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‘Authentic reproductions’: museum collection practices as authentication

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Abstract

This article investigates the concept of cultural authenticity in museums through an analysis of how indigenous cultural objects in Taiwan are being authenticated by museums as ‘indigenous cultural heritage’.

In Taiwan, and internationally, indigenous artists and artisans are engaged in the revival of indigenous cultural heritage. Museums are participating in such revival through the acquisition and commission of ‘heritage objects’, newly made artifacts closely resembling their ‘traditional’ correspondent (Clifford 2004). I argue that in so doing, museums are authenticating newly made artefacts as indigenous cultural heritage; in the process, a reproduction is turned into an original, and that original into a canon.

I propose a theoretical and analytical shift away from the authenticity of the object, and towards *authentication* that, I suggest, can be understood as a process intrinsic in several museum practices. The ultimate goal of this article is to cast light on the under-researched role of museums as sites for cultural authentication.

Keywords: authenticity; authentication; museums; indigenous; collections; Taiwan.

Introduction

Practices of copy are central to processes of cultural production and reproduction: as Geurds and Van Broekhoven (2013, 4) put it, ‘culture depends on copying and imitating’. This is all the more the case for indigenous groups engaged in processes of identity-making, self-empowerment, and the promotion of indigenous rights in national contexts dominated by non-indigenous majorities. For indigenous groups such as those in Taiwan discussed in this article,¹ being able to reproduce cultural artefacts of the past and – crucially – tie them through discourse to indigenous identity, can make the difference between cultural survival and assimilation (Varutti 2015).

When set in the context of museums, the notions of copy and reproduction are both problematic and revelatory. On the one hand, the copy may be seen as problematic for museums since the authenticity of museum objects has long been at the very core of the museum concept. Indeed, according to some scholars (Reisinger and Steiner 2006, 67; Wang 1999, 350, both drawing on Trilling), authenticity as a concept originated in the very context of museums, out of a need to make distinctions among artworks, and to justify their market value and artistic status. Authenticity was also a key aspect of the trust and authority that have been endowed to museums since their establishment, in the 18th and 19th centuries, as authoritative public institutions based on scientific and ‘objective’ knowledge. On the other hand, however, the copy has been part of museum practices since their inception. Michelle Henning (2015, 4) notes for instance that

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This article is based on long-term field research conducted in Taiwan (initiated in 2010) among indigenous artists and artisans (with a special focus on Paiwan communities around Sandimen, Pingtung county) and in museums holding indigenous collections.

In the eighteenth century, casts and replicas in a wide range of materials were sold as ornaments and collectables, and there were galleries of plaster-cast facsimiles of antiquities throughout Europe. In Britain [...] the Victoria and Albert Museum established itself as a prototype of a new type of museum, willing to use reproductions instead of originals to enable it to include as much as possible of the world's artworks.

In the light of this tension between the significance of the reproduction of cultural artifacts for today's indigenous groups, and the inherent emphasis of museums on 'the original', it seems interesting to consider the role that museums can play in processes of authentication – and in particular, in the authentication of an indigenous cultural heritage that is essentially based on the reproduction of 'traditional' objects.

In this article, I focus on Taiwanese museum practices of commissioning newly made heritage objects to indigenous artists and artisans in Taiwan. This empirical context opens up for an analysis of the role that museums play in the authentication of indigenous heritage objects. On a more theoretical level, this empirical material enables me to engage with the concept of authenticity. In a paper surveying theoretical approaches to authenticity, Reisinger and Steiner (2006, 66) concluded that the term should be abandoned "because the different concepts, values, and perspectives on the authenticity of objects and activities are numerous, contradictory, and irreconcilable". Whilst acknowledging the problematic blurring surrounding authenticity, I argue that this conclusion is not so much a reason to abandon this concept, as it is an invitation to engage further with it, to achieve higher degrees of conceptual refinement and operativity. In this spirit, I take a constructivist approach to authenticity, whereby I consider authenticity as "a socially constructed interpretation (...) rather than as a real and objective phenomenon discernible

empirically” (Reisinger and Steiner 2006, 67). From this theoretical standpoint, I suggest that: i. we can more fruitfully understand authenticity as a process, rather than as a fixed concept or an inherent property of objects; and ii. museums play a key (yet under-researched) role in such processes.

Methodologically, my analysis is based on long-term field research in Taiwan (since 2010) including direct observation of museum displays; ethnographic fieldwork among Paiwan indigenous communities in Southern Taiwan; and interviews with indigenous artists and artisans from different groups, as well as museum curators and public officials.

