Wandering in the West: A Critical Examination of the Curation of Chinese Art(ifacts) and Ideological Lessons at the Royal Ontario Museum

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Abstract

Based on personal visiting experiences in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), this research explores how Chinese art(ifacts) are displayed, constructed, and re-constructed to convey specific meanings and ideologies by the ROM. As an immigrant nation that adopted a vision of multiculturalism as official federal policy in 1971, Canada positions itself as a place that upholds values of freedom, equality, and cultural diversity. Functioning as vital educational spaces, museums play a pivotal role in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue around cultural heritage while simultaneously standing as symbols of a nation's cultural and spiritual identity. However, the way Chinese art(ifacts) are displayed in the ROM teaches a kind of unequal and hierarchical relationship, especially between European and Chinese culture. The experience of wandering through the exhibition mirrors an experience of navigating the Western world as an international student from China, where Chinese art(ifacts) and culture are placed in a marginalized position. From a post-colonial perspective, the curatorial strategies in Chinese galleries are not neutral, as they actively disseminate specific ideologies and values regarding power. I engage Eisner's concept of "three curricula" to explore and analyze how Chinese and European art(ifacts) are displayed, and produce specific meanings through explicit, implicit, and null curricula. This research highlights how a museum functions as an educational space, the institutional responsibility to be consciously aware of the social orders that exhibitions are reifying between different cultures, and the need for a comprehensive and decolonial approach to inspiring cross-cultural understandings in museum education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

In an increasingly multicultural and globally connected world, museums have undergone a significant shift from static repositories of objects to comprehensive cultural institutions. Combined with conservation, research, exhibition, and education, museums stand as bastions of cultural heritage preservation, offering not only repositories of historical art(ifacts) but also act as vibrant hubs for knowledge exploration and cultural exchange. Issued by the Royal Commission on National Development in 1951, the Massey Report advocated federal funding for a wide range of cultural activities. The recommendations made by the Massey Report, especially those concerning the conservation of Canada's historic places, are generally seen as the first major steps towards nurturing, preserving and promoting Canadian culture (Stewart & Kallmann, 2019).

Massive immigration after World War II in Canada prompted the central government to rethink the role and status of other ethnic groups within Canadian society and to acknowledge the contributions of non-Indigenous, non-French, and non-English groups to the nation's cultural enrichment. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was established to alleviate growing tensions between English and French communities. Meanwhile, other ethnic groups expressed strong dissatisfaction over the neglect of their voice, demanding that their contributions and identities also receive recognition from the country. In response, the federal government formally introduced its multiculturalism policy, recognizing and supporting the right of all ethnic cultures to preserve and promote their traditions within the unified framework of Canadian society, where reconciliation,

immigration, and equity are core themes in public discourse. However, scholars like Bannerji (2000) argue that state multiculturalism, even in its institutional forms, often functions as a managerial tool that contains difference within a framework still dominated by an Anglo-Canadian core, potentially side-stepping deeper challenges to racial hierarchies and colonial power structures. The evolution of Canadian museums has been inextricably linked to national narratives and policy reformation, from the nation-building mandate of the Massey Report to the Multiculturalism Act. As critical scholarship emphasizes, this institutional shift remains an area of negotiation where museums must balance celebration and inclusion with the challenging task of confronting Canada's complex historical and social realities.

Nowadays, the role of museums is being re-imagined not just as preservers of history and culture, but as facilitators of dialogue, learning, and social solidarity (Macdonald, 2006). In 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) redefined the definition of the museum, emphasizing that the museum should be a server to society and the public, fostering diversity, sustainability, and connection across different cultures to optimize the educational function of the museum (ICOM, 2022). This redefinition acknowledges the changing expectations placed on museums, particularly in the context of social responsibility and inclusivity. In addition, Geroge Hein (1998), a professor emeritus at Lesley University, museum educator, education theorist, and education researcher, emphasizes that the educational role of the museum is not limited to formal programming, but extends to every aspect of its operation, including the selection of exhibits, design of gallery spaces, and interpretive experience offered to the public. Despite these optimistic visions of the museum, we cannot ignore our awareness of dominant Western ideology and sustained colonial

legacies embedded within museum structures, which continue to shape their internal structures and external representation.

As a Chinese international student and a newcomer to Canada, my visiting experience and observation within the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) resonates deeply with my lived experience. No matter how diverse and welcoming Canadian society appears on its surface, it is impossible to ignore the underlying colonial framework that continues to shape public narratives, policies, and cultural institutions. My perception and engagement with these issues is not limited to my experience as a visitor in the ROM—it is also grounded in my professional background.

Before pursuing my studies in Canada, I worked for four years as a visual graphic designer at the National Museum of China (NMC), one of the largest and most influential cultural institutions in China. During my work at NMC, I was actively involved in various curatorial projects, including both domestic exhibitions of Chinese heritage and international collaborations. Notably, I participated in projects showcasing Roman sculpture and Renaissance art in collaboration with European museums. These experiences exposed me to different curatorial philosophies and emphasized the importance of cultural respect, storytelling, and audience engagement, such as becoming more visitor and community centered, and creating living, dynamic exhibits that are deeply connected to daily life and community identity, rather than static, decontextualized displays (Kreps, 2003).

At NMC, even foreign art(ifacts) were presented with thoughtful context and well researched history (Figure 1). The aim was never just to attract visitors and satisfy curiosity, but to learn and connect. The curatorial team I was working with in the NMC always made an

effort to ensure that each display—whether Chinese or Western—reflected its cultural origin and offered visitors a meaningful and thought-provoking experience. Seeing the contrast at the ROM made me question: Why do Western museums, despite their resources and reputation, adopt a homogeneous, less careful curatorial practice when showcasing non-Western art(ifacts)? Especially in a context of Canadian cultural diversity, the carelessness of display may easily re-enforce the biases, stereotypes, and hierarchical relationships between different culture.

Figure 1

Ancient Roman art(ifacts) and Renaissance art exhibited in the National Museum of China, 2022.

My academic studies at NSCAD University further shaped my understanding of these

issues. Through courses on post-colonial theory, Indigenous studies, and curatorial practices, I learned how colonialism continues to influence how we understand art, culture, and history. Also, I visited many exhibitions across Canada, including *The Fairest Order in the World* located at Dalhousie Art Gallery in Halifax, *The City before the City* at the Vancouver Museum, and the ROM in Toronto. Throughout my visits, I was deeply moved by how some museums are beginning to re-frame their narratives by including Indigenous voices and immigrant experiences.

In the Museum of Vancouver, I saw that they chose not to exhibit some sacred ceremonial art(ifacts) to visitors in order to show respect to Indigenous knowledge. Sameer Farooq highlighted the irreconcilable contradiction between museum presentation and colonial histories through a mixed media installation in his show *The Fairest Order in the World*, which asks visitors to think and "probe notions of provenance, repatriation, and repair" (Filip, 2023, para. 2). Such Indigenous-led exhibitions emphasize relationship over classification, place over time, and spiritual meaning over external appearance.

These exhibitions are not perfect, but they offer a model for what museums could become: spaces of inclusivity, reconciliation, and respectful dialogue. Reflecting on the differences in how Indigenous and Chinese cultures are presented, I realized that both face similar challenges under the oppression of Western ideology and frameworks. Despite being vastly different in geography and history, both have been marginalized within public narratives—presented either as remnants of the past or symbols of the exotic (Willinsky, 1998). Historically, non-Western art has been stripped of its accoutrements and isolated to focus the eye on its purely sculptural or painted form. This way of seeing it—

as fragments and components removed from aesthetic-cultural complexes made up of different expressive, performative, and ritual elements—is now so thoroughly naturalized (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991; Phillips, 2002). What is missing is the acknowledgment that these cultures are not lifeless but living, evolving, and intellectually rich.

From a Chinese philosophical perspective, the concept of harmony and coexistence—expressed by Confucian ideals like “大同” (Datong)—offers a vision of a world where cultural differences are not threats but strengths. As 费孝通 (Fei Xiaotong) beautifully articulates, “各美其美，美人之美，美美与共，天下大同—Each culture has its own beauty; the beauty of others should be appreciated; share in the beauty together, and the world will achieve harmony” (Shan, 2020). This spirit of mutual respect and coexistence is something I believe museums could use to build bridges, rather than using art(ifacts) to build walls between civilizations.

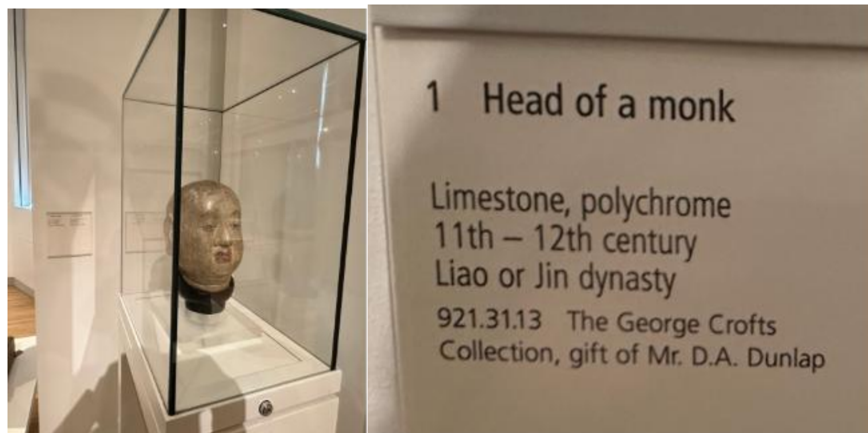
In Chinese, 文物 or “artifact” refers to an object that carries a special cultural heritage and historical legacy, which “refers to elements that are common to a given group because they are culturally meaningful, connected to shared memory, or linked to collective identity” (IPinCH, 2015, p. 2). However, before those objects became known as an “art(ifact)”, they were produced as artworks or daily objects. As time goes by, some objects may no longer serve their original functions, and the inherent meaning may continue to evolve and change based on the different era, environment, and ways of interpretation. Thus, the distinction between “artwork” and “art(ifact)” lies in the kind of constructed meanings and ideologies humans impose on these objects, and how they are then constructed and disseminated. In fact, the meaning building of those art(ifact)s cannot escape from the inherent existence of

colonial discourse, because “museums are, of course, repositories of material and other expressive culture whose incorporation into these institutions has come to symbolize much more extensive acts of colonial appropriation and oppression” (Phillips, 2022, p. 60). Despite decolonization currently in full swing in North America, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonization in the cultural sphere assuages white guilt and evades actual returns of stolen lands. Indeed, we cannot undo the historical fact of colonization, nor can we undo the shared legacies of modernity that we all inhabit today.

In this context, I acknowledge that museums have become factories of meaning making and reconstruction; the information and knowledge of those art(ifacts) we receive from exhibitions already deviate from their original meaning and function. In other words, the reason why those art(ifacts) can be displayed is because the museum wants people to see with purpose. But the most important and urgent thing, as a curator, is what kind of meaning we impose on those artifacts— and whether it's appropriate and facilitates cultural learning and understanding. Many Chinese art(ifacts) in the ROM were once weapons, tableware, and sacred objects worshiped by people. Due to being put on display, they no longer
serve from their original functions, but it doesn’t mean we can overlook their spiritual and cultural significance especially for their original culture. The visiting of ROM on December 29th, 2023, caused a strong sense of discomfort, enough so that I returned on March 23rd and 24th, 2025 to examine why as part of my master’s thesis research. The difference in care in how the Chinese and European art(ifacts) were curated and displayed provoked a visceral understanding of cultural and social hierarchy.

Figure 2

Head of a Monk



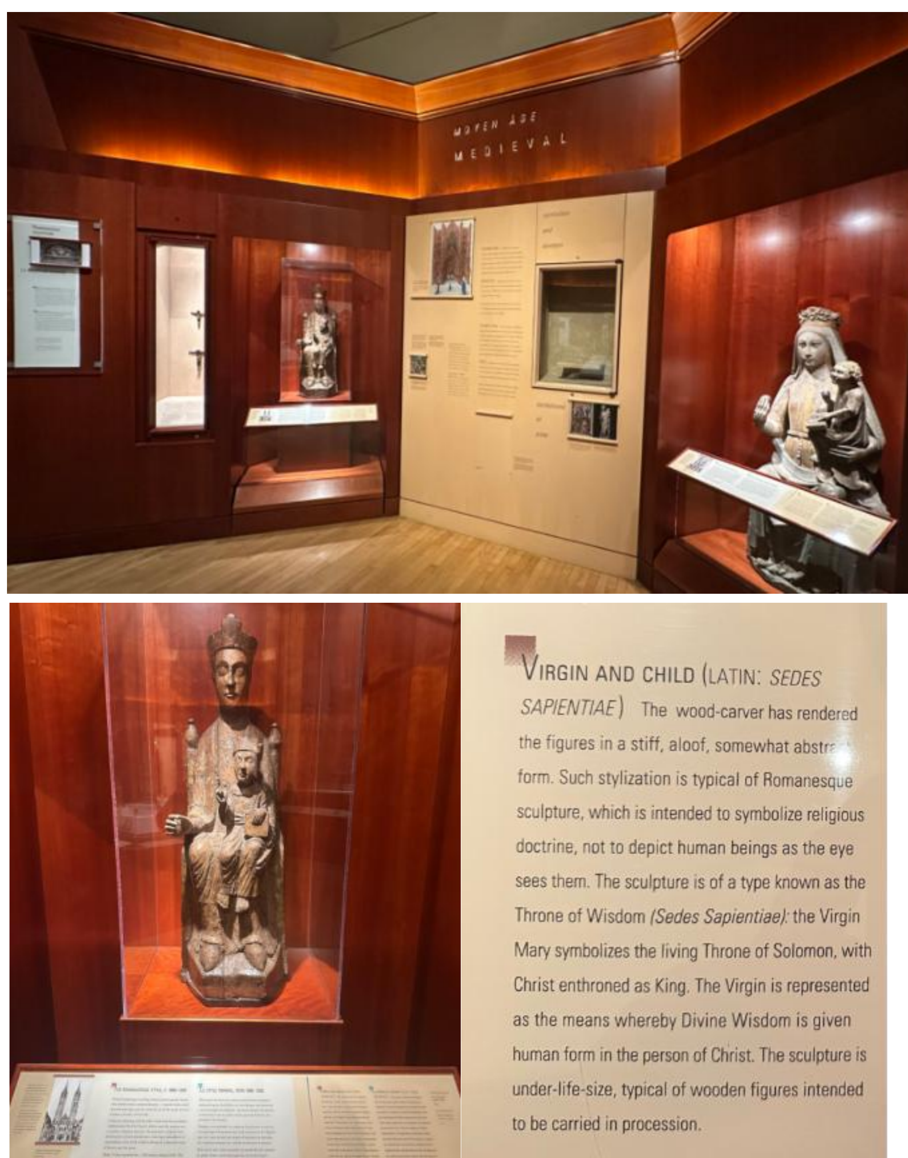
For instance, in the Matthews Family Court of Chinese Sculpture, the display of a set of Buddhist stone statues intensified my discomfort and unease. Two stone Buddha heads were placed separately in the corner of the exhibition area (Figure 2). Their bodies were missing, leaving only the heads encased in small glass cases. The label simply read *Head of a Monk*, offering no further valuable information to help understand these artifacts. Who are these monks? Where are those missing parts? And why are they here? Such questions kept echoing in my mind. This display method reminded me more of laboratory specimens rather than a presentation of cultural heritage.

In contrast, in the entrance of the Europe: Evolution of Style, I was attracted by a wood

sculpture—*Virgin and Child, a* European deities sculpture. The interpretation label provided rich information, allowing visitors not only to appreciate the unique aesthetic style of this piece but also to understand the spiritual and cultural significance it represents (Figure X). As a typical work of the Romanesque style, this sculpture is not displayed in isolation—it is deeply connected to the overall narrative of the exhibition and the evolution of European artistic styles.

Figure 3

Virgin and Child



In conjunction with a walk through the Chinese and European art(ifacts), one can feel Willinsky's (1998) critique toward colonial ways of structuring the world, using Hegel as the example:

> I take [Hegel's] use of the present tense with the Orient to suggest a lack of a past or a future... [China and India] are mired in a state of perpetual despotism, which is played against the West's historical achievement of liberty, and thus deserve to be excluded from the progress of World History. (p. 117)

Colonial ways of thinking, seeing, and understanding Chinese culture stop at the past, producing careless displays of Chinese art(ifacts) that distort and flatten Chinese culture. They frame China as a foreign 'Other,' as an ancient and mysterious land that remains static, rather than showing these art(ifacts) as a living and evolving part of a developing China. Hall (2018) further explained how the "West and the Rest" discourse, or system of representation, was constructed. From a Western perspective, the description of the non-Western world is usually accompanied by the idealization of the West and the projection of desire onto the East. The non-Western world is understood as one with an absence of government and civil society; this results in a failure to recognize and respect differences and impose European categories and norms. Simply put, the non-Western world is seen through Western modes of perception and representation.

Such a mode of display constitutes one of the most profound manifestations of a colonial perspective. In this research, I use "art(ifacts)" to highlight this tension regarding objects on display as relics of the past versus objects that showcase the everyday life of a culture that continues to evolve. Wandering not only refers to my visiting experience, but also points to

how the Chinese art(ifacts) were taken from their original contexts to become part of a new educational project—the three sub-galleries within the Chinese exhibition area (see more details in Chapter 5)—when they are displayed in the ROM.

My goal is not to critique the ROM or Western museums for the sake of criticism, but to explore how cultural representation can be improved, and how curatorial practices can evolve to offer more balanced, inclusive, and meaningful experiences. I want to understand how Chinese art(ifacts) are curated in comparison to Western ones, what narratives are disseminated through their display, and how Chinese visitors like myself respond to these exhibitions emotionally and intellectually.

1.2 Motivation Statement

For non-Western art(ifacts), especially Chinese art(ifacts), the lack of connection with their original context, reconstructed in a homogeneous way, has already become an emerging issue requiring more attention. For instance, when I step into the Chinese Galleries in the first level of the ROM (see more information in Chapter 4 and 5), I am deeply attracted by the display: numerous Chinese art(ifacts) are placed in groups of glass cabinets, fragmented and with a lack of coherent curatorial narrative. It is reminiscent of a marketplace or trophy room, with little interpretive text or cultural framing (Figure 4). I feel like I am wandering in a silent, forgotten vault. Such a way of presentation seems to reduce this rich and complex civilization to a visual spectacle rather than inviting meaningful engagement.

Figure 4

Chinese art(ifacts) exhibited in the Royal Ontario Museum

In contrast, the European gallery within the ROM, Europe: Evolution of Style, is often meticulously curated, arranged with clear chronological and thematic structures, displayed within reconstructed historical scenes, and supported by rich contextual information (Figure 3). This thoughtful installation design allows visitors to systematically grasp the development of European art history and the evolution of artistic styles. The different degree of care taken to display Chinese and European art(ifacts) provokes a strong sense of powerlessness and alienation within me, because there are two distinct narrative logics existing within the ROM which are not same as mine, or what I have experienced in China. What I have seen and what I have learned there keep me questioning my positioning, identity, and spiritual connection as a Chinese person with Chinese history and culture.

Figure 5

European art(ifacts) exhibited in the Royal Ontario Museum

This emotional response is not simply personal—it reflects a broader issue regarding how museums participate in shaping cultural hierarchies. Museums have always been more than spaces of visual engagement; they are ideological arenas where knowledge is constructed, identities are negotiated, and power is exercised, particularly in how art(ifacts)—especially those from non-Western cultures—are acquired, interpreted, and displayed. In that regard, Willinsky (1998) asks us to consider the role museums play in educating the public:

> how the museum placed its visitors at the center of a world to be known and possessed, how a museum might use its collection of African masks, Ming vases, and Egyptian mummies to teach visitors about the past and present civilization and empire, and their place within that order. (p. 63)

These profound questions evoke a rethinking on the issue of museum education and its function. In Canada, this can show up in museums that celebrate Western heritage while treating non-Western cultures as subaltern or fractured. This subtle but persistent difference reinforces a sense of Western superiority and non-Western deficiency.

