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Competing Sovereignties: Indigeneity and the Visual Culture of Catholic Colonization at the 1925 Pontifical Missionary Exhibition

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Cover Page Footnote

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MEDIATING CATHOLICISMS

Studies in Aesthetics, Authority, and Identity

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GLORIA BELL

Competing Sovereignties: Indigeneity and the Visual Culture of Catholic Colonization at the 1925 Pontifical Missionary Exhibition



Gloria Jane Bell writes about Indigenous arts and histories for academic and popular audiences. At McGill University, Professor Bell's research focuses on exhibition histories of First Nations, Métis and Inuit arts in the early twentieth century in Italy, Global Indigenous studies, decolonizing and anti-colonial methodologies, materiality studies, and animals in art. Bell has Métis and Celtic ancestry. She has published in journals such as *Wicazo Sa Review* and the anthology *Métis in Canada*. She contributes to art publications including *Canadian Art* and *First American Art Magazine*.

On Sunday, December 21, 1924, Pope Pius XI solemnly opened the holy door to the Pontifical Missionary Exhibition (PME) (Figure 1).¹ Standing in the central room, the Hall of Americas, with the visual culture of the Indigenous peoples of North America surrounding him, he welcomed tourists and pilgrims into this unprecedented exposition. Assembled in the heart of the Vatican, the PME included specially designed pavilions showcasing art and artifacts collected by missions across the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.² Sponsored by Pope Pius XI, and with the cooperation of the city of Rome and Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the exhibition featured over one hundred thousand objects and attracted over one million visitors during its thirteen-month run. Amidst a flurry of world fairs and colonial exhibitions, this exposition is particularly influential in that it was the first and largest Catholic missionary display in Europe during the early twentieth century. Materials that were sent in for the exhibition from around the globe were described as "gifts" to the Pope. Not inadvertently, the material was framed as conquests of the church, part of a long history of Roman triumphal culture. Indeed the PME cannot be separated from its Roman environs.³ The PME, when thought of this way, ties itself back to centuries, eons, and epochs of the glories of ancient Rome, wherein the spoils (books, antiquities, paintings, sculpture, and people) were paraded by Roman generals and troops through the streets of Rome for the ultimate glorification of the Roman Empire.⁴ Anthropologist Guido Abbattista notes that parading captives of the New World through the streets of Rome was done in the Renaissance era, which he calls the "trophying of



Figure 1.
Pietro Gagliardi,
Pope Pius XI opening
the holy door, 1924,
lithograph. Ebay.

1 The "Holy Door" of the Jubilee Year tradition extends back to the 1200s. The door is opened only during the Jubilee Year and blessed by the Pope on its opening. "Mostra Giubileo," Senato della Repubblica, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://antiquorum-habet.senato.it/mostra-giubileo/>.

2 John Joseph Considine, *The Vatican Mission Exposition: A Window on the World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 80.

3 Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 289.

4 Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 289.

human otherness.”⁵ Pope Pius XI saw the materials sent in for the exhibition ranging from books, antiquities, paintings, sculpture, miniatures, and mannequins, to flora and fauna, as showing *Lux in Tenebris* (light amidst the darkness) and sending a message of “silent eloquence” of the heroism of missionary work.⁶ However, I argue that the materials made using Indigenous methods and hands were not merely silent markers of missionary progress, but should be considered as present markers of Indigenous cosmologies and understandings.⁷

Materials sent in comprised secular and sacred things. Indigenous cultural belongings displayed in the exhibition including a Passamaquoddy cross is a central participant in my narrative arc of the PME. Despite missionary positioning of sacred and secular materials as the “gifts of the Pope” and triumphal Roman heritage, the presence of the Indigenous cultural belongings speaks to the unacknowledged Indigenous labor and the artistic and spiritual wealth of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island. Rather than see them as solely silent objects of the Vatican, they should be considered as “willing and unwilling” travelers, subjects and actors with “social lives” that continue beyond the hands of their creators.⁸ This project then takes up the challenge posed by Indigenous studies scholars to unbind historical silences, rereading colonial archives which are inherent “repositories of colonial privilege” to re-center Indigenous perspectives.⁹ I argue that the terms used “object,” and “material culture,” and “gift” do not account for the sacred understanding

