

### *The Founding of the MFA: Myths and Realities*

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), one of the first major museums in the United States, was an ambitious undertaking. The committee that formed the museum wanted to create an educational institution that would cause Americans to develop a taste for the fine arts<sup>1</sup>. Critics objected to the museum's eclectic collection and accused the museum of simply being an imitation of European museums.<sup>2</sup> I want to look at the myths surrounding the formation of the Boston MFA, that is, the myths born out of criticism by Americans and Europeans alike. In re-evaluating these myths in terms of America's cultural climate and the practical limitations of creating a new museum in Boston, I argue that we can understand the formation of the MFA as the start of a unique and American institution. I then re-evaluate the situation surrounding the museum boom in Abu Dhabi using the MFA's history as a lens through which to view the Abu Dhabi museums as unique to their region and time.

The Boston MFA was one of the first large museum institutions created in the United States. Although there had been previous attempts to create large museums in America, during the 1870s there was a unique set of circumstances that led to the founding of

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<sup>1</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 8. JSTOR.

<sup>2</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009: 263.

museums in New York, Washington, and Boston<sup>3</sup>. At this time in Boston, there were multiple institutions that needed more space to house their growing collections of art. Specifically, Harvard, MIT, and the Boston Athenaeum were acquiring new collections but lacked the facilities to display them. Charles C. Perkins, a Boston intellectual, was instrumental in the creation of the MFA. Perkins was a theorist and a member of Boston's elite 'Brahmin' class, so was in a perfect position to organize and execute this endeavor. He was also the brother of Edward N. Perkins, the head of the Fine Arts Committee at the Boston Athenaeum. The Boston Athenaeum's Fine Arts Committee, while often incorrectly considered to provide the 'nucleus' of the MFA's first collection<sup>4</sup> nevertheless contributed a great deal of resources to the founding of the MFA. The Athenaeum was both a library and a fine arts gallery, but the Library Committee and the Fine Arts Committee were constantly vying for space and money. As the library started to receive more resources, it was difficult for the Fine Arts Committee to continue supporting the arts: "The Fine Arts Committee was left with this difficult task, while its independence and power—and even its true institutional affiliation and system of support—remained highly ambiguous.<sup>5</sup>" In order to continue its mission of contributing to the appreciation of the fine arts in Boston, the Fine Arts Committee became more involved with the formation of a citywide institution. They donated space and pieces of art to the early museum exhibitions that occurred before the

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<sup>3</sup> Coleman, Lawrence Vail. *The Museum in America: A Critical Study*. Vol. 1. Washington: American Association of Museums, 1939: 17.

<sup>4</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009: 231.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

museum had a permanent building<sup>6</sup>. The early MFA also collaborated with the newly formed MIT architecture department, which had a large collection of plaster casts. When the MFA was founded in 1870, the trustees included three members of the Athenaeum, three people from MIT, and three from Harvard. Charles Perkins, who served as honorary director under president Martin Brimmer during the early years of the MFA, had a hand in most major decisions including the work that the museum acquired and showed. Perkins believed that the increase in public appreciation of art could “only be done by the organization of comprehensive museums, which will raise the standard of taste, furnish materials for study to artists and archaeologists, affect industry, and provide places of resort for the general public where amusement and unconscious instruction will be combined.”<sup>7</sup> He used this philosophy to shape the MFA as an educational institution modeled after the South Kensington Museum in England.

When the museum was founded, its three goals were to (1) make the art in Boston available to the public, (2) develop a comprehensive museum, and (3) instruct people in the studio arts. In order to accomplish these goals, the committee started hosting exhibitions in the Athenaeum’s building with loaned art from the Athenaeum, MIT, and Harvard. Eventually they amassed enough of a collection through donations and loans to move into a larger space—a ‘terra-cotta Gothic structure’<sup>8</sup> in Back Bay designed by architects Sturgis and Brigham. The early MFA did not have many funds and spent their

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<sup>6</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 5. JSTOR.

