Exhibiting New Guinea: Changing Approaches In Ethnographic Museum Practice

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Exhibiting New Guinea:
Changing Approaches in Ethnographic Museum Practice

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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For Marvin, Gaetano, Ulysses and MaryAnn, I thank you.
I. Abstract

We go and look at the objects in the glass cases and at the paintings on the wall, as if by standing there we could absorb into ourselves some of the energy that flowed once through the bodies of the live things represented. A museum...cater[s] to the urge to absorb the life of another into one's own life...museums are a form of cannibalism made safe for polite society.

Tompkins 1990:533

Ethnographic museums have the daunting task of representing cultures. It is merely human to be curious and to want to understand others as well as ourselves. One of the roles of a museum is to give the viewer a glimpse of a people or a culture, to care for the objects in a particular collection and through interpretation and context exhibit cultures from all times and places. Museums absorb the objects of others and make people and their cultures accessible to the public first through acquisition and ownership and then through scholarship. The museum becomes cannibalistic: digesting non-western collections and cultures in order to make them palatable for Western society.

Ever since I was a child I have loved museums. I believed them to be temples of universal truths full of fine art and genuine objects from all over the world and from other periods of time. Museums represented places of beauty, truth, intrigue and excitement. I could look at the cultures of people that were long gone. I could visit places I would have never been able to travel to on my own. Museums provided the gateway into these other worlds and it was magic.

For me the magic rose from the authenticit[y] and the rarity of these objects rather than the historical circumstances by which museums had acquired them. These objects and exhibitions were there for me anytime. It was a given that the museum exhibition was accurate and honest and that the exhibition represented cultures as the people actually looked and lived. Museums brought me closer to my fellow humans by showing them to
me as “fellow men” in an honest way. I marveled at the knowledge museums had about all of these people.

As a student of anthropology with a “love” of non-western cultures I gravitate towards museum departments and displays of non-western objects, especially collections from New Guinea. I am interested in other cultures and the objects people create to reflect their world. Perhaps the objects from New Guinea scared me a bit, while fascinating me as well. Their religious rituals and warfare practices struck me as different from anything I’ve ever read about. Plus, New Guinea was on the other side of the world! A remote place with people living a lifestyle untouched by outside influence!

Exhibitions of New Guinea cultural material are rare. There are museums in the United States that have departments devoted to the collection, care, interpretation and display of objects from non-western cultures. Two world renowned institutions that have collections from New Guinea are the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Both museums are tied to Nelson and Michael Rockefeller and both museums display their collections in a different manner. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology is a research institution devoted to the field of anthropology and The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a fine arts museum.

In discussing my thesis I discovered that when I mentioned the subject of New Guinea most people had no idea about its location or people. When I mentioned cannibalism and headhunting their eyes lit up and the burning question was - do they still do that there? I found this to be an interesting question considering my audience had no knowledge of the “they” or the “there.” It is the rumors they have heard about headhunting
and cannibalism that intrigued them yet they had no idea if the practice or the people still existed today.

This question about the present existence of people in New Guinea along with the aforementioned museum exhibitions got me thinking about the representation of New Guinea culture through museum displays. Do museums represent New Guinea on a continuum, not only as the cultures existed during the years of colonial rule, but as the people of New Guinea live today? If so, how would this knowledge be imparted to an audience by the museum? If not, why would a museum display a culture as it existed one hundred years ago or even fifty years ago, especially if that culture had evolved and changed over time?

I found that although I was "seeing" the objects on display, I saw very little of the culture being represented. I could understand this method of display in a fine arts museum but not in the Peabody Museum. In both institutions however, I sensed the purposeful use of text, photographs and display to portray a timelessness. A moment in time.

My thesis proposes that although both institutions display New Guinea culture in very different ways, both museums appear to present the culture at a moment in time, rather than as a vital and evolving society. Their exhibits present the culture as "captured" in time and may distort the perception of the museum audience, that among other things, these cultures no longer exist.

Through my research of the history of collecting material from New Guinea and the exhibition of this culture along with the prevailing beliefs about non-western cultures, I will conclude that these types of displays not only reinforce the perception that the cultures of New Guinea no longer exist but that these institutions actively choose to display them in a manner demonstrating that they no longer exist. What remains to be exhibited is a snapshot
of what life was like in New Guinea when the colonial powers were present there. This ties into the myth of the perpetually vanishing non-western culture that is both discovered, interpreted and rescued by scientists, anthropologists and the western museum. Objects are preserved in museums in a state of timelessness. The “capture” of the culture by Europeans perpetuates this myth that is played over and over again in the contact between native cultures and the west.

The interwoven history of the colonial powers in New Guinea and the founding of the ethnographic museum in the United States led to the creation of a type of museum display in the late eighteenth century. Although collecting as a by-product of colonization no longer exists, museums are left with large collections to conserve, interpret and display. European explorers, scientists, missionaries, government officials, and anthropologists came to New Guinea and saw the natives through a Western lens comprised both of the prevalent theories of social evolution and very succinct ideals of beauty, truth, art and civilization. The non-Western societies they encountered were considered primitive, unspoiled and untouched by the “modern world.”

My thesis will examine the history of New Guinea as it is tied to the history of European colonialism. One of the progenies of these two entities is the ethnographic museum in the United States. I survey museum exhibitions of New Guinea cultural materials and examines the intersection of anthropology, art, and the ethnology museum in the United States. I trace the Western perception of cultural materials from New Guinea from curiosity to ethnographic object, to fine art and how these perceptions influence the display and interpretation of the non-Western object. Then I look at the present day and the questions surround the display of non-Western objects and how museums are dealing with these issues.
II. The Disappearance of Michael C. Rockefeller

The key to my fascination with the Asmat is the woodcarving. The sculpture which the people here produce is some of the most extraordinary work in the primitive world. And equally as remarkable as the art is the fact that culture which produces it is still intact; some remote areas are still headhunting; and only five years ago the whole area was headhunting.

Michael C. Rockefeller – October 4, 1961

In November of 1961 Michael C. Rockefeller disappeared in the Asmat area of Dutch New Guinea while collecting the wood carvings of the Asmat people. His fascination with the culture and the role of native artists led to ideas of creating a permanent exhibition in his father’s museum, The Museum of Primitive Art in New York City and establishing a local museum in Dutch New Guinea. His goal was to show the western world that these people were not “savages,” but real people with their own ideas about art and the role of the artist in their culture. He saw a link between the art of the native cultures and specific people and specific ideas which made them real people with their own thoughts and ideas and not merely “savages.”

In 1960 Michael C. Rockefeller, the son of Nelson Rockefeller graduated from Harvard University. He joined a group of anthropologists from Harvard University led by Robert Gardner who had organized the Film Study Center for Anthropological Film Research at Harvard University. The group was traveling to New Guinea to document on film the daily life of the culture of the Kurelu Dani people, a stone age tribe living in the Baliem Valley in central Dutch New Guinea. The Dani are warrior farmers and they were chosen by The Harvard-Peabody Museum because they practice ritual warfare. They were thought to be relatively un influenced by the encroaching Dutch missionaries and traders. Ritual warfare is a term used by anthropologist to describe warfare that is a regular part of

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the life of a people and is considered to be an indispensable part of their culture. Melanesia is an area of the world that has cultures who engage in this practice.

Robert Gardner was approached by Victor J. DeBruyn, the Director of the Bureau of Native Affairs in the Netherlands New Guinea. DeBruyn an anthropologist and archaeologist. He lived in the interior of New Guinea during World War II and was presently assisting with the development of the country. He wanted the Peabody Museum to do research there because the program of pacification of the local people started by the Dutch government ten years earlier had not achieved the success that the government had anticipated. The Harvard-Peabody Expedition went to New Guinea in the spirit of conserving a passing age for once again it was thought that these stone age people would rapidly be absorbed by the outsiders they came into contact with. New Guinea was one of several areas that The Peabody Museum felt was in immediate need of study due to this premise that the culture was on the verge of extinction and enculturation into the dominate European culture.

Rockefeller signed on as the sound technician and still photographer for the expedition which was sponsored by Harvard University with the approval of the Dutch government. The expedition consisted of several anthropologists, a film and sound crew, and a Dutch anthropologist and interpreter. The Harvard-Peabody Expedition remained in the Balem Valley for three months living among the Dani people, filming and photographing their daily life as well as collecting objects from their daily life such as ornaments, containers, domestic tools, bows, arrows, and net bags.

In June and July of 1961 Michael Rockefeller and Sam Putnam, a college friend left the expedition to explore the southern coast of New Guinea in the hopes of collecting Asmat art. The Asmat or the People of the Tree practice headhunting. The geographical location of
the Asmat area is southeastern New Guinea. The Asmat area sits in an alluvial mud swamps, just above sea level making it one of the largest swamps in the world. The environment is harsh with daily rides and heavy rains for over 200 days in the year. Mud is a way of life.

There is no stone, no pottery, no soil in the Asmat world. Wood is the basic material of all the Asmat culture: fuel, houses, canoes, spears, bow and arrows are all made of wood. Ritual objects such as masks, drums and shields are also made of wood. One source of food is provided by the Sago tree. Sago is the pith from the tree that is a starchy food in the form of hard, white grain. Other food sources are fish and small animals that live on the island. 

Rockefeller’s base camp was in the tiny village of Amanamkai. They stayed with Dr. Adrian Gerbrands, the then Assistant Director of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden Holland, who was making a detailed study of the sculptors and sculpture in the village. Dr. Gerbrands resented the Dutch government and the missionaries trying to impose their values on the Asmat. Michael Rockefeller, Dr. Gerbrands, Sam Putnam and René Wassing, a Dutch anthropologist traveled by canoe to various villages in the Asmat area. This first expedition lasted from June 24th to July 5th, 1961. Traveling with Gerbrands gave Rockefeller access to tribes he would have never be able to meet on his own. Since Gerbrands developed a trusting relationship with various tribes Rockefeller was able to buy art from the local people. He stored his art in a mission shed pending shipping it to New York City.