- 5 Guido Abbattista, “Trophying human ‘otherness’. From Christopher Columbus to contemporary ethno-ecology (fifteenth-twenty first centuries),” 29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/Cromohs-13651>.
- 6 Frances Lord uses “The Silent Eloquence of Things” as the opening to his article and sustains the silence that Pope Pius XI perpetuates, in *Canadian Missionaries/Indigenous Peoples: Representing Religion at Home and Abroad*, eds. Alwyn Austin and Jamie S. Scott, 205-34 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Through his encyclicals, Pius XI promoted missionary work as an active part of all orders and placed emphasis on training local Indigenous clergy in Africa and Asia. “*Rerum Ecclesiae*,” accessed February 13, 2019, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius11/p11rerec.htm>.
- 7 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- 8 Jace Weaver notes the “unwilling” Native travelers in *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2014), 58. See also Jessica Horton, “A Cloudburst in Venice: Fred Kabotie and the U.S. Pavilion of 1932,” *American Art*, 29 (2015): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681655>.
- 9 Danika Medak-Saltzman, “Transnational Indigenous Exchange: Rethinking Global Interactions of Indigenous Peoples at the 1904 St. Louis Exposition,” *American Quarterly*, 62 no. 3 (2010): 594.



of materials that Indigenous perspectives bring to this discussion. Instead, I argue that the term “cultural belonging” is more appropriate and use this throughout my research on the PME to dislocate the sovereign claims of Papal authority and center an Indigenous frame of reference. I contend that the Indigenous materials, many of which are sacred and important historical markers in their own rights, may be thought of as having a presence both physical and spiritual within the walls of the Vatican. PME visitors were anxious about this sacred aspect, suggesting that the cultural belongings were far more than just silent markers of missionary progress but also powerful enchanting materials that carry the weight of Indigenous spiritual ideas and thought processes.¹⁰

THE PME: ‘SILENT ELOQUENCE’ IN THE HALL OF THE AMERICAS

Envision an exposition occupying the space of several neighborhood blocks, filled with blooming gardens, ornately-designed pavilions, and models of Indigenous peoples, all within the walls of the Vatican. All of these aspects worked on the visitors’ senses to create an atmosphere of reverence and spectacle.¹¹ The burial place of many saints and martyrs, St. Peter’s Basilica housed countless relics and reliquaries. The Vatican also functioned as a sacred pilgrimage site as well as a reminder of the overlapping of previous pagan rites; Catholics built St. Peter’s on the pagan ruins of Roman antiquity. Proceeding through the grounds of the Vatican, visitors would have experienced the grandeur of St. Peter’s Square at the start of the exhibition: the Pavilion of the Holy Land and the History of the Missions. Onward through the Halls of the Americas, Oceania, and India, visitors encountered the objects (missionary paintings, statues of martyrs, cultural belongings from diverse Indigenous communities) and witnessed an overwhelming collection of Indigenous belongings from around the globe.

Scholars in the disciplines of art history, anthropology and museum studies, have

10 Rodney Harrison, *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency*, (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 5.

11 For a parallel discussion of a sense of reverence in secular art institutions, see Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203978719>.

discussed world's fairs and museums as contested spaces of competing influences, especially for the presentation and curation of Indigenous art.¹² Art historian Ruth Phillips notes that the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, on Musqueam territory, is nowadays a space where the museum works with Indigenous communities and that "competing claims to ownership, compensation, authority, and interpretation have to be negotiated on an almost daily basis,"¹³ but she then traces how previous scholarship, museum exhibitions, and world's fairs assumed a hierarchy between Indigenous arts and the colonial powers and perpetuated the denial of Indigenous peoples' modernity. Building from Phillips' argument that the museum needs to be "re-disciplined,"¹⁴ Indigenous studies scholars articulate how re-reading colonial expositions and their archival holdings in colonial institutions, such as the PME, can offer different lessons on the complexities of Indigenous experience within international case studies. As Turtle Mountain Chippewa historian Danika Medak-Saltzman notes:

... examining the historical record to shed light on transnational Indigenous encounters is not about seeking a continuous resistance movement where there is none. It is about recognizing Indigenous resistance as a continual part of Native negotiations with colonial regimes and about considering how moments of colonial celebrations of empire may have inadvertently served anticolonial purposes by presenting the Indigenous participants with opportunities to interact across larger distances than had been practical or possible in the past.¹⁵

My methodology for the work in this essay builds on the insights of Medak-Saltzman, especially her creative interpretation of archival documents and Indigenous resistance via close readings of photographs of Indigenous participants at the 1904 St. Louis exposition. In addition to Medak-Saltzman, I also draw inspiration from the work of Tanana Athabaskan scholar Diane Million, who argues for emotive

12 Laura Hollengreen, Celia Pearce, Rebecca Rouse, and Bobby Schweizer, *Meet Me at the Fair: A World's Fair Reader* (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2014).

13 Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2011), 73.

