

From Margins to Center: How Exhibition Labels Shape Cultural Hierarchies in Contemporary Art Museums

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Abstract. This study investigates how exhibition labels in contemporary art museums contribute to the construction and reinforcement of cultural hierarchies through both language and spatial design. While museums are often perceived as neutral repositories of knowledge, they are in fact sites where power operates subtly, shaping visitors' perceptions of cultural value. Drawing on Foucault's concept of knowledge/power and Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, this research focuses on the geographical dimension of cultural hierarchies, specifically the divide between Western art and non-Western art. The analysis is based on qualitative case studies of selected contemporary art museums, combining textual analysis of exhibition labels with spatial mapping of display layouts. Findings reveal that label phrasing, narrative framing, and spatial positioning often privilege artistic traditions from Western art, while relegating works from non-Western art to marginal positions in both language and space. The study also identifies emerging curatorial strategies that decentralize authority and promote more inclusive, decolonial exhibition practices.

Keywords: Exhibition Labels, Language and Power, Cultural Hierarchies, Visual Arrangement, Curatorial Narrative

1. Introduction

Art Museums have long been regarded as neutral spaces for the preservation and dissemination of artworks and art history. Yet, as critical museum studies have shown, they are also sites where cultural power is negotiated, reinforced, and contested [1,2]. In modern public museums, particularly art museums with collections spanning multiple cultures, exhibition labels and spatial arrangements play a crucial role in shaping how visitors perceive cultural significance. Far from being mere accessories to the objects on display, labels are active agents in the construction of meaning: they speak in authoritative voices, select certain narratives over others, and position cultures within implicit hierarchies [3].

The concept of cultural hierarchies is how certain cultures and artistic traditions are accorded centrality and prestige, while others are relegated to the periphery. In this research, cultural hierarchies are examined specifically along a geographical dimension, which the division between Western art and non-Western art. This hierarchy turns the artworks from Western as canonical and central to the narrative of art history, while works from non-Western art are positioned as marginal, supplementary, or ethnographic in character [4,5]. Exhibition labels have become a key tool for

constructing and reproducing these differences, through vocabulary selection, narrative frameworks and translation practices.

Spatial design also plays a significant role in shaping cultural value. This part of the study is building on Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, investigating how the physical placement of objects interacts with textual framing to divide margin and center, for example, central galleries versus side rooms, and prominent sightlines versus obscured corners [6].

Moreover, Michel Foucault's idea of knowledge/power helps explain how museums use their authority to shape hierarchies. The words on exhibition labels do more than describe objects—they carry power, endorsing some cultures and art styles as significant while dismissing others [7].

Therefore, this research asks: Why are some cultures often shown as peripheral in modern art museums? How do language and object placement in exhibitions shape knowledge and strengthen cultural hierarchies? This study looks closely at exhibition labels, curatorial stories, and display layouts in selected museums. It aims to show how these hierarchies are created and maintained. It also explores strategies for more inclusive and decolonial exhibition practices.

2. Literature review

The research of the Contemporary Museum reveals that exhibition labels and spatial layout play a core role in shaping cultural values and maintaining the knowledge system. A large number of scholars have pointed out that museums are not only places for preserving and disseminating artworks, but also Spaces where cultural power is produced, negotiated, and contested [1,8]. Duncan and Wallach demonstrated through the concept of "universal investigative museums" that Western art is systematically placed at the center in the narrative of art history, while non-Western works are classified as "marginal" or "ethnographic" [2]. Clifford and Thomas further emphasized that this center-periphery structure was deeply influenced by colonial history and curatorial context, and non-Western works were often weakened in terms of their artistic quality, becoming a supplement to "cultural materials" [9]. Furthermore, Karp and Lavine pointed out that the arrangement of label language and exhibition space is a political act, which directly affects the audience's understanding of the value of art [4]. This is related to Lefebvre's theory of "space production". Lefebvre's "spatial production" theory reveals how spatial layout materializes cultural levels through the division of the central exhibition hall and the surrounding exhibition areas [6]. In recent years, the decolonization curatorial practices proposed by Sandell and Preziosi & Farago have provided new paths to break the existing power structure, including multi-voice exhibition labels, collaborative narrative writing, and cross-cultural exhibition layouts [5,10].

