By titling his installation “Mining the Museum,” [artist Fred Wilson] set up a three-way pun: excavating the collections to extract the buried presence of racial minorities, planting emotionally explosive historical material to raise consciousness and effect institutional change, and finding reflections of himself within the museum. “Où est mon visage?,” reads Wilson’s label accompanying Joshua Johnson’s 19th-century portrait of a white family. An artist of African and Carib Indian ancestry, Wilson identified with Johnson, who was black, and of whom there are no known portraits.

Judith Stein, “Sins of Omission,” Art in America, October 1993

African artworks found their way to the West in the nineteenth century. There they were considered “savage fetishes” and put in ethnographic museums. In the twentieth century, Western artists such as Picasso were inspired by the aesthetics of African art, and private collectors began acquiring it. Now the world’s major art museums display African art.


Yet different sections of the public do not use (or create) cultural resources for the same purposes (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). If traditional, educationally-oriented museums try to fill visitors’ minds, while theme parks try to empty their pockets, both define their audiences restrictively. In neither is the public an active participant. Not everyone, of course, wants to ‘create’ culture, or at least not all the time; part of the continuing appeal of traditional museums is the access they give to what other people have created. How people respond to museum displays is a complex process, still imperfectly understood.


There is a strong sense that it is our responsibility as Western educated scholars to educate communities about their cultural and historical heritage to correct their perceived undervaluation of material evidence from the past. It is possible to imagine new actions and performances that would represent a rekindling of past connections, to forge new connections between objects and communities that would empower local communities to preserve these works. This is not possible if we do not study the objects that are in the public and private collections and continue archaeological work in the region.

Kristina van Dyke, “Demanding Objects: Malian Antiquities and Western Scholarship,” Anthropology and Aesthetics No. 52; Museums: Crossing Boundaries, Autumn 2007

I have come to feel that the museum dealing with culture (and even more with non-Western art) cannot adopt the authoritative voice commonly heard in museums of Western art and science. We are too far from the voices of the original owners and makers, too locked into the perspectives of our own culture to presume to be faithful to the object in any exalted way.


Early on in my fieldwork, I tried to explain to the chief who had arranged my meeting with Sande women in one of these more traditional villages that it wasn’t necessary for my needs to go to all the trouble of “pulling” the whole masquerade. He gently responded that the ndoli sowei could only be seen when fully and correctly garbed, and to drive home the point he asked me: “Could you go out without your head?”


I have never since been able to look at a museum installation in which a sowei mask has been stripped bare of her raffia, white head tie, protective amulets, jewelry, and black body costume without feeling that a violation has taken place—a voyeuristic stripping bare, an amputation.


“. . . our categories can no longer contain the accumulated contradictions bred by their own fictiveness.”

The re-engagement of art history and anthropology in the 1980s was stimulated by a number of interrelated political, economic, and social movements of the postwar period, including the dismantling of colonial empires, the civil- and human-rights movements, identity politics, the growing demographic pluralism of Western nations, and economic and cultural globalization. Arguably, the growing cultural inclusivity of art history and its renewed interest in the social history of art, the revival of material culture studies and the anthropology of art, the interest of both scholarly communities in contact histories, and the emergence of new interdisciplinary fields such as visual studies and critical museology all respond to these global developments.


If in the past, the museum has served as one of modernity’s key tools of separation and purification, it is, then, today called upon to serve as a site where the networks that link complex and apparently heterogeneous social, political, economic, and natural events are revealed rather than concealed.


If our goal is to decolonize archaeology, we must then continue to explore ways to create an ethical and socially just practice of archaeological research – one that is in sync with and contributes to the goals, aims, hopes, and curiosities of the communities whose past and heritage are under study, using methods and practices that are harmonious with their own worldviews, traditional knowledges, and lifeways.


De-centering involves moving [Indigenous] concepts from the margin to the center.


A decolonizing archaeology must take as one of its goals the work of bringing these concepts to the academy and working toward their legitimization in areas of research that have a dramatic impact on Indigenous people globally, such as archaeology.


“The agba [ogboni] would have been part of a group of such drums, thought of as a family... The smaller drums that accompanied it were likely carved with related motifs. Agba function in a variety of ways. On a practical level, they announce the meetings of the Ogboni lodge every seventeen days. They were also sacred objects, and in yearly rituals the blood of sacrificial animals is rubbed into its sides. Because of its sacred character, the intrinsic iconography of this drum would never have been seen by anyone other than initiated members. In nocturnal but public memorial services for deceased elders, for example, the sides are ritually covered to ensure that the surface designs are not seen by the uninitiated.”


When wondering how artifacts from marginalized populations get into museums in the West, we often resort to victim-blaming as a means of coddling the museum consumer. We reference changes in religion and culture as reasons why objects have been given up or sold, but never address the systemic issues that facilitated the change in religion and culture. In our discussions on decolonization of collecting institutions, it is imperative that we remember that Christianity, Islam, and European styles of education and government were all used as tools for colonizing. These are institutional problems, not the fault of the individual.