14 Phillips, *Museum Pieces*, 92.

15 Medak-Saltzman, "Transnational Indigenous Exchange," 593.

histories that consider how Indigenous peoples work through trauma and the structures of colonial imposition on Indigenous lives, what she calls “felt theory.” Million notes that Indigenous studies scholars, and particularly Native women, “feel our histories as well as think them.”¹⁶ This essay considers an affective approach to writing about Indigeneity in colonial archives.

Visitors appreciated Indigenous cultural belongings sent in from the missions as silent markers of conversion. Although anxieties surrounding Indigenous beliefs and the cultural belongings that represented them remained just under the surface, materials functioned as reminders of the triumph of missionary work and the suppression of alternative religious beliefs. Thus, Pope Pius XI even situated the objects as part of the “spiritual wealth” and cultural heritage of Catholicism.¹⁷ Paradoxically, the inclusion of Indigenous cultural belongings from the Americas bolstered the visual consumption and viewing experience of Catholic citizens through hierarchies of vision that also reinforced a hierarchy of race and the arts established by the organizers.¹⁸ An account in the *New York Times* promised that the PME would “present to visitors the life, customs, and habits of the most obscure tribes in the remotest regions of the earth.”¹⁹ PME visitors wanted to see things the newspapers had promised, and visiting reinforced their intangible beliefs through the observation of tangible things. The organizers framed cultural belongings as material evidence of Catholic conversion and faith in the Americas, Oceania, Africa, and Asia, all the while denying the modernity of the makers and their artistic, cultural, and spiritual ancestries and iconographic traditions.²⁰

16 Diane Million, “Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 9 (Fall 2009): 54. Million’s affective approach also has parallels with Ruth Behar’s *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0035>.

17 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 95.

18 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?* (London: Seagull Books, 2007), 16. See also Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg, eds. *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16p95>.

19 “Pope Inspects Exhibition: Views Preparations for Missionary Fair in Vatican Grounds,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1924, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

20 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1983), 35.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE PME

The PME opened on December 21, 1924, and closed on January 10, 1926. Over one million pilgrims attended the exhibition, which occupied twenty-four specially designed pavilions in the Pine Court of the Vatican Museum.²¹ From the moment visitors entered the exhibition, the Catholic white male heteronormative ordering of vision pulled them into the space.²² Missionaries displayed cultural belongings in glass cases and also piled them high on top of the displays. The inclusion of cultural belongings foreshadowed their permanence in the Vatican Missionary Ethnological Museum, which Pius XI opened after the closing of the PME.²³ PME organizers noted that missionaries sent in 100,000 items, and from this they selected 40,000 for inclusion.²⁴

Melding historical and contemporary missionary history, statistical data, dioramas, cultural belongings, “and a great variety of memorabilia,” Father Wilhelm Schmidt, the curator for the Pope, and his team created the exhibition like an adventure experience.²⁵ Visitors moved counter-clockwise through a sequence of thirty-two rooms, with information posted in Italian and other languages, viewing Catholic missionary work through a Judeo-Christian linear framework in which Indigenous peoples could only become modern and redeemed if they converted to Christianity. They started with the early martyrs (The Pavilion of the Holy Land, the History of Missions, and the Hall of Martyrs) and moved to the contemporary missions, beginning with the Ethnology Room, Schmidt's special project.

21 Considine, *The Vatican Mission Exposition*, 26.

22 Religious studies scholar David Morgan does not discuss how white male heteronormative visions have shaped the discourse around Catholic visioning and community via visual culture. David Morgan, *Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (University of California Press, Oakland, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520272224.001.0001>.

23 Angelyn Dries, “The 1925 Vatican Mission Exposition and the Interface Between Catholic Missionary Theory and World Religions,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 2 (2016): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939316638334>.

24 Nicola Mapelli, Katherine Aigner, and Nadia Fiussello, *Ethnos: Vatican Museums Ethnological Collection* (Vatican City: 2012), 152.

25 “Quantity and A Great Variety of Memorabilia” *Vatican Missionary Exhibition* (Mill Hill Missionary Society Archive Papers, 1925).

