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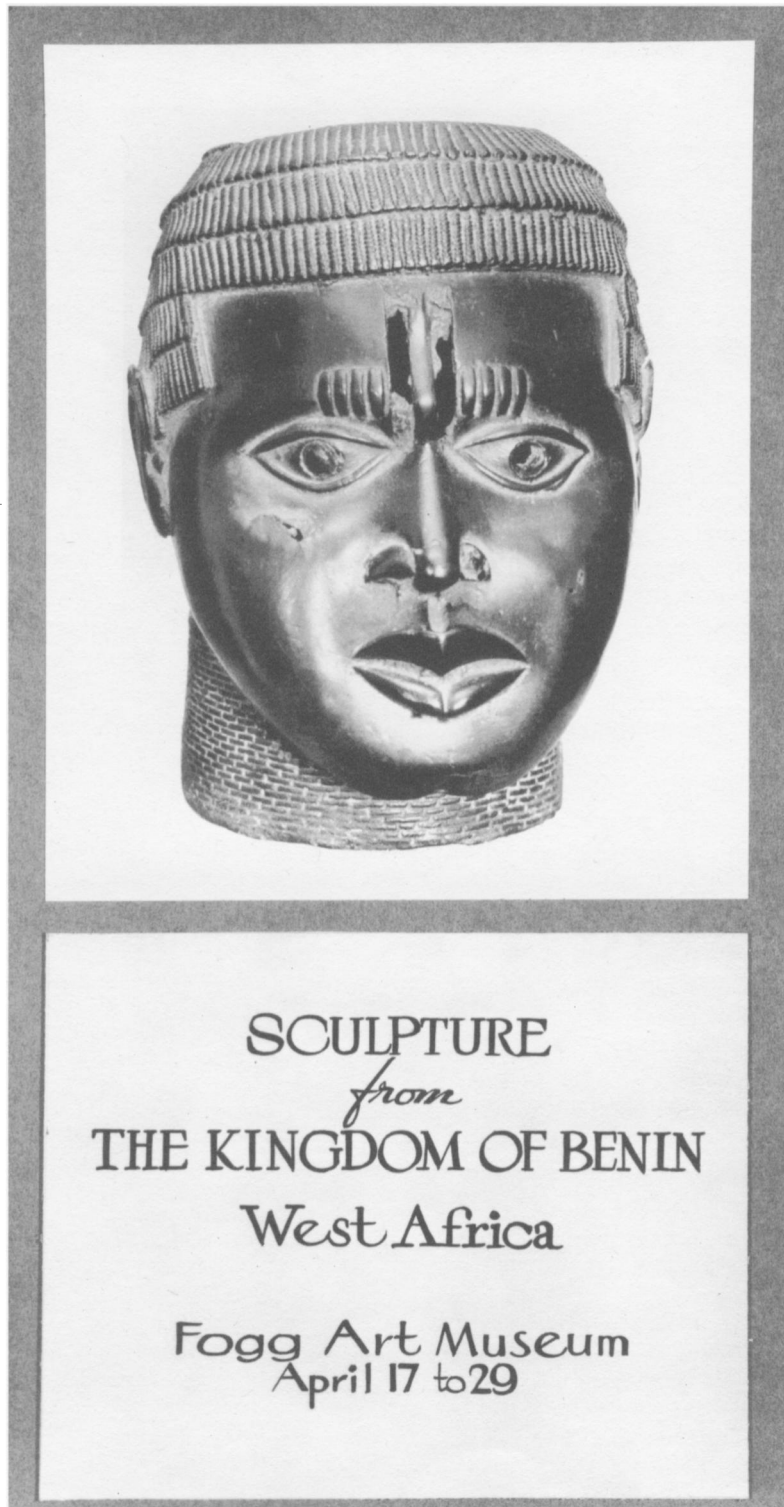


Figure 5. Flyer "Sculpture from The Kingdom of Benin," Fogg Art Museum exhibition, April 1937. Exhibition Records, Harvard University Art Museums Archives. File: Loan Exhibition of Art of the Kingdom of Benin.

