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Exhibiting Cultural Objects from Asia in the Norton Simon Museum:
The Orientalization of the Asian Art Galleries

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Anna Kryczka, who was my first TA at UCI, my role model and the person who took the time to meet me at LACMA to get coffee and inspired me to write this paper.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Exhibiting Asian Objects in the Norton Simon Museum:

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The purpose of my thesis is to analyze how the label, "Asian Art Collection," misrepresents and misinterprets the cultural objects displayed in the Norton Simon Museum. After Norton Simon's death in 1993, the museum underwent a five million dollar renovation, which included adding gallery space for Simon's Asian art collection. Designed by Frank Gehry with the assistance of Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, the overall design and aesthetic of the galleries suggests the idea of a sacred temple space, which generalizes Asia to be a timeless and oriental place. While the collection itself contains mostly religious objects, it fails to represent all Asian cultures and countries as indicated by the collection title. Using James Clifford's art-culture system, I question whether these cultural objects are considered art and analyze the value the museum assigned to these objects and how this value is reflected in how they are displayed. The Norton Simon Museum fails to educate the community it serves by not presenting a diverse and inclusive collection of objects from Asia.

Introduction

Displays of non-Western objects from sacred temples to Western museums have allowed visitors to encounter these objects in a specifically Western context. This allows the museum (potentially) to educate the visitor about the artistic and sacred value of the object, precious to the culture that it originated from. But many institutions, such as the Norton Simon Museum, situate non-Western objects within a context that strips away from the object its history and original function. In the Norton Simon Museum, the objects in the Asian Art collection are identified as *art* but not treated as equal to Western artworks. The museum imposes a value on the collection that is different from what the culture that produced them had conceived. And so my thesis will focus on the Norton Simon Museum and discuss how the museum misappropriates and misrepresents Asia through the objects that it displays.

I first went to the Norton Simon Museum in 2015 and was immediately in awe of the institution and its collection. Walking through the galleries on the main floor, I saw a massive collection of European masterworks ranging from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. However, it was the South and Southeast Asian art collection located in the lower galleries that caught my particular interest. Never before had I encountered an Asian art collection in a Western institution that incorporated works from Southeast Asia. For the first time, I felt personally represented because I saw objects from my culture. At first glance, the South and Southeast Asian art galleries seemed inclusive, but as I spent more time in the galleries, I realized that not all South and Southeast Asian countries were represented and that there were problems with the organization and presentation of the collection. I argue here that the objects displayed in the South and Southeast Asian art galleries are cultural objects that are limited by

only being presented as *art*, and that the overall design and aesthetic of the galleries enforce the ideas of Orientalism, inappropriately coalescing all Asian cultures together.

Orientalism and Panethnicity

In 1974, entrepreneur and philanthropist Norton Simon assumed leadership of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. That same year, the museum closed for renovations and incorporated Simon's collection with the institution.¹ On March 1, 1975, the museum reopened, and in October of that same year, the institution changed its name to the Norton Simon Museum. After his death in 1993, his wife, actress Jennifer Jones took over leadership and renovated the museum to include the Asian art collection.² Today, the museum displays over 800 works, ranging from Impressionism to Contemporary art, as well as works from Simon's Asian art collection, which is the focus of this thesis.

Throughout this paper, I use the terms "Orientalism" and "Panethnicity" as part of the discourse of how the Norton Simon Museum labels and displays its Asian art collection. These terms were used to describe the "Other," specifically the Middle East and Asia but originated from different events in history. Coined by Edward Said, in his most influential book, *Orientalism* (1978), the term refers to "a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')." ³ In other words, Orientalism is a framework of how West viewed the East through a lens that distorts the actual reality of the East, specifically the Middle East, as foreign, timeless and backwards. Orientalism is an external way of defining collective identity, where the West created a label that imposes and produces the notion of Asian nations and people. Panethnicity,

¹ The Norton Simon Foundation, "Norton Simon Biography," www.nortonsimonfoundation.org/norton-simon-biography.

² Suzanne Muchnic, "Jennifer Jones Simon Gave New Life to Husband's Museum," in *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/dec/18/entertainment/la-et-jones-appreciation18-2009dec18>

³ Edward W. Said, "The Scope of Orientalism" in *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 44.

on the other hand, is an internal way of collective identity, where it is simply the person's idea of the organization; it created the discourse for political and cultural elites to recognize ethnic and cultural diversity within its boundaries. The idea of Asian American panethnicity began with non-Asians who were unable or unwilling to distinguish between different subgroups.⁴ Used by Asian Americans as a political resource to mobilize people, panethnicity forces others to be more responsive to their grievances and agendas.⁵ Yen Le Espiritu (Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego), defines panethnicity as the "generalization of solidarity among ethnic subgroups."⁶ Both of these labels were designed for Westerners to create stereotypes in non-Western cultures, and although used in sociological literature, they also had an influential role in the art world, such as the depiction of the "Other" in paintings and photographs.

Before the publication of *Orientalism* (1978), the term Orientalism referred to the scholarly study of cultures of "the Orient," comprised of regions of North Africa, present-day Turkey, the Middle East and parts of South Asia extending towards Japan.⁷ By the nineteenth century, Orientalism also referred to a genre of Romantic painting, exemplified by the works of Jean-Leon Gérôme and Eugène Delacroix that depicted the Orient as sensuous and exotic. In her article "The Imaginary Orient," art historian Linda Nochlin critiques how French Orientalist painters, such as Gérôme, Delacroix, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, used picturesque styles and realism to legitimize the concept of Orientalism and the negative stereotypes associated with it, which is similar to Said's arguments in his discussion of the Orient. In the painting *The Snake Charmer* (1870), Gérôme depicts a naked young boy holding a snake as an

⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, "Pan-Asian American Ethnicity: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992), 161.

⁵ Yen Le Espiritu, "Ethnicity and Panethnicity" in *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.* 6.

⁷ Said, "The Scope of Orientalism," 52.

older man plays the flute – charming the serpent and the audience. Nochlin analyzes how this painting manifests an imperialist and colonized view of the East, with its depiction of a timeless world seen through a European perspective.⁸ She outlines five absences in the painting: history, westerners, representation, art, and labor. The absence of history, where time stands still, is disclosed in the temporal world that Gérôme creates in the painting, suggesting that the Oriental world is a world that is untouched, timeless and romanticized.⁹ Another absence that Nochlin points out is that of Westerners, where no European settlers are seen in the painting. Although Westerners are not depicted, they are present in the controlling gaze.¹⁰

These Oriental paintings were created in the aftermath of a general historical movement. The West came in to colonize and study the East, and these paintings presented a romanticized view of the East to a European audience.¹¹ Nochlin argues that Gérôme wanted to make his viewers forget that they were looking at a painting of the Oriental world. Gérôme constructs this scene of *The Snake Charmer* (1879) from of his imagination to convince the audience that this scene was an authentic and scientific reflection of the Oriental world.¹² According to Nochlin, the absence of art, or human subjectivity, is evident in Gérôme’s concealed brushstrokes, the evidence of his touch, and emphasized the unnecessary “authentic” details to make the painting look like a realistic everyday scene of the Oriental world.¹³ Gérôme utilized a realistic style to suggest that this painting showed a common scene in the everyday life of the East, but it also illustrated the negative stereotypes constructed by the West, such as nudity being a normal occurrence in the East. The last absence that Nochlin points out is labor, where the Orient does

⁸ Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

not work. Gérôme depicts Middle Easterns as lazy as they lounge around, watching the snake charmer.¹⁴

French Orientalist paintings did not reflect the reality of the Orient, but produced meaning, and illustrate how in the West romanticized the East.¹⁵ This idea of creating a reality and the framework of the absences may also be seen in the effort of Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, who oversaw the design of the Asian art galleries for the Norton Simon Museum. Pal presents the Asian art collection, which spans over two thousand years, in galleries designed to “contextualize” the idea of a sacred temple space, which can be perceived as timeless and exotic because the galleries fail to represent time and geography.¹⁶ Another example is how the museum fails to represent the historical, cultural, and appropriate religious context of these cultural objects (i.e. cloth paintings and bronze religious statues), and displays them only as works of art. It should be the responsibility of the museums as well as the curators to present an objective and appropriate view of Asia through the objects they choose to present to the visitor.