Father Wilhelm Schmidt, Pius XI's advisor for the PME, was an Austrian Catholic missionary, linguist, and anthropologist, and the founder of *Anthropos*, an important journal of ethnology, anthropology, and missionary studies. Schmidt wrote many essays on his theory of "primitive monotheism," which he published in *Anthropos*, essentially a sounding board for his Catholic version of anthropology.²⁶ Interested in understanding how "primitive" peoples maintained what he saw as their "monotheistic" beliefs, Schmidt maintained that there was an inherent link between race and belief.²⁷ He suggested that, among tribal peoples, a belief in one God paralleled Christian beliefs. While overseeing the entire exhibition, Schmidt took a special interest in the construction and display of the Ethnology Room, which was created to reflect his theory of "primitive monotheism," an innovative idea at the time, but now discredited.²⁸ The Ethnological Hall was arranged by Schmidt to show the "progress of civilization outside the influence of Christianity," complete with many fetishes and other occult objects.²⁹ Founder of the tradition of *Kulturkreise*, Schmidt took a missionary-based approach to anthropology that emphasized understanding the particular histories of individual societies rather than placing cultures within a universalizing discourse of human nature.³⁰ He believed anthropology should be "a scientific discipline, proving the ability of Catholics to work in this field, and an apologetic discipline, proving the natural foundations of Catholic doctrine."³¹ Schmidt's thesis, based on his studies in Africa, did not address the complexities of religious belief for the Indigenous peoples of the

26 Schmidt was also blatantly anti-Semitic and published writings to that effect. In the words of social anthropologist Thomas Hauschild, "his work aimed at dethroning the Hebrews as the direct predecessors of the Christians." Thomas Hauschild, "Christians, Jews, and the Other in German Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 99, no. 4 (1997): 749, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1997.99.4.746>.

27 Hauschild, "Christians, Jews, and the Other in German Anthropology," 749.

28 Wilhelm Schmidt was a prodigious author, and an analysis of his theory of primitive monotheism in relation to the ethnological debates in Europe at the time is beyond the scope of this article. Schmidt's racist ideas were allied to those of the Nazi party in Germany, but his Catholic beliefs were not, and for this reason he was persecuted by the Nazis in the late 1930s. See Hauschild, "Christians, Jews, and the Other in German Anthropology," 749.

29 F. J. Bowen, "The Missionary Exhibition at The Vatican," *New Blackfriars* 6 (1925): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1925.tb03478.x>.

30 It should be noted that the term "Kulturkreise" was later used by the Nazis in their racial eugenics program.

31 Stefan Dietrich, "Mission, Local Culture and the 'Catholic Ethnology' of Pater Schmidt," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 23, no. 2 (1992): 114.

Americas. His curatorial method contributed to an understanding of Indigenous Americans as primitive and uncivilized, outside the “rational” time and space of Western exposition visitors, the normative perspective showcased by missionary expositions and world exhibitions at the time.³² As anthropologist Alison Kahn notes, “[t]he pre-contact ‘heathen objects’ were presented en masse with the implicit message to visitors that Indigenous cultures were lost and in need of guidance. Conversion to Christianity was portrayed as simultaneous with an enriched material.”³³ By this, Kahn means that with conversion to Christianity, Indigenous peoples would achieve both greater material wealth and the ability to assimilate into Western societies. A newspaper report noted that this section of the exhibition included “a wealth of material relating to the pagan cults and rites, witchcraft, [and] conditions of life,” emphasizing the spectacle rather than the science.³⁴ After these first rooms, deemed the “scientific” section, visitors moved, in the Hall of Americas, onto the larger work and accomplishments of the Catholic missionaries abroad.³⁵

For this vast and ambitious exhibition, Schmidt and his team of missionaries worked with a variety of materials, a plethora of cultural belongings and ephemera including pottery, textiles, paintings, pamphlets, books, and photographs.³⁶ Since Pope Pius XI had sent out a call for submissions connecting the broader community of Catholic missionaries and converts, Schmidt had to work with whatever the missionaries submitted. The submissions’ unpredictability and variety formed

32 Alison Kahn, “Mind over Matter: A Catholic Ethnology for the Vatican’s Ethnographic Collections (1911-1939)” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2006). OCLC Worldcat (500335678).

33 Kahn, “Mind over Matter,” 191.

34 “Vatican Exhibition is Taking Shape: Pavilions to Cost 6,000,000 Lire,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1924, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

35 “Vatican Exhibition is Taking Shape,” *New York Times*.

36 My use here of the term “visual culture” encompasses popular culture items (such as board games, posters, and photographs) and is part of the broader movement within art history to draw attention to the biases of the standard canon of art history, namely, that aspect of the discipline that only examines the work of Western artists and so-called “high art.” For more on this issue, see James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

part of the importance of the exhibition as pop and pope culture.³⁷ As Father Penkowski, former curator of the Vatican Ethnological Collection, noted regarding the array of material donated:

They included objects from every part of the world where the Catholic missions carry out their activities. The systematic display of this heritage, arranged according to the geographical criteria, provided in itself a wonderful panorama of the life and wide-ranging activities of many non-European peoples in the economic, social and artistic fields, as well as that of their magical practices and their multifarious beliefs.³⁸

Penkowski hints at the collision, throughout this period of intense missionization and salvage paradigm collecting of “magical practices,” between Indigenous belief systems and Catholic dogma. Visitors admired cultural belongings for their status as objects created by Indigenous peoples described sometimes as converts and sometimes as pagans.³⁹ Materials functioned as uneasy reminders of alternative religious beliefs but also of the triumphs and trophies of missionary work. Reviewers ignored the Indigenous materials surrounding them.