Existing research provides a theoretical basis, but there is a lack of systematic analysis of how museums jointly construct geographical and cultural hierarchies from the dual dimensions of "language" and "space".

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Museums as sites of power and knowledge

Foucault shows that knowledge and power are closely linked. For Foucault, knowledge is never neutral but is always produced within systems of power. He develops the idea of discourse, meaning structured ways of speaking and writing that determine what can be said, who can speak, and what counts as truth [7]. In museums, this means that exhibition labels do not merely provide information; they are a discourse act that organizes knowledge of art and culture. Labels legitimize certain

viewpoints, establish categories, promote dominant narratives, and reduce the visibility of other voices at the same time.

One of Foucault's core concepts, "the power of truth", is particularly important here. He believes that society establishes specific truths through institutions that claim authority, such as schools, prisons, and museums. Against this background, the museum's label operates as part of the truth system: it presents its interpretation as a fact, natural and indisputable. This reinforces cultural hierarchies, for instance, by positioning Western art as universal art and non-Western art as secondary art or ethnographic art.

Foucault also emphasized that power functions not only through suppression but also through normalization. In exhibition practice, when Western curatorial categories such as "masterpiece", "modern" or "primitive" become the standard terms for audiences to interpret works, standardization emerges. These standardized classifications have shaped visitors' evaluations of cultural values and strengthened the dominant position of Western art.

Building on Foucault's insight, Bennett describes museums as part of an "exhibitionary complex" [1]. In this system, museums and their displays are not passive containers of objects but active instruments of governance and pedagogy. Exhibition practices, including label language and spatial positioning, teach the public how to understand culture and history in ways that privilege certain groups.

3.2. Cultural hierarchies and the politics of display

This research defines cultural hierarchies primarily in geographical terms, focusing on how works from Western art are given prominence while those from non-Western art are marginalized. Duncan and Wallach show that the universal survey museum constructs a narrative of cultural progress that situates European art at the center of world culture [2]. Clifford demonstrates how non-Western art, when exhibited in Western institutions, is often framed through ethnographic or colonial perspectives, reducing its status as art and reclassifying it as a cultural artifact [9]. Karp and Lavine argue that curatorial choices regarding selection, placement, and labeling are not neutral but political acts that directly shape how audiences perceive value [4]. Taken together, these studies underscore that the museum is not only a site of preservation but also a site where geographical hierarchies are produced and maintained through both discursive and spatial practices.

3.3. Spatial production and the materialization of hierarchy

Lefebvre explains that space is not a neutral container but is socially produced. For Lefebvre, space is created through practices, representations, and experiences, and it always reflects and maintains power relations [6]. This is especially relevant to museums, where spatial arrangements function as part of what he calls the production of space. Exhibition design, including object placement, gallery sequencing, and sightlines, creates a spatial order that communicates cultural values. These curatorial choices do not simply organize movement but also establish hierarchies by making some works more central and others more peripheral.

Lefebvre distinguishes between conceived space (the planned, institutional design of galleries), perceived space (the physical arrangements visitors encounter), and lived space (the meanings audiences attach through experience) [6]. In museums, conceived space appears in curatorial planning, such as placing Western masterpieces in central galleries. Perceived space guides visitors' movement, leading them toward these central works. Lived space develops as visitors absorb these

patterns. They often connect central and well-lit displays with higher value, while those works in seeing peripheral with dim light are seen as less important.

3.4. Language, interpretation, and the museum text

Labels are also shaped by their form and style. Hooper-Greenhill argues that museums interpret visual culture through text [3]. This framing affects what visitors see and how they understand it. Ravelli offers a model for studying museum texts by looking at tone, vocabulary, and narrative voice [8]. Black describes how some museums are moving toward more inclusive and conversational labels to engage wider audiences [11].

