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Objects, Provenance, and Cartography in Curation: The Use of Maps on Labels at the RISD Museum

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Keywords postcolonial theory, museum decolonization, maps, cartography, RISD Museum

Abstract This paper seeks to address how and why cartographic power is employed on the object labels of *Head of a King (Oba)*, *Head of a man*, and *Native American Sachem*, all artworks currently on display at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). In situating my analysis within the larger political debates surrounding these objects, and in utilizing a theoretical framework focused on decolonizing museum collections and practices of object display, I argue that the maps on these museum labels do not merely point to the artworks' provenance. Rather, I find that these maps do important social work in connecting pre- and postcolonial geographic contexts and employ cartographic power to address the modern museum's ongoing legacy as an agent of Western imperialism. Art and ethnographic museums do not exist in a vacuum; as postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha writes, these kinds curatorial moves are crucial to the project of undoing our promotion and maintenance of the "death of History."

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Politics troubles our consciences. But places haunt our imagination.
– Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*

The act of displacement is essential for the collection of virtually all older artifacts and most modern ones—pulled out of chapels, peeled off church walls, removed from decayed houses, given as gifts, seized as spoils of war, stolen, or "purchased" more or less fairly by the economically ascendant from the economically naive. — Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder"

A distinction must be maintained - in the very conventions of presentation - between works of art whose pasts have known the colonial violence of destruction and domination, and works that have evolved into an antiquity of a more continuous, consensual kind, moving from costs to collectors, from mansions to museums. Without making such a distinction we can only be connoisseurs of the survival of Art, at the cost of becoming conspirators in the death of History. — Homi K. Bhabha, "Double Visions"

It seems to me that art objects are equally valid modes of repairing relationships. Or at least addressing them. — Gina Borrromeo, Curator of Ancient Art, Museum of Art at RISD

Introduction

The Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design has a collection that contains over one hundred thousand works of art and design dating from ancient times to today. At the time of writing (in 2019), 3,058 objects from this collection were on view to the public at the museum, and nearly all of them were supplemented by interpretive text in the form of an object label. Of that number currently on display, three objects at the RISD Museum have maps on their labels. These objects are *Head of a King (Oba)*, *Head of a man*, and *Native American Sachem*.

According to the RISD Museum's "Interpretive Text Guidelines," the purpose of an object label is to address individual works of art and design by "offering additional context, content, and meanings."¹ Conventional art object labels are limited to roughly one hundred words. However, RISD's labels for *Head of a King (Oba)*, *Head of a man*, and *Native American Sachem* incorporate not only longer texts but also ancillary visual information—"bucking the system" in the words of Gina Borrromeo, the museum's curator of ancient arts.² While this intervention may seem small, these labels stand in contrast to the museum's standard interpretation approach, and the approach of most contemporary museums. By situating my analysis within the broader political climate surrounding these three objects, this paper seeks to explore why and how maps are employed on their object labels. Utilizing a theoretical framework focused on decolonizing museum collections and practices of object display, I argue that these maps do not merely point to provenance. Rather, maps are included on object labels at the RISD Museum to connect pre- and postcolonial geographic context, employing cartographic power to address the modern museum's ongoing legacy as an agent of Western imperialism.

On Maps, Museums and Power

Cartography is necessarily partial, as it is imbricated in power dynamics and political agendas. Yet, despite using abstraction and selective interpretation, maps are often viewed as a neutral medium between spatial reality and human perception.³ As a result, much of maps' power lies in their covert manifestation as scientific and objective arbiters of "truth." In "Deconstructing the Map," J.B. Harley distinguishes between the "internal" and "external" dimensions of this power. The former results from cartographic process; i.e., "the way maps are compiled, and the categories of information selected; the way they are generalized, a set of rules for the abstraction of the landscape; the way the elements in the landscape are formed into hierarchies."⁴ Internal power thus implies the way a map is made, and what cartographic decisions inherently obfuscate, subjugate, or ignore. By contrast, external power is exerted onto a map, showing the political power relations that necessitate the map's existence. In essence, a map itself is a social construct that responds to the needs of its patrons, maintaining certain geo-political boundaries and controlling the viewer's perception of space and land as a result.

