

The Art of the Anthropological Diorama

Noémie Étienne

The Art of the Anthropological Diorama

Franz Boas, Arthur C. Parker, and Constructing Authenticity

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She talked about this world where objects had more hope than the living, where, morning after morning,
you invent angels who'll protect you.

Wajdi Mouawad, *Anima* (translated by Linda Gaboriau)

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Noémie Étienne

TRIGGER WARNING

In academia in general, and in a colonial context in particular, the choice of words and images is important. How can we study the past without repeating its brutality?

In this text, I favored a double reference for the names of the Nations and the People concerned: in English and in the language of the communities. However, I am unfortunately referring to terminology based on a colonial geography, including terms such as “New York,” “The United States,” and “America.” For the sake of historical accuracy, I kept the original vocabulary in the quotations, despite its offensive dimension.

As much as possible, I studied Indigenous expertise through the case of Arthur C. Parker (Gawaso Wanneh). I discussed the use of dioramas by minority groups, among others in the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. Moreover, I limited the illustration of this text to the images essential for its understanding. Some reproductions show casts of human beings taken in a highly unbalanced power situation. Others depict people in a stereotyped way or performing sensitive rituals. I draw the reader’s attention to the violence present in this iconography and apologize for the discomfort it may cause.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, diorama displays in anthropological and natural history museums have come under fierce criticism. At the opening ceremony in 2004 of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D. C., Richard W. Hill, assistant to the director and a member of the Tuscarora (Skaruhreh) Nation, declared them intrinsically problematic:

Dioramas are in themselves a throwback to the old-style museums that freeze Indians in the past. ... Will museums forever associate Indians with dioramas containing life-size figures? Will museum visitors always expect to see casts of Indians next to the stuffed animals, mechanical dinosaurs, and replicated fauna?¹

Earlier judgments were less damning. In 1943, Claude Lévi-Strauss published an article in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (which he then republished in *La voie des masques* [1975; *The Way of the Masks*, 1982]) in which he described the museography established by the anthropologist Franz Boas at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), located west of Central Park, at the heart of Manhattan Island:

There is in New York ... a magic place where the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where century-old tree trunks sing or speak, where indefinable objects watch out for the visitor, with the anxious stare of human faces, where animals of superhuman gentleness join their little paws like hands in prayer for the privilege of building the palace of the beaver for the chosen one, of guiding him to the realm of the seals, or of teaching him, with a mystic kiss, the language of the frog or the kingfisher. This place, on which outmoded but singularly effective museographic methods have conferred the additional allurements of the chiaroscuro of caves and the tottering heap of lost treasure, may be seen daily from ten to five o'clock at the American Museum of Natural History. It is the vast ground-floor gallery devoted to the Indians of the Northwest Coast, an area extending from Alaska to British Columbia.²

Lévi-Strauss spent six years in New York during the Second World War. When he visited the museum, the dioramas created by Boas were still on view—indeed, some of them are still exhibited today in a similar museographical setting.³

- 1 Richard W. Hill, "The Indian in the Cabinet of Curiosity," in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museum and Native Cultures* (Washington, D. C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2000), 105, 107.
- 2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, trans. Sylvia Modelski (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 3.
- 3 For a history of the hall and its transformations, see Ira Jacknis, "'A Magic Place': The Northwest Coast Indian Hall at the American Museum of Natural History," in *Coming to Shore: Northwest Coast Ethnology, Traditions, and Visions*, ed. Marie Mauzé (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 221–50.

As I will show, there are three types of diorama: the diorama as animated painting (a canvas, usually a landscape, that changes with shifting light effects); the natural history diorama, in which animals in a replicated native environment are displayed behind glass;⁴ and the anthropological diorama, in which the museum's collections are staged, often using plaster or wax figures. The third category is my focus. In this book, I study the installations constructed before the First World War in the AMNH and the New York State Museum (NYSM) in Albany. The corpus of objects assembled by the two institutions very early in the history of the diorama was relatively homogenous in terms of format and subject. The displays represented Native Americans as life-size figures, which were sometimes placed in front of a landscape and were often separated from the public by a pane of glass. These dioramas were created during one of the greatest periods of immigration in the history of the United States, when, over a period of thirty years, roughly between 1890 and 1920, twenty-three million immigrants settled in American territory.⁵ I argue that the dioramas discussed here participate in a broader logic, studied among others by Alan Trachtenberg: it is a question both of staging the Natives (Staging Indians) and creating an American identity specific to different cultural groups (Making Americans) by fabricating common historical references.