Indigenous heritage objects as ‘authentic reproductions’

All around the world, indigenous artists and artisans² are engaged in the retrieval and revival of ‘traditional’ forms of indigenous art and craft (e.g. Berman 2012; Morphy 2008; Rushing 1999; Townsend-Gault et al. 2013). The need for reconnecting with past artistic and craft traditions and related skills and knowledge might be something experienced by many contemporary artists and artisans, yet, such needs are often particularly acute for indigenous makers, given their past (and in some cases recent and ongoing) experiences of colonial dispossession, discrimination and cultural assimilation, which have severed contemporary indigenous communities from their

2 When referring to Taiwan, I use interchangeably the terms ‘indigenous artists’ and ‘indigenous artisans’ since for my Taiwanese interlocutors this distinction is not relevant: for instance, an individual cannot position him or herself as an indigenous artist without having developed a range of skills relating to the making of indigenous cultural objects, and without having gained deep insights into the cultural significance of, and contextual cultural knowledge about, those objects.

cultural roots and cultural heritage.

Internationally, Indigenous Peoples are claiming the rights to re-appropriate, interpret and define their cultural heritage (e.g. Hendry 2005; Sleeper-Smith 2009). As a consequence of colonial indiscriminate collection practices, ethnographic museums have become major repositories of indigenous cultural heritage. Today, in an intriguing twist of history, those same ethnographic museums might also become instrumental to the revival of indigenous cultures through the validation and authentication of contemporary indigenous artefacts. Such authentication enables the shift from the category of ‘items of indigenous art and craft’ to the much more salient and politically powerful category of ‘items of indigenous cultural heritage’. In Taiwan, as elsewhere, heritage is a key political tool for the revival of indigenous identities and the promotion of indigenous rights.

In Taiwan, indigenous populations have been subject to centuries of colonial domination, and as a result, many art and craft traditions among indigenous groups have simply been abandoned and forgotten (see Varutti 2015). Taiwan was first annexed to the Qing Empire in the 16th century, and subsequently became a Japanese colony in 1895. Re-annexed to China in 1945, when Japan was defeated in War World II, Taiwan became the stronghold for the Chinese Nationalist Party – the Kuomintang, or KMT – which established a dictatorial regime that was only to end in 1987.

Today, Indigenous groups represent around 2% of the total population of Taiwan. Sixteen indigenous groups have been officially recognized (the last in 2014), and several others are seeking recognition. In spite of their relatively limited number, over the last three decades the indigenous groups of Taiwan have started to gain national visibility and political weight. Since the 1990s, in connection with Taiwan’s turn to democracy (in 1997) and renewed efforts to redefine Taiwanese national identity, Taiwan’s multicultural roots and indigenous cultures have

been gradually ‘rediscovered’ and re-evaluated. Crucial, in this respect, was the establishment in 1996 of the Council of Indigenous Peoples, a ministry level body composed of indigenous representatives, and solely devoted to indigenous affairs (including the making of specific legislation).³

Taiwan is currently experiencing a revival of 'traditional' forms of indigenous art and craft (Harrell & Lin 2006). Whilst there is an emerging indigenous contemporary art scene in Taiwan, many artists and artisans focus on the reproduction of ‘traditional’ indigenous cultural objects. The term ‘traditional’ is fraught with problematic essentializing connotations, tradition being an ever changing and relational concept.⁴ I therefore prefer to use the expression ‘heritage objects’, put forward by James Clifford (2004, 2013) to denote newly made artifacts closely resembling their ‘traditional’ correspondent. In the case of Taiwan, the ‘traditional correspondent’ refers to objects that were in use or display in indigenous communities in the past century or so, and that have largely disappeared over the 20th century due to predatory collection by anthropologists, museums and private collectors, combined with aggressive colonial policies discouraging—and in some cases, forbidding—specific art and craft practices under claims of ‘modernization’.⁵ This

3 For a more thorough discussion of the historical and contemporary contexts for Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan please see Varutti 2011, 2013a; 2013b; 2015.

4 See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) and the overall body of literature that one might label as ‘post-modern cultural critique’, informed by a critical, de-constructive and self-reflective approach to fundamental concepts in cultural studies such as ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional cultures’, and the way these are conceptualized in the literature (see the seminal Clifford and Marcus *Writing Culture* volume, 1986).

