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The Museum as a Mirror: Reinterpreting and Delinking American Landscape Art from Colonial Narratives

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Blythe Romano

American Studies Senior Honors Thesis:

The Museum as a Mirror: Reinterpreting and Delinking American Landscape Art from Colonial
Narratives

Advisor: Professor Amber Hickey

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Abstract

Art museums have recently been looking at their existing collections with heightened scrutiny, revisiting their decision to display colonial works uncritically in their gallery spaces, and reconsidering the idea that there is such a thing as a unified art historical canon. These conversations regarding reinterpretation are necessary for all museums that choose to display art with problematic histories, as this information is owed to visitors -- especially within the settler colonial context. The Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine is one site where such collection and gallery “reinterpretation” has begun to be implemented and discussed. For example, in the museum’s Osher Gallery of the American West, there have been attempts to address American colonialism and its modern legacy. However, other galleries that perpetuate harmful ideologies, such as the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery and its focus on landscapes of the American East (which were widely used as imperial tools) have undergone virtually no reinterpreive work. Although the Colby College Museum of Art presents itself as an educational institution which seeks to expand the canon of American art, its reinterpreive efforts have fallen flat as they promote the harmful dissonance/resolution model of gallery construction and the unrealistic neutrality of settler-colonialism. In my paper, I argue that the Colby College Museum of Art must abandon these gallery models in favor of promoting community collaboration and shared authority with Indigenous communities, and embracing a more intentionally disruptive organization of the gallery space. I interrogate specific works of art and their placement in the Colby Museum to call attention to areas that must be readdressed. I then assert that reinterpretation is the first step in a necessary decolonial process that will lead to the dissolution of the settler state.

Preface

During the summer of 2019, I worked as an intern at the German-American Heritage Museum in Washington, D.C. One experience in particular that continues to stand out to me was a confrontation that happened between myself and my supervisor. The president of the museum had written a letter to the board of directors expressing interest in an exhibit about Karl May. Karl May was a popular German author who wrote novels set in the American West, with depictions of Indigenous people based almost entirely on myth and stereotype. May had never even visited the American West, and when he finally had the opportunity to meet a group of Indigenous people from North America, he “not only avoided them but defamed them as “outcasts from their tribe” who played “vile, lying roles”” when they conflicted with the false images of American Indians he had procured in his work.¹ The proposed exhibit was not to be critical of a man who had popularized harmful stereotypes of American Indian people, but rather, to celebrate him as some kind of German-American icon. I spoke out against this narrative, and it brought up larger questions in my mind about curating exhibits that deal with problematic, racist, and colonial subject material. I wondered whether or not there is a space for such exhibits in museums and galleries, and if so, how those exhibits can tell a story that is actively critical of the United States’s colonial history. Last winter when I visited the Colby Museum’s Osher Gallery, I noticed that the gallery explicitly stated that the exhibit was undergoing a “collection reinterpretation,” in an attempt to more sensitively address the complicated history represented by art of the American West. I was impressed by this display of transparency and wondered why such an acknowledgment felt so unfamiliar. The statement drew attention to the way art history is a collaborative work in progress rather than an objective truth. As an American Studies major, I

¹Rivka Galchen, “Wild West Germany,” *The New Yorker*, April 2, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/09/wild-west-germany>.

have always been interested in ideas of how history is actively constructed and informed by our ingrained, ideological beliefs.

While these experiences define my interest in the subject matter, I acknowledge the limits of my knowledge regarding the intricacies of museum work and exhibit curation. More so than that, I acknowledge my privileged position as a white woman in the United States, who has always seen myself represented in mainstream cultural institutions. I have never had to fight for the stories of my ancestors to be deemed important and worthwhile. Additionally, a passion for museum work is arguably a classed interest. It is a privilege to have grown up with access to art museums, and it is a privilege to have studied art history in high school and college. I have admittedly struggled while writing my thesis, questioning my reasons for producing this text and if I am truly the best person to be authoring it. I still have no concrete answers. When talking with Professor Hickey, my advisor for this project and someone whose work also explores indigeneity and colonialism, they gave me an incredibly helpful piece of advice. Professor Hickey said that as a facilitator of some Indigenous knowledge, they attempt to take on some of the important labor of educating non-Indigenous people on these topics, particularly the kind of labor that can be emotionally exhausting given the pressure for Indigenous people to educate settlers. I hope that this project can be similarly beneficial, and I hope to be informative and respectful while being conscious of my boundaries and limitations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Amber Hickey for her consistent honesty and guidance over the past year. She always believed in my ability to finish this project, sometimes more than I did, and I cannot thank her enough for that. Professor Hickey's courses at Colby have challenged me in the best possible ways, forcing me to interrogate my discomfort and most importantly, to listen and understand. I'm honored to have been advised by such a brilliant academic.

Thank you to Professor Laura Saltz for being the second reader for this project. Laura's structural suggestions helped make this paper exponentially better. Laura offered me kindness and support throughout this entire process. She encouraged me to present my research at a dinner for the department that made me feel appreciated, and I'm so lucky to have received such generosity.

Thank you to Professor Ben Lisle for everything, but especially for teaching Alexander Nemerov's "Doing the Old America" in his Introduction to American Studies class, which I took as a freshman. I have never stopped thinking about that piece, and this work is a reflection of that.

Thank you to Alexis Saba for teaching my JanPlan class during 2020, Indigenous Knowledge(s), Education, and Schooling. It was in Alexis' class that I submitted a proposal for my very first version of this project. Although the idea has changed significantly since then, Alexis was the first to encourage me and I am endlessly grateful for that.

Thank you to Jackie Terrassa, Kris Bergquist, Theresa Secord, and Gwynn Shanks for sharing your professional knowledge, experiences, and opinions during our interviews. You all

bolstered this project in significant ways, and I'm grateful for your openness and your trust in me.

Thank you to my parents for encouraging and supporting me even when I refused to tell them what I was writing about.

A final thank you to Patricia Hans for shaping me into the American Studies major I am today. I think of you always and I am a better person for having been taught by you (which feels so long ago, but "the past is never dead. It's not even past"). Few people can say they've wanted to be an American Studies major since they were 15, I'm proud to be one of them. Before I was even accepted into Colby, Ms. Hans urged me to go to Maine and become a writer. And since then there has been no other choice.

Introduction

“Unravelling whose version of the truth we are permitted to tell... sits at the root of many ethical dilemmas facing museums today.”

--Julie McNamara, “Spectacular Defiance”

Problematizing Art of the American West and Landscape Paintings of the American East, and Considering Revolutionary Futures

In an 1893 address given at the Chicago World’s Fair, Frederick Jackson Turner addressed what he deemed as “the closing of a great historic moment.”² He was referring to the lack of an identifiable western frontier line, as proclaimed by the 1890 census. Turner lamented this monumental change in American culture, believing that the history of the United States was essentially “the history of the colonization of the Great West.”³ In many ways he was correct: the story of the United States is very much the story of brutal and unrelenting colonialism which continues today. The West in particular has been and continues to be extremely significant within the white settler imagination. To many Americans, the American West’s supposedly “primitive society” represented rebirth, rugged masculinity, and freedom from the industrial workplace and “furnish[ed] the forces of American character.”⁴ The desire for some type of “primitive” way of life, combined with romanticism of the past, was often projected onto Indigenous groups in North America in art produced during the 19th century, often for imperial purposes. Schools of art such as the Taos Society of Artists and The Hudson River School were particularly inspired

² William H. Truettner, ed. *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991): 31.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Truettner, 29.

by this nostalgic imagery. These interpretations are still upheld today in many galleries throughout the United States, despite that it is widely accepted amongst historians that these works and their idealization of the American West are lies. Of course, before American colonization in the West, there was the colonization of the Eastern United States. Landscape paintings were used to serve a similar purpose here, to justify American imperialism.⁵

This history matters. Alexander Nemerov writes that, “a past exists outside of representation but only faintly.”⁶ The nostalgic mood of Western and Eastern American landscapes has become canonized as truth despite its ignorance of reality. Lewis Lapham says that, “history is work in progress, a constant writing and rewriting as opposed to museum-quality sculpture in milk-white marble.”⁷ Although abstract, there is something important conveyed within this quote: when something is “museum quality” it is perceived as a concrete truth. But how can this be the case when so much is lost in the current state of museum and gallery construction, when so much is denied. In my critical analysis of specific American art galleries in the Colby College Museum of Art, I will use Colby’s spaces as a case study to propose a way to remedy this problem of museum denial.

In attempts to reckon with this unsavory past, the term “decolonization” has become very much in-vogue amongst museum boards and staff when referring to their social justice initiatives.⁸ The way that this term is put into practice differs depending on the institution, with some using it to describe merely “expand[ing] the perspectives they portray,” by presenting a more diverse selection of objects, and others defining it as, “at a minimum, sharing authority for

⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁶ Alex Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America*. Ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 287.

⁷ Lewis H. Lapham, “Ignorance of Things Past,” *Harpers Magazine*, May 2012, page 4.

⁸ Elisa Schoenberger, “What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum?,” April 8, 2021, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

the documentation and interpretation of Native culture.”⁹ Museums are representational entities: hypothetically, art and artifacts are used to represent the “truth” of a community.¹⁰ Yet, despite how the word “decolonization” is often used, it signifies more than just an expansion of representation. The goal is not to simply expand the art historical canon and keep all else the same. For as long as the Western museum model exists so will Western hegemony and priority.¹¹ As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain in “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” returning land back to Indigenous communities is absolutely necessary for a full-scale decolonization to ever take place.¹² So why stay within the museum? My answer is: “we won’t stay here forever.” What it means to mount critique of colonialism from within a colonial institution is that the cracks in the framework of the settler state can no longer be hidden. We see the broken pieces of the system that revolutionaries can seize and use to reinvent the future.

In order to do so, we can turn to Walter Mignolo’s theories on reinterpretation. Mignolo uses the term “delinking” to describe “every thinking and doing that is geared toward undoing a particular kind of aesthesis, of senses, that is the sensibility of the colonized subject.”¹³ He is referring to critical, anti-colonial interpretations within art history. The “colonized subject” would be a piece of art (including performance, song, multimedia) that represents colonial “sensibilities,”¹⁴ or values. To delink from these values would be to actively undo them, providing representations that complicate and dispel colonial dogma. Mignolo eloquently acknowledges that although many people who have been educated in the West “are trapped in the

⁹ Elisa Schoenberger, “What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum?,” April 8, 2021, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

¹⁰ Blythe Romano and Gwyneth Shanks. Interview with Gwyneth Shanks. Personal, January 7, 2021.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 23.