The dioramas of the AMNH are well known, whereas those of the NYSM have never been afforded any detailed study. Yet these two institutions, less than 155 miles (250 kilometers) apart, constructed their dioramas almost simultaneously. Moreover, the same artists were often involved—notably, the German sculptor Caspar Mayer, who worked for both museums. The different critical receptions and various amounts of attention these displays have received can be partly explained by the individual reputations of the anthropologists in charge of the two projects: Franz Boas (1858–1942) in New York City and Arthur C. Parker (1881–1955) in Albany.

In 1896, Boas left Berlin to study the culture of the Bella Coola (Nuxalkme) in British Columbia. The following year, he settled in New York City after obtaining a job at the journal *Science*; he then worked as an anthropologist at the AMNH, which he left in order to run the anthropology department at Columbia University in 1905.⁶ Boas is the focus of a large quantity of essays, and today he is considered the founder of academic anthropology in the United States.

By contrast, Arthur Parker—who was an autodidact anthropologist and activist of Native American descent working in a city less magnetic than New York—has been less studied in the history of anthropology. One of the main sources of information about him is the biography by historian Joy Porter. Arthur Parker was born on the Cattaraugus Reservation in the north of New York State; his mother was an American of Scottish English descent, while his paternal grandfather was Seneca (Onondowahgah), from an important Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) fami-

4 Stephen Quinn, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: Abrams, 2006).

5 Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2004), 32–33.

6 Charles King, *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Doubleday, 2019), 48–52.

ly.⁷ Parker's identity as a Native American and his decision not to pursue a college education (he refused an offer to study at Columbia University with Franz Boas, who was keen to become his thesis advisor) made his position in the field of anthropology somewhat exceptional.

Between Image and Space

The word *diorama* literally means "sight seen through." It was coined in 1822 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and derives from the Greek words *dia* (through) and *horao* (see). Daguerre trained as a painter but was also a theater decorator and the inventor of an early form of photography known as the daguerreotype.⁸ His first diorama was a theater that he opened in Paris in 1822. Inside, spectators could admire two scenes: the interior of Trinity Chapel in Canterbury Cathedral—realized by Daguerre's colleague, the painter Charles-Marie Bouton—and a painting by Daguerre himself representing the valley of Sarnen in the Obwalden canton of Switzerland.

After a short walk through the darkness of the theater, the cathedral appeared behind glass. Every fifteen minutes, the auditorium physically rotated so that the audience was able to see the other painting. In both cases, changing light simulated the hours of the day, moving from dawn to daylight and back to darkness, and sometimes the turn of the seasons, from summer to winter. To obtain this effect, areas of opaque paint were flanked by more translucent zones on the screen, while successions of colored screens were aligned behind it. A similar use of transparency had already been developed in other contemporaneous installations, such as the diaphanoramas created by the Swiss painter Franz Niklaus König.⁹

Around 1900, all the definitions of the word *diorama* in English were unanimous about two things: dioramas were "optical exhibitions," and they created an "illusion." In 1903, *Chamber's Etymological Dictionary* defined the diorama as "an exhibition of pictures, illuminated, and viewed through an opening in the wall of a darkened chamber."¹⁰ Some years before, Walter W. Skeat's dictionary had noted that, in its modern usage, *diorama* was "a term applied to various optical exhibitions."¹¹ Also in 1903, *A Companion Dictionary of the English Language* added

7 Joy Porter, *To Be Indian: The Life of Iroquois-Seneca Arthur Caswell Parker* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma, 2001), 16–17.

8 Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *L. J. M. Daguerre: The History of Diorama and the Daguerreotype* (New York: Dover, 1968), esp. 14–41. See also Germain Bapst, *Essai sur l'histoire des panoramas et des dioramas* (Paris: G. Masson, 1891), 20–22.

9 See Guillaume Le Gall, *La peinture mécanique: Le diorama de Daguerre* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2013).

