Wunderkammers and Contested Sacrality in the Walters Art Museum

Founded in 1934 "for the benefit of the public," the Walters Art Museum houses 36,000 anthropologic and artistic artifacts in its properties in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood ("About the Walters Art Museum"). The museum's collection and three of the five buildings on its campus are publicly owned by the City of Baltimore and "stewarded" by the Walters, which refers to itself as an institution of public education. The collection is made more accessible by recent initiatives, like imposing free admission and maintaining the impressive open-access digitized collection on their website. As accessibility to the museum improves, more people are able to experience the physical space and absorb the artifacts presented within. However, the way in which these artifacts are presented asks the observer to accept certain ideas as fact, leaving some elements of their history to remain in the shadows. Referring to Rowland Sherrill's understanding of the unique worship of American Civil Religion and David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal's claims about sacred spaces as inevitably contested, one can see how the Walters Art Museum qualifies and aims to be considered as a 'sacred space' in the American public. However, mixing sacred and oversimplified histories significantly affects the space and its reception. During my experiences observing the space of the museum as a volunteer since March 2022, I have gained access to some 'behind the scenes' discussions of the future of the museum and its collection. Using these observations and other research, I argue that the narrative honoring the 'gentleman collector' archetype present in the Walters Art Museum, and specifically within its example of a wunderkammer, the Chamber of Wonders, makes the museum a contested space of subjective sacrality.

The Gentleman Collector and the Birth of Public Museums

In the Age of Exploration in the 15th through 17th centuries, wealthy people of Europe fueled by Enlightenment ideas voyaged across the world, encountering unfamiliar people and

cultures. The European gentry became obsessed with collecting plants and live or stuffed animals from different continents to sell to other men of stature or to exhibit in their homes (Jenkins 17). The *wunderkammer*, or 'wonder room' from German, were the rooms in these wealthy homes dedicated to displaying these relics from distant lands (Jenkins 41). It wasn't until later that the market for anthropological artifacts (bought, bartered or stolen) from Indigenous people around the world boomed, and these objects were added to wunderkammers across Europe in addition to objects from the natural sciences (Jenkins 27). The displays of collections, either from their own travels or from trade with others, manifested the archetype of the gentleman collector; he held the appearance of wealth (by quantity and material of the artifacts, and having the space to display them) and intellect (heterogeneous collections translated into a multitude of intellectual interests) (Filippoupoliti 53-54).

These collections and the wunderkammers they sat in became a way to preserve the legacy of the gentleman collector. Often, the artifacts were bequeathed to kin or donated to museums, and many of these collections built the foundation of modern museums (O'Neil 63; Jenkins 47). Museum scholar Mark O'Neil argues that museums originated in part from private collectors' desires for "death planning," as a way to preserve the record and influence of the collector's life once it ends (63). In this way, the collections that wealthy men amassed in private then became a public and collective display of a "large part of the meaning of the collector's

life," and in the desire to create museums, these collectors "pressured the state to create institutions which could assure their afterlife through the preservation of their collections" (O'Neil 63; 53). O'Neil implies that museums have the power to instill a kind of sacrality by arguing that "Museums provided—and still provide—an effective model of death planning for people who own significant objects, especially in the groups identifiable as collections. They provide a symbolic immortality both through the guaranteed survival of the objects both individually and as a significant group and through the association of the donor's name with the object, collection or institution" (66).

Beyond the individual gentleman himself, collections were a testimony to the wealth and power of nations. In the 1770s, when a group of high-ranking officials of the British navy began donating natural and anthropological objects from their collections to the juvenile British Museum, the head of the museum noted that the men were "'insistent' that they were to be displayed 'in a distinguished place as a monument of these national exertions of British munificence and industry'" (Jenkins 22). During the Age of Exploration, which predated the resurgence in collection in the 19th century in which William Walters and his son Henry Walters began the collection that catalyzed the Walters Art Museum, the "voyages of discovery" resulted in European evangelization and colonization of new peoples while European powers competed for colonies and naval supremacy (Jenkins 30). While wunderkammers full of worldly artifacts were a tribute to gentlemen collectors, when shown in wealthy white European homes they also symbolized the imperial power of the West. This narrative that glorifies the gentleman collector archetype and the imperial and colonialist power it hails from is still present in museums today.