In contrast to Orientalism, which is based on the word “orient,” a term used for hundreds of years throughout the world to describe the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa, the concept of panethnicity emerged within the political context of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s in America. It sought to bring together different minority groups of African, Asian and Hispanic descent.¹⁷ In her essay, “Ethnicity and Panethnicity,” Espiritu focuses on the development of panethnicity, and the instrumental incentives for Asian American “subgroups” to adopt the collective panethnic label, “Asian.”¹⁸ Espiritu begins by outlining the distinction between ethnicity and panethnicity. Ethnicity is based on the cultural heritage of one’s ancestors,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ Surbhi Bajaj, “The New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum: An Interview with Pratapaditya Pal,” in *Orientalisms* vol. 31.1 (2000), 68.

¹⁷ Espiritu, “Ethnicity and Panethnicity,” 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

while panethnicity is a socially constructed category. While Asian American panethnicity originated through “racial lumping” by outsiders, it has also become a political resource for insiders.¹⁹ During the sixties and seventies, individuals belonging to smaller ethnic populations saw considerable incentive in adopting the larger Asian American label in pursuit of obtaining social, economic, and psychological benefits for themselves and their communities. This panethnic label was not just imposed on them; it was created through symbolic reinterpretation of a group’s common history, particularly when it involved racial subjugation.²⁰

The label “Asian American” did not describe the actual lives of people of Asian descent. Euro-American cultures would often lump all Asian Americans together and treat them as if they were the same. In her book, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Museum* (2011), art historian Bridget R. Cooks notes, “The political act of naming is significant as it demonstrates the struggle for racial self-representation and efforts to transform the perception of African Americans throughout the twentieth century.”²¹ Although Cooks focuses on African Americans, this argument can be used universally amongst cultural groups seen as the “Other” by “superior” cultures. Espiritu argues that while ethnicity may have been an exercise of personal choice for Euro-Americans since they were the group that ascriptively classified others, it was certainly not for minorities.²² However, minorities had the power to choose how to utilize the label to their advantage. This is not the case with “Asian” cultural objects; this label was imposed on these objects.

¹⁹ Yen Le Espiritu, “Pan-Asian American Ethnicity: Retrospect and Prospect” in *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992), 174.

²⁰ Espiritu, “Ethnicity and Panethnicity,” 8.

²¹ Bridget R. Cooks, “A Note on Terminology” to *Exhibiting Blackness: African American and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2011), XV.

²² Espiritu, “Ethnicity and Panethnicity,” 6.

For my thesis, I use Said's labels of Orientalism and Espiritu's label of panethnicity to discuss how the Norton Simon Museum's misrepresentation and cultural appropriation are evident in the Asian art collection. Panethnicity groups together different ethnic populations based on commonalities beyond geographic location, such as culture and experience. Pal wanted to take a panethnic approach to the design of the galleries to show the visitor who may not have visited India before that these sculptures were meant to be shown together and not in isolated galleries.²³ In other words, Pal evidently believed that the intended purpose of these cultural objects was to be seen together, but my objection is that he did not organize the cultural objects by origin, but rather by chronology. Since we do not have any information about which temple or space these objects come from, Pal is imposing an idea onto these objects by grouping them to be seen together. Pal created the galleries to emulate a sacred temple space, inspired by Indian and Southeast Asian shrines, in order to include South and Southeast Asian cultures and connect them with the theme of religion.²⁴ Although Pal wanted to be inclusive, the architecture of the Asian art galleries inappropriately coalesces all Asian cultures, which I argue is pan-Asian.

Unlike panethnicity, pan-Asian is based on the commonality of geographic location. This label homogenizes Asian cultures together, destroying their identity and giving new value through the museum, which orientalizes these cultures as something that is unfamiliar to the West. The design of the galleries is pan-Asian because it does not specify or focus on a culture's architecture but rather generalizes what a typical temple in Asia would look like, which erases the individuality of each country that makes up Asia. This generalization also leads to Orientalization because the design does not indicate a specific period or culture. Even the label

²³ Bajaj, "The New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum: An Interview with Pratapaditya Pal," 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

“Asian Art Collection” does not represent all countries from Asia; it only focuses on South and Southeast Asia, and even then, not all the countries in that category are represented.

Another term I use is “orientalizing” which is to make something Oriental or relating to Asia. Gehry orientalized the design of the galleries to present the objects in a “contextualized” sacred space. Other key terms I will be using in this paper will be “culture,” defined as the language, values, and beliefs that form a person’s way of life. A “nation” is a large population of people that inhabit a specific territory and are connected by history or culture. And a “country,” which is a nation with its own government, occupies a particular territory. In regards to the Asian Art Collection in the Norton Simon Museum, the labels that are used in the galleries as well as the organization of the galleries “lumps” together Asian cultures and erases the individuality of the country that these objects belong to. Overall, the Norton Simon Museum and curators inappropriately coalesce different Asian cultures through the way they organize and present these cultural objects from Asia to the viewer.

The Art-Culture System

Simon’s Asian art collection is mainly composed of stone and bronze religious statues that decorated the exterior walls of temples and religious spaces from India and Southeast Asia.²⁵ Once these religious objects are displayed in a museum setting, their value is changed. In his book, *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), anthropologist James Clifford outlines the process for assigning a value to an object, which he calls the art-culture system, by determining the context in which the object belongs and circulates. The art-culture system is represented in a diagram that unfolds between four categories, with “art” and “culture” at the top and “not-culture” and “not-art” at the bottom. Objects that are valued as original and one-of-a-kind or validated as

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

traditional or collective are placed on the side of authenticity. In contrast, objects that are deemed commercial or inauthentic are placed on the inauthentic side of the system. The classification of these objects is based on Western connoisseurship, markets, and art museums that established these parameters of what was or is considered authentic or not.²⁶

However, an object is not necessarily stationed in one category permanently. As an object moves between various contexts in the system, the object's value can change. An example of this movement can be found in Cooks's chapter, "Back to the Future: The Quilts of Gee's Bend" (2002), in which she discusses how the quilts made by the women of Gee's Bend in southern Alabama changed from domestic items to works of art displayed in museums around the United States. To the women, these quilts were just everyday objects, made from scraps of fabric and used for warmth and storytelling.²⁷ When William Arnett, a curator and art collector, discovered these quilts, he valued them as art.²⁸ In 2002, Arnett, his sons Matthew and Paul, along with the Director Peter Marzio and Curator of Contemporary and Modern Art, Alvia Wardlaw, from the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, created the exhibition, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, which featured seventy quilts that illustrate the style and culture of the women as quilters.²⁹ When Arnett displayed the quilts in the museum, he changed the value of the quilts from the category of "culture" to "art," but the women who made these quilts did not fully cross over as artists. Art reviews separated the women's identity from the quilts because the value of the quilts was associated with modernist abstraction paintings by White male artists.³⁰

²⁶ James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 220.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁸ Bridget R. Cooks, "Back to the Future: The Quilts of Gee's Bend, 2002," in *Exhibiting Blackness: African American and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2011), 138.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

The reason for this separation is noted in the article, “The Challenge of Presenting Cultural Artifacts in a Museum Setting,” where Professor of Art Education at the University of Houston, Sheng Kuan Chung, discusses how art criticism is a “Western enterprise.”³¹ During the nineteenth century, Western institutions, such as the Royal Academies of Art in France and England, dominated the art world and dictated the public’s view of what was deemed acceptable as art.³² Art criticism as a tradition was formed to critique Western art and not the art of other cultures. Chung says that using a “formalist analysis to interpret a cultural object will result in misinterpreting and misunderstanding the object.”³³ This formal limitation is similar to the criticism that Clifford makes about in the art-culture system, in which the system does not recognize the racial or cultural identity of the artist. Clifford also argues that this system creates hierarchies because the West used this system to justify its advancement over other countries that they colonized. This is an issue because the objects selected represent the values and views of the museum, not of the culture itself. The art-culture system remains a powerful and influential set of ideological practices of contextualization that are still dominant and used to this day by Western institutions.