According to Althusser (2006), museums function as ideological state apparatuses by shaping cultural values and norms through their exhibitions and educational programs, whether public or private. Additionally, Western ideology highlights people's difference, as Bannerji (2000) illustrates in the book *The Dark Side of the Nation*:

> We can see how the ideological state apparatus ... segments the nation's cultural and political space as well as its labour market into ethnic communities. This results in fractured cultural communities, thus, third world or non-white peoples living in Canada become organized into competitive entities with respect to each other. They are

> perceived to have no commonality, except that they are seen as, or self-appellate as being essentially religious, traditional or pre-modern, and thus civilizationally backward. (p 7)

In the ROM, such Western perspectives and filters manifest in the differential treatment of Chinese and European arti(facts). The former are often displayed as isolated objects, stripped from their original context, while the latter are presented as a coherent narrative that highlights their artistic and historical significance. This distinction perpetuates a binary opposition between the West and the non-West and reinforces stereotypes and prejudices that hinder cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Moreover, such an unbalanced power of display inevitably reflects the West's cultural hegemony over Chinese culture and further impacts museum education, "there, imperial display educated the eye to divide the world according to the patterns of empire. As the eye was disciplined, so was the body" (Willinsky, 1998, p. 57).

Ideally, by presenting global art(ifacts) and histories, museums have great potential to provide a vehicle for education about foreign cultures to local people. For visitors whose cultural backgrounds differ from where the art(ifacts) originate, exhibitions can offer an interpretation of the culture on display for the general public and provide an open space for cultural appreciation and new knowledge. For visitors who have the same cultural background as where the art(ifacts) originate, exhibitions "can provide a focus of cultural identity and engender a sense of pride in their heritage" (Simpson, 2001, p. 81). However, in practice, when non-Western art(ifacts) are displayed without meaningful context, especially those from colonized or marginalized cultures, they face risks of becoming exoticized,

objectified, or rendered voiceless. In other words, these objects are seen but not heard.

According to the Smithsonian Institute (2025), the Chinese collection in the ROM is the second largest collection outside of China at present, next to the British Museum. Besides, "the ROM's Chinese collection is characterized by its wide range of categories, representing one of the most comprehensive and diversified art collections outside China" (Chen, 2014, p. 246). This means the ROM is in a unique position to collect, display, and interpret Chinese art(ifacts) and the museum holds immense potential to showcase Chinese history and culture to Canadian and international audiences. Unfortunately, things did not turn out as expected. In my view, the ROM's exhibition has failed to become a catalyst for cultural communication and appreciation but instead intensified the sense of alienation associated with foreign cultures under Western filters.

In John Willinsky's (1998) book *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End*, the idea of education as spectacle is explored. Accompanying Western colonization, the "educational spectacle" emerged and became prevalent among exhibitions, museums, and world fairs, which was driven by a desire for sensationalism (p. 58). Captured Indigenous people were displayed, attracting visitors by the uniqueness of their skin colour, body shape, and behaviour. Within the context of imperial expansion, knowledge and power were presented as grand visual displays. By presenting colonial cultures and resources as objects of study, these spectacles claimed to educate the public while normalizing imperial hierarchies. Education operated not just through texts or classrooms, but through theatrical, entertaining, and highly visual experiences that disciplined viewers as they watched. Inspired by Huyssen (1993), Thurston (2017) has argued, "as sites of 'edutainment', the museum

narrative is both real and contrived, authentic and spectacular, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction" (p. 2). The framework of the "educational spectacle" also offers a lens to understand the differing arrangements of Chinese and European art(ifacts) in the Royal Ontario Museum, where display practices themselves reiterate and naturalize cultural hierarchies.

The West's way of display was an education in how to conceptualize the world in mind, ignoring the power required to mount exhibits as well as turned the world into an exhibit (Willinsky, 1998). Hence, the remarkable difference of curatorial strategy as mentioned above provide strong evidence when comparing the display of Chinese art(ifacts) with those of European origin within the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. Highlighting differences between cultures is not inherently problematic, but the key lies in how we perceive and interpret these differences. Although Canada is a country with a diverse culture and population, the "diverse" itself cannot become a strength for our community automatically unless we can manage relationships across cultures carefully and appropriately and enable people to coexist harmoniously while respecting cultural differences.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

My research is driven by a critical observation: though Chinese and Western art(ifacts) are displayed under the same roof within the ROM, they experience notably different curatorial strategies. These differences go beyond aesthetics and reveal deeper ideological orientations embedded within museum exhibition practices. While Western art(ifacts) are frequently accompanied by structured narratives, thematic groups, and contextual explanations, Chinese art(ifacts) are often displayed in isolated glass cabinets or directly

exposed, with limited interpretive guidance. This analysis will mainly focus on several permanent exhibitions within the ROM—Chinese Galleries and Europe: Evolution of Style (see more details and maps in Chapter 4 and 5).

Based on my personal curatorial experience, academic engagement in post-colonial theory, and multiple site visits to the ROM, this thesis analyzes the curatorial approaches used to present Chinese versus Western art(ifacts) at the ROM. It aims to understand how these strategies and methods affect visitor interpretation, emotional resonance, and broader perceptions of cultural value. Museums, as Althusser (2006) argues, are not neutral but ideologically charged. Thus, the choices of what stories to tell and how to tell them could have latent implications for shaping cultural identity and animating or deterring inclusivity. This distinction in presentation may also subtly impact the museum's educational mission.

Hence, the educational impact of museums cannot be ignored, and is as important as traditional classroom teaching and learning. In this thesis, I examine the museum as an open educational space, adopting Elliot W. Eisner's (1979) "three curricula" as a theoretical foundation for my data analysis, which encompasses an analysis of my own visitor experience. The study explores the educational role of museums as vehicles for forming cultural narratives that support diversity as a positive and valuable aspect of society. My study is guided by two key research questions:

1. What ideological lessons does the curation of Chinese art(ifacts) teach the public in the ROM?

2. What resonances and dissonances does an international Chinese person feel when walking through the ROM's exhibitions of Chinese art(ifacts)?

As I conduct this research, I hope that the museum can be a place where cultures are not valued based on a concept of hierarchy, but respected—where heritage is not ornamental, but meaningful, and where visitors from all backgrounds can see themselves not just reflected but honored. The function that museums can have in reinforcing a sense of cultural belonging and ancestral pride (Simpson, 2001, p. 81) positions such institutions as a bridge between worlds, but only if curators are willing to challenge Eurocentrism and decolonize to engage multiple perspectives with sincerity.

In this research, Chapter 2: Museum Studies and Museum Education: Royal Ontario Museum will provide a comprehensive review of the literature on museum studies and education. It will trace the historical evolution of the field, paying particular attention to the impact of colonial history and its educational vision. It will also summarize key scholarly debates to clearly identify the specific research gap that this study aims to address. Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks will elaborate on the theoretical framework integrated with this research. By drawing upon Eisner's three curricula and critically engaging with perspectives from critical museology and material culture studies, this chapter constructs a specific analytical lens, which will subsequently guide the review and analysis of the research data. Chapter 4: Methodology and Method describes how the data was gathered and analyzed, with a particular emphasis on the standpoint of (Auto)ethnography. Chapter 5: Data Analysis presents the analysis of data from two exhibition areas within the ROM: Chinese Galleries—consisting of three sub galleries, including Chinese sculpture, Gallery of China, and Chinese Architecture; and European: Evolution of Style. Through detailed case studies, it examines what kinds of information and ideological messages the ROM conveys

through its display of Chinese and European artifacts. The findings will be presented in Chapter 6: Conclusion. Also, I will share some suggestions regarding how to improve the exhibition and visiting experience of Chinese galleries in the ROM.

I hope my research will not only attract scholars and curators seeking to refine museum programming but also raise and evoke awareness of relevant institutions in China to pay more attention to how Chinese art(ifacts) are conserved and displayed overseas. For both Chinese and Western practitioners, it is important to actively engage with various resources and carry out more cultural communication and cooperation with overseas institutions to provide higher-quality museum education resources for audiences around the world.

Chapter 2: Museum Studies and Museum Education: Royal Ontario Museum

The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) was established in 1912 and opened to the public in 1914. Initially founded as a joint institution of the Government of Ontario and the University of Toronto, The Royal Commission on the University of Toronto Report (1905) proposed and advocated the prime need for a museum in Toronto. After that, The Royal Ontario Museum Act was approved in 1912, marking the official establishment of the ROM (The Rise of the ROM, n.d.). “The latest expansion project, the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, was completed in 2007. The museum now boasts about thirty newly renovated galleries, of which five are for Chinese arts” (Chen, 2014, p. 245). Nowadays, the ROM is Canada’s largest and most comprehensive museum, which holds an extraordinary collection of 18 million artworks, cultural objects, and natural history specimens from around the world and across the ages. With 40 distinct galleries and exhibition spaces, the ROM serves not only as a world-class museum but also as a premier field research institute and national landmark. Overall, it plays a vital role in advancing global understanding of art, culture, and nature, making it a dynamic and essential cultural destination in the heart of Toronto (About ROM, n.d.).

The concept of the museum has evolved significantly over time, reflecting changing social, political, and epistemological conditions. Abt (2006) traces how “most accounts of museum history begin with either the etymological origins of ‘museum’ in the ancient Greek word for cult sites devoted to the muses (mouseion) or the legendary Museum of Alexandria’s founding c.280 BCE” (p. 115), which embodies reverence for divine inspiration, scholarship, and philosophical reflection. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, museums were privately owned by noble and rich people and presented as a “cabinet of

curiosities" which was "composed of an extraordinary rich amalgam of miscellaneous" items (Lidchi, 1997, p. 156). During that time, "museum[s] reconcile curiosity and scholarship, private and public domains, the whimsical and the ordered" (Findlen, 1989, p. 60).

Although the origins of museums can be traced back to ancient Greece, the institution's expansion and global prominence are inextricably linked to the rise of European colonialism. In contemporary society—particularly within postcolonial and critical museology discourses—such historical background has prompted urgent calls for decolonization in museums. Decolonization here refers to a profound epistemological shift: rethinking the frameworks through which museums produce, categorize, and disseminate knowledge. It involves challenging Eurocentric assumptions, resisting the simplification and de-aestheticization of non-Western cultures, and interrogating how institutional practices perpetuate historical imbalances of power.

This research uses a postcolonial lens (Bennet, 1995; Said, 1978; Willinsky, 1998), to examine how the ROM's Chinese and European galleries reflect unequal and different curatorial strategies. These differences reveal how museums may continue to reinforce colonial hierarchies through display choices. Given the museum's role as a public educational institution, such disparities make the call for decolonization of museum education not only timely but pedagogically essential.

However, it is important to distinguish between postcolonial critique and decolonial action. While postcolonial critique examines the intractable cultural and political legacies of imperialism, such as Said (1978), they also reveal how colonial powers constructed knowledge to dominate the Orient. The latter determined that critique

alone was inadequate, and required deeper layers of reconstruction, the restoration of Indigenous and non-Western sovereignty and, in some cases, the repatriation of land and cultural patrimony (Lonetree, 2012; Breske, 2024). Scholars like Heather Ahtone (2019) further grounds decolonization in the specific tension between Western and Indigenous paradigms, emphasizing the integration of spirit and physical. Her arguments also greatly inspired museum display and education, illustrating that the construction and narration of exhibit meanings must be grounded in the original civilization's paradigms and aesthetic systems; “rather than becoming an ‘expert’ in a distinct field, knowledge keepers are valued for their collective understanding and spiritual capacity” (Ahtone, 2019, p. 3). Engaging with the foundational work of Indigenous decolonial thinkers provides the necessary framework to transition from critiquing colonial displays to actively dismantling the hierarchies they represent, thereby fostering institutions that serve all communities justly.

2.1 History and Colonialism: The Darkness of the Past and the Contemporary Crisis

The origin and development of the museum was a long journey and a complex process, and “the beginnings of the public museum are commonly traced to either the founding of the Ashmolean Museum in 1683 or the opening of the Louvre Palace’s Grand Gallery in 1793” (Abt, 2006, p. 115). Looking back on history, the development and evolution of the museum were not accidental and purposeless, but closely associated with Europe’s history of colonization, mission, and plunder. This has become an established understanding in the academic world: while scholars such as Vawda (2019), Marten (2019), Simpson (2001), Lidchi (1997), and Macdonald (2006) focus on different scopes, all of them recognize and seriously critique the colonial history of the museum.

As Lidchi (1997) illustrates in *The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, museums in earlier periods are unique from contemporary museums. This contrast is exemplified in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the classification and display system was built by personal collections from European nobles, collectors, and researchers. Especially, the "Cabinet of Curiosities" can be seen as a prototype for the development of museums in a Western colonial context. During the sixteenth century, Italian Grand Duke Francesco I assembled his "Cabinet of Curiosities" with landscapes painted on the walls and treasures from afar; he also placed a desk in the middle of the room to situate himself at the center of the known and possessed world, which implies a hierarchy of civilizations in which non-Western objects are often categorized as "curiosities" or "primitives" in service of the European construct of self-supremacy (Willinsky, 1998).

The Duke's cabinet was not an exception; collections like this were widely popular in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. As these "cabinets of curiosities" evolved into museums, Simpson (2001) notes how museums then became "the storeroom of a nation's treasures, providing a mirror in which are reflected the views and attitudes of dominant cultures, and the material evidence of the colonial achievements of the European cultures in which museums are rooted" (p. 1). Furthermore, "these early museums housed collections of curious and wonderful art(ifacts) extracted from European voyages of exploration and the colonies ... [and the objects were] measured and experimented with on spurious grounds of scientific research" (Vawda, 2019, p. 74). The institutional impulse to collect, classify, and display has always been entangled with notions of ownership, control, and Eurocentric world making. While early museums may have appeared as spaces of wonder, showcase, and

collection, they were in fact structured environments "by their policies, missions, architectural styles, catalogues, exhibitions, wall texts, educational programs, and conservation" (Prianti & Suyadnya, 2022, p. 231), which reflected and reinforced the political ideologies of their age.

The act of displaying foreign or non-European art(ifacts) was never neutral; it was an articulation of dominance—a way of turning the unknown into the known, the "Other" into the objectified, and cultural difference into material possession (Lidchi, 1997; Marten, 2019). In this framework, the museum was not merely a mirror of the world, but a device for shaping it through selective storytelling and hierarchical framework. Prianti and Suyadnya (2022) elaborated the following in their research:

> Museums were used to show the glory, domination, superiority, and conquest over their colonies. Museums then were a symbol of victory over a competition of excellence of European nations. Through the history of conquest, trade, and the politics of colonialism, Western museums are undeniably a representation of the colonizer. (p.240)

This argument incisively revealed the persistent colonial sentiment when non-Western art(ifacts) were displayed in Western museums. Meanwhile, it critically pointed out the fundamental purpose of Western museum displays—to reinforce colonial domination and narratives. In the ROM, large open spaces on the first level were dedicated to Chinese art(ifacts) and superficially created an illusion of multicultural representation in Western museums. The homogenized curation and simplistic spatial design ultimately perpetuated a colonial framework, leaving Chinese culture marginalized, which led to museum exhibitions no longer centered on cultural communication, but rather an extension of

power dynamic. “The development of the museum in Western contexts—simplistically put from (extended) cabinets of curiosities to more organized showcases for promoting knowledge and colonial dominance–is a profoundly politicized movement and was never simply about the ‘pure’ promotion of culture” (Marten, 2019. P.489).

The British Museum stands as an example of how museums have historically embodied the intertwined dynamics of colonial dominance and cultural authority. Founded in 1753 amid the expansion of the British Empire, the museum’s vast collections comprise art(ifacts) acquired—often through conquest, exploitation, and unequal power relations—from colonies around the globe. Those objects were displayed not simply as curiosities but as tangible proof of Britain’s imperial glory, superiority, and control over colonized peoples, aligning directly with Prianti and Suyadnya’s (2022) observation that museums served as symbols of domination and national identity construction within colonial meta-structures.

The British Museum today also exemplifies how museums have become contested spaces where formerly colonized societies seek to reclaim their histories and cultural heritage. Debates over the repatriation of art(ifacts) such as the Elgin Marbles highlight the ongoing struggles around cultural authority and the right to narrate history (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2023). To respond to the debates, the British Museum released a *Trustees' Statement* arguing that “the sculptures in their collection should remain in London because there’s nowhere to house them in Greece and that the Greek authorities can’t look after them” (The Trustees’ Statement, 2025). Such a statement illustrates the complex and often contradictory role museums play—not only as institutions of colonial power but also as arenas for negotiating identity and memory. While claiming to preserve universal heritage, they

frequently uphold narratives that marginalize the cultures from which artifacts were taken. The refusal to repatriate reflects not just bureaucratic inertia but a deeper resistance to redefining institutional authority in a postcolonial world.

As a settler-colonial nation, Canada occupied a dual position: both subject to British imperial authority and actively participating in colonial practices. Although Canada was not a colonial metropole, it was part of the British Empire historically; its cultural institutions developed within this imperial framework. The establishment of the ROM was driven by the expansion of university education and the museum movement in the early 20th century. The Royal Commission's report in Canada advocated for the prime need for a museum among several other recommendations which recognize the important role of museums as a local community educator and server, however, the establishment of the ROM and its early exhibitions always centre white narratives and perceptions of the museum movement in North America. In fact, museums continue to be used as tools of colonialism (The Rise of the ROM, n.d.).

In 1921, the Globe and Mail published a picture and description of a large Chinese Bell. The article details the journey of the bell, including its method of transportation to the museum (Figure 6). From the brief description we can learn how Chinese cultural relics are described and stripped from their cultural background by Western media. They marveled at the artifact's exquisite craftsmanship and treated it as a gift but failed to understand its deeper cultural significance. What's more, the money paid to five men in New York far exceeded what was given to the two hundred Chinese laborers who helped move it—revealing the hegemony and exploitation of Western capitalism over the non-Western world. Nowadays,

this Chinese bell is still displayed at the entrance of the Gallery of China (see Figure 9 and 12 in Chapter 5).

Figure 6

The News of the Chinese Bell

7,500-LB. CHINESE BELL ARRIVES

The Royal Ontario Museum on Bloor street west has just received this great bell from China, where it was manufactured about 1450 A. D. It is a marvellous casting, in perfect condition, and a wonderful example of Oriental artcraft. Gorgeous dragons are interlocked, forming the handle by which the bell is hung in the belfry. When the bell was being shipped from China it required 200 men and three flat-cars to move it 200 miles, but when it arrived at New York on its way to Toronto it was handled by five men and one flatcar. The cost of handling it in New York was much more than that paid the 200 men in China. It is the gift of the Canadian General Electric Co., through Hon. Senator Nicholls, Toronto.

In this research, the goal will not be to focus on the debate regarding the issue of the ownership or repatriation of art(ifacts). Rather, the intensity of these debates offers context for my study at the ROM. The issue is inseparable from the fact that the museum is built upon a Western epistemological framework. As Simpson (2001) explains:

> In discussions concerning museum provision for culturally diverse audiences, it is often stated that the museum is based upon Western ideology; that the concept of visiting a museum—a collection of objects removed from their arena of active participation in cultural affairs, to a place in which they are put on public display to be preserved for future generations—is unique to western cultures. (p. 107)

The entrenched Western knowledge system compels non-Western aesthetic works to be transposed into the Western system of classification of fine and applied art, to be represented as art(ifacts). This system not only solidifies social hierarchies but also keeps museum exhibitions and interpretations long entangled within Western paradigms. Tracing its origins, Western museums have remained deeply bound to colonial ideologies from their inception to the present day, continuously shaping public consciousness (Phillips & Steiner, 1999). Consequently, they may unintentionally reproduce the cultural hierarchies they seek to challenge—privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, regional cultures, or minority communities. As Marten (2019) notes, "nineteenth and early twentieth century museums were often closely connected to missionary activity, and missions themselves were an integral part of the colonial enterprise" (p. 490), which underscores how museums were not only secular institutions of knowledge, but also moral and religious instruments embedded within the broader civilizing mission of empire.