Like maps, museum labels silently, anonymously, and authoritatively inform the viewer about what is ‘important’ about an object. Curatorial decisions focus attention and control the meaning of material culture through exhibition and display. Existing scholarship on critical museology has identified the agency of exhibitions as key areas of cultural production, with the power to inscribe constructs such as nation, citizenship, and race.⁵ Western museums of the nineteenth century, which displayed and interpreted objects acquired through imperialist exploits, were thus entrenched in a relationship with empire and colonialism. Not only were modern museum collections often obtained through violence, but traditional display practices used these objects to construct and interpret human difference consistent with an ideology of Western superiority. While postmodernist critique and increased reflexivity in the humanities and social sciences have raised awareness about how “objectifying traditions of material culture display have supported colonial and neocolonial power relations,” contemporary museums of the 21st century are still finding ways to directly confront and respond to the powerful currents of cultural pluralism, globalization, and decolonization.⁶

“Decolonization” is an emerging concept and conversation in museum practice in the United States. It encompasses efforts to critically examine the connection between cultural institutions and colonial legacy, and diversify perspectives in object portrayal. These efforts vary drastically among different institutions, from the level of a mission statement to actionable strategic plans. On the RISD Museum’s website, a page titled “RISD Museum Anti-Racist Work,” published on June 15, 2020, describes the Museum’s commitment to addressing white supremacy and the institution’s ties to colonization.⁷ During the time period in which the research for this paper took place (from March to May of 2019), the museum did not explicitly advertise a mission to decolonize their galleries or programs. Personal conversations with curator Gina Borrromeo suggested that ideas about ethical acquisitions, and the deaccession, repatriation, and restitution of collection objects with problematic histories of ownership were circulating among the museum’s curators. The exhibit *Raid the Icebox Now*, planned to open in September 2019, would present works formerly relegated to the museum’s storage; this exhibit was designed to work against a presentation of culture from bias “which is more often than not white and privileged, economically and otherwise.”⁸ It is important to point out that the efforts addressed in the “Anti-Racism” page were not explicit in the RISD museum’s public-facing online content until after June 2020’s racial justice protests, during which time many companies, organizations, and cultural institutions added “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” statements to their websites.



Figure 1: Palmyrene (modern Tadmore, Syria), Head of a man, ca. 160-220 CE, limestone.

The Palmyrene head is included in the RISD Museum's ancient arts collection, and displayed in an outward-facing circle with six other busts from Rome. The portrait's beige limestone subtly draws attention, distinct from the whiter marble of its company. What also stands out in the ring-shaped display is the Palmyrene head's object label. Not only is it three times the word count of the others, but it is the only label that includes any ancillary visual information: a simple birds-eye map of the Middle East. A bright, linearly bounded outline in the center of the map emphasizes of the geographical region that is the modern-day country of Syria. Two points on the map represent Damascus, Syria's current capital, and Palmyra, the ancient city of the object's provenance.

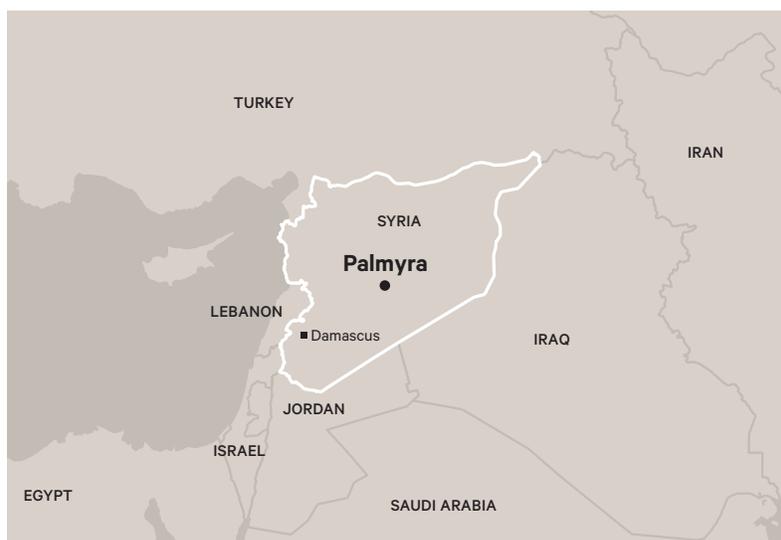


Figure 2: Object label (detail), *Head of a man*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

The text accompanying the map notes the head's decorative origin as a part of a broken-off relief panel that sealed a Palmyrene grave. It also describes Palmyra's rise as a prominent travel destination for wealthy Europeans and Americans in the 1800s, during which time tourists began to bring back portraits such as *Head of a man* as souvenirs. This practice resulted in the current diasporic nature of Palmyrene art objects, thousands of which now live in museum collections of the U.S. and Western Europe. In an outlined text box, the label also notes the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS), 2015 seizure of Palmyra, in which several important ancient structures were destroyed. In the same text box, the label acknowledges the object's complex colonial entanglement in relation to current events:

This sculpture of a man from Palmyra reflects the fact that museum collections are often shaped by histories of colonialism, and that objects were sometimes first collected in contexts we can find troubling today. At the same time, this sculpture also illustrates that in an era of global political upheaval, contemporary museums often play important roles in preserving irreplaceable cultural material.

Palmyrene (modern Tadmor, Syria)
HEAD OF A MAN
 ca. 160-220 CE
 Limestone
 Museum Works of Art Fund 71.167

This portrait of a bearded man was broken off a rectangular relief panel that sealed a grave. The panel formed part of the wall of an underground family tomb chamber or an above-ground tower tomb. Panels from Palmyra often included a portrait of the deceased from the waist up, with the head carved in high relief and an inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic. Large eyes and a linear treatment of the hair are characteristic of these portraits.

