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“Women of Color

In Museums of Art and Natural History”

It has been estimated that there are approximately 17,500 museums in the United States¹ and a 1999 study “reported that ‘American museums average approximately 865 million visits per year or 2.3 million visits per day.’”² With so many museums and their visitors in existence, it is alarming to learn that “women of many ethnic and racial backgrounds have...been invisible”³ in these institutions. This lack of representation of women, minorities, and most importantly for our purposes, women of color in museums raises the question, are women of color at all present in American museums today?

In fact, women of color have impacted and continue to affect American museums. This essay aims to expose how women of color have shaped American museums of art and natural history through both their physical roles and their presence in collections and exhibitions. I am focusing on only museums of art and natural history because my academic interest is in art history and because I have volunteered in a natural history museum (Florida Museum of Natural History) and can share first hand knowledge of such an establishment. In order to explain how museums have been affected by women of color I will illustrate the roles of such women and give an overview of a few museums that are showcasing women of color today in their collections or exhibitions.

It is crucial that we first establish that women of color are or have been largely absent from American museums. The Associate Director of Public Programs for the National Museum of Natural History, Robert Sullivan, recently wrote that “based on the extent to which one race and/or gender dominates museums’ governance, policies, practices, and programs... museums

¹ American Association of Museums, “How many museums are there in the United States?,” *Museums FAQ*, http://www.aam-us.org/aboutmuseums/abc.cfm#how_many.

² Ibid., “How many people visit museums in the United States?”

³ Heather Anderson, “Making Women Artists Visible,” *Art Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 17. www.jstor.org.

are generally racist and sexist institutions.”⁴ We can hardly deny the truth of this statement when we consider that racism is often defined as “prejudice plus power” – “racial prejudice when combined with social power...leads to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices.”⁵ Sullivan is certainly not the only one to observe this about museums. The Guerilla Girls, a group of anonymous women from the art world dedicated to fighting racism and sexism in the industry, “formed in 1985 to protest” a 1984 exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art which was “comprised of approximately 169 artists, thirteen of whom were women and none of whom were artists of color.”⁶

However, to accept these evaluations of museums would be to deny the progress that women of color have made. Indeed, women (generally, not women of color specifically) have been a serious driving force behind historic conservation and preservation since the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Contrary to the notion that women had no role in museums, a newspaper article from 1962 notes that a woman who at the time was “chairman of the woman’s committee of the [American Museum of Natural History]” was the “fourth woman to serve as a trustee” for the museum.⁸

Of course, one may be skeptical of the achievements of women of color in museums but they too made an impact; unfortunately not much has been researched about them except for African Americans. “Rowena Stewart asserts that it was a woman who started the movement for African American museums, which empower black people to select their own heroes and to

⁴ Robert Sullivan, “Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums,” in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, eds. Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 100.

⁵ Beverley Daniels Tatum, “Defining Racism: ‘Can We Talk?’,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 6th ed., ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2004), 127.

⁶ Kim Kanatani and Vas Prabhu, “Instructional Resources: Artists Comment on Museum Practices,” *Art Education* 49, no. 2 (1996): 27. www.jstor.org.

⁷ Barbara J. Howe, “Women in Historic Preservation: The Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham,” *The Public Historian* 12, no. 1 (1990): 31. www.jstor.org.

⁸ *New York Times*, “Woman Museum Trustee,” November 14, 1962, www.proquest.com.

control the depiction of their heritage, struggles, and social contributions.”⁹ Stewart remarks that “women of the twentieth-century African American museum movement” did not occasionally surface in museums but can instead be “categorized as founder/activist, scholar/museum professional, those who struggled for African American representation in the nonblack institutions in which they worked, and patron of the arts.”¹⁰ While little is known about the physical roles women of color fulfilled, a better image of these women is painted through an exploration of museum collections and exhibitions.