The preservation of legacy as a mirror of the afterlife is one way in which museums represented sacred space to the gentleman collector, but in understanding public museums as

contested American institutions, we can see modern museums become sacralized to the mainstream American public as pillars of our society. The Walters, like other public museums, represents an "informal educational [area] and [tool] for communicating the mass culture" (Günay 1251). Museums are perceived as having "responsibility to scholarly accuracy" (Buggeln 42). Via "object based information usage" and the institutional structure of museums which became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively, museums began to offer "the provision of services to educate the working class that started to rapidly increase in the cities as a result of industrialization (Günay 1251). Once public museums became recognized as a tool for educating the masses, this role of "training citizens" became legitimized and allowed the greater public to observe artifacts which had previously been hidden in the homes of the gentlemen collectors (1251). It is for this reason that as visitors enter, they are likely to assume the narratives they are absorbing are the 'correct' ones.

Museums as Sacred and Contested Space

As they become legitimized as sources of public education, museums become worshipped as sacred "'shrines,' 'sanctuaries,' and 'temples,'" (Buggeln 36). This is in part due to what Rowland Sherrill refers to as American Civil Religion in Chidester and Linenthal's *American Sacred Space.* American Civil Religion is a mythology that enforces imaginings of a collective American identity as it is tied to place, space, and political and social practice (Sherrill 313-314). As a tool to educate United States citizens, the museum represents an important contributing institution in the myth of American Civil Religion, and so it is critical that it does not present any indications of fault, lest it poke holes in the fragile collectivization of the American identity. However, even though as visitors enter a museum, they are primed to receive the

curated narratives as legitimate and infallible, because of the nature of their origins and their contents, museums are highly contentious spaces.

David Chidester and Edward Linenthal supply their own definition for sacred space as "inevitably contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols" (15). They elaborate by explaining that "sacred places are arenas in which power relations can be reinforced, in which relations between insiders and outsiders, rulers and subjects [...] and so on, can be adjudicated. But those power relations are always resisted. Sacred places are always highly charged sites for contested negotiations over the ownership of the symbolic capital (or symbolic real estate) that signifies power relations" (16). However, as Satterthwait points out, "the problem is that, with rare exceptions, collections represent samples derived in largely unknown ways from unknown universes," and wunderkammers, as displays of artifacts often from dark origins of imperialist and colonialist provenance, certainly represent contested space in which narratives of ownership conflict (Satterthwait 25). The Chamber of Wonders and the Collector's Room in the Walters Art Museum are examples of these styles of rooms, covered wall-to-wall in artifacts and objects from around the world (many of unknown prevenance), but housed in a museum founded by the collections of wealthy white men in Baltimore, Maryland ("Chamber of Wonders"; "About the Walters").

The United States is a society that has a certain history of systemic oppression of others, and "the analysis of sacred space in America, therefore, will require not only attention to how space has been ritualized and interpreted but also to how it has been appropriated, contested, and 'stolen' back and forth in struggles over power in America" (Chidester and Linenthal 16). O'Neil argues that museums are no exception to this: "museums are instruments of ideological hegemony, designed to reinforce the structures of power within human society [...] Museums are

not just archives of material facts but institutions which are so important that they were ‘essential’ ‘to the fabrication and sustenance of [the] system of beliefs...’ which ‘have constituted the core of 'modernity'. These beliefs concern ‘assumptions about the nature of meaningful relationships between subjects and objects, between individuals or communities, and the worlds they weave about themselves’” (O'Neil 54).

Knowing that museums are critical to the creation of belief systems in society makes it even more concerning that they (and the Walters specifically) present their exhibits in a way that attempts to hide the contestation from their visitors (Buggeln 43). The act of worshipping museums as relics of American Civil Religion makes the process of revealing contested narratives and hegemonic ideology more challenging for the museum visitor. In many ways, how the Walters Art Museum has curated their Chamber of Wonders passively but harmfully hides the contested nature of their artifacts and space, and in doing so, desacralizes them.