UNSETTLING THE PME: COMPETING SOVEREIGNTIES: A PASSAMAQUODDY CROSS IN ROME

An example of Passamaquoddy culture displayed in the PME, and still in the Vatican collections, is a statue of Christ that provides a powerful example of Passamaquoddy carving ingenuity (Figure 2).⁴⁰ Father Pancrazio Maarschalkerweerd, the former museum assistant of the Vatican Missionary Ethnology Collection in 1937, described the statue as “an art object that is of importance, being from the

37 A call for submissions was also sent out by the curator Dino Alfieri, who organized the Fascist Exhibition, the mass appeal of which was an intentional goal of his curation. Vanessa Rocco, “Room O of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution-1932,” in *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Pressa to The Family of Man, 1928-55*, ed. Jorge Ribalta (Barcelona: Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2008), 245.

38 Giuseppe Penkowski, *Il Vaticano e Roma Cristiana* (Citta del Vaticano, Roma: 1975), 26.

39 Considine, *The Vatican Mission Exposition*, 108.

40 The “crucifix” was listed in AMDG, Croquis de Visite D’Exposition Recueillis Par un Des Missionnaires Exposants, Avril 1925 (Industria Tipografica Romana, Roma, 1925), 16-17. Propaganda Fide Library Collections, Vatican Missionary Exposition Papers, document B1i 30 (2).

historical period and also representing the question of Indigenous art.”⁴¹ Maarschalkerweerd’s phrase “question of Indigenous art” suggests he at least considered the shifting hierarchies of value surrounding Indigenous art in this period, from anonymous arts of “primitive” artists as presented at the PME to part of the “Indian Craze” to arts of diverse peoples worthy of recognition as art.⁴² Catholic missionaries at Passamaquoddy sent in the carving as part of the Museo Borgia Della Propaganda al Museo Lateranense collection.⁴³ It is the work of an Indigenous artist from the first half of the nineteenth century, with a height of 72 cm.⁴⁴

The Passamaquoddy artist carved the cross out of wood from the yellow birch, a tree with multiple layers of importance for Indigenous communities across the Northeast of Turtle Island, including the Anishinaabe and Algonquin. Anishinaabe writer Robin Wall Kimmerer observes that “[t]he birch forests maintained by indigenous burning were a cornucopia of gifts: bark for canoes, sheathing for wigwams and tools and baskets, scrolls for writing.”⁴⁵ The tinder of the birch is also used to light fires and is an important part of indigenous ontologies and ways of relating to and understanding the world. Kimmerer notes that fires are central to the Anishinaabe creation stories, but they can also destroy. A particular fungus that grows on the birch is also highly valued in traditional medicine.⁴⁶ Passamaquoddy use the birch to make baskets and carrying bags as well as for ropes and other utility items for hunting.⁴⁷ Passamaquoddy and Wendaki continue to use birch for

41 I came across this Indigenous cross made by a Passamaquoddy artist while at the Propaganda Fide Library. The Catholic order that sent it in are not listed in the record. Catholic orders amongst the Passamaquoddy since the seventeenth century include the Capuchins, Recollects, Spiritans and Jesuits. Pancrazio Maarschalkerweerd, “Plastiche Cristiane delle Terre di Missione nel Pontificio Museo Missionario Etnologico,” *Annali Lateranensi* 1 (1937), 16–19 (accessed at Propaganda Fide Library Collections, Rome and Society of the Divine Word Verbite Archive, Rome).

42 Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2011), 92.

43 Maarschalkerweerd, “Plastiche Cristiane delle Terre,” 16.

44 Maarschalkerweerd, “Plastiche Cristiane delle Terre,” 16.

45 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 363.

46 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 363.

