“Asia is One”: Curating the Far East in American Asian Art Museums from the Early 20th Century to Present

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Introduction

“Our objects speak, not with their own voice, but with the voices of those for whom we are privileged to speak.”¹ Problems with speaking for others and representation have plagued museums since the first attempts to curate collections intentionally and meaningfully. While this was not quite seen as an issue throughout the 19th and early 20th century, postcolonial movements and critiques against Western imperialism have led many American museums to take a critical look at the ways in which they represent and curate other cultures. Whereas previously, American museums served as places to display the “curiosities” of the Far East and either portray the barbaric nature of China or the Westernized progress of Japan, postcolonial museums have attempted to reject the old “dichotomous cartographic splitting of the world into ‘East’ and ‘West’”² and contextualize art and artifacts outside of the imperial gaze of Western civilizations.³ In order to do so, curators have placed a heavy focus on multiculturalism - placing works in relation to each other with no clear delineations between savage and modern or East and West. They have also attempted to uproot themselves from Western traditions of presenting history as a linear progression from barbarity to civilization or centering progress and civilization narratives around Asian cultures adopting or incorporating Enlightenment ideals.

While much of the literature on Museum Ethics and guidebooks for thoughtful museum curation have led many to believe that there has been a movement away from curation styles that play into colonial and imperial frameworks and tout Western superiority at the cost of Othering or denigrating non-Western cultures, these systems of curation are still at play to this day.

² Ibid.
“Colonizing” museum curators, or curation which plays to a Western imperial gaze, occurs to this day and can be seen most prominently in the continued existence of Asian Art Museums throughout America. In tracing the original intent of Asian Art Museums from the early 1800s to contemporary “postcolonial” museums like the San Francisco Asian Art Museum and Seattle Asian Art Museums, I will illustrate how attitudes, curation styles and production/dissemination of knowledge have not changed as radically as we imagine and, in fact, curators of “post-colonial” American Asian Art Museums still have considerable, but ultimately feasible, work to do towards decolonizing these spaces. In order to trace the curation of the Far East in American (Asian) Art Museums and collections, I will be presenting four case studies: Nathan Dunn’s “Curious Things” collection of Chinese materials (1832), Charles Freer’s Washington Gallery (1906), the modern San Francisco Asian Art Museum collections and the modern Seattle Asian Art Museum.

In examining these four case studies and comparing the kinds of Orientalism and imperialism occurring in all four museums, I will challenge the idea that American museums have successfully transitioned from colonizing, Western spaces of domination and representation into thoughtful, multi-cultural/ postcolonial displays. While problems with Orientalism in American Asian Art Museums are not nearly as explicit as they had been before the era of decolonization, any lingering Orientalism still present in contemporary American Asian Art museums can be read as dangerous and reductive. In offering my critiques of contemporary American Asian Art Museums, I hope to continue a dialogue taking place in the field of museum curation and ethics concerning how we can respectfully represent and display non-Western cultures in America. Further, I hope to encourage thoughtful discourse on whether any peoples
should have a right to claim authority over the display and curation of another’s culture - especially when the relationship between curator and curated has historically been a relationship of oppressor and oppressed as we seen in American curators and curated “Asia.”

Case Study: Nathan Dunn’s “Curious Things”

Nathan Dunn, a Philadelphian merchant who lived and conducted business in the Canton region of China from 1818 to 1832, was an avid collector and appreciator of Chinese art, culture and civilization. When Dunn returned to Philadelphia in 1832, his quickly set to work funding and curating a gallery of over 10,000 Chinese objects he had brought back with him from the Canton region. Dunn’s museum, opened on December 22, 1832, was one of the first real “systematic collections of Chinese materials exhibited publicly in the United States.”

Previously, collections of Chinese materials had been displayed and exhibited throughout the United States, but they were not curated, categorized or classified in the meaningful way Dunn’s collection was. Neither were collections like those held by The East India Marine Society constructed by a single man, in the way Dunn’s museum was, but instead represented a “hodgepodge” of materials picked up by merchants and sailors and dropped off for display in Salem Massachusetts. Without a single individual making sense of the sheer volume of goods and material being brought into the display - let alone any individual with the authority to determine whether goods were authentic to a region the merchants and sailors claimed them to be - these collections provided only an ad hoc and unsystematic portrait of cultures outside of America.

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5 Ibid., 91.
6 Ibid.
The pre-Dunn American collections of works, instead of attempting to construct a compelling and informative view of far-away cultures, aimed at titillating and mystifying viewers. In 1842, British traveler J.S. Buckingham voices his complaint about the nature of these American museums as

a mass of everything that is likely to be thought curious… the worthless generally prevailing over the valuable. The collections are then huddled together, without order or arrangement… and there is generally a noisy band of musicians and a juggler… to attract visitors… and mere amusement, and that of the lightest and most uninstructive kind, is the only object sought in visiting them.\(^7\)

Buckingham’s critique of these pre-Dunn American collections is extremely telling, as it offers insight into not only the intent of American collections, but also the beginnings of the soon widely held belief that museums are places of instruction, order and value. Whereas American collections pre-Dunn had sought only to amuse, here meaning to offer pleasure without stimulating thought,\(^8\) Nathan Dunn had a clear plan in mind when he began his collection. Having spent 14 years in China, completely submerged in Chinese culture and society, Dunn wanted to bring that experience back to the American public in its entirety. In order to immerse the museum-goers into the full Chinese experience, Dunn had to be methodical in not only what he included in his displays, but where and in what fashion. Whereas early in his collecting, Dunn had in fact worked with the goal of gathering only enough material to fill a small cabinet in his apartment “that he could use to amuse his friends,”\(^9\) his project soon turned gigantic in scope and

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\(^7\) Ibid., 91.
\(^8\) Here, I offer additional clarification on the word “amuse” because I think it is necessary to understand exactly what J.S. Buckingham was deriding. Many would argue that modern museums use amusement and entertainment to supplement their exhibits fairly often - whether that be an interactive component or the opportunity to craft replicas of pieces from their collections. These “amusements” would in fact be helpful in supplementing the purely educational displays and would not be the kind of empty frivolities J.S. Buckingham would be referring to. In that way, we cannot understand early museum amusement in the same context we understand contemporary museum amusement.

veered sharply away from what J.S. Buckingham would condemn as thoughtless display for the sake of amusing others.