<sup>8</sup> Whitehill, Walter Muir. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1970. 16.

money on securing reproductions of famous works and trying to amass enough of a comprehensive collection to present an overview of global artistic history. Unlike their European counterparts, they did not own all of the works, and relied heavily on loans and donations from wealthy collectors. Among the original body of work displayed at the 1876 MFA (when they moved into the Back Bay building) were paintings by Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Crawford, Washington Allston, Joseph Duplessis, and Joseph William Turner, plaster casts lent by the Athenaeum, Egyptian sculptures, artifacts from the Cesnola collection of Cyprus antiquities, various tapestries and pottery, Japanese artifacts, examples of German and Venetian glass, photographs of old master drawings, carved wood, and prints lent by Harvard University<sup>9</sup>. With the new space in Back Bay and a rise in donations, the MFA was able to realize its goal of having a school for studio art. Previously, Boston had not had an art school on the level of New York and Philadelphia's<sup>10</sup> and the main mode for teaching art to young Americans was to send them to Europe to learn: "It was out of the question for anyone who wished to study art seriously to remain in Boston, if he could afford to cross the Atlantic."<sup>11</sup> Art education was not considered necessary in American society: "The artist was popularly supposed to be an inspired being, needing only his inspiration, depending solely on the 'Divine Afflatus.'"<sup>12</sup>

As a new institution, the MFA was not safe from critics, both from America and Europe. American museums were seen as trying to catch up to the 'great museums

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27-37.

<sup>10</sup> Peirce, H. Winthrop. *The History of the School of the Museum of the Arts, Boston 1877-1927*. Boston: T.O. Metcalf, 1930. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Whitehill, Walter Muir. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1970. 42.

<sup>12</sup> Peirce, H. Winthrop. *The History of the School of the Museum of the Arts, Boston 1877-1927*. Boston: T.O. Metcalf, 1930: 15.

abroad.<sup>13</sup> Even as early as 1816, Americans were fighting to convince the world that they were capable of possessing ‘taste.’<sup>14</sup> Instead of considering America as a separate entity, it was viewed as the daughter of England, and could owe its successes to that fact.<sup>15</sup> However, despite its European heritage, it was believed that culture would never take root in America.<sup>16</sup> Such criticism suggests that an art museum was necessary and yet doomed to fail in the eyes of critics. Hira Hirayama summarizes the criticism of the MFA as “a variety of perceived faults: that it was a mausoleum of accumulated family wealth; that the founders imposed European notions of art on native taste; that the museum institutionalized the hierarchical distinctions between high and popular cultures; and that the museum movement in general was a quintessential manifestation of the vulgar, Gilded Age worship of money and consumption.”<sup>17</sup> Critics were also skeptical that an art museum would ever succeed in America without any works by old masters or the means to secure them.<sup>18</sup> To complicate the lack of original artwork in America, Parisians were resistant to Americans legally buying French artwork, because they felt that Americans were unable to understand it properly.<sup>19</sup> The irony in this situation was noted in 1887: “While the standard of art is higher in France than in America, what better means could Americans

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<sup>13</sup> Coleman, Laurence Vail. *The Museum in America: A Critical Study*. Vol. 1. Washington: American Association of Museums, 1939: 18.

<sup>14</sup> "For the North-American Journal. Institution for the Fine Arts." *The North-American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 2.5 (1816): 153-64. JSTOR.

<sup>15</sup> "The Americans, in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations by Francis J. Grund." *The North American Review* 46.98 (1838): 111. JSTOR.

<sup>16</sup> "A Frenchman's "Coup D'Oeil" of American Art." *The Crayon* 5.1 (1858): 11. JSTOR.

<sup>17</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009: 263.

<sup>18</sup> South, Erastus. "An Art-Musée in America." *The Aldine* 5.6 (1872): 127. JSTOR.