47 Frank W. Porter, *The Art of Native American Basketry: A Living Legacy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1990), 21.

birchbark writing.⁴⁸ In Indigenous ontologies, the birch is part of a wholistic system of relationships between people and the earth, and a vital part of the ecosystem for animals, plants, and humans.⁴⁹

The arms of the cross taper into a stylized floral design. Northeast carvers used stylized floral designs throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries on effigies for Indigenous spiritual practices, in making ritual belongings for burial, and to create what art historians Ruth Phillips and Janet Berlo call “arts of the middle ground.”⁵⁰ Indigenous artists of the Northeast were influenced by the impact of trade with Europeans, creating gifts of exchange for diplomacy.⁵¹ Above the figure of Christ is the Latin acronym “INRI” (standing for “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews”). The body of Christ has a red tint, and his hair and beard are black. The artist carved the figure out of a single piece of wood and then nailed it onto the larger cross behind. The minimal red-and-black color palette creates a stark mood for the piece, one suitable for the agony of the figure; the viewer is meant to empathize with the suffering of the Indigenous man on the cross. The artist presents the viewer with the tangible suffering of the emaciated figure; the pain manifests in the open grimace carved into his face and the lashes incised thickly across his chest. Notably, he is an Indigenous savior, wearing what appears to be a stylized beaver belt depicted by a crosshatched garment wrapped around his waist. The crosshatch technique of the loincloth presents an Algonquin approach



Figure 2. Passamaquoddy artist, Untitled, c. 1830, wood carving with pigment, in *Annali Lateranensi* (1937), volume 1, 19. Propaganda Fide Library, Rome.

48 Alison Laforge, “Burl Bowls and Birchbark Baskets: Decolonizing Indigenous Material Culture in the Native Northeast” (MA thesis, Mount Holyoke College, 2016). <https://ida.mtholyoke.edu/xmlui/handle/10166/3803>, Mount Holyoke College Institutional Digital Archive.

49 On Passamaquoddy art traditions, see also Joan A. Lester, *History on Birchbark: The Art of Tomah Joseph, Passamaquoddy* (Bar Harbor, ME: The Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, 1993), 10.

50 Ruth Phillips and Janet Berlo, *Native North American Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90.

51 Phillips and Berlo, *Native North American Art*, 92.

to the iconography of sacred beings. The oval almost abstract shape of the face and the incised eyes and lips are reminiscent of faces of sacred beings on catlinite pipes and feast bowls, part of the carving traditions of figurines and effigies used in medicine bundles and other sacred practices of Algonquin peoples of the Northeast.⁵² Considering also that Passamaquoddy used this cross in processions, showcased how Passamaquoddy adopted rather than assimilated Catholic practices into their carving traditions and spirituality, presenting a First Nations man as the human face of the divine.⁵³

The adoption of Christian mythology using an Indigenous lens and an Indigenous approach to image-making is evident in this sculpture through the carving method that presents the suffering of a Passamaquoddy man as Christ. Theologian Thomas Murray admits that “[m]any Indians’ faith may well be a synthesis of traditional Indian and Christian beliefs, because over the centuries Christian missionaries continually noted—usually with distress—how easily Native Americans adopted portions of Christian doctrine without abandoning tribal practices.”⁵⁴ The cross is evidence of the ongoing Passamaquoddy worldview and its characteristic approach to sculpture, using a distinct visual language as part of the long continuum of visual culture practices in the medium of birchbark which also includes birchbark writing and basketry.⁵⁵ This understudied cross is also a telling reminder of the series of transitions and hardships that the Passamaquoddy peoples went through, such as removal from their lands and attempts by missionaries and the federal government of Canada and the United States to force their assimilation into settler society. It is also evidence of the persistence of the chip-carving method and of the ingenuity of Passamaquoddy carving traditions, yet in the earliest discussion of Native American material in Vatican collections by David Bushnell, published in the *American*

52 Ralph T. Coe, Jonathan C. H. King, and Judith Ostrowitz, *The Responsive Eye: Ralph T. Coe and the Collecting of American Indian Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003), 201.

53 Maarschalkerweerd, “Plastiche Cristiane delle Terre,” 16.

54 R. Murray Thomas, *Manitou and God: North-American Religions and Christian Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 5.

55 Mark Hedden, “Passamaquoddy Shamanism and Rock Art in Machias Bay, Maine,” in *The Rock Art of Eastern North America: Capturing Images and Insight*, eds. Carol Diaz-Granados and James R. Duncan (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 319.

Anthropologist (1906), there is no mention of it. The cross is also not in the *Americas* catalogue, the most recent Vatican publication.