5 This understanding of traditional objects is emerging from conversations with indigenous artists and artisans in Taiwan during my fieldwork.

situation resonates with Clifford's approach to heritage as 'self-conscious tradition (...) performed in old and new public contexts and asserted against historical experiences of loss' (2013, 215).

For instance, the Paiwan group of Southern Taiwan was known for its elaborate wood carvings and specifically carved poles and ceremonial seats that would be located either in front of a house, or inside, to signal the central place reserved for the eldest member of the family, for whom the wood carved seat would designate not only the central position for story-telling, but also a link with the ancestors, and a connection between the earth and the sky, the visible and the invisible. In an effort to discourage such 'superstitious' and 'backward' beliefs and practices, both Japanese and Chinese colonizers engaged in policies of systematic destruction of the carvings. As a result, by the 1970s, there were virtually no woodcarvers among the Paiwan, and those few artists and artisans determined to revive the craft in the early 1980s were discouraged and derided by their very own communities: the sense that these artefacts had little value in the contemporary world had sunk deep in indigenous consciousness. In the light of this hiatus in the production and appreciation of 'traditional' objects, the expression 'heritage object', sketched by James Clifford effectively captures how the making (and remaking) of cultural objects creates frameworks where different generations, different kinds of knowledge, collective and individual ideas, rigorous technique and creativity can productively come together. Tellingly, Clifford (2004, 16) describes such heritage objects as 'specially valued material sites of remembrance and communication.'

Such practices raise the question of authenticity of the cultural objects thus produced. Definitions of authenticity are particularly problematic when pertaining to objects produced by non-Western artists and artisans, since historically, authenticity has been the predicate of Western actors (such as museum curators and scholars) based on western perspectives and values. The paradigms of

‘Primitive art’ and Primitivism in art history offer an illustration of this (Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Price 1989). Currently, and increasingly in Taiwan and all over the world, definitions of authenticity in relation to indigenous art are forged within the indigenous source community, by indigenous artists and artisans themselves (see also Meyers 1995). Indigenous artists and artisans are today not only skilled in articulating *in their own terms* the authenticity and cultural value of their artistic production (through displays, discourse and practice, see Varutti 2015), they are also skilled in reaching out beyond indigenous communities to mobilize those actors and institutions (government bodies, collectors, and most importantly museums) that can lend support and validation to their statements of authenticity. As a result, one can notice a parallel set of indigenous claims at play: indigenous groups are claiming the restitution of their ancient cultural artefacts *from* national museums, but there is also a movement in the reverse direction, whereby indigenous communities are eagerly positioning their newly made heritage objects *in* museums.

Heritage objects in Taiwan

In what follows, I introduce some examples of heritage objects in Taiwan. These examples illustrate the current revival of ancient artistic and craft traditions and will allow me to discuss, in the next section, how Taiwanese museums are responding to such newly made heritage objects.

The first example I propose pertains to the woven textiles of the Atayal indigenous group, produced from ramie fibre. The plants from which the ramie fiber is obtained were traditionally grown in the mountains of northern central Taiwan, where the Atayal indigenous communities mainly reside. However, the elaborate process of turning the plants into the textile fiber was gradually abandoned, and by the early 1990s, only a few elders were still able to produce ramie

fiber according to the traditional method. In an effort to retrieve the almost lost knowledge, contemporary weavers worked closely with elders in order to study the whole process of the cultivation and processing of the plant into ramie fiber, as well as the weaving patterns used in Atayal textiles. After years of research with Atayal elders, as well as through trial and error, one particular weaver, Yuma Taru, was able to identify more than 10,000 Atayal textile designs and more than 300 weaving patterns (Wang 2010). Today, Yuma is known internationally both for her contemporary textile artwork and for her high quality reproductions of traditional Atayal textiles, made using traditional techniques and hand looms. For instance, the costumes used in the 2011 Taiwanese historical movie *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale*⁶ were commissioned to Yuma's workshop, and made with a high concern for historical accuracy and detail.

