National Museum of Iraq: A Case for Curating a New Identity

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> "To control a museum means precisely to control the
> representation of the community…"[1]
> —Carol Duncan

In April 2003, the National Museum of Iraq was plundered and the substantial majority of its artifacts were looted. The Iraqi people have lost important elements of their socio-cultural identity; the recovery of these priceless items has been slow. By drawing on examples from past and current museum installations, this paper investigates how art has been used for formation of a new identity. Adolf Hitler's 1937 "Temple of Art", for example, showed Germans that they could be descendants of a Classical "master race." The transformation of the Louvre into a public space of equality and tolerance demonstrated people's perseverance and need for a new national identity. Fred Wilson's 1992 installation in Baltimore deconstructed the validity of such a master narrative, questioning the predominance of one discourse over another.   This paper argues that the restoring restoration of the stolen artifacts and their display in terms of Iraq's ethnic multiplicity is a vital step and an opportunity in the creation of a new and diverse Iraq, one in which the various ethnicities are given voice, counter to the identity pushed previously by Saddam Hussein. Thus, the re-conceptualization of the National Museum of Iraq into a site of heterogeneous and diverse identity formation is one of many tiers that could be used to reduce what Geert Hofstede calls the "Power Distance", helping to shape a new Iraqi nation.

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[1] Esslinger, Sandra. "From *Performing Identity: The Museal Framing of Nazi Ideology*." In *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, Edited by Asgate, 326. Prezios, 2004.

Islam is one of three great monotheistic faiths and is the predominate religion in the Middle East. Although this spread of influence has been complex and chaotic at times, the essence of the faith is simple: belief in one God (Allah), with Muhammad being his primary Prophet.[2] The cultural dimensions of today's Iraq are similar to that of Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. According Professor Geert Hofstede of Maastricht University there are five dimensions that culture be can measured to various degrees (Fig.1-1): Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS) Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) and Long-Term Index (LTO). For the sake of this paper I will focus on the PDI, UAI, and IDV. The Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) and the Power Distance Index (PDI) suggest that the Iraqi society is very rule-oriented and has a high tolerance in terms of how equally or unequally power is distributed within society. These indexes indicate that upward mobility is difficult to achieve.[3] According to Professor Hofstede, what consequently occurs when the PDI and the UAI are taken into consideration is:
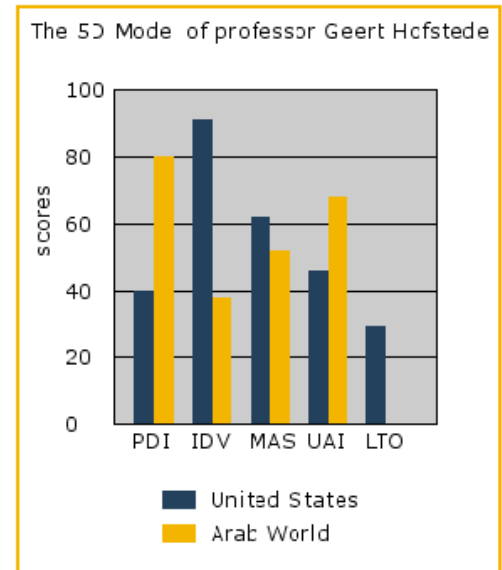

Fig. 1-1

It creates a situation where leaders have virtually ultimate power and authority, and the rules, laws and regulations developed by those in power reinforce their own leadership and control. It is not unusual for new leadership to arise from armed insurrection – the ultimate power, rather than from diplomatic or democratic change. The high Power Distance (PDI) ranking is indicative of a high level of inequality of power and wealth within the society. These populations have an expectation and acceptance that leaders will separate themselves from the group and this condition is not necessarily subverted upon the population, but rather accepted by the society as their cultural heritage.[4]

Iraq is one of the lowest ranked cultures on the Individualism Index (IDV) which is to say Iraqis act in a more collective manner than compared to, let's say, the United States which is actually rated the highest on the IDV. The United States is rated lower than the Arab World on the UAI, suggesting that Americans are more of a "risk takers" than the Iraqis would be. When these two dimensions are combined then the society tends to be more collective in their decision making; thus in order to avoid uncertainty laws, protective polices and regulations are put up. Muslims, especially Iraqis, do not instantly accept change and have an aversion for risks.[5]

