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Impossible appraisals: art, anthropology, and the limits of evaluating museum collections in the mid-twentieth century United States

SAMUEL J. REDMAN, PHD
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Keywords Museum history, art history, anthropology, collections, relativism

Abstract In 1958, art historian Creighton Gilbert proposed an audacious system to rank art museums in the United States. The system compared museum collections during an era in which relativism was becoming a dominant force in the social sciences, eschewing the direct comparison or ranking of differing cultural production. This article explores how and why such a system for ranking museums failed. At the same time, however, museum professionals nevertheless maintained their own, internal and less formalized systems for comparing museum collections. In California and beyond, museum professionals used pragmatic assessments to determine the value of museum collections when touring other institutions and orchestrating collections exchanges. In both art and anthropology museums, informal modes of assessing museum quality were maintained while public efforts to rank museums largely failed.

About the Author Samuel J. Redman is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He teaches courses on public history, oral history, and modern U.S. history. His research focuses on 19th and 20th century U.S. cultural, social, and intellectual history. He received his B.A. in anthropology and history from the University of Minnesota Morris and an M.A. and Ph.D. in American history since 1607 at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* (Harvard University Press) and *Historical Research in Archives: A Practical Guide* (American Historical Association). Before graduate school, he worked at the Science Museum of Minnesota, Field Museum of Natural History, and Colorado History Museum.

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Introduction

In 1958, Yale University art historian Creighton Gilbert proposed an audacious system to rank art museums in the United States. Gilbert's bold scheme appeared in the *College Art Journal*. The essay proclaims: "there has never been a way to list the museums in order of the importance of their collection."¹ While conceding, "A really accurate rating is not possible,"² Gilbert nevertheless argued that even a superficial list would spark dialogue on museums. Hartford, Connecticut, for example, was only the forty-seventh largest city in the country in 1958; and yet, according to Gilbert's calculations, possessed the fourteenth best public art collection in the nation. Publishing formal rankings, Gilbert argued, would make clear each city's achievements and failings. The logic justifying emergent museum rankings might be deemed unsurprising when considered in context. Museum historian Neil Harris explains, "Like so much else in the world of American art, justifications for museum support have been

instrumental.”³ Arguing for museum rankings from another perspective, Gilbert described potential pragmatic benefits, “By presenting a complete roster of the relative ranks, we can perhaps find a pattern of what makes for success or failure in a city’s museum development.”⁴

Gilbert’s museum ratings system represents a conceptual break from more dominant patterns of thought regarding museum critique in the mid-twentieth century, an era of rapid growth for cultural institutions.⁵ In November 1961, *The New York Times* proclaimed in a front-page article that museums were undergoing a major revival. The article reads, “Winds of innovation, sometimes blowing at gale force, are whistling through the vaulted halls of American museums.” Exhibits became more dynamic. Larger crowds even lead to new acquisitions through purchase – rare during the Great Depression and World War II.⁶ Despite post-war growth, museums still faced challenges. This included budget shortfalls (sometimes creating extreme budget crises), space limitations, and shifting theories regarding art and society.⁷ Even still, many new museums opened. Nearly seventy percent of all museums in the United States opened after 1940.⁸

This article examines efforts to publicly rank museums in contrast with more common, internal assessments made by museum professionals. The methods used to compare museum collections include collections exchanges, a practice fading during the middle third of the century in favor of a system of temporary object loans. Exchanges provided tangible value systems for collections, as assessments were necessary in order to ensure trades of equal value to both parties. They also provide opportunities to theoretically reinterpret evolving ideas about “value” and the “market” as it relates to art and ethnographic objects in museums.⁹ This article explores both the connections and tensions between cultural and market forces working to evaluate museums in differing forms, ranging from systems imagined for broad popular consumption to handwritten notes scratched in the marginalia of letters exchanged between museum professionals. Varied they may be, writings left behind comparing museum collections represent tangible and occasionally ironic efforts to think through the impossible – judging widely disparate material culture objects during an ongoing relativistic awakening.¹⁰

Curators also toured and compared cultural institutions by reputation. Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber offers a candid example of museum intellectuals assessing collections not quantitatively, but pragmatically and subjectively.¹¹ Kroeber, like others of his generation, maintained his own subjective opinions about competing museums – his writings on the subject represent an alternative approach to museum comparison. Exchanges and value judgments were negotiated just as theorists were reinterpreting art, social formations, and taste making.¹²