<sup>19</sup> Durand-Gréville, E. "Private Picture-Galleries of the United States. First Article." *The Connoisseur* 2.2 (1887): 90. JSTOR.

employ to elevate their taste than to lavish their money upon French art works?"<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, a Frenchman visiting America felt that the galleries in New York (which were representative of galleries elsewhere) were too 'eclectic.'<sup>21</sup> This criticism suggests cultural elitism by Europeans who gave authority to the established museums in Europe. While there is certainly merit to these arguments, I want to specifically tackle the notion that museums in America were doomed due to lack of funds or taste. Through the efforts of Charles Perkins and the early museum committee, I believe the MFA was able to carve a niche as a new kind of museum, and a uniquely American institution.

I intend to re-evaluate the criticism of American museums by examining the practical impetuses for the museum's decisions. One criticism was that American museums were lesser imitations of European museums, and that they focused too heavily on displaying European goods. Kouwenhoven suggests that even though the museum was intended to assist industrial design, it was all just part of the "tradition which had dedicated itself to persuading the Americans that they were a 'raw and noisy and obtrusive people' who could be saved only by placing themselves under the influence of the past and reverently studying specimens of the arts of luxury from Europe."<sup>22</sup> Let us first tackle this criticism by examining in what ways the MFA was modeled after European tradition, specifically the South Kensington Museum.<sup>23</sup> Hirayama summarizes the founding principles and influences of the MFA:

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<sup>20</sup> Durand-Gréville, E. "Private Picture-Galleries of the United States. First Article." *The Connoisseur* 2.2 (1887): 90. JSTOR.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>22</sup> Kouwenhoven, John Atlee. *Made in America; the Arts in Modern Civilization*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948: 115.

<sup>23</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 15. JSTOR.

Instead of being a mere extension of the Athenaeum, the new institution was to become, in Charles Perkins's view, a didactic museum with illustrative collections and an art school. The proposed museum was to be committed to the cultivation of public taste for the ultimate improvement of industrial design, operating not like the Louvre or London's National Gallery but exactly like the South Kensington Museum.<sup>24</sup>

In order to cultivate industrial design, Perkins convinced the museum to show many decorative objects and plaster casts. The museum even purchased a large set of Italian artifacts from Castellani, an Italian dealer, in 1880.<sup>25</sup> As a final example of the South Kensington influence, the architects modeled the original Back Bay building after the gothic style emulated in the South Kensington Museum.<sup>26</sup> Despite these similarities, and the fact that there were many European works shown in the museum, there were many factors to suggest that the MFA did not completely imitate the South Kensington Museum.

The United States was very different from Europe. Perkins recognized that the lack of central authority in America made it more difficult to suddenly create a new museum. In speaking of Europeans, he claims "They do not recognize that we are called upon to solve a new problem, and to discover some way of overcoming the obstacles which are created by our position."<sup>27</sup> Without any princely galleries to begin with, the founders of the MFA had to look to local institutions for support and to loan them their collections.<sup>28</sup> As the committee began plans for the MFA before they had a dedicated collection, Perkins urged Boston to be patient and focus on building a collection before constructing a physical

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<sup>24</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009: 241.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>26</sup> Whitehill, Walter Muir. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1970: 25.

<sup>27</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 26. JSTOR.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

building. They followed his advice, and it took six years from incorporation before the MFA placed the artwork in the Back Bay establishment.

America also had a unique social situation that led to the creation of multiple museums in 1870. After the Civil War there was a period of prosperity in the northern United States, which led to an increased interest in culture.<sup>29</sup> Judith Blau claims that “Typically, the impetus for establishing a museum comes from a civic association composed of a broad segment of city notables—wealthy entrepreneurs, collectors, civic leaders, along with educators and artists—and this pattern has been fairly persistent over time.”<sup>30</sup> These factors resulted in more American collectors, and allowed for the formation of a committee of notables willing to devote the time to creating an artistic institution in Boston. Unlike the royal art collections in Europe that served as basis for many European museums, Americans created their own cultural environment through individual collection and a commitment to donating to these public institutions. As a result, some including Lewis Mumford have argued that “by the patronage of the museums the ruling metropolitan oligarchy of financiers and officeholders establish their own claims to culture: more than that they fix their own standards of taste, morals and learning as that of their civilization.”<sup>31</sup> This would suggest that the museum committee was beholden to their patrons, and that just like these new collectors, they were trying to fill their walls with anything that seemed ‘cultured.’ Neil Harris argues that despite the collecting activity of these *nouveaux riches*,