A second example of revived cultural objects and traditions is provided by the items made of banana fiber by the Kavalan indigenous group. As in the case of Atayal ramie weaving, knowledge about how to produce and weave banana fiber had been forgotten, since the practice had been discouraged during Japanese and Chinese colonization. By the early 1990s, only a few Kavalan elderly women in the village of Xinche, on the north-eastern coast of Taiwan, had kept some memory of the process of banana fiber weaving. In the course of the 1990s, thanks to the combined efforts of a cooperative of Kavalan women weavers, community elders as well as anthropologists from the National Taiwan University in Taipei⁷, it was possible to gradually

6 The movie is a fictional account of an historical event – the 1930 ‘Wushe Incident’ – in the resistance fight of Seediq indigenous groups to the Japanese colonial power

7 The 2011 video documentary *Collected Ping-pu Memories- On Representing Kavalan and Ketagalan Voices and Images*, documents this collaboration. Online: [Collected Ping-pu Memories- On Representing Kavalan and Ketagalan Voices and Images](#)

retrieve the banana weaving skills. Such skills are an exclusive prerogative of the Kavalan group; no other indigenous group in Taiwan can claim such knowledge. The unique ability to produce handicrafts (mainly clothing items) using banana fiber played a central role in the definition, and re-definition, of Kavalan indigenous identity. This became particularly evident when, in 2002, the Kavalan received official recognition as an indigenous group in Taiwan (prior to 2002, they had been considered a sub-group of the Amis indigenous group). The retrieval of banana fiber weaving skills and craft has been crucial in substantiating the Kavalan's claims to the right to be officially recognized as an independent indigenous group of Taiwan since such skills and related cultural objects became an illustration of Kavalan's cultural distinctiveness (Varutti 2015).

A third instance of revived tradition and cultural objects is provided by the making of glass beads by the Paiwan indigenous group of Southern central Taiwan. Glass beads are a culturally salient artifact for the Paiwan: they indicate social status (the Paiwan are known for their hierarchical social structure, see Chen 2011), as well as wealth, and they are still routinely exchanged as gifts at Paiwan weddings. To this day, the origins of Paiwan glass beads are not known – it appears that glass beads were not made by the Paiwan, but introduced to Paiwan communities through trade (Chen 1968). In the course of the 20th century, most ancient glass beads were either lost, destroyed or sold to collectors; thus ancient, original glass beads became rare and highly precious items. In the 1970s and 80s, Paiwan artists and artisans became increasingly interested in finding ways to produce glass beads that had very similar characteristics to the original ones. Through interviews with Paiwan elders and much laboratory experimentation, a few artisans were successful in devising chemical formulas and techniques that resulted in beads very similar to the ancient ones. Today, in Southern Taiwan, glass bead workshops are a thriving reality, providing employment for several local indigenous women, and attracting tourists from Taiwan and beyond.

Atayal ramie textiles, Kavalan banana fiber items and Paiwan glass beads are illustrations of indigenous artists' and artisans' (and by extension, indigenous communities') interest and commitment to the retrieval and reinvention of their heritage, past traditions, and indigenous identity. The making of cultural objects that aim to be very similar to their ancient counterparts raises a legitimate question about indigenous artists and artisans in Taiwan being self-referential, stuck in an inertia of self-reproduction with little room for innovation and creativity. One might even ask whether the Taiwanese case might be an instance of internal orientalism, whereby indigenous makers are the very producers of stereotyped, static representations of indigenous cultures. Whilst these are legitimate concerns, they might not offer a correct interpretation of the situation in Taiwan, since in most instances, the makers of heritage objects are both skilled in the production of heritage objects, and innovative artists able to create artwork that sits outside indigenous cultural terms of reference, and can easily find their place in the broader cross-cultural and international circuits of contemporary art. In other words, from the standpoint of Taiwanese indigenous artists and artisans, it appears that the production of heritage objects is not incompatible nor is it inconsistent with creating other art. In Taiwan, the most accomplished artists and artisans are equally comfortable producing heritage objects, indigenous contemporary art, and contemporary art tout-court. Not all indigenous artists and artisans of course are in this dual position – many prefer to locate themselves on one side or another (traditional or contemporary, indigenous or non-indigenous). Not all museums in Taiwan are equally at ease with these multiple positionings, registers and discourses of contemporary indigenous artists and artisans: some museums wish to collect and display only ancient 'original' cultural objects, whilst others, as I explain below, show an increasing interest for the contemporary creations inspired by ancient artefacts.