For historians, Creighton’s attempt at ranking fine art museums might represent a final gasp in assessing cultural objects soon shattered by seismic shifts in theories regarding cultural criticism. Disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, and sociology upended older methods for interpreting art and material culture. A close study of historical approaches to comparing museums allows us to further penetrate what

historian and theorist James Clifford described as the “art-culture system.”¹³ Attempts to create museum rankings suggest dual longings for respectable public cultural institutions within modern cities against rapidly shifting discourses of academic disciplines. The tenuous reasoning thought to make museum rankings necessary, neglected to fully adhere the radical shifts in thinking about culture and society, museum objects, and art. Efforts to judge museum objects continued internally out of necessity when deciding fair value on an exchange of objects between museums or appraising the value of an object for insurance purposes before temporary loans. The practice of touring and comparing museums would continue into the later twentieth century but published museum rankings failed to catch on.

Reconstructing debates about comparing museum collections provide at least two important insights. First, these debates illuminate evolving theoretical discomfort with judging material culture and art across human societies. Further, this discourse provides important clues to historians of museums regarding the actual state of particular museums during the eras in which these debates were taking place. Museum thinkers left behind records comparing exhibits, preservation efforts, and holdings.

More recent attempts to develop “rational approaches” for “ranking items in museum collections” have emerged from Great Britain. Despite seemingly proposing a new approach to comparing collections, these efforts continue to focus largely on internal assessment tools for museum professionals and furthermore struggle to articulate an adequate approach to comparing objects of widely disparate origin. These recent systems also generally fail to articulate the symbolic value attached to prized paintings or other museum objects for local communities.¹⁴ These social valuations prove difficult if not impossible to quantify.¹⁵ Popular magazines have ranked places to attend graduate school, get a heart transplant, or see a baseball game, but not to view exhibitions of Maori art or European impressionist paintings. While the absence of museums from these rankings may seem to some an anomaly, this article examines why public systems for ranking museums never developed successfully in the twentieth century United States, and why internal alternatives developed by museum professionals have proven more persistent.

Ranking fine art museums

Creighton Gilbert based his museum ratings around strikingly simple criteria. Gilbert used *Old Master Paintings in North America*, John D. Morse’s popular book originally published in 1955. Morse describes forty canonical “Old Masters” in Western art.¹⁶ Gilbert took Morse’s list and compared master paintings in each city against its population. He then *ranked* museums based on Old Masters per capita. Some results proved unsurprising. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is listed as the top art museum in the nation with the National Gallery in Washington D.C. following behind. Other assessments, however, such as the Toledo Museum (25) ranking above the Fogg Museum of Art at Harvard (26), or the fact Gilbert separated the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco from the Omaha Art Museum by only one painting might stand out as revelations. Gilbert writes, “Looking at the above list, most readers, I suspect, will be chiefly surprised by some of the rankings that are higher than they had

expected. For some it will be the Corcoran, for others Raleigh, the Taft or Muncie that seems to be in remarkable company.”¹⁷ Despite embracing simple methods, the survey produced unanticipated results.

Today, we can critique Gilbert’s criteria for assessing art museums as simplistically uncritical and ethnocentric (focusing exclusively on European cultural accomplishments), yet his rankings bring to light at least one important and valid notion. If those thinking about museums believe the Fogg Museum of Art to possess a superior collection to the Muncie Art Museum, on what was this assumption based? If these suppositions were merely assumptions; it seemed to follow, what might be learned from attempted quantification? Gilbert opined in his essay, “How many visitors to the Fogg have ever seen Muncie at all?”¹⁸

The *College Art Journal* soon printed a critical response to Gilbert’s essay authored by Daniel Catton Rich from the Worcester Art Museum (which did not appear on Gilbert’s list). According to Rich, Gilbert’s rating system was mere parlor game. Gilbert’s system, said Rich, “may have a certain success on campus,” but “its method is one of the most peculiar, statistically, ever invented by a fun-loving college professor.”¹⁹ Rich’s critique of Gilbert’s Rating System was based substantially on Gilbert’s choice of Morse’s book as his singular criteria for assessing museum collections. Rich argued European Old Masters alone do not provide an accurate assessment of an art museum’s collections. Rich responded to Gilbert’s methodology, “In spite of Gilbert’s assertions that this is playing fair, what happens when such a measure is applied to Cleveland? Even with its superb medieval collection it appears as ninth in his rating. What of Kansas City, famous for its Oriental art? Thirteenth, reports Gilbert.”²⁰ It was true, Gilbert’s rankings were not in line with commonly held perceptions in the art history community, and this was deemed good reason to call them into question.