# The common path

## Possible futures for art and anthropology museums

THOMAS W. LENTZ

The Harvard University Art Museums today stand at a turning point in their history. As we plan a complex and extensive renovation, expansion, and transformation of our physical spaces, we are also reexamining our roles and responsibilities as an institution within the wider context of a university, one with extraordinary collection and scholarly resources across multiple fields and disciplines, all in the service of advanced education and research.

While we are often regarded among art museums in the United States as the “great teaching museum,”<sup>1</sup> with European, American, and Asian holdings considered strong by any standard, we also confront, in my view, a growing contradiction: Major world visual traditions—and the objects, ideas and values associated with them—are not currently represented in our physical spaces or in our intellectual and programmatic life. Historically, the material achievements of African, pre-Columbian, Native American, and Oceanic civilizations—with the exception of a brief, early exhibition presence in the Fogg Museum—have never in any substantial way constituted a significant part of our collections or our collecting habits and strategies (fig. 1). With our physical transformation imminent, we now have an important opportunity to address what for many is seen as an increasingly narrow, selective, and even regressive view of historical and contemporary visual creativity.

For obvious reasons, ranging from cultural property issues to decades of narrow focus or neglect (some

deliberate, others unintentional), the Art Museums at Harvard are today unlikely in any practical or meaningful fashion to begin assembling major holdings in these areas.<sup>2</sup> To enter into those collecting realms in this day and age would be roughly tantamount to the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City suddenly deciding to build substantial and important collections of European and Asian art—and face the same likelihood of success. Fortunately, other prominent collecting institutions at Harvard have assembled important holdings from these traditions: Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., with its great pre-Colombian collections, and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, with its vast and wide-ranging collections located not far from the Art Museums.<sup>3</sup> The existence of these separately held but far from integrated resources at Harvard raises a number of intriguing intellectual and pedagogical questions: Can

2. Acquisition funding, staffing considerations, and the Art Museums’ late entry into these collecting fields remain strong inhibiting factors. Giving even greater pause are the renewed efforts on the part of many in the academic and museum communities to affect a greater and more equitable balance between the desire to preserve the world’s cultural and artistic heritage with a respect for and adherence to the cultural property laws of other nations. The latter view is articulated in Irene J. Winter, “Challenges in the Art Museum in the 1990s: The (an) Art Historian’s Voice,” in *Different Voices: A Social, Cultural and Historical Framework for Change in the American Art Museum*, ed. M. Tucker (New York, Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992), pp. 30–55.

3. See J. O. Brew, *People and Projects of the Peabody Museum, 1866–1966* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum Press, 1966); and *Early Days of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University* (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum Press, 1966). See also Rubie Watson, *Opening the Museum: The Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology*. Occasional Papers, 1 (Cambridge: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 2001). For Dumbarton Oaks, see Elizabeth P. Benson, “The Robert Woods Bliss Collection of Pre-Columbian Art: A Memoir,” in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), pp. 15–34; and Elizabeth Hill Boone, “Robert Woods Bliss and Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 1–10.

I would like to thank Sarah Ewick and Porter Mansfield for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

1. This perception took root in the early part of the twentieth century with the reconceptualization, under the leadership of Edward Forbes and Paul Sachs, of the Fogg Art Museum (the oldest of the three art museums at Harvard) as a single, unified space for learning and research. Those developments are cogently summarized in Kathryn Brush, *Vastly More Than Brick and Mortar: Reinventing the Fogg Art Museum in the 1920s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 2003). See also Kimberly Orcutt, “Personal Collecting Meets Institutional Vision: The Origins of Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 18, no. 2 (2006):267–284.

