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Diversity Analysis of the Portland Art Museum's Exhibitions:
a Closer Examination Through an Art Historical Lens

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

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Thesis Advisor

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Introduction

I want to acknowledge the ways in which I am writing this thesis are unique. I am taking a different approach towards my art history thesis by analyzing the diversity of exhibitions at the Portland Art Museum spanning a near ten-year period, between 2013 and 2022. Most art history majors choose a specific artist, time period, or movement to study and then analyze a specific piece in context with the artist's history and general history. My interest not only in museums in general but specifically, art museums, spurred this different path. Aspiring to study museology in the future, this thesis will shed light into the ways in which exhibits are curated and received by both critics and the general public alike. I would like to emphasize that this analysis studies the process and influences of how art reaches the public, not the art itself.

In this thesis, I will analyze the ways in which the Portland Art Museum has increased the diversity of its exhibitions over the past ten years by focusing on four specific examples:

1. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*,
2. *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art*,
3. *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy*, and
4. *Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism*.

Through outside reviews and sources, I will examine how the diversity of a city influences an art museum, specifically the exhibits it displays. I ask the question: Is there a significant change in exhibits over just ten years? By focusing on how the museum's exhibits have changed over the course of ten years as well as how the museum presents these exhibits, I will then look deeper into the presentation and curation of these exhibits.

Background of Museums as Western Institutions

To understand the ways in which I am analyzing these exhibits, we need to examine the ways in which the past has shaped present-day institutions, or as I refer to it in my focus, modern day museums. There is an intricate history regarding the museum as a western institution which is predominantly rooted in colonialism, racism, and elitism that has been kept alive in modern day museums despite efforts to become more diverse and progressive.

First, the connection between colonialism and museums as western institutions should be addressed. Many museums have benefited from the colonialism and imperialism of either their own government or the government of the generous patrons they accept donations from on their behalf. We must recognize that many artifacts and works of art were not given by the peoples they originated from, but were looted by conquistadors, generals, and others as a side effect of war or simply stolen as a result of colonization.

To address the ways in which racism has seeped into modern day museum culture, we need to look no further than the history of many museums' foundations. Historically, when many museums were founded, those who were already in positions of power were given key roles for oversight and management as well as essential curatorial roles. As a western institution, most of the people who work at museums are affluent and white. Further, a lot of the true work done in these institutions is supplemented by unpaid volunteers who have the luxury of volunteering their time and expertise. This puts barriers in place for those who do not have the luxury of volunteering their time and most importantly, creates a culture of inaccessibility to a career in the field unless you have connections with more affluent or legacy families. So how does this make museum culture racist? Generally, those responsible to bear the brunt of unpaid labor in society

are people of color and women. This continues into the ways in which museums operate today by benefiting from volunteer work yet continuing to accept donations that pay the salaries of those higher up in the museum. That alongside the ways in which museums have benefited from colonialism and imperialism as I outlined previously, continue to enable a racist hierarchy in museum culture.

To outline the ways in which elitism plays a role in museum culture, we must look to what predated museums: private collections. The concept and practice of museums came into existence from cabinets of curiosity also known as the German term *wunderkammer*. These cabinets of curiosity can be dated as far back as the Renaissance era in Europe. These “cabinets of curiosity” were not simple cabinets. Often patrons would devote entire rooms to these collections. When the popularity of these private collections began to decline in the nineteenth century, it was because of the rise of museums as official institutions. As the status quo shifted from the cabinet of curiosities to museums, those who had already started to amass collections saw museums as a way to continue their collections in a public environment.¹

On the artist’s side of things compared to the collector, historically, the museum has been a place for male white affluent artists to have their work shown to the public. Initially, however, before the conception of what we know as museums, there were Academy sponsored exhibitions like the *Salon* in Paris that predated public museums.² In these “salons” the artists catered to more affluent clientele and they slowly became more accessible to the public, which then led to the formation of public museums.

¹ Galambosova, Caroline. “What Is a Wunderkammer? Best Cabinets of Curiosities.” *DailyArt Magazine*. *DailyArt Magazine*, July 22, 2022. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/cabinets-of-curiosities/>

² Andrew McClellan, “A Brief History of the Art Museum Public.” In Andrew McClellan, ed. *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Blackwell, 2003), 1-49.

This is also where European history differs from American history. Because European countries have a longer history than America by over a thousand years, their governments have more of a presence in the cultural impact and influence of art. “It may be argued that the tension between public and private is a peculiarly American phenomenon absent in state-sponsored museums on the European model, but hierarchies necessarily exist there too and will only become more prominent as costs rise, government subsidies decline, and the American self-supporting model gains ground.”³ Looking at art history in general, many patrons of fine art were royalty, as well as people with titles and thus power and influence. For example, in the world of print media, it was not until the invention of the printing press around 1440 that we see an influx of prints begin to circulate in Europe. This opened the door for a large portion of the common population to actually see and more importantly, own art. This also made artists desperate to stake their claim as fine artists along the same lines as poets and theologians. Once artists were recognized as fine artists, they created institutions like Art Academies, where drawing could be taught, but only for men; until 1860 at the Royal Academy in London for example.