Originally an oasis settlement in the Syrian desert, Palmyra controlled the trade routes between the Roman Empire and lands east of the Euphrates River. Palmyra lost its prominence as a trading center by the mid-650s and was gradually abandoned. The buried city was rediscovered in 1691, and in the mid-1700s wealthy British tourists began visiting the site. By the late 1800s, Western Europeans and Americans were traveling there, some bringing back Palmyrene portraits as souvenirs. Thousands of these portraits are now in museum collections in the U.S., Western Europe, Turkey, and Russia. Systematic excavations of the site did not begin until 1902. This portrait was purchased by the RISD Museum at an art auction in 1971, but records suggest it was probably taken out of Syria much earlier.

 **In 2015**, the terrorist group ISIS seized Palmyra, killing many people and using Palmyra's Roman amphitheater as a site for executions. ISIS intermittently controlled the city over a period of about two years, during which they destroyed several important ancient structures. Because Palmyra is culturally important to Syrians, and because Westerners have long romanticized the site, ISIS considered its destruction particularly meaningful.

This sculpture of a man from Palmyra reflects the fact that museum collections are often shaped by histories of colonialism, and that objects were sometimes first collected in contexts we can find troubling today. At the same time, this sculpture also illustrates that in an era of global political upheaval, contemporary museums often play important roles in preserving irreplaceable cultural material.



Figure 3: Object label, *Head of a man*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

In the “Poetics and Politics of Museum Display,” Stephen Greenblatt defines a curatorial paradigm he calls *resonance* as “the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand.”⁹ A resonant exhibit goes beyond presenting objects in isolation and instead directs the viewer toward a series of relationships and questions made visible by curatorial decisions. The city of Palmyra, a former Silk Road hub and wealthy metropolis of the Roman Empire, is home to some of the world’s most well-preserved ancient ruins. From May 2015 to March 2016, ISIS occupied the city in an ongoing military campaign to target and destroy the region’s cultural heritage. Notably, the group bombed the Temples of Bel and Baalshamin and executed Khaled al-Asaad, a Syrian archeologist and Palmyra’s head of antiquities. Propaganda videos of the violence and destruction drew global media attention as the international community mourned the mass-scale loss of cultural heritage.¹⁰ Because the choice to display *Head of a man* was in direct response to ISIS’s seizure of the city,¹¹ the object’s label articulates Greenblatt’s curatorial paradigm by linking a historical artifact to current events of international significance.

While the object’s geographic displacement is indicated by the accompanying texts, the map deployed on *Head of a man*’s object label visually contextualizes this issue. However, by drawing attention to the Syrian cities that were prominent in the news at the time, and providing little to no other geographic information, the map’s internal power—the technical decisions about which place names to include and which to omit—also connects historical circumstance to the modern viewer’s cultural, social, and political familiarity. In this way, the map’s external power (in its creation as a response to current global events) serves to remind viewers that although this object belongs to the RISD Museum’s collections due to the “troubling” context of Western extraction, the area from which it came faced a more recent, but in many ways similar, destruction of its material culture. By acknowledging the parallels between past legacies of European empire and Palmyra’s recent seizure by ISIS, the map’s combination of past and present participates in justifying the museum’s ownership of the piece. As a result, the map not only mediates the artwork’s relationship to the viewer, but the museum’s attempt to simultaneously confront and justify histories of colonial accumulation.



Figure 4: Benin (present-day southern Nigeria), Head of a King (Oba), Probably 1700s, Bronze.

Head of a King (Oba) rests in an austere glass case displayed squarely in the middle of one of the RISD Museum's European galleries. Borrromeo describes this piece as having "virtually no context" as one of the only significant pieces of the museum's African collection.¹² It is only placed on view sporadically, often in response to requests made by Brown University professors for a global art history class.¹³ The object label is prominent by virtue of its length and accompanying images, inviting viewers to engage with the contentious politics behind owning and displaying a Beninese bronze.

Benin (present-day southern Nigeria)

Head of a King (Oba)

probably 1700s

Bronze

Deaccessioned by the Fine Arts Committee and Board of Governors, Fall 2020. Ex Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich D39.054

This bronze head is an idealized representation of an oba (king) of the Edo people of Benin, West Africa. Made in the same time period as surrounding works of European art in this gallery, this example illustrates the technical mastery of royal Benin artists, who were introduced to lost-wax casting techniques by neighboring Yoruba artists. Metalworking remains an important tradition in this part of Africa today.

Commemorative heads such as this one were commissioned by an incoming oba to honor his departed predecessor, and were placed on ancestral altars in the royal palace. The oba's high status is indicated by his cap of coral beads and the single cowrie shell placed on the middle of his forehead. Braids and additional beaded strands frame his face. Above each of his eyes—opened wide to signify that he was all-seeing—are three scarification patterns. A tubular bead collar covers his chin and neck. An elephant tusk, carved using techniques acquired through trade with the Portuguese, once protruded from the hole on top of his head.