The finely carved cross is a marker of Passamaquoddy presence in the Vatican and in the PME, and a reminder of the ongoing use of the arts by Native people to assert their identity and adapt Christian mythologies to Indigenous worldviews. The Indigenous figure on the cross reminds one of the seventeenth-century conversion of the Passamaquoddy and their adoption of Catholicism but also shows how Passamaquoddy peoples retained their Indigenous spiritual beliefs and cultural practices.⁵⁶ Like many of the cultural belongings that featured in the PME, the current whereabouts of the cross remain a mystery, suggesting that the PME curators may have lost or damaged it. In an article from 1990, “Roman Ecclesiastical Archives and the history of Native Peoples of Canada,” Giovanni Pizzorusso notes that “[n]o further collection history [of the cross] is available as old inventories were not copied at the time of the transfer.”⁵⁷ My interviews with a former curator corroborate Pizzorusso’s claim.⁵⁸ The afterlives of many of the Indigenous cultural belongings sent in for the PME remain a mystery. Many cultural belongings of the Americas have either been lost, destroyed, or have disappeared. Others, such as buffalo hides from the Plains, disintegrated due to insect infestations.⁵⁹ The disappearance even of sacred items such as the cross suggests the utter curatorial disregard for Indigenous cultural belongings in addition to the way that time and neglect can erode history. As Czech-French author Milan Kundera notes, “the struggle for power is the struggle between memory and forgetting.”⁶⁰ The cross provides a powerful reminder in my larger research project to remember and articulate the contributions of Indigenous artisans within the PME and within the Vatican collections that were neglected by missionaries.

56 Tomson Highway and John George Moss, *Comparing Mythologies* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005).

57 Giovanni Pizzorusso, “Roman Ecclesiastical Archives and the History of the Native Peoples of Canada,” *European Review of American Indian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1990): 24. Newberry Library Edward E. Ayer Special Collections.

58 Conversation with the former curator, November 2016.

59 Conversation with the former curator.

60 Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York, Knopf: 1980).

The materiality of the cross, carved from yellow birch, matters on multiple levels of the collective memory of Indigenous peoples of the Northeast. Yellow birch continues to remind Indigenous peoples of the respect they hold for the tree within creation stories, and the ability of this sense of connection to strengthen and nurture Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. On an intellectual level, birch plays a central role in sustaining Indigenous mythologies. At a material level, it forms the literal basis for many arts practices, including basketry and carving traditions.⁶¹ More broadly, the cross represents the importance of Passamaquoddy carving traditions within the adaptation of Christian stories to the Passamaquoddy worldview. As such, it is evidence of the extensive period of creative cultural encounter the Passamaquoddy built with missionaries, and the multiple forms of cultural exchange between diverse peoples. When I first encountered this Passamaquoddy cross at the Propaganda Fide in Rome I was struck by its immediacy and felt that perhaps it was a metaphor for my research. Million's affective approach to writing histories resonates with me on the labor of working in colonial archives. The mental, physical and spiritual struggles Indigenous studies scholars face are part of my affective labor practices that inform and motivate my research. In the broader research project, I include my journal excerpts to center my experiences working through the violence of colonial archives. The almost tangible suffering of the man on the cross recalls for me the competing sovereignties of Indigenous artworks in the strongholds of the Vatican but also more broadly a reminder to trace and honor Indigeneity in archives.

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTIES: ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF INDIGENEITY

Colonial archives remain fraught spaces of competing sovereignties for Indigenous scholars and art historians; they present the violence of colonial rule and attempted jurisdiction over Indigenous peoples in their topology.⁶² One strategy I use when approaching and researching Indigeneity in colonial archives is to consider how Indigenous nations, artists and cultural belongings are present in material traces in

61 Lester, *History on Birchbark*, 11.

62 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

archives and as in the case of the Passamaquoddy cross it is a matter of re-interpretation and reading archives from multiple angles and sites of access. Indigenous scholars articulating multiple forms of Indigenous sovereignty, visual, cultural and intellectual sovereignties create a decolonizing movement in writing Indigenous art histories, and my research, as an Indigenous scholar, builds into this initiative. Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja argues that the imaginative potential of Indigenous cultural, visual and intellectual sovereignty opens up thinking for the possibility of alternative spaces of Indigeneity and a creative form of interference amidst the overt colonial aims of spaces such as the PME.⁶³ Tuscarora scholar Jolene Rickard defines sovereignty as, “the border that shifts indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one.”⁶⁴ Tsimshian scholar Mique’l Dangeli articulates sovereignty through her conceptual framework of dancing sovereignty. Northwest Coast Dance Indigenous protocols form a transmotion of creative expression and cultural sovereignty. She affirms it as an expression of “self-determination carried out through the creation of performances (oratory, songs, and dances) that adhere to and expand upon protocol in ways that affirm hereditary privileges (ancestral histories and associated ownership of songs, dances, crests, masks, headdresses).”⁶⁵ Indigenous scholars, artists and activists maintain cultural being intellectual sovereignty in creative ways in an ongoing assertion of agency on Turtle Island.