Rich not only articulates discomfort with formally rating art museums by dismissing it as a game, he implies that experiential knowledge of museum collections outweighed simple surveys. The assumption Kansas City and Cleveland have been rated too low is based solely on his personal assessment of museum holdings. Gilbert seemingly anticipates this critique in his original article. He comments directly to reputation-based practice of assessing museums, “Readers of CAJ all carry around a feeling about the distinction between the major and minor art museums in this country. Though the biases of geography and our specialized interests exist, they can be discounted.”²¹ Cities were eager to proclaim their art museum best, and museums also had reason to promote particular collections as unique or especially valuable nationally. Gilbert called into question these assumptions when he articulated his museum-rating scheme.

Museums and their boosters were quick to tout specific collections. This included recently acquired or exhibited treasures as evidence suggesting their city’s museum superiority.²² The disagreement emerged when thinkers proposed to rationalize and make measurable the previously experiential based and informal museum impressions. In their exchange, Rich chides Gilbert for “handicapping” museums based on the size of their surrounding community. The number of Old Master paintings

held by public museums, in a sense, worked symbolically as a marker of overall cultural literacy. This public critique poses a problem for Rich, who is willing to applaud cities like Kansas City and Cleveland in his printed response, while avoiding criticism of any particular institution's collections. This sort of avoidance of public critique of museum collections, however, certainly did not mean collection weaknesses were totally unknown or went unmentioned in private, professional dialogue. This sort of discourse extended beyond fine art collections and Old Masters, experienced in different contexts in other academic disciplines during the same period, including museum anthropology.

Assessing museums of anthropology

Natural history and anthropology museums in the United States emerged from a spirit of urban and regional competition within the expanding nation. As urban centers competed with each other for regional markets and prestige – cultural advancement in higher education, science, and museums became critical to establishing modern cities. Even before the watershed 1893 World's Columbian Exposition – city boosters in Chicago were pondering how a new museum of natural history might improve the city's standing on the national stage. One article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, published two years before the important fair reads, "If Chicago gets down to work at once it can have the largest Museum of Natural History on the continent." The article continues by considering the standing of existing museums, "There are at present only three great museums in the United States – the National Museum at Washington, the Peabody Institute connected with Harvard University, and the American Museum of Natural Sciences in New York." This apparent lack of competition, coupled with the coming of the international exposition, created an opportunity for the city, "Chicago can outdo all of these if its acts promptly in the matter of securing the necessary funds."²³

Even when museums could not compete in terms sheer size, they often posited claims regarding particular collections. San Diego, following cities like Chicago, used an exposition to organize new museums in Balboa Park. Just two years after the 1915 fair, *The Los Angeles Times* touted the Science of Man Building (later the San Diego Museum of Man) as possessing "collections [that] ranks as the most important of its kind in existence."²⁴ Competition over what were understood to be limited resources in ethnographic and archaeological material, coupled with a blend of urban and nationalistic competition, fueled museum growth. The resulting expansion – described by historians as culminating into an era known as the *Museum Period* – led to further reflections upon the state of anthropology collections by the mid-twentieth century.²⁵ Lesser-known writings of anthropologists, notably Alfred Kroeber and Cornelius Osgood add considerably to our knowledge of the challenges facing museums after World War II.

By 1946, Alfred Kroeber, a leading Boasian anthropologist and director of the University of California Museum of Anthropology, reflected on the institution he helped build.²⁶ Annual reports of this era were, in many ways, strikingly different documents from the glossy museum reports issued today. Whereas today, museum reports tend to be promotional documents shared with board members and potential donors, older

