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FROM THE GUEST EDITORS



Excuse Me, Is This a Church? Display as Content at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Risham Majeed

ABSTRACT

This essay explores two canonical installations at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Cloisters and African galleries in the Rockefeller wing. After providing a brief history of the formation of these collections and their display strategies, I analyze the effect of exhibition design for a visitor's judgments and impressions of the works of art. I argue that museum educators should incorporate display strategies into the narratives we create in these spaces, and I share approaches that I use in my lectures and tours.

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Excuse me, is this a Church?

I have been a lecturer at the Met Cloisters (the medieval outpost of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) for the past decade. This is among the most frequently asked questions by the general public, “excuse me, is this a church?”¹ I never quite know how to respond accurately, because the answer is somewhere between yes and no.

The answer is a contingent one, because the museum's galleries used to be functioning churches and monastic buildings. Embedded in a museum structure, however, they are desacralized, on display for their visual rather than spiritual properties. My ten years of experience witnessing the general public grapple with the ambiguity of such spaces, wherein decontextualization is complicated by objects and installations that are deeply charged with religious meaning, has brought to light a core tension that museum educators constantly negotiate: how much does the public need to know about the context of a work of art? Of course this is also a key question faced by curators, how best to emphasize aesthetics or context for an object through display strategies and labels. But as museum educators, we have the discretion to accentuate formal character and downplay use, or vice versa, through the narratives we construct orally and sequentially as we weave audiences through the galleries.²

In this essay, I consider two case studies of collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose status in the art historical canon is uniquely tied to this question of decontextualization: the Met Cloisters and the African art collection in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing. These collections illuminate the issues at stake when educators are faced with permanent installations, which, while often outdated, have themselves become canonical. For this reason, I argue that exhibition design and a conscious awareness of the history of display should inform the educator's narrative in these kinds of spaces. Educators should interpret the function and meaning of design and the history of display when

working with the public. Furthermore, they can disrupt and redirect the canon if they can help visitors see and understand the hierarchical power of placement and reveal curatorial strategies. Dismantling the decisions of an exhibition's design alerts the visitor to the charged interpretive environments of museums, and provides them with a set of tools for "museum looking"³ that makes installation design an integral part of interpretation.

I show how interrogating strategies of display as inseparable components of the popular highlights circuit, specifically, is a way of enabling audiences to appreciate how much the framework of the museum itself furnishes certain kinds of premade attitudes and arguments. Since the highlights tour is the bread and butter program of many museum education departments, this essay provides analysis and practical suggestions that can be instructive for many different kinds of museums. While I focus on the art museum to draw attention to the fact that canonical displays exert just as much pressure on museum education as canonical objects do, this is a topic of great relevance to all kinds of cultural institutions, including museums of science, natural history museums with ethnographic collections, and even memorials, where the museological frame is an inescapable component of their collections.

The Cloisters: Reluctant Romanesque

The Cloisters has been a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1925, when John D. Rockefeller, Jr. provided funds for the acquisition of fragments from medieval churches and monasteries that the American sculptor, George Grey Barnard, had amassed in France during the first decades of the twentieth century. Barnard had run out of money working on a commission for the Philadelphia State Capitol Building in Harrisburg, and in an effort to continue work, he began buying and selling fragments of medieval art scattered in various towns in southern France.⁴ With the hope of finding a wealthy American buyer, the sculptor had these large-scale carvings and architectural fragments shipped over to New York City before French patrimony laws were enacted in 1914.⁵

When he could not find a collector, the ever-entrepreneurial Barnard opened his own museum, called Barnard's Cloisters Museum, near Fort Tryon, not far from where the current Met Cloisters stands. It is important to realize that, at this time, there was no serious appreciation for the formal character of medieval carving or any consideration of it as artistic creation with expressive intention, which is one of the reasons why it was readily available for acquisition in the first place. Barnard's installation of fragments from Romanesque and Gothic monuments reflected this aesthetic disinterest on the part of collectors and the first generation of American art historians.