¹³ Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): pp. 196-212.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Western epistemic and hermeneutical vocabulary,” it is somewhat necessary to work with existing concepts “in order to de-naturalize them or, if you wish, to decolonize them... and look behind and under them.”¹⁵ Mignolo’s explanation establishes the reasoning for working *within* museums as a first step towards a decolonial future. This resonates deeply with my project as I interrogate the museum, a colonial institution, as one single point in the decolonial process. Further relating to this, throughout my thesis I use terms like “American art,” “the American West,” or “the American landscape.” As Wabanaki artist Barry Dana shared with me, “its not the american west..its the stolen west” [sic].¹⁶ When I use terms like “American,” I am using them with the intention of “look[ing] behind and under them,” as Mignolo says.¹⁷ Like language, museums and institutions of public history are useful tools to help us interrogate colonialism and Western-centered history.

While it was initially difficult for me to justify this project while also acknowledging that it is not necessarily calling for full decolonization, I now see this project as a first step, as a call to action. A “gesture to the potential of revolution,” an allusion to “the big, giant, totalistic system that is underneath everything” with “more than a hint of foreboding.”¹⁸ Although not decolonization, I do see my project as *decolonial*. When the brutality and ongoing process of colonialism can no longer be ignored by whitestream settler audiences, revolution and decolonization become more feasible.

As I’ve mentioned, one site of interrogation that I will focus on is The Colby College Museum of Art’s Osher Gallery, which is mainly dedicated to art of the American West. The

¹⁵Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial Options and Artistic/AestheSic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): pp. 196-212.

¹⁶“Re: Introduction,” *Re: Introduction*, March 7, 2021.

¹⁷Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial Options and Artistic/AestheSic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo.”

¹⁸Annie Lowrey, “Why the Phrase 'Late Capitalism' Is Suddenly Everywhere,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, August 3, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/>.

gallery looks markedly different than it did even just four years ago: the space has been rearranged so the two gallery rooms tell a more cohesive story, new acquisitions have been added to the display, and text blocks allude to the darker themes of these American artworks. There is potential, here, for a reimagining of what the art gallery can communicate. Additionally, I will analyze the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery, which includes landscape art from the American east.

To fully interrogate these two galleries, I will begin with a chapter that establishes the role of a museum in society, and explains the construction of public memory and how it relates to the formation of culture. I will then move on to discussing the history of Indigenous representation in the museum space by analyzing several case studies. Following this, I will posit my own judgment of the reinterpretation efforts at the Colby College Museum of Art.

Chapter 1: Understanding The Museum as a Cultural Mirror

“A national museum of art is, among other things, a mirror composed of the elements of [cultural, historical] consensus-- a necessary mirror in which to look at oneself, preferably not too much, but once in a while, to remember what one’s face is like.”

Héctor Feliciano, “The Museum of Art of Puerto Rico, or, the Reconstitution of a History of Art”

The “Responsibility” of The Museum: Meshwork, Memory, & Assemblage

Museums are fundamentally “knowledge-making” entities.¹⁹ This is asserted by Susan D. Dion and Angela Salamanca in their paper “inVISIBILITY: Indigenous in the city.” This assertion is fundamental to the argument of this paper: it will be assumed throughout the paper that museums and galleries must provide accurate, critical, anti-colonial messages through their exhibits. It is necessary for museums to actively critique colonialism in the way they display their exhibits and educate visitors. Reinterpretation of art with problematic histories is essential for these efforts. The Colby College Museum of Art writes in their mission statement that, “We manage these resources for the benefit of the Colby College community, the region, and the nation, and we aspire to display works that embody the highest standards of achievement.”²⁰ Colby’s most expansive collection is its American art,²¹ also referenced in the mission statement as a central focus of the museum’s vision.²² In an interview with Colby Assistant Professor of

¹⁹ Susan D Dion and Angela Salamanca, “InVISIBILITY: Indigenous in the City Indigenous Artists, Indigenous Youth and the Project of Survivance,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, 59.

²⁰“About Us: Colby College Museum of Art,” Colby College, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.colby.edu/museum/mission/>.

²¹Earl H. Smith, *With the Help of Friends: The Colby College Museum of Art, The First Fifty Years, 1959 - 2009* (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, 2009).

²²“About Us: Colby College Museum of Art.”

Theatre and Dance Gwynn Shanks, she helpfully problematizes the idea of “responsibility” that pervades so many museums and galleries. The idea that the best place for cultural artifacts is placed behind walls of glass in a museum is a very Western one.²³ The assumption that these institutions know best is highly paternalistic,²⁴ and this is certainly reflected in the Colby Museum’s assumption that their stewardship over artistic objects is for the benefit of the entire “community, the region, and the nation.” In suggesting that the works, housed in the Colby collection, a significant amount of which are American, “embody the highest standards of achievement,” the Colby Museum is engaging in public memory creation.

There are two diagrams that help us visualize how a museum’s messaging functions, and assists us in establishing why museums must be held accountable for presenting critical versions of history. First is Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki’s diagram of public memory (Figure 1).²⁵ Memory is intensely related to the work of a museum due to the perception that both deal with preservation of the past.²⁶ Dickinson, et al. distinguish between multiple different types of memory in order to define what constitutes as a public memory. One type is collected memory, which refers to the *selection* of artwork and artifacts that are presented to the public.²⁷ The other is displayed memory which refers to the deliberate *interpretation* of such works and artifacts.²⁸ When combined, collected and displayed memory become *public memory*. The chart made by Dickinson, et al. further explains the various museal practices involved in the construction of collected and displayed memory, distinguishing between selection versus interpretation of

²³“The Paternalistic Nature of Collecting,” Archival Decolonist (Wordpress, February 6, 2020), <https://archivaldecolonist.com/2017/06/12/the-paternalistic-nature-of-collecting/>.

²⁴ Blythe Romano and Gwyneth Shanks. Interview with Gwynn Shanks. Personal, January 7, 2021.

²⁵Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

²⁶Alexandra Sauvage, “To Be or Not to Be Colonial: Museums Facing Their Exhibitions,” *Culturales* 6, no. 12 (2010), http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1870-11912010000200005.

²⁷ Dickinson, et al.

²⁸ Ibid.

artworks in a museum space. The second helpful diagram is Rodney Harrison’s visualization of the “meshwork” of museum relations and “the connections between people, things, and institutions” (Figure 2).²⁹ Harrison’s diagram represents how museums are both material and social “assemblages.”³⁰ This depiction of the different actors at play in the museum field allows one to visualize, “the connections between people, things, and institutions but also the medium by which agency is transmitted” in the exhibition space.³¹ This diagram emphasizes how objects in the museum are bound up in contemporary cultural definitions, histories, and expectations.

	Public Memory			
Form of Memory	Collected Memory		Displayed Memory	
Museal Practice	Collection	Preservation	Exhibition	Representation
Curatorial Process	Selection of artworks		Interpretation of artworks	

Figure 1. “The relation of curatorial processes and museal practices to public memory.”³²

²⁹Rodney Harrison, “Reassembling Ethnographic Museum Collections,” *School for Advanced Research*, n.d., <http://oro.open.ac.uk/30885/>, 26.

³⁰ Harrison, 18.

³¹ Harrison, 23.

³² Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

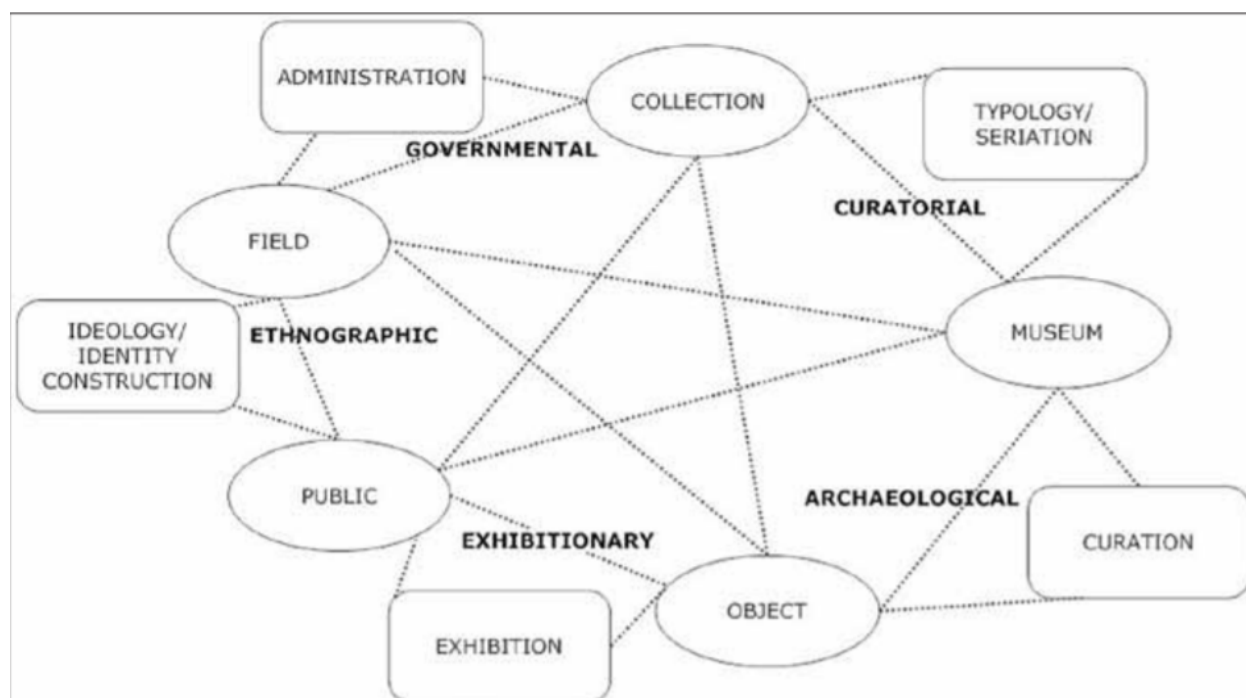


Figure 2. “A schematic diagram representing the field of relations surrounding the museum, including sites of mediation (oval labels) and various processes and relations that arise from them (rectangular labels). Different perspectives or disciplinary points of entry are shown as “cuts” across the meshwork (unbounded labels). Drawing by Rodney Harrison.”³³

Considering these two diagrams allows us to understand that the choices regarding what is displayed and how it is presented are never neutral, especially relevant when 73% of museum leaders, those who make decisions about what is displayed and why, were white as of a 2019 report.³⁴ They are always related to audience perception and larger contemporary political issues. Dickinson, et al. explain that, “memory is always “activated by concerns, issues, or anxieties of the present.” So, as the central concerns of society change, social institutions such as museums

³³ Rodney Harrison, “Reassembling Ethnographic Museum Collections,” *School for Advanced Research*, n.d., <http://oro.open.ac.uk/30885/>, 26.