10 Andrew Findlater, ed., *Chamber's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1903), 126.

11 "Diorama, a scene seen through a small opening. (Gk.) Modern. A term applied to various optical exhibitions, and to the building in which they are shown." Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1882), 168.

that the diorama was “a mode of painting and scenic exhibition, so arranged as to produce a complete optical illusion.”¹²

As dioramas, in Daguerre’s sense of the word, declined in popularity, the term gradually took on a broader sense. After 1900, it was primarily used in two contexts: natural history and anthropology. Usage also differed between languages. In the field of natural sciences, the French use of *diorama* referred to what was often called in English a “habitat group.” In 1889, the American sculptor and taxidermist Carl Akeley, who was then working for the Milwaukee Public Museum, created one of the first dioramas in a North American museum: it comprised zoological specimens in a recreated natural habitat, with a painting as background. The term was also used to describe installations presenting human figures made of plaster, wax, or terracotta. A postcard dated 1911 shows *Les Dioramas—Filature de la laine à la main* (The dioramas—wool-spinning by hand), one of a series of dioramas (and of postcards representing them) at the Palais des Industries Textiles at the Exposition Internationale du Nord de la France in Roubaix, and attests to the use of this term in French to describe such installations in the early years of the twentieth century.

Dioramas were omnipresent in exhibition spaces in Europe from the 1850s onward and were also used in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. To take one example, the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, which was inaugurated in 1964, uses dioramas to present Indigenous Peoples. These displays generally take the form of a rectangular space that is sometimes surrounded by a wooden frame. The spectators remain in the dark; all the light comes from the installation. Many—though not all—dioramas are protected by a pane of glass. The organization of figures in space and the landscapes behind them create a false perspective imparting depth to the scene. Finally, most dioramas are made on one of two different scales: life-size, like all the examples cited in this book; or miniature, which allows the spectator to see the scene from above and dominate the representation.

First used to describe Daguerre’s pictures but later ascribed to three-dimensional exhibitions, the word *diorama* may seem to have evolved in a surprising way. But we should remember that it has always referred to not only a painting but also a space—that is, to the theater within which the animation took place. This can be seen clearly in a colored engraving from the early nineteenth century representing a theater with the word “Diorama” written across it. Daguerre sometimes included three-dimensional elements, such as trees, in order to enhance the illusion. Thus, in 1930, he presented a view of Chamonix to which he added a chalet, a grazing cow, and other objects that he sometimes repainted so that they harmonized with the rest of the representation.¹³

12 James Henry Murray, *A Companion Dictionary of the English Language: Comprising Words in Ordinary Use, Terms in Medicine, Surgery, the Arts and Sciences, etc.* (London: George Routledge, 1903), 191.

13 Claudia Kamcke and Rainer Hutterer, “History of Dioramas,” in *Natural History Dioramas: History, Construction, and Educational Role*, ed. Sue Dale Tunnicliffe and Annette Scheersoi (Berlin: Springer, 2015), 10.

Optics and Politics

In the history of anthropology, dioramas are considered a mode of exhibition.¹⁴ In her groundbreaking work on the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the French historian Nélia Dias approaches museographical issues through an analysis of the laws, discourses, and controversies engendered by different systems of classification.¹⁵ The concrete staging of dioramas, however, occupies relatively little space in this work, and we learn nothing about the ways in which they were made.

In media history, dioramas are frequently presented as an anticipation of cinema.¹⁶ Alison Griffiths suggests that each diorama might be considered a film scene.¹⁷ She uses the word “promenade” to characterize the way in which the museum spectators activate this “film” by the movement of their gaze. The other experience that she invokes is that of consumption: she compares dioramas to the windows of the shopping arcades typical of the late nineteenth century. The theoretical framework in which these studies are inscribed was laid out by the art historian Jonathan Crary in the early 1990s. With reference to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin and the panorama, Crary emphasizes the emergence in the nineteenth century of a mobile spectator whose shifting perception presents things in their multitude rather than their singularity.¹⁸

The sense of sight has been a central element in the study of dioramas. The spectator described in the books cited above might be a moving eye without real embodiment. But one of the arguments of this book is that the issue of contact is essential. At the turn of the century, the reception and activation of the diorama depended as much on the full body and the sense of touch as on the eye. Thus, each chapter shows that physical interaction is a key element for understanding the medium. I shall dwell on the relations between the public and the diorama, the contact between artistic materials and bodies, and the ways in which objects are manipulated. From an iconographic point of view, dioramas directly evoke touch, because the human figures are manipulating objects in each of the scenes. More generally, I intend to dissociate the diorama from the history of photography and cinema, two media with which it is often compared, in order to underline its materiality and the politics of its making.