Narratives the Walters Art Museum Tells

When entering a museum space, we assume that things are as they should be. Objects presented without their proper context are not immediately obvious because of this assumption of legitimacy. As a volunteer at the Walters Art Museum, I was encouraged to direct families with young children to the Chamber of Wonders. The expectation was that these young children would be enchanted by the crowded and colorful walls, the ‘cabinets of curiosity’ filled to the brim with ancient jewelry, sculptures, preserved bugs, the stuffed crocodile, and more. However, the Chamber has almost no plaques associated with its artifacts. For the vast majority of the objects, a visitor must locate one of the unwieldy laminated booklets hidden in various pockets

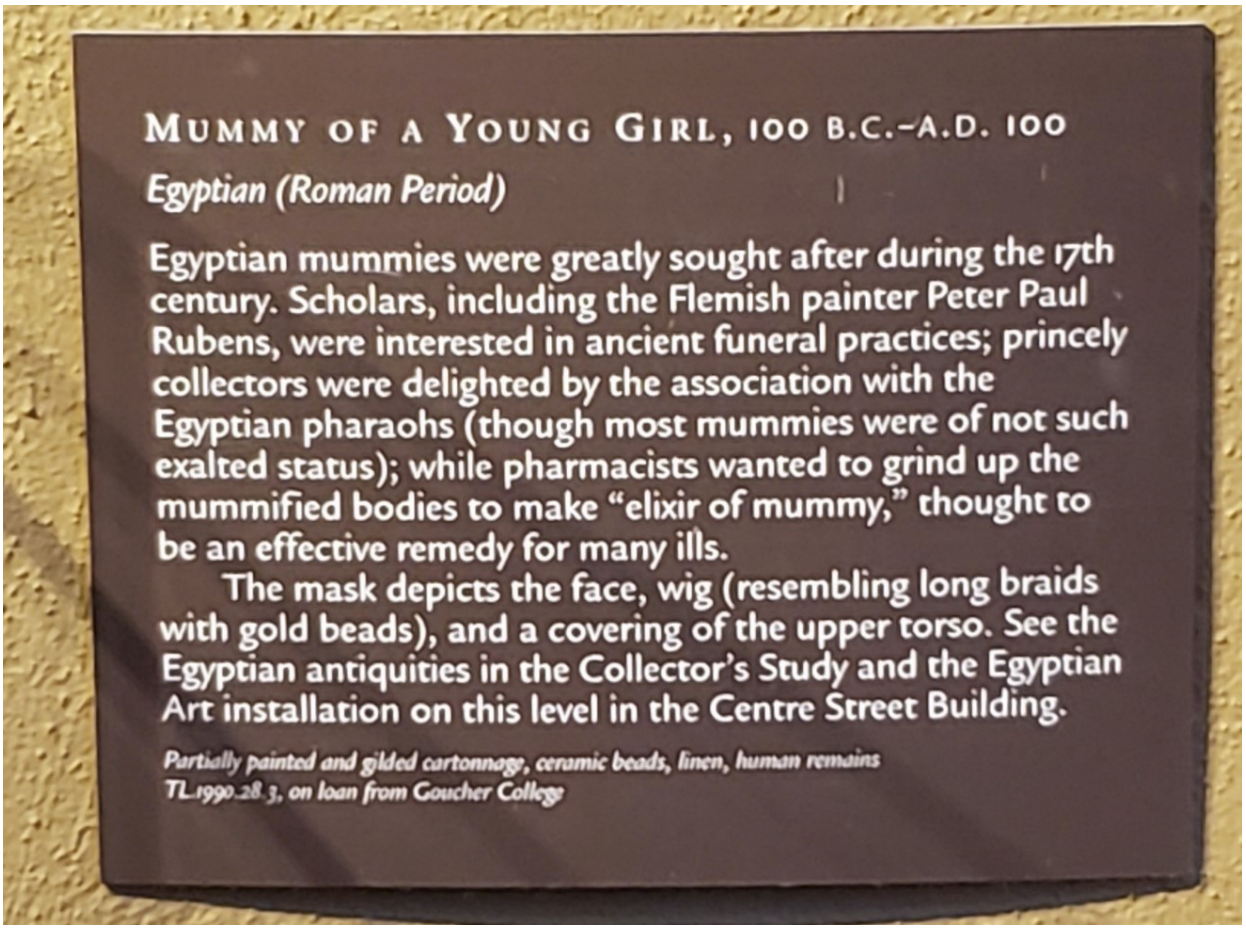
of the room, find their artifact of interest among hundreds, and read the fine print there. From my experience, a busy parent with young children is not likely to do this extra research, and their child even less so. The lack of plaques is a lack of accessible information about the contents of the Chamber of Wonders and the historical context of each artifact. Because of the assumption of legitimacy that worshippers of American Civil Religion are partial to believing, the contestation of the exhibit is hidden from the public eye—the very eye the public museum is meant to educate.