³⁴ Carey Dunne, “Diversity in Museum Leadership Has Marginally Increased Since 2015, New Survey Says,” *Hyperallergic* (Hyperallergic, January 28, 2019), <https://hyperallergic.com/482077/diversity-in-museum-leadership-has-marginally-increased-since-2015-new-survey-says/>.

must change accordingly,”³⁵ especially as we return to the assumption that museums are “knowledge-making” entities.³⁶

In summary, museums can construct or reinforce certain understandings of history. Consider Héctor Feliciano’s belief that a national art museum is a cultural “mirror composed of the elements of consensus-- a necessary mirror in which to look at oneself, preferably not too much, but once in a while, to remember what one’s face is like.”³⁷ This is dangerous when histories of conquest and colonization are presented uncritically, or perhaps even praised or portrayed with nostalgia. Kathleen Ash-Millby and Ruth B. Phillips stress the importance of “writ[ing] a new kind of art history that will actively grapple with the impact of settler colonialism on both artistic practice and art historical narratives.”³⁸ Of course, museums are not the only institutions that must embrace a new canon of art history. Yet, as Marsha Weisiger states, although stances that critique colonialism are now “*de rigueur* among historians of the American West,”

relatively few Americans read academic books. Most learn about history from the History Channel, historical museums, historic sites, and the like. It’s safe to say that the recent insights of western historians— the complex relationships between colonists and indigenes; the legacies of conquest; the struggles over power; the multiethnic, gendered, and environmental histories of the region—haven’t infiltrated cable television, but what about museums and historic sites?³⁹

³⁵ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

³⁶ Susan D Dion and Angela Salamanca, “InVISIBILITY: Indigenous in the City Indigenous Artists, Indigenous Youth and the Project of Survivance,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, 59.

³⁷ Selma Holo and Mari-Tere Alvarez, eds., *Remix: Changing Conversations in Museums of the Americas* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

³⁸ Kathleen Ash-Millby and Ruth B Phillips, “Inclusivity or Sovereignty?: Native American Arts in the Gallery and the Museum Since 1992.” *Art Journal: Recent Native American Art*, December 22, 2016.

³⁹ Marsha Weisiger, “No More Heroes: Western History in Public Places.” *Western*

Again, the unique role that museums and historical sites play in the construction of history, especially for the average American, is emphasized. Collection and exhibit reinterpretation aids in the process of promoting a decolonial history.

Representing Indigenous Culture in the Museum Space: A Historical Overview + Representation as Sovereignty.

The history of Indigenous representation in museums is incredibly fraught.⁴⁰ As Amy Lonetree asks, “how can we begin to decolonize a very Western institution that has been so intimately linked to the colonization process?”⁴¹ Doing so is a delicate process involving community-collaboration and the championing of Indigenous agency,⁴² and some would argue that even this is not enough, that museums should not at all be looked to as sites of decolonization.⁴³ Some Indigenous scholars believe that because “culture is a living process that incorporates both continuity and change” displaying items behind a glass is insufficient to fully communicate this complexity.⁴⁴ Further, it is a fact that, “[t]he development of national institutions such as museums and art galleries coincided with the emergence of colonialism and imperialism, and consequently such institutions were saturated with notions of racial difference and human classification,” and in many ways these hierarchies and dualisms have endured in modern museums.⁴⁵

Historical Quarterly, vol. 42, no. 3, 2011, pp. 289–296. JSTOR, 290.

⁴⁰Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁴¹Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

⁴² Lonetree, 1.

⁴³ Lonetree, 6.

⁴⁴Moir Simpson, “Museums and Restorative Justice: Heritage, Repatriation and Cultural Education.” *Museum International* 61, no. 1-2 (2009).

⁴⁵ Tsosie, Rebecca. “Native Nations and Museums: Developing an Institutional Framework for Cultural Sovereignty.” *The University of Tulsa Law Review* 45, no. 1 (2009).

As an attempt to address these legacies of colonialism, in 1990 the United States government passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). NAGPRA is a significant piece of legislation regarding the relationship between Indigenous people and museums, galleries, and historical archives. NAGPRA created a mechanism for Indigenous communities to claim human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony that had been stolen by museums or organizations, or are contemporarily “discovered” on federal or tribal lands⁴⁶ (Figure 3). If artifacts are held in museums or institutions, a full inventory of Indigenous human remains, funerary objects, and cultural items must be created. A federal agency must ensure that the requirements of NAGPRA are met, museums must consult with lineal descendants, Indigenous tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations about the relevant artifacts. If objects are repatriated, this must be made transparent to the public.⁴⁷ The act acknowledges that “human remains and other cultural items removed from Federal or tribal lands belong, in the first instance, to lineal descendants, Indian Tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations.”⁴⁸ Federal agencies, museums, universities, state agencies, local

⁴⁶“Compliance: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” National Park Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/compliance.htm>.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸“Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (U.S. National Park Service),” National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://home.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm>.

governments, and any institution that receives Federal funds must comply with NAGPRA.⁴⁹



Figure 3: From the National Park Service website about compliance with NAGPRA on federal or tribal lands, “Process applies to Federal and Tribal Lands ONLY after 1990.”⁵⁰

Although many point to NAGPRA as an effort to repair the wrongs committed by museums to Indigenous communities, there are still major discrepancies and limitations in the act. There are international challenges: NAGPRA has been unable to protect from Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo sacred objects being sold in French art auctions.⁵¹ There are also domestic challenges, with restrictive and ignorant interpretations of NAGPRA in U.S. courts.⁵² In one instance, the skeletal remains were found along the shore of the Columbia River outside Kennewick, Washington. Under the impression that the remains belonged to an early European settler, they were excavated and examined by anthropologists, who then discovered that the

⁴⁹“Compliance: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.”

⁵⁰“On Federal or Tribal Lands,” National Parks Service (U.S. Department of the Interior), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/on-federal-or-tribal-lands.htm>.

⁵¹ Kevin P. Ray, “NAGPRA and Its Limitations: Repatriation of Indigenous Cultural Heritage,” *The John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law*, 2016, 470.

⁵²Ibid.

remains were 9,000 years old.⁵³ As a result, “five tribal groups from the area around the Columbia River opposed further scientific study of the remains and demanded, pursuant to NAGPRA, that the remains be turned over to the tribes for reburial.”⁵⁴ A group of Washington scientists filed a suit in Oregon against these claims, arguing that the Kennewick Man was not “Native American” within the meaning of NAGPRA, citing differences in Kennewick Man’s physical features from features of the modern tribal claimants.⁵⁵ The court ruled in favor of the scientists in 2002, a decision that was upheld in 2004.⁵⁶ And yet, in 2015 it was revealed that the sequenced genome of Kennewick Man was more closely related to modern Native Americans than to any other living population.⁵⁷ The decision of the case remains, complicating the ability for tribes to prove their “relationship” to human remains, requiring that a direct line must be drawn to an existing tribe.⁵⁸ While Kennewick Man was too old to be claimed under NAGPRA, other cases were rejected for being too recent, like the claims made in 2010 by Jim Thorpe’s sons and the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma, of which Thorpe was an enrolled member. When Thorpe’s remains were seized by his non-Indigenous wife and buried without the consent of the Sac and Fox Nation, the nation attempted to file for the repatriation of Thorpe’s remains. The United States District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania denied this claim, writing off the conflict as a “family dispute.”⁵⁹ It is clear that although NAGPRA was intended to help right colonial wrongdoings, this outcome was not always achieved, and the tense relationship between tribes and historical institutions remains in many cases.

⁵³Kevin P. Ray, “NAGPRA and Its Limitations: Repatriation of Indigenous Cultural Heritage,” *The John Marshall Review of Intellectual Property Law*, 2016, 477.

⁵⁴Ray, 476.

⁵⁵Ray, 478.

⁵⁶Ray, 479.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ray, 481.

Despite this, Amanda J. Cobb makes a powerful argument for the ways museums, when receiving guidance from Indigenous boards and staff, can be transformed into tools of Indigenous sovereignty. Cobb writes of an exhibit in the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian called *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*, in which they outlined how although warfare, churches, and government were three major weapons of colonialism, those same weapons could act as tools of “resistance, resilience, and survival” in the hands of Indigenous people. She goes on to argue that,

[it] was striking... that this argument was being made in a museum, an institutional tool of culture that quite possibly could serve as the fourth major force of colonization after guns, God, and government. I was therefore struck by the fact that in creating the NMAI, Native Americans have *again* turned an instrument of colonization and dispossession into something else— in this case, into an instrument of self-definition and cultural continuance.⁶⁰

The success of the NMAI’s reclamation has had much to do with their almost entirely (19/24 board members) Indigenous board of governance⁶¹ who have continuously prioritized “keep[ing] native voices in all that [they] do.”⁶² This allowed for the NMAI to construct museum galleries that look markedly different from those of Western-centric museums. The NMAI’s exhibits actively critique narratives of colonial expansion, such as their longstanding exhibition “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations,” while also highlighting Indigenous cultures, resilience, and experiences in exhibitions like “Our Universes:

⁶⁰ Cobb, Amanda J. “The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 2, June 2005, pp. 485–506. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068276?seq=2#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁶¹ “Governance,” Governance | National Museum of the American Indian (National Museum of the American Indian), accessed May 13, 2021, <https://americanindian.si.edu/about/governance>.

⁶² Machel Monenerkit, “From the Acting Director,” From the Director | National Museum of the American Indian (National Museum of the American Indian), accessed May 13, 2021, <https://americanindian.si.edu/about/from-the-director>.

Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World.”⁶³ Thus, the NMAI is a great example of how a colonial tool can be transformed into a symbol of resistance when these strong commitments are made and upheld.