The oba possessed political and religious authority and held sweeping powers over his subjects. The official owner of Benin lands and final adjudicator of justice, he oversaw resources and regulated trade with other African kingdoms and with European traders, including the Portuguese and Dutch. During the period

in which this sculpture was made, the Benin Empire exerted a powerful presence on the west coast of Africa.

In 1897, following unsuccessful attempts at annexation, British forces sacked the Benin kingdom, killing many people, burning cities, forcing the reigning king into exile, and looting works of art and other treasures in a campaign known as the Benin Massacre. Soon after, museums and individuals throughout Europe and the United States began collecting Benin bronzes, including this one.

The staff of the RISD Museum acknowledges the histories of colonial looting that are inherent in geographically comprehensive museum collections and embraces this opportunity to identify and confront those injustices.

Recognizing the looted status of this sculpture, the RISD Museum deaccessioned it in Fall 2020, anticipating its repatriation. Objects can be removed from a museum's collection through the process of deaccessioning. After deaccessioning, an object can then be given to another institution, sold, or—as in this case—returned to a rightful owner. Leading up to the deaccession of this work, we initiated communication with the current oba of Benin, Oba Ewuare II, and with the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Nigeria.



Bronze and brass heads at the foot of Oba Ewuare II's throne, 2016. Royal Palace, Benin City, 2016. (Photo courtesy Dr. Paju Layiwola)



Benin Kingdom Edo-speaking peoples Directions of expansion from 15th to 17th century



Participants in the Benin Massacre of 1897, with some of their loot. © British Museum

Figure 5: Object label, *Head of a king (Oba)*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

The label's first two paragraphs describe the head's creation using wax-casting techniques, its original use as an honorific to an incoming Oba (the Beninese word for "king"), and the significance of its design. In a transparency that is unusual for museums that display Beninese objects, the label also describes its provenance: in 1897, a large British military force, known as the "Punitive Expedition" arrived in Benin City under orders to invade and conquer it. British forces sacked the Benin kingdom, burned cities, forced the reigning king into exile, and looted works of art and other treasures. These looted objects eventually made their way into museum and private collections around the world. The last sentence of the text acknowledges the RISD Museum's ties to the violence and destruction inherent in "geographically comprehensive museum collections," openly embracing this opportunity to confront those injustices.

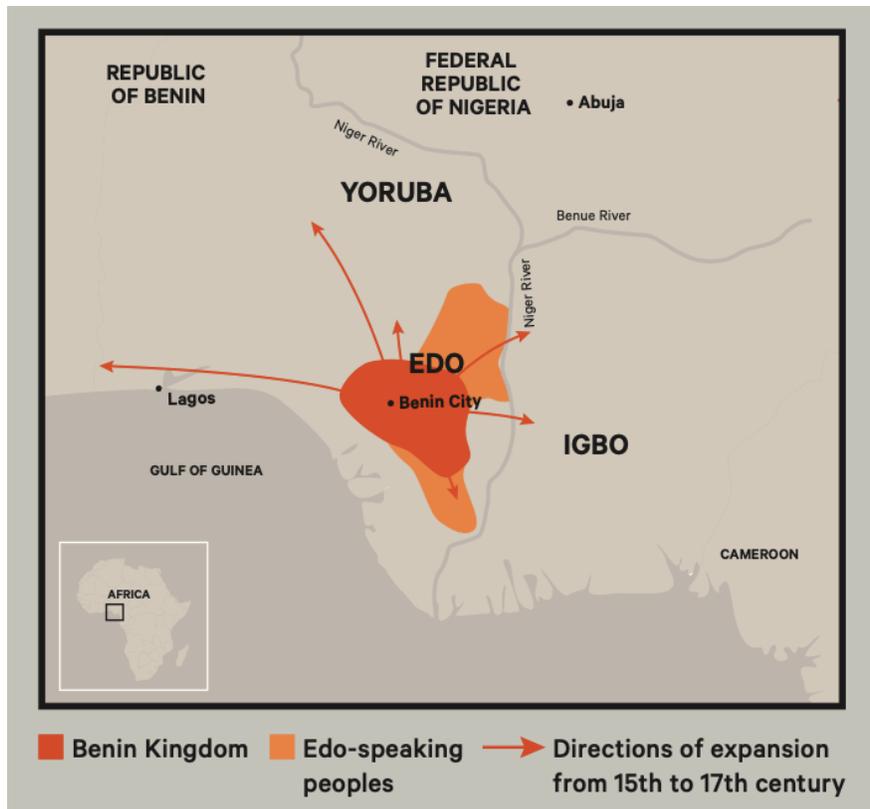


Figure 6: Object label (detail), *Head of a king (Oba)*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