With this background in mind, I will turn our attention back to modern day museums in America. My thesis specifically focuses on the Portland Art Museum located in Portland, Oregon. I will go into further detail about the local history of Portland and more broadly Oregon, but before I do so, I want to reiterate the ways in which modern day museums in America are rooted in the same practices that their long-standing European counterparts created. These practices, which I have outlined as being rooted in colonialism, racism, and elitism, unfortunately continue today. My analysis of these exhibits aims not to fix the problem but to highlight it. By sparking conversation surrounding the ways in which we can work together

³ Andrew McClellan, “A Brief History of the Art Museum Public.” In Andrew McClellan, ed. *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Blackwell, 2003), 1-49.

towards improving diversity in exhibits, not only in the Portland Art Museum but across the board in museum culture.

Background of Portland, Oregon

Before I go into further detail of why I chose these exhibitions and why they are important in the context of the focus of my thesis, allow me to provide critical background about Portland, Oregon and the Portland Art Museum. Understanding the historical context of Portland, Oregon is important to understanding the exhibits in the Portland Art Museum. For example, there are numerous laws that historically excluded people of color from Oregon in general. So in reviewing how the museum was established in this time period of exclusion, we can appreciate the newfound growth of today's overall progress in the Portland Art Museum. However, we must situate this history within the larger context of museums in America and Europe as wholly western institutions and recognize how they have collectively been slow to make changes and recognize their potential, if not explicit, bias surrounding diversity in the art world.

In order to understand the art world's roots in Oregon today, we must look back at the state's history. Furthermore, to understand the ways that Oregon became a state and how it was settled, we must look back to the laws it had when it was a territory. There were multiple exclusion laws that directly targeted Black settlers in Oregon as a territory and later as a fledgling state. Several laws in particular highlight the exclusionary nature of Oregon's early years as a territory before becoming a state. This is important because the people who settled here and created these exclusionary laws more often than not became permanent residents which added to a hostile environment for settlers of color. The Territorial Legislature on September 21,

1849 specified that “‘it shall not be lawful for any negro or mulatto to enter into, or reside’ in Oregon, with exceptions made for those who were already in the territory.”⁴ Eventually, when the time came to have a constitutional convention in 1857, delegates submitted an exclusion clause in addition to a proposal to legalize slavery. “Voters disapproved of slavery by a wide margin, ensuring that Oregon would be a free state, and approved the exclusion clause by a wide margin. Incorporated into the Bill of Rights, the clause prohibited Blacks from being in the state, owning property, and making contracts. Oregon thus became the only free state admitted to the Union with an exclusion clause in its constitution.”⁵ These laws helped create a culture of exclusion, even long after they became moot as a result of the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 to the United States Constitution. (The Fourteenth Amendment “granted citizenship to all citizens born or naturalized in the United States—including formerly enslaved people—and guaranteed all citizens ‘equal protection of the laws.’”⁶) This culture of exclusion continued when black communities began to thrive in places such as the Albina district in Portland, which later became gentrified. This means many Black families moved elsewhere completely.

Additionally, we must recognize the ways in which Native Americans were systematically driven from their lands as Oregon was settled by pioneers. There was the initial wave of pioneers that “... gained the right to claim hundreds of acres of prime farmland under the Oregon Donation Land Claims Act (1849), without the United States having previously acquired

⁴ Nokes, Gregg. “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.” The Oregon Encyclopedia, March 24, 2022. https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/exclusion_laws/#.YnQ27hBKiuU

⁵ Nokes, Gregg. “Black Exclusion Laws in Oregon.” The Oregon Encyclopedia, March 24, 2022. https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/exclusion_laws/#.YnQ27hBKiuU

⁶ Onion, Amanda, Missy Sullivan, and Matt Mullen, eds. “14th Amendment.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, November 9, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fourteenth-amendment#:~:text=The%2014th%20Amendment%20to%20the,era%20to%20abolish%20slavery%20and>

the rights to the land from the tribes. For the tribes, this was a devastating invasion of their homelands.”⁷ Just a few years later, “In 1856, Palmer [Indian Superintendent of the Oregon Territory] made arrangements for removal of all of the tribes in western Oregon to the newly created Grand Ronde Indian Reservation.”⁸ The devastating effects on Native Americans continued “on reservations, [where] the United States continued the policy of assimilation, which worked to degrade tribal culture, language, and identity.”⁹

Lastly, there were laws at the federal level, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, that targeted Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which remained in effect until 1943, “was the first and only federal law in American history to prohibit immigration on the sole basis of nationality.”¹⁰ Overall, this history is extremely important when understanding the ways in which Oregon as a state was formed because of the lasting impact these laws had on disenfranchised people of color.

