a stigmatizing or one sided perspective. In Duncanson’s work we can still see his beautiful landscape while also appreciating the beauty and innocence of Little Eva (that can attribute to the hope of the new generation). The power that curators must hold is the strict dichotomy against colonizers and those who were colonized—not erasing the past, but presenting each work so that it may evoke empathy and inspiration. The decolonization of the museum is a huge part in decolonizing the world. If art is a reflection of the world, curators have the power to positively influence the society through linguistic correctness and radical neutrality of the Orient and the Occident.

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Artwork

[Uncle Tom and Little Eva](#), 1853, Robert S. Duncanson, American, 1821 - 1872
Oil on canvas
Unframed: 27 1/4 × 38 1/4 inches (69.2 × 97.2 cm)
32 13/16 × 43 3/4 × 2 1/2 inches, 30 pounds (83.3 × 111.1 × 6.4 cm, 13.6 kg)