This change in attitude - from wanting to use Chinese materials to titillate viewers because of their Otherness to using Chinese materials to stimulate an appreciation for Chinese culture and peoples - likely came about once Dunn fully integrated into the Chinese cultural elite. According to John Haddad, Dunn had been so successful in both integrating himself into Chinese culture and obtaining rare Chinese artifacts not typically given or sold to foreigners because he “learned to respect the ‘ingenuity’ and ‘intelligence’ of the Chinese and treated ‘all classes’ well.”\(^\text{10}\) His condemnation of the Opium trade, coupled with this respect for the Chinese people gained Dunn significant social capital in China and led him to experience Chinese society, not as a perpetual foreigner, but as a well-integrated, welcomed individual. From this vantage point as both an outsider-looking-in and a foreigner allowed access into that “in” of Chinese society, Dunn was about to more deftly present and articulate Chinese culture and society for the Americans that was more nuanced than merely intriguing the public with a mystifying object from the “Others” existing across the globe.

Dunn’s collection, when finally constructed, curated and opened, was a sprawling immersive experience that left museum-goers astonished. Dunn left no stone unturned with his collections and had brought “[to Philadelphia] everything that was characteristic or rare, whether in the natural history, or natural and artificial curiosities and manufactures.”\(^\text{11}\) Dunn had not only filled the rooms of his museum space with objects, but he had populated them as well, with life-sized mannequins in authentic Chinese garments standing alongside the displayed lanterns,

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{11}\) Conn, 91.
Buddhas and painted, panoramic landscape scenes. J.S. Buckingham, the British traveler originally so critical of American museums, could not help but also be overwhelmed by the sheer size, scope and thoughtfulness that went into Dunn’s Chinese museum:

…[the mannequins] are all actual figures, as large as life, moulded in clay, with a resemblance to life… greater than that of the finest wax-work figures. They are placed in the most natural and appropriate attitudes imaginable. They have all actual dress of the exact kind worn by several classes they represent and are surrounded by those several auxiliaries and accompaniments which belong to their respective dwellings or occupations, and have a reality about them, which comes the nearest to actual life of anything I have ever seen...\(^\text{12}\)

The elements of realism and immersion were incredibly important to Dunn, who oversaw every detail of the museum’s creation - right down to the expressions on the mannequin faces. In personalizing each mannequin’s face, Dunn was able to simultaneously familiarize and Other the Chinese bodies in the exhibit. By seeing each face as a distinct character, American museum-goers were able to empathize and recognize the individual, human existence of the elite, the shop-workers, the farmhands all being recreated in each exhibit. The creation of these mannequins was not without its racist overtones, however, as the recreation of each mannequin’s face and head-shape was influenced by Dunn’s interest in phrenology. According to historian John Haddad, “when confronted with a new culture in China, Dunn apparently employed phrenological theories to understand it.”\(^\text{13}\) All the mannequins share roughly the same head shape and size, leading one visitor to remark that students of phrenology will be “struck by the smallness and meagreness of the [Chinese mannequin’s] cranium.”\(^\text{14}\) Despite admiring the “ingenuity” and “intelligence” of the Chinese, it is clear Dunn used his display to also

\(^{12}\) Haddad, 16.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
communicate white supremacist ideas and reinforce pervasive ideas in America of Chinese barbarity. While this racism was not explicit, the ways in which Dunn imagined the Chinese into these physical mannequins and visibly marked them as inferior speaks to the implicit bias Dunn and museum-goers shared in their attitudes towards the Chinese.

Dunn’s system of organizing both artifacts, facts and (created) bodies in his museum as a panoramic staging of life in China, rather than simply displaying the objects in cases, succeeded in Dunn’s attempt to recreate “China in miniature” for American museum-goers. Dunn’s recollections and reimaginings of Chinese culture through the filter of his own memories and biases were not the only forces at work shaping this imagined Chinese space. Museum-goers, too, projected onto this museum space their own thoughts and feelings towards their imagined China. As one museum-goer remarked concerning Dunn’s museum:

We seem to realize those imaginings of the gorgeous East, which have haunted us like dreams of childhood. We seem to be in the China of Arabian Nights - a realized world of fancy, and we move about a state of consciousness, what we see mingling with what we dream, until it is scarcely possible to distinguish observation from speculation.\(^\text{15}\)

Museum-goers’ inability to separate a fictional China from a factual one was likely only exacerbated by Dunn’s exhibit. The choice to pose the Chinese mannequins in re-enactments of Chinese street life staged reality more than it objectively presented it. Museum-goers were able to project their own ideas onto the (literally) objectified Chinese bodies and be unchallenged in the ideas they projected since facts and knowledge about the exhibits was offered in a supplementary pamphlet that could be looked at at the guest’s discretion. Unlike museums today, object and history/fact did not exist alongside one another, forcing museum-goers to acknowledge both simultaneously. Rather, Dunn allowed museum-goers to engage with fact and

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 21.
reality to their own leisure - with their imaginations and narratives projected onto the exhibits existing regardless. While it cannot be said that Dunn did not try to educate museum-goers about the reality of China, the goal of his exhibit was to display China more than it was to educate on it. For Dunn, demystifying Chinese society and culture did not necessarily mean challenging myth or stereotypes in a meaningful way, but allowing myth to exist alongside material facts in whatever way the museum-goers imagination can reconcile.