annual reports were often candid assessments of institutional operations and problems. Kroeber offered a critical museum assessment in the year of his official retirement (he would remain active in anthropology until his death in 1960). In his essay, he situates the University of California collections against other museums of anthropology in the United States. He split university museums from major metropolitan museums. While Kroeber believed his museum compared favorably to other institutions across the American West, eastern museums were older, and in certain ways, more successful. He repeated his museum's claim to the largest anthropology collection west of Chicago. Kroeber believed Harvard University in particular had solved many of the key problems associated with university museums. Continuing in his praise of museums on the campus he wrote, "Harvard appears to have found the best solutions. In its Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, its Museum of Zoology, and its Fogg Museum of Art, it has three times developed university museums premier in its field."²⁷ Harvard had worked to address Kroeber's notions of the problems inherent to university-based museums. He explained, "Any university museum faces a specific problem. This springs from the fact that essentially such a museum consists of a collection of physical objects placed in a setting which contrariwise operates primarily with ideas words and symbols."²⁸ Contradictions notwithstanding, Kroeber still believed university museums enjoyed several advantages, including that they were often directed by scholars in the fields in which they intended to both instruct and research. Kroeber advanced that this worked to free these institutions from the obligation to entertain the public, and allowed them to "aim at an intellectually much higher level of communication than can the public or community museum, which has the average citizen or the child as its objective."²⁹

While Kroeber believed his museum's collections ranked among the best in the country, he was quick to acknowledge the Field Museum of Natural History (FMNH) in Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York as being obviously superior in anthropology collections overall. Some Berkeley collections, however, compared favorably to the larger, older east coast museums.³⁰ This was especially true in terms of the most obvious regional advantage presented to Kroeber – California Indian material. This project of rapid museum collecting and expanding, especially in the field of California cultures, came to a crescendo in 1925 with the publication of his encyclopedic *Handbook of the Indians of California*.³¹ Although Kroeber did not abandon the museum after this period, his biographers note both some personal frustration with curating the museum on campus coinciding with his personal intellectual shifts away from material culture as an object of study.

Kroeber's museum assessments were informal and not widely distributed. Despite their basis in personal experience rather than statistical quantification, Kroeber's impressions are not easily dismissed. By the time he reflected on the comparative state of museums in the United States, he had worked as a visiting scholar or researcher at numerous other institutions, including significant time working with the collections at AMNH and FMNH. His own fieldwork in both North and South America resulted in new collections for other museums, as well as for the museum at Berkeley. He was therefore intimately familiar with a wide variety of anthropological and

archaeological collections across the country, including both universities and major urban museums.

In this instance, despite Kroeber's personal stature in anthropology as a field, the fact museum annual reports received minimal circulation outside of the museum community, made the impact of this essay limited. The casual assessments made by a senior scholar did not seem to call for a response in the same manner a proposed rankings system might have. While maintaining with confidence some collections are superior to others, Kroeber eschewed detailed justification for these assessments – failing to answer possible questions such about the size of collections, uniqueness, or comparative research value. Education and outreach were completely ignored as possible museum assets. Published evaluations of museums and museum collections appeared only occasionally during the next few decades.

Yale University anthropologist and museum curator Cornelius Osgood authored a report published in 1979 entitled *Anthropology in Museums of Canada and the United States*, assessing museum effectiveness. Following the tradition of museum professionals like Kroeber, Osgood based many of his ideas about particular institutions on personal experiences. An accomplished ethnographer who studied in Asia and the Arctic, Osgood began his career as an ethnologist at the National Museum of Canada before joining the Yale faculty. He later became the director of the Peabody Museum of Natural History on campus. By 1970, the bespectacled Osgood had spent decades traveling to museums in North America, Europe, Asia, and South America. In a single year, he completed a 13,000-mile drive around Europe visiting museums. Between 1970 and 1974, he covered another 30,000 miles to tour more than sixty museums in the United States and Canada. Osgood spent so much time looking at museums he was moved to comment about his travels, "It was perhaps one museum too many. As an ethnologist should know, intensive data collecting can be exhausting. Perhaps it would have been wiser to look longer at waterfalls."³² Osgood's work provides baseline descriptions of the institutions he visited, but hesitates to go so far as to compare disparate museum collections.

Collections exchanges and evaluating museum objects

Museum object exchanges were a common feature in museum history early in the twentieth century. A 1905 article in the *Washington Post* quotes Smithsonian curator Otis Mason describing a Native American mannequin (complete with authentic clothing), "This figure . . . will be sent to the castle of a Bohemian nobleman, in exchange for some beautiful peasant costumes which the latter has given us."³³ Overshadowing collections exchanges are more common acquisition methods; gifts, purchases, or collecting expeditions. More common than exchanges with private individuals were exchanges between museums, yet in most cases, pragmatic desire to acquire specimens outweighed social theory. Understanding how museums worked together in order to make attempts at equal value exchanges can help historians comprehend how museum professionals assessed certain kinds of material culture. In an era defined by expanding relativism in the social sciences, exchange of disparate material culture objects became increasingly complicated by the changing theoretical landscape. Following practices common in natural history museums, museums

concerned with material culture frequently offered “duplicate” objects in exchange for materials perceived to be missing from collections, following principles of natural classification more closely associated with Linnaean thinking than emerging Boasian relativism in anthropology. Exchanges were most common between American museums from their founding to post-World War II era, when insured loan agreements began to become the preferred method for sharing collections. Typically, museums would play off each other’s strengths and weaknesses in order to make trades beneficial for both parties.³⁴