Amy Lonetree, author of *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America In National and Tribal Museums* also makes the case for the potential of museums and historical institutions as mediums through which to assert Indigenous sovereignty. Lonetree argues that by addressing “the legacies of historical unresolved grief” and “cut[ting] through the veil of silence around colonialism and its consequences for Native families and communities,”⁶⁴ museums can become powerful sites for reckoning and healing, similar to the purpose of public memorials. Lonetree makes an important distinction that, “the time for exhibits that merely state ‘we are still here’... is past,”⁶⁵ museums must go farther than simply emphasizing contemporary Indigenous presence.

In her book, Lonetree focuses mainly on museums whose entire purpose is to offer insight into Indigenous history, perspectives, and lifeways. She writes specifically about the Smithsonian’s NMAI, the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, and the Ziibiwing Center for Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways. My project attempts to apply Lonetree’s suggestions and observations to art museums like the Colby Museum, whose mission has not always involved the championing of Indigenous sovereignty, but has recently begun to pay attention to these issues. All museums should be incorporating methods of community collaboration and critical history into their exhibition efforts. Like Dickinson, et al. claim, museums must change shape in order to

⁶³ “Exhibitions in DC,” National Museum of the American Indian (National Museum of the American Indian), accessed May 13, 2021, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/washington>.

⁶⁴ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

⁶⁵ Lonetree, 174.

appropriately represent developments in society. Further, museums are allowed to acknowledge the ways they change shape over time. “Rarely do museums reflect on the fact that their current collected and displayed memory is *only one option among an infinite array of possibilities*,”⁶⁶ [emphasis added], an act that further erases the colonization process from the historical canon. Museums and their curators must be encouraged to acknowledge reinterpretation efforts, this is essential for a critical perspective of colonisation to truly be presented and for the settler perspective to be decentered.

Exhibit Reinterpretation

In order to discuss exhibit *reinterpretation*, the focus of this thesis, we must first establish a definition of *interpretation* in the museum space. Nicole B. Hoffman offers a helpful definition: “interpretation in its broadest sense refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness, deepen visitor experience and enhance our understanding of museums.”⁶⁷ Interpretation also “prompts the audience to explore the relationship of tangible museum resources to their intangible meanings.”⁶⁸ Zachary Kingdon provides another workable definition of interpretation, writing that interpretation is the “deliberate act of relating [a museum object] to a chosen meaning or set of meanings.”⁶⁹

Hoffman presents somewhat of a formula for interpretive work in the museum: IPOP (Ideas, People, Objects, and the Physical). “Ideas” refers to the informal knowledge and

⁶⁶ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

⁶⁷ Nicole B Hoffman, “Rethinking Reinterpretation : the Application and Potential of the IPOP Theory in Decoloniality and Wider Engagement for New Museum Audiences,” *South African Museums Association Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2019), <https://journals.co.za/content/journal/10520/EJC-1ce75b717d>, 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Zachary Kingdon, “Reinterpreting the African Collections of the World Museum Liverpool,” *Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 2, no. 1-2 (2008), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19301944.2008.10781329?journalCode=rcin20>, 31.

perspectives that the individual carries with them, the lenses through which they view the world.⁷⁰ “People” refers to the human element of an object. This means understanding how others’ lives were touched by a specific object and understanding the political, cultural, or historical context the object was created in.⁷¹ The term “objects” is intended to describe the craftsmanship, aesthetic appearance, and materials that comprise an object.⁷² The “physical” describes senses of touch, sound, and sight that are triggered by an object.⁷³ Each of the words in the IPOP acronym are present when visitors make their way through a museum. The goal is to combine all four elements in an exhibit so that visitors have their own “moments of opportunity, insight, and meaning” in the museum.⁷⁴ This model has been used by many museums including the Smithsonian’s NMAI. When carried out properly, the strategy “eliminates the need for singular narratives... IPOP can therefore function as an interpretative tool... to transform, decolonise and reinterpret museums.”⁷⁵ Hoffman acknowledges that the definitions of interpretation and reinterpretation are incredibly similar, yet reinterpretation becomes relevant when dominant cultural narratives must be challenged.⁷⁶ The model offered by Hoffman is an incredibly thorough example of the ways in which an exhibit can be constructed to critically engage with audiences about colonial themes. Hoffman’s suggestion exemplifies the options available for museums, such as the Colby Museum, to implement when they decide to launch reinterpretive efforts.

⁷⁰ Nicole B Hoffman, “Rethinking Reinterpretation : the Application and Potential of the IPOP Theory in Decoloniality and Wider Engagement for New Museum Audiences,” *South African Museums Association Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2019), <https://journals.co.za/content/journal/10520/EJC-1ce75b717d>, 21.

⁷¹ Hoffman, 22.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Hoffman, 21.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Critical Reinterpretations of Western Art History: Why Reinterpret American Landscapes?

As suggested by Alexander Nemerov, art of the American West never realistically depicted the West. Yet, many Americans interpreted art of the American West to be an accurate documentation of the United States' expansion efforts.⁷⁷ Nemerov explains that museum collections of this type of art “mutually reinforce[d] each other’s factual authority,” for example, “at the Metropolitan the claim of [Remington’s bronze statues] to represent the real West was reinforced by the museum’s claim to represent the real history of art.”⁷⁸ While some museums now are shifting their purpose to be more of a “forum” than a “temple,”⁷⁹ and thus attempting to move away from their perception of “ivory towers of exclusivity,”⁸⁰ false conceptions of the United States still persist and are communicated through art.

These false conceptions mostly have to do with what Dickinson, et al. refer to as “imperialist nostalgia:”

A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim. In a more attenuated form someone deliberately alters a life form, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of “innocent yearning” both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal the complicity with often brutal domination.⁸¹

⁷⁷Alexander Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America*. Ed. William H. Truettner. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 289.

⁷⁸ Nemerov, 294.

⁷⁹Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

⁸⁰ Lonetree, 1.

⁸¹Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

Much art depicting the physical landscape of the American continent is entrenched in this “imperialist nostalgia.” As Philip Deloria writes in “Playing Indian” white Americans have a long history, going back to the actions of the Boston Tea Party, of believing that, “[Indigenous people] spoke for the ‘spirit of the continent.’”⁸² Deloria claims that Americans were “fixated on defining themselves as a nation” and used Indigenous people as a vehicle to do so. This relentless search for a concrete national identity necessitated a grappling with the existence of Indigenous people “in order to meet the ‘demon of the continent’ head on and thus finalize the ‘unexpressed spirit of America.’”⁸³ In many respects, real Indigenous identity and personhood became overshadowed by white Americans’ “awkward tendency to define themselves by what they were not.”⁸⁴ When American landscapes included figures, white Americans came to represent progress while Indigenous people became the opposite, “a metaphor [for] the past.”⁸⁵ The overall goal of this “American sublime” constructed by Romantic art movements in American landscape painting, such as the Hudson River School, was “to promote a unified sense of national identity by deflecting attention away from “the injustices, disparities, inconsistencies, and crimes of the nation.””⁸⁶ This phenomenon is still present in art galleries across the United States,⁸⁷ where walking through a gallery of American landscape paintings allows a white settler to distance themselves from the violent realities of colonization.

⁸² Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian*. Yale University Press, 2007, 3.

⁸³ Deloria, 4.

⁸⁴ Deloria, 3.

⁸⁵ Alexander Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America*. Ed. William H. Truettner. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 311.

⁸⁶ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

⁸⁷ Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

These are the problematic narratives that museums must grapple with when displaying art of the American West. Presenting such art uncritically allows for the propagation of these narratives. Nemerov eloquently writes that, “a past exists outside of representation but only faintly,”⁸⁸ once again underlining the ways museum collections and galleries lend themselves to the construction of public memory. While the Colby Museum has recently indicated a commitment to reinterpreting their permanent collections of American Art, much of the other galleries remain unchanged, and refrain from challenging settler colonialism, racism, and the American empire too tangibly.

Regarding Existing Scholarship

In the coming chapters, I will examine how the Colby Museum, a museum that is not wholly *dedicated* to Indigenous history and culture, can construct anti-colonial narratives in their gallery construction. Although this has been done notably by Dickinson, et al. in their analysis of the Whitney Gallery of Western Art, this type of analysis has not been applied to the Colby College Museum of Art. Working with art pieces and artifacts that are specific to the Colby Museum’s collection and the existing exhibition spaces at the museum will be a unique contribution to this existing research. My scholarship integrates the literature I’ve previously discussed about the meaning of “decolonization” and artistic representation with scholarship about American art as an imperial tool. I place emphasis on the decolonial *process* as a reminder that this is only a preliminary step, what museums could look like in the in-between stage from now until full-scale decolonization.

⁸⁸Alexander Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America*. Ed. William H. Truettner. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 287.

Chapter 2: Permanent Galleries: The Osher Gallery & The Casting Off of Settler Guilt

Background Information

Due to the Colby College Museum of Art's close relationship with the Lunder Institute For American Art, their American art collection has been noted as a distinguished strength,⁸⁹ with the museum Board of Governors recently expressing that one of their priorities is "expanding the canon of American art."⁹⁰ There are several significant galleries in the Colby Museum dedicated to American art, most notably the Osher Gallery and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery. Further American artworks can be found in the Shore Gallery, the Booth Ferris Foundation Gallery, and the Cohen Gallery.

In our examination of the gallery space we must return to the Dickinson, et. al diagram about public memory (Figure 1). By examining the works in the Osher Gallery in regards to their "selection," or the very fact that they've been chosen to be displayed, along with the "interpretation" of those works, we can understand how the Osher Gallery's construction contributes to the formation of public memory, for better or for worse. This framework will be applied similarly in Chapter 3, which interrogates public memory in the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery.

Overview of the Osher Gallery

The plaque at the entrance of the Osher Gallery explains that most of the works represent the American Southwest (Figure 4). With great attention to the physical landscape of the American West, the plaque describes, "towering mountains, placid rivers, and sunlit plains," and

⁸⁹"Who We Are," Lunder Institute, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.colby.edu/lunderinstitute/who-we-are/>.

⁹⁰ "Jacqueline Terrassa Named Director of the Colby College Museum of Art," News, July 22, 2020, <http://www.colby.edu/news/2020/07/13/jacqueline-terrassa-named-director-of-the-colby-college-museum-of-art/>.

