

5-2014

Non-Western Art and the Musée du Quai Branly: The Challenge of Authenticity

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**Non-Western Art and the Musée du Quai Branly:
The Challenge of Authenticity**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the B.A. in International Studies Program
of The University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, with University Honors
and Honors in International Studies

By Mary Grace Cathryn Bernard

May 2014

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to my thesis director Dr. David Beriss and my academic advisor Dr. John Hazlett for their wonderful support and guidance.

I discovered the inspiration to undertake writing this thesis while attending Dr. David Beriss's course *Ethnicity in Contemporary Society*.

The continuous help and encouragement of the Honors Office has been pivotal to the completion of my thesis. James Brodie LeBlue deserves special thanks.

I am also grateful to my family, friends and professors for their support throughout my undergraduate studies.

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the recent construction and anthropological collaboration of the Paris museum: Musée du quai Branly (MQB), an art museum dedicated to showcasing art collections specific to aboriginal and indigenous cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania. The opening of MQB in June 2006 raised a plethora of controversial questions concerning the museum's methods of curatorial display of the art it has made its primary focus. One of the major issues discussed examines the Quai Branly's authentic, or inauthentic, representation of certain artworks displayed throughout the museum. Thus, the essay raises the questions: does a non-Western object remain authentic once it is exhibited in a Western society's art museum? To answer this question, the essay explores the various explanations of art and authenticity in order to reach an understandable conclusion of what constitutes an authentic display of non-Western objects in a Western art museum.

Keywords: authentic, authenticity, art, Musée du Quai Branly, aboriginal art, indigenous art, non-Western art, commodification, museums.

Introduction

The role of the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) and how it challenges the idea of authenticity in non-Western art has concerned anthropologists and art historians ever since it opened to the public. Since the museum's opening in 2006, the Musée du Quai Branly has received ongoing critiques and criticism of its controversial displays and exhibitions of indigenous art. According to Catherine Benoit (2008), author Sally Price produced a book, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, "that illuminates key contradictions arising from France's colonial legacies," such as "illegal art trafficking involving the state" and "the ongoing French debate about privileging either a 'Western' aesthetic approach or a culturally and socially informed manner of displaying non-Western material culture" (451-452). The controversies of the MQB raise the question of what constitutes an "authentic" representation of "art" from other societies when there is the possibility of miscommunication and misrepresentation.

For the past one hundred and fifty years, anthropologists, as well as art historians, have focused significant attention on non-Western objects and how they are represented in Western art museums. In addition, social scientists have been equally interested in whether or not that art continues to exist for the purposes for which it was originally created. The concept of authenticity applied to art has also been a topic of interest for many social scientists, especially in the context of global tourism (Kahn 2000; Wang 1999; Bruner 1991; Condevaux 2009). For example, in Kathleen Adams' *Art as Politics* (2006), the anthropologist explains the crossing of art and tourism in Tana Toraja, Indonesia, where locals produce and sell replica sculptures of their traditional objects to outsiders. Her findings raise the question of whether or not the art produced for tourists,

art collectors, rival ethnic groups, government officials, and other outsiders – also known as “tourist” art – can be seen as authentic. Similar to the non-Western objects in Western art museums, “tourist” art raises the issue of whether or not the objects retain their original purpose and meaning. In other words, the art that “tourist” art is based on is no longer in longer being produced for its original intention, but instead as “tourist” art. Therefore, the objects, which were originally created to serve a different purpose, now serve the “tourist” art purpose and in turn lose their original meaning and authenticity. Here I will also draw on the work of several anthropologists who question the authenticity of a culture’s traditional, reproduced art, including Kathleen Adams (2006), Quetzil Castañeda (2005), George Marcus (1995), and Fred Myers (1995). In addition, I will seek to explain the importance of defining art and authenticity. Do cultural artifacts lose their authenticity in the process of becoming art?

But first, what is authenticity? The concept of authenticity is defined differently by different people, depending on cultural setting, time, location, and many other conditions. In addition, the idea of art is also difficult to define. In what respect can an object be defined as art? Who has the authority to define an object as a work of art? And why do we desire to define art? According to Edmund Feldman (1985), defining art is important because it lets the viewer or “reader know what objects or activities are being discussed” (3). Also, it brings a certain amount of order to a field that has embraced almost everything people do or make or enjoy (Feldman 1985:3).

Why do we insist on defining authenticity? Just like art, it is important to define authenticity so that we know what authenticity is, or is not. Several anthropologists have defined the term with different definitions depending on situation, time, and place. As

stated by John L. and Jean Comaroff (2009), “authenticity is not a fixed property of an object or a situation but is a negotiated attribute” (27). According to Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2013), “the concept of authenticity encompasses diverse sets of meaning that range from genuineness and originality to accuracy and truthfulness” (339). Authenticity, as defined by Edward Bruner (2001), is a concept which can mean “credible and convincing,” “original, as opposed to a copy,” and “duly authorized, certified or legally valid” (400). Furthermore, both Bruner (2001) and Theodossopoulos (2013) describe authenticity as a concept that applies labels to cultures and identities of persons and groups, the authorship of products, and producers: the categorical boundaries of society. Thus, the objective of this thesis is to explore the implications of these attempts to define authenticity in order to better understand whether or not Western art museums authentically represent non-Western objects. But there is the question of *how* to represent “non-Western” art in Western art museums. It is problematic for a variety of reasons: the definition of art; the history of colonialism; the notion of the individual; the definitions of Western, non-Western, and primitive; and the definition of authenticity.

The Musée du quai Branly and Its Discontents

The Musée du quai Branly (MQB) opened its doors to the public in June 2006. Designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel and financed entirely by the French government, the museum is an architectural wonder located near the Eiffel Tower in Paris. It is the creation and conception of former French President Jacques Chirac, who even before becoming president, displayed an intense interest in non-European cultures in general and non-Western art in particular. As a result of his passion, the MQB came together as an anthropological collaboration dedicated to showcasing art collections specific to aboriginal and indigenous cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania; specifically, societies dominated by European colonialism. It displays 3,500 objects from the museum's collection of 300,000 works that had belonged to two previous institutions – the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie – which have been dismantled (Dias 2008:300). At the time of the museum's opening, Chirac explained that the MQB was created to further the understanding that “there is no hierarchy among the arts just as there is no hierarchy among peoples” (Coleman 2007:1). Thus, the museum advocates an attitude which might be considered fundamental to recognizing the value of other cultures and cultural diversity.

Especially in a time of increasing globalization, the preservation of cultural diversity became a key factor during the museum's creation. The museum came together, therefore, both as a cultural institution and as a political institution; its creation was the idea of the French president, after all. It not only intends to educate the Western population about non-Western art and culture, while illustrating France's openness to the world, but also plays a pivotal role in reaching out to non-Western peoples at a time when

France is trying to reconcile itself to increasing ethnic diversity within its borders. In 2007, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, commented on the similarities between the United Nations (UN) and the Musée du quai Branly. According to Nélia Dias (2008), both the UN and the MQB display the “universality of the human family,” and aim to promote the dialogue between people and civilizations (301). Furthermore, by displaying the diversity of cultural expressions, the MQB “reinforces UNESCO’s conventions regarding cultural diversity and its preservation” (Dias 2008:301). Similar to the United Nations, the Musée du quai Branly’s goal is to display and preserve cultural diversity in a world threatened by globalization. Moreover, because many of the objects originate in former French colonies, the museum also displays an attitude of reconciliation between France and its former colonies. With the opening of the museum, Chirac could respond to France’s postcolonial troubles and restore the dignity of violated peoples (Coleman 2007:1). Thus, as Elizabeth Harney explains, what is at stake at the MQB is the contemporary French understanding of its modern history as one intimately shaped by colonialism, waves of immigration, debates on assimilation, acculturation, and integration, and belief in a humanism and in freedoms that were too often advocated through illiberal means (2006:8).

When it opened to the public, MQB stood out in the Parisian landscape as the first national museum to display American, African, Asian, and Oceanic “objects together in a new framework as ‘art,’ rather than within a traditional ethnographic context,” going along with the idea that there is no hierarchy among arts or cultures (Levitz 2008:600). However, although the museum displays the positive attributes of preserving and promoting cultural diversity, along with establishing the claim that all art and all cultures

are equal, the MQB has been criticized by journalists and anthropologists alike. The museum is, as a consequence, one of the most controversial museums created within the past ten years. French anthropologist, Bernard Dupaigne, released the very passionate text, *Le scandale des arts premiers: La véritable histoire du musée du quai Branly*, to coincide with the museum's opening and to expose the corruption at the heart of its creation. According to Anthony Shelton (2007), Dupaigne expresses outrage and incredulity at the “cronyism through which Jacques Chirac pushed his project . . . [,] the marginalization of research,” the escalating financial costs, and finally “the arrogance of the architect, Jean Nouvel” (230). In addition, Sally Price suggests in her book, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, that the museum illuminates key inconsistencies “arising from France's colonial legacies,” such as “illegal art trafficking involving the state” and “the ongoing French debate about privileging either a ‘Western’ aesthetic approach or a culturally and socially informed manner of displaying non-Western material culture” (Benoit 2008:451-452). Furthermore, as Katharine Conley (2010) explains,

The musical instruments on shelves visible through glass walls in the central well around which the path into the museum winds at the QBM in Paris . . . are displayed in a way that recalls their initial categorization as scientific evidence, documents kept as guides to non-European people and natural history rather than as records of human ingenuity and artistry. Paradoxically, the entire museum was intended to be among the first to evoke non-Western culture in a truly post-colonial manner. It was conceived as though it were

possible for it to exist completely separate from France's colonialist past. (45)

However, as both Conley and Price suggest, the museum seems to contradict itself.

