



# MUSEUMS AS WUNDERKAMMER AND COMMUNITY CENTERS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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*ABSTRACT: Museums are inherently experiential locales wherein objects are imbued with specific meanings that influence the ways visitors understand the wider world around them. In the context of cultural and historical objects, their presentation in exhibits greatly contributes to public perceptions of specific cultures, communities, people, and identities. Wunderkammer, or cabinets of curiosities, are prime examples of this, wherein the random organization and curation of objects based on their perceived exoticism depicts cultures outside of the West as strange, mysterious, and, at worst, dangerous. Therefore, it is imperative that museums institute inclusive and thoughtful exhibit designs that uplift and support represented cultures rather than diminish them. These ideas are explored through comparative analyses of exhibits at the Seattle Art Museum and Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience and their incorporation of Wunderkammer-inspired and community-based exhibition models.*

Museums can act as a means of intellectual exploration and knowledge gathering, encouraging visitors to recognize and gather new understandings of what differs from their own knowledge backgrounds. On the other hand, museums can also act as a tool for preservation and representation, employing techniques made to inspire action in the visitor as opposed to merely awe. Though equally intriguing in their own respects, museums like the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) and the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience utilize the space and ideologies behind the process of museum work to impart varying values and purposes onto the viewer. Therefore, different forms of display can have varying impacts on museum visitors' interpretations of the pieces they are viewing, in turn influencing the ways in which they understand their origins and significance.

Wunderkammer (German for “wonder room”), also commonly referred to as cabinets of curiosities, are a collection of rare and unique objects ranging from historical objects,

artworks, heirlooms, and scientific specimens (Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, 2021). Gaining popularity in 16th century Europe, the goal of these collections was to tell spectators a story about the world through a specific selection of objects. These stories were heavily influenced by the perspective of the owners of these collections, usually reflecting colonial and Orientalist themes in an attempt to impress visitors through objects' perceived strangeness and exoticism. These collections also had the goal of earning their owners fame and status, especially amongst European nobility. By seeking the rarest objects to tell intriguing stories, many scholars (both experts in their fields and not) took designing Wunderkammers as an opportunity to obtain wealth and climb the social ladder. As a whole, scholars wished to transfer the whole of the world into the interior of a museum, making the inaccessible accessible (Olmi, 2004).

The pieces residing in SAM are housed within the usual facets of a modern art museum: bare white walls, high squared cathedral ceilings,



## Youssef

blue-shirted security guards, and an impressive piece of artwork suspended from the ceiling, all culminating into a resolute invitation into the world of art and culture. The stark plainness of the museum's architecture serves to highlight the pieces situated throughout its meandering and seemingly disconnected hallways, homing the visitors' attention and interest straight to the pieces themselves. The means of walking through the museum hallways offers the sense of an ambiguous connection between the exhibits, especially in the 4th floor cultural and historical artifacts sections. Each exhibit links to the other in abstract ways, blending from African wooden carvings, to silver inkpots etched with Islamic scriptures, to ancient Egyptian jewelry, to ancient Greek vases. In walking through SAM, in that sense, the architecture exists as a quiet director of the visitors' attentions, subtly guiding their experience without encouraging a specific interpretation of what is being viewed.

The Wing Luke differs in both visual stature and purpose. Built by and for Asian and Pacific Islander communities, the interior reflects the image of a lived-in space, with exposed brick walls, wood-paneled ceilings, a large wooden staircase, and several hand-crafted pieces of décor dangling from the ceiling and slung across the walls. The main rotating exhibit is featured on the first floor and positioned slightly to the left of the visitor's line of sight upon first entering the museum. Following up the large staircase, there is a long hallway lined with entryways into meandering exhibits. On the right, an exhibit featuring modern art from AAPI artists. On the left, histories of Asian communities, including their migration journeys to the United States and the common, everyday items they brought with them. There is also a line of exhibits displaying cultural belongings of underrepresented Asian communities, consisting of Filipino, Burmese, Cambodian, and Desi objects in individually designed spaces.

SAM's focus in its display is to inform on the basis of awe and inspiration. The imitation

of a 16th century Italian stüa with its oakwood paneling, two lite casement windows, and simulated sunlight immerses and educates visitors on Renaissance-era Italian art and architecture through visual cues. There are no signs and there is no audio explaining what the visitor is walking through; they can peer into every corner of the room, admiring the detailed woodwork and leave with either a mere satisfaction of being transported to a romanticized time past, or inspiration to learn more about what they have just witnessed. This emphasis on visual cues is also evident in SAM's modern art and photography exhibits, where movement throughout a room can reveal the storytelling techniques at play.

The arrangement of exhibits such as Carrie Mae Weems' "Kitchen Table" series rely on the visitors' trained eyes to notice the beginning of their story and follow through to the end. Visitors enter the spacious Weems exhibit to see a collection of black and white photographs



*Figure 1: A replica of a 16th century Italian stüa at the Seattle Art Museum. Photo by Layla Youssef.*



spread across three walls. As visitors follow along each wall, moving counterclockwise, they follow the visual story of a woman entering a relationship, being left by the man she loved, then traversing her heartbreak through female friendships and caring for her daughter. As visitors maneuver through this anonymous woman's search for solace, they turn to the final fourth wall, which feature individual portraits of her appearing content with herself, enjoying the activities she had been doing with her partner and her other relationships solo. This aligns with

SAM's focus on interpretation being left to the visitor as opposed to more direct messaging of what the visitor should expect from their time in this exhibit.