What I wish to underline from the examples introduced above, is that Indigenous artists and artisans in Taiwan (and beyond, see Clifford 2013) are reproducing 'traditional' artefacts through research in museums and private collections, as well as interviews with elders in their communities. The recognition of a newly made artefact as both 'traditional' and 'indigenous' comes mainly from two sources: the members of the indigenous source community, and museums (local, but mostly national). From my interviews with indigenous artists and artisans, community elders and cultural bearers, it emerges that some conditions are necessary in order to obtain such recognition: it is crucial that the techniques of production of the newly made objects, the materials used, and these objects' functional and aesthetic properties closely adhere to those of their ancient correspondent. As a result of this, these newly made artefacts are, in substance, contemporary copies of ancient ones. Yet on what basis could one claim that they are less authentic? Heritage objects present us with an example of 'authentic reproduction': they are considered authentic by their makers and their source community on the basis of the objects' close resemblance to their ancient and 'traditional' correspondent. More specifically, heritage objects are illustrations of what Denis Dutton (2003, 259) called the 'expressively authentic', referring to 'the object's character as a true expression of the individual's or a society's values and beliefs'. However, in order for the heritage object to be broadly accepted as authentic beyond its source community, another step is necessary: the museum validation and authentication.

Museums and the commission of heritage objects

Museums in Taiwan are starting to tap into these revived indigenous art and craft traditions. Over the last decade, national museums such as the National Taiwan Museum, the National Museum of

Natural Science, the National Prehistory Museum, as well as the Shung Ye Museum of Formosa Aborigines, have started to regularly invite indigenous artists and craftsmen to view their collections of indigenous material culture – mostly gathered in the course of the late-19th and 20th century by Japanese and Chinese ethnographers (Hu 2007) – in order to study production techniques and artistic styles, and use those ancient artefacts as a source of inspiration for the making of contemporary artwork.

Whilst more and more museums *invite* indigenous artists and artisans within their walls, this does not necessarily amount to adopting a thoroughly open, transparent and participative approach: the act of inviting is in itself an expression of unequal power relations, whereby the subject that is inviting has the power to set the parameters of the invitation, implicitly placing the ‘invited’ in a subaltern position. In such instances, collaboration with indigenous makers runs the risk of enacting another form of appropriation (Ames 1994, 12). Making museum collections thoroughly available to indigenous artists and artisans – that is, giving them unlimited and unconditional access to objects, museum catalogues and other documentation – is not (yet) a widespread practice in museums in Taiwan: only a relatively small number of museums have been experimenting with such collaborative frameworks. In most instances, indigenous representatives are simply ‘invited’ by museums in the context of exhibition projects still largely managed by museum staff (Lin 2009, Varutti 2013b). Nevertheless, these initiatives are important as they pave the way for new relationships between museums and indigenous communities, and enable the latter to re-establish connections with their cultural heritage.

Beyond the mentioned collaborative projects based on exhibitions, another channel for museums to connect with indigenous makers is the commissioning of heritage objects. The commissioning of heritage objects is happening more and more in Taiwan: it has become a way for museums

(especially for national museums with important ancient indigenous artefacts), to update their collections, to document the evolution of indigenous arts and crafts, and through these processes, to impart historical continuity to the representation of indigenous cultures in Taiwan. So for instance, the National Taiwan Museum commissioned Yuma Taru, the Atayal textile artist and weaver, to create 50 Atayal textile items using exclusively ‘traditional techniques’. The same practice has been adopted by the National Prehistory Museum, which commissioned the Kavalan women’s cooperative in Xinshe to produce a set of clothing items made of banana fibre. The National Museum of Taiwan History in Tainan also commissioned banana fiber garments for its collections to the same Kavalan cooperative (Varutti 2013a). Similarly, in 2013 the National Taiwan Museum acquired for its collections a large set of glass bead creations (necklaces, bracelets and other body ornaments – including both heritage objects and contemporary, creative jewelry). It is not only small items that are collected, large canoes have also been commissioned by several museums to the Tao indigenous boat makers on Lanyu island (Summer and Always 2011).

The commissioning of heritage objects brings benefits to both indigenous groups and museums. Head curator Li Tzu-Ning at the National Taiwan Museum explains that ‘the problem is that some of the traditional techniques have been lost, so we let them [*indigenous artists and artisans*] access our collections and see what they can learn from them. We think we can help the local artist, and they can expand our collections’ (personal communication, April 20, 2010). Moreover, Li Tzu-Ning adds, indigenous artisans and artists are also cultural experts, they can provide information and documentation not only about the techniques of production (crucial for the recognition of authenticity), but also about the cultural context, clarifying for instance the meaning of designs, the use of the artifacts, the associated stories or performances. Therefore

making collections accessible and commissioning heritage objects can be seen as first steps in the process of authentication, whereby museums on one hand enable artists' and artisans' research into their own history and cultural identity, as materialized in museum collections, and on the other, they elicit cultural knowledge and expertise that contribute to authenticating the artefacts and their makers.