While contemporary museums present themselves as inclusive, scientific, and culturally respectful, many of their practices often unconsciously continue to echo colonial frameworks. A recent example posted on the ROM's official website on April 24, 2025—*Why X-Ray a God? The search for hidden objects inside Taiwanese deity sculptures*—illustrates this tension. In an effort to research a 19th-century Chinese wooden sculpture of Avalokiteshvara (观音菩萨), museum staff subjected the artifact to X-ray analysis to uncover whether any sacred objects were hidden within its sealed body. Though framed as a conservation effort, this act reflects a lingering Western impulse to "know," "see," and ultimately possess the spiritual and cultural essence of the Other. As the description posted on the website

describes, “The deities’ combination of white, grey, and black shades...in the X-ray of Avalokiteshvara, Lipcsei identifies a bright white spot in the centre of the sculpture—two (likely hollow) round metal bells” (Why X-ray a God?, 2025). The X-ray enabled the ROM to reveal the sealed and secret objects directly to the public, trying to use a voyeuristic approach to lead the visitors into an unknown realm—examining every detail of the art(ifacts) through visual spectacle yet neglecting the spiritual connotations and the significance of faith embodied in the art(ifacts). As Prianti, and Suyadnya (2022) point out: “[Museums] visual orders construct and instil meaning by interaction that relies on gaze”(p.229), emphasizing the important role of visual effects within exhibition and meaning building. When visitors are surprised by those peculiar pictures, they always admire the advanced technology and mystery of art(ifacts), careless about whether it is an appropriate way to acquire knowledge from the perspective of its original culture.

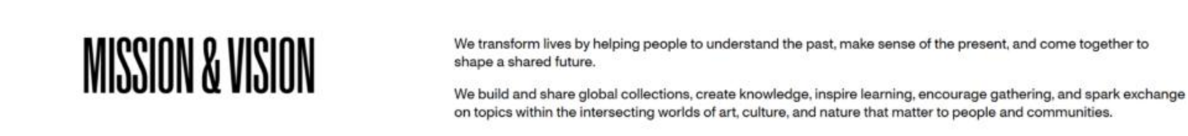
This epistemic framework justifies the museum’s desire to see through, analyse, and classify the sacred art(ifacts), thereby subordinating traditional and spiritual meanings to scientific knowledge. The continuation of such colonial power dynamics can be seen in the case of the Royal Ontario Museum’s X-ray examination of the Taiwanese Avalokiteshvara (观音菩萨) sculpture: the museum asserts its right to interpret and author cultural meanings, disregarding the paradigms and ways of knowing in which the sculpture was embedded when it was created. These practices demonstrate how museums do not merely preserve cultural heritage but actively reshape it according to modernist and colonial logics. When exhibitions came to make a spectacle of the world, especially of societies outside Europe, the triumph of imperialism for colonizer and colonized was the constant theme (Altick, 1978).

The Taiwanese Avalokiteshvara (观音菩萨) sculpture collected by Canadian missionary George Leslie Mackay during his efforts to convert Taiwanese people to Christianity, was originally created through a sacred ritual that involved placing symbolic items inside a "spirit entrance" to bring the statue to life. For the communities that made and worshiped those statues, what was sealed inside was not meant to be exposed or inspected, but to remain spiritually sealed. In the Chinese context, people always pay more attention to beliefs and artistic significance in the worship and appreciation of Buddha sculptures, highlighting cultural heritage and aesthetic value rather than colonial occupation and othering. In fact, scanning art(ifacts) by X-Ray only reveals physical structures; it cannot fundamentally dispel the spiritual significance they embody. The fundamental difference lies in the attitude toward culture, whether it is approached with reverence and respect, or with domination and control.

The use of modern imaging technology to peer into the statue—without the consent or involvement of the originating culture—becomes a metaphor for the museum's continuing authority over cultural meaning, even when dealing with profoundly spiritual materials. The X-ray examination, though materially non-invasive and perhaps well-intentioned, reinforces the museum's role as a site of epistemological dominance. It re-enacts the historical logic of colonial collecting: the transformation of sacred, living statues into data points, curiosities, and research samples. Despite modern museums' publicly declared commitments to reconciliation and respect, their methods can leave little room for Indigenous or non-Western epistemologies, especially those that prioritize relationship, spirituality, and embodied knowledge over visibility and disciplinary analysis.

The ROM's official mission and vision (Figure 7) avoids the term 'decolonization', instead focusing on a 'shared future', 'global connections', and the importance of issues that matter to people and communities. While this language promotes inclusiveness and dialogue, the more crucial work of structural change and concrete practice lies at the heart of museum decolonization. Thus, while the mission opens up possibilities for such efforts, real commitment must be demonstrated through policies, projects and actions. Otherwise, such efforts may risk becoming mere symbolic gestures rather than substantive transformations (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Figure 7: *ROM's mission & vision from their official website*



In our contemporary times, "political, military and economic performances use the slogans of freedom, democracy and sometimes multiculturalism in the West, and culture, god and identity in the third world—a rhetoric which often slides into a self-proclaimed anti-colonialism" (Bannerji, 2000, p. 4) which emphasizes the critical importance of distinguishing between authentic, structural decolonization and institutional displays of inclusivity that ultimately perpetuate existing hierarchies. In the area of museum studies, to decolonize means first to acknowledge what colonization meant for museums. As Lonetree (2012) mentioned, it is critical for museums to speak the hard truths of colonization and to honor Indigenous ways of understanding history. This involves centering Indigenous voices, challenging stereotypical representations, and functioning as sites of "knowledge making and remembering." However, these are only initial steps. A truly

decolonizing practice requires museums to courageously speak the hard truths of colonization and honor Indigenous historical perspectives. Avoiding this responsibility severely limits a museum's capacity to address the unresolved historical grief within Native communities, squandering the opportunity to contribute to healing, empowerment, and a more positive path forward. Thus, vision and a commitment to truth-telling are essential.

In the Canadian context, the media and some members of the Canadian intelligentsia speak in terms of the end of ‘Canadian culture’, displaying signs of feeling threatened by these ‘others’, who are portrayed as an invasive force (Bannerji, 2000, pp. 3-4). The “others” mentioned here are specifically non-Western people and cultures who have been alienated and devalued within the Western context, which is also defined as “Oriental” in Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*:

> For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”). This vision...express[es] the strength of the West and the Orient’s weakness—as seen by the West. (pp. 44-45)

Seeing non-Western people and cultures as a threatening and invasive force reflects the dominant position of Western culture in today’s society, as well as the Wests’ desire to maintain its dominance in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

Such notions and statements created a strong binary opposition, just like Said (1978) pointed out:

> when ones uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, and public policy, the result is usually to polarize the

> distinction—the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Westerner—and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. (p. 46)

This polarized framework seriously hinders people's understanding of non-Western knowledge; we need to realize, there is not only Oriental and Western that exists in this world, there are a lot of different cultures, communities, and people beyond or within these two categories that deserve to be noticed, appreciated, and understood. The care we give is the best bond for building mutual communication and connection, while gradually dissolving polarization into diversity.

While "Canadian official multiculturalism has developed through the1970s and 80s, and has become in the 90s a major part of Canadian political discourse and electoral organization" (Bannerji, 2000, p. 8), through the analysis of the above cases the contemporary manifestation of multiculturalism in Canada remains incomplete and fragmented (Henry, 2017). The exhibitions and curatorial strategies of Canadian museums are inevitably influenced by this broader context. As museums continue to address their legacies, the question is no longer simply whether they can change, but how deeply they are willing to reconsider their fundamental principles and operational ethics.

2.2 Interpretation, Narrative, and Meaning Building

While the relationship between museums and colonial history has been thoroughly documented, its long-lasting effects are perhaps most visible in how cultural meaning was constructed and communicated within exhibition spaces. As "a museum can also be critically seen as a space for the production of cultural discourse that narrates a particular ideology through exhibition strategies and display systems" (Nindyo et al., 2020), representational

strategies are then not simply curatorial decisions. They are meaning-making tools that shape how visitors understand the past, evaluate cultural value, and build emotional or intellectual connections. Therefore, this background raises crucial questions about how museums should approach interpretation and education moving forward.

Given the crucial role that museums play in shaping historical narratives, as well as their ongoing perpetuation of colonial epistemology, it is imperative that we critically reflect on their responsibilities in interpretation and meaning making. Traditional museum practices often reduce non-Western cultural objects to static “art(ifacts)” or “evidence”, stripping them of their living cultural contexts and spiritual significance. This escalates issues of cultural appropriation and unequal power dynamics. For these issues to be addressed, museum education and exhibition design must evolve from mere information delivery to become platforms for dialogue that respect and reinstate the knowledge systems and narrative authority of source communities. This is not merely a response to historical legacies but also a critical step towards repositioning museums as public educational institutions in contemporary society.

In museum spaces, interpretation is often assumed to be an educational bridge between art(ifacts) and visitors. However, curatorial interpretations of museum exhibitions reflect certain perspectives and classification schemes, historically specific and sometimes ideologically driven, and seek to encapsulate and convey certain ideologies through exhibition design and curatorial strategy. This includes their policies, missions, architectural styles, catalogues, exhibitions, wall texts, educational programs, and conservation (Lidchi, 2013; Prianti and Suyadnya, 2022). The ways in which museums deploy specific methods

and materials—such as labels, lighting, and wall texts—are all deeply implicated in systems of meaning making that determine what stories are told, how they are told, and who has the authority to tell them. As Bennett (2004) describes:

> Far from being let off the leash of the written word, the visitor was led into an environment in which the meaning of things—far from standing clearly before the eye–was constantly deferred in being referred to a dense and proliferating web of words. (p. 167)

What appears to be an explanatory act is, in fact, a form of narrative control, framing objects through the lens of scientific, colonial, or national ideologies, while often silencing alternative interpretations.

In the case of the ROM's Chinese collections, art(ifact) labels tend to offer sparse, decontextualized descriptions that emphasize material, date and dynasty over ritual function, cultural specificity and local epistemology. A porcelain vase, for instance, might simply be introduced as "Vase Jingdezhen, Qing dynasty, 17th century, Porcelain". While this is fairly accurate, it strips the object of its historical context, ignoring its role in the national system of rites and etiquette, its spiritual symbolism in Confucian domestic rituals, and its association with specific regional craftspeople and their techniques. These omissions flatten the cultural meanings embedded in the object and describe it instead as a mediocre handicraft—valuable not for what it represents, but for how it looks and when it was made.

Moreover, the spatial arrangement of objects within the gallery often contributes to unintended or misleading interpretations. Regarding this issue, I will illustrate with maps and images later in the Chapter 5. Ritual bronzes, domestic ceramics, and funerary sculptures

are frequently displayed in adjacent cabinets, grouped according to medium or dynasty rather than cultural logic or usage. As Reid (2018) illustrated in *The Secret Life of Objects*:

> The position of one object next to another can create new associations and ideas for that object... if a salt shaker is placed next to a pepper shaker, it suddenly becomes a reminder of the dinner table. If instead the salt shaker is placed next to a pair of maracas (an instrument), we might re-imagine it as a potential musical instrument. (p. 4)

Although the meanings and functions of art(ifacts) displayed in the museum already deviate from their origin, constructed and re-constructed by the curators, they can still affect each other by positioning relationship and visual order, creating a new layer of interpretation that may not align with the original cultural context.

Display strategies that ignore cultural, religious, or social contexts can silence the stories, practices, and worldviews that gave them meaning and replace them with a meticulously curated visual impression. Visitors are usually unable to access more in-depth information and are left with a superficial understanding entirely shaped by how the museum chose to display the objects. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000) has asserted: "The visual arrangements on the walls, and the objects grouped in glass cases ready for inspection, carr[y] the messages prepared in advance by the curatorial expert, sanctioned by his peers" (p. 131). Thus, while visitors are positioned as co-producers of meaning, they are recipients of curated truths as well. Labels, lighting, object sequencing, and interpretive texts work collectively to construct a seemingly self-evident narrative which privilege particular interpretive frameworks and render others invisible. Careful examination and critical attention are needed to uncover the embedded layers of meaning that are obscured by the exhibition.

Furthermore, interpretation is deeply tied to language, which is a dimension often overlooked in discussions of exhibition design. At the ROM, object labels are presented almost exclusively in English (and occasionally in French), regardless of the linguistic and cultural background of the art(ifacts) themselves. This creates a linguistic asymmetry that reinforces cultural hierarchies—subtly positioning English as the language of legitimate knowledge and institutional authority. For visitors from Chinese communities, such Anglocentrism can alienate them from collections and exclude the possibility of reading objects through culturally specific or vernacular terms.

By offering selectively sparse information to assert curatorial authority, but not to stimulate critical or cross-cultural reflection, such displays preserve institutional control over narratives of truth without fully opening a space for recognizing a diversity of voices that contribute to the formation of truth. The idea of interpretive pluralism—where multiple, potentially conflicting narratives can coexist—offers a productive alternative to the monologic tendencies of traditional exhibition practices (Macdonald, 2006). This approach does not seek to replace one authoritative voice with another, but rather to foreground interpretive multiplicity as a central curatorial strategy. In the context of non-Western collections, this shift would involve not only revising label content but restructuring the entire epistemological foundation of exhibition design to accommodate and reflect culturally diverse ways of knowing.

An examination of curatorial choices raises significant questions about the educational work that museums are actually doing. Interpretation is not a neutral transmission of knowledge and functions more as an ideological apparatus. The ways in which

museums interpret and display art(ifacts) keep shaping visitors' perceptions and understandings; when knowledge is transmitted through exhibitions, the educational outcomes are inherently shaped by curatorial decisions that may reflect specific institutional and cultural biases. Hence, we must ask what museums are teaching their visitors and whose knowledge they are teaching. In this context, the museum cannot be understood as a transparent educational space. Instead, it must be re-imagined as a contested terrain where meaning is negotiated, not given, and where learning is dialogic rather than didactic.

2.3 Curriculum and Educational Visions in Museums

With various art(ifacts) and cultural collections, "museums have long been considered sites of education and informal learning" (Wood, 2011, p. 51). Furthermore, Hein (1998) points out, "education as a crucial museum function has been recognized as long as there have been public museums" (p. 3). In the nineteenth century, education was not simply a goal but the defining mission of the museum, which was imagined as "the advanced school of self-instruction" (p. 5). In this context, learning in the museum is not merely a one-way transmission of knowledge but should emphasize the agency of visitors, and encourage them to reflect and question through interpretation of the art(ifacts).

Interpretation of museum education is not just about how information is displayed, it is deeply connected to how knowledge and values are taught, much like an educational curriculum. In other words, the ways in which museums interpret objects and stories resemble a system that organizes what visitors learn, how they learn it and which ideas are excluded: "This curriculum of the museum and art(ifacts), yields vast potential for meaning and interpretation that provide as much information about the visitor's conceptualization of

the life world as it does of the curators and others who collectively present the exhibits" (Wood, 2011, p. 52). Therefore, museums actively participate in our cultural learning through shaping our perception and understanding of the world.

2.4 Summary and Research Gap

According to Smith (2020), decolonization is raging in our public institutions, in our universities and art schools, and on the streets. Artists, designers, academics, critics, curators, educators, and activists internationally are demanding a decolonizing of the museum, a decolonizing of the curriculum, a decolonizing of knowledge, and a decolonizing of the mind. However, "as 'inventions' of the West's global blueprint, museums, institutions of higher education, and the worlds of art and design are always already aligned with the logic of coloniality" (Smith, 2020, p. 12). He further points out:

> Today 'decolonizing' has become a fashionable buzzword, and we must be wary of this...that 'decolonizing' itself doesn't become just another tick box exercise, a righteous but ultimately empty rhetorical rallying cry, a corporate strategy even, a difference that doesn't make a difference. (p. 40)

In the current context of intense debate about decolonization, as institutions of cultural education, museums should shift their focus away from vague or unfocused discussions about the broad concept of decolonization. Instead, we should concentrate more on the educational mission and curricular structure of museums. By identifying and improving the educational aspects of museum practice, we can address and avoid structural biases more effectively. This is why my research will adopt Eisner's (1979) concept of the "three curricula" to comparatively analyze the differences in the display strategies of Chinese and European

art(ifacts) in the ROM—revealing how these distinctions reflect differentiated curricular structures.

My analysis aims to expose the educational shortcomings within the ROM and raise public awareness, thereby contributing to the broader goal of decolonization, because:

> decolonization of the curriculum will offer students a wider range of types of art and design and fashion and architecture (and ways of thinking about and discoursing on them) that will create an expanded field which will feed into, enrich, and transform their practice, and thus the industries in which they will go on to ply their trade. (Smith, 2020, p. 23)

Most existing museum education studies in the West that engage with postcolonial and decolonial frameworks tend to focus on the intense tensions between Indigenous cultures and Western dominant power structures. However, as an immigrant country, Canada presents a much more diverse demographic and cultural composition.

According to Statistics Canada (2021), the Chinese population in Canada was approximately 1.7 million, accounting for about 4.7% of the total population, the second largest minority in Canada. This figure includes immigrants and their descendants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Chinese-speaking regions. As a Chinese international student, I am trying to emphasize and evoke thinking regarding an authentic, open, and sustainable environment that fosters a diversity of cultures, histories and knowledges.

This concern about creating an environment where people of difference can thrive becomes particularly urgent when considered in the context of public institutions like

museums, which play a critical role in shaping how cultural knowledge is disseminated and whose narratives are legitimized. If we are to build an equitable and inclusive cultural environment, we must critically examine not only what museums choose to teach, but also how they teach it—and, equally important, what they omit. This brings us to the need for a more nuanced understanding of museum education that goes beyond the surface of explicit messaging.

Although museums are widely recognized as important educational institutions that convey knowledge and cultural values, much of the existing research and practice focuses primarily on the explicit curriculum—the formal, clearly articulated information presented through exhibition labels, guided tours, and educational programs. Though systematic and intentional, this traditional descriptive and explanatory mode overlooks the powerful influences of the implicit and null curricula in shaping visitors' understanding.

The implicit curriculum, which includes exhibition design, spatial arrangements, language choices, and curatorial decisions regarding what is emphasized or excluded, silently convey underlying values concerning culture, authority, and identity. Despite the significance of what is implicit/hidden or absent, there is a lack of in-depth investigation into how these subtle non-verbal clues impact visitor cognition, emotions, and behaviour within museum settings. Besides, the "null curriculum" of museum education—the knowledge, histories and perspectives that are deliberately or unconsciously excluded from museum narratives—has not received sufficient attention in scholarly research. While scholars have noted that these absences reinforce existing power structures and cultural exclusions, there is limited research on effective strategies to identify, confront, and counteract these silences through curatorial

practice and educational programming.

Therefore, a comprehensive exploration of the three curricula—explicit, implicit, and null—within museum education is essential for understanding the full spectrum of learning experiences and cultural transmission that takes place in museum spaces. This framework explicitly confronts and challenges the entrenched legacies of Western colonial epistemology embedded in museum practices. Only then can museums move beyond reproducing colonial narratives and instead foster more inclusive, decolonised modes of knowledge production and cultural representation that validate diverse ways of knowing and being.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Museum curriculum is a comprehensive educational concept, it refers to a structured learning experience and meaning making framework actively constructed by museums through all their resources and practice—including exhibition narratives, art(ifacts) collection and display, and public programs. It is rooted in the understanding that museums are not neutral repositories of objects and knowledge, but rather vital cultural institutions that shape knowledge. It is, rather, an interdisciplinary field associated with curation, educational design, and community participation (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 1995; Macdonald, 2006). Hence, the execution of museum curricula are not only "explicit", but also "implicit" and "null" (Eisner, 1979). Today, the most cutting-edge discussions in this field focus on decolonizing museum curricula, which involves critically examining the underlying power structures, knowledge systems, and narrative logics, while striving to incorporate marginalized voices and modes of cognition (Smith, 2020).