Museum and heritage consultant Crispin Paine argues “the dominant people in the ‘reclaiming’ group want to control not access, but understanding.”³⁴ Paine notes that the role of the museum is to teach its community through these cultural objects. The problem of having a museum teach the community about a cultural object is that it could potentially ignore or generalize the understanding and meaning from the cultural community it came from. This may

³¹ Sheng Kuan Chung, "The Challenge of Presenting Cultural Artifacts in a Museum Setting." *Art Education* 56, no. 1 (2003), 4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194027>.

³² Jason Rosenfeld, “The Salon and The Royal Academy in the Nineteenth Century,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (2004). http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sara/hd_sara.htm.

³³ Chung, "The Challenge of Presenting Cultural Artifacts in a Museum Setting," 18.

³⁴ Crispin Paine, “Objects Claimed: How Religious Objects are Demanded ‘Back’ From Museums,” in *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 49.

also illustrate how the West believes that it has a greater understanding of the object than the actual cultural group does, which Said points out, is the same kind of authority that the West had when they came in to colonize the Middle East.³⁵ Although the museum owns the object, the cultural group that the object came from has a more meaningful understanding of its context. Museums and curators should collaborate with these cultural groups to ensure that the object is displayed properly and the labels accompanying the object provide interesting and accurate information.³⁶

In the Asian art galleries of the Norton Simon Museum, Pal attempts to present the scope South and Southeast Asian art by displaying the objects chronologically to show the constant exchange of ideas between each region.³⁷ The issue here is that Pal suppresses the knowledge of the individual countries and culture from which these objects originated. By displaying the objects chronologically, Pal inappropriately coalesces the Asian cultures that are represented and the context of the cultural object. Simon's collection includes cultural objects from the mainland of South and Southeast Asia, including India, Nepal, China, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Vietnam. The collection does not include South Asian countries like Bhutan and Bangladesh or the Southeast island countries like Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Pal connects the collection together by focusing on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which he perceived as the three main religions that were most influential to South and Southeast Asia throughout the centuries. For example, there is a room in the Asian art galleries that exhibits bronze sculptures, specifically from the Chola (c. 850 – 1279) and Vijaynagar (c.1375 – 1565) dynasties. There is no label that discuss what the Chola and

³⁵ Said, "The Scope of Orientalism," 30.

³⁶ Paine, "Objects Claimed: How Religious Objects Are Demanded 'Back' From Museums," 50.

³⁷ Jyotindra Jain, "New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena," in *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts*, vol 51, 79.

Vijaynagar dynasties or labels that illustrate this exchange, and because these bronze deities have the same motifs and design, viewers can generalize that this is what all Asian art looks like.

The practice of selecting one object and displaying it to represent an entire culture or country implies that the curator and museum defines what is valuable, recognizing that value in non-Western objects and gives them an identity and a place in history by displaying them in a museum setting. Once these cultural objects were integrated into Simon's collection, these objects now represent Simon's interest and are placed under the label as the "Asian Art Collection." Espirtu notes "to interact meaningfully with those in the larger society, individuals have to identify themselves in terms intelligible to outsiders. Thus, at times, the museum sets aside the object's national or tribal identities and assigns to them the ascribed panethnic label."³⁸ The ascribed panethnic label misrepresents the collection and "lumps" these cultures together, focusing on a general context of religion, which illustrates how the Norton Simon Museum does not properly display the Asian art collection because of the lack of historical and cultural context that is not provided.

Norton Simon: Asian Art Collection

To understand the Asian art collection, it is important to first look at the history of how the Norton Simon Museum and its collection began and changed since its opening in 1975. Norton Simon was born on February 5, 1907, in Portland, Oregon, and made his fortune investing in the food industry and creating his successful business, Hunt's Food Inc. His interest in art began in the 1950s with works by Edgar Degas, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Paul Gauguin and by the 1960s he had gathered one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled, including a collection of masterworks of European art from the Renaissance, Impressionism, and

³⁸ Espirtu, "Ethnicity and Panethnicity," 10.

Cubism. At the beginning of the 1970s, the executive board of the Pasadena Art Museum, created in 1922, turned to Norton Simon, who was living in California at the time, for financial help. Simon assumed management of the institution in exchange for his collection having a permanent home in the museum and taking on the museum's financial obligations until his death in 1993.

Prior to his marriage to actress Jennifer Jones in 1971, Norton Simon's acquisitions were mainly European; however, during the couple's honeymoon trip to India, Simon began to explore Indian art.³⁹ Simon called on Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, who was at that time the curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, to assist with the acquisition of Asian art and become Simon's advisor for the Asian region. Even after Simon's death in 1993, the trustees of the Norton Simon Art Foundation requested Pal's assistance to catalogue Simon's Asian art collection and collaborate with Frank Gehry to design the new Asian art galleries.

The Norton Simon Museum contains over 600 objects in its Asian art collection from the Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas, and Southeast Asia. Pal published three volumes that divided the collection based on each region, which I will be giving a brief overview in this section. The first volume, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum Volume 1, Art from the Indian Subcontinent* (2003), focuses on the objects collected from four regions that collectively make up South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. This volume is prefaced with a historical overview, and the 229 catalogue entries are arranged chronologically and subdivided by geographical location.⁴⁰ Almost all styles of sculptural art, influenced by the three major religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), are represented in the collection, which ranges

³⁹ Pratapaditya Pal, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum: Art from the Indian Subcontinent*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

from the second century BCE to the eighteenth century CE. The majority of the collection is particularly rich in art from the Indian subcontinent, including monumental stone sculptures from the Kushana and Gupta periods, and a significant collection of Chola bronzes from southern India.

The second volume, *Art from the Himalayas & China* (2004), concentrates on sculptures and paintings from the Indian states of Jammu, Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, along with the countries of Nepal, Tibet, and China, dating from the fifth to the twentieth century. It includes 185 catalogue entries divided into sections on sculpture and ritual objects of India, Nepal, China and Tibet, followed by book covers and paintings.⁴¹ Most of the Himalayan objects are from Nepal and Tibet with a few exceptions from Kashmir, Ladakh, western Tibet, and Himachal. The collection is made up mostly of Buddhist and Hindu metal images, but there are also woodcarvings from Nepal and Tibet. The collection also includes illuminated manuscripts and murals from Tibet and central India, specifically Tibetan mandalas and *thangkas*, which are meditational aid and cosmic diagrams painted on cotton. These objects served the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. Though the Himalayan Mountains divide these countries, these objects illustrate how the religions played an important role in visual culture and how it spread throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The third volume, *Art from Sri Lanka & Southeast Asia* (2004), focuses on art collected from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Vietnam. The collection consists of over 190 catalogue entries, including pottery from the Ban Chiang tradition, bronze drums from the ancient Dong Son culture of northern Vietnam, and stone and metal sculptures from Cambodia and Thailand. The objects in the collection are organized geographically from

⁴¹ Pratapaditya Pal, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum: Art from the Himalayas & China*, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

each region of Southeast Asia. In this catalogue, the majority of the collection comes from Cambodia and Thailand, while works from Sri Lanka came from donations after Simon's death.⁴²

In these catalogues, Pal discusses the major influence the Indian subcontinent had on South and Southeast Asia. He does note that other countries, such as China, had a great influence over Southeast Asia, as well; however, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent have a long history of trading.⁴³ Pal illustrates how the Indian subcontinent was an important area, which greatly influenced other regions, leaving a rich visual and religious culture. Although Pal provides a historical overview in each of the catalogues, he assisted Simon in acquiring an extensive collection of art from all over the South and Southeast region of Asia. Yet, not all of these acquisitions were ethical.