Rockefeller kept a journal documenting his experiences among both the Dani people in the Baliem Valley and the Asmat. He took photographs and shot film footage to document the Dani people. Because of his wealth he was able to trade in steel axes and there was no end to his supply of goods to trade for the local art work. He was collecting specific

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1 *CLA Fact Book*, 2002
materials and although he was moving among various tribes he impacted on their culture by trading steel axes for wood carvings. He may not have realized his immediate impact on the people. Because he could afford steel axes for trade he could buy the best and the most art work. Other missionaries and anthropologists living in the area had to compete with Rockefeller for native art work.

Michael Rockefeller and Sam Putnam rejoined the Harvard-Peabody expedition in early September. When the expedition ended in September of 1961 Michael planned on returning to the Asmat area of Dutch New Guinea. He went home to New York for a brief time and then returned to Dutch New Guinea in late September with his Dutch friend René Wassing. He had a specific purpose to document and collect art for the Museum of Primitive Art of which he was a trustee. His intention was to demonstrate to the Western art world the artist's function in Asmat society, to show the regional styles of objects, and to "do justice" to the art of the Asmat. He believed that an opportunity such as this one had never before been granted to a primitive people by European society and by collecting art and then organizing a huge exhibition he could achieve this end.

Dr. Gerbrands considered the Asmat expert wood carvers. One aspect of Asmat religious belief is that man is a tree and a tree is man. The tree represents a human being with the roots as feet, the trunk as the body, the branches are arms, and the fruits of the tree represent the human head. The ritual of cutting down a tree incorporates many references to the killing of a human being during a head hunting raid. In order to create life, one has to kill and no one in Asmat society ever dies a natural death. Everyone is killed by an enemy, either by actual physical fighting or by magic. The bis is a pledge from the living to a dead relative that his killing will soon be avenged.

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Michael Rockefeller admired the ancestor poles or *bis* called by the Asmat which are carved from the full-grown mangrove tree. *Bis poles* are between 15 and 20 feet high and when cut into bleed red sap. After being displayed in the village, the *bis* are transported into the forest, where they are left to decay. The Asmat believe that their supernatural powers will promote the growth of the Sago tree — the main food source for the Asmat.

Michael Rockefeller and René Wassing traveled from village to village collecting objects. This second expedition into the Asmat area began on October 13th, 1961 in the village of Per on the Arafura Sea. Rockefeller kept detailed field notes, took photographs, and documented the objects he collected and the circumstances by which he collected them. They finished up collecting in the Agats region of Dutch New Guinea in November of 1961. Rockefeller, Wassing and two Asmat guides set out in their catamaran on the morning of November 18th, 1961 from the missionary outpost in Agats heading to the Causuarinen coast. Their catamaran was constructed from two native canoes and one 18 horse-power outboard engine. Their boat being loaded with steel axes, machetes, knives, food, cameras clothes, and kerosene was headed to the village of Atsj 25 miles down the coast.

According to Wassing, they were going across the Eilanden River which empties in to the Arafura Sea. The catamaran was swamped in the heavy seas and the engine died while the river current pushed them farther out. The two native guides decided to swim to shore for help, while Rockefeller and Wassing drifted with the canoe. The seas were rough and the boat was filling with water. Rockefeller tried to rescue things by putting them on the tin roof of the catamaran but the whole craft capsized. Rockefeller lost his camera, film, and journals to the bottom of the sea. Rockefeller and Wassing clung to the vessel all night. At dawn on November 19th when no help came Rockefeller decided to swim the 12 miles to shore. Wassing tried to dissuade him from attempting to swim to shore. Although a good
swimmer he made a life preserver out of two gas tins tied together with his belt. He stripped down to his shorts, tied his glasses around his neck and slipped into the Arafura sea. His last words were "I think I can make it." He was never seen again.

René stayed with the canoe and was rescued that afternoon when a Dutch patrol plane saw the catamaran. The two native guides reached the shore that evening and were also rescued. By the next morning Nelson Rockefeller and Michael’s twin sister Mary were on their way to Dutch New Guinea. The Dutch began to search for Rockefeller and eventually the Australian and the United States governments aided in the search. After 10 days he was presumed dead, either drowned or perhaps eaten by sharks or crocodiles. The monsoon rains prohibited any further search attempt.

Nelson Rockefeller and his daughter went home convinced that Michael had drowned in the Arafura Sea. Nelson spoke to the press before leaving Hollandia stating that his son had been the happiest while in Netherlands. "He was always interested in art and, had a great love of people and was a student of human values, anthropological values."

Although Michael Rockefeller was not an anthropologist by profession he mirrored one. He took on the role of anthropologist while in the field in New Guinea. Anthropologists were still looking for non-western cultures to study in the belief that cultures were still pure and "untouched" by western contact. New Guinea fit the bill. Despite all of the western intruders over the decades, the myth that New Guinea is the land of head hunters living in a pristine landscape untouched by outsiders remains intact. This myth is only partially true. There are cultures that were heavily influenced by missionaries but this was not the focus of the Harvard Peabody expedition. Their goal was to study a

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5 Paul Toohey. *Rocky Goes West.* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 111.
6 Ibid. 127.
tribal society that they believed was still pure and uninfluenced by European contact. The disappearance of Michael Rockefeller only fed into the myth of the savage.

There has been much secrecy surrounding the disappearance of Michael Rockefeller. The Dutch government suppressed the reports that began surfacing in the bush about two weeks after his disappearance. The rumors were that Michael had survived and came ashore near the village of Otsjanep. The people of Otsjanep had a reputation for being dangerous and missionaries and local tribes avoided them. The whispers began that Michael had swam ashore and immediately had been speared to death and taken back to the village and eaten.

In an attempt to suppress headhunting, the Dutch government had killed a group of Otsjanep warriors in 1958. Since all deaths must be avenged Michael Rockefeller had the rotten luck of surfacing at the wrong place at the wrong time. His death simply avenged the death of the four villagers. Though this story has never been confirmed by the Dutch government, it has been collaborated by the Dutch missionaries in Agats. It is a part of the myth of Michael Rockefeller, Dutch New Guinea, and the Asmat.

Michael Rockefeller's collection of Asmat art became a part of the collection of The Museum of Primitive Art in New York City founded by Nelson Rockefeller. This collection consists of shields, drums, horns, paddles, sago pounders, spears, canoe prows, ancestor figures, bowls, headrests, ancestor vessels, poles, masks, human skulls (decorated) that were obtained on head hunting raids, skirts, daggers, and bone nose ornaments. One of the bis poles collected by Michael Rockefeller went to the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.

In September of 1962, Michael Rockefeller's collection of Asmat art was put on exhibition in New York City at The Museum of Primitive Art, the museum founded and financed by his famous father Nelson A. Rockefeller. The exhibition entitled The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea ran for two months.
III. 6 00 S, 147 00 E: The Geography and History of New Guinea

The peaks of the Snow Mountains, on bright mornings, part the dense clouds and soar into the skies of Oceania. The Snow Mountains are the summit of western New Guinea. On a high flank in the central highlands lies a sudden valley: here the B dele River, which had vanished underground some twenty miles upstream, bursts from the mountain wall onto a great plain. The B dele Valley was discovered from the air in 1938, but no white man came to live there until 1954, when a government post was established on abandoned lands of the Wakuhi tribes.

Peter Matthiessen — Under a Mountain Wall

The island of New Guinea lies just above Queensland Australia to the east of the Philippine Islands in a region known as Melanesia. It is the second largest island in the world with a population just over four million people. Nearly 85% of the island is carpeted with tropical rain forest. The central part of the island rises into a wide ridge of mountains known as the Highlands, a territory that is so densely forested and topographically forbidding that the island’s local inhabitants remained isolated from each other for millennia. The mountains cut the island in half, north and south. These natural barriers have created the most culturally diverse area in the world with more than 700 distinct languages belong to the Austronesian and Papuan groups spoken on New Guinea.

Each group of people has its own social system, customs, rituals and style of dress. New Guinea is home to volcanoes, rolling plains, dense rain forests, one of the largest swamp in the world, and huge mountain ranges. It is the size of California. The coastline is dotted with coral reefs and mangrove swamps. The climate is tropical as New Guinea is located just below the equator. December to March is the wet season. Although the climate is tropical, the elevation in the Highlands causes temperatures to be much cooler.

The principal island group of New Guinea consists of the Bismarck Archipelago which includes: New Britain, New Ireland and Manus; Bougainville, the Trobriands; D'Entrecasteaux Islands and Louisiade Archipelago. New Guinea is classified as a part of Melanesia and the capital city is Port Moresby in the southeast.

Archaeological evidence indicates that humans migrated to New Guinea at least 60,000 years ago, probably by seas from Southeast Asia during an ice age period when the seas receded and the distances to travel between islands was less. Evidence also indicates that gardening evolved rather quickly along with the Hunter Gatherers. Although the Portuguese explorers first sighted the island in 1512 it was Jorge de Meneses who made the first landing. He called the island Ilhas dos Pupaus, "island of the Pupuans," from the Malay word papiwah.¹⁰

The Spaniard Ynigo Ortiz de Retez sailed his ship the "San Juan" to the mouth of the river Mamberamo. He thought the land to be similar to Guinea on Africa's west coast thus the name Nueva Guinea. Although trading was done on the coastlines, one hundred years later it was discovered that New Guinea was an island. The interior of Papua New Guinea remained unexplored until relatively late in the nineteenth century. The natural geographic features such as mountain ranges, raging rivers and swamps created natural barriers that made exploration difficult.

Britain, Germany and Holland all laid claim to the various parts of the island as these countries all were in competition to control the people and the resources on the island. Control of the island had more to do with keeping the other colonial powers away so towards the end of the nineteenth century the country was divided up among the Dutch, the Germans and the British. The western half of the island became Dutch New Guinea, the

¹⁰ ibid 32.
northeastern quarter became German New Guinea an the southeastern corner became British New Guinea.