The commission of heritage objects is by no means a phenomenon exclusive to the context of Taiwan, nor specifically linked to indigenous collections, or specific museum categories. The reproduction of 'traditional' objects is a practice adopted by museums internationally (see for instance *The Great Box Project* at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haidabox>). Indeed, commissioning artefacts has become a method for museological and anthropological research whereby the researcher documents the whole process of reproduction, and uses it as a background for interviews with makers and other members of the source community (see Moutu 2007).⁸ Newly commissioned cultural objects not only enable the creation of insightful ethnographic exhibitions (as evidenced for instance by the research project and exhibition *Pacifika Styles* at the Museum of Anthropology, University of Cambridge⁹), but also point at the emergence of a new display genre, where the newly made object is set into dialogue with the ancient one, enabling narratives on cultural continuity (or change), knowledge transmission, skills and specific terminology. For instance, the *POLIN – Museum of the Polish Jews in Warsaw*, whose exhibitions have been set up by an international and multidisciplinary

8 In 2013, as part of my field research in Taiwan, I also commissioned and collected heritage objects from several indigenous artists and artisans for the ethnographic collections of the Museum of Cultural History of the University of Oslo, Norway.

9 <http://maa.cam.ac.uk/pasifika-styles/>

groups of scholars led by museologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett – has placed at the physical and metaphorical core of its exhibition space a reconstructed, life-size synagogue.¹⁰

The commission of heritage objects transforms museums into key actors in national and international art worlds since through their acquisitions, museums not only create value – cultural, artistic, scientific, historical, and monetary – for these newly made artefacts, they also implicitly define and redefine what is to be considered traditional and contemporary indigenous heritage. In fact, once acquired by a museum (all the more if national), heritage objects become *representative* – of a group, its aesthetics, an artistic style, and material culture; they become portals to a different culture. The process of accession and its practices of selection (what is chosen, what is left behind) and classification substantiate a shift from the ethnographic object understood as a fragment of a culture (following on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of 'objects of ethnography', 1991) to an object representative of that culture. We know that cultural production (including art and craft) is not fixed but evolves over time, adapting to market demands (Myers 2002; Phillips and Steiner 1999). Yet when museums select and purchase one specific reproduction over its variants and interpretations, they are turning that reproduction into something representative: they are transforming a copy into an original, and that original into a canon.

Authenticity and authentication

10 *Gwoździec Re!construction* project: <http://www.polin.pl/en/exhibitions-core-exhibition/gwozdziec-reconstruction>

Whilst audiences come to museums with pre-formed ideas and expectations about what constitutes an authentic object (for instance about what an ‘authentic’, centuries-old artefact might look like), those ideas and perceptions can be influenced by how objects are presented and framed in displays, and by the very authoritative voice of the museum in stating the object’s provenance. Authenticity can here be understood as located at the intersection between audiences’ expectations and assumptions, and museums’ agency in staging displays as authentic. Indeed, in order to capture this dialogical dimension, some authors refer to ‘constructive authenticity’, whereby “tourists are complicit in and aware of the mediation, reconstruction, modification and commodification of cultural heritage in the pursuit of quality of experience” (Bryce et al. 2015, 572). It might be that a heritage object will not be perceived as authentic as the century old ‘original’ that inspired it, yet it will likely be perceived as *more authentic* than another similar reproduction on sale in the airport souvenir shop. This echoes what museum director and scholar Matti Bunzl (2016, 146) calls the ‘multiple degrees of defamiliarization’ of replicas, referring to the different kinds of relations that can exist between the original and its replicas. In Bunzl’s article (2016) this idea is illustrated by the case of an Andy Warhol painting in the *Red Self Portraits* series. There are two such series: the first one is of great value (made in 1964), whilst the second was made in 1965 and was not physically made by Warhol himself but by a collaborator on Warhol’s direct instructions. Whilst Warhol considered the second series no less authentic than the first one (he even chose images from the second series for book covers), their ‘authenticity’ is contested by other authoritative actors: ‘it was his [*Warhol’s*] absence that led the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts Inc, and the Andy Warhol Art Authentication Board, Inc. to withhold its seal of approval. (...) They are neither fakes nor the real deal’ (Bunzl 2016, 145). This example illustrates to what extent authenticity is context-dependent, linked to

changing aesthetic, cultural, social, historical, political, economic, disciplinary and subjective registers. Appadurai (1986, 3), drawing on Simmel, notes that value ‘is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects’; the same can be said of authenticity. Like beauty, authenticity too can be said to be in the eyes of the beholder. Yet authenticity seems to also require an external recognition.