Figure 1. Table of the Fogg Museum’s collection, 1922. Edward W. Forbes Papers, Harvard University Art Museums Archives. File: Visiting Committee—Correspondence, 1922–1923. Photographer: Katya Kallsen.

and should the objects and ideas of traditions historically housed at Harvard in anthropology museums be introduced into art museums? Or vice-versa? If so, how can it be done? What is the mechanism? And, from the perspective of the Art Museums, can one bring this intended convergence about without falling into the snares of exoticism or tokenism?

Behind these questions is yet another one of even more fundamental importance to me and my colleague, William Fash, director of the Peabody: What is the future long-term relationship between the art and anthropology museums at Harvard? This question takes on increasing relevance as the likelihood increases of the Art Museums and the Peabody Museum moving into closer physical and programmatic proximity in Harvard’s new Allston campus across the river from Cambridge.<sup>4</sup> Harvard in a very preliminary way is beginning to contemplate this possibility, one that envisions the option of sharing intellectual and collection resources as well as exploring links across multiple fields and disciplines, ranging from art history to archaeology, anthropology, and beyond. While this scenario is being actively explored, it is also recognized that there are real and necessary differences among both our museums and separate disciplines. Harvard possesses two powerful collections, but they were assembled at different times, for different purposes and, for the most part, according to widely divergent criteria. As distinct museums, we

follow, and likely always will, separate disciplinary pathways for the historical, cultural, and intellectual reasons well known to members of our respective disciplines. We obviously respect and embrace those differences.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, at the same time, there are undeniable links between our two institutions and disciplines—historical, visual, intellectual, programmatic, functional, pedagogical. Logic would dictate a movement toward some kind of sharing of these great resources, and that impulse was, in fact, present in the earlier histories of both the Peabody and the Harvard University Art Museums (figs. 2–5). In other words, these sentiments are hardly new, nor are the complexities and contradictions of such an undertaking. A letter dated October 4, 1966, from Alfred H. Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, to fellow members of the Harvard University Overseer’s Committee to Visit the Fine Arts, discusses what Barr believed to be “certain opportunities and obligations that Harvard [and by extension the Fogg] has in relation to Pre-Columbian art and the so-called primitive art of the continents other than Eurasia and its cultural colonies.” Barr also notes that since its opening in 1927, the Fogg had devoted one of its galleries to Mayan art loaned by the Peabody Museum, stating that he believes the Fogg was not only the first university art museum to take such a step, but that it was also the first to present a

4. Initial planning ideas and concepts for Harvard University’s expansion of its campus into the Allston section of Boston can be found in the “Harvard University Allston Campus Institutional Master Plan,” located at <http://allston.harvard.edu/imp/imp.htm>, on Harvard’s Allston Initiative website (<http://allston.harvard.edu/ai.htm>).

5. This line of thinking has never envisioned an administrative merging of the two institution’s collections, operations, and programs, that is, their identities. In addition to separate histories and disciplinary differences, a plethora of legal, financial, and governance provisions effectively prevent such a union.