Towards the late eighteenth century Europe had a growing need for coconut oil. The Germans began trading for copra in the New Guinea islands. Copra are the dried kernel of a coconut, from which coconut oil is extracted. In 1884 the Germans took possession of the northeast quarter of the island and the Solomon Islands naming them German New Guinea. The administration was in the hands of a chartered company called Godeffroy’s of Hamburg. The Germans established plantations and trade using local labor. They settled along the coastal areas as the interior was almost impenetrable. The absence of roads required travel by boat. The Germans remained in New Guinea until the start of World War I when Australian troops occupied the northeast quarter of the island. In 1921, after World War I, the area was assigned to Australia as a League of Nations Trust Territory.

The capital of Port Moresby was founded by Captain John Moresby who landed there in 1883. Rubber, gold and Copra were exported from there. In 1884 the British claimed the Southeastern coast of New Guinea and its adjacent islands as a protectorate calling it British New Guinea. In the early years, the administrators had the responsibility of protecting incoming Europeans from the local people. Under British authority, local natives were arrested and punished for the murder of Europeans. In 1888 British New Guinea became a crown possession. The area was placed under the authority of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1902. Following the passage of the Papua Act in 1905, British New Guinea became the Territory of Papua and formal Australian administration began in 1906.
Under Australian rule, exploration continued with miners, missionaries and government officials coming into the area. The discovery of gold sparked prospecting and exploration. Two large exploratory expeditions in the 1930's mapped the interior of the island as well as laid the foundation for the introduction of trade, missions and prospecting beyond the coastal areas of New Guinea. Local natives in the highlands probably had their first contact with missionaries, miners or government officials and police at this time.

Papua was administered under the Papua Act until it was invaded by the Japanese in 1942 at the start of World War II. The Papua and New Guinea Act of 1949 formally approved the placing of New Guinea under the international trusteeship system. The two areas were combined and administered as the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Papua New Guinea became self-governing in 1973 and achieved independence from Australia in 1975.

The central part of New Guinea is known as the Highlands and was thought to be too inhospitable for habitation. It was not explored until the late 1920's when gold was discovered. Ironically, European explorers discovered over one million people living in fertile mountain valleys who had never encountered outsiders. This was a time of intense contact between people from vastly different cultures. The contact between natives and outsiders resulted in the exchange of goods with local inhabitants recruited as porters, paid to carry cargo inland. In other instances, outsiders were attacked and killed. Warring tribes were ever a threat to outsiders and diseases such as dysentery and malaria as well as the drastic climate and changes of weather known to the island.

Europeans interfered with local customs, getting involved with inter-tribal warfare and trying to put an end to local practices such as head hunting. Australian explorers such as Michael Leahy who worked for the government, in his memoir entitled The Land that Time
Forgot" recounted his numerous encounters with local tribes while searching for gold in unexplored territories between Papua and New Guinea. In other accounts of exploration, writers such as E. Baxter Riley wrote an ethnographic account of his travels on the Fly and the Sepik rivers in 1925. Another narrative of exploration in New Guinea is entitled *Across New Guinea from the Fly to the Sepik"* written by Ivan Champion, a European who had grown up in Papua. He was one of only two Europeans, who along with a small group of native men explored the region that connects both rivers.

All of these accounts are fascinating reading filled with descriptions of the island topography as well as the native people, their customs, manner of dress, and decoration. For both the native and the European, this first encounter alone worth reading, especially the reaction of the local inhabitants who had not previously seen white men. Since these were missions of exploration there is little writing of much else. Other Europeans who established a foothold in all the territories of the island are missionaries. Numerous religious denominations were in competition with each other on the island. They arrived in the late nineteenth century to establish religious dominance and trade with the local people.

Because the interior had not been explored the missionaries that came to New Guinea had little choice but to settle along the coast. Catholics, Protestants, Lutherans, Jesuits, Baptists, and numerous other religious groups came from Europe to sow the seeds of Christianity in a foreign land. Numerous accounts written by missionaries tell of their encounters with the local people in Papua and New Guinea as well as in Dutch New Guinea. Their job was especially challenging since they were living among certain tribes who still practiced headhunting and cannibalism.

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The clash of two very different cultures and ideologies sometimes resulted in the death of missionaries. Disease also took its toll on the Europeans. Today the Roman Catholics continue to work in New Guinea. Their influence stems back to the German and British colonial period. Many journals and diaries written by missionaries recount their experiences in Papua & New Guinea. Today, New Guinea's religious life blends the new with native cultural traditions.

The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC) was a powerful trading empire. The original goal was money before political power. The VOC had been granted many of the powers of a sovereign state by the government of the Netherlands partly because communication between the Netherlands and Asia was so slow that colonial activities simply could not be directed from Amsterdam. In 1605 the Dutch East India Company sent an expedition to the western side of the island of New Guinea, and in 1642 Abel Tasman explored its coast for the VOC on a voyage back from New Zealand.

The Dutch had little interest in the island of New Guinea. They simply wanted to protect their interests in Indonesia and they hoped that the sultanate rulers of Indonesia would stop the Spanish and the British from using the island as a base to reach the Spice Islands. In 1610 the VOC created the post of Governor General for the Dutch East Indies, a position that lasted until 1941. Early attempts at settlement of New Guinea by the Dutch and the British failed due to disease and the hostility of the native people. In 1824 the British and the Dutch signed the “Treaty of London” and divided up the Indies. A part of that division included Irian Jaya – the western part of the island of New Guinea. Their first permanent settlement post was established in 1828 and abandoned in 1836.

The Netherlands East Indies (present day Indonesia) was first named “Indonesia” by a German geographer in 1884. When the island was carved up between the Netherlands,
Britain, and Germany, none of these nations had an administrative presence. Holland established administrative posts beginning in 1898. In 1904 the first Europeans began to arrive in the southeastern area of Irian Jaya known as the Asmat. This term describes the people, the geographic area and the language spoken by the native people. The remoteness of this region makes travel in and out very difficult. Asmat sits in alluvial mud swamps in a vast river-delta system covering 10,425 square miles. To the immediate north lie some of the highest mountain ranges which are near to the equator. To the south of the Asmat is the treacherous Arafura Sea.

Due to the topography of the area, the Asmat people were left relatively undisturbed by outsiders until the early 1950’s. The Dutch set up their first patrol in 1938. In 1953, Dutch missionaries and the Dutch colonial authorities returned to the area and took up permanent residence in the village of Agats. The Catholic order of the American Crosiers replaced the Dutch missionaries in 1958. The patrol officers who held various roles tried to suppress headhunting through force. In the absence of the Europeans during World War II, the headhunting culture had become prevalent once again.

The origin myths of the Asmat describe of the taking of heads and the accompanying rituals that develop as the will of the deceased relative. The Asmat believe that the spirits of their ancestors lived in the village until their death had been avenged. Only by avenging them could the village send them off to the land of the dead. To serve as memorials, villagers displayed the skeletal remains of their relatives, using a skull for a pillow, stringing vertebrae on a necklace or carving daggers of human bone.¹⁹ Headhunting raids by groups such as the Asmat avenged a death and appeased their spirits. Masculine aggression and warfare are essential cultural values of the Asmat people. Headhunting involves the practice of removing

and preserving human heads. The belief is that the soul resides in the human head and in
taking the head, especially of an enemy, then one has captured the soul, or the essence of the
other person. The Australian government began the task of squelching cannibalism and
headhunting when they took control of New Guinea and these rituals are no longer
practiced today.

Woodcarving is the major art form of the Asmat and is tied to the ritual activity of
headhunting. A man who captured heads was viewed as a defender of his village against
either physical or spiritual enemies. He had the respect of his peers and stood a better
chance of getting a wife. In order for the village to prosper and survive, sago and fishing
grounds had to be protected and new food resources acquired from other villages by
headhunting. Asmat rituals included affirmations of revenge and efforts to expel the spirits
from the village and send them to their final resting place beyond the sea.14

To gain support for a hunt, families wanting revenge would sponsor a feast and
commission the carving of large poles (bis), which represented recently deceased ancestors.
These poles were set up in front of the men’s house or laid of frames facing the river, like
canoes. After revenged had been taken the poles were dragged into the swamp left to rot in
the belief that their presence would assure the growth of new sago palms.

The relationship between wood and the Asmat is crucial. The material used by the
Asmat in their daily life is wood. The Asmat are master wood carvers using wood to carve
everything from shelter to drums, canoes, paddles to personal ornaments, ancestor poles,
horns, spears, masks and figurines. There is no stone nor clay suitable for pottery in the
river-delta where the Asmat. They use animal teeth and shell carve the wood. Bone is used
for personal ornaments and daggers.

14 ibid. 7.
The Asmat developed the decorative art of woodcarving which is tied to their ritual activities. Major rituals include the raising of the men’s house, a head hunt and the initiation of boys into adulthood. The is no formal training to become a woodcarver. In a village of 700 persons there might be 20 to 25 woodcarvers.15

The only colors used by the Asmat are white, red and a little black, each color being created from natural elements. After contact with Europeans steel tools were used for woodcarving. Motifs associated with head hunting are used to decorate houses, canoes, shields, clubs, tools, bowls and headrests. Animals and insects that symbolize the head hunting motif are also used and have become a part of the iconographical world of the Asmat. Despite the belief that the Asmat were savages with violent urges that could only be satisfied, headhunting is tied to many symbolic beliefs, which provided many of the themes of their art. One of the most important occasions for a head hunt was the initiation of a boy into adulthood.16

When the Indonesian government took over the administration of Irian Jaya on May 1, 1963 so began the repression and destruction of traditional Asmat art and culture because of the connection of these objects with warfare, cannibalism, and headhunting. The government forbid any activities tied to headhunting and outlawed woodcarving and the use of carving tools which are integral to Asmat culture. In attempts to wipe out headhunting and cannibalism the men’s houses were burnt down. Men’s houses are used for the carving and display of wood carvings. They are a place of residence of the men and their families.

