

**AH 3XX Decolonizing the Museum:  
Addressing Systemic Racism and Promoting Social Justice**

Instructor: Saleema Waraich

Credits: 4 (Content/Theory/Reflection component - 3 credits; Practice/Application component - 1 credit)

Format: Three weekly meetings (one 55-minute meeting and two 80-minute meetings)

Prerequisites: one AH course

**Course Description**

Examines historical, political, curatorial, and theoretical issues related to collections and exhibitions of South Asian, Islamic and African/African diasporic arts in the west, focusing on the United States, to help students understand issues pertaining to power, justice, and identity in contemporary America. From colonial expositions (world's fairs) to the rise of national museums to recent curatorial debates, this course critically engages with practices of display and representation of South Asian, Islamic, and African/African diasporic arts in the colonial, modern, and contemporary eras. In particular, recent movements demanding social justice for marginalized communities are forcing western museums to re-evaluate their collections and modes of display; questions of reinterpretation, de-accessioning and repatriation are coming to the fore like never before. Students will engage with these efforts to decolonize the museum and critical curatorial practices as they design their own exhibits or propose a reinstallation of an existing one through developing exhibition narratives and physical display spaces of their own design.

**A. Content/Theory/Reflection component**

Universal expositions and encyclopedic and anthropological museums in Europe and the U.S. were key sites for manufacturing and popularizing western white ideologies by disseminating "race science" through their displays of people and cultural artifacts from various cultures. These displays were instrumental in legitimizing hegemonic narratives of racial hierarchies and white superiority. Moreover, the majority of highly regarded museum collections are the products of the wealth amassed through enslavement, colonization, and/or western capitalism and the looting of valuable objects from around the world. In recent years, in response to demands for social justice, museums have begun addressing their disturbing pasts and flawed, detrimental practices. Movements for social justice have forced museums to address their roles in promoting and maintaining white supremacy.

Since the U.S. adopted and adapted European practices and ideologies related to world's fairs and museums, it is necessary to examine key European case studies to understand their manifestation in the U.S. Moreover, the deeply embedded and systemic nature of racism necessitates a historical approach as it is vital to understanding the current practices and making critical interventions.

**B. Practice/Application component**

In the fourth hour (and through related readings and assignments), students will develop skills





### **Engagement and Group (Team) Work**

I expect you to participate regularly and productively in class and in your assigned group sessions, and to demonstrate a mature, collegial attitude in all forums. I evaluate engagement by observing how often you speak, as well as the substance of your contributions in class and in your assigned groups; and any interactions that we have during individual and small group meetings.

I will be dividing the class into groups or teams to facilitate preparation for curator visits and also for peer review of your exhibition projects. A separate document with guidelines (titled “AH XXX Group Work Guidelines”) will be made available on *theSpring*.

### **Reading Responses**

Carefully and critically examining the readings is an especially important aspect of class. You are expected to submit a reading report for every assigned reading. Your entries should demonstrate careful reading of the texts; **you need to show me that you carefully and critically read the assigned readings; you must address what the article is about.**

**Some of the readings listed below specify a set of questions to be discussed in your response. Others direct you to separate document with guidelines** (titled “AH XXX

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the original source. Failure to do so is considered plagiarism. It is good practice to avoid using quotations, unless it is essential to reproduce an author's exact words. For your written

## **Diversity and Inclusion**

Skidmore College is committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive community in which members develop their abilities to live in a complex and interconnected world. Consistent with our educational mission, we recognize ourselves as a community that respects individual identities based on varying sociocultural characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, religious and spiritual tradition, age, ability, socioeconomic status and learning style. We strive to create a socially just world that honors the dignity and worth of each individual, and we seek to build a community centered on mutual respect and openness to ideas—one in which individuals value cultural and intellectual diversity and share the responsibility for creating a welcoming, safe and inclusive environment. We recognize that our community is most inclusive when all members participate to their full capacity in the spirited and sometimes challenging conversations that are at the center of the college's educational mission.