Even when museum-goers did choose to guide their tour of the museum with Dunn’s 120-page informational pamphlets, they were not learning an objective reality of Chinese life, society and culture. All the information in these pamphlets had been produced from Dunn’s memory and knowledge of China through his own engagement with it. One example of Dunn’s inability to truly present an “objective” reality of Chinese life and society comes when he describes their army as “little better than a rabble rout, mere men of straw.”¹⁶ What Dunn’s intention in including this commentary was - whether he was attempting to defang the Chinese by presenting them as weak or if he genuinely believed that to be true - is not clear. However, what is clear is that Dunn was not attempting to keep his own thoughts, beliefs and opinions from shaping the reality of the China he was creating for American consumption. In filtering all the knowledge and experiences of China through his own lens, there is little room to believe that the reality Dunn was creating was not distorted by his own Western/white background. Comments about the weakness of a Chinese army or depictions of Chinese individuals with smaller “craniums” means that Dunn’s museum cannot be divorced from the project of reinforcing and perpetuating white superiority over a less-civilized and intelligent Other.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.
White “racial biases” also can be seen in how Americans visiting Dunn’s collection regarded the reality that Dunn creates in his “China in miniature” collection as objectively true. White objectivity is the idea that white people can present and engage with history or culture from an objective viewpoint. Since “white people” do not have the same racialized perspective as other cultures and people, they can present Truth in a logical, coherent and unbiased way. The implication of this is that other cultures and peoples do not have access to Truth - even truths about their own cultures - and that only white people have the right to present Truth about themselves and others. Haddad catalogued the overwhelmingly positive reviews on Dunn’s collections and nearly every review leads to some mention of Dunn presenting the “truth” or being an authority on what truth is. In one example, a guidebook for touring Philadelphia declared, “everyone who takes pleasure in accurate knowledge, will find here, in a few hours, that which cannot be procured, from reading, view from engravings, or even an actual visit to China.” Echoing the guidebook’s glowing review, E.C. Wines claimed that Dunn had done more than “any other man to rectify prevalent errors, and disseminate true information.” As the guidebook illustrates, a white man - and a foreigner no less - was able to accurately portray the customs, beliefs, society and culture of China either as accurately or more accurately than an actual visit to see the country themselves. It is notable that it was Dunn who rectified errors about the Chinese and not any Chinese individuals themselves, as it reveals again that only white Western individuals had access to the Truth and the creation, maintenance and altering of it. The museum space became a kind of safe “vacation” for white Americans - one where they could momentarily journey to a dangerous or unfamiliar place with the knowledge that they would

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
experience no culture shock and have their ideas of China either reinforced or harmlessly
challenged.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Case Study: Charles Freer’s Gallery}

Nearly a century after the success of Nathan Dunn’s collection of “Chinese Curiosities”
sparked interest in Chinese art and culture, American industrialist Charles Freer donated his
enormous collection of Asian art to the Smithsonian Institution - a collection today housed in the
Freer Gallery of Art. Unlike Dunn, whose interest remained focused on Chinese art, Freer’s

\textsuperscript{20} Note: I would like to expand here about how Asian culture was made consumable. Especially given that it was
only to be viewed in a few hours and one was made an expert on literally everything “Asian.”
interests extended into Japan, Egypt and Persia; thusly, his collection (and eventual gallery) is among the very first “Asian Art” museums in America to attempt to carve out what exactly constitutes an “Asian” art and aesthetic. Further, Freer’s inclusion of different cultural groups and geographic locations under the single banner of “Asia” prefigured how contemporary Asian Art Museums in America would emphasize “the commonality and cross-cultural fertilization” between various “Asian” countries.

Like Dunn, Freer’s frequent travels to Asian countries greatly influenced how he would eventually curate an “authentic” “Asia” for American consumption and understanding. Between 1894 and 1911, Freer made two extended trips to China and four extended trips to Japan. Freer, like many American art enthusiasts of the time, was contending with how to include Asian art into a “fine art” tradition which previously had initially consisted only of Western art works. The inclusion of Japanese art and artifacts did not come as uneasily as the inclusion of Chinese works, given the Americans saw Japan as Westernized and “progressive because of its aggressive and successful campaigns of modernization.” The same could not be said of China, who had “languished in civil war and, therefore, in the estimation of the West at the turn of the century.” Thusly, Japanese art was slowly being considered less a product of a foreign “Asian culture,” but a kind of pseudo-Western work produced by an increasingly more familiar “Asian neighbor.” Meanwhile, the Chinese art/artifacts and culture which had been so mystifying and

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23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
enticing to Dunn’s viewing public was falling out of favor for art enthusiasts who were not interested in unrefined works produced by barbaric peoples as anything but passing curiosities.

For Sinophiles like Freer, this devaluation of Chinese art and culture because of historio-political realities proved frustrating. However, Freer and fellow Chinese art enthusiast, Laurence Binyon, resolved to rehabilitate Chinese art in the eyes of American and Western fine art critics by collapsing the barriers between Japanese and Chinese art. Playing upon Western veneration of Greek and Roman art and culture, Binyon describes the cultural debt Japan owes China as analogous to that of Rome and Greece. Binyon claims: “Nobody ever claimed for the Japanese originality of thought or religiosity of temper… in a sense, Japan owes everything to China.” In order to prove the value of Chinese art as a fine art, a same-ness must be established between both Japanese and Chinese culture which allows the positive perceptions of one Asian country to be transposed onto another through a perceived cultural commonality. Chinese art is not valued as a fine art for its own aesthetic merits, but because of the influence Chinese aesthetic and culture had on Japanese art, which in turn was valued only because of American acceptance of Japan into the modern/Western world. Japanese art and Chinese art become inextricably bound together if they were to be accepted as “fine art” by a Western art metric. As we will see later in this paper, they way Freer privileged Japanese and Chinese art as the pinnacle of “Asian Art” and the way he homogenized Chinese and Japanese aesthetic and style will carry over into the contemporary period.

Concerning Freer’s curation of his Asian art gallery more directly, one might hesitate to describe the Freer Gallery of Art an “Asian Art Museum.” This is because, among his collection

of Chinese, Japanese, Egyptian and Persian works, Freer included four large rooms dedicated to
the works of his friend, James Abbott McNeill Whistler. While Whistler was certainly influenced
greatly by “Japanese prints and Chinese ceramics,” no one could claim Whistler belonged as a
permanent component in an Asian Art Gallery, let alone have four rooms dedicated to his works
- a number equaling the number of rooms dedicated to permanent installations of Japanese,
Chinese, Egyptian and Persian works. Yet, the Smithsonian not only accepted the Whistler
works among the galleries Asian art donations, but has preserved the gallery as a holistic
combination of Asian art and Whistler’s paintings.

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27 Wang, 415.
The continued comingling of Whistler’s paintings and the Asian art which influenced him is likely due to the fact that Freer had originally intended to create a gallery dedicated to Whistler’s work and decided to utilize his enormous Asian art collection throughout this “Whistler gallery” as a way to highlight the Asian influences in Whistler’s work.28 Scholar Linda Merrill leaves no room to doubt the original function of the Asian art in the Freer Gallery when she states: “The Asian objects were meant to enhance the Whistlers.”29 As demonstrated, despite Freer’s intense interest and appreciation for Asian art, Freer considered Asian art as something supplementary to Western art and only important insofar as it influenced Western artists.