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15 ibid. 8.
16 ibid. 6.
The church as well as missionaries such as the Crosiers who had come to Irian Jaya in the early nineteen fifties from the United States began to collect and safeguarded thousands of Asmat cultural objects after the 1962 ban on wood carving. The government saw the collecting of Asmat art by priests and missionaries as condoning headhunting.

The Indonesian government banished Dutch missionaries from Irian Barat however a Cholera epidemic in 1962 forced the missionaries to stay to help dispose of the native bodies that needed to be burned. Cholera became rampant in the area. As the result of the tense political situation in West New Guinea, the area remained closed to all but European missionaries until well into the 1970's. 17

In recent years, the Crosiers have promoted the sale and trade of Asmat artifacts. The missionaries have also encouraged the Asmat to pursue their traditional art form of wood carving in the absence of headhunting. There is an Asmat Museum in the village of Agats, the same mission outpost that Michael Rockefeller and René Wassing set out from on November 18, 1961.

It is both confusing and ironic that the church would play very different roles in their relationship to the Asmat. First in trying to convert the Asmat to Christianity and then by encouraging and collecting Asmat art in attempts to preserve the “traditional” culture. Traditional Asmat culture is tied to headhunting and cannibalism, cultural practices that both the church and later the Indonesian government would try to eradicate through very different methods. Still, museums throughout the world contain collections from Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea. Some of the more famous collections are in the countries that had a foothold in New Guinea such as Britain, Germany, Holland and Australia.

VI. Encasing the Other: Western Perceptions of a non-Western World

Museums have been living witnesses to dying cultures and societies, seeing the whole fine infrastructure collapse and degenerate. They appeared on the scene as fetishistic souvenir hunters—doing their best to save the hat of a drowning man.

Tomislav Sola: 1994: 187

If museums have been witnesses to dying cultures, then are anthropologists the catalyst for the death and destruction of a culture? Anthropologists lived and studied among the people of New Guinea, inhabiting this remote island with vastly different cultures of people. Because the people of New Guinea were perceived as primitive, common belief is they were on the verge of extinction. It was necessary to collect and document these primitive cultures before extinction. The objects collected held the significance of not only coming from another place but were believed to represent man’s evolutionary past.

In the late nineteenth century museums looking to sponsor ethnographic fieldwork sent expeditions and anthropologists to New Guinea to collect artifacts for museums in America. This was the time to create collections instead of purchasing them. In America, there were already antiquities and ethnographic objects in the earliest museums in Charleston, South Carolina and Salem, Massachusetts. 10

This is the reoccurring theme of the simultaneous need to preserve and to change an existing non-western culture. It is the act of “discovering” a native people, documenting their culture by way of collecting objects and placing them in western museums, and being drawn to the presumed simplicity of the lifestyle along with the need to “civilize” the native culture. Why Europeans saw the native cultures they encountered as rapidly vanishing has much to do with European thought at this time. Darwin and his theories of evolution substantiated European beliefs in their cultural superiority over native cultures. The mission

to "civilize" the native people is based on the current tenets of evolutionary theory. Civilizing a people meant indoctrinating them into western religion and thought. It was thought that native cultures could not sustain their way of life by hunting, gathering, and using stone tools, however, it did not occur to the outsiders that the people had lived this way for thousands of years. European perception saw the native culture as unable to survive, so it was only a matter of time before the lifestyle would disappear therefore collecting becomes a necessity before the way of life no longer exists. Europeans were there to save the "hat" of the drowning man.

Numerous monographs have been written by anthropologists and museum curators with titles such as Under the Mountain Wall: A Chronicle of Two Seasons in Stone Age New Guinea, The Technology of a Modern Stone Age People in New Guinea and Gardens of War; Life and Death in the New Guinea Stone Age. In each case the title of the monograph validates the perception that the tribes encountered were prehistoric. Government patrollers, administrators, missionaries, explorers, and anthropologists all collected objects from the local people.

In the nineteenth century, the newly emerging science of anthropology needed to place the foreign objects collected into a scientific, systematic framework. The vast quantities of objects that came out of New Guinea as well as the people who made them required understanding. Ethnological theories about people and their material culture began to help put all of this into a scientific framework to be classified and studied. This classification, cataloging and studying of native cultures is rooted in the European Enlightenment and led to the establishment of both the field of anthropology and consequently, the ethnographic museum.
Ethnographic museums followed on the heels of Colonialism. In European museums, many royal collections evolved into museums of ethnography. Museums such as the Museum of Man in Paris, France, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, Holland, and the Berlin Ethnographic Museum grew from royal collections that had been amassed over centuries. The origins of these collections were called Cabinets of Curiosities. Initially considered unsystematic and haphazard, these collections illustrated the fruits of newly contacted or recently colonized lands. The Germans called these rooms “Kunst-und Wunderkammer,” meaning art and wonder room. These collections consisted of objects from the natural world along with coins, mirrors, sea shells, or human bones. Whatever would impress or interest an audience was brought back to the kings of Europe.

In Northern Europe, the idea was to create the “theatrum mundi,” a theatre of the world. Objects became classified based on the way people perceived the world. On the “great chain of being” God is on the very top, with man under him. Then came animals and plants. Both the natural and the artificial came together to explain the order of the world with categories such as fine arts, flora and fauna, natural history, and scientific instruments. In the theatrum mundi, all the parts of the world came together to create a whole picture of the universe.

In the mid-eighteenth century the theories of Linnaeus prompted the emergence of “rational” systems of classification to be born. In his book *System of Nature* (1735), Linnaeus attempted to construct a taxonomy based on the Great Chain of Being. His system of classes, orders, genera and species are still used today in biological classification. Ironically, in the same century the two most famous auction houses, Christie’s and Sotheby’s are founded in 1762 and the 1740’s respectively. Ethnographic materials collected during this time is considered secondary to flora and fauna. They are considered “miscellanies” and
documented, if at all, randomly. Darwin would develop the theories of social evolution that are necessary to prove that all creatures belonged to hierarchies that had both high and low forms within them.  

Eventually, the Cabinets of Curiosities were dismantled and the collections dispersed as objects are viewed as teaching tools to learn about a culture. Objects deemed scientific made their way into universities be studied and exhibited. Fine are objects made their way into the newly emerging art museums. Thus the distinction and the division is made between the natural world and the artistic world. This same distinction manifests itself into a very specific way of seeing the world, which for the Europeans, fell into two basic dichotomies: nature vs. civilization or culture. In simple terms, nature is that which exists in a natural state and civilization or culture is that which is man-made – the products of human thought. It is this dichotomy in western thought that creates the debate between two opposites: art vs. artifact, ancient vs. modern, savage vs. civilized. This distinction would change the type of museum and its contents in the future.

The dichotomy of the European vs. the savage, art vs artifact, modern vs. primitive-all of these opeposites evolve from Social Darwinism and the belief in European superiority over all other cultures. Culture came to signify anything Western and nature came to be synonymous with the savage. It is this perception that splits the material culture of both western and non-western cultures and creates both the fine arts and the natural history museum.

In the early nineteenth century, museums such as the Field Museum in Chicago, The American Museum of Natural History in New York City held collections of Pacific cultural materials. Universities such as the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard also had vast collections of Pacific Island cultures. Systems of classification and the inter-relationships between objects became the focus. Collections were organized and categorized on themes of race and evolution as Europeans tried to make sense of the non-western peoples they had encountered. Museums held a progressive model of cultural development ranging from the lowest to the highest, a progression from savages to a civilized society with Europeans being on the highest end of this line. The Age of Enlightenment grew out of the belief in progress and the power of reason.

Museums were jam packed with ethnographic objects in display cases. In some instances, collections were not complete so museums had store rooms full of various objects from the daily life of a culture. In numerous cases, objects were not thoroughly documented, which hampered the ability by curators to properly explain the object to the public. It was thought that objects could speak to the museum audience simply by being on display.

In the United States, modern Anthropology owes much to a German immigrant and the founder of professional anthropology in the “New World,” Franz Boas (1858 – 1942). His ideas about native peoples and the display of their cultural materials changed the field of anthropology in the early 1900s. In the late nineteenth century Anthropology was emerging as a discipline in American universities. The term anthropology refers to the science of man which included physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and ethnology. It would be anthropologists and scientists who sorted through all the material gathered up by European adventurers in attempts to produce objective knowledge of the peoples of the world.
Modern Anthropology in the United States as well as this approach to museum exhibitions developed from a background in Natural History.

Boas worked for the Columbian Exposition (The World's Fair) held in Chicago, Illinois, in 1893 supervising the arrangement of the ethnographic materials on display collected from around the world. The Field Museum of Chicago founded in 1893 grew from these collections. He worked for the Field Museum but after a falling out he moved on to become a curator for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Due to his seminal philosophies concerning the role of anthropology in the United States, he began to split his time between The American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University. He left the Museum of Natural History in 1905 where he took up a full-time position of professor at Columbia University in New York City. He founded the first academic department of anthropology at Columbia University in 1896.

While working at both The Field Museum and The American Museum of Natural History, Boas developed displays based on his philosophies of how cultural materials should be exhibited. Objects were only a small presentation of the true life of a people he is described as saying in Some Principals of Museum Administration (1907). He exhibited artifacts in settings to simulate the original culture and cultural environment (context) of a particular people. Artifacts are grouped together by geographic region to illustrate a way of life of a particular group of people.

Boas based the "life group" model on his own field experience in the Pacific Northwest among the Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Pacific coast and among the Baffin Island Eskimos in 1886 and 1883, respectively. Boas began his work in anthropology at a time when the field was not recognized as a science or even a field of study. He based his

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theories on his belief in the invaluable experience of fieldwork. Exhibiting the daily life of people gave context to their objects and this mode of display would give the objects their meaning.