During the 1970s, several objects, including the bronze statues of Hindu deities, the *Nataraja* and *Somaskanda*, were smuggled into the United States and sold to Simon. Indian government officials say that these statues belonged to a temple in Sivapuram in southern India, but the originals were stolen and replaced by copies and sold on the black market. Simon bought the bronze statues from Ben Heller, a New York collector and dealer. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Simon commented: "my understanding was that my statue was sold by the temple authorities to a dealer and the dealer sold it to a collector . . . I believe that authorities in Indian temples have the right to sell works. It's not like Italy, where the work belongs to the state."⁴⁴ Although Simon bought these sculptures from a dealer, he ignores the fact that these

⁴² Pratapaditya Pal, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum: Art from the Sri Lanka & Southeast Asia*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴ David L. Shirey, "Norton Simon Bought Smuggled Idol," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1973, <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/12/archives/norton-simon-bought-smuggled-idol-a-smuggled-idol-bought-by-simon.html>.

bronze sculptures were stolen from their original location and had great meaning to the people of India. Simon is only thinking of the objects as art and nothing more as well as denying the ownership of the object by the people of India. He even admits that he knew that these cultural objects from Asia were stolen and said that he “spent between \$15-million and \$16-million over the last two years on Asian art, and most of it was smuggled.”⁴⁵

After Indian officials discovered that Simon had the statues, they opened a highly publicized repatriation case that pitted Simon against the Indian government and put a strain on his relationship with Pal, who wanted to return the sculptures.⁴⁶ After an out-of-court settlement, the *Nataraja* would return to India, where it resides in Tamil Nadu, while the *Somaskanda* resides at the Norton Simon Museum. Although some say that this case was a humiliating loss to Simon, Simon did not lose entirely. He was still able to display the *Narajara* as a showpiece for another decade before its return and was able to get back the \$900,000 he spent on the statues by suing Heller.⁴⁷ Simon’s decision to return the *Nataraja* also ensured the protection for the rest of his Asian art collection against future claims by the Indian government, which means that these objects will be remain with the Norton Simon Museum to be on display. Repatriation of cultural objects is a complex issue involving ethical, political, legal and emotional factors. Although the Norton Simon Museum wants to display Simon’s Asian art collection to educate the visitors, there is the ethnical issue of how these works are displayed and who owns the object and culture.

In the Norton Simon Museum, these objects are displayed as art and generalized in a religious context. At the end of his essay, “What Do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical

⁴⁵ Shirey, “Norton Simon Brought Smuggled Idol,” in *The New York Times* (Manhattan: New York Times Company, 1973). <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/05/12/archives/norton-simon-bought-smuggled-idol-a-smuggled-idol-bought-by-simon.html?mcubz=0>

⁴⁶ Lucian Harris, “Hell, Yes, It Was Smuggled!” *Forbes* (2004). https://www.forbes.com/2004/05/25/cx_0525conn.html

⁴⁷ Richard H. Davis, “What do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical Approach,” in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, ed. Bruce M. Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 20.

Approach,” Richard Davis argues that objects cannot be returned to their original settings to serve religious purposes, which is due to the looting and lack of context accompanied by the object. The *Somaskanda*, along with the rest of Simon’s Asia art collection, is now displayed on the bottom floor of the museum. The Museum suppresses the knowledge that these cultural objects, like the *Somaskanda*, were looted. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the true origin of the object or the claims to ownership. Although the *Somaskanda* is placed in a temple-like setting in the Norton Simon, its identity is still reduced because it is placed in a new context in the museum that is different from where it originated.⁴⁸ The labels that accompany each object only discuss the visual motifs and mythology behind the object and do not include where the object originated (what temple or shrine it belonged to), what role it played in its respected religion, or how the museum obtained it (i.e. looting or purchasing from the black market). It is important to include the history of the object in order to give back agency because it educates the visitor about the object and its connection to its culture. It also illustrates to the viewer how these cultural objects were obtained. When objects are placed in museums, the object is stripped of its original context and so it is the museum’s responsibility to provide information to the visitor to help them understand the object. Since these objects are displayed in a pan-Asian temple space, it is also important to discuss what role these cultural objects had in their respected religion and the context the galleries are trying to create. These two problems, art looted from context, and inadequate labeling, are intertwined.

The Asian art galleries were designed by internationally acclaimed architect Frank Gehry. When he received the Norton Simon commission, he had already developed an extensive reputation for producing consistent and innovative works, such as the Vitra Design Museum (1989) in Germany and the Frederick R. Weisman Museum (1990–1993) at the University of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

Minnesota. Gehry was on the Norton Simon Museum board and a close friend of Simon and Jones. Two years after Simon's death, Jones went to Gehry for assistance in redesigning the interior of the museum. Gehry was known for his deconstructive style, which opposed the ordered rationality of geometry, preferring a non-rectilinear approach to design; his style breaks down the parts of material so that its organization appears chaotic.⁴⁹ Unexpected details and building materials were used to create visual disorientation and disharmony.⁵⁰ Jones, as well as the board, wanted to tear down the original building. Many people were expecting the massive renovations to include a new building with titanium-clad undulating envelopes, perplexing volumes, and aesthetically discordant detailing. Nonetheless, Gehry kept the exterior and focused on transforming the interior. Before Simon took over and integrated his private collection, which included works from Europe, America, and Asia, the museum had been known for displaying only modern art. Architects Thornton Ladd and John Kelsey, who had designed the original structure of the building, built the interior with continuous curving walls to complement the works. After careful consideration, Gehry decided to reconfigure the interior with medium-size rectilinear rooms that better portioned and provided more hanging space for the paintings in Simon's collection, and added additional skylights.⁵¹

Although Gehry's contributions to the museum seemed muted, he believed that "the most important thing [was] to break down the barrier between the person looking and what the person [was] looking at."⁵² Gehry believed that the gallery space could enhance the visitor's experience and connection with the art. He designed the European and American galleries to be more open and inviting by having a clearly laid out floor plan that allowed for a sequence, by date and

⁴⁹ Jackie Craven, "Biography of Frank Gehry: Deconstructivist Architect of the Wavy Facade. b. 1929," *ThoughtCo*, accessed November 15, 2016, <https://www.thoughtco.com/frank-gehry-deconstructivist-architect-177847>.

⁵⁰ Craven "Biography of Frank Gehry: Deconstructivist Architect of the Wavy Facade. b. 1929," (2016).

⁵¹ Barbara Isenberg and Frank Gehry, "Art Monastery on the Mississippi," in *Conversations with Frank Gehry* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 96.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

region, from room to room. In contrast, Gehry and Pal incorporated pan-Asian architecture into the design of the Asian art galleries and organized the objects chronologically to in order to “contextualize” the idea of a sacred space to the visitor by creating a stage that presents these objects in a context that was close to their original placement.⁵³

Architecture: Pan-Asian Temple

The galleries are divided into four wings. On the main floor, the left wing displays art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The right wing displays art from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries and provides access to the South and Southeast Asian collection and a temporary exhibition space located on the lower level. Simon believed that a museum is a place to worship art and the past. In 1974, Simon said that “I am not essentially a religious person, but my feeling about a museum is that it can serve as a substitute for a house of worship. It is a place to respect man’s creativity and to sense a continuity with the past.”⁵⁴ Such a view is similar to that expressed by art historian Carol Duncan, who also argues that the museum is similar to a sacred space, and she argues that the whole museum building is designed to not necessarily celebrate art, but to create a space for the visitor that is separate from their everyday life, which can be seen by the art displayed inside. The visitor behaves in a particular way, like being silent and pausing, which is similar to worshipping in a shrine.⁵⁵ Aided by the arrangement of objects, lighting, and architecture, the museum provides both the “stage and the script” that allows the visitor to enact in this ritual.⁵⁶ According to Duncan, museums are the stage, set for a ritual in which the visitor is the principal performer, and it is through these rituals that the museum

⁵³ Jyotindra Jain, “New Asian galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena,” *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* vol. 51 (2000), 80.

⁵⁴ “Norton Simon Biography,” <http://www.nortonsimonfoundation.org/norton-simon-biography>

⁵⁵ Carol Duncan, “Museum As Ritual” in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995) 16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

communicates its values to them. Gehry designed the Asian art galleries as a “shadowy temple of densely planted Indian sandstone columns with plate-glass windows open to the banked garden.”⁵⁷ He wanted the Asian art galleries to look like a pan-Asian temple, which illustrates the museum’s understanding of Asia as timeless and Orientalizes the collection. Pal’s intention for the galleries was to suggest “the idea of sacred space without being literal.”⁵⁸ Pal believed that contextualizing the space would add to the visitor’s experience in seeing the objects in a similar context that was similar to their original placement. Although the Gehry and Pal wanted to create a new and innovative space for the Asian art collection, the overall design and aesthetic of the gallery space fail to recognize the individual countries that makeup Asia. This generalization and orientalization can be seen in the three main architectural components of the Asian art galleries: the stairwell, the main galleries, and the sculpture garden, which illustrates the institution’s control over how the Asian art collection is seen and understood.