Situating the Portland Art Museum

The Portland Art Museum was initially founded in late 1892 and was housed in a public library. In 1905 it had grown enough to justify its own location and in 1932 further expanded into what is now the current location of the museum. Expanding again in 1939, at its current

⁷ Lewis, David G. “Four Deaths: The Near Destruction of Western Oregon Tribes and Native Lifeways, Removal to the Reservation, and Erasure from History.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 414–37. <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0414>

⁸ Lewis, David G. “Four Deaths: The Near Destruction of Western Oregon Tribes and Native Lifeways, Removal to the Reservation, and Erasure from History.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 414–37. <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0414>

⁹ Lewis, David G. “Four Deaths: The Near Destruction of Western Oregon Tribes and Native Lifeways, Removal to the Reservation, and Erasure from History.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2014): 414–37. <https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.115.3.0414>

¹⁰ Wong, Marie Rose. “The Chinese Presence in Oregon.” Essay. In *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon*, 74. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004.

location, doubled the available gallery space. Another wing was added in 1970 which housed “classroom and studio space for the Museum Art School, a sculpture mall, a new vault for the collections, and an auditorium.”¹¹ Celebrating the museum’s centennial in 1992, the museum purchased an adjacent Masonic temple, which was renovated in 2005 and is now used as a multi-use building as part of the museum. The Hoffman Wing was renovated in 2000 and thus became the first gallery space addition since 1939.

The initial founding of the Portland Art Museum “... was established by the Portland Art Association, organized in 1892 by businessman Henry W. Corbett and six other community leaders who determined ‘to make a collection and erect and maintain a building’ for the cultural enhancement of the city. With funds provided by Corbett, lumberman Winslow B. Ayer and his wife traveled to Europe to select 100 casts of Greek and Roman sculptures.”¹² I found it interesting in that it was private citizens who came together to create a museum to culturally enhance the city, not the city or state government. However, looking historically at American museums, they are founded by private citizens whereas most museums in Europe are founded by the government. Thus, it is not surprising that private citizens were again the ones financially supporting the expansion and development of the museum's permanent collections. These citizens were creating spaces for the community to gather and become culturally enriched. Even though at the same time, laws still excluded many from Oregon in general.

So how can the early days of founding, over a hundred years ago, influence how an institution operates today? The goal of creating a place of cultural enrichment for the community

¹¹ “A Brief History of the Museum” *Portland Art Museum*. https://portlandartmuseum.org/about/brief-history-museum/?gclid=CjwKCAjwjtOTBhAvEiwASG4bCGy2_AMM8WTas_I_5BELG61fUDgjT9bDZ0xHRMutTRNuZXiBWi2JoRoC7AcQAvD_BwE

¹² Hull, Roger. “Portland Art Museum.” *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, May 22, 2019. https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/portland_art_museum/#.YnVvjhBIDi0

is still the goal. But now that the community's population has become diversified, the goal needs to address the question: how can the institution effectively welcome the diversified community of Portland and truly create a place for them to access cultural enrichment in their own community? Curating more diverse exhibitions and providing fiscal and enhanced ADA accessibility to these diverse exhibitions seems to be obvious choices. By analyzing the following four exhibitions, I will examine the ways in which the Portland Art Museum has integrated diversity into its exhibitions and then ask the question: can more be done?

Defining diversity in museums

A key to understanding the exhibits I will be analyzing is to understand the museum industry standard for diversity. Looking to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) for a clear set of terminology that can be applied to analyzing exhibits through an art historical viewpoint, I chose the publication "Facing Change: Insights from AAM's DEAI Working Group". This AAM working group worked specifically to focus on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. The definition this working group defined for diversity is "... all the ways that people are different and the same at the individual and group levels. Even when people appear the same, they are different. Organizational diversity requires examining and questioning the makeup of a group to ensure that multiple perspectives are represented."¹³ Recognizing that organizations have a part to play in the greater picture of creating a diverse community is extremely important because without diversity reflecting the community, museums will continue to lose touch with their respective communities and the spaces within which they occupy will

¹³"Facing Change: Insights from AAM's DEAI Working Group" American Alliance of Museums, 2018. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf>

remain stagnant. Additionally, the working group highlights the fact that “while a truly ‘inclusive’ group is necessarily diverse, a ‘diverse’ group may or may not be ‘inclusive.’”¹⁴

Inclusivity is inherently linked to diversity. Being aware of the ways in which they are mutually beneficial is critical to achieving the overall goal many museums have of creating a welcoming environment for their communities.