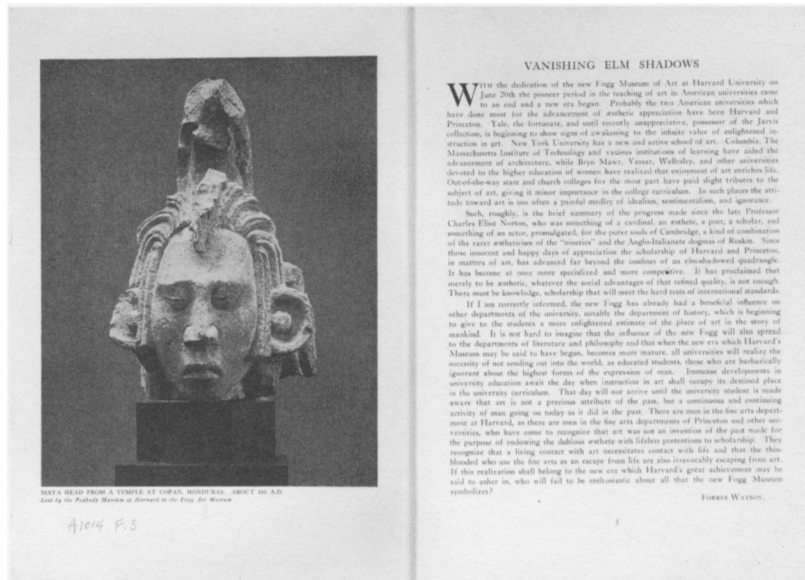


Figure 2. *The Arts*, vol. XII, no. 1 (July 1927). Brooklyn: Hamilton Easter Field, 1927, pp. 2–3. Maya Head from a temple at Copán, Honduras. About 300 A.D. Lent by the Peabody Museum at Harvard to the Fogg Art Museum. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library. Photographer: Katya Kallsen.

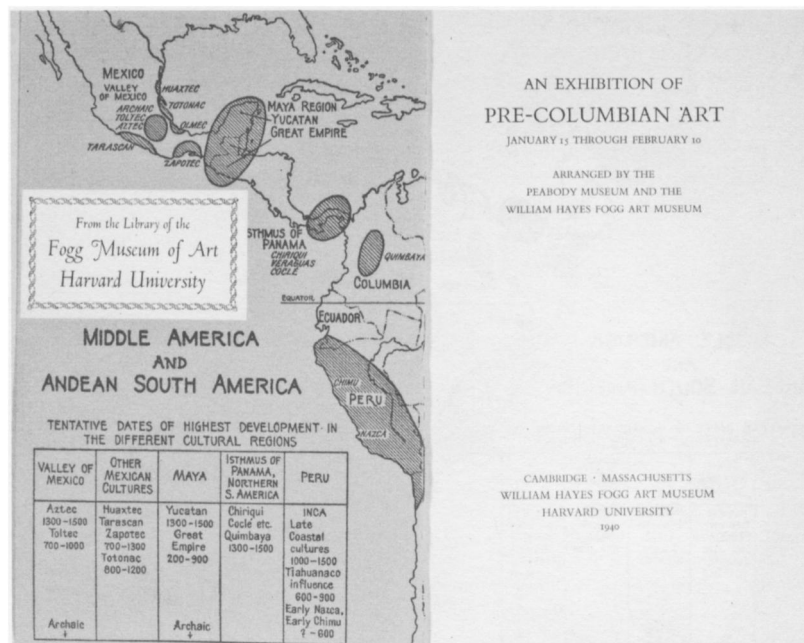


Figure 3. Opening spread of the Fogg Art Museum exhibition catalogue, *An Exhibition of Pre-Columbian Art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940). Courtesy of the Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library. Photographer: Katya Kallsen.



Figure 4. Gallery view, "Maya Art," Gallery X, Fogg Art Museum, 1927. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library. Photographer: August Boecker.

large pre-Columbian exhibition; this "experiment" apparently ended when the Peabody withdrew its loans in an "abortive attempt to present its material as works of art rather than ethnographical specimens."<sup>6</sup> By the same token, African art was first displayed at the Fogg Museum in 1934 in an exhibition entitled "Oceanic and African Art," again drawn from the Peabody collections and preceding by a year the first major exhibition of African art in the United States, "African Negro Art" at the Museum of Modern Art. A second African exhibition at the Fogg followed in 1937, "Sculpture from the Kingdom of Benin, West Africa," drawn from the Peabody and a number of other public and private collections. It was not until nearly sixty years later that

6. Alfred H. Barr Jr., to the members of the Harvard Overseers' Committee to Visit the Fine Arts, October 4, 1966. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, RdH IV.6. Ivan Gaskell has also intriguingly raised the question of whether the Fogg's display of pre-Columbian art in 1927 conformed to an ideology of Americanization: an assertion of American antecedents in contradistinction to the ancient classical antecedents of European society, meant to serve as a means of further (and questionably) asserting the particularism of continuing American colonial culture. Note: I am grateful to Beatrice Kernan, formerly of the Museum of Modern Art, for bringing this information to my attention.