Indeed, above all else, Freer’s curation of Asian Art points to a dual desire to present Asia as a single entity and provide the West insight into the ways in which Asian art is not only aesthetically pleasing but useful in the project of proving Western superiority. As seen in Image 1, China and Japan flank the entrance and are located in the very center of the gallery. These galleries are also the only ones accessible from any side, as they have entrances located on all four sides. The barriers between these two cultures have been literally broken down and allow for the free flow of visitors between the two unimpeded and unhalted by any completely solid walls. This free-flow means visitors are not challenged in their conflating of these two rooms and viewing the aesthetics and these presented in the rooms as belonging to two discrete entities. While cross-cultural exchange certainly occurred, the layout of the gallery seems to purposely encourage visitors to experience the rooms as linked and homogenizes Japanese and Chinese arts. Their centrality in the gallery also belies how central they are in what Asian art was and still is considered to be - primarily Chinese and Japanese. While Persia and Egypt are included in this

29 Ibid.
gallery, their rooms are smaller in size and placed against a wall. Egypt and Persian are, therefore, situated at the periphery of “Asia” and, when considering how far they are from the Whistler rooms, almost completely foreign from the West. The position of the Persia and Egypt rooms, with China and Japan sitting between them and the Whistler rooms, also implies a kind of progression in Asian art and its value in relation to its proximity to a Western stylistic tradition. However, regardless of the Chinese and Japanese art rooms’ proximity, all four Asian art rooms are united in their subordination to the Whistler rooms, reinforcing the subordinated position of Asian art as a fine art when compared to Western art.

Clearly, the ways in which Freer curated his Asian Art Gallery and the impetus behind placing them in relation to Western pieces to enhance Western artistic prowess was problematic. While Freer attempts to engender an appreciation for Asian art in the American public in a manner that was not as overtly Othering as Dunn’s, Freer’s gallery perpetuated (and continues to perpetuate) ideas of a homogenized Asian art aesthetic privileging Japanese and Chinese art and reinforcing a hierarchy of artistic value progressing from uncivilized, peripheral Asian countries to modernized, Western civilization. Freer’s highly intentional, self-conscious layout of the Asian art rooms as a way to define what is Asia and what is periphery, as well as the homogenizing of Asian art (especially in regard to Japanese and Chinese art) will not be unique to Freer. In fact, these problematic trends will not be unique to the early twentieth century at all. As I will demonstrate, contemporary American Asian Art Museums continue to perpetuate harmful ideas about Asia and Asian art begun by Dunn and Freer.
Case Study: San Francisco Asian Art Museum

Compared to Dunn and Freer’s collections, the San Francisco Asian Art Museum (SFAAM) is far more progressive in its representations of the Far East. On its website, the SFAAM clearly explains its vision of representing a culturally diverse Asia: “Asia is not one place. The ideas and ideals that we call Asian are countless and diverse. Some of the works we display pre-date written history. Others were recently created. Many have connections to works from other continents and other millennia.” Further, SFAAM Director Jay Xu claims the mission of the museum is to “be a catalyst of discovery, dialogue and inspiration.” Not only does the SFAAM commit throughout their online vision and mission statements to work toward representing an intentionally diverse Asia, but the curation team for the Asian Art Museum are primarily Asian-American. Unlike Dunn and Freer, who are white men curating and filtering Asian materials for the consumption of a white, American audience, the SFAAM is curated more thoughtfully by this team of Asian-American curators, museum directors and staffers. This decision seems intentional on the part of the SFAAM hiring team, as problems with representation and “speaking for” others can be mitigated by having Asian-American directors and curators represent themselves and their own cultures. However, while the curators may not be white, they are still largely curating with a white American audience in mind.

In February 2015, the SFAAM had a special exhibition entitled “SEDUCTION: Japan’s Floating World” which centered around courtesans and geishas from the premodern period.

31 Ibid.
Image 2 was taken from the SFAAM website, where the SFAAM promoted the exhibition as an opportunity to “dive into [a] hotbed of hedonism and transgression,” with museum-goers escaping to an imagined, hyper-sexual “Japan” and vicariously experiencing the pleasures shown in the erotic works of art.\(^{32}\) This example of Orientalist sensationalism relies on portraying Japanese women, and Japan itself by extension, as sexually promiscuous, provocative and deviant. The imagined “Japan” becomes a site of escape for a (presumed) white audience to project their racially-charged sexual desires onto. Japanese women are not just exploited for this exhibit, they are fetishized and reduced to objects of lust. The offensive nature of this exhibit would not be as glaring had it not been for this exact same exhibit being shown at two other museums - the Tokyo National Museum and the Okayama Prefectural Museum of Art - under the less provocative titles of “The Lineage of Culture” and “Hosokawa Family Eisei Bunko Collection” respectively.\(^{33}\)


A culturally derived discrepancy is clearly at play in the choice of theme and focus for this collection in American and Japan. Similarly to Dunn’s and Freer’s collections, the SFAAM is choosing to construct a reality of Asian countries - in this case, Japan - that does seek to educate, but does not challenge preconceived notions of the white audiences viewing the displays.

Americans, many of whom already view Japan as a sexually deviant and exotic space, would find their beliefs and assumptions reinforced by this exhibition - despite the fact that individuals in Japan viewing this display would not see the same sexual deviancy and eroticism represented within the pieces.

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Problems with Orientalism are not only present in how the SFAAM invites white audiences to consume Asian art, but also in how they allow white audiences to engage with Asian culture. In image 3, a white individual has dressed in yellowface for the opening celebration of the “SEDUCTION” exhibition.\(^{35}\) In image 4, a white individual has inserted their face into a cut-out featuring one of the paintings in the exhibit.\(^{36}\)

Both of these images present examples of the appropriation of Asian visual culture by white individuals for the purpose of entertainment. The museum, by encouraging white individuals to “wear” Asian identity through either donning yellowface or literally displacing an Asian figure from a historic Asian art piece, reduces Asian identity, culture and history to something that can be owned, defined and determined by white individuals. Scholar Edward Said describes one result of Orientalism as the inability of the East to “represent [itself], [thereby preventing] true

\(^{35}\) Sugiru, Majime, “Yellowface is Such a Drag: Orientalism, Drag, and White Supremacy at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco,” asian art museums samauri blog, February 24, 2015, https://asiansart.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/yellowface-is-such-a-drag/.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
Since the East is unable to represent itself, white, Western individuals lay claim to this authority, further silencing the Asian individuals through both a continued refusal to allow Asian individuals to self-representation and continued violence against Asian identities by owning and displacing Asian individuals from their own culture and heritage. That the SFAAM would not only condone yellowface, but actively encourage the appropriation of Asian identity by white individuals through the cut-outs reveals the SFAAM staffs’ unwillingness to challenge white supremacy and Orientalism if the sensationalism guarantees interest and participation.

