Museums & the Language of Curiosity / Indians as Curiosities

AML 3031: American Literature
Museums & the Language of Curiosity / Indians as Curiosities

Unit Goal: to familiarize ourselves with historical, biographical, and cultural contextual information on the concept of curiosities and wonders, Pocahontas, Indians as curiosities, and Daniel Bowen and the Columbian Museum. We will spend 2 classes on this unit.

Before class
1. Read the seven (7) available broadsides for the Columbian Museum by Daniel Bowen, and bring the print outs or electronic copies with you to class. The broadsides are available via Early American Imprint, Series 1 and have been uploaded to our Webcourses site.

   - Go to Google Images and type in the name of any three paintings, wax figures, or natural or artificial curiosity listed on the seven broadsides. For example, you can search for the wax figure of “Baron Trenck,” the painting of “An Indian Princess,” and the natural curiosity “the diamond beetle.” Post your three findings on our discussion board for this week. We will bring these up on the classroom computer for “show and tell” during class.

2. Read the following contemporary reviews of the Columbian Museum from American Periodicals: “The Columbian Museum” by Charles Read (from 1904), “Article 1 – no Title” from Lady’s Weekly Miscellany, “Chronicle of Memorable Occurrences. 1806–7” from The American Register, “Miscellaneous Notices” from The Monthly Anthology (in two separate PDFs, make sure you read both), “Amusing,” “Columbian Museum,” and “Other 1 – no Title” from The Boston Weekly Magazine, all of the “Columbian Museum” articles from The Polyanthos (four total), “Domestic Intelligence” from The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine, and “Columbian Museum” from The Fly. The reviews are available via American Periodicals and have been uploaded to our Webcourses site. Post two quotes from these reviews to our discussion board for this week that you would like discuss in class. We will bring these up on the classroom computer for “show and tell” during class.

3. Go to the Brighton Allston Historical Society’s page on “Daniel Bowen: Boston’s Pioneer Museum Keeper” and read the entire article.
   (URL: http://www.bahistory.org/HistoryBowen.html)

4. Go to The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University’s page on “Charles Willson Peale’s Museum” and read the entire article. Pay special attention to the broadside for the museum.
   (URL: http://www.anfsp.org/museum/jefferson/otherPages/peale_museum.php)
5. Go to the Monticello website and read the entire article on “Indian Hall and Museum” and “Entrance Hall.” (URLs: http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/indian-hall-and-museum and http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/entrance-hall)

During class

In *The Coquette*, Lucy Sumner writes to Eliza Wharton about the circus and the Columbian Museum ("Mr. Bowen’s museum"). Let’s suppose Eliza wrote “you” back asking for a more detailed description of the museum. You can either pretend to be Lucy or another friend (female or male) of Eliza’s and you will write her a brief 200 word description of the museum based on the broadsides you read for today’s class. See below for Lucy’s description of both the circus and the Columbian Museum.

From Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*:

“The circus is a place of fashionable resort of late, but not agreeable to me. I think it inconsistent with the delicacy of a lady, even to witness the indecorums, which are practiced there; especially, when the performers of equestrian feats are of our own sex. To see a woman depart so far from the female character, as to assume the masculine habit and attitudes; and appear entirely indifferent, even to the externals of modesty, is truly disgusting, and ought not to be countenanced by our attendance, much less by our approbation. But setting aside this circumstance, I cannot conceive it to be a pleasure to sit a whole evening, trembling with apprehension, lest the poor wight of a horseman, or juggler, or whatever he is to be called, should break his neck in contributing to our entertainment” (128-9).

“With Mr. Bowen’s museum, I think you were much pleased. He has made a number of judicious additions to it, since you were here. It is a source of rational and refined amusement. Here the eye is gratified, the imagination charmed, and the understanding improved. It will bear frequent reviews without palling on the taste. It always affords something new; and for one, I am never a weary spectator” (129).

- **Discussion Question:** Why does the circus receive Lucy’s condemnation while the Columbian Museum receives glowing reviews? What does this suggestion about colonial women’s relationships to gender norms, public/private spheres, and public/private collections?
- **Discussion Question:** How does Foster’s description of the Columbian Museum uphold or challenge reviews from the periodicals? How does Foster’s description uphold or challenge the Bowen broadsides?

**Curiosities and Wonders**

*From Susan Stabile’s “Still(ed) Lives”*:

“As fictional referents, her familiar wax iterations rendered Charlotte vulnerable to collection, curation, display, and decay. Elbow to elbow with allegorical figures (“Goddess of Liberty supporting the American standard”), biblical characters (Samson and Delilah), military heroes (Commodores Perry and Decatur), and Christian reformists (Erasmus and Swedenborg), Charlotte’s embattled sexual virtue—which ultimately kills her in the novel—transmuted into more enduring civic *virtu* in the wax memorials (Hadden 38)” (391).
“Assembled and dismantled, collected and sold, exhibited and neglected, wax figures powerfully materialize the killing nature of museums” (392).

- **Discussion Question:** How, if at all, does Stabile’s observations translate to analysis of the Native American, African American and non-European wax figures in the Columbian Museum?