14 Benoît de L'Estoile, *Le goût des autres: De l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007). See also Stanley A. Freed, *Anthropology Unmasked: Museums, Science, and Politics in New York City* (Wilmington, OH: Orange Frazer, 2012).

15 Nélia Dias, *Le Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878–1908): Anthropologie et muséologie en France* (Paris: CNRS, 1991).

16 See, for example, Birgit Verwiebe, *Lichtspiele: Von Mondscheintransparent zum Diorama* (Stuttgart: Füsslin, 1997).

17 Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology & Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 49. See also Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2013); and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1991), 112.

18 Crary, *Techniques*, 20–21.

In her article “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt insists that cultural transfers occur at the sites of encounter and exchange between peoples.¹⁹ These spaces are also zones of conflict, where individuals and ambitions not only meet, collide, and intermingle but also resist one another in asymmetrical power relations. These encounters occurred in different places and at different times: the reservations to which Native Americans were confined; the educational institutions in which young children were schooled and forcibly acculturated; and, lastly, the museums in which the dioramas were realized. And the scale of the contact ranged from a meeting between an artist and an anthropologist sharing the same workplace and living in the same city to a scientific mission to Alaska or New Mexico, controlled from New York, and requiring a journey of several thousand miles (or kilometers).

In most of the research done in the wake of Crary’s book, the comparison of dioramas to pictures is justified primarily by their transmission through photography. The diorama necessarily involves a mixture of media—notably, painting and sculpture—but when reproduced on paper, it inevitably becomes an image from a chosen angle. Its multimedia and multidimensional characteristics are masked by its two-dimensional reproduction, which is primarily a form of documentation—a point that should also be made about the images that accompany this text. Indeed, the photographs that I took during my research necessarily led me to assign a point of view to each diorama, even when it was possible to enter them.

Taxidermy in the Garden of Patriarchy

Differentiating regimes of perspective is useful when establishing a typology of dioramas. First, picture dioramas are front-facing and often behind glass, and they have a large painting as their background. Many conform to this pattern, including all those created by Arthur Parker at Albany. A perspective is created by the construction and landscape, and this unavoidable point of view suggests a fixed spectator, as do the paintings of the Renaissance. Second, display-case dioramas, such as the many dioramas installed by Franz Boas at the AMNH in the late nineteenth century, are installations that the visitor can walk around, and they therefore afford numerous points of view. Thirdly, milieu dioramas are truly immersive ensembles in which spectators, upon entering them, are immersed, decentered, and participative, as in the model described by Julie Reiss and Claire Bishop in relation to contemporary-art installations.²⁰ Indeed, Boas used the word “installation”²¹ to describe his dioramas, though there is no mention of them in most studies of installation art.²²

19 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

20 Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999). See also Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005).

21 Claude Imbert, “Boas, de Berlin à New York,” in *Franz Boas: Le travail du regard*, ed. Michel Espagne and Isabelle Kalinowski (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), 16.

22 In addition to Claire Bishop and Julie Reiss, see also Julian Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003); and Vivian von Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

For the purposes of this book, the political perspective is even more important than the visual. Since the 1970s—and notably in the wake of Michel Foucault's writings—art historians, museologists, and anthropologists have established a broad range of commentary on the performative power of exhibition apparatuses; like many other museal arrangements, a diorama organizes things into a system. These arrangements can also be discussed as *assemblages*, a term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.²³ Beyond a biographical approach to the objects, one can consider the parts composing the diorama (specimens, models, and garments) as singular elements redefined by their collocation.

