

Message from the Editors

## Art & Cultural Institutions and AAPI Communities

Franklin Odo and Paul Ong

Over the last several decades, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) have struggled to ensure that their peoples, histories, and cultures are accurately represented. Unfortunately, popular images of AAPIs have been based on simplistic stereotypes of perpetual foreigners or disease-bearing poor or unfair competitors in the marketplace or “model minorities,” images that have had serious negative implications for AAPI communities. Accurate or “authentic” representation of AAPI cultures and history are clearly important elements in America’s ability to acknowledge our presence, our complex roles in society, and our problems and potentials. As historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen discovered, Americans are most likely to trust grandparents or relatives and museums to tell the truth about the past or accurately represent historical events.<sup>1</sup> And since so much of prevailing stereotypes depend upon false or misleading interpretations of historical events such as immigration, relationships to countries of origin, class-based hierarchies or gender issues, there is a visceral sense that museums and other cultural institutions, traditionally viewed as “temples” of beauty and truth, must become more accountable. Because we are unlikely to have serious influence on very many grandparents anytime soon, museums and similar institutions like libraries and historical societies become the default targets to secure more accurate representation, or even representation at all, of AAPI communities and their diverse experiences.

These institutions have become, in short, serious sites of contestation—among the latest battlegrounds in the American culture wars. With approximately 18,000 museums and 16,500 public libraries in the nation, the stakes are extremely high. Of the field in general, Richard Kurin (1997) noted:

Cultural scholars and curators face a fundamental contradiction, one that is all too evident at the meetings of any of their professional associations. We claim a special empathy for, an understanding of, and an ethical relationship with the people we study and represent. Yet, if we are so close to the people and communities struggling with cultural issues, those people should be flocking to us for knowledge, wisdom, and insight. They—the studied, the represented, the brokered—should be coming to our meetings, enrolling their children in our courses, reading our books, even joining our ranks. In the United States this is not happening. The participation of African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and Asian Americans in the cultural studies and curatorial fields is stunningly low (280).<sup>2</sup>

Despite this less than sanguine assessment, there has been some progress with respect to improving the treatment of AAPIs by cultural institutions.

Limited but nevertheless important progressive changes have emerged from at least three sources. The struggle to make cultural institutions more representative and accountable is part and parcel of the larger struggle by people of color and their allies for equality and justice. During the latter part of the twentieth century, the civil rights movement and later the more militant offshoots forcefully transformed this nation politically and socially, and the cry for self-determination included the right to control one's collective identity. While many mainstream institutions have resisted change, there have been sympathetic insiders who have supported the struggle because of a deep sense of moral and professional obligation to "do the right thing." They have played an important role in initiating and carrying through the process of self-evaluation and self-criticism vital to reformulating institutional canons, policies and practices. Finally, AAPIs have seized the openings created by the larger social movements to move away from being passive subjects to being active agents. In the early years, activist AAPIs mainly pressured from the outside, participating in protest politics against mainstream institutions, but over time, they have worked their way into the "belly of the beast" and equally important have established parallel and counter organizations.

How far AAPIs have gone and how far we still have to go can be seen in the Smithsonian Institution, where the guest editor Franklin Odo works. It is the world's largest museum complex

with nineteen museums and dozens of research and education units. The APA Program has been in existence for a decade and has created, hosted or traveled a dozen exhibitions and presented over 100 public programs. Unfortunately, the program has only a small staff confronting over 160 years of neglect, and the fact remains that almost all advances within the Smithsonian are attributable to efforts based in this Program.<sup>3</sup> Other major institutions like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Asian Art Museum, and the de Young Museum in San Francisco, are also changing and making serious strides acknowledging the importance of Asian American artists and their work. Sadly, these changes are more the exception than the norm.

Ethnic-based institutions have played a role in filling gaps. This approach is not new, as show by the experience in Hawai`i, where AAPIs comprise approximately two-thirds of the Aloha State's population. In addition to the preeminent Bishop Museum, the museums on Neighbor Islands regularly feature AAPI collections, exhibitions, and programming. But the State also has many ethnic-specific institutions such as the Hawai`i Chinese History Center, the Filipino Community Center, the Japanese Culture Center of Hawai`i, and the Hawai`i Okinawa Center. As significantly, the Hawai`i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, the first state entity created after the National Endowment for the Arts established art agencies for the states in 1965, is generously funded and supports hundreds of organizations and individuals involved in APA arts and culture. Beyond Hawai`i, there are examples of history-making achievements. The tepid and slow response from mainstream institutions on the mainland has generated a major wave of ethnic-based initiatives, including the Japanese American National Museum (JANM), Visual Communications and Korean American Museum in Los Angeles, the Center for Asian American Media in San Francisco, the Filipino American National Historical Society based in Seattle, the Museum of Chinese in the Americas in New York City (MoCA), and the Chinese Historical Society of New England. As a pan-AAPI museum, Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle represents an important and promising development that mirrors a broader political effort to build organizations across ethnic lines.

The "brick and mortar" organizations have been complement by other cultural activities. The spectacular growth of *hula halau*, Native Hawaiian dance troupes, or the Japanese American

taiko drumming groups, are examples of extraordinary cultural vigor. The number of Asian American film festivals has grown steadily, and the number of films screened has mushroomed—the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival began in 1982 showcasing thirteen films; in 2007, fifteen years later, it featured nearly 150 films to enthusiastic audiences.<sup>4</sup> Equally impressive is the embrace of new technology to expand AAPI cultural space. Wing Luke has worked with community stakeholders including Densho (Japanese for “to pass on to the next generation”), a state-of-the-art web-based database of searchable video histories of Japanese Americans and WWII. JANM covers the entire history of the Japanese in America and has a substantial website on the Japanese diaspora in the Western Hemisphere. MoCA has also developed an extensive website, with a focus on providing historical and contemporary information about its immediate local community, New York City’s Chinatown.