## **Conscientious Religious Observance Policy**

If religious observances cause absence from class, campus employment, athletic practice, and/or game days or necessitates accommodations, students should notify their faculty, coaches, or supervisors prior to the date(s) of their absence. New York State policy and Skidmore College policy mandates that students be allowed to make up academic work and/or campus employment requirements without penalty. These accommodations should not reduce the overall expectations of a course nor unduly burden the student requesting accommodation. Faculty must permit students to take a makeup examination without any penalty if they have to miss an examination due to religious observances. Similarly, faculty must permit students to submit missed assignments by an agreed upon due date, without penalty.

Although not required, the College highly recommends that students submit written notification of (c) 0.2 1 Tf [( .5 ( t)j ET Q q 0.2nr2 (l) 0.2 w) -0.2 w s0.2 (e) (ubm)0(nd/) 0.2 (or ) JTJ Ez0bie re

## **Schedule of Meetings**



**Week Two: History of Non-Western Exhibitions**

**Mon, Aug 31**



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compelled to resist the problematic aspects of the show, illuminating not only the enduring legacy of colonial discourses in contemporary museum practice but also as manifest in the audience desires and expectations. Her work draws much need attention to how conscientious curators wrestle with institutional needs and pressure to draw in large numbers of visitors, often through blockbuster exhibitions like *Maharaja*.

Week Five:

“What’s in a Name?” Exhibiting Islamic Art in the West

**Mon, Sep 21** *Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

- Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, “Collecting the ‘Orient’ at the Met: Early Tastemakers in America,” *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 30 (2000): pp. 69-89

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- Robert Worth, "At the Met, a New Vision for Islam in Hostile Times," *NY Times*, 28 October 2011

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/magazine/at-the-met-a-new-vision-for-islam-in-hostile-times.html>

- Nasser Rabbat, "What's in a Name," *Artforum International*; *New York*, Vol. 50, Iss. 5, (Jan 2012): pp. 74,76,78.

<http://blog.metmuseum.org/newgalleries2011/en/welcome.html#more-5>

**Thu, Sep 24: Islamic Arts at the Louvre**



## Week Six: On Curating

**Mon, Sep 28**

- Beverly Serrell, “What Are Interpretive Labels?”; “Types of Labels in Exhibitions”; “Labels That Ask Questions,” *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.): pp. 9-36; 105-110

\* all three chapters are in the same document in *theSpring*

*Super Useful Guides for Label Writing:*

- Beverly Serrell, “Guidelines for Exhibition Texts,” *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996).

- V&A, “Gallery Text at the V&A: A Ten Point Guide” (August 2013)

*Recommended:*

- Polly McKenna-Cress, “Advocacy for the Subject Matter,” *Creating Exhibitions* (Wiley, 2013): pp. 69-88

**Tue, Sep 29: Guest Speaker Rachel Seligman, Assistant Director for Curatorial Affairs and Malloy Curator, Tang Museum**

Skidmore’s much beloved Assistant Director and Malloy Curator, Rachel Seligman, will speak with us about the various considerations of curating; including curating as narration; curating as authorship with its own point of view and agenda, like other types of storytelling; curating as agency (and how to encourage and transfer agency from a curator to audience viewers); curatorial choices about how to present information; how exhibition design (inc. wall color, lighting, hanging in a grid, etc.) shapes narrative and audience experience. She will address museums’ hidden agendas, how they drive decision making, the narratives they put forward and suppress, and a curator’s role and responsibility in making those decisions and narratives transparent.