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[2] Wilkinson, Philip. *Religion: Visual Reference Guide*. New York City: Metro Books, 2008. 127
[3] Hofstede, Geert. "*Arab World*." 1967. http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_arab_world.shtml (accessed Apr. 13, 2011).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

These cultural dimensions are in *the process of* changing. With the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein *over*, Iraq *has* moved towards more Enlightenment ideals with the establishment of its new democracy. The PDI will shift so that dictatorship and absolute power will not be tolerated, and that the Iraqis will become more prone to egalitarian ideals and representation. The fear that if one speaks out in protest, he or she is putting one's life on line will be nonexistent now that the new Iraqi constitution allows for freedom of speech, thus the UAI will shift positions overtime. The IDV will remain the same because of the combination of democratic principles and Islamic rules. Though individual and cultural identity is low in Iraq, the Museum can play a vanguard role in shaping identity, as can be seen in numerous examples, such as the Nazi Temple of Art.

In the year 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany and, within a very short time, he rose to power as Fuehrer of Germany. Hitler, considering himself to have a refined taste for the arts, commissioned the construction of the a Temple of Art in Munich. Through this museum Hitler hoped to establish the Thousand Year German Reign, to eternalize the Nazi way of life into the hearts and minds of its citizens. Hitler chose to build his monumental structure in Munich, which he was envisioned to become the center of the art world. Why Munich when Hitler's greatest display of pageantry took place in Nuremberg in 1934? According to scholar Sandra Esslinger, Munich was a mythological site of a mythological society known as the Volk[6], a society that the Nazi regime was very interested in aligning itself with to win the minds and loyalty of its citizens for ITS own molding purposes. The publicized mission of the museum was to bring German art to the German people. Many German citizens found this to be very enticing, because to them it felt democratic; it felt as though this public museum gave them a sense of ownership to the art. The Temple of Art thus created a sense of egalitarianism. However, that sense was simply a façade that the Nazis created to manipulate the citizens into their ideologies.

The art that the Nazis chose to feature in their exhibition was of the Romantic, Classical, and Biedermeier[7] style. The selection of art works came from all across Germany. The Nazis judged 25,000 paintings and finally narrowed it down to 900 paintings to be featured in the Temple of Art[8]. To this extent, the Nazis gained the prestige of having good judgment in aesthetics. According to Robert Bottcher (the director of German art education appointed by the Nazis), he espoused the idea that "art was the 'social cement' of society"[9]. The standard that Hitler we trying to set was that of the mythological Volk ideology. Within Volk society, men were considered to be the breadwinners of the household, and the ideal Volk man meant that he held an office and military position. Being a Volk woman, the ideal was to remain at home, be a housewife, and be a mother[10]. This sort of message and imagery, which was featured in Temple of Art, roused the German people into thinking that, in fact, this would be the best example to live life in this new time. Thus, the Nazis gained an influential ability to even tell people the ideal mate that they should be seeking. This then feed into the eugenics

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[6] Esslinger, 332.
[7] Ibid., 324
[8] Ibid., 332
[9] Ibid., 328
[10] Ibid., 330

mission that the Nazis pushed in the creation of the "master race". The Nazis successfully accomplished their mission in using the museum as an instrument to move the German people into their political and military agenda.

Given the desperate circumstances that Iraq and its people are currently facing, the National Museum of Iraq needs to be wary of its fragility, especially in the lesson found in the case of the Nazi Temple of Art in identity building. People during the period of the Weimar Republic, were both desperate and ready for change. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis Party were the only able body to rise up and face the challenges brought on by the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles. Since the Fall of Saddam Hussein, violence and fundamentalism has been the scourge in undermining the democratic progress of the new Iraq. The National Museum of Iraq, now has a moral duty and opportunity to not succumb to the false notions and false promises of extreme Islamic fundamentalism.