These moments of racism and sensationalism should not be seen as merely moments. While the events around this particular exhibition certainly provide one explicit example of Orientalism at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, the terminology used in the galleries, the use of geographic areas to group various Asian ethnic and cultural groups, and the layout and progression of the museum’s galleries all reveal a more insidious Orientalism that betrays the post-colonial, multi-cultural mission statements the San Francisco Asian Art Museum claims to uphold. The remainder of this case study will be dedicated to discussing the issues outlined above.

Immediately, the problem with terminology is evident from the very name of the museum. The San Francisco Asian Art Museum does very little to problematize their use of the word “Asian” in their title and throughout the museum other than to point out that the word is indeed problematic. On a placard near one of the entrances, the SFAAM explains:

‘Asia’ is a term invented by the Greeks and Romans, and developed by Western geographers to indicate the landmass east of the Ural Mountains and Ural River, together with offshore islands such as Japan and Java. Culturally, no ‘Asia’ exists, and the peoples who inhabit ‘Asia’ often have little in common with each other. Recognizing the diversity of the huge area conventionally designated ‘Asia,’ the Asian Art Museum has arranged its collections into seven general groupings: South

In his introduction to *The Modern Anthropology of South-East Asia*, Victor King similarly asserts “‘Asia’ is above all a Western creation, a product of Western perceptions of the ‘other,’ a result of European depiction and classification of other cultures, values and mentalities as radically different from the West.” Unlike King, the SFAAM’s does not include the role that Orientalism and racialization had in the West’s creation of ‘Asia.’ In fact, the SFAAM seems to completely ignore these facts by attributing the creation of ‘Asia’ to the need for the Greek and Roman geographers to define the lands they were unfamiliar with. This retelling of events presents a logical reason for why the Western powers would want to define the ‘Asia’ continent and islands which serves only to elide the hugely problematic Othering which occurred once the West sought to define what the “East”/“Asia” was in contrast to how the West understood itself. King fills in this gap when he writes: “Asian peoples and cultures were therefore contrasted with Western ones as less civilized and developed, and more spiritual, mystical and despotic.” By bringing up the role of the West in creating ‘Asia,’ but failing to also acknowledge how the political and economic dominance of the West over the East post-contact stemmed from racial attitudes, the SFAAM presents a sanitized version of history free from the trouble of challenging white supremacy, Orientalism and Western modes of thought production.

Their failure to challenge Western modes of thought-production when describing the creation of ‘Asia’ as a solely cartographical project is especially important given that the placard continues by stating the SFAAM will be reproducing that cartographical project in their own

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39 Ibid.
galleries. While the SFAAM nuances what ‘Asia’ is far more than the West did when it lumped the entire Far East together as ‘Asia,’ the SFAAM’s creation of seven groupings primarily based on geographic locations and proximities does not offer any challenge whatsoever to how the West defined ‘Asia.’ Like the West, the SFAAM lumps hugely diverse groups together based on geography - ignoring the political, social, cultural, linguistic and religious realities differing between the various groups in these areas. While the SFAAM acknowledges that culturally no ‘Asia’ exists, they undermine this point by creating seven groupings within ‘Asia.’ By dividing singular ‘Asia,’ which they say does not have cultural ties, the SFAAM implies their divisions will demonstrate cultural commonalities within these smaller groups. That must be assumed because if there were absolutely no cultural commonalities between various Asian groups, then all attempts to create any subdivisions would be fruitless since these subdivisions would replicate the issue caused when categorizing different ethnic and cultural groups under a singular ‘Asia.’ By dividing ‘Asia’ into smaller groupings immediately after describing that the peoples within a single ‘Asia’ do not have much in common with one another, the SFAAM creates the expectation that they have solved that issue and have found a cohesive way to sort various Asian identity/ethnic groups together. Of course, we know that cannot be true since King makes a point to say that it is misleading to use geographic area to indicate any kind of cultural uniformity in Asia.\(^40\) Merely breaking ‘Asia’ into smaller clusters does not solve the issue of homogenization but instead creates several homogenized “Asia’s” also based on arbitrary geographic location. These homogenized groupings invariably force certain facets of each cultural/identity/ethnic group to be subsumed for in order to keep the collective identity cohesive and uncomplicated.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
China and Japan are the only two countries in the SFAAM not grouped with other countries or peoples. This comes as little surprise that China and Japan would figure most prominently in the SFAAM (and, indeed, in most American Asian Art Museums) when seeing this focus as an extension of the inclusion of Japan and China in the Western fine art tradition during Freer’s lifetime. Of course, the politico-economic relationship between the United States and China and Japan differ greatly from that of the 1920s, specifically in regard to the relationship between the United States and Japan. Interestingly, Japanese art is the first gallery one finds when entering the SFAAM. When considering how Freer’s gallery is configured, with visitors moving upward in a progression from barbaric art toward more enlightened, Western art, the SFAAM intentionally placing the Japanese gallery feature first seems to disrupt this Western idea of a linear progression from barbarity to enlightenment. However the layout of the galleries in the SFAAM does in fact create a hierarchy based on proximity when considering that the absence of Western art in this museum does not necessarily mean an absence of the West. Instead of experiencing a positive progression from barbarity to enlightenment like in Freer’s gallery, visitors to the SFAAM find themselves instead “regressing” the moment they “leave” the Western World behind them. Since Western art is not permanently displayed within the SFAAM, there is no comfortable Western enlightenment to progress towards, only a Western world to be left behind as visitors climb ever further away from the Western world behind the doors of the entrance/exit and towards increasingly more “Other” Asian cultures.