The essay “Cultural Diversity: Politics, Policy and Practices. The Case of Tate Encounters” discusses policy implementation for museums in the United Kingdom. In this essay, there is information that can still be applicable to museums in America. “The case in point in cultural diversity policy is that the classification of people by race and/or ethnicity through demographic census, when correlated against other behavioral quantitative measures, such as museum attendance, shifts the problem from the museum to the targeted group as if something in the culture or the non-attendees stops them valuing the cultural offer in British institutions.”¹⁵ While this essay was written in the context of policy implementation in the United Kingdom, this viewpoint is still important to American institutions in how they can examine the ways in which museums interact with their respective communities. It forces one to ask whether or not the responsibility of community engagement falls upon the institution, the community itself, or on both.

Additionally, in trying to understand the ways in which diversity and equity are integrated into museums, one must also examine funding. “The fact that most of the funding for US museums, apart from the Smithsonian, is from private rather than public sources may also be

¹⁴ “Facing Change: Insights from AAM’s DEAI Working Group” American Alliance of Museums, 2018. <https://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf>

¹⁵ Dewdney, Andrew, David Dibosa, and Victoria Walsh. “Cultural Diversity: Politics, Policy and Practices. The Case of Tate Encounters.” Essay. In *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, edited by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, 114–24. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

a contributing factor although certain businesses (both in the United Kingdom and United States) have been very active in the areas of diversity and equality incorporating this into their mission and strategic plans.”¹⁶ This is important to recognize with regards to further implications such as the lack of policy in the United States related to integration of diversity and equality in institutions. While ideally this thesis would examine each sponsor for each exhibit and understand the ways in which they influence the greater theme of the exhibit, because of the overwhelming amount of varying sponsors and levels of sponsorship, it is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Despite this, I want to highlight the ways in which the National Endowment for the Arts has supported the Oregon Art Commission. The National Endowment for the Arts is “an independent federal agency that funds, promotes, and strengthens the creative capacity of our communities by providing all Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation.”¹⁷ and is a source of funding for the commission which is one of the Exhibition Series Sponsors at the Portland Art Museum. This sponsorship has been involved in each of the exhibits I will examine.

Analysis of exhibitions

The first exhibit I have chosen to analyze was exhibited during 2013 and is titled *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. It was not organized by the Portland Art Museum nor curated by the Portland Art Museum. According to the Portland Art Museum, it

¹⁶ Nightingale, Eithne, and Chandan Mahal. “The Heart of the Matter: Integrating Equality and Diversity into the Policy and Practice of Museums and Galleries .” Essay. In *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, edited by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, 13–37. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

¹⁷ National Endowment for the Arts. arts.gov

was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and curated by Kathryn Delmez. As a rotating exhibit, its first stop was the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Tennessee. Additional stops included the Portland Art Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, and the Solomon B. Guggenheim Museum. As a retrospective aspires to encapsulate the full trajectory of an artist, the book published in conjunction with the exhibit highlights the way in which “... the two hundred photographs, videos, and installation pieces in this retrospective and book offer an unprecedented opportunity to trace the full scope of her work and evolution as an artist.”¹⁸ To understand and situate this exhibit within the context of museum history in America, we must recognize that it was not until 1972 that an African American woman held a solo exhibition. “In 1972, in her 80s, she was the first African American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.”¹⁹ That woman was Alma Thomas, and she had been a public school art teacher for 38 years before she became formally recognized as an artist. This is a key indicator of the ways in which the art world was far from welcoming to female African American artists during the time that Weems’ was cultivating her own artistic career. The art world is slow to change, resistant at times, but 41 years after Thomas’ historic show at the Whitney, we can see Weems’ retrospective in an entirely new light and appreciate the ways in which the art world is slowly progressing.

In a newspaper article titled “The best of Portland's visual arts scene in 2013” Motley, an arts writer for the *Oregonian*, says regarding Weems’ exhibit that “The Museum’s three-decade

¹⁸ Delmez, Kathryn E, Henry Louis Gates, Franklin Sirmans, Robert Storr, and Deborah Willis. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. Edited by Kathryn E. Delmez. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p.1., 2012.

¹⁹ “Alma Thomas Became a Nationally Recognized Painter after 38 Years Teaching Public School.” Smithsonian Institution. Smithsonian Institution, March 6, 2018. <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/snapshot/alma-thomas-became-nationally-recognized-painter-after-38-years-teaching-public>

retrospective of Weems' video and photography was something of a homecoming for the artist, who was born in Portland in 1953. Spanning 20 bodies of work, the exhibition showcased how Weems' probing examination of race and identity, whether in the context of the nuclear family or the grand sweep of history, has sustained a career dedicated to wide-eyed truth and social justice, not just beautiful images."²⁰ This is a well-deserved reception of Weems' career and highlights her commitment to social justice throughout her photography career.