The University of California Museum of Anthropology, under Kroeber’s guidance, engaged in numerous exchanges. The museum must be understood within particular contexts, however. As a public body embedded within the University of California, the institution consistently struggled to obtain funding to acquire new collections. Research and teaching interests influenced decisions to acquire certain kinds of collections opportunistically. When studied within the context of particular museum goals and historic contexts, the practice of exchange frequently made rational sense at the time. In practice, however, exchanged objects caused even those who generally espoused cultural relativism to temporarily suspend their theoretical sensibilities in order to advance the mission of the university museum. At the University of California, Alfred Kroeber and curator Edward Gifford understood their museum as aspiring to develop encyclopedic collections representing the material culture of California Indians. Although the museum was best known as a repository for these collections, they frequently balked at the prospect of trading their marquee material. Instead, the museum attempted first to find other areas of “duplication” in the collection to trade.

Between 1928 and 1930 the Otago University Museum in New Zealand completed a series of collections exchanges with the University of California. Otago University offered to trade a collection of Maori material, which at the outset of the Great Depression, the University of California could certainly not afford to collect through fieldwork. The curator of the Otago University Museum material responded favorably to the University of California’s offer to return in exchange ancient archaeological material from Greece or Rome, but penciled in the margins, “Santa Barbara things would be much more to the point, if your regulation forbidding export is rescinded by that time.”³⁵ While the University of California aimed to protect its California Indian materials, other institutions presumed an abundance of materials collected from the state would encourage local curators to use California collections when bartering with other museums for artifacts.

Throughout the 1930s, archival records suggest the University of California’s reluctance to trade California Indian material, but no official policy on the subject emerged. With Kroeber and Gifford as the two major figures nearly solely governing the campus museum, a verbal or even implicit agreement on the matter may simply have been in place. Early in the 1940s, Kroeber continued to envision his collection as intended to document the entire pre-contact history of American Indians in California. By the late 1950s and 1960s, the final decades in which museum exchanges were common (and the decades in which both Kroeber and Gifford died), the Hearst Museum loosened its restrictions on the exchange of California Indian materials with

other museums. By this time, however, the heyday of museum exchanges had passed, and the collections largely remain intact, as Kroeber and Gifford intended. While certain museums avoided trading their marquee collections, as the University of California Museum of Anthropology did with their California Indian objects, many museums in the United States eagerly attempted to obtain collections through trades throughout this period, consistently assigning a value for different forms and types of global material culture and art.

Museum exchanges were not limited to the University of California. In 1930, the Smithsonian reported the National Museum of Natural History traded 12,649 objects that year alone, “these being duplicates for which return was made to the Museum collections.”³⁶ Just two years earlier, exchanges in anthropological material at the American Museum of Natural History brought to the museum examples of African beadwork, ancient stone tools, and ethnographic objects from the Northwest Coast of North America.³⁷ Also in the late 1920s, the AMNH and FMNH completed an exchange of materials from Southeast Asia – with the museum in New York receiving a collection of masks in exchange for a wooden temple drum sent to Chicago.³⁸ Just as at Berkeley, other museums approached institutions abroad for specialized collections – sometimes directly linked to colonial occupation. In 1934, Chicago’s Field Museum completed an exchange with the National Museum of Denmark, acquiring stone tools from the region dating back to the Neolithic period. That same year, the museum also acquired material from French colonies in Africa through exchange with the Musée d’ethnographie in France.³⁹ Exchanges with private individuals, while less common, continued to occur in certain scenarios. Byron Knoblock of La Grange, Illinois sent the FMNH six human skulls, fragmentary bones, and a Folsom like flint point from California as part of an exchange in 1936.⁴⁰

Museums were willing to part with objects or collections when tempting opportunities to exchange might strengthen respective collections. The University of California was not alone in its inability to conduct fieldwork abroad during the Great Depression’s economic crisis and an exchange with a museum in New Zealand offered access to materials not immediately available otherwise. In order to make exchanges work, however, museums needed to consider the relative strengths and needs connected to each institution. International exchanges involving disparate cultural objects could prove awkward and challenging. Personal relationships, built through years of correspondence and academic discourse complimented another form of experience – actually visiting other museums and meeting face-to-face with other curators to facilitate exchanges.