Darlene Clark Hine, a prominent African American historian, once noted that “historians can write a history of anything of anyone but the key is the historian must decide that that thing, event or person or group is worthy of historical investigation.”¹¹ Hine's comment, though not about museums, seems to reflect the hesitation of museums and their curators to adopt collections or exhibits about women of color or to display the work and accomplishments of these women. To be sure, art museums have begun to embrace the work of women of color. “In recent decades an exciting new vision of a multicultural, multiethnic art world has arisen. Artists from diverse backgrounds – Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans – who in the past were largely excluded from the mainstream are beginning, in increasing numbers, to exhibit their works in major galleries and museums.”¹²

In 1896, one author wrote that “the Museum of Art is a depository for the aesthetic products of man’s creative genius,” and proceeded with, “the greater art collections illustrate...

⁹ Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou, eds., *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), xix-xx.

¹⁰ Rowena Stewart, “The Empowerment of African American Museums,” in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, 75.

¹¹ *Shattering the Silences: Minority Faculty Break into the Ivory Tower*, “Transcript,” <http://www.pbs.org/shattering/transcript.html>.

¹² Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Sculptors: A History of Women Working in Three Dimensions* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), 560.

the intellectual progress of the civilized races of man.”¹³ We can assume that this author was writing of men specifically, not using “man” as a generalization for both sexes. With this in mind, the opening of the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in 1987 signifies a triumph in the recognition of and appreciation for art by women. “For the first time in history, women have a permanent repository for their work and a center for exhibitions of women’s art from all times and places.”¹⁴ The NMWA lists 142 American women artists in their permanent collection ranging from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, the majority of artists in the collection are not women of color. However, there are some women of color represented in the collection such as Elizabeth Catlett (African-American), Lois Mailou Jones (African-American), María Montoya Martínez (Native American), and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (American Indian). Other notable non-American women of color in the collection include Young-Ja Cho (Korean), Frida Kahlo (Mexican), and Marina Nuñez Del Prado (Bolivian).

Akin to the NMWA in its effort to draw attention to an otherwise unrepresented group, the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA) since its opening in 1996 “has been dedicated to gathering a collection of art that demonstrates the distinction and quality of fine art produced in the latter half of the twentieth century from the Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries of Latin America.”¹⁶ Predictably, the MoLAA presents a problem contradictory to that of the NMWA – the former’s collection is completely comprised of artists of color but women are vastly underrepresented. The greatest showing of women Latin artists – as gleaned from the

¹³ G. Brown Goode, “On the Classification of Museums,” *Science* 3, no. 57 (1896): 154. www.jstor.org.

¹⁴ Rubinstein, 538.

¹⁵ National Museum of Women in the Arts, “Search results,” <http://nmwa.org/collection/searchresults.asp>.

¹⁶ Museum of Latin American Art, *Permanent Collection*, http://www.molaa.org/permanent_collection.htm.

MoLAA website – was an exhibition in 2004 called “A Woman’s Touch” which featured sculptures by four Latin American women.¹⁷

While there are very few large museums committed to showcasing a minority group, like the NMWA and MoLAA, there are many smaller museums or art centers dedicated to highlighting minority groups through exhibitions. One such place is the Asian American Arts Centre. Founded in 1974 “to address the distinctive concerns of Asian Americans in the United States,”¹⁸ the Asian American Arts Centre features a few women artists including Djin-Suk Kim (Korean American), Tara Sabharwal (Indian American), and Noriko Shinohara (Japanese American).

Much like the Asian American Arts Centre, “the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) is dedicated to the celebration, exhibition, collection and criticism of black visual arts heritage worldwide.”¹⁹ The NCAAA has exhibited several works by women artists such as the upcoming “Enter-ACTION – New Artwork by: Maya Freelon,” an entire show featuring the art of the African-American woman.²⁰

Museums of natural history are less likely to focus solely on one sex or race/ethnicity than art museums, but they often house exhibitions which do just that. As early as 1934, the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) was reported to have “one of the finest collections” of West African arts and crafts.²¹ Today the NMNH continues to showcase collections from Africa as well as many other places and cultures including online

¹⁷ Museum of Latin American Art, *Exhibitions*. http://www.molaa.org/exhibitions_past_feb_may_2004_womans.htm.

¹⁸ Asian American Arts Centre, *Mission*, <http://www.artspiral.org/about.html#top>.