Following this review by Motley, we must ask ourselves is recognition of Portland as Weems' hometown due? We can acknowledge that yes, Portland is Weems' hometown, but also address further nuances that arise when examining her background as an African American woman whose family originated in Mississippi and the ways in which she grew after leaving Portland and attending multiple different schools in California to further her artistic career. By continuing to examine the environment in which she was raised, we can further understand her work. She was an African American woman growing up in Portland during a period of racial tension. It is important to confront the ways in which her familial history with Portland relates to the issues surrounding the history of exclusion of Black people in Oregon. Weems' family moved to Portland, Oregon from Mississippi where they were sharecroppers. Searching for more opportunities that lay out west, they moved, like many others, with the hopes of a brighter future for themselves and their children. Despite the ways in which Portland provided more opportunities, unfortunately it also had a negative impact because of how difficult it was to thrive as an African American woman in Portland at that time. Thus looking at her decision to leave

²⁰ Motley, John. "The best of Portland's visual arts scene in 2013: Carrie Mae Weems, Isamu Noguchi, Jamie Isenstein and more." *The Oregonian* (Portland, Or. 1937) (Portland, Or), 2013. https://www.oregonlive.com/art/2013/12/best_of_2013_visual_arts.html

Portland brings us back to recognizing the hostility built into the societal and overall community feelings of Portland in the 1950's and 1960's.

So then the question becomes, does Portland receive credit for the development of Weems' creative career? Not entirely, but Weems' time in Portland during her formative years surely contributed to her interest in social justice. In examining Weems' background, Delmez states she had "a longing to examine more deeply the underlying causes and effects of racism, slavery, and imperialism in general [which] spurred Weems to travel widely, throughout the United States and beyond to Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean."²¹ If she had lived someplace less homogenous as an African American woman, would she have come to the same conclusion? Possibly yes, but Portland deserves credit in accelerating her interest in social justice and yearning to learn and see how the rest of the world works. Additionally, Delmez points out that "Weems has also created work that transcends specific concerns about race, gender, or class, especially as experienced in the United States, to address the abiding, universal struggle for equality and justice."²² This theme is surely showcased in this exhibit by the critical reception by Motley and it is a theme that continues to be relevant throughout America, not just in Portland.

The second exhibit I chose to analyze was exhibited during 2016 and is titled *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy*. As stated by the Portland Art Museum, this exhibit was organized by the Portland Art Museum and co-curated by Deana Datt, Ph.D., Curator of Native American Art, and Julia Dolan, Ph.D., The Minor White Curator

²¹ Delmez, Kathryn E, Henry Louis Gates, Franklin Sirmans, Robert Storr, and Deborah Willis. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. Edited by Kathryn E. Delmez. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p.2., 2012.

²² Delmez, Kathryn E, Henry Louis Gates, Franklin Sirmans, Robert Storr, and Deborah Willis. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. Edited by Kathryn E. Delmez. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p.5., 2012.

of Photography. This exhibit strove to make viewers aware of the ongoing legacy surrounding the photographer Edward Curtis and how his photographs and consequently his overall legacy shaped the ways in which Native Americans were viewed historically.

Before I frame the ways in which the curators at the Portland Art Museum were trying to deconstruct and reframe the narrative surrounding the legacy of Edward Curtis by integrating contemporary Native American photographers, we must situate Curtis within his active time period as a photographer. Curtis was an active photographer during the early twentieth century. With this in mind, we need to understand the ways in which there were already stereotypes being formed around Native Americans, stereotypes that lasted long into the twentieth century as we can see in the legacy of many western and cowboy films. Curtis framed the Native American population that he photographed within these stereotypes and leaned into it in order to sell his work to his audience. Additionally, many ethnologists, which Curtis is also classified as alongside his title as a photographer, during this time period truly believed they were capturing a dying race. We now know that Native American populations, while decimated, have survived. With this in mind, the juxtaposition between the legacy of Curtis and contemporary Native American photographers we can see the shift from stereotyping to realism in photography.

In order to shift the focus of this ongoing legacy of Curtis' photographs, the Portland Art Museum partnered with multiple contemporary Native American photographers: Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson. Alex Greenberger, a senior editor for ARTNews, showcased the results of a survey of "the 30 institutional members of the Association of Art Museum Directors with the largest operating budgets"²³ in which they "surveyed every solo exhibition

²³ Greenberger, A. *White Cubes: Do exhibitions at U.S. Museums Reflect calls for diversity?* ARTnews.com, November 18, 2019.

held at 30 museums across America over the past decade and broke them down by race.”²⁴ Their findings showcased that “0.09% of the shows surveyed were devoted to Native American and indigenous artists.”²⁵ While the Portland Art Museum did not meet the qualifications to be included in this survey, I am using this information to highlight the fact that overall in museums in America, Native Americans and indigenous artists are statistically underrepresented. By partnering with these contemporary Native photographers, this exhibit aimed to showcase the ways in which the Native American population still exists today and how they are very much part of the art world despite being statistically underrepresented.