4. Analysis and findings

4.1. Language dimension: vocabulary choice, narrative voice, and translation strategy

The role of exhibition labels in shaping cultural values is reflected in aspects such as vocabulary selection, narrative voice, and translation strategies. Whether professional, academic terms or adjectives related to value are used in vocabulary directly affects the audience's judgment of the value of the work.

This view is related to Michel Foucault's opinion that discourse is never neutral but is always associated with power [7]. For instance, when labels refer to European paintings as "masterpieces" but describe African or Asian works as "ethnographic objects", they follow what Foucault called "rules of discourse". These rules give priority to certain traditions and push others to the margins. In this way, label vocabulary is not just a curatorial preference. It is an exercise of power that organizes cultural knowledge and maintains geographical hierarchies between Western art and non-Western art.

In the book <The Universal Survey Museum>, art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach study how large Western art museums create stories that present European art as the highest form of cultural achievement. As prominent scholars in museum studies, Duncan and Wallach observe that the Louvre's label language reinforces this hierarchy, frequently using evaluative terms such as "masterpiece" or "iconic" to describe canonical Western works, while non-Western works are often classified under ethnographic categories such as "artifact" or "ethnographic object." Such difference in vocabulary creates an art historical perspective that takes Western masterpieces as the standard to evaluate other cultural productions [2].

At the same time, the narrative voice used in exhibition labels shapes the viewer's understanding and level of engagement. Museum communication specialist Louise Ravelli, in *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks*, notes that the narrative voice—whether first person, third person, or multi-vocal—affects the perceived authority of the information [8]. Building on Ravelli's analysis, third-person, impersonal voice projects institutional authority and distance, while multi-vocal or first-person insertions reduce that distance and open interpretation. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Western art galleries often use a third-person voice to present historical facts and aesthetic judgments as if they are beyond question. But as Graham Black observes, "people today increasingly refuse to be passive recipients of whatever museums offer" [11]. His point highlights a growing expectation for museums to adopt more dialogic and participatory communication. Some exhibitions of non-Western or Indigenous art at the Met respond to this shift. They include first-person quotes from community members along with the official label. This multi-vocal style gives space for alternative interpretations and weakens the museum's control over meaning. Therefore,

although the dominant voice in art museums often strengthens cultural hierarchies, changing the narrative voice can challenge them and create room for more inclusive curatorial practices. Another factor that can shape cultural value is the translation strategy. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, editors Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine bring together essays that examine how museums shape cultural meaning through curatorial choices. They find out that translation is not just a transfer of words but also a political act. According to the book, "the struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing" [4]. This framework explains why choices in translation, such as selective omission or deletion, are political. These choices transfer the power of interpretation to institutions and reshape the public significance of the exhibits. This criticism is consistent with James Clifford's analysis in "The Dilemma of Culture". He pointed out that non-Western art is usually given only limited or simplified background information in Western institutions [9]. For example, in the World Art section of the British Museum, the labels of East Asian artworks are sometimes translated only as part of the original titles. They may omit terms of specific cultures and replace them with common English words. These omissions weaken the original cultural context, making the exhibits easier to incorporate into the Western interpretive system. This approach indicates that the choice of language in translation can subtly alter the audience's understanding of the identity of the exhibits and strengthen the epistemological hierarchical structure among cultures.

4.2. Spatial dimension: location, visibility, and visitor flow

One of the important spatial ways to construct cultural hierarchy in an art museum is the position of artworks in the exhibition space. Cultural theorist Elaine Hooper Greenhall and sociologist Tony Bennett point out that spatial arrangement is not neutral but a curatorial act that emphasizes certain narratives [1,3]. For instance, in "The Birth of the Museum", Bennett analyzed how modern museums establish a kind of "visual education" through architectural layout. In this arrangement, the central space becomes a symbol of cultural authority. He pointed out that works placed in the central hall or the main exhibition hall would gain a default classic status because the audience saw them first and stayed longer [1]. This can be seen in the Tate Modern. The core exhibition hall mainly showcases Western modernist artists such as Picasso and Rothko, while non-Western works are mostly arranged in side halls or temporary exhibitions. This arrangement indicates that spatial location maintains the cultural hierarchy. It is achieved by placing mainstream art at the center and other traditions on the periphery.