Instead of showing the objects as works of art in their own right, Barnard wanted to recreate the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, using the galleries to transport the public to the "dark ages."⁶ Guards were dressed as monks, the galleries were kept dim and illuminated primarily with flickering candlelight so as to simulate the imagined historical context of the old stones. Barnard's intention was to create a theatrical ambience for the visitor, and the objects on display were there to authenticate this time travel by virtue of their age. People went to Barnard's museum for this complete sensorial experience, not just to admire the venerable fragments (Figure 1).

In 1914, an ordinary New Yorker would never have seen real medieval art in person, unless she/he had traveled to Europe. If Barnard had been asked the question that I



Figure 1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters (formerly known as the George Grey Barnard collection and museum, The Cloisters); As installed at the original site of The Cloisters Museum created by George Grey Barnard; View of the interior looking west showing the Nave. Photographed in 1926. Source: Art Resource, NY. Barnard referred to this gallery as the “nave” and it consists of capitals and columns from the cloister of St. Guilhem-le-Désert on the lower level. Note the glass roof with retractable canopy and candlesticks throughout the gallery. Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

have been asked so many times over the years, I can imagine that he would have said “yes, this is a church!” enthusiastically, as he led the unsuspecting visitor through dim brick halls, perfumed by incense and echoing with polyphonic chant.⁷ Part of Barnard’s museum’s mission, as he saw it, was to give an American audience a peek into an entirely alien and remote past, perhaps even exotic for the United States. It magically gave New York a “genuine” medieval building (in reality a pastiche of fragments of medieval buildings, not unlike Fenway Court at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum⁸ in Boston, which opened in 1903).

When the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired Barnard’s collection, it came under the purview of Joseph Breck, the curator of Decorative Arts, and he, together with architect Charles Collens, designed the Cloisters as it now exists between 1925 and 1937. The building is loosely based on the plan of a medieval monastery, with the cloister from St. Michel-de-Cuxa installed as its center. The Cuxa cloister functions architecturally for the museum in the same way it would have for the abbey: it links the discrete galleries of the museum together with its four covered walkways (Figure 2). Just as in an actual monastery, the Cuxa cloister provides access to a chapter house; the one in the museum is from Notre Dame-de-Pontaut, a Cistercian monastery that in the twelfth century would have been the rival of St. Michel-de-Cuxa, which was Benedictine.⁹ In that sense the Cloisters, like all museums, furnishes opportunities for historically impossible meetings, between fierce rivals in this case; but in the museum, they behave as old friends, peacefully providing access to one another.



Figure 2. Fragments from the cloister of St. Michel-de-Cuxa, France, ca. 1130–1140. Installed at the Met Cloisters. Photo: Risham Majeed (2017).

The joint efforts of Collens and Breck museum-ized Barnard's core collection, through a systematic arrangement organized according to geography, style, and time period. Labels, one of the unequivocal signs that the object has entered a new context and is not what it used to be, were added complete with dates and locales. The architect and curator wanted the new museum to be at the cutting edge of the museology of the 1930s, with clean, uninterrupted light sources, providing minimal interference for an elegant communion between learned spectators and worthy monuments. While Barnard's desire was to plunge the viewer into the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, Collens and Breck worked to accurately restore these fragments by recreating their original architectural contexts in the new galleries, in a didactic manner. Where Barnard had indiscriminately mixed fragments from different monasteries and churches, Breck and Collens aspired to archeological accuracy in terms of the proper positioning of fragments with regard to their original architectural edifices.¹⁰

The concern for temporal and stylistic unity was the primary guiding principle for the architect and curator, but they, like Barnard, wanted to retain an atmosphere that was reminiscent of the Middle Ages.¹¹ For example, entirely new arcades were built for twelfth-century capitals and columns from Cuxa, but Collens sourced the distinctive pink and white veined marble from the same quarry that the twelfth century builders had used. Thus a seamless continuity is established between the twelfth century stone and the twentieth century reconstruction because there is no disruption in the color of the stone. Today, labels on each of the cardinal piers show the areas that are original, but to the untrained eye, the Cuxa cloister appears to be an actual medieval cloister (a quarter of its original size), and that was the curator's intention. I include this detail in my lecture because it helps the audience understand that we are in a simulated

environment, not an actual monastic structure. Since I start my highlights tour with this monument, the inclusion of provenance and museology alerts visitors to look for similar interventions in other galleries as we proceed through the collection.