Stairwell

In his article, “New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena,” art historian Jyotindra Jain discusses the renovations Pal and Gehry made to the Asian art galleries, which include the winding stairwell. Visitors must descend the stairwell to enter the space that is reminiscent of the *stupas* of Sanchi due to the color and texture of the stone used.⁵⁹ The stairwell at the *stupa* of Sanchi was used to help the visitor venerate the Buddha’s remains by leading them to circumambulate (in a clockwise direction up the second level) the dome, which was a solid earth-and-rubble mound that held the Buddha’s remains and stands 50 feet high.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁷ Joseph Giovannini, “The Norton Simon Museum Lightens Up,” in *The New York Times* (Manhattan: New York Times Company, 1999). www.nytimes.com/1999/07/18/arts/art-architecture-the-norton-simon-museum-lightens-up.html?mcubz=0.

⁵⁸ Jain, “New Asian galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena,” 80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁰ Fred S. Kleiner, “South and Southeast Asia Before 1200,” in *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2015), 435.

stairwell at the Norton Simon, on the other hand, does not have a religious significance and takes the visitor down to see the collection. From a bird's-eye perspective, the stairwell spirals in a way that follows a mandala pattern, which was a common motif used in Indian and Tibetan art.⁶¹ Pal wanted to integrate Asian design motifs to add to the sacredness and authenticity of the Asian art galleries. Pal chose the bottom floor to display the Asian art collection for two reasons. First, there was more space in the galleries downstairs, and it had access to its own garden.⁶² Second, the space was more cohesive because the lower levels have an open floor plan that offered easy access from room to room with columns spaced far apart to divide the floor.⁶³ The open floor plan also allowed Pal to organize the Asian objects to show the exchange of ideas throughout South and Southeast Asia, which means that these objects are placed chronologically rather than geographically to show the similarities that reflect this exchange. Although it is important to note this exchange in ideas, placing these cultural objects from Asia chronologically erases the individual cultures and countries of which these objects came from.

There was much speculation about having the galleries on the lower level. However, Pal states "Gehry elevated the position of the downstairs space by connecting it with a magnificent stairwell that draws the attention and curiosity of visitors."⁶⁴ Pal elevates these cultural objects from Asia by placing them in a museum setting, as indicated by the art-culture system. Although they may be placed in a museum setting, there is a hierarchy. The Western art collection is placed physically over the Asian art collection, and at the same time, these cultural objects from Asia are also used to show the West's superiority over them, by imposing a general label and inappropriately coalescing the Asian cultures together.

⁶¹ Dirk Mathison, "Masterpiece Theater - Actress Jones Manages the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California," in *Los Angeles Magazine* (1998), jenniferjonestribute.weebly.com/masterpiece-theater.html.

⁶² Surbhi Bajaj, "The New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum: An Interview with Pratapaditya Pal," in *Orientalisms* vol. 31.1 (2000), 66.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁴ Jain, "New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena," 79.

Galleries

Pal and Gehry wanted the Asian art galleries in the Norton Simon Museum to do more than present the collection. According to Davis, the Asian art galleries are intended to “suggest to the viewer the ambiance one finds at religious sites” and to create a “temple-like atmosphere of serenity and tranquility.”⁶⁵ In her essay, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” art historian Svetlana Alpers proposes that museums establish their own way of seeing an object, which she calls the “museum effect.”⁶⁶ When an object is displayed in a museum, it becomes estranged from its original context and purpose. In this way, even mundane objects, such as a crab shell, can become exotic objects that intrigue visitors. The museum forces the visitor to see these works in a certain way. With regards to the Norton Simon Museum, Pal and Gehry wanted their visitor to see these objects in a pan-Asian space to give them an authentic experience of Asian art and religion.

In the conclusion of his book, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, Paine concludes his chapter with the responsibilities of religious objects in museums. He argues, “religious objects in museums must have an exceptional role and responsibility in the great cause of helping humankind to understand human motives.”⁶⁷ Paine believes that it is the religious object’s social obligation to teach the visitors to understand not just a generalization about the religion but how the religion is used daily and to understand it through the eyes of a practitioner. Paine rightly remarks that the way the museum displays these religious objects affects how the visitor interacts and learns from the object. When these objects are placed in the museum, they are not fulfilling their responsibility because the museum is only valuing these

⁶⁵ Davis, “What do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical Approach,” 12.

⁶⁶ Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 27.

⁶⁷ Crispin Paine, “Conclusion: What Have We Learnt And How Can We Help Religious Objects In Museums Fulfill Their Public Duties?” in *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 114.

objects for their visual features and not their historical, cultural or appropriate religious context. It is the object's responsibility to teach and the museum's responsibility to display the object properly so the visitor can learn.

Another tactic that Pal used to invite visitors to the Asian art galleries was to place some of the cultural objects from the Asian art collection on the main floor in order to orient the visitor towards the Asian art collection by giving them a preview of what they were about to see. Unlike the Asian art galleries downstairs, the Asian objects upstairs are placed in corners and niches. Although their purpose is to orient the visitor downstairs, these cultural objects look displaced. In the Asian art galleries, the objects project Asia to be a timeless and Oriental place due to the historical information text that is missing from the labels. Paine argues "it is difficult to see how religious objects can avoid becoming pawns in a growing spiritual inequality in the world, making their own contribution to the dominant power of the already wealthy."⁶⁸ When these objects are placed in public museums, their position and context are different; with regards to the Asian art collection at the Norton Simon Museum, these religious objects also contribute to Simon's wealth and power. Paine says that these cultural objects are just "everyday objects that go to tell the story of religion and the lives lived by religious communities of all sorts of shapes and conditions."⁶⁹ This is important because the purpose of displaying the object is to communicate its historical, cultural, and religious context to the visitor so that they can better understand the object and culture that it comes from. However, the museum exoticizes these cultural objects and gives them the purpose of being a visual spectacle for the visitor's gaze and not for teaching.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

There is also a disorienting feeling when the visitor enters the galleries from the use of light and the organization of the collection. On the main floor, natural light floods the museum during the day. However, in the Asian art galleries, with the exception of one of the rooms near the Asian sculpture garden, Gehry uses dim lights in the galleries to make them look as if the visitors are in a dark temple. Light plays a significant role in developing an interaction between the visitor, the object, and the space. Yet the Asian art galleries in the Norton Simon Museum uses dim lights to disorient the visitor's awareness of direction in the galleries, and so they wander aimlessly in the galleries. This gives the visitor an experience of what perhaps temples in Asia might be like.

The organization of the collection also adds to this disorientation because the collection is curated chronologically, giving a generalized idea of Asia and erasing the representation of individual countries and cultures. Gehry and Pal wanted to create a gallery space that was inspired by Asian temples; however, due to the placement of the collection, the use of light and the overall aesthetic, Gehry's design orientalize the space to give a visual and spatial experience of the religious aspect of Asia. While the organization of the objects was not compliant, Pal also did not effectively utilize labels for the galleries, which are essential to helping the viewer understand the theme of the exhibition as well as the objects that are displayed.

Labels

When cultural objects are collected, their historical, cultural and religious context is stripped away, and these objects are given a new context and interpretation by the institution. The West has used these collections of cultural objects to study the culture that the object came from as well as to illustrate the West's wealth, power, and advancement. Now that these collections are placed in museums, curators and museums have the opportunity to give back

agency to these objects that the West and history have taken away. One of the most important ways for the museum to give back agency to these objects is through the labels that are used in the exhibition and that accompany each object. When Pal curated the exhibition, he knew that the majority of the objects in the collection were sculptures that decorated temples and walls, and not consecrated images that were to be worshiped.⁷⁰ He said that it is important “to have as much didactic material as possible, with good labels explaining the use of the sculpture, and to display it in such a way that is not presented simply as a dead work of art [but] . . . [to convey] the spiritual essence that has been instilled into them by the artist.”⁷¹ Pal knew the importance of using labels but fails to utilize them to provide appropriate information about the galleries and objects as well as to help the viewer understand the context of the overall exhibition. In the Asian art galleries, Pal includes labels, such as introductory, section, object and title labels, but these labels are poorly placed and do not fulfill the purpose that Pal mentions in the previous comment.