It was not a matter of trying to force Victorian standards down the throats of countrymen who reveled in plain design and bright colors, but rather to stem the tide of ‘indifferent’ European paintings and designs which were flooding America, to

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<sup>29</sup> Blau, Judith R. "The Disjunctive History of U.S. Museums, 1869-1980." *Social Forces* 70.1 (1991): 88. JSTOR.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938: 32.



produce an 'educated public' with an appreciation of artistic meaning and purpose. This was the museum's function.<sup>32</sup>

To support this view, the collections were not composed of only European goods. Harris suggests that the prominence given to "Asiatic and Near Eastern designs in the Boston Collection, and to handicrafts and household wares, seems to belie the charge that the founders adhered rigidly to European traditions of gentility."<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, Americans were impatient to increase the cultural appreciation in Boston, which prior to the MFA "was essentially a Puritan town, and with all its virtues, the English Puritan Reformation had been an anti-art movement from the time when Cromwell smashed church windows and knocked off the heads of gothic saints."<sup>34</sup> Art museums were recognized by many as a tool for elevating American artistic taste to keep up with their successes in manufacturing and social order.<sup>35</sup> The impatience is evident in how the MFA moved quickly to host exhibitions in temporary galleries before their permanent building was constructed. Those outside of the United States also recognized that it would not be long before Americans would want to enter the art world. According to the *Chronique des Arts*, "The day cannot be far distant... when the United States will desire to form collections, for it is impossible to admit that so intelligent a people can long continue to ignore the fact that the fine arts make men moral by raising them to a comprehension of the beautiful, and that they increase the wealth of nations by developing good taste in their artisans."<sup>36</sup> In the

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<sup>32</sup> Harris, Neil. "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement." *American Quarterly* 14.4 (1962): 561. JSTOR.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Peirce, H. Winthrop. *The History of the School of the Museum of the Arts, Boston 1877-1927*. Boston: T.O. Metcalf, 1930: 11.

<sup>35</sup> Hale, Edward E. "Fine Art in Massachusetts." *The Art Review* 1.3 (1871): 2. JSTOR.

<sup>36</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 25. JSTOR.

same publication, it urged France to purchase French masterpieces before American institutions took them. The desire for greater cultural affinity in America was one of the founding theoretical impetuses for the creation of the MFA, and led the committee to focus on creating a didactic, instead of aesthetic, program at the museum.

As a result of the American social situation, impatience, South Kensington inspiration, funding, and the institutions present in Boston, the early MFA displayed a unique and eclectic set of artwork. Due to their lack of funding, the committee relied on donations, loans, and cheaper reproductions to create a collection. Although they did not have a lot of American art<sup>37</sup> at the start, they tried to support the American arts whenever possible. Of the 56 paintings that the Athenaeum donated to the MFA when it opened, 18 were by American artists,<sup>38</sup> and in 1880 they had an exhibition of living American artists that was very well received.<sup>39</sup> In the event they came into money, the museum consciously decided to first buy cheap pieces, then decorative art, then works from Boston artists, and finally would acquire permanent works at small cost.<sup>40</sup> They felt they could make the most progress in terms of pedagogical benefit by acquiring greater volume in the form of reproductions and plaster casts. Perkins knew their situation and was looking to create a museum:

...mostly composed of reproductions of statues, architectural fragments, monuments, gems, coins, inscriptions, &c. &c. These will answer our purpose, *as we*

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<sup>37</sup> It's important to note that much of the highly regarded 'American' art was produced in Europe at this time. People in general were still unsatisfied with American art production and hoped that the MFA would stimulate a national style.