3.1 Three Curricula

To better understand museum curriculum, we can adopt Elliot Eisner's (1979) concept of the "three curricula"—explicit, implicit, and null curriculum, which helps us to consider what museums teach in different ways. This concept also provides a systematic framework to help with the observed data analysis. In this chapter, I will elaborate on how the concept of "three curricula" is associated with specific aspects of museum exhibitions and explain the rationale for organizing this theoretical framework.

Explicit Curriculum

The "explicit curriculum" typically refers to traditional teaching methods that are based

on publicly stated goals and expectations, which can also be referred to as direct instruction. As defined by Elliot Eisner (1979), this includes certain publicly explicit goals regarding skills training and different subjects:

> [Which means] not only do these goals appear in school district curriculum guides and the course-planning materials that teachers are asked to prepare, the public also knows that these courses are offered and that students in the district will have opportunity to achieve these aims, at least to some degree, should they want to do so. (Eisner, 1979, p. 74)

When this concept is transferred into a museum context, it can be associated with the content and knowledge that the museum offers to visitors directly. This includes exhibition labels, guided tours, digital interfaces, and educational programs, all of which are designed to convey specific knowledge. These visible pedagogical strategies reflect the institution's educational aims and cultural narratives. Through explicit curriculum, we can clearly see what information the museum hopes to convey through the exhibition and how visitors follow the exhibition's guidance.

Yet, as Hooper-Greenhill (2000) critically observes and argues, "much of the work of museums in the past has involved the establishment of a canon. Canons create order by giving authority to certain texts, figures, ideas, problems, discursive strategies and historical narratives" (p. 21). This means that what is included in a museum's interpretive material is not simply factual information, but the product of selective institutional judgments about what constitutes valid knowledge. For example, when a museum foregrounds the chronological development of artistic style, ceramic techniques, or dynastic timelines,

this represents not only historical data but a pedagogical decision to present culture through a linear, progress-oriented framework. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) notes that the technique of seriating—arranging a sequence of similar objects in a logical order—can be used to develop an argument about change and development. This method reinforces a particular historical logic, privileging Eurocentric or modernist frameworks of progress and evolution, while marginalizing cyclical, symbolic, or Indigenous epistemology (pp.131-132).

An illustrative example of how the explicit curriculum functions within the museum context can be found in the study conducted by Letourneau et al. (2021), titled *Effects of Facilitation vs. Exhibit Labels on Caregiver-Child Interactions*. In this research, the authors examined how different modes of museum interpretation, such as prompts offered through staff facilitation versus printed labels, shaped caregiver-child interactions in a children's museum setting. In the label directed condition, the explicit curriculum was clearly visible: carefully crafted text panels conveyed structured information intended to educate visitors about scientific phenomena and historical facts. These standardised labels exemplified what Eisner (1979) would describe as a system of publicly stated learning objectives designed to provide clear, accessible, and repeatable content.

The Letourneau et al. (2021) study revealed that while the exhibit labels—aligned closely with the goals of an explicit curriculum, providing formal, institutionally endorsed knowledge—"had an impact only on caregivers' actions, and not on the frequency of directive interaction styles... choosing facilitation over exhibit labels may support children's performance in such problem-solving tasks" (p. 10). This means labels typically led to less collaborative engagement, and fewer elaborative utterances by caregivers, and they often led

to shallow or perfunctory engagement. This reflects a core limitation of the explicit curriculum: although the communicated knowledge is clear and straightforward, it may not always evoke deeper conceptual or emotional engagement if not supported by more interactive or participatory modalities.

Nevertheless, as one of the most basic educational tools in museum education, exhibition labels are still of great importance. They function as visible symbols of what the institution prioritizes for public learning—what content is legitimate, what narratives are sanctioned, and which bodies of knowledge deserve to be displayed. In this way, exhibit labels function exactly as Eisner (1979) describes the explicit curriculum in schools: they are publicly visible, intentionally designed, and widely understood by audiences as formal educational tools.

While the explicit curriculum in museums is crucial for communicating structured knowledge and institutional narratives, it does not encompass the full range of learning that takes place within these spaces. Visitors are not passive recipients of information but active interpreters whose understanding is influenced by more than just what is written on labels or spoken during tours. Beyond the intentional and visible educational messages lies a more subtle layer of communication—the implicit curriculum.

Implicit Curriculum

Implicit Curriculum is less obvious but equally powerful. This can include elements such as how objects are arranged, which art(ifacts) are highlighted or neglected, and how material, lighting, and colors are used in the museum space. These elements silently communicate ideas about culture, authority, and identity, shaping visitors' understanding,

sometimes without their conscious realization. It corresponds to the subtle messages embedded in the museum's explanations and displays that influence how visitors think about what they see.

Compared to the explicit curriculum, which disseminates knowledge through clear and direct modes of communication, the implicit curriculum refers to the unspoken norms, values, and believes embedded in exhibition design, spatial arrangement, and curatorial voice, which collectively shape values, attitudes, and perceptions indirectly. They are less obvious but equally powerful. As Eisner (1979) notes, what students learn is often shaped not only by formal instruction but by the context in which that instruction occurs. Similarly, in museums, what visitors come to understand about culture, identity, and authority is shaped as much by how knowledge is presented as by what is presented. Recognizing this dimension allows us to explore how museums convey meaning through formality, tone, and institutional culture, often without making these messages explicit.

The implicit curriculum, or hidden curriculum, unlike the explicit, does not announce itself in the form of educational programs or didactic panels. Rather, it resides in the silent display of the institution—the visual priorities of exhibition layout, and the emotional atmospheres cultivated by lighting, color schemes, display materials, sound, and object arrangement. These spatial and symbolic features subtly inform visitors about what is culturally significant, what is marginal, and what roles they are expected to adopt as viewers. As Bennett (1995) has argued, the museum functions as a "disciplinary institution" that subtly shapes public behavior, perception, and cognition through its exhibitionary order. This "disciplinary gaze" does not require enforcement—it is internalized through spatial and

affective design (pp. 6-7, 21-24). Hence, the implicit curriculum silently communicates ideas about culture, authority, and identity, shaping visitors' understanding, sometimes without their conscious realization. It corresponds to the subtle messages embedded in the museum's explanations and displays that influence how visitors think about what they see.

Moreover, sensory interaction should not be overlooked within the museum exhibition; it offers an implicit curriculum because it is felt and not explicitly said. It could become directly perceptible when considering the role of physical interaction in museum learning. Because "the context of the museum provides visitors with sensory interactions as well as those that intersect body-mind perceptions" (Wood, 2011, p. 51), Wood calls for museums to pay closer attention to the sensory, particularly tactile, dimensions of visitor experience. He argues that museum education "requires access to the meaning of the object that is best gained through touch, and more specifically through the sense receptors and accompanying affective effects from the skin and hands" (p. 54). However, this position reflects visitors' implicit desire for embodied learning, ignoring the attributes and characteristics of the art(ifacts), which raises another question: while tactile interaction can enhance visitor engagement, it can conflict with the traditional museological notion of the artifact as untouchable—an object of preservation, reverence, or sacredness.

Indeed, whether a museum object should be touched depends not only on educational goals but also on the object's ontological and cultural status. For instance, at the ROM, visitors are invited to wear replicas of medieval gauntlets to experience the weight and form of historical armor. Such practices recognize the educational potential of sensory engagement while preserving the integrity of original art(ifacts). In contrast, institutions such as the

Museum of Vancouver choose not to display certain Indigenous ritual belongings—not due to political controversy, but to respect cultural protocols and protect both the artifact and the viewer. If museums fail to reflect on these choices, they may risk reinforcing colonial epistemology and hierarchies of knowledge. Uncritical encouragement of touch, for example, might seem progressive but can inadvertently revive exploitative relationships with cultural materials—especially those tied to colonized or sacred traditions. In such cases, what appears to be inclusive practice may in fact wake up deeper forms of epistemic violence.

Understanding the implicit curriculum requires more than observing what is presented. It demands close attention to how meaning is conveyed through institutional habits, spatial logics, and curatorial values. As with schools, the lessons museums teach most powerfully are often those they never articulate. By identifying these hidden curriculum, museum educators and curators can become more critically aware of the assumptions they reproduce—and more intentional about challenging them.

While the implicit curriculum reveals how meaning is shaped through institutional choices and spatial cues, it is equally important to consider what is absent—what is not taught, not shown, and not acknowledged. These omissions form what Eisner (1979) describes as the null curriculum: the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences that are intentionally or unintentionally excluded from educational spaces. In the museum context, this includes the stories that are silenced, the communities not represented, and the interpretive frames that are never made available to the public. Just as silence can be a form of speech, absence in museums often communicates powerful cultural messages about legitimacy, authority, and belonging.

Null Curriculum

The null curriculum refers to the content, intellectual processes, or perspectives that are systematically excluded from formal educational environments. Eisner (1979) observes, "what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach" (p. 83). These absences "will have important consequences on the kind of life that students can choose to lead" (p. 92). In other words, what is left out—intentionally or by tradition—shapes not only what learners know, but also what they come to value, question, or ignore.

This insight is particularly relevant in the museum context, where exhibitions are often perceived as comprehensive representations of history and culture. The absence of Indigenous cosmologies in natural history displays, the omission of colonial violence in empire-themed galleries, or the failure to address labour issues in craft and design exhibits all exemplify how museums participate in a form of null curriculum. These curatorial silences silently shape visitors' perceptions of what counts as knowledge, whose stories matter, and which voices remain unheard.

Identifying the null curriculum in museums requires asking difficult questions: Whose histories are excluded from the display? What political, religious, or emotional discomforts are engaged or avoided? Which ways of knowing are overlooked because they do not conform to institutional logic? By applying Eisner's (1979) model to museum interpretation, we recognize that meaning is structured not only by presence but by strategic absence—and these absences are often where the most significant ideological work takes place.

The null curriculum, in this sense, operates as a quiet but powerful mechanism of cultural exclusion—one that defines the boundaries of what can be known, seen, or debated

within the museum space. For instance, Bennett (1995) reminds us that museums are not neutral venues of cultural preservation but are deeply implicated in the governance of knowledge and affect. When particular histories—such as colonial resistance, queer heritage, or Indigenous cosmologies—are left unacknowledged, the institution silently teaches that these narratives are peripheral or illegible within official frameworks of memory (pp. 115-120).

Museums, as an informal classroom, teach the history and cultures of the world. Visitors "therefore generally take for granted that what is presented in a museum is as 'truthful' and 'objective' as possible" (Reid, 2018, p. 3), as well as what is not shown is simply unavailable, not selected, or not relevant—rather than politically or culturally suppressed. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) notes, "cultural politics concerns itself with... sociological questions of exclusion and inclusion, advantage and disadvantage, and these concerns are of extreme relevance within the museum" (p. 19). This observation resonates with Eisner's (1979) idea: "In fact, to take no position regarding ends is to take a value position, but it is one of absence rather than of presence, as far as educational goals are concerned" (p. 68).

In this regard, addressing the null curriculum in museum education requires a conscious act of counter-curation—of actively seeking out those voices, themes, and histories that have been neglected or erased. Projects such as the *Uncomfortable Truths* series at the Victoria and Albert Museum (White, 2007), which invited contemporary artists to intervene in permanent collections through artistic expression to address Britain's role in the slave trade, provide examples of institutional attempts to reckon with their own null curricula—the absent

historical stories and sealed memories. Ultimately, the null curriculum reveals that the most powerful educational messages in museums are often those that remain unspoken.

By connecting museum interpretation to Eisner's three curricula, we can see museums more clearly as complex educational spaces. They do not simply provide explicit instruction but also convey hidden messages and omit certain knowledges. This framework helps us to ask important questions: In the ROM, whose stories are being told? Whose are left out? And how do these inclusions, subtleties, and omissions affect what visitors learn and how they think about culture and history?

3.2 Critical Museology

Critical museology is an approach within museum studies that challenges traditional assumptions about what museums are, and questions the traditional role, power structures, and ideologies of museums, such as how museums have historically represented different cultures—especially Indigenous, colonized, or marginalized groups—and seeks more equitable and inclusive practices. It also suggests that we begin a process of "rethinking cultural property classification and redefining museum roles in knowledge management and research" (Magnolo & Galán-Pérez, 2025, p. 59). As Shelton (2013) pointed out, the field of cultural and artistic production, which is constituted by multicultural institutions such as museums, heritage sites, and art galleries, are clearly related to competing subfields of power relations and economic regimes that are made partially visible through ideas and counter ideas of patrimony and social identity. Hence, we can easily see that decolonization is particularly the core concern of critical museology. On this premise, Magnolo and Galán-Pérez (2025) write, "examining the mission and vision of museums and heritage institutions

in terms of their roles in knowledge management and research is crucial" (p. 68). They continue to say that "museum environments provide a theoretical and practical basis for using artistic and visual languages in the context of intangible cultural heritage valorization and knowledge exchange" (p. 68). Such ideas enable us to carefully examine how the curation, layout, and interpretation of museums and exhibitions reflect particular worldviews, histories, or biases.

Inspired by Shelton (2013), this research considers critical museology as an essential intellectual foundation for better understanding the ROM and is particularly crucial for developing new exhibition genres, telling untold stories, and repurposing the ROM, aligned with multicultural and intercultural states and communities. Compared to the traditional didactic presentation, critical museology provides a new perspective to re-examine the narrative structure within museums. It moves away from the idea that museums are neutral spaces and acknowledges that curatorial choices can inevitability reflect values, ideologies, and politics. In this case, the curatorial strategies and specific findings in my research within Chinese and European galleries serve as strong evidence to understand how the ROM disseminates constructed and re-constructed Chinese culture and historical knowledge through their exhibitions.

3.3 Material Culture Studies

Material Culture Studies examines the relationship between people and physical objects; it mainly concerns how things—like art(ifacts)—are made, used, valued, and given meaning in different cultural and historical contexts. In the museum context, art(ifacts) can be seen as "specimens of material culture, as register and archive of human activity" (Gessner, Nandi,

& Schwarz-Bierschenk, 2019, p. 308). As cultural material, art(ifacts) have their uniqueness; just like Gaskell & Carter (2020) pointed out, art(ifacts) are mute and cannot tell; the stubborn silence is an obstacle if we want to learn more about an art(ifact)'s past. For this reason, museums and curators become the agent or spokesperson for art(ifacts), museums and curators value systems directly merged into and reflected by the exhibition. To facilitate cultural understanding and knowledge learning, we must actively integrate local cultural systems of art(ifacts) into exhibition narrative structure.

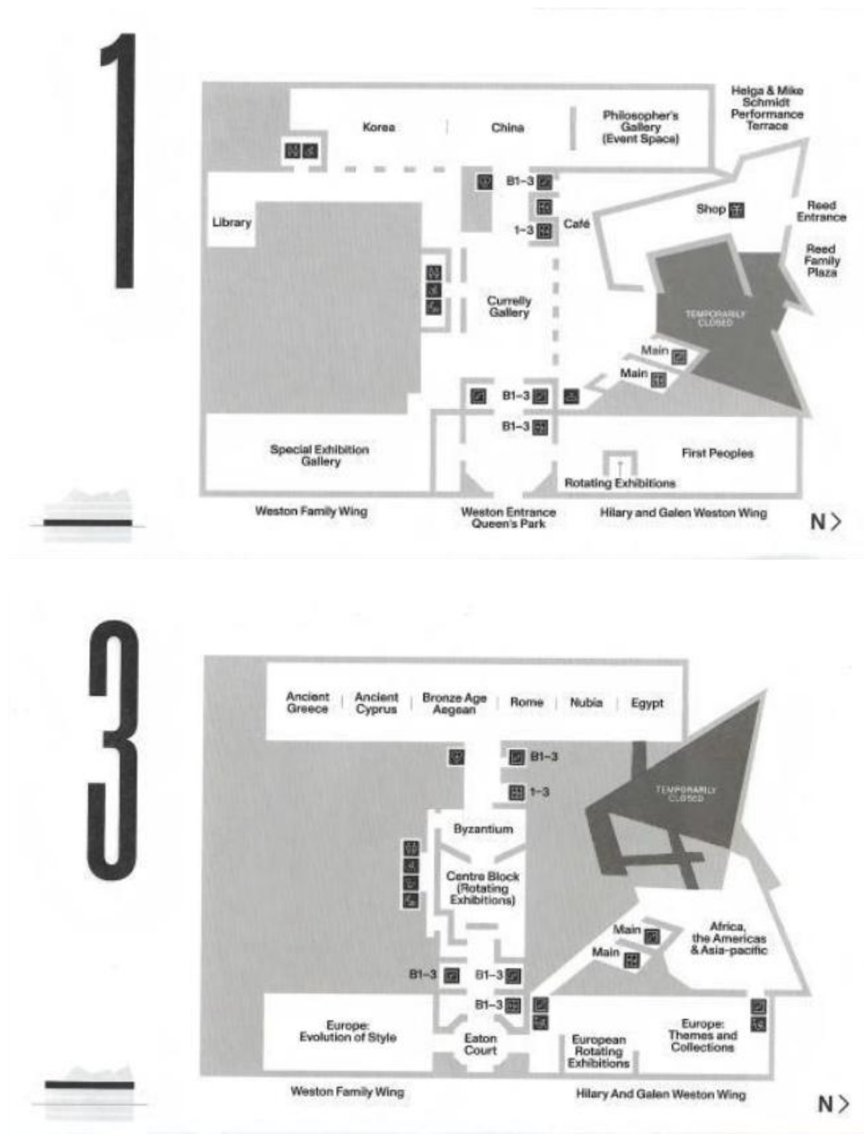
From Chinese Galleries in the ROM, we can always see different types of Chinese art(ifacts) such as weapons and instruments, ceremonial items and daily necessities displayed within one big glass cabinet, regardless of their functions and cultural context, which "could seem to flagrantly disregard these art(ifacts)' uniqueness and originality" (Gaskell & Carter, 2020, p. 50). Hence, material culture studies enabled us to question the original and reconstructed meanings of art(ifacts), as well as how they disseminate specific knowledge and affect visitors' understanding. Art(ifacts) in museums play a vital role in the circulation of cognition and mediation; they can transcend the barriers of time and space, build knowledge of ourselves and others, and affect the ways we engage with each other.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

To explore the different curatorial strategies between Chinese and European galleries at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), this research adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to understand how these curatorial differences shape and influence museum education. The entire data collection process was primarily aligned with my walking and visiting experiences at the ROM on March 23rd and 24th, 2025. As shown in the Map Guide (Figure 8), the word China in the guide map refers to the whole Chinese exhibition area. In fact, according to my visit experience, I found that there are three sub-galleries: Chinese Sculpture, China, and Chinese Architecture, which jointly constitute the entire Chinese exhibition area. To avoid confusion and misunderstanding, in this research, I will use Chinese Galleries to refer to the whole Chinese exhibition area, and Gallery of China only to refer to the sub-gallery in this area. The Chinese Galleries are located on the first floor, facing directly toward the Weston Entrance, which is the most eye-catching and easily accessed gallery. In contrast, Europe: Evolution of Style is located on the third floor, next to the stairs and elevator, and has great accessibility as well, but comes at the very end of the tour of all galleries in the ROM (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Map Guides of ROM



As Berard (2018) suggests, although museums have been a site of political, historical, socio-economic contestations, we can also consider them as a space of potentialities, allowing other modes of being and knowing. The walking and visiting experiences offer us "corporeal ways of knowing" (p. 106). This idea recognizes the important effect on visitors' intellectual and emotional processes informed by the overall environment of an exhibition. Edensor (2010) argues that walking "generates a range of possibilities for putting oneself in an experiential flow while simultaneously maintaining a flow of thoughts" (p. 72). I will consider my personal visiting and walking experience, as well as encounters with art(ifacts)

as important parameters and variations within the museum space. This perspective enables me to explore the museum's educational function beyond traditional schooling and to position it as a culturally embedded space of informal learning. Importantly, this analysis draws on my own observation logs, recorded during multiple site visits. These reflections provide a first-hand, ethnographically informed lens to examine how such environmental and sensory elements operate pedagogically.