Although the founders of the museum attempt to create an environment which highlights the non-Western art's own cultural environment in a Western style art museum, the message becomes miscommunicated in the different exhibits presented throughout the MQB. As for the architecture of the MQB, "Jean Nouvel did not want a building that resembled a classical museum or to create a copy of presumed tribal architecture" (Dias 2008:303). He thus designed the building not only as a container for the collections but also as a reflexive content, to the extent that the building rather than the collections expresses the complexity of cultural diversity (Dias 2008:303). The method of displaying the artwork and trying to convey the idea of cultural diversity and equality becomes skewed. Thus, because art curators at the MQB focus on aesthetics while anthropologists focus on the true histories of the non-Western objects, the balance between aesthetics and anthropology may, in this case, be part of the problem.

Lastly, Sally Price (2013) explains the complicated situation involving a few contemporary artists from an aboriginal culture located in Australia. She states: "The objections of some of them to the way parts of their work were transformed for purposes of the architectural design were disregarded and the critical/political intent behind their work was largely whitewashed into a primitivizing stereotype" (144). Although the museum claims to be an advocate for cultural preservation and diversity, there are many examples which suggest it is not doing this effectively. The MQB's desire to display art that is fair to both Western and non-Western cultures is very difficult to accomplish.

According to Herman Lebovics (2006), the Musée du quai Branly has not “successfully solved the thorny problem . . . how in the West to show the objects collected by conquest, swindle, and purchase during the colonial era” (98). Hence, displaying objects from one culture in a museum located in another culture becomes a hotly debated issue, especially when those objects were gained through colonization or conquest. But why?

What is it about these objects that makes the worlds of anthropology, ethnography, art history, and aesthetics clash, and causes the controversy that surrounds the MQB? First off, a problem arises when Western cultures begin to treat non-Western art as similar to Western art because doing so creates the possibility of misunderstanding and misrepresentation – misunderstanding in the sense that a Western curator may not fully comprehend the purpose or meaning of a non-Western object; and, misrepresentation in the sense that the object may be misrepresented due to the misunderstanding. For example, it is possible for an inhabitant of a Western culture to view a particular object as art whereas a member of a non-Western culture may perceive the same object to be something other than art and vice versa. Furthermore, there seems to be a fundamental divide between how Westerners view a Western artist who created a work of art and a non-Western artist who created an art object. Where Western art is attributed to a specific artist, non-Western art is attributed to cultural traditions, rather than individuals. Through the Western perspective, an original Picasso piece is an authentic Picasso piece, whereas an original piece created in Tana Toraja, Indonesia has no artist’s name attached to it. As Price (2001) explains, “questions of authorship further muddy the already murky canal through which objects pass on their way from tribal

obscurity to Western authentication as art – with profound and occasionally farcical consequences for transcultural artistic encounters” (100).

Finally, in relation to the Musée du quai Branly a third predicament results. Because Westerners, have historically treated the arts of the West as speaking to a universal human condition, while the artifacts of non-Western societies have been represented, by Westerners, as merely the expression of the traditions, rituals, and practices of those societies, the historical domination of the West over the Rest becomes apparent. The museum was originally created as a new space for presenting the arts of non-Western people more as art and less as objects of ethnographic interest. This intention attempted to address two problems: how can the Museum avoid giving the impression that it endorses cultural hierarchy, and how can the Museum minimize prevalent cultural ethnocentricity? However, the museum immediately led to controversy, since even as it pretended to undermine colonialist representations, it actually reasserted them, both by retaining the division of the world – the West and the Rest – and through exhibits that exoticized non-Western artifacts, as well as through a variety of antagonistic relations with anthropologists and others, such as art historians and museum curators. In other words, the museum failed in its attempts to introduce a cultural dialogue and create cultural equality.

In order to address the controversies of the MQB, I will first explore the cultural history of the twentieth-century Western art museum and its methods of displaying non-Western objects as “tribal” or “primitive” art. I will examine where objects, such as African masks, have been displayed and why. Next, I will address the concept of art and how it applies to the West and the Non-West. Moreover, I will concentrate on what

constitutes an “authentic” representation of “art” from other societies when there is the possibility of miscommunication and misrepresentation; finally I will ask the question: do cultural artifacts lose their authenticity in the process of becoming art? When addressing these questions, I will also focus on the various definitions of authenticity in order to achieve a better understanding on how authenticity is attributed to art.

Twentieth Century Western Museums and Non-Western Art

Social scientists explain that in many cases, art museums across the world are created in order to fulfill a particular political agenda. The Musée du quai Branly, for example, was produced to rehabilitate France's relationship with its former colonial states. According to Sarah Amato (2006), museums are political monuments; they have become separate political actors in the heart of a city, conspicuous for their location, as well as their power to show and tell, and display or ignore certain information (47). Before the museum's establishment in a prestigious location next to the Eiffel Tower, Chirac proclaimed the twenty-first century as the proper time to reconsider France's colonial past and reconcile wounded relationships through the foundation of a museum dedicated to the importance of cultural diversity and preservation in a location which affirms the museum's significance. Many of the museum's controversies stem from these issues, since even as it pretends to counteract colonialist representation, it reasserts it. However, although it is important to understand the museum's political aspects, it is also important to understand the reason for these controversies on a more cultural level. In other words, it is important to discuss how the museum may not be fully and fairly representing non-Western cultures through its curatorial displays.

Thus, to explain why the Musée du quai Branly immediately led to cultural, rather than political, controversy, it is necessary to recognize the twentieth-century history of how non-Western artifacts have been represented in Western museums. In the nineteenth-century museum, unlike its predecessor, the eighteenth-century *cabinet de curiosité*, exhibits were expected to reflect some clear rationale: museums of natural history presented instructive exhibits of objects from the natural world; museums of art presented

things of beauty. But the place of ethnographical displays in this scheme of things was not wholly clear (Williams 1985:147). Most non-Western objects of ethnographic interest were displayed initially in Western museums of natural history or ethnography as scientific examples of distant cultures. Usually, objects were exhibited with descriptions explaining their past history: where they came from, what culture produced them, why the culture created them, and how the culture used them. They were understood to represent traditional and collective cultural principles that remained unchanged over centuries, often to have religious significance, and to lack marks of an original maker in the Western sense of the heroic artist-genius (Conley 2010:37). Hence, observing and displaying these objects in such a manner already presented problems, because the objects lacked original authorship and the cultures were seen as incapable of progressing. One problematic display of pre-Colombian materials is the example of the 1878 exhibit in Paris that gave the final impetus to the creation of the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. As Elizabeth Williams (1985) explains, the primary purpose of the exhibit was to achieve “life-like” effects that would intrigue and please the public (152). It made no consistent distinction between different locales or cultural areas, and objects from non-Peruvian collections were mixed in with Peruvian materials (Williams 1985:152). This display style proved to be very controversial, as its main purpose was to inform the European public of cultures deemed less civilized. Thus, although ethnographic exhibitions were intended for educational purposes, they also made the division between the West and the Rest more evident by declaring European cultures superior to all other cultures. In the mid-nineteenth century, pre-Colombian or tribal objects were antiquities or curiosities. At the beginning of the twentieth century,

however, the perception of such objects began to change and by 1920, they were aesthetically valued (Clifford 1985:243).

This was partly due to what some scholars call the “primitivist” or “modernist” revolution (Williams 1985; Clifford 1985). Artists in the avant-garde and surrealist schools of thought began to admire, appreciate, and collect non-Western objects and recognize and attribute modern aesthetics qualities to them. For example, the founder of the surrealist movement, André Breton, began his collection of non-Western art with an Easter Island statuette he bought as a teenager (Conley 2010:39). Later on in life, as he continued to add more pieces to his collection, he realized that non-Western artifacts are, in the Western sense, works of art. In other words, he saw them as objects with pure aesthetic qualities. Objects such as African masks introduced new ideas to surrealist thought and influenced artists like Pablo Picasso to create new works of modern art. In Paris, the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro, which in 1937 was renamed the Musée de l'Homme, played a pivotal role in presenting these objects, as it was here that avant-garde artists became intimately acquainted with what Jean-Louis Paudrat (1984) describes as *arts primitifs* or “primitive arts.” Thus, with the “primitivist” or “modernist” revolution the proper place of non-Western objects was again put into question. Now the debate encompassed privileging either a Western aesthetic approach or a culturally and socially informed manner of displaying non-Western material culture.