another exhibition of African art was held at the Art Museums at Harvard, "The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection," in 1996 (fig. 6).<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, a more expansive series of motivations was present from the late 1920s at Harvard, only to be retreated from in ensuing years. It is almost as if the distance across the intellectual and disciplinary divide at Harvard that historically had steered certain objects to an art museum and others to an anthropology museum had become simply too wide. Nineteenth-century taxonomies for objects and knowledge are still present among Harvard's collecting entities, an observation that is not meant to suggest a diminution of the staggering achievements generated by that intellectual framework but instead a need to move beyond it in ways that bring both resources and disciplinary capacities into closer alignment and coordination. In other words, how do we harness for the benefit of students, faculty, and the communities we serve our own respective strengths and

7. This brief, sporadic history, as well as the issues it raises, is detailed in Suzanne Preston Blier, Aimée Bessire, and March H. C. Bessire, "The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection," *Harvard University Art Museums Gallery Series* no. 21 (1996), esp. pp. 9–12.



Figure 6. Gallery view, "The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection," Harvard University Art Museums exhibition, 1996. Photographic views of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums Archives. File: 1.824—The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel.

distinctions, our unique and often conflicting views of the material and visual manifestations of human history, for the collective advancement of knowledge and understanding?

Art museums, variously seen throughout their increasingly complex and conflicted histories as treasure houses, secular temples, educational instruments, and now economic engines, are obviously no longer viewed, as they once were, as neutral entities.<sup>8</sup> As a physical

8. The literature devoted to institutional histories and critiques of art museums is voluminous. Excellent introductions to a multitude of perspectives in this burgeoning field of study can be found in Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); *Art Apart: Art Institutions and Ideology Across England and North America*, ed. Marcia Pointon (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994); *The Formation of Natural Collections of Art and Archaeology*, ed. Gwendolyn Wright, *Studies in the History of Art*, Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996); Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradictions: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); and *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

manifestation of thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes, art museums are firmly positioned on an ideological plane—which plane being dependent on one's perspective—that is brought into play by the conscious, systematic collecting of other cultures. As has often been observed, once objects are divested of their function, because they are collected, they become possessions whose meanings are controlled by the collector.<sup>9</sup> This is no less true of museums. One cannot avoid asking whether art museums, and anthropology museums as well, inevitably turn cultural materials into something else by the way they are structured and operate, and by the behaviors, visual or otherwise, they encourage.

Widely acknowledged also is the fact that by encouraging a specific way of viewing (looking) that isolates, heightens, distances, and charges, art museums clearly transform objects, regardless of cultural value or intent, into objects primarily of visual interest, into—as we like to say in my world—a work of art. In what

9. Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 7–24.

Svetlana Alpers famously termed “the museum effect,” what the art museum registers is visual distinction, not necessarily cultural significance.<sup>10</sup> This result, of course, is far from the primary concern for most anthropologists, but it is telling that anthropology museums, through the use of display strategies and paradigms that follow those of art museums, often create a similar effect.

If the original functions of and intentions underlying objects are often diminished or marginalized in this acculturating process of acquisition, interpretation, and display, is it possible for contextual and cultural meaning to be conveyed to viewers, even in anthropology museums? Some of the habits and assumptions of scholars in art and anthropology museums are not only blurred, they also cohabit a complex and contradictory landscape.<sup>11</sup> Yet these similarities are overshadowed by our differences, which inevitably raise more questions. Should the divide between art and anthropology museums ever be negotiated? Or will the relationship always be one of division characterized by the act of privileging either the object or context? Aesthetics or function? Visual concerns or social and political meaning? Is there a middle ground?