Yet the diorama is not a heterogeneous ensemble wrought by chance; it is an intentional construction that carries a political implication. This thesis was argued in 1984 by Donna Haraway in "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," an article on the habitat dioramas of the AMNH.²⁴ The artist and taxidermist Carl Akeley created the dioramas studied by Haraway; he was a friend and hunting companion of Theodore Roosevelt, whose hunting trophies were stuffed and displayed at the AMNH.²⁵ Like other authors, Haraway states that the eye is the "critical organ" in the reception of dioramas, and she compares the quest for the perfect specimen, which underpinned Akeley's gorilla hunts, to the eugenic studies of the time. She describes taxidermy and photography as technologies that help advance a conservative ideal promoted by the institution. The objective, according to Haraway, was not only to preserve biotopes but also to freeze a world threatened with extinction.

Haraway presents dioramas as machines in the service of an evolutionist discourse that are shaped by the values of those who created them²⁶—in short, paternalism, racism, and sexism. The accuracy of this analysis has guaranteed its success; the central argument remains unassailable, and I do not seek to challenge Haraway's thesis. Nevertheless, I feel that her article has unwittingly distorted some of the analyses made in the wake of her work. The dioramas of the AMNH, though often mentioned and photographed, have rarely been studied in detail or properly analyzed. More specifically, the natural history dioramas have received most of the critical attention, while the anthropological dioramas are rarely discussed. Lastly, the examinations of other North American dioramas are often cursory and simplistic, and are generally based on the AMNH model. The problem therefore lies not in Haraway's article but in its reception; the natural history dioramas of New York became the paradigm that determined the critical approach to all other such displays.

23 Tony Bennett et al., *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums, and Liberal Government* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 5. See also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 20–38.

24 Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984): 19–64.

25 Bridgette Barclay, "Through the Plexiglass: A History of Museum Dioramas," *The Atlantic*, 14 October 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/10/taxidermy-animal-habitat-dioramas/410401/>.

26 "And dioramas are meaning-machines. Machines are time slices into the social organisms that made them. Machines are maps of power, arrested moments of social relations that in turn threaten to govern the living." Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984): 52.

The other dominant perspective in the historiography of dioramas is a postmodern analysis mostly concerned with ideas of reality and simulation. Between 1973 and 1976, the Italian writer and semiologist Umberto Eco published excerpts about his trip to North America.²⁷ Traveling across Florida and Louisiana, Eco tabulated the creations that, in different ways and to different degrees, questioned the boundaries between authenticity and fiction, and between reality and imitation. Describing the dioramas of the Museum of the City of New York (since dismantled), he established them as a paradigm of hyperreality, which was, he claimed, characteristic of the country he was exploring. As places of fantasy, reproductions of spaces that do not exist, and copies of invented universes, dioramas are undoubtedly hyperreal, in the sense given to that term by the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard: “Simulation ... is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: the hyperreal.”²⁸ To be sure, dioramas are fictions. The spaces created have no historical or geographical reality beyond that which they themselves establish. Almost everything by which they are constituted (landscape, model, and specimen) is artificial, as is the arrangement itself, and it is precisely this fabrication that interests me, and which I here approach on the microhistorical scale.

A Diorama Aesthetic

In what follows, I provide a close study of not only the archives that detail the dioramas’ creation—such as the correspondence between the anthropologists, museum administrators, artists, and models—but also the plaster casts used to make figures and a few of the individuals who allowed casts to be taken of them. Before denouncing the logic that underpins many dioramas, it is important to understand the modes of their production in a broader cultural and visual perspective, and thus obtain a better grasp of what role they play in the public space. This perspective, akin to genetic criticism,²⁹ helps reveal the aesthetic, political, and institutional issues at work. In contrast to scholarship that approaches dioramas as if they were two-dimensional images, it is necessary to examine how these representations were fabricated so that the illusion of their transparency can be exposed and their true complexity revealed. The objective is to consider dioramas as material constructions that are ideological and political, as well as symbolic and aesthetic.

Focusing on these modest creations provides an opportunity to study a category of makers that has received little attention in art history: practitioners who diversified their skills and activities in order to survive. By extending the art historical research conducted by André Chastel and Krzysztof Pomian into “intermediaries,” the study of dioramas notably uncovers

27 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 3–58.

28 Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.