This new approach of categorizing non-Western artifacts as art brought about several controversies surrounding museum practice, specifically the academic debates over ethnographic authority and authenticity: “The creation of traditions, the examination of colonial and post-colonial bias in the representation of other cultures, the ethical

responsibilities of anthropologists, and the epistemological status of analytical categories including art, text, and culture” (Jones 1993:201). In 1928, an exhibition of pre-Colombian art was held in the Louvre’s Pavillon du Marsan. According to historian Elizabeth Williams (1985), the exhibit, including almost a thousand objects, mostly from Central and South America, “was the first [...] to accent the aesthetic rather than ethnographic interest of such pieces” and thus the first exhibit to introduce the possibility of the misconception and misrepresentation of non-Western objects in museum exhibitions (146). A catalog, *Les arts anciens de l’Amérique*, Williams further explains, “was prepared by the exhibit’s organizers . . . Alfred Métraux and Georges-Henri Rivière, who on the strength of the show was soon to be hired as curator at the Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro” (1985:146). The catalog described the exhibit’s sole purpose as an illumination of the objects’ artistic development and beauty. As a result, the artifacts were instantly transformed into art.

Thus began the transformation of non-Western artifacts from items in a natural history museum to art works in the art museum. According to James Clifford (1985), the winter of 1984-85 in New York City premiered at least seven highly visible new exhibitions featuring “tribal art” (243). The 1984 exhibition “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern” at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City not only resulted in opposition to the use of the term “primitive,” but also the negative aspects of cultural imperialism. The exhibition displayed a major body of African, Oceanic, and Eskimo artifacts, which were brought from ethnographic museums and private collections, alongside works by Picasso, Derain, etc. – modernist works that the “tribal art” had either directly influenced or powerfully resembled (Clifford

1985:243). Once again, the artifacts were transformed into art. While displayed alongside “masterpieces” by Picasso and other modernist works, the non-Western objects prove to be just as beautiful and aesthetically pleasing as the Western art, and in turn, equally as important; in the sense that the non-Western objects become “masterpieces” in the eyes of the Western museumgoer, rather than just simple objects. This was a forerunner of the aesthetic message of the MQB, which attempts to communicate through its exhibits the idea that there is no hierarchy among the arts just as there is no hierarchy among peoples. However, this method of display still proves challenging. Although all of the objects – Western and non-Western – are exhibited in a similar fashion, Western viewers are able to relate to the work created by Picasso more than they can with a piece created by an artist in a non-Western culture. This is so simply because the work created by Picasso was indeed produced by Picasso, whereas the work created by the non-Western culture lacks the original artist’s name who produced the piece. In other words, museum-goers can understand a Picasso piece because they can understand why and how the artist created the work, whereas, for the non-Western object, the museum-goers may never understand how or why the object was created. This not only causes issues of communication between the original artist, the museum curator, and the viewer, but also raises the issue of authentic representation. It is a problem of authentic “representation” because it is the Western museum that is presenting the non-Western objects on behalf of the non-Western cultures. These Western museums are not only presenting the objects as art, they are also attempting to preserve or communicate information about the cultures the objects originated from to a Western audience.

The Menil Collection located in Houston, Texas, houses the personal art collection of Dominique and Jean de Menil. The contemporary museum opened to the public in 1987 and displays surrealist, non-Western, and ancient art. The Menil celebrates the beauty and histories of all the objects in the collection and the curators pay attention to contexts for the collection's non-Western works. The Witnesses Room, in particular, with its mixture of works by avant-garde artists from the 1920s and 1930s such as Max Ernst and non-Western objects, mimics Picasso's studio, or, even more precisely, André Breton's personal collection as it evolved from the 1920s up to his death in 1966 (Conley 2010:41). Furthermore, the Witnesses Room, as Conley explains, reflects Breton's appreciation of how dynamically these works function together and replicates the disorganization they must have all endured at the Trocadéro. However, although displaying Western and non-Western artworks together in a living room setting may exhibit some type of equality, the method is still problematic. Like the MOMA, it miscommunicates and misrepresents the non-Western objects' original use or meaning. Because the original non-Western artists' names are unknown, the authentication of the works is, of course, impossible. Moreover, the surrealists' collections, informed by their modernist perspective and infused with universalist idealism, were colonialist appropriations of the work of colonized peoples, domesticating that work and using it as household decoration, even when that use ran counter to the original intention of the works' creators (Conley 2010:42). What Conley suggests, then, is that when the non-Western objects are put into a modernist, Western perspective a new cultural hierarchy is established: one that privileges Western art over non-Western objects.

Both MOMA and Menil exhibitions display non-Western objects alongside Western art, in turn reconstructing the non-Western artifact as art. Although the initial style of displaying non-Western artifacts revealed the division between the West and the Rest and suggested cultural hierarchy, exhibiting non-Western artifacts as “primitive” art unearthed additional controversies by revealing one society's misunderstanding and misrepresentation of another society. Thus originated the debate of what constitutes an authentic representation of art from other societies. How can objects be displayed authentically across cultures? Are they cultural artifacts or art? Because of this issue, art museums were caught in the rather sticky position of having to figure out how to represent authentically the arts of non-Western peoples as “art” and as a “cultural dialogue.” This could be the reason why perhaps non-Western objects were originally regarded as artifacts rather than as art. However, Price (2001) clarifies that there are definite hierarchical schemes involved in how objects of non-Western provenance are presented, even though they do not remain constant through time (86). While non-Western objects were at one time regarded in the West as artifacts and curios, they soon gained interest as anthropological specimens, then as aesthetic objects, and finally as works of art and even as masterpieces. When the collections in the Musée Trocadéro were rehoused in the Palais de Chaillot, Price explains,

The objects were installed in austere metal cases and laden with exhaustive ethnographic contextualization, out of an explicit desire to stress that anthropology was a legitimate *science*; increasingly didactic labels thus allowed the objects to be upgraded from curios to scientific specimens. During the past several decades, with less

concern about the status of anthropology as a science, the prestige of particular pieces is more frequently upgraded through a *reduction* in the label copy. (2001:86)

Thus, in addition to the “primitivist” or “modernist” movement, and the relative security of anthropology as a social science, Price suggests that non-Western artifacts slowly became works of art due to the decline in information presented on the label which describes an object on display in a museum. In the West, works of art – paintings by Van Gogh, for example – exhibited in art museums are usually displayed with a tiny description which includes only the artist’s name, the name of the piece, and the year it was created. When art museums began exhibiting non-Western objects in a similar fashion, the objects took on a Western aesthetic and thus became works of art. With hardly any description of the piece, the viewer could appreciate the object purely for its aesthetic qualities, rather than gain the knowledge of what the object was originally created and intended for. Thus, non-Western objects transitioned from anthropologic or ethnographic objects into art objects, in turn, creating a disagreement between the worlds of anthropology, ethnography, art history, and aesthetics. In other words, should these objects be regarded as art or artifact and who gets to make that determination?

This clashing of academic fields presents the debate of what embodies “art” in the Western perspective, and then raises the question of what constitutes an “authentic” representation of “art,” specifically from other cultures and societies. Does a tiny label make a non-Western object “art”? And does that small description represent the object authentically? In order to answer these questions, we must first identify “art” and what exemplifies “art” in the Western perspective. Secondly, we must recognize the various

explanations of “authenticity” and then how it may be attributed to “art”: the authentic representation of art, and authentic art itself.

Reflecting on Art

The possibility of misunderstanding and misrepresentation intensifies when Western cultures begin to treat non-Western objects as art. For example, it is possible for a people in a Western society to view a particular object as art whereas people in a non-Western culture may perceive the same object as something other than art and vice versa. Furthermore, differentiating between Western and non-Western art is difficult because Western terms often do not correspond to non-Western thought systems. According to H. Gene Blocker (2001), in principle this cross-cultural comparison could go either way – Europeans comparing non-Western thought systems to their own European systems, or non-Westerners comparing European thought systems to their own Chinese, Indian, African, Polynesian, or Native American thought systems (4). But because of the history of European military, scientific, and economic domination of the world since the seventeenth century, it has been primarily Europeans who initiated the discussion using their intellectual framework to analyze and judge non-Western thought systems (Blocker 2001:4). But how do Western cultures define “art”? And why is it that some objects are deemed “art” when other objects are not? And lastly, what differentiates Western art from non-Western objects considered “art”? By answering these questions, we may come to a better understanding of what constitutes “art” and why it is problematic to treat objects from one culture as “art” in the same way objects from another culture are treated as “art.”