- Leslie Bedford, “Alternative Exhibition Models,” *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences* (Routledge, 2014): pp. 39-53

**Wed, September 30**

**\* revised proposal, list of tombstones (object IDs), and the text for the accompanying introductory wall panel (i.e. an introduction to your exhibit) are due by noon today**

**Thu, Oct 1 and Fri Oct 2**

## Week Seven:

### Exhibiting Islamic and South Asian Arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

#### Mon, Oct 5: From Bazaars to White Boxes

- David J. Roxburgh, "Au Bonheur des Amateurs: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art, ca. 1880-1910," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 30, (2000): pp. 9-38

#### Tue, Oct 6: From Bazaars to White Boxes

- David J. Roxburgh, "After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions," *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. Avinoam Shalem & Andrea Lerner (Leiden: Brill, 2010): pp. 359–86

#### Thu, Oct 8

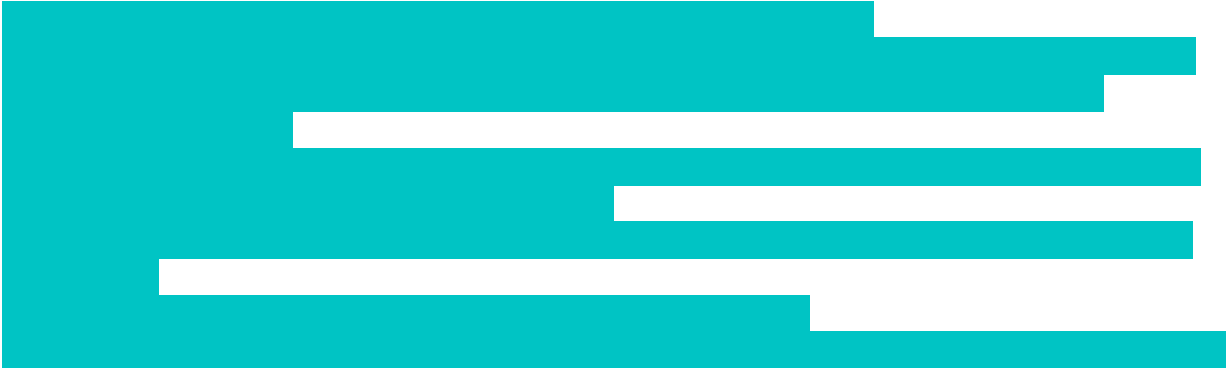
- Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Contrary Careers of India's Art Objects," *Spectacle and Display*, Deborah Cherry, ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2008): pp. 628–654



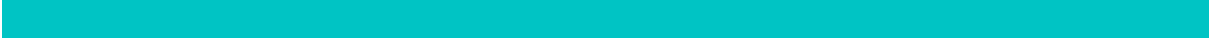
**Week Eight: Exhibiting South Asian Arts Today**

**Mon, Oct 12**

**\* take-home midterm is due by noon today**



**Tue, Oct 13:**



**Week Nine:**  
**African Arts, Black Lives Matter, and Decolonizing Museums**

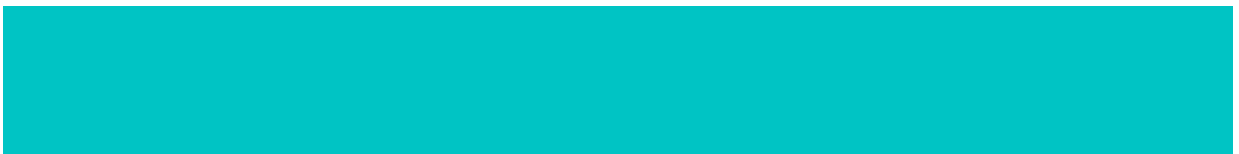
**Mon, Oct 19:**

Susan Vogel, "Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion," *Exhibiting Cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display*, edited by Ivan Karp & Steven D. Lavine, Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1991: pp. 191-204

**Tue, Oct 20: Guest Speaker Dr. Amanda Gilvin, Senior Curator of Collections and Assistant Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Davis Museum, Wellesley College**

: Amanda Gilvin is an art historian and curator who writes about textiles, contemporary art, and museums of Africa and the African Diaspora. She finished her Ph.D. in the History of Art at Cornell University in 2012. Before arriving at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College as an Assistant Curator, Gilvin taught at Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and Skidmore College. Her book manuscript, *Mining Beauty: Art and Development in Niger*, includes an analysis of the Musée National Boubou Hama du Niger. In her current role as Director of Curatorial Affairs, Dr. Gilvin is in charge of the Davis Museum's efforts to decolonize the museum.