29 In literary studies, *genetic criticism* foregrounds the process by which a work came into being through an emphasis on drafts, sketches, and successive versions.

the networks of such actors and expands our understanding of their contributions.³⁰ Little is known about the many people who worked on the fabrication of dioramas; their careers featured jobs that did not necessarily match their qualifications, which led to both success and failure. These practitioners were artists, dealers, anthropologists, copyists, photographers, and artisans. Some were multivalent, while others contributed a specific expertise to the collective fabrication of these displays. The written sources from the archives, the correspondence with museums, and sometimes the works themselves—when they are still extant—testify to the existence of these makers.

Studying dioramas allows new attention to be paid to a corpus of works widely disseminated but partially lost or consigned to museum storage vaults: mannequins, life casts, and the wide-format paintings that sometimes served as backgrounds (along with the preparatory sketches for these, whenever it was possible to rediscover them)—in short, all the objects created by artists specially for these constructions. The works that constitute the dioramas have been scattered and sometimes thrown away.

Dioramas have inspired artists for a long time, and art history can be used to understand this art form. Starting in the 1950s, many artists more or less explicitly returned to the formal codes of the diorama. Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) (1946–66), in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, presents a very diverse mixture of elements representing landscapes and objects gathered around the body of a naked woman.³¹ The works of Edward Kienholz bring together figures and material culture in spectacular installations that the visitor can enter, such as *Five Car Stud* (1969–72).

Kienholz, moreover, used life casting to create his mannequins. The American artist George Segal also cast from life, placing his figures in urban spaces or arranging them in relation to elements extracted from those spaces, such as benches, traffic signals, a bicycle, and so on. Dioramas have more directly influenced contemporary artists. Since the 1970s, the Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto (b. 1948) has been photographing the dioramas of the AMNH, producing black-and-white images that blur the frontier between fiction and reality.³² Today, artists such as Sammy Baloji, Mark Dion, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Kent Monkman explicitly refer to dioramas in their work, to such an extent that one might speak of a “diorama aesthetic” in art.³³

30 André Chastel and Krzysztof Pomian, “Les intermédiaires,” *Revue de l'art*, no. 77 (1987): 5–9.

31 Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage ...* 1946–66, mixed-media assemblage (wooden door, brick, stucco, velvet, steel, card, hair, oil paint, nails, etc.), 242.6 × 177.8 × 124.5 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art. On Duchamp and the diorama, see Kornelia Imesch Oeschlin, “Étant donnés de Marcel Duchamp, ‘period room’ et cheval de Troie,” *Retour d'y voir*, no. 6, 7, 8 (2013): 406–22.

32 Takaaki Matsumoto, ed., *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Dioramas*, exh. cat. (New York: Pace Gallery, 2014).

33 See Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, *Chronotopes & Dioramas: Atlantic, Desert, Tropics* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2009); Sammy Baloji, *Hunting & Collecting*, 2015, metal structure (400 × 550 cm, site specific), photographs, book (37.5 × 31 cm); Mark Dion, *Paris Streetscape*, 2017, glass, metal, fur, mixed media (190 × 150 × 250 cm), private collection; Thomas Hirschhorn, *Diorama*, 1997, mixed media, 12 × 61 × 7 feet (365.8 × 1859.3 × 17.8 cm), Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; and Kent Monkman, *Bête Noire*, 2014, acrylic on

It is not my purpose in this book to establish a general history of art installations that is inclusive of dioramas. Nor will I institute a general grammar of dioramas, given the heterogeneity of the materials (wax, wood, paper, metal, glass, and plaster), media (painting, sculpture, and taxidermy), scales (life-size dioramas, maquettes, miniature dioramas, and monumental ensembles), and genres (realist, symbolic, and other). However, I will argue that dioramas are a useful platform from which to interrogate, in indirect but effective fashion, the connections between art, art history, and anthropology in the United States around 1900, including what dioramas teach us about collective authority, authenticity (particularly in the museal context), and more broadly about American art history. Thus, I will examine the iconography and the materiality of such displays, as well as interactions between the professionals (the painters, sculptors, and anthropologists) who worked together on their fabrication.

