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"Junk" and Priceless China: A Chronology of Cataloguing at the Museum of Anthropology (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

This paper considers how knowledge has been organized around museum objects at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), in what is known as British Columbia[1]. We trace the practice of cataloguing material heritage at this museum, through close examination of catalogue records and interviews with past and present MOA staff, reading from the first attempts at standardizing object nomenclatures in the journals of private collectors, to the contemporary practices associated with object documentation in the digital age. Through a critical cataloguing perspective; this paper plots the creation and use of museum record keeping systems in the particular milieu of Western Canada. This paper is part of a larger research project, "The Work of Repair," which investigates museum documentation histories across Canada.

1. Introduction

In a 1979 internal Museum of Anthropology (MOA) report, visitors critiqued the museums' new Visible Storage strategy for exhibiting its anthropological collection: "The visible storage area is spacious, airy and neat, and many people think they are in the midst of an exhibit area. 'Your displays are too crowded,' some have said. 'Why do you have junk next to that priceless china?'" David H. Scott Consultants Limited, 1979, 12). These divisions, seemingly naturalized to the public, are part of what ethnographic museums have been struggling to untangle since their origins as storehouses for colonial collecting practices (1979, 12). However, these divisions are not natural or given, and are part of a longer history and colonial ontological approach that separates and reinforces the distinction of people from their belongings, and cultural history from the land, particularly from Indigenous communities in Canada (Muntean et. al., 2015; Wilson 2015). They are indicative of a colonial, Eurocentric, and othering approach to understanding belongings, that continues to do harm through epistemic violence and that is being actively resisted from within and outside of these institutions (Spivak 1988; Gray 2022; Leischner 2022; Schneider and Hayes 2020).

Understanding the way that Eurocentric epistemological commitments become privileged in museum recordkeeping is only a small part of a wide range of reparative work being conducted in museums and with collections broadly (Allison-Cassin and Seeman 2022; Gray 2022; Gupta et. al., 2023). Part of the work that needs to be done is to address the kinds of distinctions made obvious by the quotation included above – how have records privileged some forms of knowledge over others, and how are these naturalized, yet non-neutral assumptions about what counts embedded in the way we describe and record material culture?

This paper plots the practice of cataloguing at MOA, as an example of a local anthropological institution. This is part of a 2-year funded SSHRC project which seeks to understand museum documentation in British Columbia, located in the legacies of Northwest Coast settler-colonialism. Through the case of MOA, we hope to show some of the kinds of epistemic assumptions that are present in the early history of record keeping. We argue there are several distinct types of epistemic privilege that are reinforced through these processes. This is not unique to MOA, but rather that MOA can be seen as a specific case study in a much broader settler-colonial knowledge system. This work involved conducting five staff interviews with the collections manager and with other retired staff, primary source research with

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[1] We are grateful to have been able to do this work on unceded xʷməθkʷəẏəm territory.

museum documents, and secondary source research through the MOA library collections, over the course of six months.

Inspired by recent developments in critical cataloguing and critical metadata studies, often situated in the field of Knowledge Organization (Bullard, Purdome and Watson 2022; Canning et. al., 2022; Turner 2017, 2020) and critical work regarding taxonomic reparation and ethical documentation or reparative description in the archival field, (Adler 2016; Anderson and Christen 2019; Curliss et. al., 2022; Gilliland et. al., 2021); we hope to understand how reparative description in museums works in practice, and document the struggles of working with century old data, while also supporting the history of museum work in British Columbia (Gordon-Walker 2019).

2. Collecting Histories at the Museum of Anthropology

MOA is built on the unceded, ancestral territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam, pronounced Mus-kwee-um) peoples. The collection began with the acquisition of explorer Frank Burnett's collection of South Pacific objects in 1927 (Mayer 2009). It was officially founded as a museum in 1947, hosted in what is now UBC's Library Circulation Department. In the same year, the museum's first director and curator were appointed: husband and wife Harry and Audrey Hawthorn. The museum formally opened to the public in 1949 but it would not acquire its own building for nearly thirty years (Hawthorn 1993, 4). The newly-dubbed "Museum of Anthropology" opened its doors in the summer of 1976. To display the collections and promote transparency, MOA introduced the innovative structure of "open storage," which housed all museum objects in glass cases available for public viewing (Hawthorn 1993, 84). In 2010, a new renovation and addition project, "A Partnership of Peoples," added a sizable amount of exhibit, office, and collections space (Mayer 2009, 13). The Museum currently hosts nearly 50,000 objects and belongings – and at least one catalogue record for each object. Like all museums, the modern cataloguing system is built upon the strata of information in earlier catalogue records (Clapperton 2010; Ames 1976; Halpin 1990; Rowan 1993).