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41 One could certainly argue that Korea should be included with Japan and China in countries who do not have to share space with other countries or peoples in the SFAAM. However, given North and South Korea are two separate sovereign states with vastly differing political, economic and social cultures, I choose to see the two as distinct entities who should not be grouped merely because of geographic proximity or pre-Cold War history.
As stated above, the Japanese art gallery is the first encountered when one enters the SFAAM. Therefore, Japan is literally and figuratively positioned as the closest in proximity to the Western World. This imagined proximity between the United States and Japan could certainly be seen as the result of Japan’s early history modernizing and Westernizing, giving an easy explanation for its place closest to the door/Western world. However, simply claiming Japan’s early modernization grants it a privileged position as more Western than any other Asian country represented in the SFAAM ignores the reality that the most blatant acts of Orientalism seen at the SFAAM happened during the “SEDUCTION” exhibition on 17th century Japanese art described earlier in the paper. Obviously, a tension exists in both the SFAAM and America itself with the perception of Japan as simultaneously reassuringly familiar, yet incredibly foreign. In order to understand this tension, we must understand how Japan functions as, not just the “Other, but specifically the “Other-as-neighbor” to the United States. In Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes what he sees as a specific type of “Othering” that is grounded in both feelings of fraternity with, but also feelings of obligation and indebtedness toward, the group being Othered. Levinas clarifies: “It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an impeachable assignation.”

For Levinas, the Other-as-neighbor describes a specific tension between the Othering and the Othered, in which the Othering group experiences a loss of power to the Othered because of an unavoidable debt owed to the Othered group. The Othering group feels a compulsion to fraternize and develop a

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close proximity with the Othered group due to feelings of obligation, but also knows this proximity is only a result of obligation, not of a decreased sense of Otherness.

If Japan truly is America’s “Other-as-neighbor,” what is the cause of the debt and obligation that forces America into close proximity and fraternity with Japan? Whereas Freer’s America would have felt a close proximity to Japan because of American interest in Japan’s modernization, contemporary American’s proximity results from mixed feelings of guilt and responsibility over post-World War II Japan. In his monograph *War, Guilt, and World Politics After World War II*, Professor of International Relations, Thomas Berger addresses America’s paternalistic attitude toward Japan after the war and the ways in which Americans saw themselves as directly responsible for Japan’s future:

> [...the United States was de facto in control of occupation policy in Japan.] To prevent Japan from becoming once again a threat to peace and stability, U.S. policy makers concluded… that it would be necessary to remake Japan and remove those elements that were believed to have inclined it toward aggression. [This] entailed [...] eliminating Japanese army and navy as institutions… In the end, the occupation succeeded magnificently… in turning Japan into a peaceful, democratic nation.43

It becomes immediately apparent that the United States felt strongly about (1) their ability to mold Japanese society into the peaceful, democratic nation they desired and (2) their responsibility and obligation to do so given they were the sole Western power occupying and exercising control over Japan. The United States very assertively attempted to remake Japan into something of its own image when democratizing the country; however, this democratization did not make Japan more familiar or non-threatening to the United States, as evidenced by the elimination of the Japanese army and navy and installation of United States forces in Japan. The complete dismantling of the Japanese monarchy, rather than simply refiguring or integrating

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American ideas into existing Japanese systems/institutions, points to an underlying belief that either (1) Japanese systems are completely inferior or dangerous in comparison to Western/American systems or (2) Japanese systems are incompatible with Western systems and institutions and the two cannot coalesce productively. In both cases, Japan is simultaneously Othered and denigrated when placed in comparison to the West/America.

Further, by figuring itself into the global peace-maker, the United States self-imposed the “impeachable assignation” Levinas describes as distinct to the Othering entity in the “Other-as-neighbor” relationship. America’s “impeachable assignation” stems from its post-World War II treatment of Japan as a major hurdle to world peace, requiring a constant American presence in Japan to surveille and police Japanese behavior, enforce democratic ideals and identify negative elements of Japanese society to neutralize and replace.44

While Americans in Japan were beginning the massive overhaul of Japanese society and taking responsibility as global peace-makers, Americans in the U.S. were grappling with questions over the morality of using nuclear weapons against enemies. One of the most vocal American critics of the use of the atomic bomb against the Japanese, David Lawrence, editor of the United States News, emphatically compelled the American public to fully acknowledge guilt:

The truth is we are guilty. Our conscience as a nation must trouble us. We must confess our sin. We have used a horrible weapon to asphyxiate and cremate more than 100,000 men, women and children in a sort of super-lethal gas chamber - and all this in a war already won or which spokesmen for our Air Forces tell us could have been readily won without the atomic bomb… We ought, therefore, to apologize in unequivocal terms at once to the whole world for our misuse of the atomic bomb.45

44 In my honors paper, I hope to provide a more in-depth discussion of Levinas’s ideas of Other and complicate my own reading of the application of Other-as-neighbor onto conceptions of the Japanese by Americans more. I also want to play with the idea of the Other-as-neighbor and the ways in which it can also apply to the U.S. and China in completely different ways.

While America has not yet acknowledged guilt through any kind of formal apology to the Japanese government or those affected by the radiation, President Obama has spoken at length about the obligation and responsibility of the American people to keep the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki alive in order to keep the “moral imagination alive” and “allow us to change.” In a 2009 speech in Tokyo, President Obama speaks about the importance of historical memory:

In Prague, I affirmed America’s commitment to rid the world of nuclear weapons, and laid out a comprehensive agenda to pursue this goal. I am pleased that Japan has joined us in this effort, for no two nations on Earth know better what these weapons can do, and together we must seek a future without them.

In reasserting America’s commitment to rid the world of nuclear weapons to Japan, Obama may not be admitting to American guilt, but he is alluding to America’s responsibility to halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons since they have been the only country to utilize nuclear weapons against an enemy. By acknowledging that only America and Japan can understand the true nature of the atomic bomb, President Obama explicitly invokes America’s bombing of Japan as a means of establishing a unique community (hopefully) only ever consisting of their two countries. This community, despite President Obama attempting to ground it in a commonality, is exactly the kind of community Levinas describes as distinct in the “Other-as-neighbor” relationship. Japan and the United States do not share a commonality in their experiences with the atomic bomb aside from the fact that the bomb existed. Commonalities do not bind them in their created community since Japan’s experiences with trauma, nuclear detonation and destruction are utterly inaccessible and unfamiliar to America. The lack of commonalities in their community is elucidated further when considering the differing impetuses behind Japan and

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America’s desire to end the proliferation of nuclear arms. For America, ensuring the end of nuclear weapons would mean never experiencing the trauma their country caused Japan. For Japan, it would mean never re-experiencing the trauma caused to the country by the United States. In outlining exactly what a world without nuclear bombs would mean for these countries, Levinas’s claim that community and proximity can arise, not from commonality, but from obligation becomes apparent. As demonstrated in the quotes from President Obama’s two speeches, the United States recognizes its responsibility as a world power and as the only country to ever utilize nuclear weapons against another country to work to rid the world of those weapons. Moreover, President Obama claims that it is the memory of destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which prompt meaningful action and “allow us to change.” In short, President Obama’s clear connection between America’s anti-nuclear weapons stance and the unfading memory U.S actions against Japan reveals how America understands itself to be personally obligated to promote an anti-nuclear weapons message because that unfading memory of Japanese trauma is also one of horrible American brutality.