The relative, contingent and unstable character of statements on authenticity only emerge when we consider a broad temporal and cultural framework of analysis, which reveals broad shifts in conceptualizations of authenticity over time and space. When, conversely, a statement of authenticity refers to a specific object, different dynamics are at play: for that authenticity statement to be consequential it is crucial that it gathers consensus – there has to be agreement around it. Unlike an aesthetic judgment, which can be totally subjective, the authenticity of a specific item cannot be single-handedly proclaimed: it needs justification, evidence, argumentation, and general agreement. This is because when referred to a specific object, authenticity is mostly understood as an inherent prerogative of that object, which is *ex post* ‘revealed’ by the statement and recognition of others. It is less common to think of authenticity as something that can be constructed through steps in a process, and even less natural to think of authenticity as ‘attributed’ to an object. Yet it is, ultimately a matter of attribution, a matter of perspective. Michael Pickering sums up this tension between the relative and objective character of authenticity: “‘authenticity’ is a relative concept which is generally used in absolutist terms’ (Pickering 1986, 213). Anthropologist Sally Price offers a way out of this conundrum:

(...) deception about ‘authentic’ versus ‘inauthentic’ artworks can only take place in attributions, labels, and stories about the objects, not in the objects themselves. It follows

that fakes aren't created by artists, but rather by the experts who authorize attributions. Physical objects are never inauthentic; only the claims that are made about them can be inauthentic. (Price 2013, 138)

Making a distinction between the authenticity of the object and that of the discourses attached to it enables us to apprehend what Price calls 'alternative authenticities', that is, situations in which the authenticity of the object is accompanied by the inauthenticity (or inaccuracy) of a discourse relating to it. On this basis, Price continues, 'it might be useful to conceptualize 'authenticity' as a quality that resides in (and depends on) the truthfulness of all the discourses connected to a given object rather than simply those concerning (personal and cultural) authorship and provenance' (2013, 147). Following on Price, I argue that there is something to be gained in shifting our analytical focus from being on the object to the discourses and practices attached to it, and aiming to portray it as authentic. In short, I suggest a shift from the concept of authenticity to the process of authentication.

Authentication can be understood as 'a process by which something – a role, product, site, object or event – is confirmed as "original", "genuine", "real" or "trustworthy"' (Cohen and Scott 2012, 1297). Thus defined, authentication is a process that involves performativity: it is an act of cultural production. In fact, the collection of an object by a museum may be the end result of a satisfactory process of authentication, but in the case of heritage objects, the acts of commission and collection are the very substance of authentication: they produce authenticity. In what follows I consider the ties between authenticity, authentication and museum practices.

Conclusions: authentication as museum practice

The considerations developed in the preceding sections lead me to locate authenticity and authentication at the core of museums and museum practices. In the context of museum work, authentication usually aims to probe the origins of an artefact in order to detect forgery, illicit traffic or other problematic situations. To this end, authentication generally involves a set of actions focusing on the authorship, materiality, techniques of production, and ownership of an artefact, among other considerations. These actions may include for instance laboratory examination of the materials, analysis of condition reports and legal documentation where available, research on provenance, analysis of similar objects in museum collections through digital visual analysis tools (Polatkan et al. 2009), and so on.

Conversely, the commissioning and acquisition of heritage objects considered in this paper point to a different process of authentication, one that begins to unfold *in situ* – in the object’s context of production and at the moment of collection or commission – and then continues within the museum. If we consider what kind of museum practices index and create authenticity, we can see that the acquisition and commission of heritage objects encompass and engender several museum practices that are part and parcel of the making of authenticity – or authentication.

For instance, in museums authenticity is constructed and substantiated not only through the selection of some objects (and makers) and exclusion of others, but also through classifications and taxonomies. For example, the label ‘Primitive art’ authenticated African tribal masks, turning them from ceremonial items and ethnographic artefacts into art collectibles. The format and content of object descriptions also contribute to determine the authenticity of artefacts, for instance, the catalogue may include documentation (such as photos and videos) about the making of the object, showing the process and skills involved, or interviews with the maker or culture