Americana

Dioramas institute spatial and temporal cells in exhibition galleries, but visitors understand—or “activate”—the displays through their own gaze and bodies. Dioramas are, in the Foucauldian sense, heterotopic and heterochronic.³⁴ Because they make it possible to construct different and perhaps incompatible places and times within the same building, dioramas create an experience of alterity that, in the very specific context of the 1900s in the United States, was also an experience of the past.

Dioramas are epistemic images: at the turn of the century, they fabricated and disseminated a historical and anthropological vision.³⁵ They allowed Franz Boas to deploy his culturalist perspective, but also afforded Arthur Parker the opportunity to combine evolutionism and culturalism. These displays were built in an intellectual context in which two currents of opinion were notably at odds. On the one hand, there was the evolutionism inherited from the nineteenth century, according to which societies underwent a gradual process of transformation and civilization that could result in wide gaps between them. On the other hand, there was cultural relativism, as promoted by Boas, according to which each culture had to be understood separately, allowing for individual presentations of each one. Parker brought these two currents of thought together in his displays, showing that the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Confederacy enjoyed an autonomous existence but also that it underwent a process of continuous transformation.

Dioramas are unique in how they transmit, enhance, and challenge scientific and historical discourses, and in how they are often located on the fringes of other spaces that disseminate knowledge, such as world's fairs, universities, and books. They have a sensorial and aesthetic dimension, as their presence in art and literature indicates. They have helped to inspire and ed-

toile, mixed media, 467.68 × 487.68 × 304.8 cm (see Katharina Dohm et al., eds., *Dioramas* exh. cat. [Paris: Flammarion, 2017], 285).

34 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

35 On this category, see Susan Dackerman, *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

ucate children, who have visited museums by the thousand on fieldtrips and with their families. Dioramas can therefore be included in the category of “sites of mediation,”³⁶ a perspective that leads to the following questions. How is historical and anthropological knowledge constructed and transmitted? What techniques and materials enable these transactions? What are the professional issues raised by these exchanges? Finally, how do practices of space and image activate these dioramas and give them meaning?

Using the dioramas of the AMNH and the NYSM in Albany as case studies, I argue that these displays have sometimes been incompletely understood and their importance underestimated. In the first chapter, I show that the anthropological dioramas developed in North America are a synthesis between two European traditions: colonial and vernacular dioramas. In New York City and in Albany, the dioramas told the history of the country and fabricated common ancestors for new immigrants. The agency of the dioramas is based on their physical appeal to spectators, particularly children. By causing museum visitors to react as they move around or through them, the displays help their observers learn and remember. As I note in my second and sixth chapters, dioramas also constructed the history of Indigenous Peoples and African Americans using an activist perspective. My study reveals that dioramas are potentially places of controversy but also of self-representation for marginalized communities, and that this has been so from their earliest use in the United States—a tradition that has never previously been studied. This is not simply an *a posteriori* reappropriation of the dioramas but rather a construction successfully carried out by a variety of people.

Moreover, dioramas represent a fundamental—if partly neglected—stage in the history of anthropology, as I will argue, mainly in my third and fourth chapters.³⁷ As a space of mediation within museums, dioramas transmit an anthropological episteme to the general public. Dioramas were standardized only after the First World War but, before that date, they were veritable sites of research and its dissemination, the interdisciplinary products of a collaboration between art and science. Study of the links between anthropology and the artistic domain has focused above all on written materials. James Clifford has examined the connections between ethnographical and artistic practices, particularly in literature and poetry.³⁸ Tracing the emergence of the ethnographic gaze, Clifford highlights writing that is both literary and scientific.³⁹ Yet,

36 See Susanna Burghartz, Lucas Burkart, and Christine Göttler, *Sites of Mediation: Connected Histories of Places, Processes, and Objects in Europe and Beyond, 1450–1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

37 Here I favor *anthropology* as the science (*logos*) of humanity (*anthropos*) over other key terms such as *ethnology* and *ethnography*. See Henrietta Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures,” in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 127; and Mondher Kilani, *Introduction à l’anthropologie* (Lausanne: Payot, 1992), 176.