That being said, the Portland Art Museum’s efforts to incorporate contemporary Native photographers into this exhibit is laudable. However, critical reception of this exhibit by Jon Raymond, a writer for *Artforum International*, highlights the ways in which the exhibit fell short. “Maybe it's the educational mandate of this regional museum (those coloring stations and index cards) that made ‘Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy’ feel at once so interesting and so sadly compromised. This show of fine work and deeply good curatorial intentions nevertheless managed to seem, on some level, condescending to everyone involved-artists, subjects, and audience alike.”²⁶ I would argue that this critical reception is not fully deserved because the goals of the coloring stations and index cards that Raymond is referring to are to engage the audience members with the themes of the exhibition. The goal of

²⁴ Greenberger, A. *White Cubes: Do exhibitions at U.S. Museums Reflect calls for diversity?* ARTnews.com, November 18, 2019.

²⁵ Greenberger, A. *White Cubes: Do exhibitions at U.S. Museums Reflect calls for diversity?* ARTnews.com, November 18, 2019.

²⁶ Raymond, J. *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy: Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson. Artforum International, 54, 402, 2016, Summer.*

the exhibit was to highlight Native American photographers and even further the Native American and indigenous populations here in Oregon and beyond.

Karp's article titled *How Museums Define Other Cultures* discusses the ways in which museum culture frames and thus defines other cultures. Most of the time they either exoticize or romanticize these other cultures. But what makes a culture "other"? This question brings us back to the root of museum culture and how it is predominantly a western institution involved in racism, imperialism, and colonialism. Diving further into how "other" cultures are exhibited in museums, Karp highlights the fact that generally there are two strategies used to display the other cultures entirely or their works of art: exoticizing and assimilating. While it is apparent that the curators of this exhibit didn't explicitly exoticize or assimilate the Native American culture on display, it is key to recognize the ways in which Native American culture and art as a whole does fall into this curatorial trap. Karp states that "Assimilating is inherently a more subtle exhibiting strategy than exoticizing. In the so-called primitive or tribal exhibits in fine art museums, art objects are usually isolated from any sort of context."²⁷ This is the case of the permanent collection regarding Native American art in the Portland Art Museum: it is in the basement of the building and overall there is a lack of context. With that being said, it does shine a better light on the curatorial work for this exhibit and contextualizes the curatorial goal of integrating stations to engage the community with a topic that is generally overlooked.

The third exhibit I chose to analyze was exhibited during 2017 and is titled *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art*. This exhibit was organized by Portland Art Museum and guest curated by Berrisford Boothe, Professor of Art at

²⁷ Karp, Ivan. "How Museums Define Other Cultures." *American Art* 5, no. 1/2 (1991): 10–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3109026>.

Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As stated by the Portland Art Museum, “The exhibition brings awareness to the contributions of artists of color, whose work is often historically underrepresented in museums and galleries, to foster a more complete understanding.”²⁸ This is an admirable goal given that they are recognizing the disadvantages artists of color encounter and are working as an institution to negate these disadvantages as well as bring awareness to this issue that is seen throughout institutions globally. In the publication that accompanied this exhibit, Boothe states that “this exhibition aims to create a context for ideas about identity based on a wealth of representations by African-American artists in this century and the twentieth century.”²⁹

Following this statement, a museum patron may then think to themselves: how does art encapsulate identity? The organization of the exhibit aims to aid the museum patrons with this question as it acknowledges that “these works of art belong to multiple categories, but we elected to display them in specific categories to provide the willing viewer with an opportunity to link images independently, as a springboard to considering their own ‘constructed identity.’”³⁰ Unfortunately, the publication accompanying the exhibition doesn’t classify which works were in what category when reproducing images of the art showcased in the exhibition.

When examining the curation of this exhibit, the question is posed: is the identity of these artists truly highlighted in the pieces selected or was the curation simply what Boothe was

²⁸ “Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art” *Portland Art Museum*. <https://portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/constructing-identity/>

²⁹ Ferriso, Brian J., James G. Petrucci, Berrisford Boothe, and Moe Brooker. *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art*. Edited by Gretchen Dykstra. Portland, OR: Portland Art Museum, p. 11., 2017.

³⁰ Ferriso, Brian J., James G. Petrucci, Berrisford Boothe, and Moe Brooker. *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art*. Edited by Gretchen Dykstra. Portland, OR: Portland Art Museum, p. 13., 2017.

given access to from the Petrucci Collection? *Oregonian* arts writer Briana Miller highlights Boothe’s potential bias as a curator by stating that “All of the works come from the private collection of East Coast developer Jim Petrucci and were selected by guest curator Berrisford Boothe, who also helped shape the Petrucci collection.”³¹ The fact that Boothe helped shape the Petrucci collection lends itself to bias. If someone else curated this exhibit that had not shaped the collection already, would that person have selected different pieces? Would it then have been more true to the artist's identity rather than Boothe selecting pieces to highlight in the Petrucci collection? While acknowledging this potential bias, there must be recognition given to the fact that at the end of the day, this collection was able to be displayed, and thus members of the community who otherwise would have not seen these works were able to, and it did give a springboard to learn more about the artists highlighted and understand more about their identities.