From the Western perspective, art is a fundamental concept that not only expresses meanings but also creates effects and even causes results within an individual and/or society. Art can be political, cultural, or historical, and can be created for various

reasons and purposes. In addition, although art encompasses a diverse range of human activities from acting to dancing, or singing to playing a musical instrument, the primary focus here is on visual arts, which are usually understood to include painting, sculpture, printmaking, photography, the crafts, the arts of design, and architecture—more specifically, objects in this realm perceived by Westerners to be aesthetically pleasing enough to be represented in an art museum. Moreover, in order to incorporate a broader spectrum of art objects from both the Western and non-Western worlds, there should be no radical distinction between the “fine” and “applied” arts. According to Edmund Burke Feldman (1985), “if ‘applied’ means practical and ‘fine’ means useless,” and there have been instances of “practical paintings and useless pots,” then ‘applied’ and ‘fine’ are of no use to the description of art, especially when history has a “habit of changing ‘applied’ art to ‘fine’ art” (2). In addition, the finest “fine” art can be useful: it can enhance one’s social and/or economic status. Thus, as Feldman suggests, both “fine” and “applied” arts should be regarded as equal. However, many anthropologists and art historians would disagree with this statement simply because of aesthetics, which characterizes an object’s beauty and pleasing visual qualities and, in turn, can distinguish between an object that is applied to daily life activities, and an object that is only displayed on a wall. In other words, some may find “fine” arts aesthetically pleasing, and applied arts not so aesthetically pleasing. This is, of course, problematic because as Blocker (2001) explains, there is no standard use of the term “aesthetics” (8). In other words, an object’s beauty always lies within the eye of the beholder.

Thus, when an object is labeled as “art,” it is usually described as such because of a particular individual’s or group’s perspective. The concept of art is therefore subjective.

Western culture also often views an art work's significance, regardless of its purpose or utility, as universal (Feldman 1985). Although this may seem true, it is also true that not all cultures and societies regard "art" in the same way Western cultures do. As Gerald L. Pocius (1995) describes, art is culturally specific. And, although many societies across the globe may create objects which appear aesthetically pleasing, they do not all classify those objects as art. Furthermore, whether an object is deemed to be art or merely a useful object, it is the culture that gave inspiration to create the work. Something designated as "art," therefore, is that specific culture's classification. It is a "distinct product of skill that fulfills certain culturally derived aesthetic criteria at the same time that it answers basic human needs" (Pocius 1995:414).

Thus, it is difficult to claim that art is universal when each culture has its own definition of what constitutes art. "Art" is a concept that is distinctly cultural and in turn functions as a product of and for a particular culture or society. Even when it is created by a single individual, and is claimed as his or her own original work, the artist is still influenced by his or her own society in some form. In addition, whether the art is created for religious purposes, cooking purposes, aesthetic purposes, or even economic purposes, it is still produced to serve a purpose for a community or group of people. Furthermore, Katharine Conley (2010) describes the notion of the universal museum. She explains that

The universal museum as a concept defends the presence of non-Western objects in Western museums, based on the belief that museums are the best guardians of universal culture and that objects collected by Western anthropologists have helped to preserve otherwise endangered cultural traditions. The universal

museum concept nonetheless justifies the continuation of highly problematic practices of acquisition and the retention of such high-profile works of art as the statues from the Parthenon, known as the Elgin Marbles, which, despite protest by the Greek government, remain in the British Museum. (37)

It is interesting that Conley frames this example as Western and non-Western since art from the Parthenon is Greek, which is generally thought of as the foundation of Western Civilization. However, the example still presents the issue of one culture representing another culture's art and/or objects in its art museums. Therefore, one can conclude that art in any society not only satisfies a culturally derived aesthetic but also produces a type of purpose or function. However, when one society presents another society's objects in a manner that may not be compliant with the object's original intention, the question of misrepresentation and miscommunication emerges. For example, when Western museums, such as the Musée du quai Branly, exhibit non-Western objects as art alongside Western art, we must analyze the differences between them in order to address the misrepresentation and miscommunication debate. Some museums have attempted to address these issues by creating an atmosphere from the non-Western culture perspective of aesthetics. For instance, in a series of exhibitions curated by Susan Vogel, the Center for African Art has stood by the principles of universal formal aesthetics (Jones 1993:206). These exhibitions maintained the thesis that there are universal criteria of formal excellence. In other ways they addressed the cultural critique of modernism. "African Aesthetics" made an attempt to characterize African aesthetics. African aesthetics generally has a moral basis, as indicated by the fact that in many

African languages the same word means "beautiful" and "good." It is consistent with the use and meaning of African art that it should be both beautiful and good, because it is intended not only to please the eye but to uphold moral values. The ethical and religious basis of African art may explain why the principal subject is the human figure; African art often appears in ritual contexts that deal with the vital moral and spiritual concerns of the human condition (Stephenson, 1993). However, the installation did not reflect alternate strategies of presentation, or the depth and complexity of African philosophical systems (Jones 1993:206). Thus, although the exhibit attempted to demonstrate "African aesthetics," it still proved difficult to communicate the complexity of African ideologies and beliefs and aesthetics. So then, what is the difference between Western art and non-Western art?

Illustrating Non-Western Art

Before addressing the difference between Western and non-Western art, it is important to discuss the various interpretations and definitions of non-Western art. Since the time non-Western art began appearing in Europe, anthropologists, ethnographers, and art historians have debated the proper terminology to describe it. Where some art historians find a particular term descriptive, anthropologists find the same term morally or ethically controversial. For example, where art historians may look at an object solely for its aesthetic qualities, an anthropologist may look at the same object solely for its cultural origin. This suggests that even before art museums exhibit non-Western art in a potentially controversial fashion, different Western academic disciplines are already clashing over the concept. How should an anthropologist, art historian, or museum curator describe objects which derive from cultures dominated by imperial colonialism and display some type of aesthetic quality? Herta Haselberger addresses these issues in her article, "Method of Studying Ethnological Art." She explains that the concepts of European art history are insufficient for the purpose of achieving a stylistic classification of all art objects; but ethnological concepts do not suffice for the comprehension of specific artistic values (Haselberger 343:1961). Thus, it is important for art historians and anthropologists to understand each other's methods in hopes of reaching a new art classification method that is both ethically and aesthetically acceptable. However, before coming to an agreement on a classification method, we must first explore why the term "non-Western" is the most appropriate term to describe post-colonial art.

Although the anthropologist Sally Price uses the term "primitive" to describe the art obtained through European domination and colonial imperialism in two of her most

acclaimed books *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* and *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, I use “non-Western” because as Conley (2010) suggests, it is proper “to art history and museum studies” (35). Moreover, I prefer to use “non-Western,” because the term “primitive” suggests “undeveloped” and brings to mind the type of artistic expression found on cave walls produced thousands of years ago. The non-Western art described in this essay, however, may also refer to objects made in the present. In other words, while “primitive” implies the distant past, “non-Western” suggests a wider time frame: the distant past to the contemporary; and thus encompasses all of the objects created by artists who lived over a thousand years ago to contemporary artists such as the aboriginal Australian John Mawurndjul. Furthermore, the term “primitive” has proven to be morally controversial. Even in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Price explains that the term has come under attack (2001:1). In addition, Larry Shiner (1994) states that over the last decades, a number of writers have exposed the complex ideology behind the construction of a largely imaginary “Primitive Other” upon whom Westerners “have projected either [the] fantasies of savagery and sexual license or an idealized vision of unspoiled humanity” (225). Furthermore, Shiner argues that the concept of primitive suggests “a framework of objectification” (Shiner 1994: 233). The concept of “primitive” does not work at all because the cultures and the art studied throughout this paper are by no means degraded in any sense. The term, therefore, not only fails to describe the art and cultures presented here, but also fails to provide any clarification of “non-Western” art.

Interestingly, the majority of the objects found at the MQB were previously located at the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre, and were declared “*art premiers*” or

“primary arts” by Jacques Kerchache, a well-known French art dealer and good friend of Jacques Chirac. According to Jean-Loup Amselle *et al.*, (2003), “*art premiers*” was the phrase originally coined for the name of the new MQB (1983). But what is “*art premiers*”? According to the French encyclopedia, *Larousse*, the term refers to exotic curiosities or arts from traditional non-European societies deemed “primitive” because the cultures in focus were founded on oral traditions and not completely evolved. In addition, the “arts premiers” is the expression used to identify the first human societies with specific aesthetics¹. Curiously, this definition proves to be very similar to the many definitions Sally Price (2001) provides in her findings for “primitive” art: the arts of people whose mechanical knowledge is scanty; art produced by people who have not developed any form of writing; or art of people who have remained until recent times at an early technological level (2). It is clear why Chirac and Kerchache quickly changed the museum’s description from “arts premiers” to “cultural dialogue.” If they had chosen to keep the previous museum description, the MQB would no doubt have received twice as much criticism.