The National Museum of Iraq has just become free from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party. It was during the reign of the Ba'ath that Saddam Hussein took on the cultural policy to fuse folklore with political ideologies, much like the Nazis and Volk society, in order to create not a celebrated multicultural society but a single unified citizen populous, *Iraqi people*[11]. Thus, Saddam Hussein used institutions such as the National Museum of Iraq as a framing device to shape the ideals and roles that the citizens should emulate. Saddam Hussein went as far as to link himself to the ancient line of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In fact, during an archeological dig near Hussein's hometown, Babylonian bricks were found bearing the name of Nebuchadnezzar II, and Saddam Hussein "ordered that new bricks used in the restoration he was financing must bear his name"[12]. From this act of patronage, Saddam Hussein saw himself as modern day version of Nebuchadnezzar. Ancient Babylon was historically and biblically known for its mistreatment of the Jews; it became only fitting for the Ba'ath and Hussein to use a historical tie-in to share their animosity for the Jews with the rest of the Middle East. However, since the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration and his coalition of the willing, revolution and strife have come to encompass the daily life of Iraqis. It is within this opportune moment that the National Museum of Iraq should shed itself of Saddam Hussein's legacy in the same manner that the French revolutionaries did of King Louis XVI in the creation of the Louvre.

In the wake of King Louis XVI's trial and execution, France was well underway in shedding the monarchial legacy that ruled France and moving towards the creation of a representative democracy. Everything in France that was once owned by the elite and noble classes had now become property of the republic. The French revolutionary government took it upon themselves to nationalize the king's art collection and convert his palace, the Louvre, to an institution free to the public.[13] The Louvre underwent a powerful transformation: The objects of luxury that previously only the extreme wealthy were allowed to appreciate were "given" to the public, which was a momentous example of the newly formed democracy's commitment to human equality. Now the common people could venture into the royal palace, see the crowns of kings on display, and walk away with a feeling that those crowns are theirs. And for the first time, "this citizen finds a culture that unites him with other French citizens regardless of their individual social

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[11] Rothfield, Lawrence. *The Rape of Mesopotamia*. Chicago, Il: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. 12.

[12] Ibid., 16

[13] Duncan, Carol. *Museum as Ritual*. n.d. 16.

position[14]". The Directors of the newly established Louvre went as far as a reinstallation of the king's collection for the purpose of educating the public into appreciating the fine arts. The art was catalogued into art-schools and then displayed based on the "visible development and achievement of each school"[15]. The viewer then could retrace each work chronologically allowing the citizen to relive France's historical progression. The Louvre has become the emblem that art is not to be hoarded by the wealthy and the powerful, but be accessible to every man, woman, and child.

Nations founding museums throughout the world have followed in the Louvre's example. Iraq should separate itself from the totalitarian regime of its past as well as the overt favoritism shown toward Sunni Muslims by the Hussein regime. With the newly formed democracy Iraq has the opportunity to implement polices of egalitarianism that will directly juxtapose the racial, religious, economic favoritism, and subsequent disparity under the previous regime. The Museum, as a storehouse of history and beacon of cultural identity, has the unique ability to change the cultural direction of Iraq.

The museum is in a precarious position however, as of the 15,000 objects of heritage and culture that were looted during April 2003, only about half of them have been returned[16]. In the same manner that the Louvre created a space of equality for its citizens, the National Museum of Iraq has a chance to do the same. Within the galleries of the Museum, people have a chance to step out of the violence outside and enter a place where differences in religion are not only tolerated, but irrelevant. In the development of the new democratic identity, the National Museum of Iraq should curate the pieces that they have recovered with the same model as the Louvre. It would be to the benefit of the National Museum of Iraq to do so, considering about a quarter of the population is illiterate.[17] The citizens can then experience the development of each bygone civilization right up to the implementation of Islam. This will be a rediscovery for themselves and how each and everyone of them are connected to a long and rich heritage and how far they have come in spite of overwhelming tribulations. The message through the curation of the Museum's collection should emit that as people of this modern world, of this new democracy they should embrace the ideals of the Enlightenment, ideals of reason and rationality, not violence and despotism.