*Please read (Sarr and Savoy) and listen (NPR) to the following and submit a reading response for each using one or more of the options described in 'AH 3XX Reading Report Guidelines'. Alternatively, you're welcome to instead submit a response that outlines the major issues that must be taken into consideration when dealing with issues of repatriation as informed by the assigned pieces, which focus on objects stolen from Africa. Whichever option you choose, be sure to address the questions and issues that come up in the NPR audio piece and the excerpts from Sarr and Savoy's report.*



- Michael Govan, “Op-Ed: LACMA’s new building is visionary — and big enough,” Los Angeles Times, April 7 2019

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-govan-lacma-zumthor-final-plan-20190407-story.html>

**also available as a pdf file on**

- Michael Conforti, “LACMA is building an institution for the 21st century,” The Art Newspaper, June 13 2019

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/lacma-is-building-an-institution-for-the-21st-century>

*Recommended:*

- Catherine Wagley, “LACMA’s \$750 Million Renovation Was Once Hailed as a Powerful Vision of What a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Museum Could be. Now, It’s a Lightning Rod,” *artnet news*, April 1, 2020

<https://news.artnet.com/market/lacma-expansion-analysis-1822221>

**Thu, Oct 29:**

Your reading response for today consist of two parts:

**Part I:**

- Joseph Giovannini, “The Demolition of LACMA: Art Sacrificed to Architecture,” *The New York Review of Books*, 2 October 2020

[https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/10/02/the-demolition-of-lacma-art-sacrificed-to-architecture/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=NYR%20Marilynne%20Robinson%20Richard%20Wright%20LACMA&utm\\_content=NYR%20Marilynne%20Robinson%20Richard%20Wright%20LACMA+CID\\_478e3db3584ba5e33d906b11bb935788&utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_term=Los%20Angeles%20County%20Museum%20of%20Art](https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/10/02/the-demolition-of-lacma-art-sacrificed-to-architecture/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NYR%20Marilynne%20Robinson%20Richard%20Wright%20LACMA&utm_content=NYR%20Marilynne%20Robinson%20Richard%20Wright%20LACMA+CID_478e3db3584ba5e33d906b11bb935788&utm_source=Newsletter&utm_term=Los%20Angeles%20County%20Museum%20of%20Art)

**Part II:** Christopher Knight received the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Criticism “For work demonstrating extraordinary community service by a critic, applying his expertise and



## Week Eleven: Asian Arts

### **Mon, Nov 2:**

Small group meetings with peer review to discuss your exhibition project / portfolio.

### **Tue, Nov 3 and Wed, Nov 4:**

Individual meetings with me to discuss your exhibition project / portfolio as well as review your individual project (tour, educational program, proposal, etc.); you must submit drafts of both the night before our meeting.

### **Thu, Nov 5: Multiculturalism and Identity Politics in U.S. Museums**

- Holland Cotter, "Under T2 (ms) JTJ ET Q q 0.24 0 0 0.24 419.62 0 0 50 0 0Tm /TT1 1 Tf [(Th) -0.2 (u) -0.2





**Nov 19: Individual public facing project presentations to the class**

**Week Fourteen: Exhibition Presentations**

Each curatorial-team will give a ten-minute presentation on your exhibition in the Payne Auditorium in the Tang Museum. This event is open to your friends, family, faculty and staff, the general public.

**Mon, Nov 30: Dress Rehearsal**

**Tue, Dec 1 Dress Rehearsal**

**Thur, Dec 3: Public Presentations**

**Your complete exhibition project / portfolio and take home final is due on the last day of Finals Week: December 11**