“Non-Western” art is sometimes considered “traditional” art. “Traditional” art, according to Susan Vogel, refers to village-based objects made in traditional styles by artists trained through apprenticeship; they are usually made for specific and largely traditional functions, such as masked dances in Africa (Flam 1991:88). Although this definition of art does explain some of the qualities of “aboriginal” or “indigenous” art, it does not fully encompass the idea or even all the elements of “non-Western” art. The focus here is not only on “traditional” art but also on contemporary art, and moreover, on art made for multiple purposes and functions ranging from traditional purposes, religious

purposes, to economic purposes. Thus, while “traditional art” may seem to fit, the concept is specific to one type of art and therefore does not work as a proper definition. I make this distinction between the terms simply because the MQB showcases both ancient aboriginal art objects and contemporary indigenous art objects. In other words, the museum displays art created thousands of years ago by aboriginal cultures, and art created in the past decade by aboriginal cultures.

Another term that is widely used to describe “non-Western” art is “folk” art. In 1932, Holger Cahill, acting Director of the Museum of Modern Art, established a definition for “folk” art as an “expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use and enjoyment” (Delacruz 1999:23). By “common people,” Cahill means that class of people within a society who are not the elite social class, thus defining “folk” art as a type of art that isn’t ‘fine’ or of any importance to wealthier populations since the art is only made by the common people for the common people. But as Feldman (1985) suggests, the difference between “applied” and “fine” art has no use to the description of art since all art can be both “applied” and “fine” simultaneously (2). Although nearly all human societies have some kind of hierarchy, they may not share the same kind. If the case presented itself where certain societies colonized by European populations did not follow a particular “Western” social hierarchy, the concept of “folk” art would not apply since there may be no distinction between a common people and an elite people. Lastly, as described is Price’s findings, it is for this reason that non-Western art has become “primitive” because “now the term . . . has simply come, for lack of a better term, to refer to art of classless societies” (2001:2).

“Non-Western” art can also be defined as “ethnological” art. Ethnological art, according to Herta Haselberger, “is used to denote the tribal and tourist art of those peoples in Africa, America, Asia, Australia, and Oceania who are the objects of ethnographic or anthropological study (1961, 341). However, when art is categorized as ethnological or anthropological, it is devalued by remaining specific to the study of anthropology and excluding all other perspectives on the object. For example, when the concept of art becomes anthropological art, it can no longer be described as historical art or political art. When displayed in an art museum, non-Western art becomes historical and political as well as anthropological, especially at the MQB. Some of the non-Western art exhibited at the MQB proves to be historical art because the majority of the works were created hundreds of years ago and in addition serve an educational purpose for the museumgoers. Non-Western objects at the MQB can also be described as political art because, as Jacques Chirac explains, the museum’s goal is to display and preserve cultural diversity in a world threatened by globalization, and to present an attitude of restoration between France and its former colonies. Thus, classifying non-Western objects as “ethnographic” art when they are exhibited in a Western museum is not wholly justified.

Lastly, contemporary indigenous art is commonly described as “tourist” art. Larry Shiner (1994) defines such art as artifacts not only made for sale to outsiders but also made in a style adapted by outsiders (227). Tourist art usually constitutes non-Western art that has been commodified for the purpose of appealing to tourism and economic growth. Researchers have studied various aspects of tourist art, including the changing dynamics of local art and communities, social and political functions of tourist art, and ownership

and control of cultural heritage (Maruyama, *et al.* 2008:453). Tourist art demonstrates that non-Western art can no longer be viewed as timeless, or represented merely as an expression of the traditions, rituals, and practices of the societies the objects originally came from. Interestingly, though, as a result of this new “tourist” art, anthropologists have begun to question such art’s authenticity. Although artists in non-Western cultures are now creating art objects that conform to Western art perspectives, the art is deemed inauthentic by Western critics because it is not created for traditional purposes.

According to Larry Shiner (1994), “the error of many art historians and critics is to see these works purely in terms of their deviation from traditional stylistic norms and uses, rather than seeing them as a creative response to the realities of the present cultural and economic situation of these societies” (229). Thus, although the concept “tourist” art seems to be moving non-Western art in a direction similar to that of Western art, the term still proves controversial and problematic. In addition, the research of Quetzil Castañeda (2005) illustrates an interesting factor of tourist art. In his article he discusses the unique Pisté – a community located in Yucatán Mexico – tradition of “stone and wood carving [which] was invented by a man, Vicente Chablé, who worked at Chichén Itzá as an employee of the federal anthropology agency” (88). Years after his departure, different artisans emerged, producing these woodcarvings as a distinct and established Mayan tradition (88). His findings not only bring into question the objects’ definition of “traditional” art, since they were originally created by a Mexican man in the 1940s, but also the objects’ authenticity, since they were not created by an artist from Mayan culture. However, the art can still be considered “non-Western” art due to the fact that

Mexico was colonized by Spain for a certain period of time, making Mexico a colonized area.

Thus, the term “non-Western” art seems appropriate because it avoids all of the controversies of the terms listed above. It is not specific to a certain type of art or particular standard, character, or value. Finally, as Conley (2010) suggests, “non-Western” is proper “to art history and museum studies” (35); but also proper to political and anthropological studies, as it establishes a sense of hyper-reality, or what the French deem as American extreme political correctness (Price, 2011).

Differentiating Between Western and Non-Western Art

To fully understand the difference between Western and non-Western art, we must first focus on the history of how non-Western objects found their way into Western cultures, because it is here that the distinction between Western and non-Western art originates. The historical processes that led to the collection of archeological objects in museums, George Stocking (1985) explains, include two conditions: they have to do on the one hand with the forces of economic development and nationalism that transformed Europe in the nineteenth century, and on the other with those of imperial domination (5). In France, especially, many of the non-Western objects found in art museums were donated from private collections usually obtained through colonial acquisition. In other cases, non-Western materials found their way into private and/or government collections through international expeditions financed by the French government. For example, in the mid-1870s the voyager and archeologist Charles Wiener traveled to Peru on an excavating trip that had been financed by the Ministry of Public Instruction with the understanding that his finds would be handed over to the French government on his return (Williams 1985:150). Therefore, because the majority of these non-Western objects ended up in Western art museums with the help of archaeologists, ex-colonial officials, and missionaries, many times through the violent practices of colonialism, controversies on how to display the objects emerged. Finally, with the placement of non-Western objects in museums, their problematic character, and indeed, their “otherness,” became more evident (Stocking 1985:4). This problem not only presented a difference between the West and the Rest but also the divide between the civilized and the primitive. And thus, an emerging difference between Western and non-Western objects and/or art.

Cecilia Klein (2002) explains that the mythic divide between the so-called West and Rest is inextricably tied to the conceptual dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive and a host of other oppositions that rank peoples within a hierarchy of values privileging one category over the others (131). Mary Erickson (1994) explains that the difference between “Western” art and “non-Western” art is that “Western” art is defined as “art included in traditionally European and Euro-American oriented art history surveys,” whereas “non-Western” art is described as “art that is not dominantly European or Euro-American in origin” (72). Although this may seem intuitive and common knowledge at first, the definitions are actually quite problematic, especially the definition of “Western” art. According to Phoebe Dufrene (1994), “just because an artwork is written about and discussed in a Euro-American art history survey does not necessarily mean it is Euro-American in origin” (252). In addition, the objects in question are not differentiated between Euro-American art origins or art that is not predominately Euro-American in origin; especially since art created by the native tribes of North, Central and South America are American in origin. In turn, the primary objects in focus are art works created by certain cultures or groups of people across the world, which were colonized by European civilizations, mainly in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

According to Lynn Hart (1991), in standard “Western” art or “Western aesthetics,” the figure of the artist is clearly that of a creative individual inspired by his or her own private muse to produce works of art that are original, one-of-a-kind images and symbols which are evaluated according to a set of formal aesthetic standards, and exemplify four key characteristics: individuality, originality, permanence, and form (146). On the other hand, non-Western art, from the Western perspective, has

traditionally been seen as objects with a certain timelessness, or represented as merely the expressions of the traditions, rituals, and practices of the societies they originally came from. According to Blocker (2001), non-Western objects

[w]ere not used primarily aesthetically but also or mainly for religious, ceremonial purposes; they did not have to be beautiful for people to look at but just to be sufficiently representational . . . to perform their ritual function. The people who made them may not have been expressing their own individual feelings, attitudes, beliefs, but conforming to the traditional pattern . . . required by the religious traditions of that particular society. (7)

Therefore, the primary differences between Western and non-Western art, from the Western perspective, is the art's function or purpose. According to these two definitions it appears that while Western art is mainly produced in order to fulfill an individual expression, non-Western art is largely produced in order to fulfill a traditional, societal expression. For example, in "Aesthetic Pluralism and Multicultural Art Education," Lynn Hart describes the ritual art forms practiced by women in Hindu South Asia (1991) as particularly challenging to standard Western aesthetics because, although they are unquestionably aesthetic systems, they seem to violate all the tenets of Western aesthetics. She continues, "ritual art is traditionally produced by Hindu women in a number of regional systems across South Asia, and is an intrinsic and necessary part of the observance of auspicious occasions in Hindu worship" (Hart 1991:147).