<sup>38</sup> Hirayama, Hina. "The Boston Athenaeum and the Creation of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts." *The Boston Athenaeum: Bicentennial Essays*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. Boston, MA: Boston Athenaeum, 2009: 254.

<sup>39</sup> Whitehill, Walter Muir. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: A Centennial History*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1970: 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

*aim at collecting material for the education of a nation in art, not at making collections of objects of art. That must be done at a later stage of national development, when we are willing to pay for them.*<sup>41</sup>

These were arranged chronologically to add to their educational benefit. Therefore, it is true that the MFA's collection did not have as many historical objects as a great European museum, but by working within their constraints the museum committee was able to create a quality institution dedicated to education. Instead of forming a museum around a vast set of objects, they intentionally filled their walls with objects to complete a historical story. A European author suggested that Americans needed to be very strict about what they showed to the public in their museums because "Although Americans have bought hundreds of fine works of art during the last ten or fifteen years, the supply of fine things available for any American is still, undoubtedly, small compared with that of the great European collections, while the supply of worthless things bought by earlier generations is very large."<sup>42</sup> As a counter to this view, we can consider that the MFA was not at the mercy of its sparse collection, but used what it had to intentionally create something better and different than a European princely gallery. Ferdinand Eckhardt captures this sentiment in 1953 when he critiqued American museums through the lens of a European visitor: "The American museum does not look back but concentrates on shaping the mind of the man of today or even better of tomorrow, to create the really internationally minded world citizen."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 8. JSTOR.

<sup>42</sup> "The Purpose and Policy of National Museums." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 9.37 (1906): 5. JSTOR.

<sup>43</sup> Eckhardt, Ferdinand. "American Museums Seen through the Eyes of a European." *College Art Journal* 12.2 (1953): 136. JSTOR.

It is evident that the founders of the MFA wanted to increase cultural appreciation in America, which they did through “comparison, not imitation”<sup>44</sup> of European artwork and museums. Many aspects were borrowed from the South Kensington Museum, including the focus on decorative arts and ties to industrial production, but Americans had a different kind of affinity towards relics, as these objects were not part of their immediate history.<sup>45</sup> According to Eckhardt, this allowed them to view the objects more objectively. As the goal was to educate the nation in art, Perkins summarizes my argument: “It will be seen that no one of the [European] museums of which we have been speaking offers a perfect example of what the American museum should be.”<sup>46</sup> Although the criticism may disagree, the MFA in Boston is a testament to how Americans leveraged their goals to create an institution recognized by Europeans and Americans alike as a unique and worthwhile endeavor.<sup>47</sup> We can look at the current museum-building boom in Abu Dhabi through a similar lens. I would like to propose that the museums in Abu Dhabi, while modeled after Western museums in very obvious ways, are nevertheless unique to Abu Dhabi’s situation.

Abu Dhabi has plans to construct four major museums as part of the Saadiyat Cultural District in order to create a cultural hub in the Middle East. Of particular note are plans for a Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, and a Louvre Abu Dhabi designed by Jean Nouvel. Both buildings leverage the brand names of the associated museums and architects. At the start, “The Guggenheim Foundation will lend works from

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<sup>44</sup> Harris, Neil. "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement." *American Quarterly* 14.4 (1962): 562. JSTOR.

<sup>45</sup> Eckhardt, Ferdinand. "American Museums Seen through the Eyes of a European." *College Art Journal* 12.2 (1953): 135. JSTOR.

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, Charles C. "American Art Museums." *The North American Review* 111.228 (1870): 14. JSTOR.