By using Levinas’s “Other-as-neighbor” to understand how Americans can simultaneously conceptualize Japan as part of their shared community but also wholly foreign, one can begin to reconcile the seeming incongruity of the Japanese art gallery being situated closest to the “Western world” and the Orientalist performances of Japanese identity by white individuals at the “SEDUCTION” exhibition opening. Of course, Japan is not the only Asian country whose perceived proximity to Western culture/whiteness is represented spatially within the SFAAM. Moving farther into the Japanese art gallery, one notices the ease with which a visitor can move between the Japanese, Korean and Chinese galleries without noticing much of a
transition between geographic and cultural relocations. Similarly to the Freer gallery, the
SFAAM collapses the boundaries between these “3” countries by having the transitions between
the galleries occur in the hallways. In these hallways, works from one location are phased in
while the next location is gradually phased out, with the overlap of Japanese and Korean or
Korean and Chinese works concentrated on the wall midway down the hallways bridging the
rooms. This blurring of the borders of the rooms and the borders of the galleries encourages
visitors to regard the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic traditions of three separate racial and
cultural groups as if they were a singular, homogenized group. This is hugely problematic
because visitors are not being asked to challenge the Western construction of “Asia” as a
monolithic racial and cultural which was pointed out at the entrance of the museum. Just as the
museum curators and staff did not adequately critique the West’s creation of “Asia” by choosing
to discussing geography over the the insidious nature of Orientalism, the curators do not provide
particularly nuanced portraits of Japan, China and “Korea” by choosing to highlight
commonalities in the art and artifacts over the diversity of identity and expression found in each
country.

The problem with the blurring of cultures becomes ever more apparent when one
journeys farther past the huge Japanese, Chinese and Korean galleries and up to the third floor of
the SFAAM. On this floor, farthest from the entrance and, therefore, farthest from white,
Western society, are the South Asia, South-East Asia, Persian World and West Asia Art
galleries. Immediately, it is clear that the distance between these galleries and the door to the
“Western World” is not just the result of these geographic locations being Culturally Other to the
West, but also Racially Other. Whereas Chinese, Japanese and Korean paintings depict
light-skinned individuals the vast majority of the time, the paintings from the South-East Asia, South Asia and West Asia Art galleries all feature individuals with far darker skin. The linear progression regressing from the Western World at the entrance of the museum “up” to the South, South-East and West Asian galleries presents both an implied cultural regression and a racial regression. Similarly to the Japanese, Korean and Chinese galleries, there are few barriers or signs indicating when you travel between third floor galleries; however, the smaller sizes of these galleries makes it far easier to notice when one collection begins and the next ends. These small collection sizes prove especially disappointing given the “three” countries of Japan, China and Korea are allocated two floors between them and three entire geographic locations share a single floor. Of course, this results in little if any representations of smaller or more impoverished countries in the galleries. For example, the South Asia Art gallery is dominated almost completely by Indian art. It certainly makes sense that Indian art would outnumber art collected from other South Asian countries given India’s high population; however, the South Asia gallery should simply be renamed the Indian Art gallery considering the paltry representation of non-Indian South Asian countries. For example, countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have a few small pieces on display, while Bhutan and the Maldives are not represented at all.

While lack of representation certainly disappoints individuals visiting the South Asia gallery, the South-East Asian Art collection both proves pleasantly diverse but problematically homogenizing. The relatively small collection manages to provide at least a single piece of art or artifact from each of the ten countries which comprise what we refer to as “South-East Asia:” Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Phillipines, Cambodia, Myanmar/Burma,
Laos, and Brunei.\textsuperscript{48} While the South-East Asian gallery is satisfying in that no one country, racial or ethnic group seem to dominate the gallery in the way India and Persia dominant their collections, the diversity of the work collected under the label “South-East Asia” as if these countries provide one cohesive culture based on geographic proximity is a problem revisited frequently in this paper. In his monograph on modern anthropology in South-East Asia, Victor King is direct in the problem with trying to describe what is common across all ten “South-East Asian” countries: “... the cultural, ethnic and racial boundaries of South-East Asia are not coincident; they are permeable and they have changed and shifted over time. The problem is compounded because in addition… Southeast Asia has no discrete geographical features to mark its boundaries.”\textsuperscript{49} The extremely unfixed nature of borders, racial populations, cultural practices, ect. in South-East Asia just highlight how inadequate it is to organize museum collections as large and diverse as the San Francisco Asian Art Museum’s by geographic locations - especially when these groupings are the product of white individuals constructing “Asia’s” based on their idea of how Asia is or ought to be divided. In summary, the problems outlined above specifically concerning the South-East Asia Art collection actually provide a fairly accurate picture concerning the San Francisco Asian Art Museum’s problematic representations of Asia overall. Primarily, by locating the South East Asian Art collection on the third floor, which is distanced from both the lighter-skinned, modernized Asian racial groups on the first and second floors and the “Western world” at the entrance of the museum, the SFAAM implies a regression from enlightened Western society at the entrance leading all the way up to a collection of art from a “barbaric” or “backward” South East Asian culture - all of which is dimly lit and miniscule.