The title label identifies the name of the exhibition. In her book, *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach* (1996), museum consultant Beverly Serrell states that “the best titles will arouse interest and curiosity and give enough information to enable visitors to decide whether they are interested enough in the subject matter to enter.”⁷² The title label is the first aspect of the collection that the visitor will interact with. It is important that the title is interesting, but at the same time accurate, to illustrate what will be present in the exhibition. In the case of the Norton Simon Museum, there is an inconsistency with title labels for the Asian art galleries and Asian sculpture garden. For the Asian art galleries, the directional sign on the main floor labels the

⁷⁰ Bajaj, “The New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum: An Interview with Pratapaditya Pal,” 68.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷² Beverly Serrell, “Types of Labels in Exhibitions,” in *An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1996), 22

galleries as the “Asian Art Galleries.” The galleries themselves are labeled “The Art of South and Southeast Asia,” while on the website calls the collection as “South and Southeast Asian Paintings and Sculpture.” For the Asian sculpture garden, the museum and website label the garden as the “Asian Sculpture Garden,” while the last section of the catalogue dedicated to the Asian sculpture garden, written by Melody Rod-ari, is labeled “Indian and Southeast Asian Sculpture.” The title labels that are used for the garden and galleries by the museum are too broad and do not identify what cultures and countries are included. The title that the website and Rod-ari used for the Asian sculpture garden and Asian art galleries are more accurate. Labeling the collection as the “South and Southeast Asian Paintings and Sculptures” illustrates which regions and objects are included, while calling the garden the “Indian and Southeast Asian Sculpture Garden” suggests that the majority of the sculptures are from India. It brings awareness that this garden only represents certain countries. By labeling the garden the “Asian Sculpture Garden,” visitors assume that the sculpture collection in the garden represents all the countries of Asia, which is misleading because there are only sculptures from India and Cambodia.

Along with the title label is the introductory label, which Serrell states “sets up the organization and tone of the exhibition.”⁷³ This label will prepare visitors for the size, sections, and themes of the exhibition.⁷⁴ In the Asian art galleries, the introductory label summarizes the theme of the exhibition and discusses the three religions that Pal believed was most influential: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. This introductory label is some of the only informational text available throughout the galleries. This label is poorly placed because it is located behind the stairwell. Once the visitor descends the staircase, they immediately enter the galleries without

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

being greeted by the introductory text. It is only when the visitor takes the elevator that the introductory label is the first thing they see when they enter the Asian art galleries. This poor placement shows the lack of attention that the museum has put in the Asian art galleries as well as in American and European art galleries. However, unlike the Asian art galleries, most if not all the objects in the American and European art galleries have object labels that include detailed captions and commentary about the object and relationship to the time period.

Object labels provide short factual information about the object such as what it is, where, when, and whom it was made by, the material and techniques used, and a caption.⁷⁵ Although every object displayed in the Norton Simon has a label, there is a distinct difference between the labels written for the Asian art collection versus the European and American collection. In the Asian art collection, most of the statues presented have a caption, while the smaller statues and manuscript paintings only have the object label. It is also important to note that the captions for each of these works average about a paragraph or less in length. The caption for *Man-Lion Avatar of Vishnu* (1000 CE) only discusses the sculpture's mythology and visual motifs.

Man-Lion Avatar of Vishnu

India, Bihar, c. 1000

Chlorite

In the incarnation known as Narasimha, Vishnu destroys the evil king Hiranyakasipu, who was so powerful that he could not be killed by god, man or beast. Hence, Vishnu assumed the form of a

⁷⁵ Dawn Hoskin, "Writing Labels & Gallery Text," Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed September 1, 2017
Accessed November 15, 2016, www.vam.ac.uk/blog/creating-new-europe-1600-1800-galleries/labels-gallery-text.

lion headed man, and so was neither man nor beast. He disembowels the titan, who lies powerless across his thigh. On the left edge, Narashima's lion head is seen emerging from a column, while his wife Laskmi stands on the other side.

The caption does not discuss why *Vishnu* has a lion head, who the titan was, where the object originated, the material used, or its function. On the other hand, the captions in the European and American art collection are much longer and discuss additional information beyond the story and imagery of the piece. The caption for Peter Paul Rubens's *The Holy Women at the Sepulchre* (1611-14) explains the subject matter in the first paragraph and then gives an interpretation of the composition in the next paragraph.

Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 – 1640)

The Holy Women at the Sepulchre, c. 1611 – 14

Oil on panel

On the third day after the Crucifixion, women visiting Christ's tomb are greeted by two angels surrounded by a blazing light of celestial radiance [Luke 24:4]. The angels deliver the astonishing news of the Resurrection. Each woman reacts differently to the miraculous announcement, contemplating the significance of what they have heard.

This dramatic composition is suggestive of a sculptural relief. It demonstrates the influence of Roman art, which Rubens studied in Italy from 1600 – 1608. Using highly rounded forms, with clear contours and rich colors, he creates a surging movement of rhythmic undulations from left to right. The woman shielding her eyes with her veil is Mary Magdalene. The central figure, looking directly at the angels is the Virgin Mary.

This label tells the visitor about what techniques are being used and who is being depicted. I do acknowledge that these two examples are two different art forms and that paintings have a longer history than cultural objects of being analyzed and discussed; however, these religious objects have important context about religion, culture, and history that the museum should include in the object's label but instead dismiss. In order for the museum to present information that is accessible to a wide range of audiences, the museum needs to design the object labels to focus beyond what it is and where it is from. This is my interpretation of what an appropriate label for the *Man-Lion Avatar of Vishnu* (1000 CE) would be:

The Narasimha (man-lion) is an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, one who incarnates in the form of part lion and part man to destroy evil and restores Dharma. Narashima is depicted in two ways: *saumya* (placid) and *kura* (cruel). In the *saumya* representation, the god is no different from a conventional image of Vishnu, except

that he has the head of a lion instead of a human. In the *kura* representation, Narashima engages in a violent act.

In this finely carved Stele, the artist depicts the story of how the titan Hiranyasipu, a devoted follower of Shiva, disregards his son Prahlada's devotion to Vishnu. One day, Prahlada asserts that Vishnu is everywhere, even in the structure in which they stand in. Hiranyasipu knocks down one of the columns of the structure and it splits open to reveal Vishnu in the form of a man-lion. Enraged at the titan Hiranyakasipu, Vishnu places the titan across his left thigh, and kills him by ripping his belly open.

Vishnu strikes a menacing pose as he lifts his left leg to receive the titan on his thigh. Vishnu's feet are protected by a cushion on his right foot and a lotus on his left. While his two hands are ripping open the titan's belly, his two additional hands are holding a wheel and a club. Hiranyasipu lays over Vishnu's left thigh helplessly while his belly is being clawed out. Vishnu's lion head is depicted with a majestic mane that forms a halo around his face. Despite this being a gruesome scene, Vishnu shows no emotion.

The information for my proposed label came from Pal's catalogue *Art from the Indian Subcontinent* (2003).⁷⁶ Although this label does not reflect the complexity of the object, it discusses a visual analysis of what the object is, what is being depicted, and what its purpose was. It would have been appropriate to discuss the object's function and origins but unfortunately, a cultural object like *Man-Lion Avatar of Vishnu* (1000 CE) often lack this information because it was probably looted or bought on the black market.

Pal placed the objects in the Asian art collection chronologically, and Indian art historian Jyotindra Jain explains how "the new Asian Galleries . . . have set an example of innovative reinvention of museum space and creation of a wider composite context for South and Southeast Asia . . . in a new and meaningful narrative."⁷⁷ In the European and American art galleries, organizing these objects chronologically is not something new or innovative. The European and American art galleries in the Norton Simon Museum are divided by time period for the very same reason, which was to show the exchange of ideas of these countries. It is acceptable for the European and American art collections to be displayed by time period because that it is the standard way of organizing Western artworks and the labels accompanying each piece recognizes each culture and country, the artist who made the work and the historical and artistic context. In contrast, there are not enough objects from each country in the Asian art collection to organize them by country. For example, there are only three objects that are being displayed from Vietnam, while there are over 160 objects on display from India. Organizing them by chronology seemed more cohesive and interesting for Pal.⁷⁸ The fact that Jain praises Pal's decision as innovative shows how Western museums need to rethink how to present these objects

⁷⁶ Pal, *Asian Art at the Norton Simon Museum: Art from the Indian Subcontinent*, vol. 1, 180 – 182.