<sup>47</sup> "The Purpose and Policy of National Museums." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 9.37 (1906): 4. JSTOR.

its collection and also provide curatorial advice as the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi builds its own staff and collection of modern Middle Eastern art.”<sup>48</sup> The Louvre Abu Dhabi has a similar agreement with the Louvre in Paris, which will loan them works and curatorial expertise until the museum can build its own collection. According to McClellan, “Prominent European architects reinforce cultural ties to countries upon which Abu Dhabi will rely for expertise and object loans.”<sup>49</sup> Abu Dhabi must also understand the ‘Bilbao Effect’, in which Gehry’s Guggenheim in Bilbao caused the struggling region to have a prosperous tourism industry. According to the Official Saadiyat website, the items shown in the Louvre Abu Dhabi “will originate from societies and cultures all over the world, but universal themes and common influences will be highlighted to illustrate similarities arising from shared human experience transcending geography, nationality and history.”<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, the ‘universal themes’ that the website mentions primarily refer to ‘western themes’ that have become the de facto art historical narrative. Abu Dhabi has taken a different approach than Qatar, whose new museums were created to celebrate Islamic art and culture.<sup>51</sup> Although some Islamic art will be shown in the Louvre and Guggenheim museums in Abu Dhabi, it will be put into the context of the larger trajectory from ancient to modern times in Western history. McClellan suggests that “It is a testament to how universal western values have become, to how difficult it is to ‘unthink’ western taxonomies, that the Louvre is essentially reproducing itself in the Persian Gulf while

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<sup>48</sup> McClellan, Andrew. “Museum Expansion in the Twenty-First Century: Abu Dhabi.” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1.3 (2012): 277.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Louvre Abu Dhabi Overview.” TDIC, <<http://www.saadiyat.ae/en/cultural/louvre-abu-dhabi1/louvre-abu-dhabi-overview.html>>.

<sup>51</sup> Ouroussoff, Nicolai. “Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity.” *The New York Times* 27 November 2010: A9.

claiming to do something new and different.”<sup>52</sup> Criticism generally takes this stance—that Abu Dhabi is missing an opportunity to showcase Islamic culture in a new way and is instead conforming to western values. Nicholas Ouroussoff of the New York Times believes there is a larger issue at play: “while the money for all these developments comes from Emirati oil, the projects themselves are being shaped almost exclusively by foreigners.”<sup>53</sup> He suggests that instead of creating something to uplift Arab culture, “what is being touted as a society wide embrace of global culture will end up being just another example of cultural colonialism.”<sup>54</sup> In taking this side, western critics are immediately placing Islamic culture as something ‘outside’ and different from the accepted western canon of art.

How does the situation in Abu Dhabi compare to the museum-boom in America during the 1870s? Both Abu Dhabi and America were using well-known art as a basis for bringing cultural recognition to their region. In America this happened through the buying of European art and reproductions. Abu Dhabi is accomplishing this by lifting entire museum enterprises to give their endeavor credibility. In both cases the museums are used as a way to change national identity. Abu Dhabi is trying to change the way the Arab world is viewed by the West, and in the United States the goal was to increase the cultural literacy of Americans so they could reach the level of Europeans. For the museums in Abu Dhabi and the early museums in America, there is criticism as to the authenticity or novelty of such endeavors: “Is it possible, some academics and art experts ask, to create an ‘oasis of culture’ in a place that has no history of museums, no community of artists to speak of, no

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<sup>52</sup> McClellan, Andrew. “Museum Expansion in the Twenty-First Century: Abu Dhabi.” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1.3 (2012): 284.