Furthermore, there seems to be a fundamental divide between how Westerners view a Western artist who created a work of art and a non-Western artist who created an

art object. Where Western art is usually attributed to a specific artist, non-Western art is usually attributed to a specific culture. From the Western perspective, an original Picasso piece is an authentic Picasso piece, whereas an original piece created in Tana Toraja, Indonesia has no artist's name attached to it. Sally Price (2001) explains, "in the Western understanding of things, a work originating outside of the Great Traditions must have been produced by an unnamed figure who represents his [or her] community and whose craftsmanship respects the dictates of its age-old traditions" (56). This division between Western and non-Western art proves controversial because it establishes a type of hierarchy between cultures, and also questions the non-Western object's authenticity due to the object's lack of authorship. As a result, some anthropologists have advocated attention to non-Western artists' individual creativity, innovation, and historical change. Anthropologists, such as Franz Boas, Price claims, insisted on thorough, first-hand field research, on the elicitation of native explanations, on attention to the "play of imagination" and on the role of virtuosity, and on consideration of the artistic process as well as the finished product (2001:57). Moreover, at the same time, anthropologist Raymond Firth,

Whose approach to the study of social life stressed the freedom of individuals within the normative systems that circumscribe acceptable behavior, focused attention on the position of the creative faculty of the native artist in relation to his conformity to the local style and pioneered the use of personal names, portraying in his work the specific individuals whose lives contributed to his ethnographic understanding. (Price 2001:57)

Some anthropologists, therefore, have attempted to adjust the traditional Western view, which connects a work of art with a particular artist, while non-Western art does not, into a new perspective that illuminates the artist behind the non-Western object.

However, it seems that for the most part, museums such as the MQB, keep to the traditional notion that non-Western art remains anonymous. Since the majority of the artwork represented at the MQB journeyed into the museum's collection by way of private collections, government expeditions, and colonial domination, they have lost their past histories and original creators' ideas. In most cases, art museums displaying non-Western art will attribute a non-Western object to the collector who donated it to the museum rather than the object's original producer. Sally Price (2007) describes what a viewer may find on a particular non-Western object – a statue of the “shark king” for example – displayed at the MQB:

Designation: Royal anthropo-zoomorphic statue

Inventory number: 71.1893.45.3

Ethnic group: Fon

Region: Abomey / Zou / Benin / West Africa / Africa

Former collection: Musée de l'Homme (Africa)

Donor: Mr. Dodds (160)².

As a result, the object becomes devalued and loses its authenticity since it no longer bears its original creator's name. When an object bears its creator's name, it is more valuable because the viewer can better relate with the object. This issue then leads us to question whether or not a non-Western object retains its authenticity when it is displayed in a Western art museum. Certainly, the Western art exhibited in the Western art museum

remains authentic because it bears its creator's name and is displayed the way it was intended. This is not the case, however, for the non-Western object. Thus, what constitutes an "authentic" representation of non-Western "art" in a Western art museum?

Establishing Claims to Authenticity

The next important contributing factor to the Musée du Quai Branly's controversies concerning its display of non-Western art is authenticity. The focus here relates to the question of what constitutes an "authentic" representation of "art" from other societies. Do cultural artifacts lose their authenticity in the process of becoming art? Here again lies the clash between the worlds of anthropology, ethnography, art history, and aesthetics: different schools of thought, dealing with different kinds of materials, operating on different assumptions, asking different kinds of questions, and even adopting different positions on political and ethical issues (Price 2013:137). As a result, the concept of authenticity becomes difficult to define, especially when it is applied to the display of non-Western art in a Western museum. Thus, in order to fully grasp the idea of authenticity, we must first explore its various definitions, what it can be applied to, and who or what has the authority to declare that something is authentic. So, what is authenticity? Who has the authority to claim that a person, place, or thing is authentic? And to what can the concept of authenticity be applied? According to Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (2013),

The concept of authenticity encompasses diverse sets of meaning that range from genuineness and originality to accuracy and truthfulness . . . it is concerned with the identity of persons and groups, the authorship of products, produces, and cultural practices, the categorical boundaries of society: 'who' or 'what' is 'who' or 'what' claims to be (339).

Thus, there are several definitions of authenticity, as well as several questions and subjects related to it. For example, as Theodossopoulos (2013) continues, a few anthropological accounts examine authenticity in relation to specific contexts or sub-disciplines such as in “cultural re-enactments and heritage sites, theme parks, museums, ethnic art, ethnic commodification, mimic goods and counterfeits, politics of indigenous representation, religious experience and the sacred, object authenticity, folklore studies, lifestyle migration, psychological anthropology,” and tourism (339). The concept of authenticity is particularly difficult to define because it is open to various interpretations based on cultural settings, time, location, and other conditions that can alter its meaning. Secondly, the centuries old term finds its origins in Latin and later on in French with an original definition explaining that something authentic possesses authority or originality, or is entitled to obedience or respect³. According to Edward Bruner (1994), one of the leading experts on authenticity, “in the Renaissance [there were] originals and counterfeits; in the industrial period [there was] the serial repetition of the same object; but in this postmodern phase [there is] simulation, without origins, referential values, or beginnings, where the simulacrum becomes the true” (397). The term, therefore, has been defined and redefined multiple times throughout the centuries. The history of authenticity produces even more controversies when displaying art from one culture in another culture’s museum. Since non-Western art is usually deemed timeless, how can authenticity be characteristic of non-Western art?

In addition, as stated by John L. and Jean Comaroff (2009), “authenticity is not a fixed property of an object or a situation but is a negotiated attribute” (27). Thus, like the notion of art, authenticity is a subjective quality given to an object. In other words, it is

up to any viewer to decide whether an object is authentic or inauthentic; and, depending on the viewer – an anthropologist, art historian, museum curator, or museumgoer, for example – the decision is likely to change. As Price (2013) explains, physical objects are never inauthentic; only the claims that are made about them can be authentic or inauthentic (138). This deepens the “authentic representation” problem further, since claims of authenticity of an art object may be challenged but not on the grounds of the authenticity of the claim itself. In addition, art can neither be true nor false, and if this is the case, “deception about ‘authentic’ versus ‘inauthentic’ artworks can only take place in attributions, labels, and stories about the objects, not in the objects themselves” (Price 2013:138). Furthermore, if we were to take Bruner’s current, postmodern view of authenticity: “we have simulation without origins, referential values, or beginnings, where the simulacrum becomes the true”; then the original stories of the non-Western objects displayed in Western museums no longer remains important to the object itself (1994:397). With this view, the concept of authenticity becomes even more controversial since it suggests that more people view the reproduction of the object’s surroundings, i.e. museum exhibits, as factual rather than the actual cultural object or art piece itself. Because the viewer disregards the object’s past and respects the object only for its aesthetic quality in a Western perspective, the object appears authentic to the viewer and therefore becomes so. However, the distortion of history in non-Western societies is an important critique of museum and ethnographic representation. In terms of the MQB, Price explains that it is the objects’ “life histories and/or their intended meanings that have been distorted in motivated ways,” thus creating further challenges to the question of what constitutes an “authentic” representation of “art” from other societies (2013:141).

Bruner (1994) relates authenticity to America as the theorists Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard (1988; 1986) do in their studies. They explain that America is hyper-real, a place which “cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and founding truth...it lives in perpetual present...it lives in perpetual simulation” (Bruner 1994:397). This suggests then that anything and everything, at any time is authentic because authenticity is a hyper-reality; it is merely an attribute given to a certain object because the viewer finds it appropriate. Price (2007) sees this “hyper-relativism” as the result of American political correctness, which conjures up the vision of museum policies in which the members of a given culture – a Native American Indian tribe, for example – are the only people entitled to speak about what objects should be displayed and how those objects should be displayed (176). If this is the case, then the objects represented in the museums must be authentic since the members of the original culture are the sole curators of the exhibits. The objects on display are exhibited the way their original creators intended, exactly as Western artworks are displayed in Western art museums. For example, if European art exhibited in a European art museum remains authentic because it bears its creator’s name and is displayed the way it was intended, then in the case of the Native American tribe curating an exhibit of their own work, the non-Western art must also be authentic.

In his article, Bruner continues with a description of the site New Salem as a tourist spot that is supposed to replicate what old America looked like. He claims that tourists go to the site in order to learn about their past, play with time frames and enjoy the encounters, consume nostalgia, buy the idea of progress and celebrate America (Bruner 1994). He is pointing to the tourists’ experience of the reproduction rather than

its pure authenticity. This observation can be compared to someone's experience in a Western art museum as they discover the various non-Western art objects on display. Similar to what Bruner suggests, a museumgoer and/or tourist goes to a museum, such as the MQB, in order to learn about the past, consume knowledge about other cultures, and buy the idea that the non-Western objects are art. Some art museums, such as the MQB, attempt to create an architectural reproduction of the non-Western object's original surroundings in order to evoke emotion within the museumgoer, thus possibly creating authenticity for the viewer. The emotions provoked by the objects therefore allow them to be authentic. Furthermore, Bruner argues that it is with the experience that authenticity comes alive within the audience because ultimately, "individuals construct their own meanings" (1994:411).