\textsuperscript{48} King, 2.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 19 - 20.
compared to the huge pieces on the first and second floors. Another critical problem is the existence of the “South-East Asian” collection which only serves to reproduce and affirm that a collective cultural identity can be created based on arbitrarily determined geographical proximities. Instead of expanding their “South East Asia” art collection in an honest attempt to embody and represent the multiplicity of different cultural backgrounds, racial identities, ethnic identities, religious beliefs and languages existing in the ten countries comprising “South East Asia,” the SFAAM instead chooses two or three items from each country - completely diluting the rich cultures and art of the countries subsumed under the label “South East Asian.”
Case Study: Seattle Asian Art Museum

Unlike the more overt problems with the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, the Seattle Asian Art Museum has not had any recent problems with museum-visitors dressed in yellow-face or unnecessarily erotic and sensational promotional materials posted online for an exhibit. In fact, the Seattle Art Museum has made significant steps compared to other art museums in developing a mission statement centered around diversity, community outreach and inclusion. These central tenets have culminated in the creation of the Seattle Art Museum “Education and Community Engagement Committee,” which aims to make the museum a more inclusive place that welcomes diversity and reflects this diversity in all aspects of its operations and programming. The committee works with staff to meet this challenge by developing and implementing plans that encourage heterogeneity among trustees, staff, and volunteers of the museum. It also works to increase diversity in programming, membership, and visitors to the museum.50

The Seattle Art Museum’s desire to increase diversity not only among the staff, trustees and volunteers, but also among the members and visitors reveals a commitment to becoming an increasingly more multicultural museum in content, programming, visitors and staff. In increasing the diversity of the individuals visiting the museum, these guests will not only interact with the works in the museum, but more importantly observe trends in how the museum curates the works and orders the exhibition and provide perspective on potentially problematic ways certain works, cultures or types or art are being portrayed or alienated. Unfortunately, despite the amazing work the Seattle Art Museum is going to live up to its desire to be a multicultural museum, several of the same issues at the SFAAM can also be seen at the SAM.

Firstly, whereas (at the very least) the SFAAM gestured toward the problematic nature of using the words “Asia” or “Asian” as Western constructs and complicated the idea of an “Asia” that could be culturally defined, the SAM does not make the same effort to problematize or challenge the Western concepts or ideas of what constitutes “Asia” or “Asian art.” While simply using the word “Asian” in the museum’s title or to describe any of the works is not harmful in and of itself, the fact that a white individual founded the Asian Art Museum and continues to be explicitly celebrated for its founding makes the unchallenged use of “Asian” more uncomfortable than it would be were the founder of the Seattle Asian Art Museum someone who identified as Asian or Asian-American. The fact that a white male founded the Asian Art Museum and no conversation is had online nor in the museum itself concerning how white men from the West constructed and denigrated the Far East and Asian identity never discussed or challenged is especially troubling given there have been several exhibitions in the past few years at the Seattle Asian Art Museum entitled “A Fuller View of China, Japan and Korea.”\(^51\) This exhibition was centered around “how Dr. Fuller, his family and friends, and several more recent Seattle collectors, built SAM’s celebrated Asian art collections.”\(^52\) An exhibition concerned with how a white man collected and curated China, Japan and Korea almost seems like a parody of Dunn or Freer’s galleries from the past; however, the SAM’s celebration of a white man participating in that same historic project of defining and legitimizing Asian art is not self-conscious or critical enough to constitute parody. This exhibition is, essentially, reinforcing the power and authority of white, Western men to dictate standards of aesthetic and cultural worth produced by other cultures - especially Far East cultures. Fuller’s focus on China, Japan and Korea also affirms the persistent American


\(^{52}\) Ibid.
fascination with the “3” lighter-skinned, modern Asian countries and how this fascination has come to define “significant” or “worthwhile” Asian art as Chinese, Japanese and Korean art - with other Asian races and cultures becoming interesting supplements to the big “3” Asian countries.

The issue with a narrow definition of “Asian Art” as art produced primarily by China and Japan, not only arises in Fuller’s exhibition, but in the Seattle Asian Art Museum’s collections itself. Given the Seattle Asian Art Museum’s smaller size, it cannot house the sheer amount of art that the SFAAM can; however, despite its limited space available, the Seattle Asian Art Museum still dedicates two full areas to Japanese and Chinese art. The collection is described briefly on the Seattle Asian Art Museum’s “About Page:” “Our renowned collection of Asian art has grown from its foundations of Chinese and Japanese art, and now includes works from India, Korea, Southeast Asia, the Himalayas, the Philippines, and Vietnam.”

Interestingly, the Seattle Asian Art Museum chooses to claim they have works from “Southeast Asia,” but then specifies also having works from two particular “Southeast Asian” countries: the Philippines and Vietnam.

One might assume they were merely clarifying where in “Southeast Asia” they had works from but the inclusion of “the Himalayas” between “Southeast Asia” and the two “Southeast Asian” countries thwarts that assumption. The only other assumption left to make is that Vietnamese and Filipino art works are permanent installations and other “Southeast Asian” works rotate into the galleries. This would still mean nearly half the gallery is dedicated to the big “3” countries and the other half of the gallery contains South and Southeast Asian art but no West Asian art

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54 I use “South East Asian” here to describe the situation of these two countries geographically. As I describe, what constitutes “South East Asia” is hard to pin down and does not truly describe a cohesive collection of countries but groups mainly based on a geographic reality.
whatssoever. By dedicating so much space to the big “3,” the Seattle Asian Art Museum reinforces the idea that an Asian Art Museum must prominently feature a permanent display of Chinese and Japanese works in order to be legitimate. Further, the Seattle Asian Art Museum assists in constructing an “Asian” cultural and aesthetic standard for inclusion into spaces dedicated around Asian art which is centered around Chinese, Japanese and Korean works - greatly devaluing the remainder of “Asia” in the process.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, I do not believe it is impossible for the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, the Seattle Asian Art Museum, and other American Asian Art Museums to end the harmful curation practices I have pointed out throughout the paper. Contemporary American Asian Art Museums have, as I have traced through my four case studies, directly inherited a mode of understanding Asian art and curation from Asian Art collectors from the past. While we recognize Dunn and Freer’s curatorial styles as steeped in Orientalist and white supremacist ideas of the “distant past,” contemporary Asian Art Museums can perpetuate the same damaging Orientalist ideas if not intentional in the ways they present and order their collections and galleries. Asian Art Museums need to make the same commitment to emphasizing a diverse staff, board of trustees, volunteer base and membership/visitor culture that the Seattle Asian Art Museum. They need to challenge their privileging of Western modes of knowledge productions when ordering and curating collections to ensure they do not perpetuate ideas of racial/cultural regression within the layouts of their museums. They need to be unafraid to present histories that are racist, sexist or harmful, but be confident and ready to confront discrimination that may be present in any museum content. This will of course be challenging and require a great deal of change to occur
on institutional, community and personal levels. However, how can any museum claim to value multiculturalism or post-colonialism, or simply inclusion of any and all interested in engaging with the past if they are unwilling to do difficult work when confronted with the real problems in the ways they order and curate? The simply answer is: they cannot.