From Maria Zytaruk’s “Cabinets of Curiosities and the Organization of Knowledge”:

“the cabinet of curiosities – a type of non-specialized collection that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Assembled during a time of increased trade and travel, cabinets displayed such diverse objects as alligators’ skins, chameleons, insects set in amber, corals, shells, medals, intaglios, South American feather work, and wampum belts; representations of mythical creatures (the unicorn, the basilisk) also found a home in these collections” (2).

- **Discussion Question:** In what ways is the Columbian Museum similar to the curiosity cabinet tradition as described above? In what ways is it different?

**Indians as Curiosities**

*From Joyce Henri Robinson’s “An American Cabinet of Curiosities: Thomas Jefferson’s Indian Hall at Monticello”:

“In many ways a distant forerunner to our modern notion of the public museum, the Kunst- und Wunderkammer proliferated throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries…The inventories of most Kunst- und Wunderkammern typically can be divided into two broad categories: artificialia, or objects of human contrivance, and naturalia, or products of nature. The artificial or human-made items included scientifica (scientific instruments); objects of historical importance; exotica (objects of foreign provenance); and any variety of meraviglie (marvelous objects displaying ingenious virtuosity). Among the naturalia were shells, mineral specimens, fossils, and animalia. Exceptionally small or inordinately large examples from the animal kingdom, such as insects or mastodon remains and rare specimens from distant lands, were especially prized” (44).

“Certainly the display of Native American curiosities within the Kunst- und Wunderkammer explicitly celebrated Europe’s encounter with the New World and implicitly signified the imperialistic intentions of its ‘discoverers.’ For the colonial American collector, however, the possessed Other was now also proximate neighbor; concomitantly, the prized artifacts gathered during the inevitable encounters with Native Americans were gradually transformed from exotic (in the sense of foreign) curiosities to tangible records of the New World’s indigenous culture” (46).

“Nowhere are the fruits of Jefferson’s intellectual curiosity more evident than in the entrance hall at Monticello—a veritable cabinet of curiosities that included fine art, natural wonders, ethnological artifacts, and marvelous curios of human contrivance” (41).

- **Discussion Question:** Based on Robinson’s description of the Kunst- und Wunderkammer’s contents, how do the items listed in the Columbian Museum’s catalogs
stay within this tradition of two broad categories (artificial and natural)? Stray from this tradition? Cite specific items from the broadsides to support your argument.

- **Discussion Question:** How does Jefferson’s “Indian Hall” compare to Bowen’s Columbian Museum? Intended audience? Public versus private collection? Range of exhibit materials? Organization and presentation?

From Troy Bickham’s “‘A Conviction of the Reality of Things’: Material Culture, North American Indians and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain”:

“In contrast [to printed discourse], material representations were more stable, and they reached audiences on whom the intense, politically charged atmosphere of the press was either lost or wasted, such as children. Moreover, and not unlike print culture, material exhibitions, whether privately or state organized, were held in public spaces where men and women from artisans to aristocrats learned, critiqued and debated American and other imperial issues. Together, these public material exhibitions helped to promote the formation of an increasingly imperial, globally minded society that shared assumptions about alien cultures and their relationships with Britain” (30-1).

- **Discussion Question:** Based on the Columbian broadsides and the excerpts from The Coquette, describe women’s relationship to colonial American material culture versus printed discourse, in terms of the public/private sphere. Did women have more “freedom” to operate within the material exhibitions mentioned above than in printed discourse?

How to cite the Columbian Museum broadsides

Bowen, Daniel. *Bowen's Columbian Museum at the head of the Mall, Boston, is opened every day: and elegantly illuminated every Tuesday, Thursday, & Friday evening. Paintings,...Figures of wax-work (large as life.)...With a large collection of natural & artificial curiosities...* Boston: Daniel Bowen, 1798. *Early American Imprints, Series 1.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.

——. *Bowen's Columbian Museum, at the head of the Mall, Boston, is open for the entertainment of the public, every day (except Sundays) and elegantly illuminated every Tuesday & Thursday evening ...* Boston: Daniel Bowen, 1798. *Early American Imprints, Series 1.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.

——. *The Columbian Museum, at the head of the Mall, Boston. 100 elegant paintings. ... Eight concert clocks. ... Fifty large figures of wax-work. ... A large collection of natural and artificial curiosities, birds, beasts, & monstrous serpents ...* Boston: Daniel Bowen, 1799. *Early American Imprints, Series 1.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.

——. *Columbian Museum, near the Mall, Boston. The Columbian Museum contains a very extensive collection of artificial and natural curiosities. ... Animals and live rattle snakes, viz. ... A great variety of large wax figures, viz. ... A large and elegant collection of historical paintings, viz. ...* Boston: Daniel Bowen, 1799. *Early American Imprints, Series 1.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.
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——. *Museum, head of the Mall, Boston, is opened every day, and Tuesday, Thursday & Friday evenings. With music on a large concert organ. Containing the following wax-figures, paintings, curiosities, &c.* Boston: Daniel Bowen, 1799. *Early American Imprints, Series 1.* Web. 16 Sept. 2011.

**Suggested Readings**


Tratner, Michael. “Translating Values: Mercantilism and the Many ‘Biographies’ of

**Works Cited**