On the otherwise beige background of the label's map, a dark orange block of color designates the Benin Kingdom in what is now the geographical area known as southern Nigeria. Pre-colonial Benin, established before the eleventh century by Edo-speaking peoples, was heavily involved in trade and the arts and became an epicenter of the Portuguese slave trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the British-led Punitive Expedition, Benin was incorporated into Great Britain's Niger Coast Protectorate.¹⁴ In slightly lighter orange, two more solid shapes designate "Edo-speaking peoples," while arrows point outwards indicate the "directions of expansion from the 15th to the 17th century" as Benin gained economic and political power from commerce with Europeans.¹⁵ Unlike the map for *Head of man*, this map does not use lines to indicate the borders of the modern-day Republic of Benin, which gained independence in 1960,¹⁶ and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Rather, the Niger and Benue rivers are the only contours dividing the image. The words "Edo," "Yoruba," and "Igbo," the Nigerian state as well as two of the region's largest native ethnic groups, are given equal size and font on the map. Benin City (the site of the Benin Kingdom's former capital), Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, and the country's largest city, Lagos, are also indicated. In the bottom left corner, a smaller map outlines where the region is on the continent of Africa.

Can art objects alone undo the destruction and violence of ongoing colonial legacies? Definitely they cannot; however, they can and do address them. The term "repatriation" is a process by which museums can return these kinds of items to a legitimate owner.¹⁷ The

last paragraph of the label acknowledges that the museum has initiated this process for *Head of a King (Oba)*. (Note that *Head of a King (Oba)*'s label has been updated multiple times since the time of writing, most recently to indicate the object's deaccessioning. The most recent iteration of the label is reflected in this paper.) However, "the mechanics of actually returning a piece to Nigeria is more complicated than simply putting this piece in a box and sending it away."¹⁸ While the museum acknowledges that owning this piece is problematic, the Royal Palace of Benin, from which the heads such as this were taken in 1897, and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments in Lagos could both lay claim to the piece. While the words "restitution" or "repatriation" are nowhere in the label, this text both explicitly recognizes the museum's illegitimate ownership and reminds viewers that enjoyment of this item rests on "morally reprehensible" acts.¹⁹ The map makes the viewing experience uncomfortable; making the museum's role in colonization both visible and uncomfortable is a key step in the museum's decolonization strategy.

The specific cartographic choices of the map (its internal power) invite reflection on colonial legacies and stir questions about *Head of a King (Oba)*'s display and interpretation. While it may not be immediately noticeable as a backdrop to the highlighted Benin Kingdom, the map does not outline the region's modern countries. The decision to not include these borders in an image meant to ground museum visitors in geographical context denies recognition to the linearly bounded countries as products of British imperialism. Those borders, arbitrarily drawn at the 1885 Berlin Conference, were in no way a reflection of the people and communities living within them. By including the former Benin Kingdom with the names of current West African countries, the map not only connects the object to geographic provenance but combines pre-colonial condition with the post-colonial present. In this way, the map's external power is its purpose to highlight complications surrounding the object's repatriation; in showing the "past" of the object's provenance and the contemporary, post-colonial nation-states, it acknowledges the present obstacles facing the object's return. Thus, the map is inherently folded into the museum's project to confront past injustices, both demonstrating the museum's decolonization efforts and justifying why RISD has yet to repatriate the piece.



Figure 7: Unknown Artist, American, Native American Sachem, ca. 1700, Oil on canvas.

This oil painting of a sachem, or leader, of the Narragansett Niantic peoples hangs on the wall in the Charles Pendleton House, a wing of the museum dedicated to American decorative arts. The first words on the accompanying object label, bolded and capitalized at the top, read, ***kunneepaumwuw ut Nahhiggananēuck aukéashut***, which translates to “You are standing on indigenous lands.” In addition to the text is a map depicting tribal territories of Southern New England circa 1600, juxtaposed with the contemporary state boundaries of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. At the bottom of the placard is a timeline of events, detailing Native American entanglement with settler colonialism in New England from the 1610 birth of the painting’s subject to his death in 1677.

