

When Culture Becomes Artefact

the Exoticism in Museums

Paula Chang

Today museums are rethinking their position under the wave of decolonisation. What is their responsibility as widely-recognised cultural institutions? How do they approach the displayed items of different cultures and eras? Which language and/or vocabulary deliver the most accurate information?

Before diving into the swirl of answering these questions, I would like to propose an entry point from the linguistic aspect. One of the concerns towards museums nowadays is the exoticism implemented in the displayed items. What message do museums send out when common items of a different culture become “art” worth showcasing in another region? If we could define “exoticism”, we might be able to finally avoid its trap that has haunted many non-Western communities while visiting well-known museums. A clarification beyond “unusual and interesting” is needed to attach more layers to the diverse cultures we live around. To extend the discourse, what criteria define “culture”? Which conditions form a certified culture that earns its place in a museum? Or even, what falls out of the realm of culture under the context of museums?

This is an attempt to define the significance and weight the curatorial terms carry, and generate a new form of curatorial guidebook aiming at treating displayed objects with more delicacy.