Visibility also plays a key role in expressing artistic value. As Lefebvre put it, spatial designs such as lighting, height and accessibility constitute the "perceivable space", which influences how viewers view the exhibits [6]. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, works by Western classic artists are usually placed at eye level and illuminated with bright lights to ensure that visitors can view them clearly. In contrast, works from Latin America or Asia are often placed in smaller, dimly lit rooms or in less conspicuous positions. This difference makes it easier for the audience to notice Western works and overlook others. From this, it can be seen that the visibility arrangement in an exhibition can either enhance or diminish the importance of the artworks.

Finally, the visiting route of the audience also reflects whether certain artworks belong to the core narrative of the museum. In the article "The Universal Investigative Museum", Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach point out that the museum route is designed as a "civic ritual" that guides visitors to visit a series of cultural nodes in sequence [2]. At the Centre Pompidou, Western modernist art is arranged along the main passage of the permanent exhibition. Non-Western art often appears in cross-cultural exhibition halls, which are located outside the main route. This spatial arrangement

means that fewer viewers will see these non-Western works, thus putting them on the periphery. Spatial marginalization has reduced the chances of these works being viewed and further lowered their status in cultural narratives.

4.3. Centrality and decentralization: Louvre vs. British Museum

The Louvre Museum exemplifies how exhibition labels and spatial strategies reproduce cultural hierarchies that privilege European traditions. In *The Universal Survey Museum*, art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach argue that the Louvre treats European art as the highest cultural achievement and builds a story of artistic progress from classical antiquity to Western modernity [2]. The Louvre's spatial design reflects the same hierarchy shown in its labels. Canonical European paintings such as da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* are placed in central, brightly lit galleries along the main circulation routes. In contrast, African and Oceanic works are shown in smaller, dimly lit rooms on the periphery, so visitors must leave the main path to see them. Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of "perceived space" [6], this layout shows how spatial choices produce meaning: central spaces signal cultural importance, while peripheral spaces mark works as less significant.

In contrast, the British Museum demonstrates mixed strategies. The label translations and linguistic framing of the British Museum often reinforce hierarchies, but some special exhibitions attempt spatial decolonization. In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, editors Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine argue that "translation is not just a transfer of words but a political act... the struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing" [4]. Labels in the British Museum's Asian Art Galleries, for example, frequently provide partial or simplified translations of original titles, omitting culturally specific terms in favor of generalized English descriptors. These omissions subtly reframe non-Western works within Western interpretive categories, reducing the cultural richness of the original context.

However, unlike the Louvre, the British Museum has tested multi-vocal label strategies in some thematic exhibitions, especially in collaborations with Indigenous communities. For example, the "Living and Dying" gallery includes first-person quotes from Māori and Pacific Islander artists alongside institutional descriptions [4]. Museum communication specialist Louise Ravelli (2006) explains that these multi-vocal approaches reduce institutional distance and "open interpretation" for visitors, shifting some authority from curators to communities [8].

In terms of space, the British Museum's core architecture still centers on Western antiquities. The Parthenon Marbles dominate the central Duveen Gallery. However, temporary cross-cultural exhibitions place non-Western works in high-visibility areas and integrate them into broader thematic narratives. This reflects Lefebvre's distinction between "conceived space" and "lived space": conceived space shows curatorial priorities, while lived space emerges as visitors experience more balanced layouts that support cross-cultural comparisons [6].