Perhaps the most ambiguous space, and one in which the opening question usually arises, is in the gallery that houses the twelfth-century apse from the church of St. Martín at Fuentidueña, a small town in northern Spain. The entire east end of the church was dismantled, the fine ashlar stones individually numbered, and then reassembled at the Cloisters ([Figure 3](#)). The gallery functions in effect as the aforementioned church's nave and retains the original twelfth-century proportions with small clerestory windows. As in the original, there is a small step distinguishing the liturgical space of the apse from the lay occupancy of the nave. The authenticity of the museum space in this instance has deep ramifications for the visitor experience and for the educator's mediation of that experience. When I teach from this step, visitors seem to realize intuitively that the space behind me is a privileged and sacred one, so they hesitate in entering into it, even when asked to do so. This caution is no doubt intensified through the installation of an imposing wooden crucifixion suspended precisely above the step, where the altar would have been located.



Figure 3. Apse from the church of St. Martín, Fuentidueña, Spain, ca. 1175–1200. Installed at the Met Cloisters. Photo: Risham Majeed (2017).

Therein is the fundamental paradox of the Cloisters as a museum: Fuentidueña used to be a functioning church, but here it is a museum object, and a prime specimen of Romanesque architecture. As art museum educators, we are frequently straddling the line between contextualization and aesthetics, use and reuse, anthropology and art history. Confusion is exacerbated in the Cloisters by the fact that this art is Christian and resembles devotional spaces that are recognizable to the popular imagination. Unlike other art museums, moreover, the Cloisters is unique because its museological frame is an integral part of the collection to the point where it becomes difficult, at times, for visitors to know where the museum ends and the object begins. In this way, the Cloisters is almost like a house museum and has much in common with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, for example.

Some might say that the Cloisters has perhaps always had an excess of context in its curatorial decisions and exhibition design. However, this “context” is invisible and silent in our galleries because the objects that we are dealing with pull our entire bodies into their midst: at the Cloisters, architecture still behaves as architecture. There are no vitrines or barriers of any kind preventing you from entering any of the “objects.” Thus the impulse to treat and experience it as a religious structure, the desire to pray or to light a candle in a chapel, seems perfectly natural to many people.

In 2017, the entire museum can be seen as a period room: it is a time capsule of the tastes and method of medievalists and collectors working during the 1930s. Drawing the public’s attention to the conspicuous design decisions made in the plan, layout, and tenor of the installation, goes a long way in moving them away from atmosphere and redirecting attention to the *objectness* of the materials on display. In the cloister from St. Guilhem-le-Désert, for instance, large potted plants are installed around a working fountain though the entire gallery is protected by a glass roof (Figure 4). On the one hand, these simulations activate the dual nature of cloister as walkway and garden. But viewers already mindful of the constructed nature of each gallery (recall Cuxa) which in this case is dominated by architecture as object, can see how the careful arrangements of plants accentuate the lively variety of foliate carving that abounds in the capitals of St. Guilhem, which in turn makes it easier to understand the third role of the cloister as a surrogate paradise on earth in the lives of medieval monks. It is this awareness of the curatorial outlook, of juxtapositions and interventions that facilitate the public’s ability to then in turn make connections that reveal something new about the object.