Boas felt that this way of thinking about material cultures was necessary in order to view objects in their “cultural context.” Seeing how objects were used in their cultural context will aid the audience in understanding the function of the objects and the culture that made it as well. It is the “life group” that provides the knowledge of the object, not merely the object alone.

Boas defied the previously held beliefs of social evolution with western societies on top. He thought the divisions such as savage, barbaric, and civilized are artificial, cultural constructs of the western way of thinking about non-western cultures are not scientifically based. He believed in cultural relativism, which means that the cultural traits of a society are the product of the historical and environmental evolution of that particular society and could only be understood within that context. Terms such as savage, primitive, inferior and superior had no cross-cultural validity as each culture could only be examined and understood within its own history and environment.

Boas believed that the current way in which museums practiced anthropology hindered the growth of the discipline. He became weary of the public anthropology practiced in museums and he moved away from museums and the object-based theories of anthropology to universities and theoretical knowledge. His thinking influenced the next generation of academic anthropologists.  

By the time of World War I, the belief that objects systematically placed and ordered in a museum could tell the story of a people or a culture fell out of fashion and was no longer

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the pervading theory. By the 1920s, half of all professional anthropologists made their homes in universities and colleges. After 1930 the focus of anthropology shifts again from museums to universities. The claims held by museums that they would advance the scientific study of human beings and their cultures no longer held true because more non-museum anthropologists became connected with universities, government agencies, research institutions, and hospitals and the growth of social anthropology moves away from traditional museum interests out into the field.

Despite the fact that museums in the United States held rich ethnographic collections, museums became isolated from the field of anthropology and the research and knowledge that comes with field work would no longer be available to the museum going public. Universities such as Harvard became the centers for anthropological discourse and advancement with the founding of research institutions such as The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

The 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago was the watershed event in the evolution of American anthropology.\(^2\) The fair gave anthropologists the chance to illustrate to the public the fruits of their labors by exhibiting objects collected from all over the world. The field of anthropology that began as an object-based field in the belief that objects alone could stand for whole cultures and therefore speak to the public moved away from the museum and into the University.

The decades between 1860 – 1900 are considered the “museum period” in the field of anthropology. Museums were staffed by a small number of professional anthropologists who were both researchers and teachers. Museum acted as centers of ethnological research and sponsors of fieldwork. Research involved classification and cultural history, material

\(^2\) Ibid. 77.
culture and the technology of a people. There was also an emphasis on salvaging the disappearing languages of the Indians of North America.23

Although objects from New Guinea have been collected by Europeans since explorers arrived there in the sixteenth century, the formation of the museum of ethnography did not occur until the late nineteenth century. The colonial powers that laid claim to New Guinea began to display these cultural materials in the late 1800s.

During the 1890's the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England had displays of Pacific Island materials. This museum was founded in 1884 when the University of Oxford accepted the gift of 17,000 object from Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers.24 The museum arranges objects by typology, for example, the museum would display a collection of drums, or musical instruments. Pitt Rivers believed in the value of the object to educate the public. It was not a specific geographical area that interested him but their cultural materials. He amassed collections from all over the world and from all periods of time. Objects were displayed in groups together in cases on or the wall. Even today, the majority of exhibitions are by typology, not by geographical region or culture group.

Like the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (The Berlin Ethnographic Museum) displayed their collections with objects crammed in glass cases with little to no text. Museums neither had today's specific exhibitions of objects nor did they feature special exhibitions. Collections from a specific area were displayed in glass cases filling large rooms. The effect was one of clutter with no descriptions of the objects or of the people who made them.

In Holland, the Rijksmuseum Voor Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden) had a display entitled *Northern New Guinea ornaments and musical instruments* in 1907. This was unusual because the exhibit focused on a geographic region and one particular aspect of the culture. The museum still chose to exhibit ornaments and musical instruments from Northern New Guinea together. However, there is a focus to a particular cultural area and identifiable aspects of the culture.

Up until the 1950's in the United States, ethnographic museums displayed objects from non-Western cultures like their European counterparts with mass quantities of objects in glass cases on display with little text or interpretation. The visual presentation was one of clutter and chaos. Having all of these objects crammed together in cases filling a large room suggests the colonial powers displaying all of their "loot." This method of display proposes that the objects individually are not important. It is the quantity of objects present that is crucial for scientific study.

Museums, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art would not collect prehistoric art. It was seen as belonging to the realm of the American Museum of Natural History. Art from non-Western cultures was viewed as having only ethnological interest to the public and no artistic value or interest to the American public. One would have to visit a Natural History Museum to see the dioramas of actual non-Western cultures and to make sense of the ethnographic objects.

One museum that would change the way non-Western objects were viewed and displayed was The Museum of Primitive Art in New York City. Although no longer in

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existence, this museum changed the way non-Western art was perceived and displayed by Western society.

The founder of this museum was one Nelson Rockefeller, politician and philanthropist, who had developed an interest in art as a young man. His mother had small gallery in their home on 54th Street. He began collecting primitive art in 1930 while on a trip to Hawaii. In time Rockefeller amassed his own large private collection of non-Western art through his world travels. He thought that these works were pertinent to our own time. As a member of the Board of Trustees of The Metropolitan Museum of Art he encouraged the collection of non-Western. The Metropolitan Museum of Art showed no interest in it.

Because of his incredible wealth Nelson Rockefeller was able to open his own museum devoted to non-western art. The Museum of Indigenous Art opened its doors on February 21, 1957 at West 54th Street in a building across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. Nelson Rockefeller had befriended one René d’Harnoncourt, a former Austrian count who had emigrated first to Mexico and then to the United States and was an authority on Precolumbian Art. Together they founded the Museum of Indigenous Art. The name of the museum changed to The Museum of Primitive Art in 1956.

At this time the terms indigenous and primitive were used to describe non-Western art. Both terms had very different connotations. Indigenous meant native to an area while Primitive implied simple, using unsophisticated techniques. One term describes the location of the object in question, the other term implies the level of technological advancement of a society. In the 1950’s the term Primitive was used less and less because of these connotations. Nelson Rockefeller’s mission was to integrate primitive art with indigenous art to incorporate all that is known about both types of art.

26 Oxford American Dictionary.
The Museum of Primitive Art held collections from sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Nelson Rockefeller financed all the exhibitions as well as cared for the collections. During its seventeen years of existence, the museum presented eighty-five exhibitions and produced sixty-three publications on related topics in this field. The museum also created an extensive library and photographic collection that was open to researchers free of charge.

Although Nelson Rockefeller's collection is considered artistic masterpieces, from its inception, the Museum of Primitive Art focused on both the aesthetic content and the cultural content of the collections. Non-Western art had finally found a home in this museum and had come to be accepted by both critics and the public. Rockefeller still wanted to give his collection to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He felt that it was vital that they include the whole range of indigenous art in their collections and give the arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas their proper place in the world canon of art.

The art world was not ready to hear Nelson Rockefeller until 1969, eight years after the disappearance of his son Michael. The Metropolitan Museum of Art held an exhibition entitled *Art of Oceania, Africa and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art from May 10 – August 17, 1969*. The exhibition featured objects from New Guinea, Australia, the Western Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, the Congo, Peru, the Caribbean, Central and North America. Unfortunately neither his son Michael nor his friend René D'Harnoncourt were present at the exhibition for René d'Harnoncourt had died tragically months earlier. As

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Rockefeller expressed in the preface of the exhibition catalog “each perished tragically. The art endures.”

Two weeks prior to the opening of this exhibition Nelson Rockefeller was approached by Brooke Astor, another wealthy philanthropist, about donating his collection to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The idea was to have a special wing built to house his collection. Rockefeller agreed to help fund a new wing. A stipulation of the agreement was that a separate department for the care and study of the collection would be established. The collection would be housed in a new wing and was to be named in memory of his son Michael C. Rockefeller.

Although the museum was committed to the project, it took another thirteen years for the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing to open to the public on January 19, 1982. The Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas is comprised of Nelson Rockefeller’s personal collection, a gift and bequest to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1978, the collection from the Museum of Primitive Art, and objects acquired by the museum.

The collection is considered superb but not comprehensive in the survey of arts from these cultural areas. In terms of beauty and rarity of objects, this collection ranks as one of the finest in the United States. Nelson Rockefeller was not looking for quantity but quality in his purchase of art work. The Metropolitan Museum of Art stresses the aesthetic qualities and visual presence of the works by the method of display. There is one object in a vatrine or a few objects exhibited in one case with little labeling or wall text.

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The Rockefeller Wing that houses the Oceanic artifacts features a map of the various cultural areas for the viewer to identify the origin of the objects. There are neither photographs showing the people of the culture nor objects shown in a cultural context. There is one black and white photograph of a white man surrounded by a group of native people. The entire gallery is designed with dramatic lighting, high ceilings, white walls and open space. This gallery has a lot of large objects, which are on platforms or in cases.

Nelson Rockefeller founded the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City at a time when non-Western art was relegated to the American Museum of Natural History. Like his son Michael, he had a vision to create a museum to house non-Western art and the material means to act on this vision. Nelson Rockefeller had the power and influence to create his own museum to house his collection and to create exhibitions and scholarly publications. His commitment to bringing indigenous art to the Western world reflects his belief that non-Western art work is as valuable and worthy to be displayed in one of the worlds most prestigious art museums with over 3.5 million objects in 21 curatorial departments.

Michael, too, had a vision to create an indigenous museum in Dutch New Guinea as well as a permanent collection in his father's museum. He saw the local people as "real people" not savages. Both of these concepts were unheard of at this time. His wealth gave him the ability and influence to join the Harvard Peabody expedition and to travel to New Guinea at a time when there were still cultures relatively uninfluenced by the West.

The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University was founded in 1866 by George Peabody. It is one of the oldest museums in the world devoted to the disciplines of archaeology and ethnology. In 1877, the present five-story building on Divinity Avenue in Cambridge Massachusetts was built to house the growing collections of
the museum. The museum is in the same building as the Harvard Museum of Natural History. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology has over 2.5 million objects with extensive collections of prehistoric and historic cultures from around the world. The largest collections focus on North America, South and Central American native cultures.