5. Discussion

This study explores how exhibition label language and spatial layout jointly shape and maintain cultural hierarchies within art museums. The research results show that both the Louvre and the British Museum, the two world-class museums, have adopted different strategies to continue and challenge the Western-centered narrative. However, whether it is the choice of language or space, it all reflects that they still hope Western art can continue to play an important role and have a right in the production of cultural knowledge.

From a linguistic perspective, the differences between the Louvre and the British Museum in terms of the vocabulary of exhibition labels, narrative voices, and translation strategies reflect their distinct positions in the construction of cultural values. For instance, the labels of the Louvre often use highly complimentary words such as "masterpiece" and "iconic" to describe European art, in order to strengthen the core position of European art in the history of global art. In contrast, the British Museum still classifies non-Western works as "artifacts" or "ethnographic items" and includes them as part of its permanent collection. However, in some thematic exhibitions, it attempts to employ a narrative style of multiple voices. For instance, it sometimes quotes the first-person descriptions of indigenous artists to weaken the dominance of the museum's single discourse and take a step towards a more equal cultural dialogue. However, as Karp and Lavine have pointed out, translation is not a neutral act. At the British Museum, the parts of the original title on the Asian Art label will be deleted and conceptually simplified, continuing to ingeniously place non-Western works within the Western interpretive framework, indicating that power is not only manifested in the clear choice of vocabulary but also embedded in the micro-mechanisms of language control.

From a spatial perspective, the two museums also exhibit different strategies in exhibition hall layout, visibility, and visitor routes. The Louvre materializes the authority of European art by displaying Western classics such as the Mona Lisa and Liberty Leading the People in the central exhibition hall and along the main circulation routes. In contrast, the British Museum still prioritizes displaying Western classical heritage in its core buildings, with marble statues occupying the central exhibition hall. However, its temporary cross-cultural exhibitions feature some non-Western works in high-visibility positions, aiming to create a more interactive and comparative spatial experience. This strategy is related to Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space: curators' "imagined space" often maintains the established order of center and periphery, but the visitor's experience in "lived space" can partially transcend this limitation, thus forming new interpretations [6].

These findings prove Foucault's argument about discourse and power: museums are not neutral institutions that merely transmit knowledge, but producers of cultural "truth" [7]. At the same time, Lefebvre's spatial theory helps us understand how language and space interact [6]: exhibition label discourse establishes authority through naming, classification, and translation, while the exhibition space concretizes this authority through location, lighting, and visitor flows. While the Louvre represents a stable model of geographic centralization, the British Museum demonstrates a partial experiment in decentralization. But overall, the discourse of global art history remains deeply dominated by Western-centric logic.

Based on existing research, an increasing number of scholars have proposed to challenge the center-periphery structure in museums through new curatorial strategies. As an important scholar in the field of museum studies, Sandell pointed out that museums need to reconstruct their narrative frameworks to reduce cultural bias and promote social inclusion. He believes that by introducing the voices of different communities, museums can transcend the traditional single Western-centered narrative and offer equal opportunities for the expression of diverse cultures [5]. Furthermore, Preziosi and Farago emphasized that the existing exhibition system is not unchangeable; curators can change the way knowledge is produced by "rewriting narratives" [10]. This view indicates that future curatorial strategies may include several approaches. First, museums can adopt co-creation tags, allowing indigenous groups or artists to directly participate in text writing. Curators can also introduce diverse narratives to present the interpretive perspectives of different cultural groups. In addition, museums can also reorganize exhibition Spaces to break the spatial hierarchy between the center and the periphery. Through these inclusive and decolonized curatorial practices, museums

have the potential to transform from mere producers of cultural discourse into platforms that promote diverse dialogues, providing a more open and equal path for global art history narratives.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the language and spatial layout of exhibition labels jointly influence the cultural hierarchy structure in contemporary art museums. The Louvre emphasizes the central position of the West, while the British Museum, although attempting decentralization, is still influenced by traditional curatorial methods. In the future, more inclusive and decolonized curatorial practices are likely to drive global art narratives towards a more equal and diverse development.

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