Conclusion

One of Gilbert’s major arguments held some merit; ideas about museum quality are largely shaped by reputation and personal experience. Museums’ perceived cultural value was closely aligned to the paintings and artifacts they possessed, but also the professionals affiliated with each institution. Built in assumptions that museums were somehow isolated from twists in the cultural marketplace and changes in political economy prove false upon closer examination. Instead, popular and professional ideas about the relative standing of museums were partly shaped by the enthusiastic civic

boosters, influential curators; as well as the canonical values associated with Western art and the ebbs and flows of the private art market, driven partly by changing tastes. Museums in cities throughout the United States hoped their collections in fine art and anthropology might one day rival the older institutions in Europe. Younger cities and universities aspired to match the prestigious collections often found in older cultural centers. Perceptions aside, little evidence supported the idea collections might be empirically compared across cultures with effectiveness.

Despite the accuracy of Gilbert's claim that reputation overshadowed quantitative evidence in comparing museums, the notion it was possible to quantify the standing of ethnography and art collections was fundamentally flawed. Collections exchange networks and museum tours provided a basic familiarity with cultural collections however flawed they might be. The experiences held by these individuals included surprisingly extensive and well documented museum tours, surveys, and exchanges demonstrating both professional concern and a genuine network of personal relationships. These relationships often built upon or accompanied exchanges or loans in museum objects and were linked to specific curators or institutions. In an era defined by cultural relativism's gradual rise, it is perhaps easy to understand the unsettled feelings many museum professionals and academics outwardly expressed in regards to comparing disparate material culture. And yet, in practice, collections exchanges show museum professionals believed themselves capable (at least in basic pragmatic terms) of determining the relative value of collections in determining comparable value for trades. Without question, the establishment of an art market helped in the expansion and professionalization of museum loan policies underwritten by insurance companies.

Basing metrics on a single criteria centered upon ethnocentric notions about Western high art proved to be a fatal flaw for museum rankings. Perhaps due to these early failures, it remains to be seen how a more complex rankings system might fare in both the public and academic discourse. Our lingering discomfort connected to valuating different types of material culture, originating in cultural relativism's expanding influence, would likely make the project impossible. The complexity of museum collections mirrors the infinite possibilities of human expression, making the ranking these institutions untenable. Quantitative analysis fails to capture the artist's execution, feeling behind a single brush stroke, or the spiritual power inherent to cultural artifacts. The power of these objects lies not within their assessed value, but instead within the collective and individual connections they provide to museum visitors, researchers, and descendent communities.

Gilbert's attempt at ranking museums potentially discomforted his contemporaries due in part to his decision to examine Old Master paintings collections as the end-all for museum rankings. Not only were other collections (and other cultures) totally ignored, formal quantitative analysis was foreign to many museum professionals. Kroeber's comparative rankings based on reputation were considered more productive and continued to be the dominant method for comparing museum collections.⁴¹ In the mid-1960s, the Committee for Anthropological Research in Museums, an American Anthropological Association subcommittee, organized a survey of anthropological

collections in North America. Statistical information was requested in order to report the size and scope of specific collections to researchers, but no attempt at *ranking* collections was attempted. By this time, the project of formally comparing museum collections appeared impractical, impossible, or simply undesirable.⁴²

The question of the utility of ranking museums remains – how useful might it be to know who has the best collection of Maori art, for instance, among the major art and anthropology museums of the United States? Might such a system be of use to students, researchers, or indigenous communities? While such a system might be of only passing interest to most visitors, a visitor with a passionate interest in a certain type of collection might find a rankings system to be of greater interest as would individuals representing indigenous communities who work with material culture artifacts. Despite potential advantages, any system attempting to compare art or global material culture will suffer from familiar insufficiencies, capturing the unlimited diversity of world expression represents a project we now recognize as steeped in outdated conceptualizations of positivism in science.