4.1 The Intersection of Ethnography and Autoethnography: (Auto)ethnography

Ethnography provides a rich account of "people and the social processes they are embedded in" (Drake et al., 2015, p. 1). In my research, I will consider the museum as an informal yet influential social and cultural learning space. I see the museum as an educational site where learning occurs through visual storytelling, spatial configuration, material objects, and the visitor experience, and actively examine the relationship between myself—as both the researcher and visitor—and the exhibition. Traditional ethnography integrates field observation, interviews, and oral histories, and interaction with people is an indispensable component of the research methodology. This research deliberately avoids direct interaction with people and instead explores how the museum environment fosters personal reflection and emotional engagement to consider its educational impact beyond mere information transmission.

The interplay between art(ifacts), narratives, and visitor interpretation allows for a dynamic learning process shaped by individual backgrounds and perspectives. I, as the researcher, become a crucial analytical lens. My identity as a Chinese visitor, cultural interpreter, and international student intersects with the museum's spatial narratives and

visitor participation. I recognize that I am embedded within the learning space as both an observer and a participant and that I am not standing objectively outside the data. This ethnographic stance acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation, enriching the analytical depth of cultural analysis. Ethnography provides a lens and scope, a means for observation, analysis, and recording how art(ifacts) are displayed. Art(ifacts) are not lifeless objects; I see them as intermediaries that preserve humanity's intellectual legacy, and they carry history, knowledge, and stories. They are alive, not dead.

However, looking back to ethnography's history, as a research method, it was always entangled with the Western colonial tradition. According to Leigh (2023):

> European writers in the eighteenth century participated in a particular ethnographic tradition when they produced knowledge about non-European peoples, [which] reminds us that ethnographic texts were tools of empire... [and] limit the potential for ethnographic texts to operate as primary sources on the groups whom their writers purported to describe. (p. 551)

This entanglement between colonialism and ethnography renders a sense of irony in this research: as a Chinese international student, it would seems I have fallen into a trap set up by a Western paradigm in that I am adopting an approach inherently rooted in colonialism and imperialism to facilitate museum decolonization. The academic discussion remains grounded in a Western paradigm, which means I am essentially using a system constructed by the West to critique itself. This excludes other knowledge paradigms and voices, including my own. Even the right to question and criticize is reserved solely for the West, and only the West is qualified to critique itself.

Yet the autoethnographic turn provides a new possibility for my research. Autoethnography is “an intriguing method that is increasingly utilized to study social phenomena through the lens of the author/researcher’s personal experience” (Wall, 2016, p. 1). It also offers an “analysis of the description of the experience to link the personal with the social, which would prevent the paper from appearing self-indulgent, therapeutic, and egocentric” (p. 4). Inspired by Adams (2005) and Wood (2009), Ellis et al. (2011) pointed out:

> Autoethnography expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic. (p.3)

Autoethnography is not something researchers “do” that is separate from who we are, how we engage with the world, and the ways we reflect upon our lives (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 206). My experience at the ROM relied to a great extent on my personal background and understanding. For example, it was precisely because of my working experience at the NMC that I developed a strong sense of emerging cross-cultural awareness during my visit to the ROM. Based on this, the research process I implemented inevitably became, to some extent, a form of self-reflection and self-inquiry. This is exactly what constitutes autoethnography.

My research is not positioned precisely as either ethnography or autoethnography because it occupies a large overlapping area between the two realms. Autoethnography takes up one’s own life as the primary source of data (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 199)—my research data consists of the art(ifacts) displayed in the ROM, but these curatorial strategies

are understood through my own visiting experience.

Autoethnography effectively addresses the ironic relationship I have with ethnography, as the methodology highlights my personal experience and reflection. In reverse, ethnography to a certain extent compensates for the issue of excessive subjectivity in autoethnographic research (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 199). The relationship between ethnography and autoethnography in my research presents intersecting and supplementary lenses for interpretation and understanding. Moving forward, I will be using brackets to signify research in the gray area, through my lens, as (auto)ethnography, as the boundaries between the two are fluid and dynamic. This hybrid approach allows me to leverage the strengths of both methods while mitigating their respective limitations.

4.2 Data collection

Although some scholars, such as Thurston (2017), prefer an unstructured data collection process—arguing that all aspects of the museum are potentially significant (p. 2)—for (auto)ethnography purposes and data analysis, I chose to structure the observation in advance. By organizing the data collection into predefined categories, I was able to systematically capture spatial arrangements, exhibition content, and visual components, ensuring that both explicit and implicit elements of the museum’s narratives were documented. This structured approach facilitates more consistent comparisons across Chinese and European galleries while still allowing for reflexive insights that emerge from personal engagement with the exhibitions and art(ifacts). This research adopts a qualitative observation method to collect the data from each of the exhibitions within the public spaces of the ROM: Chinese Galleries and European Gallery: Evolution of Style.

The first part of my data collection focuses on the general information of the ROM. I gather reading material and online information, including the museum's official website, brochures, information in the space, coverage and commentary written by social media or newspapers, and articles written by other scholars. In this first part, a general overview of the ROM was established (Table 1), including its year of establishment, physical footprint, the quantity and categories of its collections, the number of exhibition galleries, and annual visitor flow. The museum's official description was also reviewed to understand its overall mission and exhibition objectives. This background information provides a foundation for subsequent observational research and analysis, ensuring that ethnographic observations and exhibition analyses are conducted with a clear understanding of the museum's basic structure and context.

By reviewing general information about the ROM, a multidimensional understanding of its distinctive features, strengths, and influence as a cultural institution is developed. This information collectively sketches an image of the ROM as a comprehensive and well-established museum, integrating functions such as collection, exhibition, research, and education. It also reveals how the museum actively constructs and communicates its image to the public. Furthermore, the image of the museum also reflects the significant role the ROM plays in international cultural exchange. The way the ROM presents non-Western art(ifacts)—especially Chinese ones—is not only central to my research but also deeply connected to how Chinese culture is perceived around the world.

Table 1

General Information About the ROM

General Information About the ROM	
Established Year	
Footprint	
Collection Size (overall)	
Collection Size (Chinese art(ifacts))	
Exhibition Galleries	
Official Introduction (from official website)	
Core Values/Mandate (from official website)	
Visitor Flow per year	

Next, I collected more specific data regarding exhibitions inside the ROM. This data includes space utilization, the display of art(ifacts), lighting, and textual information on the exhibit. The following details the specificities of observation.

Space Utilization: The examination of how the exhibition space is designed and utilized involves an evaluation of the decorative elements employed, such as colors and materials, and their connection to the content and narrative of the exhibition. The design of the visiting route was considered, including whether it followed an open plan or a single, guided path. Additionally, the spatial organization and division of the exhibition was analyzed, including the criteria used to separate different sections or themes. Finally, the presence of interactive projects within the exhibition was assessed, along with how audiences engage with them and participate in the activities. This focus on space utilization provides insight into how curatorial and design decisions shape visitor experience, learning, and interpretation.

Display of art(ifacts): The study examined how art(ifacts) are presented within exhibition galleries. This includes the measures used to protect the art(ifacts), as well as the design, shape, and material of the display cabinets. The criteria for dividing different sections of the exhibition was considered, along with the spatial relationships between art(ifacts) and visitors, such as distance and positioning. Special attention was paid to key art(ifacts), including how they were highlighted in displays, the basis for classifying them as key art(ifacts), and the proportion of exhibition space dedicated to them. Analyzing these aspects provides insight into how curatorial decisions influence both the preservation of art(ifacts) and the ways in which visitors engage with and interpret them.

Lighting: The study examined lighting in the exhibition galleries, including direction, type, intensity, and the use of decorative sources. It focused on how lighting affects artifact visibility, enhances the exhibition narrative, and shapes the overall visitor experience.

Textual Information of the Exhibition: The study examined textual information presented to visitors through labels and display boards. This includes the basis and rationale for the exhibition's narrative structure, whether organized by time, artifact type, or geographic region. Attention was paid to the adjectives and language used to describe art(ifacts) and their historical background or context, as well as the presence and placement of any visitor warning signs. Analyzing such textual information can illuminate how exhibitions convey meaning and guide visitor interpretation.

4.3 Curriculum Based Formal Analysis and Thinking

During my field trip at the ROM, I observed the art(ifacts) with their accompanying texts and environment, seeing the exhibition representation as a contest of rival ideologies,

because “the relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings” (Mitchell, 1986, p.43). Driven by this notion, I employed formal analysis, which is “an analysis of the form the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color texture, mass, composition” (Barnet, 2011, p. 46)—trying to reveal how meanings and education envision not only what is contained within the art(ifact) itself, but also its context, as well as the person who perceives it. The form, such as size, texture, and style contributes meaning to the art(ifacts) (Barnet, 2011).

In museum exhibition, the “three curricula”, which refers to tangible and intangible, as well as highlighted and omitted elements, constitute the form of exhibition. More importantly, formal analysis views the art(ifact) as an object that reveals the power structure of a society, which can also help to reveal the underlying political and social realities that the curators sought to cover up (Barnet, 2011).

To record perceptions and to reflect on the whole exhibition system and curatorial practice in the ROM, I separated the exhibition into parts, that is, explicit, implicit and null. On the one hand, “three curricula” as a strong framework could enable me to extract data from an educational perspective as well as examine the educational outcomes of a museum exhibition. On the other hand, “every part of [art(ifacts) and exhibitions] communicate something to the viewer, and the viewer does not merely see the pattern but also experiences it, participates in it” (Barnet, 2011, p.71). That is how museum educational process actively engages with visitors’ intellectual process, as a mutual interaction rather than one-way

transmission, which provides a significant direction for analytical thinking of how the ROM constructs meaning and ideology through different curricula.

To analyze a set of comprehensive data from the ROM, I engage Eisner's (1979) "three curricula" as introduced above as a conceptual framework. Sitzia (2023) advises to:

> move beyond the dependence on the visitor surveys and instead adopt an interdisciplinary approach using mixed methods. By doing so, we can not only acquire the tools to study how much exhibition narratives are received, but also how they are created and mediated. (p. 155)

Eisner's (1979) framework supports an analysis that goes beyond surface-level content. The explicit, implicit, and null curricula help identify not only what is presented to visitors, but also what is communicated subtly through spatial design, material hierarchy, and the absence of information.

Additionally, the researcher's, in this case my own, personal background and prior experiences serve as a critical lens for analysis, consistent with an autoethnographic methodology. By incorporating these reflexive insights, as well as specific analysis of some highlighted art(ifacts) within the Chinese and European galleries, the study can examine how exhibition narratives are both constructed and experienced. While affirming the role of museum education, I will attempt to explore the social values and power dynamics that exist and are promoted behind museum exhibitions, connecting visitor perception with the broader sociocultural and institutional context.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Data was collected through my field observation in public spaces of the ROM, including

field notes and photography. It is important to clarify that photographs are taken only of scenes and art(ifacts) displayed in museum's public spaces; any data that reflected private information about other visitors was avoided. To ensure ethical integrity, this study prioritized both visitor privacy and cultural sensitivity throughout the data collection and analysis process. No identifiable personal information was gathered; all photographs and field notes focused solely on publicly accessible exhibits. Particular care was taken to avoid reductive language when describing non-Western art(ifacts), with the researcher maintaining a reflective journal to track and minimize potential cultural bias.

This study deliberately avoids dwelling on local colonial history or such issues of provenance and ownership. Because we cannot alter the fact that the Chinese art(ifacts) are already collected and conserved by the ROM, instead of expending efforts on demanding the repatriation or debating the legitimacy of their provenance, it is more constructive to explore how Chinese art(ifacts) in the ROM can be utilized to promote cultural exchange and education, transforming this established fact into an advantage that fosters broader understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

In this research, I am trying to avoid framing China solely as a victim of invasion and plunder. While my focus is on Chinese and European art(ifacts) at the ROM, the museum is a global institutional construct with collections ranging from world cultures to fossils and animal specimens. Thus, its exhibition strategies are better understood through a global lens rather than regional cultural or historical conflicts. The study considers the ethical complexities of displaying spiritually or ritually significant art(ifacts) and avoids making assumptions not clearly expressed by the museum or its partner communities. To ensure my

analysis is empirically grounded, field observations are cross-referenced with official ROM publications and exhibition guides to reinforce a balanced interpretation.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis

In this chapter, I examine how Eisner's (1979) three curricula—explicit, implicit and null—manifest themselves in the Chinese and European galleries. However, within the museum exhibition and curatorial practice, the notion of curriculum is not always presented as straightforwardly as in a school setting. These curricula may overlap, blur, and integrate with one another, forming hybrid pedagogical landscapes that carry implicit values and cultural ideologies. When analyzing this data, I pay particular attention to how narrative content and meaning-making are co-constructed through exhibition design and how the spatial layout intersects with storytelling to shape visitor learning. Therefore, my observational data collection within the ROM, including field notes, photography, and any relevant records, are not merely data records, but integral tools of cultural interpretation within this ethnographic process.

5.1 Explicit Curriculum

In the museum context, explicit curriculum refers to goals and objectives for the museum exhibition and narrative, which is deeply entangled with how the museum interprets, displays, and classifies different aspects of cultural heritage. It can be found in museum curatorial programming and is associated with the core values of the institution as shown in the official website: "Creativity in our approach to challenges; Adaptability in changing contexts; Respect for our differences; Excellence in all aspects of our work; Courage to take risks and try new things; Collaboration across boundaries; Accountability for outcomes" (ROM Core Values. n.d.). Not only do these goals appear in museum exhibition materials, but the public is also generally aware of these attributes and values that the museum upholds.

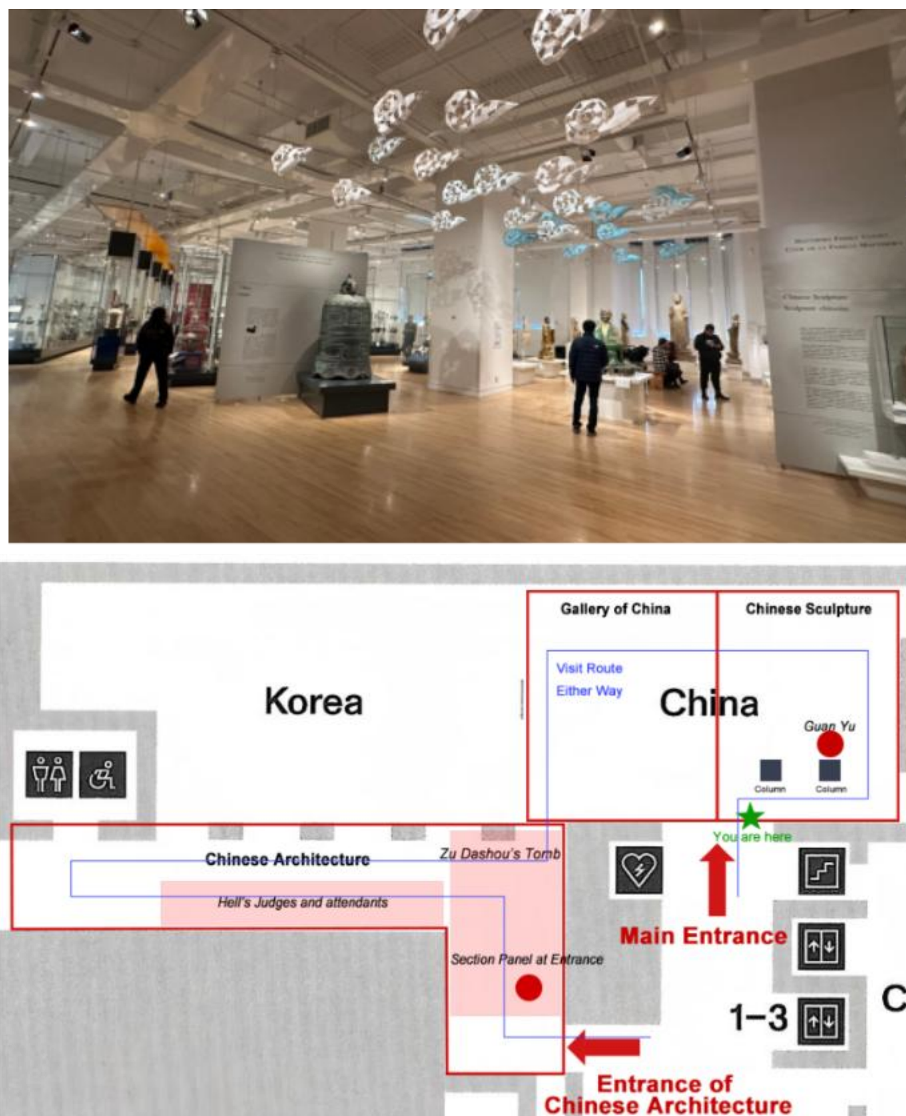
Visitors are expected to have a fruitful visiting experience and learn some specific knowledge.

Chinese Galleries

In the ROM, a large number of Chinese art(ifacts) were displayed on the first floor—the most accessible space near the museum's main entrance—which includes three different sub-galleries: Chinese Architecture, Chinese Sculpture, and Gallery of China. From this spatial arrangement alone, one could infer the importance that the ROM places on Chinese historical culture and its presentation within the museum's curatorial narrative (one of the biggest collections of the ROM as well). However, upon entering the Chinese galleries, a particular phenomenon drew my attention (see position in Figure 9). Although the space was carefully divided into three sub-sections aligned with different exhibition themes—sculpture and religion, art and material culture, and architecture and funerary traditions—each of these sections was not only named according to their themes, but also named for Canadian philanthropists and businessmen whose financial contributions were instrumental in the establishment or renovation of these spaces. More noticeable, the names of those philanthropists and businessmen are often printed in a larger font on the interpretation panel, making them more noticeable (see Figures 10-12). As Chen (2014) pointed out, The ROM's Chinese collections raise complex issues relating to the acquisition, trade and collection of illicit objects, as well as the relationships between museums and their patrons, donors, private collectors and dealers. These issues are global, cross-cultural, moral, economic and politically sensitive. Hence, such curatorial choice introduces an over-layered narrative that merges cultural display with institutional history and patronage politics.

Figure 9

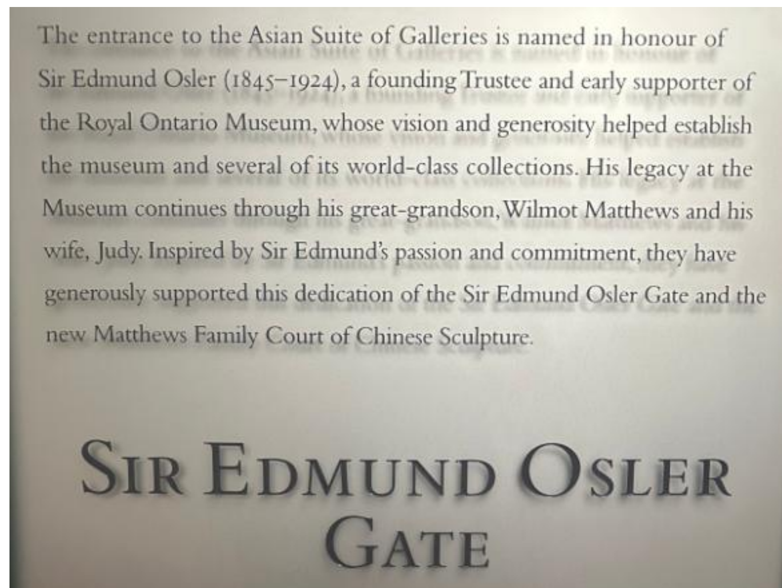
The Main Entrance of Chinese Galleries



For instance, the Sir Edmund Osler Gate (Figure 10) is situated at the entrance of Chinese exhibition area. It is named after Sir Edmund Osler, "a Canadian businessman, politician, and philanthropist, and a founder and benefactor of the Royal Ontario Museum" (Edmund Boyd Osler, n.d, para.1). His legacy is both inscribed in the funding of the institution and shown at the interpretation panel of the Chinese cultural space.