The Rockefeller Wing: African Art

I would like now to move downtown and turn to another section of the Metropolitan Museum, where I have also taught, and where the entangled issues of context and display are different and yet equally problematic: the Rockefeller Wing. If the Cloisters’ curatorial attitude was steered by re-contextualization and atmosphere, the Rockefeller Wing was committed to decontextualization and neutrality from its inception in the late 1970s and early 80s.¹² No visitor has ever confused the installation of canonical Benin commemorative brass heads, now complete with their carved narrative ivory tusks, for an actual altar. In fact, in these galleries, most of the objects are perpetually incomplete, stripped of costumes and movement, without which they never would have been seen in isolation as they are here (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Fragments from the cloister of St. Guilhem-le-Désert, France, late twelfth to early thirteenth century. Installed at the Met Cloisters. Photo: Risham Majeed (2017).

The removal of context is the foundational condition for nearly every historical object in a museum setting, but for African art it was seen as especially necessary because it was only through removing the ritual attachments, and drawing attention exclusively to its plastic form, that Americans and Europeans began to consider it as “art.” Indeed, non-sculptural materials, frequently organic, had to be eliminated to definitively divorce African art from ethnography, and so it could meet the expectations and standards of the art museum.¹³

The presence of classical (what used to be called “traditional”) art from Africa in the art museum was predicated primarily on form. The African galleries in the Rockefeller Wing are populated with large, active, vibrant sculptures that have been museum-ized in vitrines. For an art that is already “other” to most museum-goers, the Rockefeller wing contains a network of barriers, some visible, others implied, for the visitor, which need to be dismantled by giving a short history of how African art came to be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to begin with.

Like the Cloisters, the Met’s core collection of African art was formed by an older museum, the Museum of Primitive Art, founded by Nelson Rockefeller in 1954.¹⁴ The MPA, located at 15 West 54th street, adopted the white cube, crystalline aesthetic of the



Figure 5. African Art galleries at the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Kongo (Democratic Republic of Congo) power figure (*n'kisi n'kondi* or *Mangaaka*) is installed without plexi at the far right. The raised wooden platform in the center of the gallery shows various examples of Bamana (Mali) sculptures, particularly from the *Jo* society. Photo: Risham Majeed (2016).

Museum of Modern Art, realizing that this gallery atmosphere predisposed their viewers to look at African sculpture the same way they would a painting by Picasso across the street. Through exhibition design, it communicated a message that these works were equivalent and could be appreciated with the same approach as the painting and sculpture on view at MoMA.

By the time that the African art collection went on permanent display at the Met in 1982, a whole generation of scholars had spent the 1970s doing field work in Africa and had returned with a desire to introduce context and local understandings into the labels, and to order the collection geographically. As the field of African art, young in 1980, has grown into a middle age, the presence of context has become even more pronounced in the Rockefeller Wing. Labels now integrate field photographs of shrines, altars, and masquerades to give the audience a sense of the life they had before entering the galleries.

The atmosphere of a gallery, especially when outdated, is the first impression that the audience absorbs. In the Rockefeller Wing, with the exception of a raised wooden platform, which shows a grouping of Bamana sculptures without vitrines, the majority of the collection is sealed off in cases, organized by ethnic group and/or region. Many of

the vitrines are necessitated because of the demands of conservation for organic materials, but the overall impression that I am speaking of infiltrates the galleries beyond such requirements.

Even the most delicate and virtuoso carving can be muted by its neighbors, which compete for the same limited attention, whether or not they merit the same concentration. In these galleries, at times one has to work even harder to direct the audience's attention to objects that are "canonical," since in many instances they are not given the room to spread out, so to speak, and seduce the eye as they otherwise could. In this situation, museum educators are constantly working against the grain of exhibition design and frequently contradicting the implicit claims of its strategies.

It is well known that audiences seldom read a label in its entirety, and even if they do, they rarely look at the object again, once they have. Educators are there to bridge this gap: to summarize and embroider the content of the label, and redirect the audience to the object simultaneously. However, when the objects themselves are not visually accessible as "masterpieces" should be, it is challenging to convincingly argue that the object in question embodies the criteria that we expect of the masterpiece. A prime example is a prestige stool, created by a master sculptor who has been identified as the "Buli" master since the late 1970s, which is nestled in a larger case with other, still very high quality, objects from Luba and Hemba (Democratic Republic of Congo) cultures. It is against a neutral linen wall, but the visitor has no access to the back of the figure where we could examine her elaborate coiffure, rendered through a dynamic criss-crossing of patterned planes. It is the Buli Master's expressive elongation, an innovation within an established set of visual expectations for this type of object, that is, a hallmark of his individual style. Visitors are also denied the ability to examine the stool in profile, whereby they would see the elegant point of the nose and consider it in dialogue with the gravity defying eyebrows, also characteristic of this hand (Figures 6 and 7).