The mission statement of the Peabody Museum is to preserve, interpret, exhibit acquire and make accessible anthropological objects for teaching, research and public education. The museum engages in ongoing anthropological discourse through exhibitions, workshops, symposia, and publications. There are collections from Africa and Oceania. The museum’s archives include accession files, expedition records, anthropologists papers, correspondence, letters, and drawings. The photographic archive houses about 500,000 images from the 1850s to the present in all media types and boasts of the ten largest photographic archives. These images reflect the use of photography in the field of anthropology to document indigenous cultures from around the world. Photography adds another dimension to the written document and literally presents a visual image to be studied and interpreted.

The Oceanic collection numbers around 23,000 objects with holdings from Melanesia, Micronesia, the Philippines, and Australia with rare items dating back to the eighteenth century collected by Boston merchants, traders and researchers to the Pacific. These objects are displayed in the Pacific Islands Hall on the fourth floor of the Peabody Museum. The hall maintains its Victorian flavor in keeping with the museum’s earlier displays. Objects are displayed with descriptive rather than any interpretive text. The gallery is filled with large museum cases made of dark wood. Each case displays cultural materials by a geographic region: Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, Sepik River. A label gives the name

*Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Harvard University. 1998.*
of the object and the accession number. In some of the exhibit cases the objects are
categorized by similar type or function. At the entrance to the gallery is a map of the Pacific
Islands with a brief introduction to the collections. Some of the display cases show a
photograph of a native person holding or wearing the object that is on display to give the
viewer some cultural context. There is no dramatic lighting, in fact the gallery is dimly lit
with low ceilings and dark, hardwood floors. The arrangement of the cases gives the room a
sense of clutter and the feeling of stepping back in time.

In visiting The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, I immediately
became aware that no other floor of the museum displayed objects in a Victorian setting. I
thought that perhaps this was the last floor of the museum waiting to be remodeled and
updated. A brochure mentions that the Pacific Island Hall retains the Victorian character of
early museum exhibits by displaying a diverse array of artifacts with descriptive rather than
interpretive text.³⁰ I had to ask myself why a museum devoted to the field of anthropology
and archaeology engaging in ongoing anthropological discourse through exhibitions,
workshops, etc. would retain the Victorian “flavor” to exhibit their Pacific Island artifacts. I
then had to ask myself how should these collections be exhibited in the 21st century?

There has been much debate over the issue of interpretation and display of non-
Western objects. The perception of non-Western art has changed over time from curiosity
to ethnographic object, to fine art piece. Questions arise as to where all of this material
belongs since objects have been removed from their cultural context. Museums that have
large collections must make choices regarding what pieces to display and how to display
them.

Challenges facing ethnographic museums included conserving collections made out of natural products. Curators are faced with the task of researching and interpreting artifacts that were never created for museums or created with longevity in mind. Other issues include considering cultures that have not died out but have evolved over time just like our own. Museum must create exhibits that are interesting, education and contemporary while remaining sensitive to the native cultures. These are just some of the challenges for all museum professionals who are custodians of ethnographic collections in the 21st century.
V. Where Does it all Belong? The Display of Ethnographic Materials

Where do these objects belong? ... they “belong” nowhere, ....

James Clifford 1985: 244

In *The Predicament of Culture* James Clifford writes at length about the illusion created by the ethnographic museum collection - the illusion of the adequate representation of a world first by cutting objects out of specific contexts and making them stand for abstract wholes.” It is this illusion of adequate representation that is being addressed here. Since it is difficult for Western museums to determine how to categorize ethnographic materials, it becomes increasingly confusing in determining where they belong. It is this basic question that has created such debate over the last century. This argument is based on the Western perception of these objects. The theoretical underpinning of the institution determines the interpretation of the object, its monetary value and the manner of display. The institution creates the illusion of adequate representation.

In December of 1984 an exhibit opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City entitled “*Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.*** The exhibition featured non-Western objects from Africa and Oceania. The artwork came from private collections, ethnographic museums and art galleries. The premise of the show was to demonstrate the affinity between the two kinds of art – tribal and modern. The supposition being that tribal art influenced modern artists and this influence is present in their art. Works by Picasso, Brancusi, Giacometti appear along side their “primal counterparts,” demonstrating for the public the alleged influence of tribal art on modern artists. This show produced a two-volume, 689 page catalog with essays on the arrival of tribal objects in the West as well as individual artists and artist schools in the West.
In her article "Broken Premises: Primitivism at MOMA," Cynthia Nadelman critiques this show. She states that MOMA draws its own conclusions and connections between the modern and primitive works of art on display. Once again the museum creates the illusion of adequate representation. In Rubin's introductory essay, in order not to appear ethnocentric, he explains the reasons for choosing the term "primitivism" for the title of the show. He stresses the point that the subject of the show is not primitive art itself, or even outside comparisons or relation seeking, but the effect of primitive art on 20th century artists. 

To illustrate the notion that European artists embraced primitive art from the beginning of this century the exhibition provides Western works of art that have been in some way touched by this influence and primitive works of art that (1) were in the personal collections of artists, 2) are documented examples of models or inspirations for modern artists' works of art, (3) might well have been seen in a museum by a modern artist, and 4) are excellent examples of their type. By creating the fourth category, MOMA draws its own conclusion about the primitive and modern art works on display. These four categories correspond to the four parts of the exhibition. The four sections are entitled "Concept," "History," "Affinities," and "Contemporary Explorations". MOMA loses sight of its original intention of illustrating connections perceived by the artists and draws its own conclusions.

Nadelman's article goes onto say that some European artists would later deny the influence of tribal art on their artwork. In fact, it seems that these artists were not particularly interested in primitive art. They were just rejecting Western tradition for

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33 Ibid. 89.
34 Ibid, 89.
something new. Picasso said that it was not the masterpiece that mattered but the idea.36 It was the form he appropriated and in the form was his idea. The objects in question were so little understood by Western artists they could only guess as to the original meaning or purpose of the tribal object.36

Europeans have a long history of imbuing non-Western art with Western values. The cannibalizing and devouring of non-Western cultures is a one-sided phenomenon. Objects are consumed, digested and reinterpreted through the Western lens of values and standards. Artists of the twentieth century were just as ill equipped to understand the meaning of non-Western objects.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term Primitivism referred to non-Western art that contained certain visual attributes or forms regarded by Europeans as primal, ancestral, fertile and regenerative.37 Primitive Art exists within the framework of ideas that Europeans held to be true about the art from the non-Western cultures they encountered.38 The term Primitive developed along with a larger set of ideas in the period of art history known as the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. The discovery of Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1738) added to the belief in the perceived nature of Classical art – realism, restraint, harmony and order.39 Western thought cast the arts of non-Western peoples in categories such as Grotesque, Ornament, Caricature, Hieroglyphic and Idol.40

Europeans perceived that the creation of art of “the Other” lacked reason. It is this fundamental issue that separates Primitive Art from the art of “civilized” people. The Other

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36 ibid, 90.
37 ibid. 94.
38 The term “Primitive Art” refers to the European concept on the arts of non-Western cultures at this time.
is defined as anyone different or distant from Western tradition. The Other is characterized as wild, unintelligible, lacking reason, rootless, naïve, and irrational. Characteristics that are the opposite of the European nature. Primitive art belonged to no artistic tradition. It was haphazard, irrational, and grotesque with no sense of beauty, thought or rational. There was no sense of order to primitive art.

European thought placed all cultures on a time line of linear progression. Each culture passed first through an infantile stage of development and progressed/advanced to finally attain the highest level of culture creating a civilization. Europeans believed that the closer one lived to nature or in nature, than the freer one was of culture. It was only the Europeans that created classical art forms as well as attaining the highest level of civilization. European perceptions view the native as child-like, living in a perpetual present with no past or future, minimal cultural tradition, no ability to reflect or think abstractly or philosophically. This belief was supported by the fact that the “Other” had no written language. It was also inconceivable to think that non-Western cultures could have a set of laws.

From the European perspective, many non-Western objects were placed in the category of ornament because the decorative motif adorned utilitarian objects and were considered the most elemental in their style. Since the primitive allegedly had no ability to reason or reflect, the two-dimensional ornamental form was the limit to their artistic expression. Ironically art works from Greek, Byzantine and Roman cultures fit into the perceived continuum of progress. Artworks of living “primitives” were frozen in their original state with no hope of progressing.

\[41\] Ibid. 21.
The term “tribal” used in the title of the MOMA show reflects the vague, ahistorical and nebulous term used to describe non-Western art. Tribal is a category easy to remove from history, from questions of nationhood and political representation; in terms of the contemporary world it implies shadowy people who do not exist, who do not have a voice. Against the term “modern,” tribal art cannot stand a chance as art with an equal voice. Tribal is a term with as many connotations as the word modern but there is a judgement here. Why not use the anthropological terms tribal and State level society? Both terms describe different types of societies based on their technological and political structures. One term implies the “Other,” a nameless, faceless, illiterate people. Modern implies Western, civilized, rational, progressive, the familiar.

The term tribal also corresponds with the Western myth of the native artist not able to produce works that are multi-layered resulting from their own individual imaginations, like Western artists. This exhibition reminds me once again of the Western reoccurrence of discovering and giving value to non-Western cultures and their art. MOMA’s exhibition attempted to reenact the modernist encounter between European artists and “primitive” objects. Ethnographic collections reveal the burden of recurrent myths perpetuating themselves over and over again.

James Clifford discusses the assumption made by the West that the primitive world is in need of preservation, redemption and representation. This myth along with what Clifford calls “temporal incoherence” clouds the ethnographic exhibition. The Fourth floor of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology demonstrates this concept beautifully. The hall retains its Victorian ambiance. Why? Is it to remind the public of the

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days of colonialism when collections were cultural trophies? Or does it have something to do with displaying the culture in some form of a vague past. By displaying the culture in this manner, the audience has no idea if it exists outside of the Victorian setting. There is no time line, no color photographs, no interpretative text to give the public the history of the people of New Guinea.