Figure 10

Sir Edmund Osler Gate, Located at the entrance of Chinese Galleries



Another example is the Chinese Sculpture Gallery named for Sir Edmund Osler's great-grandson Wilmot Matthews and his wife Judy (Figure 11) when they made a substantial contribution to the museum to establish the Matthews Family Court of Chinese Sculpture (Sir Edmund Body Osler, n.d.), yet the focal naming belongs to the donor's lineage rather than the cultural origin of the art(ifacts).

Figure 11

Matthews Family Court—Chinese Sculpture

Furthermore, The Joey and Toby Tannenbaum Gallery (Figure 12) showcases a vast collection of Chinese art(ifacts) dating from 2000 BCE to the early 20th century. Joey Tanenbaum inherited his grandfather Abraham's legacy, who was the first-generation immigrant of the Tanenbaum family. Through the efforts of several generations, Abraham's successful business investments enabled Joey to make significant donations to the ROM and contribute to its development (Joey and Toby Tanenbaum, n.d.).

Figure 12

The Joey and Toby Tannenbaum Gallery—Gallery of China

This logic of naming galleries provokes a sense of dissonance—almost a sense of cultural misplacement. The names of wealthy Canadian businessmen are shown in bold, capitalized letters at the top of each gallery's entrance panel, while the title directly related to Chinese culture appears distant and marginal. It feels as though two cultural forces are wrestling for discursive authority within the same space. The gallery layout visually asserts who has the right or privilege to speak first.

The development of the ROM is inextricably tied to the prosperity of Canadian capitalism. Behind the concept of "donation" lies substantial monetary support from private benefactors, but this naturally raises the question: Where does this capital come from? Capitalism and colonialism are inseparable in the historic trajectory of Western modernity and the formation of global power structures (Palmer 2024; 2025). As Loomba (2005) observes, "colonialism was the means through which capitalism achieved its global

expansion. Racism simply facilitated this process, and was the conduit through which the labour of colonized people was appropriated.” (p. 107). The accumulation demands of capitalism motivated the violent expansion of colonialism, then racism was formulated to conceal and legitimize the brutal expansion. Capitalism, colonialism and racism are closely tied, mutually reinforce each other, and constitute a set of coexistent forces which shape unequal global power structure.

The gallery titles, boldly stamped with donor names, signal a claim of ownership and authority over the funding of the museum and over the stories and cultural knowledge that are told within it as well. When visitors begin reading wall texts and interpretive panels in the Chinese galleries, the first element to catch their attention is not the narrative of Chinese history or culture, but rather the striking names of Western businessmen, evoking the success and legacy of Western capitalism and colonial entitlement. This naming practice distracts from the thematic integrity of the exhibition. The content classification system becomes dilute and, instead, visitors are drawn into the aura of wealth and power behind donor legacies. By highlighting the charitable contribution, the dominant power of the West sought “to secure their innocence at the same moment as they assert[ed] European hegemony” (Pratt, 1992, p. 7).

Another striking issue regarding the thematic mismatch within the Chinese galleries caught my attention—there seems to be a deviation between the stated theme and the actual curatorial content. One of the sections is labeled under the broad title “Chinese Architecture” (see position in Figure 13). However, upon closer observation, the art(ifacts) and interpretive texts are overwhelmingly centered around funeral culture, rather than architectural style or

structure. The majority of objects displayed are burial goods, such as spirit guardians, miniature tomb models, and ritual items, with heavy emphasis on belief systems, ancestor and deity worship, and funeral customs.

Figure 13

The Entrance of Chinese Architecture

While such art(ifacts) may offer indirect insights into historical architectural forms, the exhibition fails to explicitly connect these funerary items to broader architectural knowledge in dynastic China. Throughout history, Chinese architecture has been characterized by rich diversity, with each dynasty exhibiting distinctive techniques, layouts, and symbolic meanings. Disappointingly, the curatorial emphasis in this exhibition obscures the distinction between authentic architectural forms and ritualized burial representations, resulting in a distorted interpretation of architectural history.

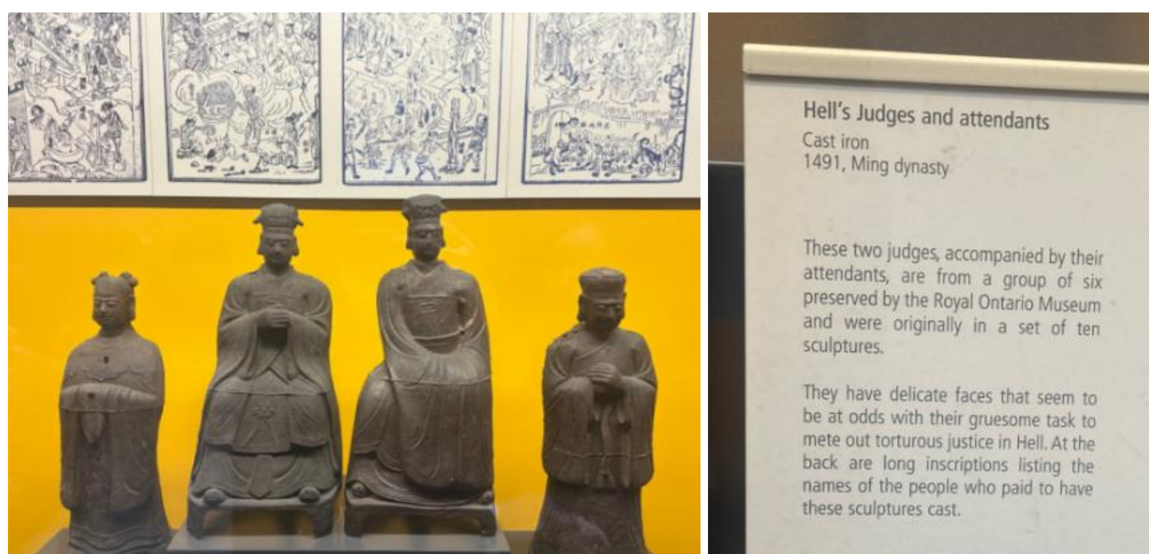
The title, Chinese Architecture, is consequently excessively broad and lacks narrative precision. The exhibition fails to address the question of how these burial objects relate to real structures, or whether they are symbolic, miniature, or spiritual representations that diverge from physical buildings. Such misleading narratives may add a layer of mystery, and

cause significant misunderstanding about Chinese ancient architecture, especially for visitors who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture, who may easily take for granted and equate the buildings and figures in the collection of funerary objects with everyday life and architecture.

A striking example is the display of underworld deities (such as the judges of hell featured in the ROM) whose delicate appearances are associated with a set of terrifying pictures that depict the brutal and bloody punishment one might encounter in the world of death. Such stories are derived from tomb murals and Daoist folklore (Figure 14). These figures were not intended to reflect actual societal roles or architecture but to serve religious or protective functions in the afterlife. Without detailed contextual explanation, visitors may mistakenly equate these stylized representations with civic architecture or even the image of contemporary Chinese people, thereby reinforcing cultural stereotypes or misunderstandings.

Figure 14

Hell's Judges and Attendants

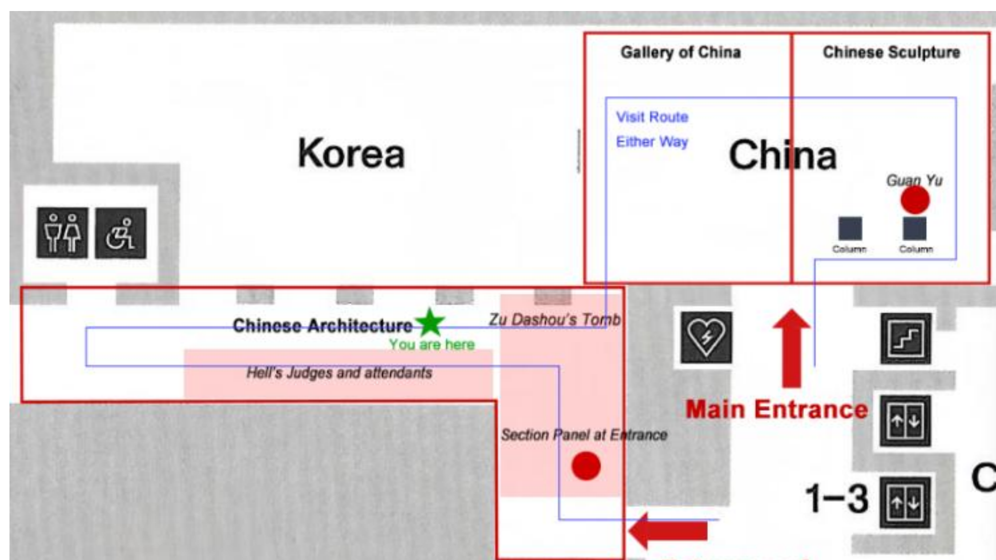


From the post-colonial perspective, these curatorial choices—both in naming practices

and thematic framing—highlight how museum education and interpretation are embedded within complex power structures. They raise critical questions about who gets to name, to narrate, and to define cultural knowledge. For a museum aspiring to educate the public, such framing subtly—but powerfully—shapes what kind of learning takes place. Figure 14 shows a particularly striking display in the gallery of Chinese Architecture; it encompasses depictions of the underworld (hell) and the afterlife in traditional Chinese belief systems. While it is true that Chinese culture has long held conceptions of a metaphysical realm—such as Diyu (地狱) and deities of judgment—what is problematic here is the way the exhibition dedicated a large number of rooms to emphasize punishment, grotesque imagery, and fear, crafting an overall atmosphere of terror and oppression (see positions in Figure 15). For many visitors, especially those unfamiliar with Chinese cosmology, such a presentation can be overwhelming and may even create discomfort or unease. This curatorial framing foregrounds gruesome aesthetics—torture scenes, sinister deities, and infernal landscapes—as if they were central or representative elements of Chinese visual and architectural culture.

Figure 15

Positions of Hell Judges and Section Panel



While the exhibition text mentions the concepts of yin-yang (阴阳) and fengshui (风水) in connection to spatial design (Figure 16), these are in fact just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Chinese architectural principles. An emphasis on these mystical elements risks distorting cultural logics, as it ignores the far broader and more rational systems of design, structure, and innovation that define Chinese architecture across dynasties. In fact, many contemporary Chinese people today perceive concepts like fengshui not as architectural doctrine, but as superstition or metaphysical speculation, often referred to xuánxué (玄学)—a term that implies abstraction, mystery, or even pseudoscience. Popular perceptions of fengshui have often been misunderstood, both within and outside China, and to treat fengshui as the core logic of Chinese architecture is to ignore the practical, social, and technological dimensions of Chinese building traditions. To use such esoteric symbols as focal points

Figure 16

Introduction Panel of Chinese Architecture Gallery

for representing Chinese architecture risks flattening its diversity and obscures the complexity of Chinese spatial and constructional knowledge. This is particularly misleading when the architectural theme is introduced through funerary objects, rather than through actual buildings or structural techniques.

What is noticeably absent in the exhibition narrative is a deeper engagement with the technical and material sophistication of Chinese architecture. One example is the mortise-and-tenon system (榫卯结构), an interlocking joinery technique that has been a cornerstone of Chinese timber construction for thousands of years. This complex but elegant method allows wooden components to connect without nails or adhesives, enabling buildings to be both durable and flexible—especially important in earthquake-prone regions of East Asia. Art(ifacts) or models demonstrating this technique could offer profound insight into ancient Chinese engineering and aesthetic values, yet they remain underrepresented in the exhibition.

The current content arrangement and naming directly illustrate a hierarchical structure of

visibility and influence: while Chinese art(ifacts) occupy a highly visible and well-resourced space in the museum, their narrative framing is still deeply entangled with Canadian institutional history, rather than being rooted in Chinese culture or tied up with historical taxonomy, "which has constructed the illusion that a universalist inclusiveness has been achieved" (Phillips & Steiner, 1999, p. 7). This observation highlights the constructed nature of the museum's explicit curriculum, in which what is made visible is not merely a selection of art(ifacts), but a curated vision reshaped by institutional priorities, donor legacies, and museological conventions. It tells the story of the Chinese as "a people finally about to enter the flow of modern history by Westernizing its economy and education system" (Willinsky, 1998, p. 116). The exhibition's framing—which emphasizes religion, ritual and mystical elements while downplaying structural ingenuity and technological sophistication—produces a selective narrative that aligns with the Western imagination of the exotic East. Such issues demonstrate how cultural knowledge is transmitted and transformed within museum spaces. The asymmetrical power relations between host institutions and represented cultures shape both the content and interpretation of the exhibitions. Therefore, even in a space of high visibility, Chinese cultural heritage is filtered through a framework that privileges external naming rights and institutional authority over domestic epistemology. These curatorial choices, though subtle, have tangible pedagogical implications for museum visitors, particularly in shaping what is learned, remembered, or (mis)understood, making the museum a classroom not just of knowledge, but of ideology.

European Gallery: The Evolution of Style

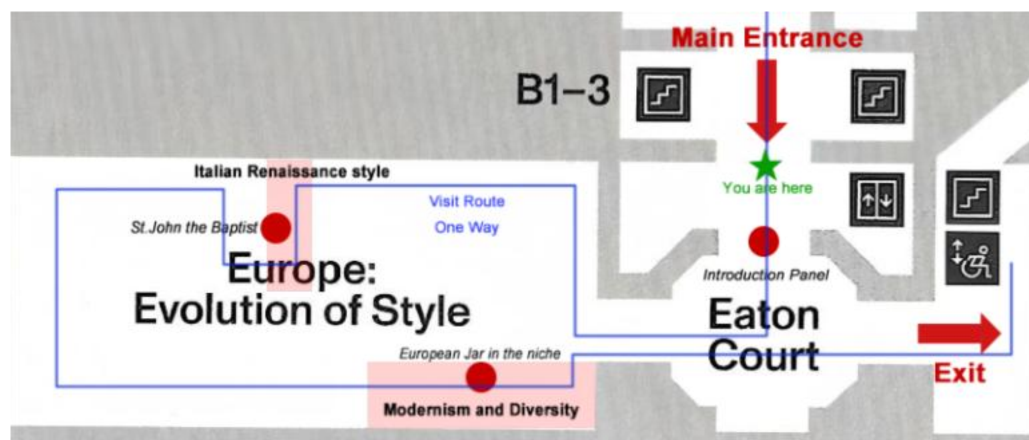
The *Evolution of Style* is located on the third floor. Compared to the bustling atmosphere

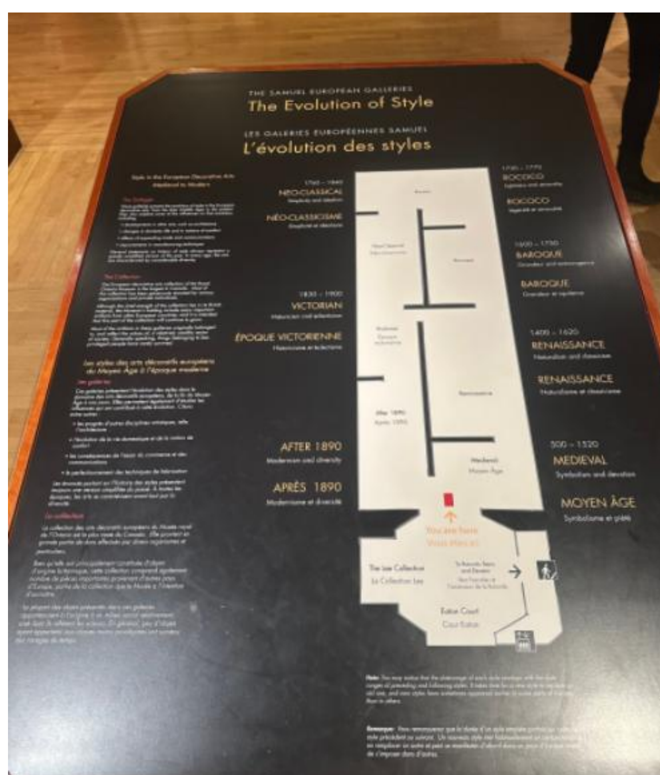
of the first floor, the traffic here is significantly lower than on the first floor, which offers visitors a much quieter and comfortable environment. The exhibition is positioned at the farthest end of the space, making it seem like the collection of European art(ifacts) is placed in the end of a secret vault.

At the entrance of the gallery, there is a large interpretation panel situated in the middle, directing the flow of visitor traffic (Figure 17); although Evolution of Style is a part of the Samuel European galleries, the most eye-catching information is the Exhibition Route Map, rather than the businessperson's name. Sigmund Samuel, through donations and the establishment of funds, greatly contributed to the establishment of the ROM Canada and European galleries (The Samuel Family, n.d.).

Figure 17

Introduction Panel of the Evolution of Style





The map shows the exhibition route in detail, including the division of each section, the proportion of the space, and the theme of each section. It even informs visitors of the timelines of different European decorative arts styles. Visitors can clearly learn the core value of this exhibition from the interpretation text, which represents the diverse range of collection sources. The presence of a detailed route map and style timeline goes beyond guiding the visitor physically; it mentally situates them within a chronological and intellectual framework of European artistic development. Every section is carefully divided based on the eras and specific artistic style, and there are well-designed panels that contextualize each section (Figure 18), clearly illustrating the characteristics, time span, development history, and representative works of each artistic style.

Figure 18

The Interpretation Panel of Medieval

Compared to a non-linear classification system within Chinese galleries, the chronological narrative in European galleries allows visitors to learn about the entire history of European art styles without missing any important parts. Hence, the explicit curriculum in the European galleries already presents a multidimensional and solid framework for understanding the development of European artistic styles. This contrast in curatorial strategies between the Chinese and European galleries reveals deeper institutionalized cognition about how cultures are framed, interpreted, and taught within the museum space. While both galleries showcase rich historical art(ifacts), the explicit curriculum constructed in the European galleries appears more structured, thematic, and pedagogically coherent.

In contrast, the Chinese galleries, despite their prominent physical location, lack such cohesive narrative infrastructure. From an ethnographic perspective, this asymmetry suggests a deeper epistemological divide: while European culture is framed as developmental and rational, Chinese culture is often cast as spiritual, mystical, or symbolic—reproducing long-standing orientalist binaries (Said, 1978). This division in the explicit curriculum also resonates with critiques of traditional ethnography, which historically constructed non-

Western cultures through the lens of Western interpretation—what Lidchi (1997) calls the "othering" process. Museums, as educational spaces, inherit and reproduce this narrative tradition, shaping public understanding through their selective curatorial voices.

Thus, even within the realm of explicit curriculum, museums do more than just inform; they reinforce cultural hierarchies and frame knowledge through a colonial lens. This is why analyzing the museum as a pedagogical site is crucial: it serves as a place of learning, meaning-making, and ideological transmission. When examining the explicit curriculum carefully, it is not hard to notice that there are other types of curricula operating under the surface, that is to say the implicit curriculum and null curriculum, because "the tension between exhibition models is also visible in the way objects are presented" (Sitzia, 2023, p. 165).

5.2 Implicit Curriculum

The implicit curriculum primarily refers to the visual and spatial cues that subtly influence exhibition narratives and visitor experiences. It teaches a wide range of intellectual and social virtues through the atmosphere created by visual, auditory, and tactile elements, and various physical facilities; it serves as an auxiliary means of education—an informal part of the curriculum—that reinforces the values it expresses and upholds (Eisner, 1979).