“a new Eden, unspoiled by encroaching industrialization.”⁹¹ “Heroic native peoples” are also grouped along with the rest of the area’s physical features,⁹² as though a part of the backdrop. Referenced as “existing in a state of harmony with nature [that was] particularly appealing to white audiences,”⁹³ the realities of this colonial period for Indigenous people of the American Southwest are largely overlooked, like forced removal, massacres, public executions, and the extermination of the buffalo.⁹⁴

Art of the American West

From the founding of the United States to the present day, American artists have employed mythic imagery—including towering mountains, placid rivers, and sunlit plains—to describe the vast expanses and striking scenery of the American West. In the nineteenth century, painters and sculptors presented the region as a new Eden, unspoiled by encroaching industrialization or sectional strife and populated by diverse, heroic native peoples. Idealized depictions of American Indians existing in a state of harmony with nature were particularly appealing to white audiences, and remained so long after the completion of the transcontinental railroads and the closing of the American frontier. In the early twentieth century, a new generation of American artists presented the mesas, mountains, and ancient pueblos of Arizona and New Mexico as a world of timeless beauty, safe from the tumult of modernity. The members of the Taos Society of Artists in particular, including Ernest Blumenschein, Oscar Berninghaus, and Eanger Irving Couse, sought a departure not only from modern city life, but also from the European influences that flavored much of American art in the late nineteenth century. They felt strongly that the source of the authentic American art they craved could be found within the landscape and indigenous peoples of the Southwest.

Figure 4: Plaque in the Osher Gallery of the Colby College Museum of Art.

⁹¹Colby College Museum of Art, “Introductory Museum Plaque, Osher Gallery.” ME: Waterville, n.d.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Donald L. Fixico, “When Native Americans Were Slaughtered in the Name of 'Civilization',” History.com (A&E Television Networks, March 2, 2018), <https://www.history.com/news/native-americans-genocide-united-states>.

As noted in the plaque, much of the art in the Osher Gallery can be attributed to the Taos Society of Artists, who drew inspiration from Pueblo and Hispanic art,⁹⁵ such as Ernest Blumenschein, whose works *Untitled (Mountain Wood Gatherers)* (Figure 5) and *Eagle Feather Prayer Chant* (Figure 6) hang in the Osher Gallery. The Colby Museum states that, “[The Taos Society] felt strongly that the source of authentic American art they craved could be found within the landscape and indigenous peoples of the Southwest.”⁹⁶ Although the museum has publicly referenced their desire to reinterpret the galleries, and as of January 2020 had a separate plaque stating that the gallery was undergoing an “exhibit reinterpretation,” the the entrance plaque presents an especially standard, non-critical version of the United States’ colonization of the West, choosing to focus more on the aesthetic appearance of the region rather than the political strife. As argued by W. J. T. Mitchell in *Landscape and Power*, this is a deliberate choice that enables the white settler to remain ignorant about imperialist practices.⁹⁷



Figure 5 (left): *Untitled (Mountain Wood Gatherers)*, Ernest Blumenschein, ca. 1926.

⁹⁵“The Taos School,” St. Louis Mercantile Library (University of Missouri-- Saint Louis, n.d.), http://umsl.edu/mercantile/events-and-exhibitions/online-exhibits/missouri-splendor/visions_Taos.htm .

⁹⁶Colby College Museum of Art, “Introductory Museum Plaque, Osher Gallery.” Waterville: ME, n.d.

⁹⁷W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Figure 6 (right): Eagle Feather Prayer Chant, Ernest Blumenschein, 1915.

However, there have been new works created by Indigenous artists incorporated into the Osher Gallery over the past few years. The gallery is split into two rooms. Upon entrance to the first room, painted a mustard yellow color, the first piece one sees to the left is Ramona Sanchez Gonzalez's *San Ildefonso Plate* (Figure 7), along with a lengthy block of text explaining that the Colby Museum has a "strategic plan" to research "understudied" and "underexhibited" works in their collection, revisiting the works they possess with a new "transparency."⁹⁸ *San Ildefonso Plate* was acquired by Colby in 1960, one year after the museum opened, via donation from Adelaide Pearson. It has only recently been attributed to Ramona Sanchez Gonzalez due to the plate's distinct black-on-black technique.⁹⁹ The immediacy of this work does indeed assert Indigenous presence and self-representation in the Southwest, a departure from works that were made by white artists like Ernest Blumenschein (Figures 5 & 6) that depict Indigenous peoples through the eyes of the white viewer. However, this is the only Indigenous work in the front room. The rest were composed by white artists who largely contributed to the mythology of the American West, the idealized image presented in the Osher Gallery's introductory plaque. *San Ildefonso Plate*'s label states that the Colby College Museum of Art is, "delving into storage to rediscover works of art that can foster institutional self-reflection, introduce new voices into the galleries, and enrich dialogues."¹⁰⁰ Again, the presentation of this work as central to the themes of the gallery space is notable. It is interesting, however, to examine the ease with which this piece can be assimilated into the dominant narrative. Consider William Robinson Leigh's *Zuni Pottery Maker* (Figure 9). Robinson Leigh was known for his landscape paintings of the

⁹⁸ Colby College Museum of Art, "San Ildefonso Plaque, Osher Gallery." Waterville: ME, n.d.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

American West.¹⁰¹ This particular painting features several Zuni Pueblos, based in the Northwest region of what is now New Mexico,¹⁰² painting pieces of pottery. There are four figures in the painting, all of whose faces are obscured. Each of the painters is huddled over their work in a circular form, wearing clothing with vibrant colors that correlate to the pottery on the ground. That the figures are faceless gives the sense that they are merely a part of the environment Robinson Leigh was painting, rather than people with agency of their own. The huddled, balled forms of the figures are reminiscent of the pottery pieces themselves, suggesting that the Zuni people are, to Robinson Leigh, decorative. Just as the Osher Gallery's entrance plaque denotes Indigenous groups to features in the backdrop of the West, so does William Robinson Leigh in his work. Additionally, that the main figure is turned away from the viewer provides some kind of distance, as if the viewer of the painting is on the outside looking in at this scene, as if this scene is representative of "otherness" and difference. *Zuni Pottery Maker* sits adjacent to *San Ildefonso Plate*. To a certain extent, *San Ildefonso Plate*'s presence critiques the narrative proposed in *Zuni Pottery Maker*, by praising Ramona Sanchez Gonzalez's influence in reviving the Pueblo black-on-black technique, creating a "renaissance in ceramics."¹⁰³ On the other hand, perhaps placing a ceramic piece beside *Zuni Pottery Maker* merely reinforces the narrative of Indigenous culture as a backdrop of the West. This lack of clarity could be addressed by the Colby Museum more explicitly.

The central piece in the first room of the gallery is Frederic Remington's statue *The Bronco Buster* (Figure 8). The sculpture shows a cowboy atop a rearing horse. The figure is full of action, the horse lurching forward gives a sense of adventure and forward progression, akin to

¹⁰¹"William Robinson Leigh (1866-1955) Biography: Medicine Man Gallery," Mark Sublette Medicine Man Gallery, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.medicinemangallery.com/william-r-leigh-biography>.

¹⁰²"Zuni Pueblo," Native American Pottery (Eyes of the Pot), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.eyesofthepot.com/zuni/index.php>.

¹⁰³ Colby College Museum of Art, "San Ildefonso Plaque, Osher Gallery." Waterville: ME, n.d.

the forward progression of manifest destiny present in the American psyche. Both the horse and its rider share a determined, fearless stance. In William Truettner's introduction to *The West As America*, he writes that images of the American West commonly "show pioneers fearlessly leading the charge— fur trappers, riverboatmen, farmers, and cowhands. The common democratic stock of the country appears to shoulder the burden of domesticating a new land, with a grace and assurance."¹⁰⁴ Remington clearly communicates these positive associations in his work. The rider looks lively and capable, bounding into an adventure. The base of the statue features rugged, rocky terrain. The rough ground exists in opposition to the man on horseback, sculpted with a smooth, careful composition, further adding to the appearance of confidence and control possessed by the rider. The man and his horse are seen in the moments before they both charge forward, an attempt by Remington to "represent progress," to portray the white man as the deserved conqueror of the West, the one responsible for the territory's advancement.



Figure 7: San Idelfonso Plate, Ramona Sanchez Gonzalez, c. 1925. Photograph taken by Blythe Romano.

¹⁰⁴ William H. Truettner, ed. *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991): 37.

Figure 8: The Bronco Buster, Frederic Remington, 1895.



Figure 9: Zuni Pottery Maker, 1907 (oil on canvas) by William Robinson Leigh.

While the first room of the Osher Gallery seems to more prominently display the myths and idealized narratives that fueled and justified the United States' colonization of the West (and continue to do so), the second room mounts more of a critical interpretation. The second room is painted a deep moss-colored green, giving it a notably darker feeling than the first room's vibrant yellow color. The works themselves, too, use more neutral, earthy tones than first room's paintings do. The most notable piece in this half of the gallery is the newly acquired *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* (Figure 10) by Wendy Red Star, a contemporary Crow artist known for her humorous, multimedia critiques of how Indigenous people are represented by mainstream media. In the artist's series "1880 Crow Peace Delegation" from

2014, she copied and wrote atop a collection of photo portraits of Crow chiefs who were involved in land negotiations with the federal government.¹⁰⁵ Red Star's annotations "expose archival insufficiencies, restoring multidimensionality to the sitters' self-presentation while evoking how the continual redrawing of territorial borders violated Indigenous treaty rights."¹⁰⁶

In *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)*, Red Star draws attention to aspects of the model's appearance that a settler viewer might not notice. Red Star uses the first-person in her explanatory annotations, speaking from the perspective of the model. For example, one of Red Star's annotations reads, "Hairbows represent physically overcoming and slitting their throat, I killed two." Others read "white clay in my hair" and "my spirit helpers." Red Star's use of the first-person is incredibly effective. If these explanations were given on a plaque of some kind, further distance would be placed between the viewer and the figure in the photograph. By providing first-person explanations and writing directly on the photograph, Red Star demands that the model in *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* get the attention and respect that he deserves. Contrast this image with Blumenschein's *Eagle Feather Prayer Chant*, a figure who is completely removed from his cultural context, and whose cultural and personal identity is not referenced once in the plaque explaining the work. While *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* could certainly invite the viewer to reflect more critically on *Eagle Feather Prayer Chant*, the two works are not placed close to one another. This distance means that the criticism mounted in *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* falls somewhat flat. It leaves room for the viewer to assume that the two works are disconnected, that they can exist simultaneously in their own right. While the addition of *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* provides a

