

identify with – a famous figure that they may have previously considered unreachable or inaccessible. But the freshness of this approach is nearing its expiry date. To take it further requires looking beyond the individual artist as a human to uncover the social and imaginative realities of that artist's historical world (an effective example of this could be 'Titian's Vision of Women: Beauty – Love – Poetry', on display in 2021 at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and in 2022 at Palazzo Reale, Milan). It necessitates a loosening of the monographic exhibition, moving beyond the individual and towards an exploration of entangled social, political and cultural networks. At its most powerful, it might spark an audience's curiosity about both historical and contemporary equivalents. One might think of the controversy sparked by Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*, bound up in the fraught context of the Counter-Reformation and reflecting a clash between ideological creative expression and restrictive institutional expectations. This exhibition itself contains traces of encounters between works of art and the institutions behind them: the largest surviving *cartone* from the Italian Renaissance, *Epifania* (1550–53), displayed in the exhibition, was recently conserved in a project funded by the Bank of America – a bank which ranks third on the 2023 list of worst fossil fuel funders.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, as the lack of humanity of arts institutions comes under more scrutiny, curators and audiences alike are increasingly interested in seeking out the humanity of art history's 'giants' – an approach that seems to be working, at least for now.<sup>6</sup>

1 I note that Neil MacGregor's and Marjan Scharloo's foreword in *Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master* exhibition catalogue opens with the statement: 'Michelangelo is a giant' / See Hugo Chapman,

*Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 5.

- 2 *Michelangelo: The Last Decades*, The British Museum, London, 2 May – 28 July 2024, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/michelangelo-last-decades> (accessed 30 July 2024)
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *Young Rembrandt*, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 10 August – 1 November 2020, <https://www.ashmolean.org/youngrembrandt> (accessed 30 July 2024)
- 5 'Banks financed fossil fuels by \$6.9 trillion dollars since the Paris Agreement; \$705 billion provided in 2023 alone; JP Morgan Chase, Mizuho, and Bank of America are worst 3 funders,' Rainforest Action Network, May 12, 2024, <https://www.ran.org/press-releases/boccc2024/>. See also Damien Gale, 'Banks have given almost \$7tn to fossil fuel firms since Paris deal, report reveals,' *The Guardian*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/may/13/banks-almost-7tn-fossil-fuel-firms-paris-deal-report> (accessed 30 July 2024)
- 6 Charlotte McLaughlin, 'British Museum shuts doors to visitors early after protest,' *The Independent*, March 24, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/london-palestine-palestine-solidarity-campaign-metropolitan-police-israel-b2517878.html> (accessed 30 July 2024)

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**'Weaving Abstraction in Ancient and Modern Art', The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 4 March–16 June 2024. Catalogue: Iria Candela and Joanne Pillsbury, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2024, 48 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781588397799, \$14.95.**

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It would be easy to compare the two rooms of 'Weaving Abstraction in Ancient and Modern Art' based on historical context, provenance, or respective cultural significance. The layout of the exhibition certainly suggests such frameworks. There are entrances to the

exhibition on either side of its two gallery spaces: one focuses on the work of modern artists Anni Albers, Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney, and Olga de Amaral, and the other features objects from unnamed Andean artists and craftsmen of the first millennium to the 16th century. With this exhibition the Metropolitan Museum of Art contributes to the increasing interest in the inclusion of textile art and work from the Global South into the art historical canon; this year's Venice Biennale, 'Foreigners Everywhere', curated by the Brazilian Adriano Pedrosa, and the recent 'Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art' at the Barbican Art Gallery exemplify such interests. 'Weaving Abstraction' in its turn proposes that each grouping of weavers was comparably engaged with textile practices as a means of complicating and elaborating geometric form. The interest in the comparison is mostly formal, with an emphasis placed on the exploration of the grid structure – the warp and weft of the loom – and it is mobilised by a historical framework that, although productive in many ways, ultimately lacks an adequate conceptualization of its limitations, and in so doing, grounds itself in self-affirming historical objectivity.

Consider the controversial "'Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern' 1984 exhibition at MoMA as a point of comparison. In Thomas McEvilley's biting review, he problematized the exhibition's tautological thesis that 'the primitive "looks like" the Modern', demonstrated by the curators' 'obsessive attention' to historical research with the intention of finding that either the 'primitive' was a nascent influence on the Modern or that such influence took shape later, as a 'confirmatory witness'.<sup>1</sup> The assumption

that either conclusion will inevitably be reached relies on an a priori conception of the ideals of modernism as objective. In 'Weaving Abstraction', by contrast, the historical background serves as evidence of and elaboration on the modern artists' sources of influence, which were, explicitly, ancient Andean textile practices, rather than as a ground of formalist objectivity which retroactively affirms the principles of modernism. The exhibition states that these modern artists cited Andean textile practices as their influence and shows what these practices were, allowing the viewer to draw the aesthetic link. This framework nonetheless lends legitimacy to a similar kind of retroactive affirmation featured in the MoMA exhibition of 1984, albeit in a different fashion and perhaps to a lesser degree. The suggestion of a broader conception of formal lineage rooted in the presumed organic process of weaving as making only serves to both obfuscate and affirm the intended objectivity of the exhibition's periodization.