3. Cataloguing and Privileged Knowledge in Records

Through time, information about material culture was privileged in distinct ways – that is, certain kinds of information were recognized as more important than others, or certain standard fields reinforce particular ideas about which knowledge matters. First, through naming, or the assignment of names to belongings within a typological paradigm; secondly, the establishment and standardization of the concept of geo-cultural location, which is part of the narrative of how the concept of provenance is crafted in museums; then through the imposition of unique identifiers, numbers and direct labels that physically mark belongings and leave residues of harm; the dominance of the concept of the donor or private collectors as the primary source of contextual information; and lastly the perceived needs of the public in the organization of displays.

The story of MOA's catalogues can be read as one of repeated attempts to reconcile information about the same object or belonging across historical records. This is difficult, as each catalogue has its own system of unique identifiers (a unique number used to identify a particular item) to refer to the objects or belongings within; between several catalogues, a single belonging may be cataloged under several identifiers. The catalogues also include different information fields, with different information in them: while a 1911 private collector's catalogue includes remarks on a belonging's origin, a 1935 catalog entry of the same belonging excludes that information in favor of including the belonging's measurements. The catalogues privilege different kinds of information, partly because of the history of standardization of museum practices (Turner 2020); but also because of what were seen as historically practical solutions to the arrangement of collections. For example, most of the catalogues contain a redundant identifier (often drawn in retroactively by later collections managers) to associate the object via

its identifier with its entry in earlier or later catalogue records. Occasionally, collectors catalogued their objects by putting the identifiers directly on them, leaving not only intellectual but actual residue on objects, with "gummed labels" that left "adhesion marks discoloring the surface" (Hawthorn 1993, 4). Seen from the perspective of the present, direct labeling is a highly visible reminder that these belongings were thought less of as important pieces of masterwork art, or familial relations, and more as objects of evidence to be sorted, lined up, and numbered.[2]

As MOA accessioned objects from private collections, they also included the epistemic concerns of the collectors, privileging often plainly colonial interpretations of objects and belongings. For example, George Henry Raley was a reverend and missionary, who was Principal of the Coqualeetza Residential School from 1914-1934 (Raibmon 1996). His collection was one of the first groups of belongings brought to the museum, and influenced the early cataloguing work of the institution. Raley was keenly interested in the work and "often came to watch and offer further information as he remembered it. He was not always certain about times, locations, and episodes" but his recollections, and MOA's ability to easily gather further data from him, informed the museum's records (Hawthorn 1993, 26). Another collector, Frank Burnett, also influenced records work. He pursued, traded for, and took many belongings from the Pacific Islands, and donated most of his collection to the Museum of Anthropology in 1927. His is considered to be the founding collection of what would become the museum. Prior to giving his collections to UBC, Burnett recorded his own catalogue of objects in 1911, and in 1927 a formal catalogue of his donated objects was presented to the University. These early catalogues numbered the objects linearly, within subsections of geocultural areas; the 1927 catalogue manifested the geocultural areas in exhibit cases, and each object was recorded as a member of a particular case.

In the 1940s, MOA created its own catalogue ledgers and for many decades, these served as primary records of belongings and objects, though the ledgers largely excluded objects considered non-anthropological (such as animal horns, and taxidermy), which were likely dispensed to other collections on campus. In the 1970s, the museum established a kind of Open Storage display, which was a novel idea at the time. This "systemic display" made it obvious what documentation was missing or absent; and the errors that had existed in the catalogue for some time. By the 1980s, there were too many objects and belongings on display, and the storage rooms were once again filled (Bruegeman et al., 2011, 190). Shifts to digital platforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s meant that there were also incentives to reconcile the last century's worth of object records, to implement new barcodes for object storage, and to fill in missing elements of objects like names, materials, measurements, and more (Bruegeman et. al., 2011, 167).

From the perspective of the present, "fixing" bad records developed over these decades of change is a key concern. There were numerous difficulties, particularly when recording object names due to bad transcriptions, multiple names for the same person and creator; and because people's records in the system include gendered binaries like male/female. Other issues exist in categories such as the culture field: artists' culture is sometimes different from the culture of their object or belongings, and settlers or Canadians are categorized as "Overseas Europeans," the chosen way to reference the populations resulting from colonialism. These are further interesting remnants of the past nomenclature system, a clear and direct indicator of Eurocentrist understandings of North American communities.

4. Conclusion

We have argued here that information about material culture was privileged through naming, the establishment and standardization of the concept of geo-cultural location, the imposition of unique identifiers, numbers and direct labels, the dominance of donor information; and the perceived needs of the public in the organization of displays. The very idea of at one time seeing belongings and cultural objects as 'junk' is a carefully crafted and violent epistemological move that privileges European objects as more important, rarified pieces, and we argue this is in part made possible by the kinds of information included in the records. As museum staff work to repair these records, alongside the other daily work of

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[2] For more, see projects like the Labelling Matters project at Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum: https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters

description and cataloguing, they also struggle against and with systems that were invented to classify and organize within a particular western ontology. As this project continues, we seek to understand and provide historical evidence of how these systems continue to have an effect across the discipline of reparative work.

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