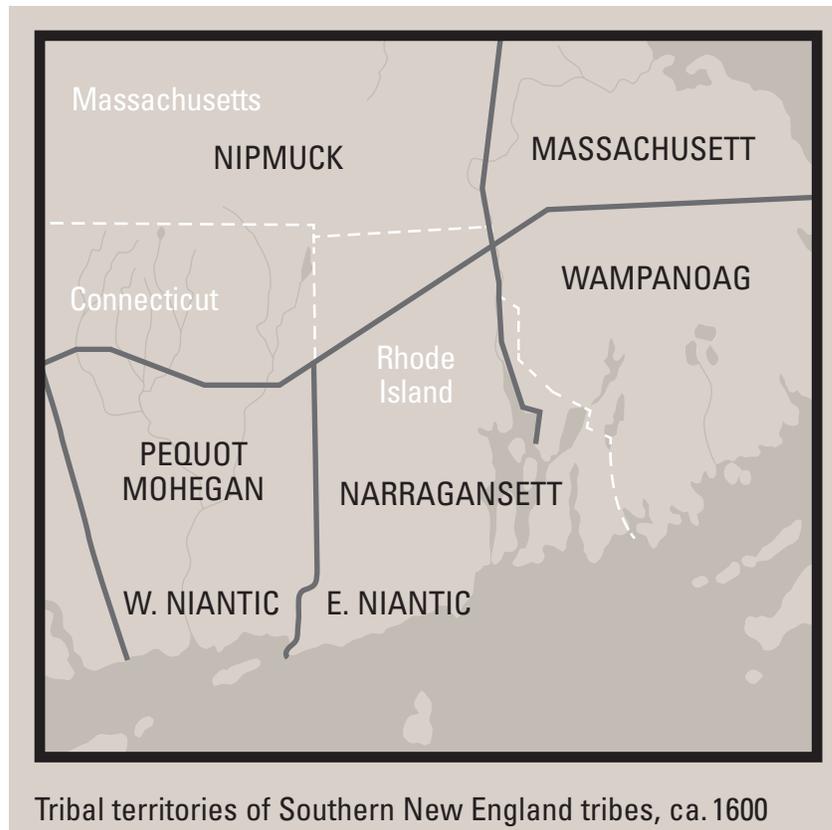


Figure 8: Object label (detail), *Native American Sachem*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Lorén Spears, Narragansett Niantic tribal member and executive director of the Tomaquag Museum, was asked to create the label for this piece by the RISD Museum’s Deputy Director and Head of Education. According to Borromeo, this “co-curricular approach” is meant to interpret the piece from the indigenous understanding because it “differs from the traditional way people think of this painting.”²⁰ The label for *Native American Sachem* thus represents an emerging, dialogic paradigm of museum curation that contrasts with past, one-sided display practices in which people and communities were represented “through the voices of their foreign interpreters.”²¹ By directly incorporating a Narragansett Niantic tribal member’s perspective on the painting’s significance, this approach articulates a postcolonial curatorial ethic and redistributes authority to those that have been historically marginalized by conventional “othering” display practices. Thus, this emerging interpretive practice signifies a shift in the intellectual, social and political dynamics of traditional curatorial process.²²

Unknown artist, American
Native American Sachem,
 ca. 1700
 Oil on canvas
 Gift of Mr. Robert Winthrop 48.246

**KUNNEPAUMWUW UT NAHHIGGANANĒUCK AUKĒASHUT.
 YOU ARE STANDING ON INDIGENOUS LANDS.**

The man in this painting lived in the same era and region as some of colonists seen in this gallery. Dated to about 1700, this portrait depicts Ninigret, a sachem—or leader—of the Niantic/Narragansett peoples. His headpiece, necklace, and earrings are made of beads from quahog shells, known today as wampum. Ninigret is dressed in a breechcloth, leggings, shoes, and cape made of animal hides. High moccasins—from the Narragansett word *mohkussunash*—protect his legs from the underbrush. He carries a scepter and wears a sheath with a knife.

This painting is significant because it presents a colonial-era Eastern woodland coastal Indigenous leader largely as he was, without the biases and stereotypes seen in later portraits of American Indians. English and other European artists creating images from the “new world” did frequently take creative license, however. The background terrain does not represent the local landscape. Colonists wrongly equated sachems with European

kings, so the artist presented Ninigret as royalty, with a draped cape and scepter, although it is highly unlikely he would have had either.

Ninigret (ca. 1610–1677), also known as Janemo, was born into a long line of Niantic and Narragansett leaders. His mother was sister to two Narragansett sachems, Miantonomi and Canonikus. At different points in his life, Ninigret served as a sachem for the Niantic and the Narragansett peoples. This was a tumultuous time, as the European colonists occupying the region brought disease and war and displaced Indigenous communities. These conflicts culminated in 1675–1676 with King Philip’s War, which ended Indigenous control.

Today some academics believe this portrait depicts Pequot leader Robin Cassacinamon (d. 1692), but for more than 400 years the portrait has been identified as Ninigret, and to the Narragansett people it will remain as such. Regardless of the subject’s identity, this image offers an important portrayal of a sachem before westward expansion and the birth of the Plains stereotype of the American Indian.

Tribal territories of Southern New England tribes, ca. 1600

—LORÉN SPEARS (NARRAGANSETT / NIANTIC)
 Executive Director, Tomaquag Museum

For an expanded timeline of events, please visit risdmuseum.org/sachem.