This is an example of how an allegiance to the organizational framework which is tied to geography, overrules the presentation of hierarchies that are the basis of canon formation. For this reason, I preface any lecture or tour in the Rockefeller Wing with the pre-history of the collection, so that audiences know that when it arrived at the Metropolitan Museum, African art fell under the purview of the newly founded "Department of Primitive Art."¹⁵ Just as at the Cloisters, I make them conscious of the fact that we are again immersed in a way of looking that belongs to 1982 not 2017. At that time, the mere separation of African art from other "primitive" art granted it a specificity and plurality of expression that it did not have until then. That being said, we can then delve into how 1982, then instructive and bold, has become draining and homogenizing in 2017.

The Met's recently acquired magnificent Kongo Power Figure is another example of how a pre-existing display logic works against the oral narrative of "highlights" in the Rockefeller Wing. Up until just a few months ago, this imposing figure was installed uncovered, slightly above eye level, a few feet from the uncovered Bamana (Mali) sculptures in the center of the gallery (see Figure 5). This figure bristles with iron nails and its aggression imbues every aspect of form, from jutting chin to bare teeth, to the hostile, shoulder-forward stance suggesting the potential for unleashing intense violence.¹⁶ Such figures ensured a communal equilibrium by punishing transgressors who violated social norms. Its initial placement on a diagonal, as the first object a visitor to the Rockefeller Wing encountered, fully harnessed the object's intended purpose, to intimidate and



Figure 6. Luba and Hemba (Democratic Republic of Congo) case at the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Risham Majeed (2017).

awe, in a manner that was easily communicable to a museum audience. Currently, perhaps because of conservation concerns, the same figure has been moved to the interior galleries where it belongs geographically, is under plexi, and is placed higher than it had been when it presided over the corridor (Figure 5). In this new configuration, it is going to be more difficult to communicate the complex energy it embodies and its natural eloquence is again muted.

Currently, the African galleries in the Rockefeller wing do not present a clear hierarchy of canonical objects, although this might soon change as the department is planning a reinstallation. Making the viewer aware of the arbitrary limitations of the organizational framework of the Rockefeller wing simultaneously enables a kind of flexibility for the lecturer and their audience. For the moment, it is left to the museum educator to devise the canon anew, every time we present the highlights of this seminal collection.

Conclusion: which came first, the canon or the museum?

To a younger generation of museum goers Romanesque and African art today are as foreign as they were in the early twentieth century. My engagement with museum



Figure 7. The Buli Master (Ngongo ya Chintu possibly) (1850–1900). Prestige Stool: Female Caryatid. 19th century. Wood, metal studs, H. 24 in. (61cm). Purchase, Buckeye Trust and Charles B. Benenson Gifts, Rogers Fund and funds from various donors, 1979 (1979.290). Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

audiences alongside my own teaching to undergraduates has taught me that the canon of art history is practically irrelevant for museum (and college) education. Within medieval art, I focus on the Romanesque period which operates as the “other” for later Gothic art; identifying the peculiarities of Romanesque serves as a trope that legitimates the regularity of Gothic as the more authentic, original, innovative, and *native* style. Romanesque art has never really been canonical the way its flashier cousin Gothic has.