Ojibwe scholar Scott Lyons argues for an Indigenous articulation of time and space that acknowledges the contemporary reality and diversity of Indigenous nations. “For far too long Natives have been discussed exclusively in the past tense and for far too long modernity has been discussed as if it were strictly a Western imposition. It is time to acknowledge not only our continued presence in history, but also the reality of Indian time on the move.”⁶⁶ I draw on Lyons’ argument to build a counterpoint to the “allochronic space” created by the curators and

63 Michelle H. Raheja, “Visual Sovereignty,” *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith and Michelle H. Raheja (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press: 2015), 29.

64 Jolene Rickard, “Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand,” *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices* (Reading PA: Aperture Press, 1995), 51.

65 Mique’l Dangeli, “Dancing Chix, Dancing Sovereignty: Performing Protocol in Unceded Territories,” *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 1 (2016): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767715000534>

66 Scott Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816666768.001.0001>

organizers of the PME, and the denial of Indigenous peoples' modernity. In this paper, I demonstrate that visual analysis of the Indigenous materials as cultural belongings opens an Indigenous spatial orientation that acknowledges the contemporary reality of diverse Indigenous nations. Building from the work of Raheja, Rickard, Dangeli and Lyons, the Indigenous cultural belongings articulate an Indigenous space of subversive potential in unsettling the sovereignty claims of Catholicism, the "colonial unknowing" prevalent throughout articulations of the PME.⁶⁷ In terms of the relationship between visual culture, the PME, and fascism, the PME inspired the ideological foundations of the new state, with its emphasis on martyrdom and heroes, Christian ritual, and the hierarchy of race and culture legitimized by colonial missionary expansion, all of which would be taken up by the fascists in Italy in the 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* exhibition celebrating the Fascist Revolution.⁶⁸ Writing from Turtle Island, the PME is also a reminder of the grief Indigenous people faced and endure due to the legacies of colonial settler missionary museum practices such as salvage anthropology and a reminder of the Canadian state's amendments to the Indian Act in 1920 when residential schools operated by missionaries became compulsory for Indigenous children, spaces of total surveillance, trauma and no empathy. Placing Indigenous cultural belongings at the center of this story, markers of Indigenous cultural and intellectual sovereignty flip the colonial analysis prevalent throughout the archival record of the PME and the legacies of the exhibition.

TRACING INDIGENEITY IN THE ARCHIVES ON HAUDENOSAUNEE TERRITORY (MONTREAL)

Finally, I will close this essay with a glimpse at a cartouche created by French artist N. Guerard in 1708 that showcases competing imperial cum spiritual claims for sovereignty (Figure 3). I was recently in the McGill University Library Rare Books and Special Collections in Montreal, Haudenosaunee Territory, with my graduate class. I assigned the class a project to trace Indigeneity through primary sources in

67 Manu Vimalassery, Juilana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): 1.

68 Libero Andreotti, "The Aesthetics of War: The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution," *Journal of Architectural Education* 45, no. 2 (1992): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1992.10734493>.



archives in Montreal as well as to consider what constitutes archives for Indigenous nations. The cartouche, which is part of a larger map created by cartographer Guillaume de L'Isle showcasing “New France,” illustrates Indigenous nations including Wendat and Haudenosaunee, as well as Recollet and Jesuit missionaries baptizing and proselyting Indigenous nations in the left and right upper corners of the cartouche. The woman carrying a swaddled infant in a cradle board on the lower left corner almost stepping outside the frame, shows evidence of the care Indigenous women take for their children and provides an unexpected moment of unsettling missionary colonial encounter. The cartouche is reminiscent of the four continents ideology espoused by Pope Pius XI at the PME and of the Greek translation of the word “catholic” meaning worldwide; missionaries aimed to travel to the four corners of the world to convert and therefore “redeem” Indigenous peoples. The map is visually striking for the wide areas of blank white space which showcase the cartographer’s lack of knowledge of Indigenous territories. The map maker and illustrator never voyaged to Turtle Island but instead relied on travelers’ accounts which in turn depended on vast Indigenous knowledges, the map features

Figure 3. Guillaume de L'Isle and N. Guérard, *Carte du Canada ou de la Nouvelle France et des decouvertes qui y ont été faites: dressée sur plusieurs observations et sur un grand nombre de relations imprimées ou manuscrites*, 1708, Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library

many Indigenous territories and communities including Anishinaabe, Wendat and Haudenosaunee nations. Map making played a central role in claiming territories as sovereign for the French and British imperial powers within Turtle Island. Looking at the map today reminds me of the competing claims for sovereignty on unceded Haudenosaunee territory and like the Passamaquoddy cross at the PME, the power of artworks to render visible Indigenous histories and spiritualities and the need to articulate beyond the “silent eloquence” of Catholic dogma.

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