The reception of *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art* from Miller is critical, examining the exhibit from a lens of high expectations. “It’s a grand gesture that falls short. With more than 100 works by nearly 80 artists and including paintings, sculptures, prints, mixed-media works and photographs, the higher aspirations of the show get bogged down, both by its broad, overlapping themes and by the sheer volume of its material.”³² Miller highlights the problems facing exhibits such as these that try to encompass a large theme in that the overall subjects can become lost in the chaos of so many different types of artists that have different concentrations and media preferences.

³¹ Miller, Briana. “A Rare Showcase for African American Artists.”, 11. *The Oregonian* (Portland, Or. 1937) (Portland, Or), 2017.

³² Miller, Briana. “A Rare Showcase for African American Artists.”, 11. *The Oregonian* (Portland, Or. 1937) (Portland, Or), 2017.

As I touched on earlier in my analysis of the *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy* exhibit, the concept discussed by Karp surrounding the ways in which museums exhibit “other” cultures can be applied to this exhibit as well. As discussed earlier, the two main ways that museums tend to rely on when holding exhibits that focus on exoticizing and assimilating. In the case of this exhibit, it is hard to state whether or not it was presented in a way that totally exoticized or assimilated the works on display, but there is a kind of glossing over the actual art for the sake of the curatorial take ultimately overshadowing the art itself by trying to educate the museum patrons.

How exhibits are presented influences the way in which viewers interpret and remember them. “One measure of a museum’s success would seem to be the freedom and interest with which people wander through and look without the intimidating mediation between viewer and object that something such as the ubiquitous earphones provides.”³³ I would argue that the headers in the exhibit Miller describes in the next quote make the success of this exhibit measurable as a bit of a failure. They are “...well-intentioned, the labels’ graphics and placement are distracting, at times competing with the art. They’re also unexpectedly verbose, with good-sized blocks of text that describe the artists rather than the artworks.”³⁴ By trying to educate the museum patrons, the curator can then take away from how the actual art is received. These headers intimidate the viewers and expect them to previously know everything about these artists when they should be able to just appreciate the art. One could argue that without these headers,

³³ Alpers, Svetlana. “The Museum as a Way of Seeing.” Essay. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display ; Essays First Presented at the Conference "The Poetics and Politics of Representation", Held at the International Center of the Smithsonian Institution 26-28 September 1988*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 25–31. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Inst. Press, 1991.

³⁴ Miller, Briana. “A Rare Showcase for African American Artists.”, 11. *The Oregonian* (Portland, Or. 1937) (Portland, Or), 2017.

the art is left in an abyss of knowledge, but I will agree somewhat with Miller that the labels compete with the art for the attention of the viewer and can distract from the true message of the exhibit which is to construct an identity of these African-American artists. However, at the end of the day, it gave community members access to works they may have previously never seen or even heard of before and that makes the exhibit worth it.

As for examining community engagement for this exhibit, it is difficult to accurately state because the link on the Portland Art Museum's website for the Museum of Impact, which they state they partnered with, brings me to a website that does not match the description given by the Portland Art Museum. Apart from this issue, the Portland Art Museum website states it held an artist panel discussion, artist talks, additional programs, and community partnerships during this exhibit. It is truly unfortunate that I am unable to fully examine the ways in which these community engagement programs influenced the community but that gives me pause to think perhaps there simply wasn't enough community engagement to generate a lasting legacy from this exhibit. I struggled with the lack of a digital footprint regarding this exhibit. While I cannot come to any solid conclusions because I was not present in Portland during the time frame of the exhibition, this lack of a digital footprint points towards a lack of effort on the museum. If the museum had put out more community engagement geared aspects of the museum there would have been twofold engagement: community engagement, as well as journalistic commentary. The lack of this on top of the broken link on the Portland Art Museum's website makes this aspect of the exhibit measurable as a failure to engage the community with an exhibit that is supposedly about identity. It feels oxymoronic for an exhibit that focuses on identity to be so insular within the art community and simultaneously failing to engage the community for their own views on identity in a city that is constantly under fire for its performative activism.

The final exhibit I chose to analyze was exhibited in 2022 and is titled *Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism* and this is the only exhibit that I was able to see firsthand in person. As stated by the Portland Art Museum, this exhibit was organized by the Vergel Foundation and MondoMostre in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL) outside of the Portland Art Museum and was coordinated for the Portland Art Museum by Sara Krajewski, the curator for the Portland Art Museum's Modern and Contemporary Art.