About 1610	1636	1663	1675–1676	After 1676	1677
Ninigret is born into a long line of Niantic and Narragansett leaders	Roger Williams founds a settlement at the headwaters of Narragansett Bay, naming it Providence	A royal charter establishes Rhode Island as an English colony, claiming its lands and resources as the property of Charles II	For dominance in the region, colonists fight Indigenous nations in King Philip’s War, killing hundreds of Narragansett people in the Great Swamp Massacre	The Narragansett and Niantic unite as one people. Indigenous people of New England suffer enslavement, displacement, and centuries of forced cultural assimilation	Ninigret dies

Figure 9: Object label, *Native American Sachem*, Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Both the label and an audio clip of Spears’ interpretation on the RISD Museum website focus on the painting’s subject, the tribal leader Ninigret, and his adornment.²³ She notes the painting’s historical accuracies, expressing that the artist did not have the biased “Western framed stereotype for all indigenous peoples of the Americas” as opposed to later “Americanized” depictions of Indigenous peoples.²⁴ Specifically, his Wampum adornment, a headpiece, necklace, and earrings made of beads from quahog shells, were honorifics particular to the tribes of Southern New England. However, the background terrain “does not represent the local landscape” and the Sachem, wrongly equated with a European King by the artist, is standing in a classical pose, draped with cape and scepter.²⁵ *Native American Sachem* came into the RISD Museum’s possession through the Winthrop family of Connecticut. Recent scholarship indicates that the painting’s subject was not Ninigret but actually Robin Cassacinamon, a Pequot leader and friend of the Winthrops. While acknowledging this academic perspective, Spears disregards it for an indigenous epistemology: to the Narragansett peoples, the painting is an important depiction of a sachem before westward expansion. Thus, Spears recognizes that the authority to interpret this piece rests with indigenous peoples whom it represents.

The interpretive power of the label reaches beyond mere art-historical documentation. Like the labels for *Head of a man* and *Head of a King (Oba)*, this map combines past and present representations of geographic space. However, by including a map from “Lorén’s perspective,”²⁶ *Native American Sachem* demands that viewers reflect on their own positions. While it abstracts “place” into intelligible shapes and boundaries, the map also directs our gaze to the very ground on which the observer of artwork is standing. We are directly confronted by the map’s external power, as the physical location of our bodies—implicit points on this map—force us beyond passive observation into new understandings of our shared, post-colonial subjective conditions.

On Museums and Decolonization

In a piece titled “Double Visions,” postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1992) critiques the exhibition “Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration” held at the National Gallery of Washington in 1991.²⁷ The exhibition marked 500 years since Columbus’ watershed voyage. The curatorial principle of the show was that of a “horizontal survey” through space; at the intersection of objects like golden jugs and rock-crystal elephants, the show was an effort to “present each civilization on its own terms” rather than from the historical European perspective.²⁸ However, this “attempt to present cultural difference in marvelous parallels” still maintains a specific angle of visibility.²⁹ Bhabha writes:

*What was once exotic or archaic, tribal or folkloristic, inspired by strange gods, is now given a secular national present, and an international future. Sites of cultural difference too easily become part of the post-Modern West’s thirst for its own ethnicity; for citation and simulacral echoes from Elsewhere.*³⁰

The multicultural “we” of “Circa 1492” has not reached the end of history. Exhibiting objects of the colonized world from a “parallel” perspective by “displaying the work of the marginalized or the minority, disinterring forgotten, forlorn ‘pasts’” not only suppresses history but fails to acknowledge the present condition that the past has engendered.³¹ Bhabha contends that a distinction must be made between objects “whose pasts have known the colonial violence of destruction and domination” and those works that have come to the museum through circumstances far less grave.³² Without making this distinction, we become “connoisseurs of the survival of Art, at the cost of becoming conspirators in the death of History.”³³

Head of a man, Head of a King (Oba) and *Native American Sachem* have each landed in the RISD Museum as a result of colonial circumstances; their labels, and particularly the maps, represent the curatorial attempt at distinguishing them amidst the larger collection. *Head of a man*’s label draws parallels between the “troubling context” of Palmyra’s past and present. The text accompanying *Head of a King (Oba)* describes the violence of the Benin Punitive Expedition, and the initiated process of repatriation (and later deaccession). *Native American Sachem* is presented through the voice of a Narragansett Niantic tribal member, and its label asserts an indigenous authority over the painting’s interpretation. Beyond the text itself, the maps are an important component of this anti-colonial move. Over the course of colonial modernity, state, nation, and border have been imposed on colonized peoples and lands. This template set by European imperial powers, which is reflected in our standard world maps, remains hegemonic among both settler colonial states (the United States, Canada, and Israel) and post-colonial states (such as India and Nigeria) alike. The maps examined in this paper are not typical of this standard. Rather each combines pre-colonial spaces (ancient city, pre-colonial kingdom, and indigenous tribe) with hints at contemporary state borders. To circle back to Harley’s theory: the “internal power” of the three maps articulates a push-back against this Western standard map, while their “external power” responds to calls to decolonize the RISD museum in a broader, and more fluid sense.