It is not just museums that perpetual the temporal incoherence coined by Clifford. In Where the Masks Still Dance, Chris Rainier, a photographer and writer documents his many trips into Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea over the past ten years. The coffee table book is filled with beautiful photographs of native people from all parts of the island. Each section of the book has a forward written by Rainier in which he describes his adventures, the landscape and the people he encountered.

There are 107 photographs in this book, all of them in black and white. Although each photograph has a one sentence description, including the village and region where the shots were taken, there are no dates. The book was published in 1996. The photographs were taken over a ten year period with eight trips into Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea. I thought it was odd that the photographs had no dates. It reminded me of the Pacific Islands Hall of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Another ahistorical setting. Rainier speaks of his travels through Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea, the tribes people he encounters, the weather conditions, the beauty of the island.

He also describes natives needing batteries for their walkmans, chiefs wearing Rolex™ watches, dirt roads, satellite dishes and MTV.™ These are clear signs of acculturation, the process of adapting or borrowing traits from another culture. We see no photographs to document these traces of the West and its influences on this island and it's people. One photographs does show two warriors preparing for a sing-song celebration.
They are decorating their faces while holding mirrors up to themselves. This is the only “sign” of Western influence the reader is permitted to see. It is this “temporal incoherence” that Clifford speaks of that Rainier achieves with his black and white, dateless photographs. He chooses to present a place and a people pure and untouched by the West. Rainier achieves the sense of both, the timelessness of the cultures and the remoteness of the island. Thumbing through this book reminds me of the sense of perpetual timelessness when documenting non-Western cultures. These photographs could have been taken over one hundred years ago.

Rainier writes of “capturing” some of the last of the Stone Age cultures before they vanish in the rising tides of Western cultural practices. It is the same myth of the Stone Age culture on the verge of extinction. The same image of cultures perpetually on the verge of extinction, whether it be 1890, 1960 or 1990. The illusion of an untouched, frozen culture rings through the halls of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and The Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as every ethnographic museum up until the later part of the twentieth century.

One cannot blame only museums for this state of temporal incoherence that non-Western cultures find themselves in. It is the relationship between anthropology and the ethnographic museum that must also be taken into consideration. One American anthropologists tried to dispel some of the myths surrounding the “Other.” He focused on cannibalism among non-Western cultures. In 1979 William Arens published The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophobia. He looks at the relationship between cannibalism and anthropology and the need for the anthropologist to perpetuate the “myth” of the cannibal. His research concludes that there exists little observation of cannibalism by

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outsiders and less that is documented by them. He questions the conclusions drawn by anthropologists that cannibalism exists with little sufficient evidence.

Arens ties the myth of cannibalism to several issues involving the relationship between the European and the “Other.” He looks at this myth as a cultural construct by the West to define the savage and exoticize them as well. He points out that there were groups of people who did not get along and they each accused the other of being cannibals. Arens points out that cannibalism is a trait that characterizes those parts of the world that have not seen civilization. Once the Europeans began to suppress cannibalism they were able to demonstrate their supremacy over the native people. Arens faults the field of anthropology for its lack of any critical assessment and documentation of evidence of cannibalism.

Something else began to happen worlds of anthropology, the ethnographic museum and the object that began to change the way museums viewed native cultures and consequently, display them. Indigenous people began to speak up. Suddenly the photographs, the big poles, and all of the ethnographic objects on display had a voice. The realization came to Western museums that all the nameless, faceless cultures depicted as being on the verge of extinction are not only alive and well, but living among us and questioning the display of their cultural heritage. In addition to questioning us, indigenous people began to ask for the return of their cultural heritage.

Suddenly Western museums were viewed as thieves, holding collections of ethnographic objects and in some cases the physical remains of people whose ancestors now came calling, asking for their return. These sacred objects and human remains belonged to people with living histories. Western museums were reminded that they did not have the right, no matter the reason, to hold onto such sacred materials. Western museums had no
right to display materials considered sacred. Western museums seem ignorant, not to mention insensitive to the needs of indigenous people from all over the globe.

The questions of cultural patrimony suddenly loomed over the museum world as indigenous people began to demand entrance into the hallowed halls of such institutions as the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. and The American Museum of Natural History in New York City looking for what belonged to them. Suddenly native peoples demanded the return of their cultural materials and took a more active role in the interpretation and display of their cultural materials in Western museums.

Museums were required to not only document all of their ethnographic materials but to provide documentation to indigenous groups for the repatriation of cultural materials. I liken this to art museums having to provide the provenance or lack of it for any painting with a circumspect history that may be connected to the Nazi looting that took place in the 1930's and 1940's. Museums were now being held accountable for the provenance of their collections.
VI. New Guinea Today: Current Exhibiting Practices in Museums

Exhibitions are constructed realities. 

Carol Mayer

Objects in all cultures are a part of a socially constructed reality. All societies create material culture and all societies have ideas, beliefs, and rituals with objects tied to them. In the case of ritual objects such as a mask, the object becomes much less important than the performance of the ritual in which the mask is worn. The object is only a part of the ritual. Ideally, the viewer needs to see both the object and its ritual environment to understand the relationship between the material and the non-material world.

Historically, museums display only the material parts of a culture, which tell only half of the story. The object then loses its context and original function, but in turn, it becomes open to Western interpretation. When James Clifford states that these objects belong no where he is referring to is the lack of context that negates the power and meaning of the object. It is vital for an audience to understand the significance of an object in a ritual and the importance and value of rituals in all societies.

Exhibitions are driven by many factors such as curatorial thrust, available scholarly materials, museum philosophy, public interest at a given moment in time, and the political climate of the world. Sometimes an exhibition will successfully transcend the established institutional culture of a museum. One such show is entitled Te Maori, an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Te Maori opened in September of 1984 prior to the “Primitivism in 20th Century Art” at the Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition was three years in the making as museum
curators from The Metropolitan Museum of Art worked with tribal elders from New Zealand. The elders were asked to decide how they wanted to present themselves to the outside world. They needed explanations of what an American museum was, what their function was, and why an exhibition of Maori cultural materials would be worth doing.48 The tribal elders were involved in every decision including giving their consent to have objects travel outside of New Zealand to the United States.

The actual ceremony for the opening of the show was hosted by tribal elders who made quite an entrance through the Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The show received 200,000 visitors and positive reviews in the press. The American public had a chance to see a living, breathing culture in one of the most prestigious museums in the West as well as to interact with the Maori and their cultural objects. The Metropolitan Museum of Art brought together two very diverse cultures while teaching American audiences about indigenous cultures and their traditions.

Consulting with native people about their objects indicates not only respect but sends a clear message that there is a voice behind the objects that not only created the art work but controls their fate. The role of the museum becomes more than a vehicle for the conservation, interpretation and display of the objects. Museums become the secondary voice of authority on any given culture. The first belonging to the indigenous people themselves.

Material culture is only a part of the whole picture of any display of ethnographic materials. Objects can be instructive as a vehicle to understanding the non-material parts of a culture such as dance, government and religion. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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incorporated both the material and non-material worlds of the Maori people to present to American audiences a more complete picture of a culture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art allowed the tribal elders to dictate the protocol in displaying Maori culture.

Since museums are a Western construct, do indigenous cultures display their own materials? If so, have they been influenced by Western ideology or have they created an alternative type of public institution? In Pacific island museums, the traditional role of the museum is to preserve their cultural heritage, reassert cultural values that were lost in the colonial period, and to foster a national identity. In New Guinea where there are hundreds of tribes and languages, it is difficult to forge a national identity. One area where this is attainable is in the realm of music, dance, and other expressions of non-material culture. In Irian Jaya, museums were conceived of and remain controlled by the Indonesian government and the Catholic church.

Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea each have a museum which opened to the public in the late 1970's. Michael Somare was the first prime minister of Papua New Guinea and a leader in the founding of the Papua New Guinea Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The museum was formed from the collection of Sir William MacGregor in 1889, the then Lieutenant Governor of British New Guinea who began a collection on behalf of the future nation. This collection was held in trust in Brisbane, Australia until the museum opened in 1977. Although outsiders are hired to help teach the staff about museum practices such as preservation and techniques, the entire staff and board of trustees are native New Guineans.

9 Ibid, 38.
In Agats, Irian Jaya, there is the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress that opened on August 17, 1973, ironically Indonesian Independence Day and the tenth anniversary of the incorporation of Irian Jaya into Indonesia. The mission statement of this museum is to preserve artifacts, to keep the people from losing their sense of identity, to encourage the renewal of carving, and to learn about other cultures and the world beyond Asmat. The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress receives funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Asia Foundation and a number of smaller donations from the United States and Europe.

The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress is the direct result of the second Vatican Counsel in 1965. Issues of religion and culture have impacted the Asmat since the Dutch missionaries came to the area. The United Nations Program for West Irian and Vatican II were both important factors in the creation of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress. Bishop Alphonse Sowado, the first bishop of Agats-Asmat, was instrumental in the founding of the museum.

The building contains 2200 square feet of floor space. The museum acquired 2000 museum quality Asmat artifacts from missionaries and various other collectors including Tobias Scheenbaum, an anthropologist and artist who catalogued the collection for the museum. His book *Asmat Images* includes text, drawings, and photographs by the author. Although one of the goals of the museum is to preserve the culture of the past, the museum has a different mission than its Western counterparts.

The cultural center stresses, admires and represents its own culture. It restricts the display of sacred objects. Objects are considered living beings and all displays are set in a

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31 Ibid. 155.

cultural context. This is theoretically opposite of the West where there is a tendency to value other civilizations, display objects from an aesthetic viewpoint, and value old objects more than contemporary ones.