The organizations emerging out of the struggle have made tremendous strides, have gained influence, and exhibit tremendous vitality. JANM is arguably the largest and most successful of any ethnic-specific museum in the nation, with approximately 100,000 sq. ft. under roof. MoCA and Wing Luke are completing capital drives to restore historical buildings to house their operations. The leaders of ethnic-based institutions have a major presence in mainstream museum circles. JANM’s President and CEO, Irene Hirano, currently serves as Chair of the Board of the Association of American Museums, and Ron Chew, executive director of Wing Luke, is an occasional contributor of provocative essays to *Museum News*, the magazine of the Association of American Museums. Despite these accomplishments, many more organizations are facing an uphill battle to secure adequate resources. The Filipino American National Historical Society still does not have a permanent home for its collection, although its current plans are to locate in Stockton, CA. There are, as yet, no museums specifically focusing on South Asian or Southeast Asian groups, although the University of California, Irvine, houses the Southeast Asian Archives, which include paintings and some documents.

Because the struggle to transform art and cultural institutions is far from over, the work to be done should be informed and guided by lessons learned from previous efforts. This special issue of *AAPI Nexus* on cultural institutions adds to our collective knowl-

edge and wisdom. The five articles provide important insights into how mainstream cultural institutions have changed, the challenges facing professional practice, and how ethnic-specific cultural institutions are faring. The Research Article by Clara Chu and Todd Honma, "Libraries as Contested Community and Cultural Space," illustrates the highly charged politics that are often intrinsic to the process of change. They examine the resistance by established powers to efforts to make the Bruggemeyer Memorial Library in the City of Monterey Park better serve the fast-growing Asian American population. The lessons are that progress does not come easily and the battles hard-fought. Securing the cooperation of mainstream institutions, nonetheless, is critical, particularly in regions with smaller AAPI populations. The Resource Paper by John Rosa, "Small Numbers/Big City: Innovative Presentations of Pacific Islander Art and Culture in Arizona," shows how AAPI communities have worked with established non-AAPI cultural institutions in the Phoenix area to display and preserve AAPI culture and art. Equally interesting, he also shows how the Pacific Islanders can benefit by collaborating with Native Americans and with the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The lesson here is the importance of partnerships to accessing existing resources and developing new synergies.

Two articles focus on professional practices. While institution building and transformation are critical, the quality of the final product is determined by the abilities and accomplishments of those working within the institutions. ShiPu Wang's Practitioner's Essay, "The Challenges of Displaying Asian American" discusses the challenges related to art exhibitions from a curator's perspective. The article examines the historical and contemporary obstacles and reasons behind the lack of exhibitions of Asian American works in the United States. History is not just the past but is also a legacy. Because mainstream cultural institutions failed in the past to acquire or keep Asian American art, the inventory of readily available pieces is sparse, and what does exist is not well inventoried. The lesson is that the struggle has to take place on two fronts, making changes to contemporary practices and recovering the past. Lewis Kawahara's Resource Paper on "It's Alive! Sounds for the Vault" discusses the difficulties facing ethnic-specific organizations in collecting, preserving, and making available sound collections. The responses provided by twenty-nine community-

based organizations and museums reveal that much more is still needed in caring for and maintaining an AAPI sound collection.

Leslie Ito's Practitioner's Essay "Seeds of Succession" raises critical questions about the future direction of the movement to improve the cultural presentation of AAPIs. Her article looks specifically at a personal journey involving a sudden leadership transition within Visual Communications, one of the nation's premier AAPI media arts center. Her training and experience say much about the programs and mentoring needed to prepare the next generation of leaders. Visual Communications is not alone in facing an intergenerational transition. Many of our pioneers are reaching retirement age, both within cultural institutions and other types of AAPI organizations. The general sense is that many of these organizations are not well-prepared for this transition, and time is getting short to address existing shortcomings.

The task before us, however, is not limited to identifying individuals as new leaders. The movement itself has undergone a change from the early days when AAPIs were fighting from the outside. AAPI concerns have become more accepted by cultural institutions, ethnic organizations have become more institutionalized, and AAPI activists have become more professionalized. All of these are essential to progress, but there is a potential downside. Incorporation of AAPIs individually and organizationally by this nation's art and cultural sector can lead to political complacency and isolation from the broader social movement long before the ultimate goals are achieved. The larger challenge before us, then, is renewing the passion for progressive social change.

## Notes

1. Their study was based on telephone interviews with 1,500 adults. We may be encouraged to learn that Disney and Hollywood were not deemed equally trustworthy. See Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen. 1998. *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
2. Richard Kurin. 1997. *Reflections of a Cultural Broker*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.
3. For example, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Archives of American Art have collections of Asian American work; so does the National Portrait Gallery. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden has been less successful although it recently acquired Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree for Washington DC*. The National Museum of American History plans to create another

exhibit focusing on Japanese Americans and World War II, following the deinstallation of its popular *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution*. The National Museum of the American Indian does not collect Native Hawaiian or Samoan or Chamorro objects but occasionally provides public programming featuring these communities. Even the National Zoo has assisted endangered species in Hawai'i and features the rarely seen *i'imi*, the honeysuckle creeper in its aviary. As the nation's cultural keeper, the Smithsonian Institution has not yet done an adequate job providing for APA representation.

4. See the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) website: [www.asianamericanmedia.org](http://www.asianamericanmedia.org).

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