¹⁰⁵ Colby College Museum of Art, "Wendy Red Star Plaque, Osher Gallery." Waterville: ME, n.d.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

basket-making practices were informed by her great grandmother, pictured selling her products in Figure 12. Although basket-weaving was certainly important to Indigenous peoples of the Southwest, the addition of these two baskets from a Northern-based Indigenous nation seems sloppy and confusing. The exact connection that is supposed to be drawn from these baskets remains unexplained upon inspection of the basket labels. Yet, it is worth noting that after donating her piece *Penobscot Barrell*, Theresa Secord, a member of the Colby Museum's Board of Governor's, was pleased with its inclusion in the Osher Gallery. Secord believes it to be an example of Indigenous self-determination and self-representation, which to her are more personally meaningful than a full scale "decolonization" or restructuring of the museum.¹⁰⁸ Secord says that to her, it is vital "not to be distracted or to spend time fixing or tearing down the aspects of institutions that had limited Wabanaki artists in the past."¹⁰⁹ From Secord's perspective, the Osher Gallery's inclusion of *Penobscot Barrell*, *Fancy Basket with Antler Handle*, and *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)* is incredibly meaningful and nods to a future where Indigenous artists do not have to fight for their right to be included in mainstream cultural institutions.¹¹⁰ As someone from within the Museum's Board of Governor's, perhaps Secord's vision of the Osher Gallery is clouded by the hope of what it could be. Do museum visitors leave the Osher Gallery with a more whole understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultures and their presence in the American West? Or do they leave the Osher Gallery with a more flattened image of Indigenous groups, after seeing the museum equate the Wabanaki people of Maine with non-specified Indigenous groups of the American West. It is very telling that the Colby Museum thought the best place for these Penobscot baskets was in the American Southwest gallery, despite that they have virtually nothing to do with this location or context.

¹⁰⁸ Blythe Romano and Theresa Secord. Interview with Theresa Secord. Personal, January 14, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Here we see an unsettling indicator that, to the Colby Museum, Indigeneity is imagined as existing only in the American West. The Colby Museum is fully capable of engaging in this level of specificity considering the baskets came from their *Wiwānikan... the beauty we carry* exhibit that was wholly dedicated to Wabanaki contemporary art. To pull from this exhibit and make it apply to another, unrelated exhibit is unnecessary, and the same level of care that was applied in *Wiwānikan* should be applied here in the Osher Gallery.



Figure 12: Theresa Secord's great-grandmother selling her hand-made baskets in Maine, 1940.

The centerpiece of the second room is James Earle Fraser's bronze *End of the Trail* (Figure 13), existing in opposition to Frederic Remington's *The Bronco Buster*. Fraser's *End of the Trail* depicts an Indigenous man on horseback. The figure is slumped over, exhausted, sitting on the back of a horse which bears a similar stance and expression to its rider. Yet, instead of expressing livelihood and progress like *The Bronco Buster*, the figure's body language and the title of the work allow the viewer to assume that Indigenous people of North America are on the brink of a morbid collapse. In William Truettner's *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images*

of the Frontier, the author cites a 1935 quote from Albert Weinberg: “the soil is destined for the race using the cannon rather than the bow and arrow,”¹¹¹ a statement that could easily be a summation of the conclusions drawn by Fraser and Remington’s works being placed in conversation with one another. While *The Bronco Buster* is in motion, bounding forward, *End of the Trail* is stalled and weakened. In this way, both statues define the future of the West by an Indigenous population that it will no longer have, and by a white population whose qualities make them exceptionally qualified to tame the West. *End of the Trail* reinforces the conception of the “Vanishing Indian,” seen in works like Edward S. Curtis’ *The Vanishing Race* (Figure 14), which presents several Indigenous people nearly dissipating into thin air. As made clear by the title of the image, Curtis’ motives were to capture Indigenous people through photography before they disappear completely.¹¹² Yet it is extremely important to mention that the imagery in *End of the Trail* has also become repurposed to serve as a symbol of Indigenous resilience and strength.¹¹³ In recent years *End of the Trail* has been screenprinted onto flags used in ceremonies and to honor Indigenous veterans and prisoners of war.¹¹⁴ The plaque below *End of the Trail* also explicitly mentions that this image has been repurposed.¹¹⁵ Contemporary artist Jeffrey Gibson who is a member of the Cherokee Nation and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has said that *End of the Trail* is, “a symbol that had lost its point of origin, but one that had been completely reinvented in a Native context.”¹¹⁶ Thus, *End of the Trail*’s inclusion in the Osher Gallery is a nod to this history of resistance and resilience. To center this symbol of resilience is

¹¹¹ William H. Truettner, ed. *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991): 36.

¹¹² “The Vanishing Race | 100 Photographs | The Most Influential Images of All Time,” Time, Accessed April 13, 2020. <http://100photos.time.com/photos/edward-curtis-vanishing-race>.

¹¹³ Shannon Vittoria, “End of the Trail, Then and Now,” Met Museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/the-american-west-in-bronze/blog/posts/end-of-the-trail>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Colby College Museum of Art, “End of the Trail Plaque, Osher Gallery.” Waterville: ME, n.d.

¹¹⁶ Vittoria, “End of the Trail, Then and Now.”

definitely notable considering the other pieces in the second room of the gallery: in the middle of a caravan encroaching on Indigenous lands, a young boy paraded across Europe as a circus act, and conflicts like the Wounded Knee Massacre (Figure 15), is *End of the Trail*, a symbol of resilience, “a warrior who is taking a break before getting back up again. There is a degree of lament, but there is also a strong sense of honor and determination.”¹¹⁷ At the same time as *End of the Trail* mourns what has been lost, it also indicates hope, complicating the idea of Indigenous people as the “Vanishing Race” of America.

However, it is worth noting that the parallel construction of *End of the Trail* and *The Bronco Buster* has a more complicated messaging. To give each of these pieces equal weight in the gallery space, to suggest that both are central to the idea of the American West lets the viewer assume that an image of Indigenous resilience can coexist with an image of spirited, enthusiastic imperialism. Placing these works across from one another does not necessarily invoke criticism of *The Bronco Buster* in the way that it should.

Other works in the second room of the Osher Gallery similarly fail to live up to these expectations. In Worthington Whittredge’s *Indian Encampment Along the Platte River* (Figure 16), the artist depicts a section of the Platte River of what is now Colorado. In the distance we see a settlement of Indigenous people. Whittredge made multiple trips to the Western plains during his career, and his works are considered notably more “intimate” than his contemporaries.¹¹⁸ The Terra Foundation of American Art notes that,

¹¹⁷ Shannon Vittoria, “End of the Trail, Then and Now,” Met Museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/the-american-west-in-bronze/blog/posts/end-of-the-trail>.

¹¹⁸“Conversations with the Collection: Indian Encampment,” Terra Foundation for American Art (Terra Foundation for American Art), accessed May 12, 2021, <https://conversations.terraamericanart.org/artworks/indian-encampment>.

Although [Whittredge] was aware of the violent conflicts between Native Americans and Anglo-American settlers in the region, his painting presents an indigenous community as peaceful dwellers in nature, at a safe remove from the presumably white viewer.¹¹⁹

It is notable that even in works depicting “peaceful” scenes like *Indian Encampment Along the Platte River*, the settler imagination fills in a story of “violent conflicts” and safety concerns. The mere existence of the settlement requires “a safe remove,” further illuminating the ways that art of the American West justified the United States’ brutal expansion. We see a similar issue in Alfred Jacob Miller’s *Caravan En Route (William Drummond Stewart’s Caravan)* (Figure 17), a fictionalization of a “western [trade] expedition bound for what is now Wyoming.” The Colby Museum notes that, “many of [Miller’s] works contain embellishments of his patron’s heroics, yet they continue to be interpreted as faithful records of the events nevertheless.”¹²⁰ This echoes what Alexander Nemerov says in *Doing the Old America*: “a past exists outside of representation but only faintly.”¹²¹ While it may be clear retrospectively that works like Miller’s were not

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰ Colby College Museum of Art, “Alfred Jacob Miller Plaque, Osher Gallery.” Waterville: ME, n.d.

¹²¹ Alex Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America*. Ed. William H. Truettner (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 287.

historically accurate, this distinction may not matter in terms of the works' reception.



Figure 14: Edward Curtis, *The Vanishing Race*, 1904.

Yet some works in the gallery do provide informative, critical context. In George Catlin's *Commanding General (Wa-Ta-We-Buck-A-Na)* (Figure 18), we see a portrait of an Indigenous boy who toured Europe in 1844 to perform and act out their customs, as a way to raise funds for the Iowa people who were amid an economic crisis.¹²² It is noted in a plaque below the work that the status of the Iowa group upon their return to their homeland, as well as how much they were compensated for this tour, remains unknown.¹²³ This concrete example of exploitation and erasure is a painful but necessary story to include in the Osher Gallery.

¹²² Colby College Museum of Art, "Commanding General (Wa-Ta-We-Buck-A-Na) Plaque, Osher Gallery." Waterville: ME, n.d.

¹²³ Ibid.



Figure 16: Worthington Whittredge, Indian Encampment Along the Platte River, c. 1877, oil on canvas.



Figure 18: George Catlin, Commanding General (Wa-Ta-We-Buck-A-Na), 1844, oil on canvas.



Figure 17: Alfred Jacob Miller's Caravan En Route (William Drummond Stewart's Caravan), c. 1850, oil on canvas.



Figure 15: William Robinson Leigh, *Sioux Family Escaping from Wounded Knee*, 1917, oil on canvas.

As part of our constructive critique, let us compare the Osher Gallery to The Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming which underwent a critical interpretation by Dickinson, et al., in their piece “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn.” Here, the authors give an example of a museum space that insufficiently dealt with reinterpretation, critiquing the way that the gallery physically presents the artwork as well as the body of work itself. Like the Osher Gallery, The WGWA incorporates pieces that complicate narratives of the West, such as Allan Mardon’s *The Battle of Greasy Grass* (Figure 18), Fritz Scholder’s *Custer & 20,000 Indians*, Albert Bierstadt’s *The Last of the Buffalo* (Figure 19), and James Earl Fraser’s familiar sculpture *End of the Trail* (Figure 13), a bronze of which is displayed in the Osher Gallery at the Colby Museum. While these works highlight the destruction of this colonial period, none of them were made by Indigenous artists. Further, these pieces are offset by peaceful, serene landscape paintings like W. H. D. Koener’s *Madonna of the Prairie* (Figure 20). This allows one to feel a “dissonance” between the two narratives. Any discomfort felt from the critical works is quickly resolved. This is problematic. Dickinson, et al. write that,

the WGWA suggests the West is a diverse and often discordant set of ideas and images. But it also suggests the West is a place where these dissonances can be resolved and harmonized... coaxing visitors to experience sublimity, and specifically the Western sublime, is far from a politically neutral endeavor.¹²⁴

¹²⁴Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott, and Eric Aoki, “(Re)Imagining the West: The Whitney Gallery of Western Art’s Sacred Hymn,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 13, no. 1 (2012): pp. 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708612464633>.