By understanding how museums and scholars in the United States compared collections, we can better comprehend how these institutions interacted and understood the value and meaning connected to their holdings. Thinking about how museum thinkers considered other collections, through attempts to create rankings systems, first-hand experiences including exchanges and tours, or through reputation, can help us better read the history of the modern museum in the United States.

Notes

¹ Creighton Gilbert, “A Rating for U.S. Art Museums.” *College Art Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 4. Summer, 1958. 392-403.

² Gilbert 1958, 392.

³ Neil Harris, “Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence,” in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*. Chicago: University of Chicago. 1990. 56.

⁴ Gilbert 1958, 392. Boosters in major metropolitan areas had utilized museum collections to boast of civic success before, especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See Neil Harris “The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4. Winter, 1962. 545-566. The development of museums in Boston and elsewhere further discussed in Levine, Lawrence. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1990.

⁵ While the practice of ranking museums never took hold, descriptive guides to museums – especially art museums – greatly proliferated in the post-war era. Walter Pach. *The Art Museum in America*. New York: Pantheon. 1948. S. Lane Faison, Jr. A

Guide to the Art Museums of New England. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company. 1958. Eloise Spaeth, *American Art Museums: An Introduction to Looking*. New York: Harper & Row. 1960. Lila Sherman. *Art Museums of America: A Guide to Collections in the United States and Canada*. New York: William Morrow and Company. 1980. Sherman's guide even includes a unique appendix, "Where to Find Special Collections" that lists particular museums under specific headings such as African, American contemporary, folk art, and even Pre-Columbian categories.

⁶ McCandlish Phillips, "Attendance Soars At Museums Here," *New York Times*, November 27, 1961. Pg. 1.

⁷ Unknown Author, "Art Museum Faces a Curtailed Week," *New York Times*, January 7, 1959. 35.

⁸ Richard Candida-Smith. "Modern Art and Oral History in the United States: A Revolution Remembered," *Journal of American History* Vol. 78, No. 2 (1991): 598-606.

⁹ Here we might consider the notions of "use value" and "exchange value" offered by Karl Marx and elaborated upon by Hannah Arendt and other thinkers. The solidification of the modern art market seems disconnected from the labor theory of value, constructing layers of cultural and civic value on top of the independent motivators of unique agents bidding on fine art or antiquities. Considering the fetishism of museum objects may be more applicable in this scenario rather than commodities based on measurements of labor. Nevertheless, it is clear that the modern art and antiquities market, as it was developing in the United States, was influenced by a variety of distinct economic, political, and cultural factors. This essay works to extend these ideas to consider the mid-twentieth century discourse about the comparative value of museum collections, trades and exchanges, and museum acquisitions from the art and antiquities markets as contributing to the solidification of the social sciences to museums (especially anthropology, archaeology, art history) and the growth of the private art market in the twentieth century. This essay therefore asks how the discourse surrounding museum rankings might have simultaneously contributed to the mid-century growth and professionalization of museums and markets. See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: The Viking Press. 1968 edition. 33.

¹⁰ Considering Marx's idea that no object can possess value without being an object of utility – we might consider how various economies – prestige, cultural, and monetary benefit from the presence of art and anthropology museums in cities. Marx notion of "use value" might lead historians to reconsider the influence of the art market and the perceived disconnect between monetary values of "priceless" works of art and the functioning of purchases of art or antiquities. Marx would argue, however, that any possible distinction drawn between these marketplaces were in reality – imaginary cultural constructions. In order to fairly exchange fine art produced by two distinct painters or trade artifacts originating from disparate cultures, Marx would contend that museum curators did – consciously or subconsciously – compare the value of these objects to other outside commodities. It was impossible to trade museum objects

without considering multiple considerations toward their perceived value – including possibly the direct comparison of cash value. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. New York: The Modern Library. 1906. 43-53. See also, Catherine A. Nichols. “The Smithsonian Institution’s ‘Greatest Treasures’: Valuing Museum Objects in the Specimen Exchange Industry,” *Museum Anthropology*. Spring 2018. 13-29.

¹¹ Numerous writings provide biographical information about Kroeber, yet no truly comprehensive or critical biography has yet appeared. Kroeber, Theodora. *Alfred Kroeber: A Personal Configuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1970. More recent examples include, Kroeber, Karl and Kroeber, Clifton, eds. *Ishi in Three Centuries*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2003. Sackman, Douglas Cazux. *Wild Men: Ishi and Kroeber in the Wilderness of Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2010. Most important to this study, however, is Jacknis, Ira. Alfred Kroeber as Museum Anthropologist. *Museum Anthropology*. Vol. 17, No. 2. June 1993. 27-32.