⁷⁷ Jain, "New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena," 78.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

from non-Western cultures so that it does not impose the museum's agenda's and presents the object objectively.

Object labels are accompanied by each object, however, when the museum or curator places certain objects together, there needs to be label to discuss this. Section labels are usually placed by the entrance of each gallery and “inform visitors of the rationale behind a subgrouping of objects, paintings, or animals.”⁷⁹ In the Asian art galleries, the only section label is in a gallery that exhibits bronze sculptures, specifically from the 14th century Chola period in India, along with other bronze Hindu statues from different countries. This is a well-written label because it presents to the viewer what objects are being exhibited, where they came from and what time period they were made in. The section label also discusses the material/technique used to create these statues and their role and purpose in religious festivals. Although it focuses on India and Sri Lanka, the section label makes it easier for the visitor to understand the theme of the gallery. It makes us question why the museum doesn't have more of these section labels. When the visitor goes into other galleries, there are no section labels that discuss the underlying principle of the objects in that section, and so it generalizes these objects on display. And when these objects are generalized, the museum fails to teach the visitor the connection between the religion and the objects and the countries they represent. To acknowledge the placing of the objects together, the museum needs an explanation of this grouping as well as provide historical context.

In his book, *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities* (2009), art historian James Cuno states that the museum's “purpose to provide [the visitor] informed access to authentic works of art, to anticipate the range of questions they may have, and

⁷⁹ Serrell, “Types of Labels in Exhibitions,” 24.

to try and help them through text labels.”⁸⁰ There are many ways for the museum to provide information, such as tours, films, and activities but the most fundamental form that visitors expect to be present within galleries are the labels. Labels provide key information and help increase the visitor’s understanding of the objects and overall theme of the exhibition. However, one of the main concerns with the use of labels in museums is that it caters to the visitor’s anticipated exhibition experience, as opposed to catering to the object. Serrell states “art museums are more concerned with aesthetics and . . . Art museum practitioners worry about visitors spending too much time reading.”⁸¹ When labels only give the basic information, a brief description from a third person, and not include information on how the object was acquired and the significance of where the object originated from, the visitors take into consideration what the museum values from the object. Thus, they take the information in the museum at face value, and not question the purposes and methods of display. Condensing large amounts of detailed information or research about an object into an interesting and widely accessible label is a challenge that museums and curators face, but it is their responsibility to provide this information and give back the agency that was taken from the object. Labels present to the viewer not only important facts about the object but also how these objects are connected to one another, and to the overall theme to the exhibition. Although Pal uses labels in the galleries, they are not effective because of its organization and how it inappropriately coalesces the objects together.

The Garden

For the visitor to enter the “Asian Sculpture Garden,” they must go through the Asian art galleries and exit through the back door. In the garden, the sculptures are placed in three specific

⁸⁰ James Cuno, “Introduction,” in *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16.

⁸¹ Beverly Serrell, “Introduction,” in *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1996), XIII.

areas. The two *Lingams* (9th - 12th century), and a *Nandi* (16th century) that is placed under an old olive tree that is reminiscent of the ancient *Yaksha* and *Naga* shrines that can be found all over India.⁸² Along the main wall, there are statues of *Vishnu* and *Shiva* and plants that are found in Asia, including Japanese maples and Chinese silk floss trees.⁸³ On the other side of the garden is the *Buddha Shakyamuni* (1100) surrounded by bamboo. These statues are disconnected by location and there is no proper labels to discuss their position. In contrast to the shadowy temple space in the galleries, Pal wanted to create a space where the statues can also be seen in natural light and create an authentic experience of Asia.

In 2015, the museum published a catalogue, *A Living Work of Art: The Norton Simon Museum Sculpture Garden* (2015), which highlighted the fifteenth anniversary of the garden and examined the space and the sculptures displayed. It also features an interview with landscape designer Nancy Goslee Power, who designed the main garden at the Norton Simon Museum. The last chapter of the catalogue (by Melody Rod-ari) discusses the Asian sculpture garden; “Indian and Southeast Asian Sculpture.” There are twelve statues, ten from India and two from Cambodia. Rod-ari gives us the labels and descriptions for each statue in this catalogue; however, when visitors go to the Asian sculpture garden, the sculptures only have a label that presents basic object information with no description of the object’s context, visual features or connection to religion.

Another issue with the section of the “Asian Sculpture Garden” is that Rod-Ari does not include an introduction about the Asian sculpture garden, or any mention of Pal, who oversaw the placement of the sculptures. The overall catalogue focuses more on the separate sculpture garden created by Power, which includes European and American sculptures. That section

⁸² Jain, "New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena," 79.

⁸³ Bajaj, "The New Asian Galleries at the Norton Simon Museum: An Interview with Pratapaditya Pal," 66.

includes an introductory essay as well as a discussion with Power about her design. Power was inspired both by Monet's garden in Giverny and by Japanese gardens, which led her to create a lush and vibrant space.⁸⁴ In contrast, Pal lumped together different sculptures and plants, attempting to connect these objects with the idea of religion. The Asian sculpture garden is in a small area, with the majority of the sculptures against the wall. There is no integration between the sculptures and the garden, compared to Power's garden design, which is placed upstairs on the main level and where the sculptures are placed along the designated pathway or integrated into the plants.

The placement of sculptures in Power's design in the garden, allows the visitor to interact with sculpture, meaning that they can walk around and see all sides of the sculpture, along with seeing the plants placed around it. On the other hand, Pal's organizations of the sculptures do not allow this interaction, since most of the sculptures are against the wall and there is not designated pathway to the *Lingams and Nandi*. Pal placed the sculptures in the space, but he is an academic scholar, not a landscape specialist, like Power. Power designed a garden that was vibrant and filled with plants and flowers, and that incorporated the European and American sculptures into the garden space. Pal, on the other hand, attempts to create a cohesive space with the theme of religion and placed sculptures and plants from Asia together into one space without thinking about the narrative being created. This is similar to Espiritu's argument about panethnicity and how different Asian subgroups would be "lumped" together based on the commonality of their geography and ignoring their individual culture. Without an introductory essay to the garden, readers do not get an understanding behind Pal's ideas about the garden. Although Pal wanted to incorporate Asian cultures and countries into the Asian sculpture garden, as he did in the Asian

⁸⁴ Carol Togneri, Leslie Denk, and Nancy Goslee Power, *A Living Work of Art: The Norton Simon Museum Sculpture Garden*, (Pasadena: Norton Simon Museum, 2015), 24.

art galleries, he ultimately fails in doing so and lumps these objects and plants together, which generalizes Asia together. Also, because the labels are very general, one must have the catalogue in order to understand the aesthetic and context of each sculpture in the garden.

Overall, the aesthetic and context of the Asian sculpture garden is anticlimactic compared to the main gardens by Power. The difference between the main gardens and the Asian sculpture garden shows a hierarchy of what the institution values. In the foreword to this catalogue, Carol Togneri, Chief Curator of the Norton Simon Museum, discusses how the Asian Sculpture Garden “provides a meditative backdrop for the Museum’s stunning Indian and Southeast Asian collection.”⁸⁵ Togneri categorizes these religious objects as basically decor for meditation, and she fails to recognize that these religious statues were meant to be worshipped and praised. Pal chose to place the Asian art gallery on the lower levels because of the access to its own garden; however, his design of the garden does not capture how gardens in Asia look, compared to his attempt in the Asian art galleries. With the lack of color and the dominance of the stone sculptures and the concrete floor, the Asian sculpture garden itself looks stark and cold. It is also less accessible compared to Power’s sculpture garden. The entrance to Power’s sculpture garden is placed in the main pavilion when the visitor enters. By contrast, the entrance to the Asian sculpture garden is placed at the very back of the Asian art galleries. There are no directional signs that can lead the visitor to the garden, which. If the visitor does not enter the Asian art galleries, they will not be able to see the Asian Sculpture garden.