The WGWA creates this pattern of dissonance and resolution throughout their space. For every critique of the colonization of the West, there are many more works that work to dispel this discomfort from the settler's mind. Whether intentionally or not, this creates the sense that Indigenous genocide is something that can be peacefully resolved. Instead of challenging settlers to think critically about their role in colonial legacies, the WGWA allows visitors to cast off this guilt, something familiar to the Colby Museum's gallery construction as well. In the Osher Gallery, museum visitors are invited to observe the mythology of the American West. Visitors are confronted with images of lively cowboys and expansive, "untouched" landscapes. In between these images are works that might evoke feelings of settler guilt and shame. Yet the dissonance/resolution model remains.



Figure 18: The Battle of Greasy Grass, Allan Mardon, 1996. Oil on linen, 76 x 136 inches.



Figure 19: The Last of the Buffalo, Albert Bierstadt, 1888.



Figure 13 (left): End of The Trail, James Earle Fraser, 1918. Image courtesy of American Art Collaborative.

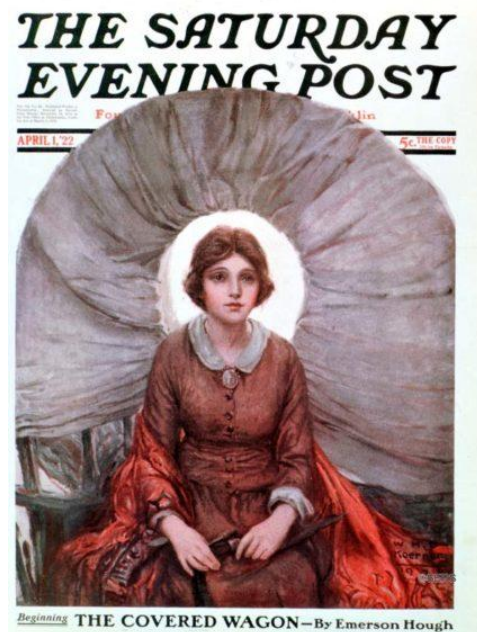


Figure 20 (right): Madonna of the Prairie, W. H. D. Koerner, 1922. Image from the Saturday Evening Post.

Chapter 3: Permanent Galleries: The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery & The Neutralizing of Historical Genocide

“In times when the human spirit seems to have burned most brightly the painting of landscape for its own sake did not exist and was unthinkable.”

-- W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*

While The Osher Gallery focuses on the American West, The Colby Museum’s Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery is dedicated more generally to American landscape paintings, many of which are in the style of the Hudson River School. Despite the difference in geographic location, similar issues regarding the representation of colonialism arise in the Arthur Vining Davis Gallery. The school’s content initially focused on the Hudson River Valley region of the United States, but its influence eventually expanded to areas like New England and Maritime Canada, as well as areas in the American West,¹²⁵ although the pieces in the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery mostly depict scenes from the American Northeast. Just as the Osher Gallery had an entrance plaque, so too does the Vining Davis Foundations Gallery, which explains to the viewer that the landscape paintings on display intend to “invite viewers to put aside their cares and lose themselves in beauty,”¹²⁶ emphasizing the “sublimity and picturesque beauty” of the American landscape which is compared to “Eden” by Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole.¹²⁷ In W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Landscape and Power*, the author argues in his “Imperial Landscape” chapter that landscape paintings are inherently tools of imperialism, and

¹²⁵Kevin J. Avery, “Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Hudson River School,” Met Museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm.

¹²⁶Colby College Museum of Art, “Introductory Plaque, Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery.” Waterville: ME, n.d.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

that to present them uncritically is to naturalize and normalize colonial expansion.¹²⁸ Further, landscape painting was often used as a way to yearn for a less industrial way of life, to mourn an idea of mankind's harmony with nature. W. J. T. Mitchell asks,

Who is the “we” that defines itself by its difference from “trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, clouds” and then erases this difference by re-creating it as a reflection of its own moods and ideas? Whose history and whose nature is “marked” into “stages” by landscape painting? What disruption required an art that would restore the “human spirit” to “harmony with its environment”?¹²⁹

While the Osher Gallery did have some traces of reinterpreting efforts, nodding to the cruel legacies of colonialism, the Vining Davis Foundations Gallery notably lacks this type of critical analysis, something that proves to be problematic as there are many notable pieces in this gallery that serve W. J. T. Mitchell's argument about the imperial landscape.

Charles Codman's *The Forest Near Portland, Maine* (Figure 21) is a perfect example of the imperial landscape. Like many Hudson River-style landscapes, Codman's work is reflective of the aesthetic theory of the Sublime, or the fearsome, in nature.¹³⁰ In Codman's piece, the forest is very clearly a wild and untamed area, with curling, severed branches and tree stumps scattered across the canvas. Similar imagery is present in Asher Brown Durand's *Catskill Mountains Near Shandaken* (Figure 22), in which the sharp remnants of a fallen tree are seen in the foreground. Most of *The Forest Near Portland, Maine* is grounded by an overwhelming darkness, with the exception of a bright, warm light emanating from behind the trees. While this painting communicates to the viewer that the wilderness is a fearsome and beastly presence, it also invites

¹²⁸W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰Kevin J. Avery, “Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: The Hudson River School,” Met Museum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004), https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm.

the viewer to step into the forest, to trek through it and claim it so that its brilliant future may be realized. A similar perspective is presented by William Morris Hunt in *Niagra* (Figure 23) While the forested foreground is dark, rocky, and rough, the serene, mountainous background highlighted by sunlight offers the potential for a bright future ahead: the colonial future. In Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*, he writes that, "the journey into the interior in imperial literature-- the trip away from the outposts of civilization into native territory-- acquires deep symbolic significance, for it is the expedition into both the geographic and the personal heart of darkness."¹³¹ Looking at landscape paintings like Codman's make it clear that this literary theme of journeying into the "heart of darkness" of Indigenous lands is also present in American landscape art.



Figure 21: Charles Codman, *The Forest Near Portland Maine*, c. 1830, oil on canvas. Photograph taken by Blythe Romano.

¹³¹ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011).



Figure 23: William Morris Hunt, Niagara, c. 1878, oil on canvas. Photograph taken by Blythe Romano.



Figure 22: Asher Brown Durand, Catskill Mountains Near Shandaken, c. 1853.

Let us contrast these paintings of empty landscapes with the ones that include figures, most of which are white male settlers. One such piece is Winslow Homer's *The Trapper* (Figure 24), in which a fur trapper stands atop a fallen tree beside his canoe. Like the aforementioned landscapes by Morris Hunt and Codman, this painting features a chaotic foreground indicated by the scattered branches, overgrown fauna, and fallen tree. The tree's trunk is splayed atop the trapper's canoe, although both he and the boat appear undamaged. Instead, the trapper looks calmly over his shoulder towards the sunlit horizon. Despite the ruggedness of the terrain in the foreground, the piece still gives the sense of peace and tranquility present in so many of the Hudson River School's landscape paintings. This is similar to George Caleb Bingham's *Landscape with Fisherman* (Figure 25). Again, a rugged landscape is offset by a man who exists in harmonious ease with the natural world around him. Charles Mills believes that in settler states, "space will... be represented as literally empty and unoccupied, void, wasteland, "virgin" territory... it is denied that any... human shaping of the world is taking place."¹³² Without white settlers, the American landscape is depicted as a treacherous place without civilization. The uncolonized land is largely a chaotic waste of space. When white figures are present, the landscape becomes tamed. We see white settlers engaging with the land in ways that suggest they are fully taking advantage of its resources: fishing and fur-trapping. It is important to be aware of what these paintings suggest when placed side-by-side, when these works are presented as being purely aesthetic experiences separate from the political (the gallery, "invite[s] viewers to put aside their cares and lose themselves in beauty").

¹³² Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011), 49.



Figure 24: Winslow Homer, *The Trapper*, 1870, oil on canvas. Photography taken by Blythe Romano.



Figure 25: George Caleb Bingham, *Landscape with Fisherman*, c. 1845-1850, oil on canvas. Photo by Blythe Romano

There is one lone Penobscot basket near the Vining Davis Gallery: “*Wicker Weave*” *Lunch Basket* (Figure 26). Located beside *Landscape with Fisherman* in the Shore Gallery, the basket is isolated behind a glass case in the corner of the room. Similar to the baskets in the Osher Gallery, “*Wicker Weave*” *Lunch Basket* seems to be an unclear attempt at reinterpretation. Although the basket is attributed to a Penobscot artist, its form and title makes it clear that it isn’t necessarily meant to conflict with the narrative expressed in the Vining Davis Gallery. The basket appears as a conventional picnic basket, almost as if it was picked out of the afternoon scene in William Merritt Chase’s *Tompkins Park, Brooklyn* (Figure 27) with white figures relaxing in the park. For this reason, along with the fact that it is the lone work indicating any kind of Indigeneity in the Eastern United States, it is difficult to consider “*Wicker Weave*” *Lunch Basket* as a reinterprative effort since it does not disrupt the gallery in any way.



Figure 26: Unidentified Penobscot Artist, “Wicker Weave” Lunch Basket, 1870.



Figure 27: William Merritt Chase, Tompkins Park, Brooklyn, 1887.

W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that, “landscape itself is the medium by which this evil (imperialism and nationalism) is veiled and naturalized. Whether this knowledge gives us any power is another question altogether.”¹³³ This question will never be answered if such knowledge remains absent from cultural institutions like the Colby Museum. To introduce the Vining Davis Gallery without discussing the imperial connotations of landscape painting is to further assist these landscapes in their neutralization of colonial, imperial motives. The way that the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery is currently constructed, with landscapes merely placed upon the wall without any explanation or critique, makes the art in the space seem neutral, defined

¹³³Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011), 30.

only by its aesthetic appearance rather than its historical context. Colby Museum curator Justin McCann has commented that although there have been discussions about reinterpreting the Arthur Vining Davis Gallery, there are more pressing interpretive efforts regarding art from the American Civil War that must first be addressed. Moving forward, the Colby Museum must prioritize the reinterpretation of the Arthur Vining Davis Gallery, paying specific attention to the way landscapes are used to neutralize Indigenous genocide.