Conclusions and Remaining Questions

What do *Head of a man*, *Head of a king (Oba)*, and *Native American Sachem* have in common? Why are maps included on their object labels? What role does cartography play? Utilizing Harvey's analytical framework, I found that the specific cartographic decisions of these maps exercised an internal power that combines pre- and postcolonial geographic representations of space. However, to understand a map, one must also read between the lines of its technical procedures and content. Thus, by linking these objects not only to their original geographic provenance, but also alluding to their original social and political contexts, these maps participate in addressing Bhaba's vital distinction. As such, these maps aid the interpretation of objects by reflecting the historical processes that transformed them from "being signs in a powerful cultural system to becoming the symbols of a destroyed culture."³⁴ Thus, the maps respond to the modern museum's calls to acknowledge the harm and violence inherent in possessing certain objects, and participate in the RISD Museum's ongoing efforts of geographical, emotional, and intellectual repair.

In light of my research and interpretations, I am still left with questions surrounding what it means to decolonize art and ethnographic museums. Do maps on labels signify a new paradigm of object interpretation in an era of the socially conscious museum? What are the consequences of using these objects as a teaching moment? While my interpretation of the way in which these maps are deployed is situated in contrast to a former, neo-colonial paradigm of display, I recognize the ways that mapping as a form of redress is only symbolic: an intervention meant to start and stop with making viewers uncomfortable with colonial origins. Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor" criticizes the increasing calls to "decolonize" (museums, the mind, methods, etc.) that in reality allow colonizers to further evade true decolonization, which can only be realized through "the repatriation of indigenous land and life."³⁵ The authors define symbolic practices such as the RISD Museum's "rebellious" labels as "settler moves to innocence" which attempt to "reconcile settler guilt and complicity."³⁶ Even by pushing viewers toward a more critical historical consciousness, awareness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism by relinquishing stolen land. I also acknowledge the ways in which all three maps articulate a Western mapping tradition, utilizing planar projection and uniformity of scale and orientation. Many non-Western mapping traditions, particular to individual cultures, use different techniques for depicting direction, location, perspective, and distance. What system is really being bucked, and how radically? Ultimately, I still struggle to reconcile the relationship between museums and their emerging role in the postcolonial and multicultural societies in which they operate.

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Notes

¹ “Interpretive Text Guidelines,” RISD Museum, accessed April 2019.

² Gina Borrromeo, interview by author, March 1, 2019.

³ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 1–19.

⁴ J.B. Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica* 26 (1989): 1–20.

⁵ Ruth Phillips, “Toward a Dialogic Paradigm: New Models of Collaborative Curatorial Practice” in *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 185–204.

⁶ Phillips, “Toward a Dialogic Paradigm,” 189.

⁷ “RISD Museum Anti-Racism Work,” last modified June 15, 2020,

<https://risdmuseum.org/art-design/projects-publications/articles/risd-museum-anti-racist-work>

⁸ Sarah Ganz Blythe, “All Behind the Icebox Door,” RISD Museum July 2019, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://publications.risdmuseum.org/raid-icebox-now/all-behind-icebox-door>

⁹ Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

¹⁰ Andrew Curry “Here Are the Ancient Sites ISIS Has Damaged and Destroyed,” *National Geographic* September 1, 2015, accessed May 4, 2021,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/150901-isis-destruction-looting-ancient-sites-iraq-syria-archaeology>

¹¹ Gina Borrromeo, interview by author, March 1, 2019.

¹² Gina Borrromeo, interview.

¹³ Gina Borrromeo, interview.

¹⁴ Kevin Shillington, *Encyclopedia of African History* (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2005), 226–246.

¹⁵ Shillington, *Encyclopedia of African History*, 226–246.

¹⁶ Shillington, *Encyclopedia of African History*, 226–246.

¹⁷ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, (Paris, France: Philippe Rey, Seuil, Paris, 2018) 1–42.

¹⁸ Gina Borrromeo, interview.

¹⁹ Sarr and Savoy, *The Restitution, of African Cultural Heritage*, 29.

²⁰ Gina Borrromeo, interview.

²¹ Phillips, “Toward a Dialogic Paradigm,” 189.

²² Phillips, “Toward a Dialogic Paradigm,” 189.

²³ Lorén Spears, “Lorén Spears on the Native American Sachem,” RISD Museum, podcast audio, https://risdmuseum.org/manual/423_native_american_sachem

²⁴ “Lorén Spears on the Native American Sachem,”

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- ²⁵ “Lorén Spears on the Native American Sachem,”
- ²⁶ Gina Borrromeo, interview.
- ²⁷ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 236–241.
- ²⁸ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 238.
- ²⁹ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 238.
- ³⁰ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 240.
- ³¹ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 240.
- ³² Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 241.
- ³³ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 241.
- ³⁴ Bhabha, “Double Visions,” 240.
- ³⁵ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012): 1.
- ³⁶ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 1.

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