¹² The work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might help us to consider these ranking systems of modes of *cultural reproduction* or *cultural capital*. Certainly, the rankings system offered by Creighton Gilbert at mid-century might be read as a mechanism for reasserting Western cultural values and aesthetic tastes. Fine art, at mid-century, could still be read as synonymous with the Old Masters. The radical paradigm shifts introduced by varied and complex modernist art movements were working to shatter these previously accepted hierarchies regarding art.

¹³ James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1988. 215-251.

¹⁴ Martin Wickham, “Ranking Collections” in *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, Susan J. Knell, ed. Burlington: Ashgate. 2004. Second Edition. 222-234.

¹⁵ In spite of this difficulty, both Freud and Marx attempted to define how material objects are made into distinct fetishes. See, Tim Dant, “Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects,” *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, Issue 3. 495-516.

¹⁶ John D. Morse. *Old Master Paintings in North America*. New York: Abbeville Press. 1996.

¹⁷ Gilbert 1958, 394.

¹⁸ Connections between wealthy newspapermen and museums include Detroit (James E. Scripps) and Kansas City (William Rockhill Nelson). Herbert & Marjorie Katz, *Museums, U.S.A. A History and Guide*. Garden City: Doubleday & Co. 1965. 47.

¹⁹ D.C. Rich. “Gilbert’s Museum Rating,” *College Art Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1. Autumn 1958. 64-66.

²⁰ Rich 1958, 64.

²¹ Gilbert 1958, 392.

²² For example, see Chesly Manly, "One Billion Years at Our Doorstep," *Chicago Daily Tribune*. April 1, 1956. 3.

²³ "Museum for Chicago: Collection of the World's Fair Scientific Exhibits." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. December 20, 1891. 11.

²⁴ "War and Learning Mix on Exposition's Site." *Los Angeles Times*. July 1, 1917. III. 23.

²⁵ See, for example, George Stocking, *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1988. 7.

²⁶ The University of California Museum of Anthropology was eventually renamed the Lowie Museum then subsequently renamed the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

²⁷ *University of California Museum of Anthropology Report to President Robert Gordon Sproul for the Year Ending June 30, 1946*, UCMA AR, 1946. 10.

²⁸ UCMA AR, 1946. 9.

²⁹ UCMA AR, 1946. 10.

³⁰ UCMA AR 8-9.

³¹ Kroeber, Alfred. *Handbook of the Indians of California*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 78. 1925.

³² Cornelius Osgood, *Anthropology in Museums of Canada and the United States*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Museum. Publication in Museology Number 7. 1979. 8.

³³ "Not on Public View: Some Curious Things at the National Museum Not Exhibited," *Washington Post*. June 18, 1905. 9.

³⁴ I have yet to find an archival document indicating dissatisfaction with an exchange. Good-faith exchange systems proved surprisingly successful, yet lost provenance information can be a frustrating legacy for museums today.

³⁵ Hearst Museum of Anthropology Accession File 642. H.D. Skinner to Gifford April 12, 1930.

³⁶ *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the year ending June 30, 1930*. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1930. 27.

³⁷ *Annual Report for the American Museum of Natural History for the year 1928*. New York: American Museum of Natural History. 1929. 87.

³⁸ *Annual Report for the American Museum of Natural History for the year 1928*. New York: American Museum of Natural History. 1929. 87. *Annual Report of the Field Museum of Natural History for the year 1928*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History. 1929. 513.

³⁹ *Annual Report of the Field Museum of Natural History for 1933*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History. 1934.

⁴⁰ *Annual Report for the Field Museum of Natural History for the year 1936*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History. 1937. 98.

⁴¹ Kroeber and Gifford did not avoid quantitative analysis altogether. In fact, both utilized quantitative data to draw conclusions in their own research. Yet, when it came to determining the value of collections, statistical or empirical analysis was often limited until the 1960s. An example of the use of statistical analysis in determining the size and scope of anthropological collections can be found in Hunter, John E. *Inventory of Ethnological Collections of the United States and Canada*. New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. 1967.

⁴² John E. Hunter. *Inventory of Ethnological Collections of the United States and Canada*. New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. 1967.

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