Conclusion: Contemporary Efforts to Decolonial Futures

“Museums are as much about the past as they are about the future.”

--Moya McFadzean, et al., “Inside out/outside in”

Critical assessment of the Osher and Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery is not intended to dismiss the efforts of the Colby College Museum of Art. In addition to the reinterpreted discussions at the museum, there have been a number of special programs and exhibits that have attempted to address institutional inequalities in the museum. From July 2019 through January 2020, the Colby College Museum of Art presented an exhibit called *Wiwānikan... the beauty we carry*, the first major exhibition of Wabanaki (the confederation of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Abenaki peoples, the First Nations of what are now Maine and Maritime Canada) contemporary art in any art museum.¹³⁴ Former museum director Sharon Corwin said that the exhibit “represents what are now ongoing commitments to acquire important Wabanaki works for the Museum’s permanent collection and to present indigenous art more broadly,”¹³⁵ which current director Jackie Terrassa has corroborated is an ongoing effort.¹³⁶

The word *Wiwānikan* means “portage” in the Penobscot language, as in to carry a boat between navigable waters.¹³⁷ Guest curator and Penobscot basketmaker and beadworker Jennifer

¹³⁴Sharon Corwin “Director’s Forward” in *Wiwānikan... the Beauty We Carry* (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, n.d.).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶Blythe Romano and Jacqueline Terrassa. Interview with Jackie Terrassa. Personal, January 12, 2021.

¹³⁷Jennifer Neptune, “Wiwānikan,” in *Wiwānikan... the Beauty We Carry* (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, n.d.).

Neptune writes that in addition to literal bodies of water being defining landscape features of the Wabanaki territories,¹³⁸

[Wabanaki] history over the last five hundred years can be marked by a series of portage points in time: first European contact, the beginnings of trade, the arrival of missionaries, the experience of colonization, the drawing of international borders through our territories, and the coming of settlers... our ancestors made decisions at each of these points, just as we now choose which traditions and beautiful parts of our culture to carry forward.¹³⁹

Neptune expresses hope that *Wiwānikan... the beauty we carry* can act as yet another portage point, “enabling those new to Wabanaki arts and cultures to make further explorations.”¹⁴⁰ Here, Neptune emphasizes the settler audience, the urgency with which settlers must come to understand and uplift Indigenous arts and culture. Although reinterpetive efforts in the gallery spaces should not be solely for the settler audience, but rather a way to affirm Indigenous sovereignty, the meaning of *Wiwānikan* should not be overlooked.

Wiwānikan... the beauty we carry was met with positive critical and community reception. News media praised the exhibit for its emphasis on contemporary works, with the Portland Press Herald writing that,

“There is nothing old or tired about the art on view as part of a new Wabanaki exhibition at the Colby College Museum of Art. There are no arrowheads, yellowing documents or other reminders of the wars and broken treaties that have defined Indian life in Maine and across North America since the arrival of Europeans.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸Jennifer Neptune, “Wiwānikan,” in *Wiwānikan... the Beauty We Carry* (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, n.d.).

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁴¹Bob Keyes, “Exhibition at Colby Shows Wabanaki Art as It Is Today,” Press Herald (Portland Press Herald, August 11, 2019), <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/08/11/colby-shows-wabanaki-art-as-it-is-today/>.

Wabanaki artists and community members who contributed works and consulted on the exhibit similarly emphasized the power of asserting contemporary Indigenous presence. Barry Dana commented on how,

“Back in the day, I didn’t like walking into a museum and seeing native artifacts behind glass and signs that said, ‘Do not touch — this is what the Indians used to do.’

Everything was past tense. We deserve our place in history, but we deserve present-day recognition too.”¹⁴²

Curator Diana Tuite praised the exhibit for its uniqueness, stating that *Wiwānikan* “is unlike anything I have seen anywhere, and why I am not seeing this more?”¹⁴³ Earlier in my paper I referenced a quote from Amy Lonetree: “the time for exhibits that merely state ‘we are still here’ ... is past.”¹⁴⁴ It is, of course, difficult to reconcile this Lonetree quote with the aforementioned ones from Dana, Tuite, and the Portland Press Herald. Although *Wiwānikan* had its limitations, being an exhibit in a colonial institution run by a board of mostly white governors, curators, and staff members, it was still meaningful. Although the exhibit was temporary and did not directly reinterpret art from the other galleries, it was still meaningful. If, like the Portland Press Herald says, *Wiwānikan* was still able to communicate that indigeneity is more than “arrowheads” and “yellowing documents,”¹⁴⁵ perhaps it was a reinterpetive effort in its own right.

Although *Wiwānikan* can no longer be viewed by the public, its impact lives on in conversations among higher-ups at the Colby College Museum of Art. When the exhibit was still going on, the Colby Museum made it clear that they intended to continue working with

¹⁴²Bob Keyes, “Exhibition at Colby Shows Wabanaki Art as It Is Today,” Press Herald (Portland Press Herald, August 11, 2019), <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/08/11/colby-shows-wabanaki-art-as-it-is-today/>.

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 174.

¹⁴⁵Keyes, “Exhibition at Colby Shows Wabanaki Art as It Is Today.”

Wabanaki communities.¹⁴⁶ Both Theresa Secord and Jackie Terrassa mentioned bright plans for the future: new acquisitions from contemporary Wabanaki artists, and a mentorship program for members of the Wabanaki Confederacy interested in the arts. Although explicit details could not be shared with me, I was reassured by each Colby staff member I spoke with that these issues are of paramount importance, that the communities represented in *Wiwānikan* have not been ignored since the exhibit has gone down.

We can see through these actions that exhibit reinterpretation requires collaboration on multiple fronts. Community collaboration and relationship building are essential in order to bridge the gap between an arts institution and the individuals they represent. Amy Lonetree also speaks extensively about the importance of community collaboration when exhibits are not Indigenous-run, meaning that Indigenous communities are consulted and involved fully and directly in exhibit construction. Lonetree dubs this process “shared authority.”¹⁴⁷ She highlights the “shift from curator-controlled presentations of the American Indian past to a more inclusive and collaborative process, with Native people often actively involved in determining exhibition content.”¹⁴⁸ For example, *Wiwānikan* featured guest curator Jennifer Neptune and received consultation from Theresa Secord, both members of the Wabanaki Confederacy.¹⁴⁹ Community collaboration is now considered a “best practice” by many in the museum field.¹⁵⁰ Russell Belk suggests the term, “full collaboration,” to mean “the ability to have self-generated objects included in a museum collection or at least to have a voice in their selection and display.” He goes on to say that full collaboration is “a fundamental challenge to museums and their

¹⁴⁶ Bob Keyes, “Exhibition at Colby Shows Wabanaki Art as It Is Today,” Press Herald (Portland Press Herald, August 11, 2019), <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/08/11/colby-shows-wabanaki-art-as-it-is-today/>.

¹⁴⁷ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Jennifer Neptune, “Wiwānikan,” in *Wiwānikan... the Beauty We Carry* (Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, n.d.).

¹⁵⁰ Lonetree, 16.

self-appointed roles as gatekeepers, experts, and cultural guardians.”¹⁵¹ Rather than relying solely on internal staff to make decisions about how to best present Indigenous art and culture, outside consultation from tribal members is sought.

Yet another important element of reinterpretation is collaboration between curators, museum educators, board members, and directors. Although each Colby Museum staff member I spoke to was passionate, committed, and receptive to Indigenous representation in the museum space, there was a lack of unity and clarity regarding future initiatives which made certain assertions seem like empty promises. For example, while Jackie Terassa told me there were “definitely” plans in the works to reinterpret the Arthur Vining Davis Gallery, curator Justin McCann admitted that although reinterpreting the Vining Davis Gallery had been a passing thought, there were no tangible efforts in place to do so. Stacey Mann suggests that up until recently, most work done on decolonization in the museum space has been pioneered by education and visitor services departments.¹⁵² Kristin Bergquist, Curator of Education at the Colby Museum expressed that she was often left to her own devices to figure out how to teach tour groups about the material in *Wiwānikan*,¹⁵³ a challenge that has been reported by many museum educators who have not been provided adequate training and can thus be unintentionally perpetuating harmful practices.¹⁵⁴ In a paper by Stacey Mann and Joanne Jones-Rizzi, two museum professionals, they “emphasize the important role that exhibition teams (designers, developers, fabricators) have in... deconstructing many of the problematic systems and

¹⁵¹Russell Belk, “Reinterpreting Collections through Online Collaborative Participation”(dissertation, ICOM-ICME International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography, n.d.), 2.

¹⁵²Joanne Jones-Rizzi and Stacey Mann, “Is That Hung White?,” American Alliance of Museums, July 28, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/05/19/is-that-hung-white-a-conversation-on-the-state-of-museum-exhibitions-and-race/>.

¹⁵³Blythe Romano and Kristin Bergquist. Interview with Kris Bergquist. Personal, October 30, 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Marsha Weisiger, “No More Heroes: Western History in Public Places.” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2011, pp. 289–296. JSTOR, 291.

structures that continue to stand in the way of meaningful change.”¹⁵⁵ The Colby Museum must emphasize this as well. Museum educators, curators, fellows, and all other museum staff members must communicate in order to be on the same page about the messages being expressed in exhibits.

To move forward completely, the sensation of dissonance-and-resolution in the Osher Gallery must be abandoned, and the “neutrality” of the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations Gallery must be radically reexamined. As previously mentioned, community collaboration or “shared authority” is essential for these efforts to be successful. The Colby College Museum of Art must continue to strengthen its relationships with Wabanaki communities and involve them wholly and consistently in their gallery construction process. When such “neutral” or easily resolved gallery spaces are deconstructed, something new is formed within the museum, something that acknowledges that we are living in a settler state that is both undeniable and unsustainable. The museum is a place of knowledge-creation and thus has a powerful ability to change public discourse and opinions. This sets the stage for more radical, revolutionary change outside of the museum.

¹⁵⁵ Marsha Weisiger, “No More Heroes: Western History in Public Places.” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2011, pp. 289–296. JSTOR, 291.

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