

Overview

Collaborators

Created by Ella Doyle, BMCC, CUNY

Graduate Fellow: Janelle Poe, The Graduate Center, CUNY

Faculty Mentor: Prof. Rachel Corkle

Costa Rican Art Museums and Accessibility of Non-European Art

This BSAA OER asks students to think about the politics and stakes in where we house art and artifacts, specifically looking at Costa Rican art and art museums. Students will be asked to analyze how museums, their donors, and board members make decisions that make them “gatekeepers” to what we can study and appreciate. Students will be asked to think critically about who has the rights to collections and resources to bring these collections to the public, and furthermore how certain populations are over- or under-represented in the world's largest museums.

This lesson plan has several interrelated activities intended to: (Learning Outcomes)

- **Engage**
- **Compare**
- **Analyze**

Introductory Activity - Preliminary Poll (15 mins)

- Students will begin with a poll that measures initial knowledge and opinions on artifacts that were acquired through colonialism and if they should remain in their respective country.

Activity #1 - “Brooklyn: Artifacts and Restitution”

- Students will read [“Brooklyn Museum Returns 1,305 Pre-Hispanic Artifacts to Costa Rica”](#) by Isis Davis-Marks that details how, in 2021, The Brooklyn Museum returned over 1300 Costa Rican artifacts to the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, and answer discussion questions about the article and transfer of the art.

Activity #2 - “Museums and Costa Rica: Museum Gatekeepers”

- Students will review a brief presentation about how museums function as institutions and key decision makers including budgets, board members, and donors. They will then participate in a structured debate about whether art should be returned to its place of origin, or be housed in the largest and most accessible collections. (The class can be divided in half or smaller groups, and students can either take a position or be assigned one)

Preliminary poll: Costa Rica and the Arts

Students should begin by answering the following questions to gauge awareness and opinions:. The login for the [Google form](#) is as follows:

bsaafall22@gmail.com

Password: FallArt22!

1. Where is Costa Rica located?

- Central America
- Europe
- Africa
- California

2. Who colonized Costa Rica?

- United States
- England
- France
- Spain

3. What do you think happened to many Costa Rican cultural artifacts in the 19th and 20th century?

- Exported to different museums
- Costa Rica donated them to different countries
- They were pillaged and sold
- Nothing, they remain in Costa Rica

4. In your opinion, should these artifacts remain in Costa Rica or be put on display in major museums world wide? Justify your response.

Activity #1 – Brooklyn: Artifacts and Restitution

Students will read the following article that details how the Brooklyn Museum returned over 1300 artifacts to the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica in 2021. This activity allows students to understand how decisions regarding where art is housed are political, as well as how colonialism has shaped museum collections and the “canon” of art.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify how museum collections are politically charged and can be a result of racist and/or colonialist pasts and present policies.
- Students will think about the stakes in taking art and artifacts away from where it was produced. Who has the power to do so? And how do they get that power?

Article:

Marks, Isis.”Brooklyn Museum Returns 1,305 Pre-Hispanic Artifacts to Costa Rica.”

Smithsonian Magazine. ## Mon. 2021.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/brooklyn-museum-returns-more-1300-objects-costa-rica-180978122>

Students will read the article in the beginning of class in groups. They are encouraged to write down any comments or concerns that may arise during the reading. The article explains how Costa Rican artifacts that were part of the “Keith” collection, held at the Brooklyn Museum, were returned to the National Museum of Costa Rica in 2021. Students should focus on how the items were acquired and **who** took the items initially.

Assignment Instructions:

1. Read the article above
2. Think about the following questions (to discuss as a class, and/or to ask for as a written assignment):

Questions:

1. Why do you think it’s important to note that Minor Cooper Keith (who owned these objects before being “donated” to the Brooklyn museum) was a plantation owner? Think about the relationship of money and power over people and culture.
2. Do you believe there is a stigma on these artifacts now that the history of how they were acquired is known. Why might there be?
3. These artifacts were mostly taken from Limón, a city of 55,000 that is home to the working class Afro-Costa Rican Community. Limón is about 3 ½ hours away from the national capital, San Jose. For more information on Limón see this [lesson about Afro-descendants in Costa Rica](#) . The artifacts were taken from this largely Black area of Costa Rica, but were returned to the Museo Nacional de Costa Rica in the national capital. Does this make sense? Why or why not?

Activity #2 – Museum Gatekeepers and Canon Formation

Students will review a presentation slidedeck that provides a brief overview of museum budgets, board members, and donors (who make major decisions). This enables/prepares students to then participate in a structured debate about whether art should be returned to its place of origin, or be housed in the largest and most accessible collections. (They can either take a position or be assigned one).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will Identify how museum collections and how accessible they are to the public correspond to budgets.
- Students will think about how institutions and individuals function as “gatekeepers” to learning.
- Students will develop critical thinking skills in thinking about the nuances of controversial questions.

Assignment Instructions:

1. Read the slide show about large art museums and budgets.

 Museums and Costa Rica

2. Stage a debate addressing the following question:

Where should art be housed/on display: where it was produced or in major museums worldwide that have searchable websites

and welcome millions a year?

Think about the pros and cons of returning art to its original home and whether/how it is productive for museums in the United States and Europe to expand their non-European collections.

- Students should be divided into 2 groups.
- One group will argue that **art should be housed where it was produced**. The other group will argue that **art should be available to major museums**.
- Students should have at least 15 minutes in their groups to brainstorm arguments that support their position.
- A group **notetaker** should make a list of supporting points and reasons why they are logical/effective solutions.
 - Each student should have 3 to 4 reasons
- A group **lead debater** should give a 1-2 minute opening argument that makes their case. (First one group will give an opening statement, and then the other).
- After opening statements, other students should add supporting arguments, alternating between sides. As many students should speak as possible.

***Students can present their reasons in the order in which they chose within their groups

- **Be sure to leave time for a conclusion.**
- As a concluding activity, students can revisit their answer to the final question of the introductory poll: **“In your opinion, should these artifacts remain in Costa Rica or be put on display in major museums world wide? Justify your response”**. Have students changed their minds?