Following these changes in the concept of authenticity, Theodossopoulos claims, "gradually, anthropological scholarship is moving in the direction of acknowledging the existence of plural, multidimensional authenticities" (2013:340). However, the question of whether or not non-Western art is represented authentically in the Musée du quai Branly still remains due to the multidimensional definitions of authenticity.

Authentic Representations of Non-Western Art

As I have stated above, a problem arises when Western cultures begin to treat non-Western art as the equivalent to Western art because in doing so creates the possibility for misunderstanding and misrepresentation. For example, it is possible for people in a Western culture to view a particular object as art whereas people in a non-Western culture may perceive the same object to be something other than art and vice versa. In addition, many of the artworks represented have lost their original histories and original purposes. For instance, in many cases, art museums displaying non-Western art will attribute a non-Western object to the collector who donated it to the museum rather than to the object's original producer, like the statue of the "shark king" displayed at the MQB. So, what constitutes an "authentic" representation of "art" from other societies? Do cultural artifacts lose their authenticity in the process of becoming art? Along with Musée du quai Branly, many art museums in Western Europe and the United States, such as the Menil Collection and MOMA, display non-Western objects in a Western fashion alongside Western art in order to establish a type of "cultural dialogue" between the Western and non-Western artworks. As we have seen, this style of display raises the question of the authentic representation of the non-Western object. Although the object is the original work of a non-Western artist, it is displayed in a way that promotes cultural hierarchy and confiscates the object's original intention. Instead of acting as an important ritualistic object – an African mask for example – the non-Western object becomes merely a less important, influential object which inspires "geniuses," such as Picasso, who, in the eyes of a Western viewer, create "masterpieces." Therefore, although the object may take on a new significant meaning, it still loses its original and thus authentic

meaning. Here “authentic” takes on Bruner’s “original, as opposed to a copy” definition (2001).

According to Claude-François Baudez (2002), “ethnoanthropologists have further demonstrated that there are cases where the surroundings of an object are as important as the object itself and contribute strongly to its meaning (140). For example, Baudez continues, “most African wooden masks are not worn alone during a dance but decorate only the head of the dancer, whose limbs and body are covered or decorated with foliage, fabrics, or jewels that also have semantic and aesthetic value” (140-141). Thus, an African wooden mask alone on a Western art museum’s wall fails to represent the object because the mask is taken out of its original, and thus authentic context; where here “authentic” refers to Theodossopoulos’s explanation that authenticity is concerned with the identity of persons and groups (2013). Once the mask is taken out of its intended surroundings it no longer holds its original meaning. Baudez (2002) also explains that the “smell, noise, and even the air displaced by a vegetal skirt during a dance often provoke emotional responses from the audience, and the presence of the skirt is absolutely mandatory” (141). Therefore, the African mask further loses its original significance because it is taken out of its native surroundings. It not only loses touch with its first home and first purpose, but also takes on an altogether new purpose and significance, and ends up representing something completely different from what the artist who originally created it intended.

In Price’s article “Alternative Authenticities (and Inauthenticities),” the anthropologist describes the story of a wooden house post from the Solomon Islands now located at the Pavillon des Sessions, one of the galleries at the Louvre Museum.

According to Sandra Revolon, Price says that the post was originally created with a significant story about an androgynous spirit searching for its next victim (2013:142). She explains that the art dealer, Jacques Kerchache, who designed the exhibits at the Louvre, rejected the original – and thus authentic – explanation of the post.

Kerchache made it abundantly clear that he had absolutely no interest in ethnography . . . that as far as he was concerned explanations like Sandra Revolon's interfered with aesthetic appreciation. Time and again he explained that he looked for only one thing in the objects that he collected and bought and sold, and that was their formal beauty. So he was certainly not about to label this house post in terms of malevolent spirits. Rather, what he read in it, which his connoisseur's impeccable eye, was erotic sensuality. (142)

Thus, because the museum's curator deliberately transformed the post's original purpose and meaning to suit an aesthetic purpose, the object's authentic qualities are skewed. This becomes problematic because it not only takes away the object's cultural heritage but also asserts the authentic cultural heritage to be insignificant by replacing it with a different cultural heritage: that of the curator. If the object's cultural history is confiscated, then all that remains is an aesthetic object of importance to its new Western owners and viewers; and if the object does not display its original importance and lacks original authorship, then it must not be authentic. Moreover, there seems to be a fundamental divide between how Westerners view a Western artist who created a work of art and a non-Western artist who created an art object. Where Western art is usually

attributed to one specific artist, non-Western art is usually attributed to one specific culture. Does this also inhibit an object's true authenticity?

Many of the non-Western works on display at the MQB lack individual authorship. In many instances, art museums displaying non-Western art will attribute a non-Western object to the collector who donated it to the museum rather than the object's original producer. Since the majority of the artwork represented at the MQB journeyed into the museum's collection by way of private collections, government expeditions, and colonial domination, somewhere along the way the objects lost their past histories and original creators' ideas. Thus, because of this loss of authorship and original historical purpose, the non-Western object loses its authenticity when it is displayed in a Western museum. The artwork takes on a new purpose and meaning by destroying its original meaning and purpose in order to suit the aesthetic needs of the Western audience rather than the original function it was intended for. But, if we "have simulation without origins, referential values, or beginnings, where the simulacrum becomes the true," then the original stories of the non-Western objects displayed in Western art museums take on a new form of authenticity; but one that no longer holds true of the object itself (Bruner 1994:397). Although this new form of authenticity may prove persuasive to some viewers, it may not hold up with others. This is where the concept of authenticity may prove challenging when non-Western art is added to the equation. Because definitions of "authenticity" lack consistency it is difficult to treat some objects as authentic while treating others as inauthentic. Authenticity is not a fixed property of an object but a negotiated attribute (Comaroff 2009:27). Thus, while an African mask on display at the MQB may have lost its original story and purpose, it may still appear authentic to the

museumgoer because it is indeed an aesthetically pleasing object produced by an unnamed artist from a non-Western culture.

Furthermore, according to Anna Jones (1993), the issues of authenticity provide an interesting complement to the critique of museums treating non-Western objects as art (208). She reexamines the article written by Sidney Kasfir, an author of an earlier critique on the notion of “tribalism.”

Kasfir’s article indicated the art world’s (amazingly resilient) canon of assumptions about African art: the ‘before/after scenario’ that privileges pre-colonial objects in major collections and exhibitions, the idea that objects collected during the early contact collecting period were unaffected by Western influence, and the persistent notion of timeless tribal styles. The distortion of history in non-Western societies is an important critique of museum (and ethnographic) representation. (208)

Her article reasserts and argues against the anthropological notion that non-Western art is only authentic when it is produced in the traditional stylistic norms and uses. Going back to the idea of contemporary or “tourist” art, non-Western art can no longer be viewed as timeless, or represented as merely the expressions of the traditions, rituals, and practices of the societies the objects originally came from. Although the non-Western art is dubbed “tourist” art, it is still art created by a non-Western artist. In addition, if the authenticity criterion of “traditional origin” is vitiated by ethnocentric prejudices, the criterion of “traditional use” is equally confused since there are carvers who have worked on both “tribal” commissions and on commissions for dealers, anthropologists, art historians, and

museum curators (Shiner 1994:228). Thus, here again, the example demonstrates the challenge of classifying non-Western art as either authentic or inauthentic. If it is already difficult to classify art objects produced in a non-Western culture as either authentic or inauthentic, how will Western art curators manage to authentically represent non-Western art in their exhibits?

There are various ways in which non-Western art is interpreted, exhibited, and displayed throughout the Western world; and in most cases, it seems that the art is questionably represented in an authentic fashion. Because the concept of authenticity “encompasses diverse sets of meaning that range from genuineness and originality to accuracy and truthfulness,” and concerns various identities, authorships, and claims, it is challenging to classify certain objects as authentic, and most importantly authentically represent objects from another culture (Theodossopoulos 2013:339). It is because of these challenges that many art museums, curators, art historians, and anthropologists have attempted to create authentic representations of non-Western art in Western art museums by utilizing a variety of display methods. For example, the “Perspectives: Angles on African Art” exhibition was one of the first to present non-Western art from a range of viewpoints, including that of African artists (Jones 1993:206). In addition, “ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections” was an influential exhibition that presented a series of galleries depicting different contexts for displaying African art: “Contemporary Art Gallery,” “Curiosity Room,” “Natural History Museum Diorama,” “Art Museum,” and a videotape of an African ceremony. This important exhibition raised the level of awareness of display conventions on the part of both art and anthropology curators (Jones 1993:206).