Right behind the main entrance of Chinese galleries, a magnificent bronze Standing Buddha sculpture is displayed alongside other stone Buddha sculptures. Its golden shining texture and meticulous craftsmanship make this Standing Buddha sculpture the most eye-catching art(ifact) compared to other surrounding stone sculptures. As visitors pause for appreciation, a glass cabinet full of bronze art(ifacts) becomes a visually conflicting

background. The two sets of art(ifacts) have totally different meanings, styles, and materials, simultaneously appearing in the visitors' sight, which cause a visual distraction and hinders understanding.This macro-level interaction becomes visible in specific display pairings, just like the *salt-and-pepper shaker* example illustrated in the Literature Review; classification and spatial design combine to produce cognitive shortcuts in visitors' understanding.

Similarly, we can see how placing a Standing Buddha sculpture with a background full of ancient bronze vessels without providing any context can subtly encourage visitors to perceive both items as generalized "Chinese art" rather than as distinct objects with more profound spiritual symbolism and cultural significance (Figure 19). In doing so, the museum's layout perpetuates a homogeneous logic that reduces cultural nuance to an easily digestible visual display. In reality, however, these art(ifacts) come from completely different contexts, serve entirely different purposes, and hold very different meanings in Chinese culture and history. The Buddha sculpture is sacred, tied to ritual and belief, while the ancient bronze vessels came from different eras and were tied to imperial power. Yet, without clear explanation or thoughtful arrangement, the display makes them appear as part of a single, unified "Chinese style".

Figure 19

The Standing Buddha displayed in the ROM

This kind of visual classification, which is based solely on dynastic periods, material, or artistic technique, encourages viewers to see these objects as representative of an abstract and static "Chinese culture", rather than considering their real-life significance. It flattens complexity and reduces cultural history to a kind of visual shorthand: "Blue-and-white porcelain means Ming", "bronze means ancient", "dragons mean China". Consequently, the gallery becomes less about appreciating Chinese art(ifacts) for their own merit and more about fitting them into preconceived notions of what "Chinese heritage" is supposed to look like.

From an ethnographic perspective, the following extract from my field notes within the Chinese galleries reveals how such displays can exemplify and produce the emotional and cognitive dissonance based on my own encounter with a particular Buddha sculpture:

Later, I finally understood why people need to move—because each person is a vast repository of history. The farther they travel, the wider the history within them spreads.
I don't even dare to look directly at these Buddhist statues. To me, they are incomparably sacred—the spiritual anchor for Chinese people over thousands of years, the resting place for countless despairing hearts. They should not be gazing back at me; they should be gazing at

the diligent, brave, honest, and pure-hearted people of their own era.

Who are you? Where did you come from? These answers have been lost to the tides of change. I feel a deep sorrow for you. On this fractured land, do you too long for recognition? Do you too wish to go home?

Perhaps compassion for all beings lives in your heart. So even on a land where you cannot be understood, you still hold your head high, smiling kindly, offering universal salvation. Yet that smile has left a shadow in my heart. If one day you could speak with those who truly understand, I think you too would feel comfort in your heart (Field notes, Feb 23rd, 2025).

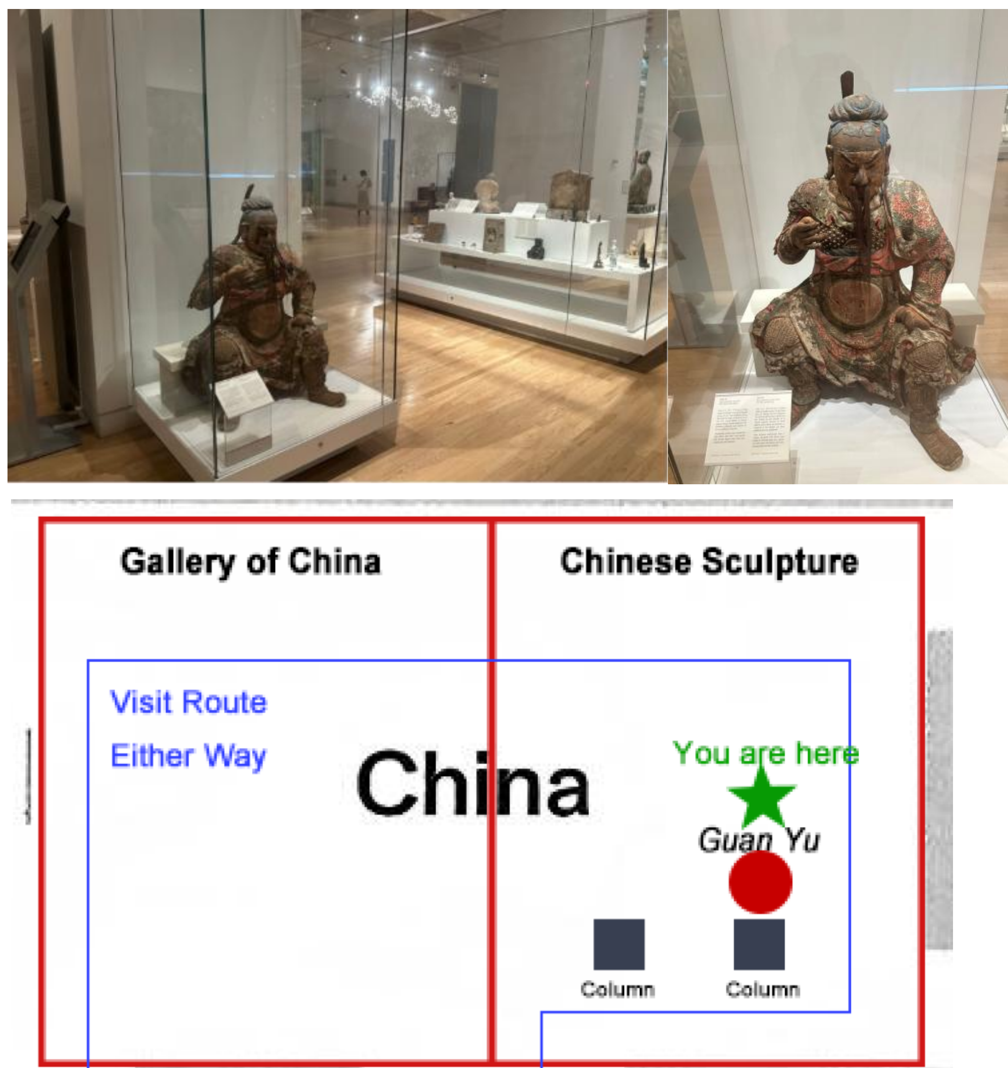
Guan Yu and St. John the Baptist

In the gallery of Chinese Sculpture (Matthews Family Court), a sculpture of Guan Yu has been placed in an inconspicuous corner (Figure 20). Guan Yu (关羽) was a famous Chinese general who lived in the Donghan Dynasty (A.D. 160-220). After his death, he was deified with different symbolic roles in various religious branches. Among the people, he is revered as “Lord Guan” (关公), and successive dynasties honored him with official titles. During the reign of Emperor Yongzheng in the Qing Dynasty, he was elevated to the title of “Martial Sage” (武圣), holding the same status as Confucius, the “Sage of Letters” (文圣). In terms of religious culture, Confucianism honors him as “Lord Emperor of Literary Judgment” (文衡帝君) (Li, 1998, p. 195), Buddhism reveres him as the “Gālán Bodhisattva” (伽蓝菩萨), and Taoism venerates him as the “Saintly Emperor Guan” (关圣帝君) (Wikipedia, 2025). As the only Chinese deity recognized by three different religions — Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, Guan Yu has been widely worshiped among the Chinese people and

holds an exceptionally important place in Chinese culture.

Figure 20

The Sculpture of Guan Yu



According to Chinese cultural tradition, when people worship deities, they are always placed on a high table or plinth, at least above eye level, to show respect. From my own experience, in every depiction I have seen—whether in temples, public spaces, or cultural institutions, whether as statues, paintings, or inscribed memorial tablets—they are always placed in prominent, dignified positions to signify reverence. This is completely different from what I saw at the ROM. First of all, the sculpture of Guan Yu was placed beside a pillar,

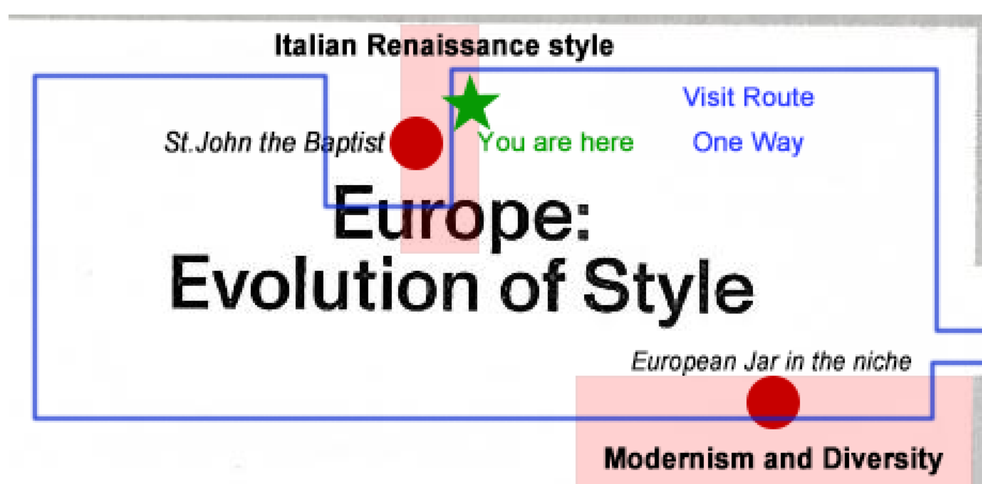
facing away from the entrance. Due to the open visiting route, such a space would be easily overlooked by visitors. In fact, the sculpture is exquisitely crafted and well preserved—visitors can even notice the colorful paints that have not completely faded. Unfortunately, because of the display method—enclosed in a glass case, with lighting that flattens its presence—it evokes the feeling of someone sitting by the roadside, homeless and neglected. Visitors without an understanding of Chinese culture would find it difficult to perceive such a deviation as I did. As a result, the information they receive is a version that has been deliberately or carelessly altered, one that differs significantly from reality.

In contrast to the Chinese display, the bust of St. John the Baptist has been placed in a must-see path within the gallery within the Evolution of Style, corresponding with the Italian Renaissance style (Figure 21). When I visited this gallery, the way the ROM displayed the bust deeply attracted me by its uniqueness compared to sculpture of Guan Yu. Foremost, the bust was placed on a raised pedestal, which not only elevated it physically but also conferred symbolic importance—positioning it at a vantage point where visitors could not help but notice it upon entering the space. Secondly, the solid wood cabinet, rendered with classical beauty, provided a dignified and solemn frame that resonated with the aesthetic traditions of the Italian Renaissance. This choice of display material subtly reinforced the cultural prestige of the artifact, connecting it visually and materially to the values of craftsmanship, tradition, and reverence with which the Renaissance period is often associated in Western art history. Although there is no spot lighting specifically for this bust, the light from the ceiling perfectly rendered its sense of serenity, delicate texture, and overall beauty. The curatorial decision to allow ambient overhead lighting to illuminate the bust created an atmosphere that

felt contemplative and intimate, encouraging viewers to pause and appreciate the work in detail. This effective visual staging made the artifact stand out from its surroundings and, importantly, highlighted the intellectual and cultural significance of the knowledge it embodies.

Figure 21

The bust of St. John the Baptist



Being a Chinese visitor, I do not have any background in Christian and Western religious traditions, but the implicit elements that contributed to the entire exhibition atmosphere inherently affected the spatial narrative. This inspired me to learn more about St. John and why he was and continues to be so important in Western history. Such displays can present a

very important catalyst for learning, as they motivate students to look deeper, investigate further, and pursue new interests that might become important to them (Eisner, 1997).

With the limited information the ROM provided through the label, I went to Wikipedia and learned about St. John's role as a prophet, his connection to the baptism of Jesus, and his enduring significance in Christian theology and Western cultural heritage. This act of self-directed learning demonstrates how an effectively designed implicit curriculum—through careful spatial positioning, material framing, and atmosphere—can transcend cultural and religious boundaries, prompting visitors to actively seek out further knowledge.

From the perspective of the implicit curriculum, the positioning and framing of the Guan Yu statue sends subtle yet powerful messaging beyond the museum's written labels. Without stating it outright, the display teaches visitors that this figure is peripheral rather than central, decorative rather than sacred, and static rather than alive in contemporary belief systems. The low placement and marginal location implicitly downgrade Guan Yu's status, normalizing the idea that non-Western sacred icons can be removed from their spiritual context and reclassified as "art(ifacts)" for passive observation. This unspoken lesson shapes visitors' cultural hierarchies, reinforcing an asymmetry where Western religious figures (such as St. John the Baptist) are granted central, elevated displays, while equally significant non-Western figures are physically and symbolically sidelined.

This comparative observation between Guan Yu and St. John the Baptist reveals how the implicit curriculum operates through spatial hierarchy, material framing, and lighting to create unspoken cultural priorities. The elevated, central placement of St. John conveys reverence and centrality, while the marginal positioning of Guan Yu implicitly diminishes his

cultural and religious significance. Such contrast does not simply reflect curatorial preference—it constructs a hierarchy of value that visitors unconsciously absorb.

Chinese Porcelain Wares and European Made Jar

Figure 22

European Jar in the niche

At the ROM, the display of Chinese porcelain wares and a European-made jar further illustrate how curatorial choices in lighting, spatial positioning, and use of materials can subtly convey different levels of importance to visitors. The European-made jar was centrally placed in a niche (Figure 22). The dark niche framed the brightly lit display, creating a dramatic and dynamic presentation. Furthermore, the light purple velvet material absorbs reflections very well, creating a striking contrast with the metal jar in terms of color and

texture, successfully drawing the viewer's attention. Its label was positioned at a comfortable reading height, making the narrative more accessible. This arrangement implicitly framed the jar as a key highlight of the gallery, encouraging visitors to approach, linger, and engage with its details. During my visits, many visitors were attracted by this metal jar and stopped in front of it, constantly praising the exquisite craftsmanship and charm of this artifact. Some keywords and phrases I heard include: gorgeous, beautiful, unbelievable, look at this, etc. Such comments were not heard from Chinese galleries when I was there.

In contrast, the Chinese porcelain wares—though historically significant and finely crafted—were all placed within a huge glass cabinet, arranged closely together, and led to a trend of homogenization among different art(ifacts). The lighting was relatively dim, and the cabinet's interior color blended in with the ware's glaze and reflections, reducing visual contrast. A large number of white labels, though informative, were scattered inside the glass cabinet (Figure 23). When visitors step forward to read them, the reflection from the glass severely affects the viewing experience. This display strategy, without any overt statement, implicitly reduced the perceived significance of the Chinese jars in comparison to their European counterpart.

Figure 23

Chinese porcelain cabinet

Overall, in the European galleries of the ROM, all art(ifacts) are presented within meticulously reconstructed historical scenes. Each chronological section is staged as a period room or an immersive setting, complete with architectural backdrops, period furniture, and contextual props (Figure 24). This design choice offers visitors not only visual coherence but also a spatial narrative that subtly reinforces the continuity and prestige of European history. Furthermore, every time period is equipped with a seating area, accompanied by extended radio descriptions of the historical era (Figure 25). These benches serve a dual function: they provide physical comfort and also encourage visitors to pause, read and absorb the knowledge from the narrative.

Figure 24

Historical scenes in the Evolution of Styles

Exhibition design choices-such as the lighting, the way objects are presented in an aestheticizing manner, and the sound level, place the exhibition in an expository logic (Sitzia, 2023, p. 163). These curatorial decisions and logic go beyond mere aesthetics of display. By combining reconstructed environments, accessible seating, and detailed historical narratives, they create a learning space that is inherently engaging and cognitively enriching. In doing so, it implicitly positions European history as the gold standard of museum storytelling—a narrative that is immersive, coherent, and fully contextualized.

Figure 25

Seating Area in the Evolution of Styles

As Eisner (1979) pointed out, the implicit curriculum teaches because school is a place

of teaching through the ancillary consequences of various approaches. Although the overall environment is seldom overtly announced, such as the visual and physical experiences the educational space provide, they are salient and pervasive features of schooling. What they teach may be among the most important lessons a visitor learns. In the cases mentioned, the physical elevation, lighting design, and spatial centrality of the European jar communicated an unspoken lesson about value and hierarchy, subtly reinforcing the idea that certain cultural art(ifacts) deserve more focused attention than others.

My field observation of visitors' behavior in the Chinese galleries can be seen as strong evidence for the existence of this issue as well. During my visit, a dialogue between a father and daughter caught my attention. They were standing in front of an ancient Chinese bronze artifact—a bronze tree-shaped lamp (Figure 26).

The daughter asked: "What is this dad?"

The father said: "That's a Christmas tree."

The daughter said: "No! Christmas trees don't look like this!"

Figure 26

Three-Shaped Lamp, Bronze, 25-220, Eastern Han Dynasty

This casual conversation reflects how the lack of contextual clarity in the implicit curriculum can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Without a well-crafted spatial narrative or visual emphasis, visitors are left to rely on their own cultural references, which may result in inaccurate associations. Such a situation in the Gallery of China is echoed by the curator’s recurring dilemma, such as:

> How to effectively convey the layers of meaning and significance in an object? The confines of the traditional museological display of a glass vitrine and a short accompanying paragraph can make this feel especially difficult, let alone the awareness that the paragraph might not be read at all, due to a lack of time, energy or desire from visitors. (Reid, 2018, p. 3)

One consequence of careless curatorial manners is the "reinforce[ment] of stereotypes that are the source of discrimination" (IPinCH, 2015, p. 8), creating a hierarchical, even competitive relationship between different cultures. Cultural hegemony and superiority have been continuously intensified across generations, which contribute to "diminished value, as what is considered culturally important or even sacred becomes commonplace, commercialized, or cheapened as 'pop culture'" (p. 8).

Separated from their original Chinese spiritual and cultural world, Chinese art(ifacts) risk becoming mere decorative curiosities, stripped of their layered meanings. In the context of the implicit curriculum, these cases highlight the museum's powerful role in shaping what is noticed, valued, or (mis)understood—not through explicit textual explanation, but through the silent language of display design.

5.3 Null Curriculum

In general, we tend to pay more attention to explicit information directly shown to visitors, because it is easier to detect. However, we should also be aware "what they put on view says a lot about a museum, but what they don't put on view says even more" (Fusco, 1994, p.148). To explore how a null curriculum plays a role in museum exhibition, we need to pay attention to the intellectual processes that museums emphasize and neglect, and the content or subject areas that are present and absent (Eisner, 1979). This includes not only the visible gaps—such as missing art(ifacts), absent narratives, or underdeveloped interpretive contexts—but also the absences in perspective: whose voices are excluded, which cultural interpretations are silenced, and which historical complexities are simplified or erased.

In the previous arguments, we already learned from implicit curriculum cases that

spatial placement, lighting, and material framing can subtly communicate cultural hierarchies. However, null curriculum addresses a deeper layer: what is deliberately or unintentionally omitted from the public narrative. For example, in the European galleries, while Christian religious art is celebrated through carefully designed displays, there is little knowledge about the darker histories associated with the Church—such as religious persecution, colonial conflict, or the suppression of dissenting beliefs. Similarly, in the Chinese galleries, while a large number of art(ifacts) are displayed, there is no clear explanation of how these objects were acquired, under what historical conditions they left China, or what debates exist regarding their cultural ownership.

By excluding certain content, museums may inadvertently perpetuate ignorance or bias and widen the gap between different cultures and people, thereby reflecting broader social values and power dynamics. This omission actively shapes the visitor's knowledge framework, creating a curated version of history where certain truths remain hidden. In this way, the null curriculum operates alongside the explicit and implicit curricula, but its influence can be even more profound—precisely because it is harder to detect, harder to question, and often goes unnoticed by the very audiences it affects. As Eisner (1979) pointed out:

> [what they] do not teach may be as important as what they do teach...because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem. (p. 83)

In the Chinese galleries, the lack of explanation regarding how certain art(ifacts)

were acquired and the omission of their broader cultural context risks detaching them from their original meanings, making them appear as isolated aesthetic objects rather than living elements of a cultural heritage.