In the early years of the twentieth century, African and Romanesque sculpture were both considered “primitive.” Indeed, director Thomas Hoving, in his foreword to the first exhibition of African art held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 wrote,

Not too many decades ago the art of the Middle Ages was still called primitive, barbaric, crude, and inexpressive. How curious that seems today!¹⁷

While in France, it was the early medieval carving that supplied an interpretive lens for African art, in America, since African art was introduced to the public in galleries earlier than medieval art, it provided the touchstone for understanding the “crude” Romanesque forms, a little known and important point that I have presented in depth elsewhere.¹⁸

Yet, the most important objects in the Cloisters collection have always been the Romanesque cloisters of St. Michel-de-Cuxa and St. Guilhem-le-Désert, even though this style

was by no means considered “canonical” in the years they were collected and first displayed. As Walter Cahn observed in 1969 regarding Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Romanesque acquisitions at the turn of the twentieth century,

Fortunately for her, however, she made her purchases at a time when Romanesque architectural sculpture was still comparatively underappreciated and in plentiful supply. She was thus able to acquire some works which collectors of a more cautious turn of mind would *at a much later time* have been right to envy.¹⁹ [emphasis mine]

I would venture to say that Cahn’s assessment was still applicable to Barnard’s Cloisters Museum into the mid-1920s. It was through their rehabilitation as the center of the new museum that the twelfth-century cloisters slowly crept into the canon of medieval art. It is through their fixity, their permanence as part of the architecture of the museum *and* as Romanesque sculpture, that makes them among the most celebrated objects in the Cloisters collection, and are featured prominently in the highlights tour I give at the museum. Lecturers at the Cloisters have flexibility in determining the objects that constitute the “highlights” narrative they present, and through the consistent emphasis on Romanesque architecture and sculpture, these galleries can be given the weight of the Unicorn Tapestries.

The history of the Cloisters’ collection evinces this migration of Romanesque fragments serving first as atmosphere, as a background, to being considered as sculpture and architecture; Romanesque art moved from functioning as a frame to being in the frame. For time periods that have traditionally been at the edges of art history, as Romanesque and African art have, canonicity frequently does not inform their presence in the museum. In the case of the Met, it is the museum that assures their canonicity. Since the museum is so instrumental in crafting their value, its displays become a part of the content of the work of art.

While museum educators may not control the museological framework or exhibition design, through language, sequencing and selection we can always direct a viewer to something lesser known, uncanonical for art history even, that sits quietly in one of the corners of the museum that we have memorized. As much as our movements matter in the galleries, the object’s prehistories, still available through display, should also matter. Indeed the journeys of these objects into the museum, which frequently begin closer to our time, are what help visitors connect art with life.

Notes

1. I have been a lecturer at the Cloisters since 2006 but it is important to note that I am not writing on behalf of the education department at that institution. The opinions and experiences expressed here are entirely my own, based upon lecturing and teaching at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other museums, for the past decade. I am also building a Museum Studies curriculum at Ithaca College where I teach courses on exhibitions, museums, medieval, and African art.
2. On the subject of composing alternative and complementary narratives in museum education see Vallance, “Museum Education as Curriculum,” 343–58. See also Mayer, “A Post-modern Puzzle,” 356–68.
3. The awareness of a particularly calibrated, heightened vision enabled by museum displays has been treated extensively in the literature on museum studies. See especially Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” 25–32. For a more recent examination of “museum literacy,”

see Mayer, "A Postmodern Puzzle," 356–68. Mayer advocates for a more expansive definition of "museum literacy" which "focuses on visitors not only deriving meaning from artworks, but also understanding the institutional codes of the museum and drawing upon its holdings for their own purposes," 358.