Fibre arts do, naturally, lend themselves to formally generative aesthetic choices. Tim Ingold proposed that all making is a kind of weaving, rooted in materiality and process, in contrast with a hylomorphic model which assigns agential primacy to form over matter.<sup>2</sup> The material structure of the loom's grid suggests certain geometric patterns which may be elaborated into increasingly complex abstracted images. This practice is rendered clearly in objects such as the 7th–11th century tunic attributed to 'Wari artist; Peru', where a 'winged feline' is nearly unrecognisable as it is geometrically deconstructed across the width of the garment. In Anni Albers' *Red Meander* (1954), the artist similarly makes use of structural mirroring and repetition to create an orthogonal maze-like pattern. As

the wall text suggests, Albers' work echoes the 'individually patterned rectangles of Inca tunics and the positive and negative shapes of ancient cloths'.

What is explicitly not at stake here is the question of cultural appropriation or colonial history. In the accompanying publication, the introductory text plainly states, 'it is not our intention to dissect how these modern artists appropriated this tradition'. This is not necessarily a problem of simplification on the part of the exhibition; to use that critical lens alone would itself be overly simplistic, and the careful attention given to historical context is admittedly refreshing.<sup>3</sup> There is an easy flow between the rooms and throughout the exhibition which generates an interactivity of aesthetic themes, satisfyingly emphasising the formal and stylistic elements with which the exhibition is engaged. To inflate its syntax with suggestions of appropriation would perhaps serve to discredit the work of modern and contemporary fibre artists who did, in fact, seriously study ancient practices. Without the ability to properly identify the producers of the ancient work, however, there is inevitably a hierarchical distinction made between the ancient and the modern. And although the extensive historical context provided in the exhibition lends a level of agency to the ancient craftsmen, their anonymity effects a certain objectification in how they are represented.

In the descriptive text which accompanies many of the Andean pieces, the cultural significance of textiles as identity markers and forms of communication is highlighted. Here, the individual significance of an object is broadened to become representative of an entire period or people. By contrast, the work of the modern artist is individualised, and linked to each of their independent practices

and the various movements of which they were part. This difference in historical scope is a consequence of the information available to scholars: we know much more about Sheila Hicks as an individual than we do about anonymous imperial workers of the pre-Hispanic Andes. Regardless of the historical scope, however, similar elements of form are mobilised in both contexts: the repetition of patterns, vertical and horizontal modulations, the elaboration of the grid. Ingold's conception of making processes is certainly evoked by such formalist readings, engaging the work productively with contemporary notions of textility, but in equating each period's aesthetic intentions, we inevitably lean towards a more modernised reading, with the exploration of the grid being formal in nature in both contexts.

That is not to say that the ancient practices of Andean weavers were not formal in nature. However, it would have been more interesting had the exhibition included a broader acknowledgment of the conditions of these ancient practices, and the ways that the framework of the exhibition itself may have limited our understanding of such conditions. What of the imperial state-sponsored workforces, for example, which were only mentioned tangentially in some wall texts? The standardisation of ancient textile arts surely would have generated weaving practices entirely different in nature from the exploratory practices of modern fibre artists, despite their aesthetic commonalities. The exhibition also excludes the practices of modern Chilean artists who have worked with fibre. Cecilia Vicuña's absence, for example, is glaring; Vicuña's work can be understood in direct conversation with ancient Andean practices, and though she did not only produce fibre-based work, it could

have been constructive to acknowledge it at least in the accompanying text. Regardless, in formally linking the practices of ancient and modern weavers, the line between the two is one of purely aesthetic inspiration across time and culture, bereft of due pressure to figure the material circumstances of either, and the historical background, informatively and carefully registered as it is, grounds the exhibition in objectivity without adequately rendering its limitations as a project of periodisation.

- 1 Thomas McEvelley, 'Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief: Primitivism in twentieth century art at the Museum of Modern Art,' *Artforum*, November, 1984 <https://www.artforum.com/features/primitivism-in-20th-century-art-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-in-1984-207620/> (accessed 29 July 2024).
- 2 Tim Ingold defines the hylomorphic model of creation as 'the assumption that making entails the imposition of form upon the material world, by an agent with a design in mind'. See 'The textility of making,' *Cambridge journal of economics*, 34, no. 1 (2010), 91–102.
- 3 It is worth noting that Albers and her Bauhaus-trained contemporaries would have encountered a primitivist perspective on non-European weaving practices stemming from earlier German Expressionist frameworks. See Elissa Auther, 'Andean Weaving and the Appropriation of the Ancient Past in Modern Fiber Art,' <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/824/andean-weaving-and-the-appropriation-of-the-ancient-past-in-modern-fiber-art> (accessed 27 May 2024). Julia Bryan-Wilson has also touched on questions of appropriation and colonial histories in relation to Cecilia Vicuña's fibre art and the work of Chilean *arpilleristas* in her book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017).