¹⁹ The National Center of Afro-American Artists, *The Museum*, <http://www.ncaaa.org/museum.html>.

²⁰ The National Center of Afro-American Artists, *Exhibitions – May 2007*, <http://www.ncaaa.org/exhibitions.html>.

²¹ *The Washington Post*, “Examples of West African Arts at National Museum,” January 21, 1934, www.proquest.com.

exhibits on the Maya, the Lakota, and Alaska Natives.²² Notably, the permanent exhibition on African culture entitled “African Voices” which was originally slated to open in December 1999 was delayed because the NMNH failed to raise enough funds.²³ Perhaps this too is a reflection of society’s hesitation to embrace a foreign culture.

Although the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH)’s “primary geographic strengths are in Florida, the Southeastern U.S. and the Caribbean,” their ethnography department has brought attention to the cultures of Latin America and North America.²⁴ The FLMNH has successfully debunked the traditional image of Native Americans as “a slumped over Indian with [two] pathetic feathers on a horse”²⁵ by compiling a collection of over 2000 “North American Indian ethnographic artifacts.”²⁶ In addition to their permanent collection, the FLMNH frequently houses exhibits that highlight other cultures such as the current “Tibet: Mountains and Valleys, Castles and Tents” and the upcoming “Inside Africa.”²⁷

Incorporating a discussion of sex or gender into museums of natural history can be rather difficult considering that these museums usually focus on cultures, broadly, rarely on men or women within those cultures, specifically. One can glean information about the sexes when visiting exhibitions, however. For example, while I was volunteering at the FLMNH in the aforementioned “Tibet” exhibit, a middle-aged, Caucasian man made an interesting remark. As he looked at a photograph of two men and a woman standing outside a tent in a clearly mountainous, cold environment, he said to me, “You women really have it hard!” Not quite

²² National Museum of Natural History, *Anthropology*, “Online Exhibits,” <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro>.

²³ Jacqueline Trescott, “Funds For Africa Exhibit Fall Short; Lacking Foundation Money, History Museum Borrowed \$5 Million,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1999, www.proquest.com.

²⁴ Florida Museum of Natural History, *Collections*, <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/museum/collections.htm>.

²⁵ Chrystos, “Vanish is a Toilet Bowl Cleaner,” in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002): 286.

²⁶ Florida Museum of Natural History, *Collections*, “North American Ethnography,” <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/museum/collections.htm#ethno>.

²⁷ Florida Museum of Natural History, *Exhibits*, <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/exhibits>.

understanding where his comment was rooted I asked what he meant at which time he pointed out that the woman was not wearing shoes (and did not have any nearby) but the men's feet were covered. It occurred to me at that moment that in an exhibit (or anywhere) seemingly devoid of a commentary on gender, one can always interpret and be made aware of such issues.

My revelation led me to conclude that issues of race and gender surround us constantly. At times we may feel that if it is not one thing, it's another, like the lack of minorities and women in the National Museum of Women in the Arts and Museum of Latin American Art, respectively. But instead of pointing fingers at "cultural institutions," "political institutions," and the education system, among others, for promoting sexism and racism,²⁸ we should encourage diversity within these establishments as we remind ourselves that "revolution is possible."²⁹

²⁸ Manning Marable, "Racism and Sexism," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 162-163.

²⁹ Randy P. L. Conner and David Hatfield Sparks, "'And Revolution Is Possible': Re-Membering the Vision of *This Bridge*," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, 516.

Museum Information

Asian American Arts Centre

26 Bowery, New York, NY 10013

<http://www.artspiral.org>

Florida Museum of Natural History

PO Box 112710, Gainesville, FL 32611

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu>

Museum of Latin American Art

628 Alamitos Ave., Long Beach, CA 90802

<http://www.molaa.org>

Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists

300 Walnut Avenue, Boston, MA 02119

<http://www.ncaaa.org/museum.html>

National Museum of Women in the Arts

1250 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20005

<http://www.nmwa.org>

Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History

P.O. Box 37012 Smithsonian Inst., Washington D.C. 20013

<http://www.mnh.si.edu>

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