Contrary to SAM's approach to object representation, the Wing Luke's focus lies in social justice and a call to action. Through a combination of historical objects, cultural belongings, and interpretive settings, the Wing Luke encourages visitors to interpret museum spaces through the appreciation of culture and



*Figure 2: A teddy bear and drawings by a Japanese American child living in a prison camp displayed at the Wing Luke Museum. Photo by Layla Youssef.*

the recognition of prevalent social issues, all combined to motivate action. This approach to exhibit design is best exemplified in the exhibit *Resistors: A Legacy of Movement* from the Japanese American Incarceration. Designed to bring attention to the oft-overlooked atrocity that was the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during WWII, the exhibit utilizes primary source material such as photographs, letters, interviews, and personal items from survivors of the prison camps to illustrate and inform visitors of the full story of their imprisonment. A teddy

bear belonging to a young child living in the camps, suitcases piled haphazardly atop each other, a narrow hallway filled with photos taken of families before they were forcefully removed from their homes, a room lined with cots and outlines of bodies that rested upon them; these objects all amalgamate into an experience that uses pieces as a recognition and memorial of an underrepresented history local to Seattle and Japanese communities. It visually portrays the racism and nationalism embedded within the federal policies that resulted in this history



Youssef

and the ways in which these ideas continue to proliferate through current U.S. policies regarding immigrants, refugees, and minority communities.

In analyzing SAM and the Wing Luke Museum, it becomes clear the differences in approaches to exhibit design and interpretation for the viewer, as well as the apparent overall mission of these museums as understood through their exhibits. In Andrew McClellan's article "Nationalism and the Origins of the Museum in France", he examines how practices of comparison and critical mass, or the concentration of a nation's artistic progress over time, are an emphasis of cultural and moral superiority that assisted in developing French nationalism and pride over the rest of Europe (31). The museum was designed as a means of developing national pride, leading to the intense reverence for these art pieces as treasures and therefore, their protection (29). In this sense, both SAM and the Wing Luke are founded on the basis of preserving history for communal pride, but for different missions. As SAM seeks to preserve and protect what is being lost to time in a tangibly destructive sense, the Wing Luke preserves and protects what is being lost to time as generations die and communities shift, their history disappearing and shifting with them.

Similarly, James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* describes how Richard Handler identifies that "'having a culture,' selecting and cherishing an authentic collective 'property' . . . presupposes acts of collection, gathering up possessions in arbitrary systems of value and meaning. Such systems, always powerful and rule governed, change historically" (217). This brings into question how museums such as SAM and the Wing Luke maintain and add to collections on the basis of systems that continually reinforce hegemonic power structures formulated during European colonialism and intense nationalism across the Western side of the continent. SAM, which is more traditionalist in its object presentation with

glass cases and minimal decor, acknowledges the power structures at play through descriptions on plaques, but does not utilize its exhibits to recognize the existence of these structures or actively work against them. It still holds the values and design of the Wunderkammer, though significantly more discreet and on a larger scale. The Wing Luke, which is community organized, only uses objects offered by local Asian and Pacific Islander communities in exhibits they desire to be made, in turn removing the arbitrary systems of value and meaning that Clifford describes and forming new systems that encourage community growth and support through culturally significant items.

While examining the difference in mission between these two museums, it begs the question of how the organization and potential reorganization of objects influence the ways that visitors interpret the messages, communities, histories, and cultures that are being represented. Objects in museums become representatives of a group of people's culture and history, and need to be treated as such, with full consideration of how their presentation imparts meaning onto viewers. With these understandings, it's imperative for any museum tending to culturally significant objects to display these objects in ways that uplift a community's cultures and histories. Museums need to abandon hegemonic power structures such as Wunderkammer to better serve and educate visitors. The lack of clarity and context within organizational structures like Wunderkammer can result in assumptions about the cultures and histories they're seeing represented through objects on behalf of the viewer, contributing to common stereotypes. Additionally, the focus on prestige as opposed to education in utilizing objects only reinforces colonial power structures, and contributes to the exoticizing of cultures from regions outside the West.

Through the process of comparative analysis, it becomes clear the ways in which design and placement influence how museum visitors



interpret histories and cultures represented in exhibits. SAM harnesses sensibilities of wonder and romantic curiosity within an audience before emphasizing strides in ethical representation in their museum. The Wing Luke takes a different approach, presenting a strict mission and theme in their exhibits that seeks to support underrepresented communities and/or advocate for systemic changes to combat prominent social issues. In essence, SAM and the Wing Luke are two sides of the same coin. The museums are holders of knowledge and public-facing representations of history and culture, representing through fascination and rumination, all in a means to educate visitors through physical connections to the past.

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