An apt example of this is the "Mummy of a Young Princess" currently displayed in the Chamber of Wonders. Walters has two full-sized human mummies on display, but while one is an adult situated in a gallery dedicated to ancient Egyptian art and artifacts, the other is a child tucked in the corner of the museum's wunderkammer, placed on a small table level with wider tables in the center of the room that display pinned insects.

The presentation of her communicates something significant. Being level with the insect display boxes creates a visual vocabulary that equates the ancient human remains with these bugs. Within the Chamber, the "Mummy of a Young Princess" is the only 'artifact' of human remains amongst hundreds of other anthropological and natural artifacts. This seems to validate Leonn Satterthwait's claim that "two collections could conceivably contain exactly the same kinds of objects, but differ considerably in character because they contain these objects in greatly differing proportions—a difference laden with implications" (25).

Other implications are made from the presentation of the child. Unlike most of the other objects in the Chamber, she does have a plaque associated with her display. However, it is even more tucked into the corner of the room than she herself is, still making it challenging for visitors to read information on her. The information that is provided unfortunately does not provide any

details about her provenance besides that she is on loan from Goucher College. The rhetoric included on the sign significantly emphasizes the European involvement in the trade of Egyptian mummies, without providing any possible information on this young girl herself. It refers to "princely collectors" who sought out the power associated with collecting mummies of pharaohs, and the fascination with the consumption of the human remains popular at the time.



By centralizing European figures in this plaque, the Walters Art Museum glosses over the colonialist relationship between the West and Egypt that contextualized the 17th century. In turn, the museum blatantly glorifies the gentleman, or "princely", collector archetype.

Having done my own research in Goucher's Special Collections and Archives, I now know that this mummy was originally purchased by John Goucher in 1895, from a German man

who may or may not have been named Brugsch Bey, and who may or may not have been the director of the Giza Museum at the time. In 1938 she was loaned to the Baltimore Museum of Art, displayed in an exhibit there in 1955. She was lost in storage until 1972 and then transferred to the Walters Art Museum in 1986 to be displayed in their Egyptian gallery. She received damage in 1998 while being moved for renovations at the Walters, and at some point, she wound up in the corner of the Chamber of Wonders by 2022. The Walters plaque does not reference any the existing or missing history of this particular young girl, nor does it offer any of the context of colonialism. It does, however, speak almost jovially about the "elixir of mummy" Europeans made out of human remains.

There is an obvious kind of tone associated with the rhetoric presented, that implies whose history the Walters would like to openly discuss, and whose can be exhibited, but not discussed. The fact that she is presented in a Wunderkammer at all implies that she is considered of the same category or value as the other 'oddities' and 'curiosities' presented there (Sattarthwait 25).

Why It Matters

The origins of public museums emphasized "the use of museums to tell national and imperial stories," which are still being told today, as museums retain their position as hegemonic institutions of public education (O'Neil 63). Because of their "responsibility for scholarly accuracy," museums worry "about providing an interpretation or a space that is incorrect,one," even while they actively glorify narratives of the gentleman collector which are incomplete and reify historical systems of global power dynamics (Buggeln 42). Not acknowledging the contested histories within the space of the wunderkammer of the Walters Art Museum desacralizes it by attempting to remove or ignore the inherent contestation.

Even though it is true that the Walters Art Museum provides a noble public service by educating the public free of charge, it is still providing incomplete narratives of the ownership of this supposedly sacred space (Chidester and Linenthal 16). Additionally, compounding this problem, ignoring contested histories of power struggles and colonialism further dispossesses the Mummy of a Young Princess of what she should be able to represent. Buggeln discusses the reception of the encounter with museum artifacts as either being with "resonance" or "wonder"(45). Buggeln explains how wonder "cuts off contextual stories and questions in the presence of the charismatic, unique, marvelous object and the aesthetic pleasure it provides" (45). Offering the mummy up for display in the way she is, with inappropriate historical context and within a room modeled after designs by imperialist and colonialist figures, implies a heavy meaning to the unsuspecting visitor who assumes legitimacy in the museum space.