Zu Dashou's Tomb

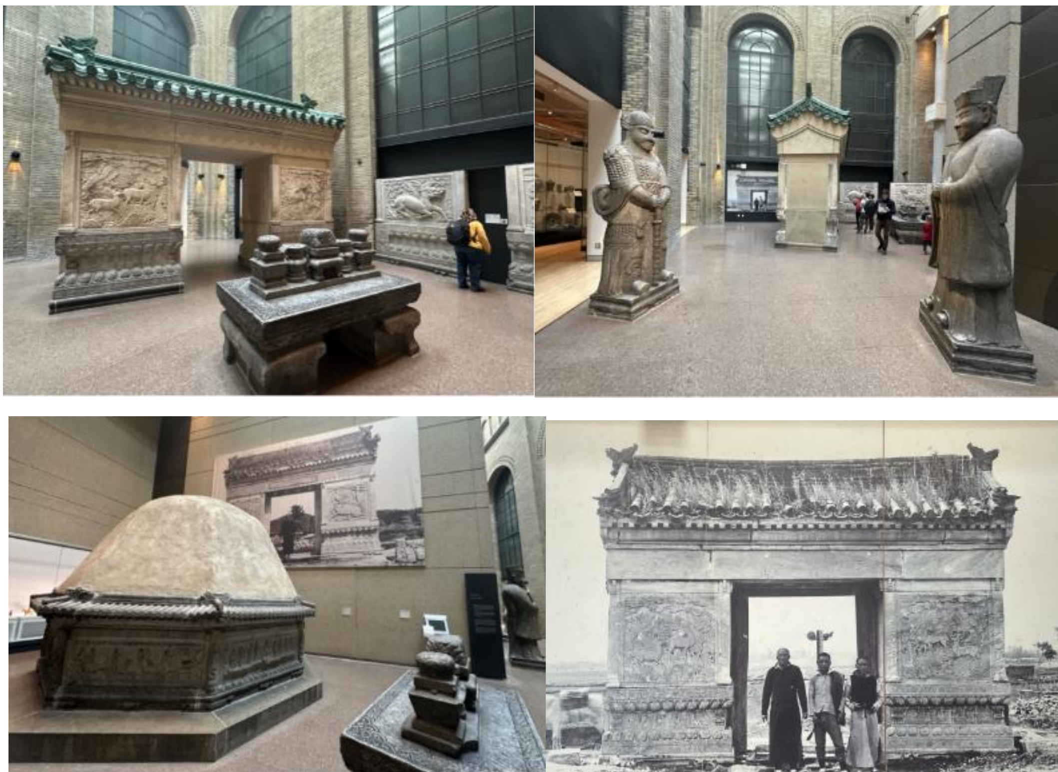
When I walked through the Chinese galleries, I was surprisingly attracted by a set of huge stone sculptures conspicuously placed in an open space within the Chinese Architecture gallery (Figure 27). After I entered in this space, I expected to learn more stories behind these art(ifacts)—To whom did they belong? What did they represent? Why were they here? However, within the entire exhibition space, I could not find the answers I was seeking. A short piece of introductory text was placed next to a damaged digital screen, and the information available was extremely limited. Zu Dashou, a general of the Ming dynasty, died in 1656. That is the only key information I can extract from the panel. I quickly searched my own memory for relevant historical knowledge, hoping to piece together the missing parts of this jigsaw, but the effort was in vain. When history is torn into fragments by a few isolated words, and scattered like dust on a foreign land, it becomes painfully clear how long the connection with our ancestors has been severed.

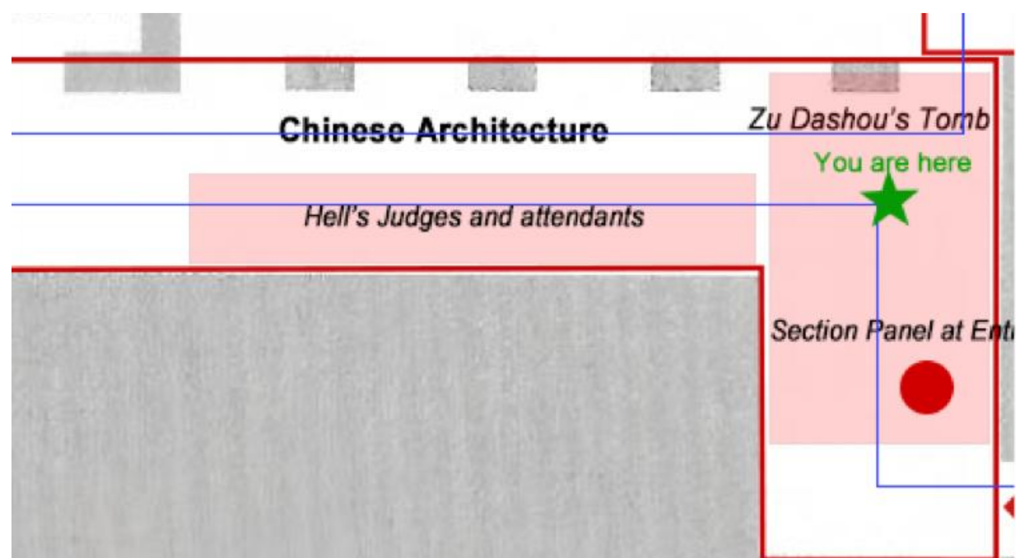
Zu Dashou was a famous Ming general who defended the invasion from Qing, serving under Yuan Chonghuan. Although he surrendered to the Qing twice, he successfully saved countless soldiers and civilians and was regarded by later generations as a hero. He played a crucial role during the Ming–Qing transition (Chen, 1986). He fought in numerous battles against the Japanese, Mongols, and Manchus, defending Ming frontiers for twenty years with remarkable achievements. Holding high reputation in the army, he was deeply respected by

both officers and soldiers. In the final years of the Ming and the early Qing, he was an influential general whose actions directly shaped the strategic situation in Liaodong (Li, 1989; Wang, 2003).

Figure 27

Zu Dashou's Tomb





The historical knowledge mentioned here clearly shows the historical significance of

Zu Dashou. However, the absence of such background information presented in the exhibition inevitably leads to a superficial understanding due to a lack of essential connection between the object and its original culture. The issue is magnified by the ignorant display of Zu Dashou's tomb without showing its original structure.

The art(ifacts) displayed in the ROM are already in a fragmented state, with their spatial relationships altered from the original layout. The absence of architectural context does not match the title, Chinese Architecture, and visitors are unable to imagine its original form. Moreover, the historical photographs mounted on the gallery wall do not clarify the relationship between the individuals in the picture and the tomb itself. Instead, they seem to reinforce cultural stereotypes and amplify the issue of ownership and interpretation rights of art(ifacts). This sense of dislocation reveals a deep rupture between the displayed narrative and its cultural context. Strikingly, the exhibition notes mention that camels and monkeys were found within the tomb but fail to explain their symbolic meanings in the context of Ming-dynasty funerary culture. The specific significance of the stone statues, the meanings of the weapons they hold, and the concept of yin–yang guardianship are entirely omitted.

Another and perhaps most important omission is the ongoing academic debate regarding the authenticity of this tomb. Some scholars have argued that after Zu Dashou died in Beijing, the Shunzhi Emperor ordered his remains to be returned to his hometown (today's Xingcheng, Liaoning Provence, China), and that the tomb displayed at the ROM may actually belong to one of his nephews (Lin & Hao, 2023). Although the true burial place of Zu Dashou remains unconfirmed, the ROM—as an authoritative cultural institution—has chosen to avoid this contested issue and instead present the tomb as an

established fact. This act of framing a disputed matter as certainty reflects cultural hegemony, in which Chinese art(ifacts) are rendered voiceless under a form of silent violence.

Such absent content directly impacts the knowledge dissemination (Eisner, 1979) of museum education. It significantly minimizes intellectual engagement between visitors and the museum narrative. Eisner (1979) writes, "when attention to such intellectual processes, or forms, of thinking is absent or marginal, they are not likely to be developed within school programs, although their development might take place outside of school" (p. 84). In this situation, the knowledge visitors acquire from the museum is incomplete or reconstructed, especially for non-Chinese visitors. When they are exposed to Chinese culture somewhere else in their lives, they will try to understand and interpret the whole cultural system with incomplete cognition; this is how stereotypes and biases are constructed. On the other hand, for Chinese people, ancestral tombs are not just physical structures, they are carriers of family history, cultural traditions, and a connection to their roots. When a well-known tomb is presented in a foreign museum in such a fragmented and misrepresented way, it undermines the Chinese community's sense of cultural belonging.

By omitting contested histories, the museum narrows the interpretive possibilities available to visitors. The lack of cultural, historical, and symbolic context prevents visitors from forming a deep, critical engagement with the art(ifacts), leaving them instead with fragmented, indecipherable impressions. This is a quintessential example of null curriculum in practice—not simply what is absent from view, but how that absence constrains the ways in which history can be understood, questioned, and re-imagined.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this last chapter, I offer a summary and reflection. Based on my Chinese origin background and what I found within the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), I propose some suggestions, especially for the ROM's Chinese galleries, regarding how to improve the museum experience for visitors and the facilitation of cultural dissemination. I also recognize my experience and background can inherently become a strength and underscores the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my research. I believe this is just the beginning; I am looking forward to seeing more comprehensive discussions regarding museum decolonization, especially those focused on Chinese culture and art(ifacts).

6.1 Findings

Through ethnographic field observation and subsequent analysis, this research explores how the ROM, as an informal educational space, applies different curatorial strategies in the Chinese galleries and European galleries. Combined with the conceptual framework of the "three curricula" (Eisner, 1979), I found that exhibitions of Chinese art(ifacts) are presented in a fragmented, homogenized, and flattened way. Such a phenomenon was mainly because of the visual effects within the gallery and the selective presentation of knowledge and information. In contrast, European art(ifacts) receive "special attention" compared to the Chinese art(ifacts). They are more systematically structured, and well designed with more sophisticated interpretation and visual presentation.

The lessons I received across both galleries, but especially from the Chinese one, were incompatible with my cultural understanding of my home country, which revealed the constructed nature of colonial values and ideologies on display. In my perspective, the

Chinese art(ifacts) seemed like homeless elders struggling to find their own position for survival in a strange land. The careless and crude exhibition approach has left the display of Chinese art(ifacts) in a constant state of vagueness and homogenization, and this poor condition is projected onto a broader understanding of what Chinese culture entails. This disparity becomes particularly striking when Chinese art(ifacts) are displayed in the same museum alongside European art(ifacts), producing a sense that the European objects are superior and the Chinese ones are inferior. On this Sandel (2025) observes:

> *People who feel they have been left behind and looked down upon may generate a sense of humiliation, which opened the way of politics of grievance. Many parts of the world are a politics of anger, resentment, and grievance without mutual recognition. Without recognizing the value of the contributions that peoples make from different walks of life, we will not really begin to address the resentments that now afflict our politics and have accentuated some of the darkest strands in social life.* (Thirteen Talks, 2024)

Without an understanding of the three curricula at play, visitors can easily mistakenly absorb an unequal, colonial, and hierarchical, value-laden cultural understanding as neutral knowledge.

The curatorial strategies applied by the ROM to organize and present the Chinese and European art(ifacts) reveal systemic differences, reflecting the invisible influence of colonial ideology on museum education. In light of these findings, it becomes necessary to consider how the Chinese galleries might be improved to foster a more balanced representation and understanding.

6.2 Suggestions

This section details a proposal of suggestions for the Chinese galleries of the ROM based on my findings. It is not presented as a request or demand for exhibition renovation. Here, I join ongoing discussions with scholars who are committed to museum decolonization and offer a reference point for those looking for alternative possibilities. From my perspective, three unification ideas can improve the Chinese galleries in the ROM: (1) theme and content, (2) space and narrative, and (3) displayed art(ifacts) and visual decoration.

Unity of Theme and Content

The three sub-galleries in the whole Chinese exhibition area—*C*hinese Sculpture; China; Chinese Architecture—all show a problem of misalignment between theme and content. The mismatch between theme and content caused a significant barrier for understanding the displayed art(ifacts) and the cultural traditions and practices of their origin. For instance, the exhibition area of *Chinese Sculpture* highlighted Chinese Buddhist sculptures as its unique and special feature, but other Buddhist and Chinese deity sculptures can be found in all three sub-galleries. Besides, there are not only Buddhist sculptures, but also Daoist sculptures and murals within the gallery of Chinese Sculpture.

Overall, I would like to recommend reducing the number of art(ifacts) on display within Chinese galleries; this would provide more space to deliver a clearer curatorial narrative and establish a more systematic and thematic classification and display system. The key is to avoid vague and broad coverage. In contrast, Europe: Evolution of Style does an excellent job in this regard. It does not attempt to encompass the entire grand historical development of Europe but instead focuses only on the evolution of artistic styles across different periods. With the solid and concentrated focus, all the selected art(ifacts) and

curatorial narratives closely revolve around this theme.

Hence, I believe the Chinese Galleries also need to find a focal point, reclassify the art(ifacts), and focus on a specific topic rather than remaining general and superficial. For instance, the three sub-galleries in the Chinese exhibition area should rename the titles of the galleries as follow: Ancient Chinese Religious Art rather than Chinese Sculpture; Chinese Funeral Culture rather than Chinese Architecture; and Bronze ware, porcelain, and furniture from China's Various Dynasties rather than the simple and broad title, China. Clarity in thematic orientation enables audiences to connect individual art(ifacts) more effectively to broader cultural and historical narratives. Without this coherence, visitors may struggle to grasp the underlying significance of what they see, reinforcing superficial impressions rather than encouraging deeper understanding. By narrowing its focus and aligning theme with content, Chinese Galleries would strengthen curatorial coherence and offer visitors a more immersive and meaningful understanding of Chinese cultural heritage.

Unity of Space and Narrative

At present, the open visiting route in the Chinese galleries has not facilitated the storytelling and learning experience. Instead, it causes visitors to wander aimlessly without a clear sense of direction. In other words, visitors are unaware of their exact location within the exhibition or the entire narrative space, nor are they aware of what they will encounter and learn next, which diminishes the coherence of the narrative journey. Therefore, I think Chinese galleries should have a redesigned exhibition layout and visiting route so that spatial design can serve the exhibition narrative. Sections can be divided into distinct exhibition areas according to different narrative foci. By flexibly using the size and interrelation of

spatial layouts, key narrative sections can be emphasized while secondary sections can be downsized, thereby shaping the rhythm of visitors' experience through space.

Even if an open visiting route is used, it should still distinguish primary routes from minor ones through width, length, decoration, and lighting. Museum studies suggest that such spatial sequencing plays a pedagogical role, as it provides visitors with orientation and structures their engagement with curatorial narratives. Ultimately, coherent spatial design can transform the exhibition from a fragmented display into a guided narrative journey, enhancing both visitors' comprehension and cultural appreciation.

Unity of Displayed art(ifacts) and Visual Decoration

Different from other fields of design, exhibition visual design places greater emphasis on abstract artistic expression and focuses on the integration of exhibition narrative and visual experience. My working experience as an exhibition visual designer always extracted visual elements such as shapes, colors and material from art(ifacts) and redesigned them as decoration elements in the exhibition. Importantly, the redesigned elements are not simply duplicates from art(ifacts) but are carefully arranged by designers to integrate into the exhibition space, assist and facilitate exhibition storytelling and provide a joyful visiting experience for visitors.

At present, in the Chinese galleries, very few decorative elements can be found that are specifically designed for the Chinese culture display. The existing decorative style is just a basic glass container. In other words, if such a space is not designated as the Chinese galleries, it can also display any other type of exhibit. The disconnection between the displayed art(ifacts) and exhibition space visually intensifies the sense of alienation and

marginalization of Chinese art(ifacts) as part of an exotic culture on display, consequently minimizing knowledge dissemination and cultural appreciation.

Here, I introduce my previous working experience in the National Museum of China (NMC) to illustrate how exhibition visual design could closely connect with exhibition narrative and create a sense of unity with the displayed art(ifacts). In 2019, I participated in the curatorial work of *The Uniqueness of Zhou Dynasty Art(ifacts): Archaeological Finds from Liujiawa, Shaanxi Province* as a graphic designer. In order to facilitate visitors' learning, enhance their experience, encourage visitors to learn more about the historical and cultural landscape of China during the Spring and Autumn period, and to understand the diversity and unity within Chinese culture, we extracted numbers of ancient patterns from art(ifacts), transferred and applied them as a decorative elements in the gallery, including a theme wall at the entrance, interpretation panel at each section, and the canopy hanging on the ceiling (Figure 28). In addition, a re-constructed archaeological excavation site was placed in the middle of the gallery, which responded to the theme of this exhibition and let the visitors know what it looked like when those art(ifacts) were excavated.

Figure 28

The Examples of Decorative Elements in NMC

Visual design plays an instructive and guiding role in exhibitions. It not only enhances the atmosphere of the exhibition and clearly expresses the characteristics of the era, but also assists the exhibits in interpretation, visiting, and learning. It is also a supplementary method for knowledge dissemination beyond the textual information within the gallery. Visual environments act beyond a neutral background. Rather, they are interpretive frameworks, shaping how visitors perceive art(ifacts) and situate them within a broader cultural narrative. When the decoration draws directly from the cultural elements of the displayed objects, it reinforces authenticity and reduces the risk of presenting art(ifacts) as isolated or decontextualized. Therefore, aligning art(ifacts) with coherent visual design does more than create an appealing atmosphere—it strengthens curatorial interpretation, enhances visitors' cognitive engagement, and deepens their cultural understanding.

6.3 Limitations and Outlook

Reflecting on this research, I acknowledge the limitations of approaching this study based on my personal visiting experience and understanding within the ROM. I am aware of how my previous experiences and perspectives may influence the understanding and analysis of data. I deeply understand how a non-Western museum such as the NMC should construct

narrative, design spaces, and teach cultural essence as a role of cultural carrier, and I know what an positive decolonization exhibition should look like; it is a space that enables different culture and history to be carefully represented and well understood; it is a space for equal conversation and cultural appreciation; it is a space that provides a meaningful and joyful learning experience for visitors.

With the integration of my working experience into an identity of visitor and researcher, I can examine the ROM from a unique perspective—an external critic empowered by practical experience—and see through the ROM's exhibition practices with a comprehensive tour, revealing what is "implicit" or "omitted" to visitors.

On the other hand, my knowledge and background leads to a more subjective understanding and analysis of this research. To keep pursuing my research on museum education and curatorial studies in the future, I will keep engaging with post-colonialism and museum decolonization, as I am committed to exploring how these frameworks can reshape curatorial practice. In my future research, I will try to use different methods and seek more opportunities to engage with people, especially the Canadian public.

Ultimately, my future curatorial practices would aim at decolonization and de-Eurocentrism in exhibition and narrative. This does not mean erasing European perspectives but rather situating them among other cultural voices. Decentering requires shifting away from the implicit hierarchy that privileges European art(ifacts) as the universal standard while framing non-European art(ifacts) as peripheral or supplementary. In practical terms, a decolonial approach to exhibition design that focuses on Chinese culture would emphasize the cultural autonomy of Chinese art(ifacts), highlighting their historical contexts, spiritual

meanings, and aesthetic values on their own terms. It would also encourage cross-cultural dialogues rather than one-way comparisons, enabling visitors to recognize the plurality of world civilizations.

By re-balancing representation and narrative structures in this way, museums such as the ROM can move toward a more equitable and inclusive model of cultural dissemination—one that respects diverse cultural contributions and challenges the colonial legacies embedded in curatorial practices.

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