38 James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 1–26.

39 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 26–30. Clifford raises the topic of exhibitions, but, when discussing the notion of “culture,” does not study dioramas. Vincent Crapanzano, meanwhile, has studied the work of the painter George Catlin but focuses on the artist’s letters and publications, without considering his visual productions. Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description,” in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 53–61.

alongside these texts, dioramas were spaces in which a particular view of Native Americans and their material culture was gradually elaborated and communicated inside specialized institutions. By studying these installations, it is possible to approach anthropology in the United States around the turn of the century as a science that was largely deployed in the museum space.⁴⁰

As an object, the diorama necessarily evokes the figure of Franz Boas and his relativist anthropology, the latter embodied in the very form of this type of display, which presented cultures in homogeneous cells.⁴¹ The diorama also offers an opportunity to discuss the museal work of the anthropologist Arthur Parker, whose name has been mostly forgotten. But dioramas do not simply illustrate anthropological theories; these discourses are embodied by dioramas, but they are also constructed in, complicated by, and even contested within the displays themselves. The participation of artists and the constraints of the museum context go some way to explain this phenomenon. Sculptors and painters held a large share of the responsibility in the fabrication of these installations. The artists' commitment to field research and their encounters with Native Americans guaranteed their legitimacy within the museum institution, but also generated conflicts that helped to define the anthropological and artistic domains in North America at the turn of the century.

Throughout this book, and in the fourth chapter in particular, I use the term *race* as a historical concept and not as a biological reality. As early as the eighteenth century, the existence of different races was the explanation favored by naturalists seeking to understand and organize human diversity.⁴² In French, in 1932, a *race* was defined as “a multitude of people originating from the same country, and resembling one another by the features of the face and by external conformation.”⁴³ In 1914, the word was defined in the *New English Dictionary* as a “group or class of persons, animals, or things having some common feature or features.”⁴⁴ The uses of the term vary, and I shall not draw up a genealogy here. The word is still commonly used in North America, though it is rarer in the historical sciences in Europe.⁴⁵ A *race* was understood in scientific discourses produced around 1900 as a category fabricated on the basis of stereotypes and physical features supposedly shared by a community and transmitted by heredity. Certain corporeal particularities (skin color, facial features, and hair) were identified as “racial markers”; in this volume, I show that the human figures in dioramas helped to construct these representations in turn-of-the-century North America (primarily the United States and Canada).

40 On exhibitions as a space in which the sedimentation of anthropological knowledge occurs, see Lidchi, *Poetics*, 159.

41 Lewis Morgan and Franz Boas are the authors presented as the founding fathers of the discipline in anthologies such as Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy, *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 49–54, 105–111; and Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Altamira, 2009).

42 For a historical approach to the notion of race, see David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century* (New York: Reaktion, 2002).

43 Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race: L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des lumières* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019), 37.

44 James A. H. Murray, ed., *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (London: Clarendon, 1914), 86.

45 Jean-Frédéric Schaub, *Pour une histoire politique de la race* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

Finally, the diorama exhibits not only human figures but also objects. In the fifth chapter, which deals with the garments displayed in these installations, I point out that dioramas constituted an important step in the construction of North American visual identity, in particular in the domain of the decorative arts. The reproductions of Native American objects displayed in dioramas prefigured the imitation of motifs that fed into the creation of a so-called "American art" in the 1920s. Thus, dioramas paved the way for primitivism—that is, for the study, reevaluation, and imitation of Indigenous productions in art and design.⁴⁶ Dioramas shared in the artistic regeneration undertaken by North American society through the appropriation of autochthonous forms in arts and crafts. In the final chapter, I discuss how Native Americans and African Americans still use dioramas today for political purposes. The future of dioramas is currently under scrutiny and discussion in many institutions worldwide: might this book help us to understand and evaluate them in order to take appropriate decisions about their conservation—or destruction?

46 The art historical term *primitivism* first came to notice in Robert Goldwater's *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (1938). He drew attention to an artistic tendency of the early twentieth century based on the appropriation of forms he deemed "basic" and that could be found, on his account, in non-European, prehistoric, and children's art. The use of the term *primitive* to denominate this art movement is nowadays controversial: it is a reminder of the colonial context of the period and derives from a Eurocentric and elitist vision according to which certain peoples, usually outside Europe, had remained in a "primary" state. In this study, the word is used exclusively in its historical sense as a category in art and anthropology, and not as an attribute characterizing a person or object.