<sup>53</sup> Ouroussoff, Nicolai. “Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity.” *The New York Times* 27 November 2010: A8.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

collectors, no donors, and where the local passions run to falcons and racehorses rather than to Pablo Picasso and Jeff Koons?"<sup>55</sup>

Just as we can evaluate criticism of American museums by looking at the goals of the institution, let us look at the goals of the Saadiyat Cultural District. According to their website:

An entire district on Saadiyat Island is devoted to culture and the arts. Unprecedented in scale and scope, Saadiyat Cultural District will be a live canvas for global culture, drawing local, regional and international visitors with unique exhibitions, permanent collections, productions and performances. Its iconic institutions will be housed in buildings drawing a statement of the finest architecture at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>56</sup>

They are building these museums in order to increase tourism and traffic to the region, and to “reshape their national identities virtually overnight, and in the process... redeem the tarnished image of Arabs abroad while showing the way toward a modern society within the boundaries of Islam.”<sup>57</sup> The building projects also have an embedded economic root. Since the 1960s, Abu Dhabi has made most of its money through the oil industry, but this only creates stability as long as there is oil available. Creating a cultural hub may be a way to compensate for their ephemeral economy and to prepare for the future.

Abu Dhabi has exorbitant amounts of wealth that allows them to build these museums and bring together names such as the Guggenheim and the Louvre into one location. The buildings will be modern and placed in a new context, even if the content of the museums is still highly influenced by western ideals. Whether critics believe it or not,

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<sup>55</sup> ARTnews. "An Oasis in the Desert." 2/1/2009. *ARTnews*.  
<<http://www.artnews.com/2009/02/01/an-oasis-in-the-desert/>>.

<sup>56</sup> "Saadiyat Cultural District Abu Dhabi". Saadiyat Cultural District.  
<<http://www.saadiyatculturaldistrict.ae/en/saadiyat-cultural-district/about/>>.

<sup>57</sup> Ouroussoff, Nicolai. "Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity." *The New York Times* 27 November 2010: A1.

the art will acquire a new meaning by being placed in a 'Disneyland' of museums, even if it does not act as a perfect 'cultural bridge' as the Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) in Abu Dhabi would like us to believe. Unlike the MFA, the Louvre and Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi will have buildings before they have large collections. However, creating such grand establishments is something that only could be done in a place with large amounts of space and wealth. It also must be remembered that these projects began at the request of Sheikh Khalita bin Zayed al-Nahayan, who wanted to create a miniature city for culture and leisure<sup>58</sup>. The decisions have been strategic, including the choice of museums and architects. It is impossible to ignore the spectacle present in the new establishments— they may be seen as an extreme embodiment of the commodification of art for tourism that happens in museums all over the world. In short, these museums, their architecture and purpose, are unique to Abu Dhabi.

It is easy to get caught up in myths derived from criticism, to get annoyed at Abu Dhabi for co-opting western ideals, or to claim that American museums are cheap imitations of their European counterparts. These myths seem to arise when a group wants to challenge tradition by bringing it to a new place or time. Harris suggests that the new post-Civil War era may have been to blame in the MFA's case: "Any reforming age condemns the immediate past as guilty, by definition. Since the museums themselves were products of an immediately preceding age, it was easier to taint their pedigree and prove their illegitimacy right from the start, than to reveal by more careful analyses just where

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<sup>58</sup> ARTnews. "An Oasis in the Desert." 2/1/2009. *ARTnews*.  
<<http://www.artnews.com/2009/02/01/an-oasis-in-the-desert/>>.



their development diverged from an acceptable pattern.”<sup>59</sup> It is more acceptable to build a museum that tries to fit in with your national identity, as in Doha, than it is to build one ‘out of place,’ like in Abu Dhabi.<sup>60</sup> How do certain canons become the established way of thinking, and when do such controversial actions become acceptable? This process definitely takes time. America is now at the forefront of the art world, yet in the nineteenth century Europeans thought they would never be taken seriously. Rich royals from the Middle East are now spending exorbitant amounts of money in the contemporary art market, just as Americans were doing in the 1800s. Perhaps in the future there will be a globalized art world and art history. In the meantime we can try to respect the institutions’ intentions and recognize when our cultural biases enter the conversation.

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<sup>59</sup> Harris, Neil. "The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement." *American Quarterly* 14.4 (1962): 562. JSTOR.

<sup>60</sup> Ouroussoff, Nicolai. "Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity." *The New York Times* 27 November 2010: A1, 8-9.

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