Furthermore, in an attempt to counteract the ethnocentric practices of the contemporary art world, curator Jean-Hubert Martin created the contemporary art exhibit “Magiciens de la terre” at the Centre George Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette in 1989. According to the Centre George Pompidou’s website, the international art exhibition featured one hundred contemporary artists from around the world: fifty from “centers” or “Western” parts of the world (such as the United States and Western Europe) and fifty from the “margins” or “non-West” (such as Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Australia)⁴. According to Francesco Pellizzi (1989), the art exhibited in “Magiciens de la terre” revealed two types of authenticities which both complemented and converged with each other (202). The first explored the concept of authenticity in a traditional notion, especially one religious in nature, and the second was a more modern idea, which of course is more difficult to define (Pellizzi 1989:202). This suggests that the exhibit, through the perspective of Pellizzi, was able to combine the traditional sense of authenticity, what Shiner (1994) describes as the authenticity criterion of “traditional origin” and “traditional use,” with the modern notion of authenticity, which Bruner (1994) explains to be simulation without origins, referential values, or beginnings. In doing so, the curators of “Magiciens de la terre” could be seen as more egalitarian than other exhibits promoting non-Western art in 1989, such as the MOMA exhibit “Primitivism.” Ivan Karp (1991) suggests that the curators of the MOMA exhibit denied that “Third World artists and contemporary artists differ in self-consciousness,” and all of the exhibiting artists were equally naïve about the magical and elemental sources of their art (13). Although this display method promotes equality, it also resurrects the

universalist idea of art, which promotes the strategy of assimilation and eliminates all “cultural context, motives, and resources” (Karp 1991, 13).

Thus, although there have been various display methods attempting to fairly and fully represent non-Western objects in Western museums, many curators, anthropologists and art historians have found the task extremely difficult. If this is the case, then what is the appropriate display method?

Returning What Was Taken

The controversies surrounding the Musée du quai Branly have resurrected the many issues regarding how non-Western objects should be displayed in a Western art museum. These controversies prove problematic for a variety of reasons: the definition of art; the history of colonialism; the notion of the individual; the definitions of Western, non-Western, and primitive objects; and the definition of authenticity. Although many anthropologists and art historians have attempted a variety of exhibiting methods that prove authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and unprejudiced, in most cases they have come up short. Especially in the case of the MQB, the museum immediately led to controversy, since even as it pretended to undermine a kind of colonialist representation, it reasserted it, both by hewing to the division of the world – the West and the Rest – and through exhibits that were exoticizing. Therefore, as suggested by Conley (2010), practices of display still need to be refined so that there is a more consistent understanding of the objects on view along with their varied histories (48). But is there another method completely different from museum display? In recent years, anthropologists such as Conley (2010) and Linda Radzik (2009) have suggested a completely different approach: reconciliation. According to them, only through reconciliation can an object regain its full authenticity. In other words, by returning an object to its original creator and/or original society, it can reclaim its original purpose and original meaning.

Display of non-Western objects in Western settings from the private homes of the surrealists to the public venues of the MQB, have allowed visitors of all sorts to experience transformational encounters with such objects, thus educating new

generations about the beauty and sacred value of objects precious to cultures from distant points on the globe (Conley 2010:48). But this rather sticky situation has led art historians and anthropologists alike to readdress the issue of what constitutes an authentic representation of non-Western art in a Western art museum. Conley (2010) explains a museum's goal of negotiating a new global audience for exhibitions and its hope of serving the dual communities of colonizers and colonized could usefully be negotiated through Linda Radzik's (2009) reconciliation theory which applies to institutions as well as individuals.

According to this theory, wrongdoers must work to reestablish "mutual respect for the equal dignity of all parties." Through moral reconciliation, wrongdoers – in this case, curators willing to acknowledge the wrongdoing involved in the past acquisition of goods through colonialism – could pursue the goal of establishing "respectful communication with victims and relevant communities," that is, members of the communities from whom objects in their collections were taken. (49)

Because the most important problem at the MQB, according to Price, is that the knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives of native peoples have largely been brushed aside, Linda Radzik's reconciliation theory is very useful when trying to reestablish authenticity (2007:176). Some reparations in the shape of return of objects to their original communities have taken place, but more in the future will not only help Westerners fully understand non-Western cultural aesthetics but also cultural authenticity. For example, Aube Breton Ellouët, André Breton's daughter, donated some of her father's non-

Western objects to the MQB and also made the ultimate gesture of request for atonement when she “visited Chief Cranmer in Alert Bay to ceremoniously return one of the important lost masks” that Breton had had in his collection (Conley 2010:49). In addition, Conley explains, human remains have been returned, particularly in the United States with the passage of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (2010:49). In another example, the remains of Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, were returned to her native South Africa in August 2002 (Conley 2010:49). Finally, in order to further reconcile the relationships between colonizers and colonized, some art historians and anthropologists have attempted to establish an authentic representation of non-Western art both through new methods of display and even by returning objects to their original creators and/or owners.

However, returning objects to their original creators and/or cultures can be problematic. In many cases, these non-Western objects have completely lost their past histories, and the location of their original homes. As a result of the post-colonial efforts to redraw national boundaries in many of the colonized areas throughout the globe, most notably throughout the African continent, hundreds of ethnic and cultural groups have either been split or combined to create new societies and new nationalities. In turn, it is difficult to state to which nation an object should be returned. Here, claiming an object to be culturally authentic to a specific society or area becomes extremely muddled. Who has the authority to claim an object as theirs or not? And how can anyone be completely certain that an object, under these conditions, is returned to its rightful owner/society/creator? Although these questions are very intriguing, they generate a whole new set of issues that must be discussed in a later paper. For now, the issue of how

to authentically represent non-Western art in a Western art museum is at stake. We must first explore the methods of how to preserve and exhibit non-Western objects/art in an authentic fashion before they are returned to their rightful owners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is difficult to say whether any Western art museum has been successful in authentically representing non-Western art on its walls or in its glass cases. When the doors of the Musée du quai Branly opened to the public for the first time in 2006, a large array of controversies flooded journals and news posts throughout the art history and anthropological worlds. While curators and recently established museums may argue that they exist in a fully post-colonial era, the institutions with which they are affiliated contain within them works acquired primarily through conquest and domination (Conley 2010:48). Because of this unfortunate situation, art museums are caught in rather sticky positions of representing authentically the arts of non-Western peoples as “art” and as a “cultural dialogue.” Because the arts of the West have historically been treated as speaking to some kind of universal human condition, while the artifacts of non-Western societies have been represented as merely the expression of the traditions, rituals, and practices of those societies, the division seems historically incorrect. The MQB was originally created as a new space for presenting the arts of non-Western people more as art and less as ethnography, in turn trying to address the two problems above. However, the museum immediately led to controversy, since even as it pretended to undermine a kind of colonialist representation, it reasserted it, both by hewing to the division of the world – the West and the Rest – and through exhibits that were exoticizing, as well as through a variety of antagonistic relations with anthropologists and others, such as art historians and museum curators.

Although reconciliation is a viable method of re-authentication for the future, for now, Western museums that currently own non-Western objects must discover the best

methods of preserving the objects' authentic histories and purposes in order to limit their misrepresentation of the cultures from which the objects were taken. One possible way Western art museums may be able to accomplish aesthetically pleasing, anthropological, and even authentic exhibitions is to display non-Western objects with a description of the objects' history of colonization, history of ethnography, human history, aesthetics, and history of anthropology, so that museumgoers may learn and experience something about how and why the objects ended up in the Western art museum. Furthermore, the description of the object could also explain why it was ever thought that it should go into the museum, and why the collector found it interesting, so that we may learn about the humanity in objects in museums, in addition to what the object was originally intended for. Lastly, explaining the history of why and how the non-Western object ended up in a Western art museum, why it is being displayed this way, and how it could possibly be displayed in a better manner, not only provides the viewer with more information on the object, but also attempts to restore its authenticity. It is certain that controversies arise when these non-Western objects are displayed in ways that are exoticizing; deepen the division of the world; promote cultural hierarchy; or for pure aesthetic purposes. When exhibited in these fashions, cultural artifacts lose their authenticity because they no longer demonstrate their original qualities and original purposes. However, they do take on a renewed authenticity because even though they lose their original meaning, they still appear authentic to some when they are displayed on a museum wall. Because authenticity is merely a negotiated attribute, it is difficult for everyone to agree on whether or not a cultural artifact loses its authenticity when becoming art.

Notes

¹Larousse, Encyclopédie, “art premier.”
http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/art_premier/187292.

² For a more detailed description, please see Price (2007).

³ Oxford Dictionary, “authentic, adj. and n.”
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13314?rskey=DjRCKZ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

⁴Le Centre Pompidou, L’Événement, “Magiciens de la Terre.”

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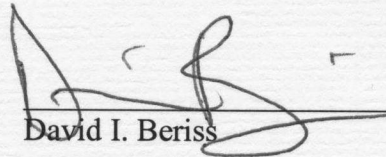
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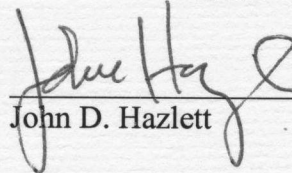
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The Challenge of Authenticity*



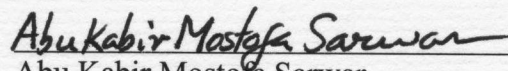
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for the University
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April 28, 2014
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