Initially, this exhibit piqued my interest with its promotion. I saw it as an ad on social media, specifically via Instagram, which showcased its efforts to bring into the museum an audience of younger members of the community. When I attended, I was extremely pleased with the visitor guides provided for the museum patrons containing information available in both English and Spanish. The exhibit also had an activity guide that was beautifully designed with illustrations and the text was again printed together in English and Spanish. I think that this is a great step in making this exhibit more accessible to those who may not have otherwise come, but after looking at the website sources for each of the other exhibits that I have analyzed thus far, no other exhibits have had bilingual resources. This causes me to wonder if the museum is only doing it because the main focus of the exhibit is Mexican Modernism? Another perspective could possibly be that the museum is adding the bilingual aspect because of the way in which the exhibit highlighted Frida Kahlo as a main focus. Additionally, Kahlo's presence in the exhibit as the museum's cash cow of bringing in viewers almost overshadows the good curatorial work done by Krajewski. By bringing in work by Kahlo and Rivera's contemporaries, as well as supplementing the exhibit with photography, these additions to the collection loaned to the

museum from the Gelman collection gave the museum patrons a window into the world of these so-called Mexican Revolutionaries and the art world they inhabited.

The exhibit was organized by themes over two floors of the museum. There were thirteen themes in total and they helped guide the viewer through a rich and complex history of Mexican Modernism. The thirteen themes are as listed: Introduction, Mexican Modernism Shifting Views, The Land, Home and Family, La Casa Azul, Circles of Influence: Frida and Diego, Extended Circles: Jacques and Natasha Gelman, Spirit of the People, Spectacular Life, Creating Frida, Being Frida, Marvelous Real, and the Exit. While the museum used Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera as the big names to draw in viewers and focused mainly on Kahlo overall, there were numerous other Mexican artists that were highlighted in the exhibit such as Lola Alvarez Bravo and Maria Izqueirdo to name a few. They also had areas in the lower level of the museum that housed murals being painted by local Portland Latinx artists that continued on the tradition of Mexican muralism. This was a touch that should be greatly appreciated because it showcased the museum's efforts to collaborate with the local community and the artists in the community.

Critical acclaim for this exhibit by Connor Reed, a writer for *Portland Monthly*, highlighted the ways in which the museum collaborated with local artists to make the exhibit more community focused and collaborative. “For the first month of PAM’s *Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism* exhibition, four local artists have worked in full view of the public to complete an enormous, colorful triptych called *Metamorphosis Mural*, which depicts three Kahlos surrounded by flowers and flaming hearts.”³⁵ The museum worked with numerous

³⁵ Reed, Connor. “Portland Art Museum's Frida Kahlo Exhibit Lends a Canvas to Local Artists.” *Portland Monthly*. SagaCity Media, April 11, 2022. <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/arts-and-culture/2022/04/portland-art-museum-frida-kahlo-mural>

artists throughout the five months of the exhibition as well as hosted numerous events. The efforts to engage the community with this exhibit is exciting and hopeful to see the ways in which the museum can make an impact on the community. Critical acclaim for this exhibit by Briana Miller, *Oregonian* arts writer, praises the ways in which the curation of the show was made specifically for the Portland Art Museum and how “Krajewski mines the museum’s excellent prints and drawings collection to subtly complement the work in the traveling show.”³⁶ By supplementing the show with pieces from the Portland Art Museums’ own collection, Krajewski is able to shine a different light on the pieces from the Gelman collection and give the museum patrons a unique experience despite the exhibit being a rotating one.

Conclusion

By giving a comprehensive background of the history of museums as western institutions, as well as discussing the history surrounding exclusionary laws at the state and federal level, recognizing the systematic removal of Native Americans from their homelands, and providing the foundation of the Portland Art Museum, I have situated a scene from which I was able to examine recent exhibits. I also made it a point to use museum industry definitions for diversity in order to truly understand the ways in which these institutions operate. By examining these exhibits, I have showcased the ways in which they have been organized, how they have

³⁶ Miller, Briana. “With Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in Spotlight, Portland Exhibit Tells Story of Mexican Modernism.” *oregonlive*. Advance Local Media LLC., March 12, 2022. <https://www.oregonlive.com/entertainment/2022/03/with-frida-kahlo-and-diego-rivera-in-spotlight-portland-exhibit-tells-story-of-mexican-modernism.html>

been received critically, and highlighted the ways in which each exhibit engaged with the community.

There will always be room for improvement as our society continues to advance. I am eagerly anticipating the day that diversity and inclusion will become second nature to people. But we are not there yet. We still have a long way to go towards implementing policies that protect diversity and inclusion in our institutions. This appears to be the next step here in America, following in the footsteps of such policies that have already been implemented in the United Kingdom. Diversity can be difficult to quantify, but after examining these four exhibits, the Portland Art Museum is showcasing true determination to bettering itself as a museum and for the sake of its community by continuously selecting exhibits with themes that promote underrepresented groups and focusing more on creating opportunities for the community to engage with these exhibits. The first exhibit I chose to analyze from 2013 didn't have anything specifically focused on community engagement but fast forward to the final exhibit I analyzed from present day 2022 and there were multiple ways in which the Portland Art Museum not only worked to engage the community but also worked to incorporate local artists into the exhibit. By continuing to break down institutional barriers, there will be a new generation of artists able to make their voices heard.

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