bearers commenting on the cultural significance of the object or related oral history or storytelling. Similarly, the terminology and degree of details used in catalogue descriptions, museum records and documentation, exhibition texts and labels, are also relevant since the use of vernacular and culturally-specific concepts (such as for instance ‘taonga’ for a Maori cultural treasure or ceremonial artefact) as well as rich descriptions revealing high levels of scholarship and connoisseurship, are all elements that signal authenticity. The cultural authenticity of the heritage object is also substantiated by techniques of conservation and storage, specifically if these include, for example, approaches to conservation inspired by indigenous perspectives. Certain woods might need to be treated with oils and herbs; shamanic items and other ritual objects might not be meant to be exposed to view, therefore their storage boxes might be accordingly designed and labeled. Cultural authentication can also be enacted through specific display solutions, using *ad hoc* juxtapositions among objects. The authenticating power of display was exemplified by the transformational effect of the inclusion of ethnographic objects in the *Pavillon des Sessions* of the Louvre Museum in 2000, which turned these artefacts into ‘non-western art masterpieces’ overnight. Similarly, scholarship and research about museum objects (academic publications, but also catalogues, brochures, websites, and other dissemination tools) contribute to singularize and authenticate the objects researched.

What is being authenticated through museum acquisition and commission is not only the object, but also its maker, as a producer of authentic indigenous cultural heritage, with appropriate indigenous and cultural credentials. This form of authentication through personal endorsement can hardly be retracted by museums, as it is based on relations of mutual trust: the statement of cultural authenticity relating to the artefact extends to its maker, it signifies support for the individual.

All these considerations underline the agency and power of curators in selecting makers and objects for museum commissions and acquisitions. As Bruner observes (1994, 400), where authenticity is certified by authoritative actors “the issue of authenticity merges into the notion of authority”. In the Taiwanese museums mentioned in this article, the curators commissioning heritage objects usually have scholarly expertise in the areas of indigenous cultures, history and cultural heritage, and they often personally know indigenous artists and artisans and have long established relationships of collaboration and trust with them. Yet very few of such curators are indigenous, with the paradoxical implication that it is largely non-indigenous curators that select and thus authenticate indigenous cultural heritage.

Today new museum practices – such as the commissioning of newly made traditional objects – are recasting the notion of authenticity. Museums are playing an influential role in statements of authenticity through the process of authentication. In this article, I have endeavoured to cast light on some of the processes – often hidden or inaccessible to wider audiences – through which authenticity is created in and by museums. To this end, I have used insights from field research among indigenous makers and museums in Taiwan to discuss the role of museums as cultural authenticators. In the Taiwanese context examined here, declarations of authenticity appear to be tied not only to the object’s characteristics, but also (and most importantly) to the object’s maker, the source community, curatorial perspectives and the museological practices that implement them.

In order to account for such a contingent, relative character of authenticity, I suggest a renewed focus on the process of authentication, rather than on the authenticity of the object. More specifically, I contend that the role of museums as cultural authenticators has been to this date

largely overlooked, in spite of its prominence: when taking a closer look at museum work, it appears that authentication is embedded in a large number of museological practices.

In particular, I argued that through the commission and purchase of newly made traditional objects, museums are *de facto* authenticating them. What was originally created as a reproduction of an ancient object - that is a copy - once collected by a museum becomes an original, and as such it takes up a new legitimacy as a cultural artifact in its own right, no longer subservient to the ancient traditional correspondent that inspired it. Museum acquisition affects the authenticity and value of heritage objects: by certifying that the maker has used traditional materials and methods, and is a cultural expert, the museum is certifying and specifying the *degree* of authenticity of that object.

From another perspective, this article brings to the fore the uniqueness of the Taiwanese case study. It casts light on the versatility, flexibility and pragmatism of indigenous makers, as they skillfully navigate the complexity of different sites of display (including within the source community, on the marketplace, and in museums), feeling equally at ease producing 'traditional' as well as 'contemporary' artefacts, and being able to mobilize the resources available – such as authenticity – to increase the value (cultural, economic, historical, artistic) of their production. In the same vein, the increasing interest and engagement of museums in Taiwan with contemporary indigenous artists and artisans – taking mainly the form of commissions and acquisition of heritage objects – is indicative of the boldness of some Taiwanese museums: they are not scared to engage with authenticity claims, nor to challenge visitors' expectations (or even to deceive some audiences wanting to see only the ancient 'authentic' collections rather than newly-made heritage objects). Through the collection of heritage objects, Taiwanese museums succeed in positioning indigenous collections firmly in the present, whilst at the same time subtly recasting

notions of authenticity. This invites explorations – as I have endeavoured to do in this article – of the blurred lines between old and new, traditional and contemporary, authentic and authentic reproduction.

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