4. The availability of large-scale fragments of medieval architecture and sculpture was made possible through the deliberate destruction of ecclesiastic and monastic structures during the French Revolution. The first museum of medieval fragments, *The Musée des Monuments Français*, was founded by Alexandre Lenoir in 1795 in Paris and closed in 1815. Lenoir's museum was an important precedent for Barnard's thinking about his own museum. On Lenoir's museum, see Bann, "The Poetics of the Museum," 77–92; McClellan, "Alexandre Lenoir and the Museum of French Monuments"; and Poulot, *Musée, Nation, Patrimoine, 1789–1815*.
5. For a more complete recent history of the Cloisters, see Husband, "Creating the Cloisters."
6. The history of the creation of the Cloisters has been laid out by Rebecca Leuchak who points out, "To create the atmosphere he artificially weathered his museum, a basilica-plan brick shed, by hosing down the walls while the mortar was still fresh," in "The Old World for the New," 257.
7. As Elizabeth Bradford Smith recounts, "Barnard, with his unerring flair for the dramatic and the unusual, had ignored conventional museum methods of display in favor of a composite medieval setting, complete with museum guides dressed in monks' robes against a background of candlelight, incense and medieval chant," 135.
8. As Walter Cahn observed, Gardner used medieval architecture as a *mise-en-scène*, not as art in of itself, "to evoke something of the tattered charm of Venice's old walls, encrusted with the accidental relics of its past," in "Romanesque Sculpture in American Collections," 47. See also Chong, "Mrs. Gardner's Museum of Myth," 212–20.
9. Pontaut was originally founded as a Benedictine monastery in 1115 but became Cistercian after 1151.
10. Charles Collens wrote

in a museum of this sort the visitor should be introduced to an atmosphere in which all the rooms are carried out in the period of architecture characteristic of the exhibits ... the other features are carried out in strict archaeology so that the entire atmosphere is without any disturbing feature

quoted in Husband, "Creating the Cloisters," 33.

11. Ultimately the museum followed the expectations of museum display but Collens harbored a private desire to retain the mysticism of an *in situ* encounter with works of medieval art, as he wrote,

I am afraid that I am one of a very large body of laymen who would much prefer to see a fourteenth century Madonna set in a niche with a sanctuary lamp as its lighting than to have the same Madonna placed on a wooden standard, suitably labeled, and so lighted that every detail is brought out in strong relief"

in Leuchak, "The Old World for the New," 261.

12. See Vogel, "Bringing African Art to the Metropolitan Museum," 38–45. Vogel notes, "I had felt strongly that the presentation should be as neutral as possible ... that our galleries not look different from the other galleries of the museum in any way that suggested that this art could not stand on its own," 40.
13. See Vogel, "Introduction," 11–17; and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Objects of Ethnography."
14. On the early history of this museum see Ezra, "Collecting African Art at New York's Museum of Primitive Art," 122–49.
15. The first presentation of African art at the Met was a temporary loan exhibition of objects from the Museum of Primitive Art in 1969. Then director of the MMA, Thomas Hoving, in his foreword to the catalogue wrote

this stunning show constitutes a truly significant moment of coming of age for this Museum, which is in essence a great encyclopedia of man-created achievements. But, even more important, *Art of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas* affords our public a splendid opportunity to see works of art of incomparable quality ... And the name of the Metropolitan is, after all, quality

in Goldwater, et al. *Art of Oceania, Africa*.

16. On Kongo power figures see especially, Thompson, "The Grand Detroit N'Kondi," 206–21. The recent exhibition *Kongo: Power and Majesty* allowed for a comprehensive examination of a corpus of these large power figures and led the curator, LaGamma to identify them by workshop, and present them as a group of sculptures manufactured in a relatively short period of time, most likely before 1930. See LaGamma, "Mangaaka." in *Kongo: Power and Majesty*.
17. Thomas Hoving in Goldwater, et al., *Art of Oceania, Africa*.
18. Elizabeth Bradford Smith argues, "it is tempting to postulate that the Armory Show of 1913, by exhibiting more 'difficult', nonrepresentational art of the European avant-garde, had, to an extent, prepared the way for a greater understanding of the more primitive aspects of medieval art," 114. While the avant-garde's moves towards abstraction might have helped "prepare" a viewer to understand medieval art, I argue that it was actually African art, presented at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 in 1914, that became the basis for interpreting medieval art for an American audience. This is an argument posited in my forthcoming article, "The Artist's Historian". A longer treatment of the parallel reception of Romanesque and African art can be found in my doctoral dissertation entitled, "Primitive before Primitivism".
19. Cahn, "Romanesque Sculpture in American Collections," 47.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the author

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