At this point, I have posed too many questions, and confess that I have no ready answers. Yet I know from my own training as an Islamic art historian, one concerned primarily with the construction of systems of representation, that it is the field of anthropology that has repeatedly provided the insights, models, conceptual approaches, and epiphanies that have opened my eyes and turned my thinking in different and unanticipated directions.<sup>12</sup> It has become increasingly obvious that our ability to work in closer alignment with the disciplinary concerns and strategies of anthropology and its related fields promises new and exciting avenues of research and scholarship for art museums, especially university art museums. Many fundamental issues of

common interest confronting scholars in both museums and academia can only begin to be understood from multiple perspectives, and not merely from the often blinkered confines of a particular discipline. Within the art museum itself, a variety of art historical problems remain stubbornly resistant to understanding, in part because their complexity of meanings straddles curatorial departments that have little interaction despite obvious historical, visual, and intellectual linkages among their fields, linkages that would argue for precisely such an approach.<sup>13</sup> In effect, fundamental questions and problems drop between individual silos that have grown around separate art historical fields, and frustratingly continue to elude not only possible resolution, but even meaningful engagement. These distances are even more pronounced when one looks for convergence between art and anthropology museums.

Despite these gaps, there is nonetheless a growing movement toward a multidisciplinary world where both institutions and their respective fields can coexist and flourish. As my colleague at the Peabody told me recently in a conversation concerning his own field of Mayan archaeology, a field where archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians work together in multiple ways, “we already live there.” Much the same has long been true for the Art Museums here at Harvard. While aesthetic and formal issues remain of major importance for our curatorial staff, those issues live with and inform a far wider galaxy of other concerns, ranging from philosophy and social or political history to scientific and material investigations. Despite the stubborn persistence of old stereotypes, art museums are hardly monolithic in their approach to objects and images.

For me as a director, an ideal perhaps both realistic and achievable for art museums remains one suggested years ago by Stephen Greenblatt, among others: a museum synthesis, one capable of sustaining for the viewer both historical memory and understanding, what we might think of as characteristic of anthropology

10. See Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 29.

11. An examination of the continuing and perhaps intractable differences among art historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists over what constitutes “art” is found in Carolyn Dean, “The Trouble with (the Term) Art,” *Art Journal* 2 (Summer 2006):25–32.

12. Particularly influential in this regard was the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose *Islam Observed* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1968) insightfully compared distinctive embraces of Islam in two very different cultures, Indonesia and Morocco.

13. In an effort to alleviate this disjuncture, study centers will be given a new and expanded prominence in the future facilities of the Harvard University Art Museums. While hardly a new concept among art museums, these physical arenas—designed for close, intimate encounters, under supervision, with objects and images—not only foster learning experiences different from that of a classroom or exhibition gallery, but also will be integrated with curatorial offices and workspaces in a physical configuration that encourages communication and collaboration across fields—and ideally across disciplines. See <http://www.p2.harvard.edu/research/HUAM.htm>.



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museums, and the “visual distinction and charged looking” that has always driven art museums. The task at hand is for objects first and foremost to be historically and culturally grounded.<sup>14</sup> The challenge then, and not always an easy one, is to accurately reintegrate into those contextualizations the pleasure and power of aesthetic understanding, so that the art museum experience is more than simply one of standing on the “conveyor belt of history.”<sup>15</sup> I see no compelling reason why these ideal worlds cannot to some extent inhabit the same universe.

This is a critical moment for Harvard. Many of us in the fields of art history and anthropology have come to believe that despite our differences, we have always been on some levels joined, driven by a deep and intuitive belief that through museums, through object-based teaching and research, we can teach in ways that other disciplines cannot, and that museums themselves are distinct, even unique sites of research and scholarship. My great hope is that this symposium and its participants can help begin to define a common path for both the Harvard University Art Museums and the Peabody that will result in actions that are literally concrete.

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14. Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Karp and Lavine (see note 10), pp. 42–56. The relevance of these ideas within the context of Asian art museums has been cited in Thomas W. Lentz, “In Flux: Asian Art at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery” in *Beyond the Legacy: Anniversary Acquisitions for the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), pp. 81–115.

15. Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), pp. 54–55.