There is an appropriate concern that, even though she is the remains of a human being, she may not be viewed as sacred in the eyes of the visitor if "predicaments of social and social-psychological, economic, and political experience in contemporary cultural existence have conspired […] to hamper the perception and imagination of sacrality itself at its very sources and in its integral operations" (Sherrill 314). This is especially true when there is so little information provided on her that could help to guide the visitor towards a better contextualized understanding of her sacrality. Sherrill emphasizes the assisting utilization of "imagination" as an element necessary to create a collectively conceptualized sacred space. This imagine flourishes without concretely provided information, such as that which might be present in a museum plaque to accompany an artifact in a crowded wunderkammer.

In one example Sherrill uses to discuss American Civil Religion in the second half of the 20th century, it says "Sometimes home seemed so beautiful and right it was hard to believe the

War was really going on out there in the fringes of the world, the bleak foreign battlegrounds and alien oceans" (Sherrill 315). Similarly, I believe placing the Mummy of Young Princess in this visually distracting room of the Chamber of Wonders, with only a small plaque hidden in the corner with offensive text, *does* distract from the real context and implications of her presence in the Chamber of Wonders at the Walters Art Museum. On the subject of museums generally, O'Neil makes a good point in asking "What would the proverbial Martian make of these strange places which gather up the remnants of the past and the corpses of other species, and sometimes of the dominant species, and arrange them in buildings which people attend for viewing?" (54). The conflict within the Chamber is similar to the concepts Chidester and Linenthal discuss with the National Holocaust Musuem in Washington, D.C.: "Here, the issue was not who got 'wall space in the permanent exhibition, but what space was appropriately 'owned' by what group, who was at home in certain space, and who was a visitor in another person's memorial place" (Chidester and Linenthal 238). When visiting the Walters, guests are not provided with sufficient tools to begin asking these crucial questions about the space. In fact, as exemplified in the display of the Mummy of a Young Princess, they are intentionally steered away from such critical thinking.

Perhaps a better alternative to the lack of information provided in the Chamber would be one like this one offered by Buggeln: "In each gallery substantial interpretive labels reflect an interdisciplinary, politically sensitive approach to American art, and the 'instructive' aims of the labels are palpable. The main introductory label, for instance, foregrounds the 'many voices' approach to American culture: 'cultural diversity and complexly is a historical fact of life in the United States, one whose impact is increasingly visible in the objects displayed in these galleries'" (Buggeln 43).

Even though I focus on the example of the Mummy of a Young Princess, it is important to note that, "as artefacts, collections have a kind of coherence, a kind of integrity, as singular entities even though they are made of physically separate things […] the associations that link the individual elements of a collection give the collection a presence in the world, an actuality, which extends beyond the existence of the individual elements that constitute it" (Satterthwait 25).

Because the museum is meant to represent a pillar of American Civil Religion as an educational institution that trains civilians, the sacrality that should be associated with this status fails when the education the Walters provides is manipulative and incomplete. In the contest of discussing the Walters as a sacred space because it is inherently contested, the contestation holds true, even while the discussion of it has not yet begun within an accessible public context.

The case of the Chamber of Wonders within the Walters perfectly exemplifies Buggelns claims about the subjectivity of sacrality and the power of museum-controlled narratives: "An experience of the sacred might erupt anywhere and at any time based on a visitor's unique encounter with space and artifacts, and many aspects of this encounter are out of the control of the museum. Yet museums do, in a variety of ways, attempt to engage or hold at bay the power of the sacred" (34). The rhetoric and visual vocabulary present in the Chamber of Wonders lends itself to evidence that the museums prioritizes imperialist narratives as more sacred than the narratives of the cultures of origin exhibited in the room–and they urge the observer towards this prioritization as well. The influence this presentation has is amplified by the power the institution of museums has over American society as a pedestal of American Civil Religion. The contestation that begets the sacrality of this space may lead us to future questions about national identity, and the ideas and spaces we worship to create it.

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