Other economic issues for museums in Irian Jaya and Papua New Guinea are more basic such as the electricity required to maintain temperature controls in such a hot and humid climate. Funding issues are a problem for both museums although these cultural centers do not have large collections to maintain. Maintaining such large collections is daunting for most museums. Over the last five to ten years, several prestigious museums with ethnographic collections have closed their doors for renovation. One such institution is The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, Holland (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde). The Museum has several world-renowned collections linked to the kingdom of the Netherlands, King William (1772–1843).  

The entire plan to refurbish the museum began in 1993. The number one objective is to establish and maintain a permanent exhibition, which provides a unique, lively and reliable insight into the history, development and present-day expression of non-Western cultures, and which demonstrated that contacts between cultures have always made a significant contribution to cultural vitality. The museum reopened its doors on April 26, 2001. The refurbished museum now has adequate climate control, security installations, and facilities to accommodate large numbers of visitors. The museum was also able to develop a new concept for the permanent presentation of its collections as well as a new wing for temporary exhibitions, an information center, a cinema, an events room, a gift shop, and a restaurant.

53 Welcome to the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde Leiden. www.rmy.nl/reml/collectie/database/e/1.html

54 Ibid.
Presently, there is a digital catalogue, which contains pictures and descriptions of 190,000 artifacts within the museum’s collections. The museum also makes information available via the internet for study and research. There are permanent collections, temporary collections, a photo exhibition, and an art project by a contemporary artist available on-line. More than 3,000 objects have been selected for permanent display from cultures all over the world. To demonstrate the living, breathing quality of non-Western cultures the museum has works conceived by twelve contemporary artists from various countries that correspond to different cultural groups around the museum.

Their living database has photographs, as well as numerous ways to search for an object. Unfortunately, right now the website is only in the Dutch language. The National Museum of Ethnology is using technology to make its collections available to the public. They have taken their world-renowned collections and made them accessible for research on-line. They understand the importance and the value of the contemporary expression of non-Western cultures. They no longer perpetuate the myth of the “just on the verge of extinction” primitive culture. Instead they have given historical context to a non-Western culture. One could argue that the National Museum of Ethnology has “westernized” non-Western cultures to give them meaning for a Western audience. I would argue that they are presenting non-Western cultures as living, breathing and evolving, which is an accurate and realistic depiction for all cultures.

Fine arts museums exhibit objects from a very different theoretical perspective – the object as a work of art and works of art that fall in the category of a masterpiece. Fine arts museums and galleries continue to present objects as aesthetic in nature. An art gallery aesthetics gives economic value to a piece. Galleries are in the business of making money and
since collectors generally want only the best that money can buy, selling masterpieces behooves the gallery and the patron as well.

James Clifford asks if museums create a synthesis of the aesthetic and the scientific, in other words, can there be a blend of both the art museum and the ethnographic museum. One institution that is trying to create this synthesis is the Musée de l'homme in Paris, France. The headline on page 11 of the January 2002 issue of The Art Newspaper read: “Musée de l'homme fights rear guard action Museum of mankind resists move.”

This headline caught my eye for two reasons: one was the mere mention of the Museum of Mankind in the Art Newspaper, a paper which focuses on the fine arts; and two, the fact that France’s leading museum of anthropology, ethnology and pre-history was involved in a controversy. In reading further it appears that the Museum of Mankind’s vast collections were being split up between two museums. This decision was made by President Chirac’s government in 1996 in order to give tribal art its rightful place among the museums of France.

The staff oppose the splitting up of the museum’s vast collections and demand that the Musée de l’homme remain as it has been since 1937 at 17, Place du Trocadero in Paris. The Musée de l’homme collections included prehistory, physical anthropology, paleontology, Paleolithic art, archaeological remains, ethnographic objects, musical instruments, sound archives, a library and a photographic library. Objects are from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Oceania & the Arctic regions.

The staff contends that removing the non-European ethnographic collection will take away the heart of the museum. The museum has already been debilitated by twenty years of a deliberate lack of funding, resulting in the deterioration of much of the collection.

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Supporters of the new museum, the Musée de quai Branly, argue that the present state of the Musée de l’homme justifies the need for a new museum. The reason for splitting the collections is that by doing so, each collection will be housed in a new modern facility and can receive the care and conservation needed for preservation. The Musée du quai Branly is scheduled to open in 2006. The first aim of the new museum is to bring about a change in the way we look at non-European civilizations, basing its approach on in-depth knowledge, a multiplicity of viewpoints and respect.\(^6\)

The Musée quai Branly will comprise the collections of the Musée de l’homme and the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. This new museum will have a new catalog system, more space for exhibitions and visitors, and better quality storage facilities for the objects. The department of Ethnology of the Musée de l’homme will close but the department of Physical Anthropology and Prehistory will remain at the present location. In the year 2000, one hundred and twenty masterpieces from both museums moved to the Louvre. Housed in a new gallery in the Denon Wing on the ground floor, a selection of masterpieces from the continents of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas are on display.\(^7\)

In reading this article I saw the Musée de l’homme and its present dilemmas as a microcosm of the problems facing ethnographic museums with such large collections. Issues include lack of funding, inadequate conservation and storage, and deterioration of objects made from natural materials. The government wants to incorporate “tribal art” into the mainstream and change the way Western culture perceives non-Western art.

The Musée quai Branly will select works for their beauty and rarity as well as for their historical, ethnological and technical interest.\(^8\) The museum will have a central area devoted

\(^6\) www.quaibranly.fr

\(^7\) www.louvre.fr
to multidisciplinary themes to explore questions in the area of non-material culture, including the values and beliefs of a society. Questions such as the relationship between humans and the invisible world, forms, figures and institutions of power, life cycles, exchanges, and man’s imprint on nature.9

The museum will focus on human beings as well as works of art and will be the center for the introduction to, as well as the understanding of, the works, objects, and artifacts of people and civilizations.60 Originally, the Musée quai Branly was scheduled to open in 2004. At this time, the opening of the museum is scheduled for 2005.

Museums need to focus on the area of display of non-material culture in order to represent non-Western cultures accurately and multi-dimensionally. The curator Tomislav Sola, in his article entitled “Redefining Collecting”, speaks of the non-material parts of a culture as a cultural construct of ideas more than a physical entity. It explains and makes us aware of values and meaning, and thus provides arguments for continuity and survival. The capacity of the mental or spiritual far excels that of the physical.61

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9 www.quai Branly.fr

9 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

VII. Conclusion

As Western museums come to terms with their changing roles in presenting ethnographic collections, the public's perception of non-Western cultures will change as well. Historically, museums display objects. There needs to be a fusion of both the material and the non-material world to truly understand objects on display. All societies are complex. Objects are merely the catalyst to convey ideas and beliefs.

Anthropologists are returning to objects and museum collections as viable methods for anthropological study using both archival research, collections-based studies with fieldwork. Curators are interpreting objects through the motivations and interests of the foreigners who came to Irian Jaya and New Guinea to collect objects. Scholars must now consider how and why collections were assembled in order to understand the changing communities from which they were collected.62 Presently, curators, anthropologists, art historians, archivists and educators can learn from the collectors as well as from the museum collections from Irian Jaya and New Guinea.

More research is now being done on the role of the native person in the collecting process. It was once thought that they were merely the victim of the colonial collecting machine, having no input into what was collected. Scholars now realize that natives were active in selecting what objects to sell or to trade. They too exerted control over what types of objects were traded with Europeans.

Issues involving contemporary and traditional Pacific Art surround museum displays and scholarly discourse. The definitions of these two terms are evolving but their meaning to the native artist must be considered as well in any display. Just as the terms ethnographic

and aesthetic hold meaning for Westerners, the terms contemporary and traditional must be understood from the voice of the Pacific-island artist and curator in defining their artwork.

In thinking about museums, ethnographic collections and their future, I am struck by the sense that there are no easy answers to the controversy surrounding the display of objects. Museums such as The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology may stick to their Victorian Era exhibition hall as their way of saying that there is no other viable alternative in the display of this material. Perhaps showing objects and a culture “frozen” in time remains a valid method of display.

In her book On Collecting, Susan Pearce talks about the collection as a tool to order time and space. Collections create relations with others as well as with ourselves. In living with another culture collecting is a way of turning chaos into sense. There is still much to discover in the relationship between the ethnographic collection, its collectors, the non-Western cultures and the museums that house them all. It remains the moral obligation of the museum professional to continue to explore and report on this relationship for they are the stewards of the history of all of mankind.

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64 Ibid. 176.
GLOSSARY

Aesthetic: A guiding principal in matters of artistic beauty and taste.

Anthropologist: A social scientist who specializes in Anthropology.

Anthropology: The study of differences and similarities, both biological and cultural, in human populations. Anthropology is concerned with typical biological and cultural characteristics of human populations in all periods and in all parts of the world.

Art: Human effort to imitate, supplement, alter or counteract the work of nature.

Artifact: An object, produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon or ornament of archaeological or historical interest.

Cannibalism: The eating of human flesh for symbolic and ritual purposes.

Colonialism: Exploitation by a stronger country of a weaker one; the use of the weaker country's resources to strengthen and enrich the stronger country.

Context: That which surrounds, and gives meaning to, something else.

Culture: The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.

Cultural Anthropology: The study of cultural variations and universals.

Ethnographer: A person who spends time living with, interviewing, and observing a group of people so that he or she can describe their customs.

Ethnography: The description of a society's customary behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes.

Head hunting: The custom of cutting off and preserving the head of an enemy as a trophy.

Indigenous: Native to an area.

In Situ: In its natural or original position or place.

Oceania: The islands of the southern, western and central Pacific Ocean, including Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

Primitive: Of or relating to a non-industrial, often tribal culture, especially one that is characterized by a low level of economic complexity. Belonging to an early stage of technical development; characterized by simplicity and crudeness.

Ritual Warfare: Warfare that is practiced on a regular basis and is indispensable to a society.

Warfare: Violence between political entities such as communities, districts, or nations.
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Lani warrior, Kambiri Village, Lani people, Highlands, Irian Jaya.
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