In his chapter, “Orientalism in Architecture,” historian John M. MacKenzie writes that during the 19th century, architects in Europe began to look at Oriental design as a source of inspiration. In the gardens, the Orient offered an alternative court of aesthetic appeal, as it was linked to new forms of spectacular entertainment, such as the use of fireworks and lights

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

outdoors. The gardens also incorporated different materials such as tile, ceramics, and textiles into the structures to add new decoration and texture to the overall aesthetic to the garden. He argues that the Oriental features used in public and private gardens aid in providing variety and option for leisure and entertainment and that the Oriental influence in design was used to satisfy the West's need for the imaginary Orient during the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ MacKenzie disagrees with the idea that the classical houses, palaces and the great public buildings of the nineteenth century represented a serious indoor world, while the outdoor park represented an undisciplined world of leisure.⁸⁷ MacKenzie argues that both styles influenced each other and states that this interpretation does not work because the park was integral for advancement in Western society, was malleable, and was intended to demonstrate that these Oriental spaces were capable of development to meet the Western standards.⁸⁸ Both MacKenzie and Pal, then, believed that the Orient and its culture had an impact with the West, but the perception created by orientalization created negative stereotypes of the East. MacKenzie challenges Said's analysis about the Orient by stating how the East had as great an influence on the West as the West had on the East but the reciprocity was not mutual, as the West colonized the East. Pal and Gehry's design of the garden and galleries inappropriately coalesces Asian cultures together. The Asian art galleries and Asian sculpture garden space becomes a spectacle to provide an authentic experience of Asia and exocitizes the culture. Since the gardens are not connected, this illustrates how the museum wants to keep the gardens separate.

Conclusion

⁸⁶ John M. MacKenzie, "Orientalism in Architecture," in *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 74.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

In this study, I analyze how the label “Asian Art Collection” misrepresents and misinterprets the Asian objects displayed in the Norton Simon Museum. By examining the collection, along with its exhibition, I show how the space evokes the idea of Orientalism, a term controlling the nature and shape of knowledge of the East, as well as how it was produced and disseminated. By orientalizing the space, these cultural objects from Asia present Asia as a timeless and foreign place concerned with religion. This Orientalization also suggests Western superiority by placing the Western galleries on the main level and having the Asian art galleries at the bottom. Furthermore, the panethnic label imposed upon the collection suggests that it represents all Asian cultures and countries when it clearly only focuses on some countries in South and Southeast Asia. Although my paper focuses on the Asian art collection at the Norton Simon, the framework I use can be applied to objects from any non-Western culture in museums. My thesis highlights a problem that museums and curators constantly face when exhibiting cultural objects from Asia. In all respects, there is no proper way to display non-Western objects in a Western institution because these objects were never meant to be placed in museums. This is not to say that Western institutions can’t help give these cultural objects agency that was taken from them during colonization. The museum plays a major role in the presentation and understanding of the objects and its culture, and here, I suggest some options that museums can do to reevaluate their gallery spaces to create interpretations that are diverse and inclusive.

The first is changing the title of the galleries that display cultural objects and focusing more on the collection rather than the commonality of their geography. A general title based on geography can also be dangerous if the actual collection does not represent all cultures and countries. As seen in the Asian art collection in the Norton Simon Museum, the collection has predominantly religious objects from some countries of South and Southeast Asia. It is not

realistic to include every country in the exhibition title or gallery, but it is important for the title to reflect what the collection actually presents. In the case of the Norton Simon, the museum needs to be consistent with labeling the Asian art collection. One possible title for the exhibition can be “The Religious Art of South and Southeast Asia.”

Another recommendation for museums is to include the life history of how the object came to the museum. Cultural objects have a history of being smuggled and sold to collectors on the black market. In the case of the Norton Simon Museum, these objects were displayed in galleries that attempted to bring the objects back to their original context. As Davis points out, objects cannot be returned to their original settings to serve their religious purpose. When cultural objects are displayed in a museum, their labels have the opportunity to teach the visitor and give these objects the agency that colonization and orientalism have taken away from them; the museum needs to design labels that go beyond discussing the object’s visual features. It is the museum’s responsibility to add the life history of that object into the label, meaning that curators should discuss where it came from and how it came to the museum (i.e., smuggled, or bought from the black market) to illustrate that these objects were first placed in temples and taken from their original contexts and placed in a museum. It also allows the museum to be more transparent and give the community another way to understand the object.

Another way museums can be inclusive is by adding more diverse art to cultural collections. In his article, “The Challenge of Presenting Cultural Artifacts in a Museum Setting,” Sheng Kuan Chung recommends that “we challenge museum policy makers to examine their own practices and ask them what criteria they used to place art or cultural objects in the so-called *Asian Art Gallery* or *African Art Gallery*.”⁸⁹ Where are the works by contemporary Asian artists

⁸⁹ Sheng Kuan Chung, "The Challenge of Presenting Cultural Artifacts in a Museum Setting." *Art Education* 56, no. 1 (2003), 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194027>.

presented? This is important because placing cultural objects in an *Asian Art Gallery* suggest that all Asian art/cultural objects are presented in all time periods, however, most collections, like the Norton Simon, only focus on one part of the historical scope of visual culture from a certain country.

In her critique of the exhibition *Puja and Piety: Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist Art from the Indian Subcontinent*, which was curated by Pal in 2016, at the Santa Barbara Art Museum, art historian Alka Patel argues that “given that more than half of the displayed objects are gifts to the Museum, the exhibition demands that we carefully deliberate the representation of South Asian art in this regional museum, and mark the lacunae that should be filled if the Museum is to continue to expand its holdings in this important area of collecting.”⁹⁰ While Simon collected the majority of the cultural objects from Asia, Togneri discusses how a large part of the Asian art collections were works donated by renowned collectors and artists.⁹¹ The museum’s collection originated from Simon’s private collection of works. If the Norton Simon Museum wants a “usefully representative collection,” it needs to fill in the gaps that gifts and donations have left.⁹² The inclusion of contemporary art of artists from the same country is needed in order to illustrate a full spectrum of Asian art and to show that Asia is a progressive continent and not timeless, and to restore historical agency. On the other hand, art historian Joanne Kee argues in her article, “What is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women’s Art?” that the common practice of categorizing the artworks from non-Western female artist according to their gender or ethnicity in international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale (1970), will enforce the objectification of their status as the “other,” and their individuality of their artwork will be

⁹⁰ Alka Patel, “Puja and Piety” in *The Burlington Magazine*, (volume 158, 2016), 682.

⁹¹ Carol Togneri, “Audio: Indian Paintings in Norton Simon Museum.” Norton Simon Museum. Podcast audio, 2009, <https://www.nortonsimon.org/learn/multimedia/podcasts-and-videos/indian-paintings-in-the-norton-simon-museum>.

⁹² Patel, “Puja and Piety” in *The Burlington Magazine*, (volume 158, 2016), 682.

overlooked.⁹³ Contemporary artists may not want to take on that label or that responsibility, and so museums and curators need to be mindful of the artists when creating exhibitions and collections.

Although transparency and ethics in acquisition have increasingly become a topic of public discussion and scholarly study, there is still much to be done for museums to become more diverse and inclusive when displaying cultural objects. Museums and curators need to be more mindful and think more critically when designing new exhibitions, or acquiring cultural objects. Visitors should challenge museums and question why cultural objects are displayed the way that they are. Does the museum display these cultural objects objectively and without the ideas of colonization? Museums are built on the practice of collecting objects from ‘primitive’ cultures for general interest and scholarly understanding as well as to showcase their achievements of colonial power and colonization. Cultural objects, like the ones from the Asian art collection in the Norton Simon Museum, are often subject to misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, and false narrative. Museums are not just cultural centers but important learning institutions. Cultural objects should be respected, and it is the responsibility of the museum to recognize the context of these objects and display them in the best way for the community to learn while returning their cultural, historical, and religious agency.

⁹³ Joan Kee, "What Is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women's Art?" in *Contemporary Art in Asia* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011), 108.

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