Deconstructing the image that Saddam Hussein had created will be no easy feat. The Nazi Temple of Art is "frequently ignored by art historians who contend it displayed propaganda, not art"[18] and has of yet to deconstruct its Nazi historical narrative. However, the Louvre, through the vigilance, dedication, and determination of its revolutionaries was successful in the deconstruction of the monarch's narrative and is now a "pillar" of France's national identity[19]. The most efficient way to deconstruct the narrative of the National Museum of Iraq would be to "mine" its collection, using the term coined the contemporary artist Fred Wilson.

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[14] Ibid., 20

[15] Ibid., 19

[16] Rose, Charlie. "*A conversation with Donny George, former director of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad*." 19 Jan. 2007. http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/39 (accessed Apr. 25, 2011).

[17] "*The World Factbook*." n.d. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html (accessed Apr. 13, 2011).

[18] Esslinger, 321.

[19] Waxman, Sharon. *Stock Image Loot: Tomb Robbers, Treasure and the Great Museum Debate*. United Kingdom: Old Street Publishing, 2009.17.

In 1992, Fred Wilson shook up the museum world with his intervention of "Mining the Museum". Wilson challenged the personality of the Maryland Historical Society, which went against it mission and challenged the general public's perception of United States' history with his curating of the Museum's collection. From this, many issues have been brought up concerning his installations. Through his installations, we are able to realize the narrative museums, as institutions, create with the artifacts in their collection. Fred Wilson focuses on the uncovering of the clandestine history of Africans in the United States through the use of materials within the museum itself. Most crucially, there has been no recognition of how wealth extracted from Africa shaped the life and prosperity of modern Europe. Without Africans populating Caribbean plantations, the modern world that we know today would not exist. Profits from slave trading and from sugar, coffee, cotton, tobacco are only a fragment of African history. What mattered was how the push and pull from these industries transformed and energized Europe's economies such as the banking, shipbuilding, wool, cotton, copper, and iron industries. Before the 19th century, more slaves crossed the Atlantic than Europeans for the construction of the New World. In essence, the colonies, now states and cities, all have an African foundation. Yet, the rest of the world has not acknowledged this detail in full.

According to news journalist Richard Drayton, the Western world is far from apologizing for its disregard that Africa and its people is what made the modern world[20]. In Wilson's exhibition *So much Trouble in the World—Believe it or Not!* at the Hood Museum, he put on display all the pieces that the museum owned relating to Daniel Webster (fig.1-2). Born to a farmer in Salisbury, New Hampshire, Daniel Webster grew to become one of America's most formidable figures against slavery in the United States. Webster attended Dartmouth College, in which the Hood Museum is located. Webster's historical actions raised him up to be Dartmouth's most prized alumni, thus elevating him to an iconic stature as a humanitarian[21]. Fred Wilson organized an entire room filled with portraits and busts of Daniel Webster, thereby critiquing this persona.

Fig. 1-2

Portraits of Blacks and Native Americans were also exhibited in the Daniel Webster room, however they were hung in such a way that they could barely be seen, whereas the portraits of Webster were hung at eye-level. Fred Wilson demonstrates that even today, people refer to the more iconic figures in history and

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[20] Drayron, Richard. "The wealth of the west was built on Africa's exploitation." *The Guardian*, 20 Aug. 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2005/aug/20/past.he... (accessed Dec. 1, 2010).

[21] Thompson, Barbara. *Fred Wilson: So Much Trouble in the World--Believe it or Not*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006. 17

continue to overlook or even omit the role of others, such as Native Americans and Blacks in the development of America. So in the case of the Daniel Webster room, Wilson shows that the historical narrative is still being dominated by the "white man", to whom all is given credit.

With the inevitable shift for ideals of culture and governance as evaluated with the Hofstede theorem, it is important that the National Museum of Iraq does not *à rebours*. The Museum should assume the role as a meeting ground where all the citizens are equal such as the case with the Louvre, and not as an instrument for military agendas like the Nazi Temple of Art. In fact, one of the only ways to achieve democracy in Iraq is—by drawing on the Fred Wilson example—to first deconstruct the narrative that the Cradle of Civilization has always and shall continue to be ruled by despotism. The National Museum of Iraq can become one of many tiers towards democracy in the Middle East.

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