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Narrative Failures

Vietnamese Handicraft at the Smithsonian

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Abstract. – This article considers what an unstudied collection of Vietnamese handicraft owned by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History reveals about its collecting culture and, conversely, what the collecting culture discloses about the collection. I show how the collecting culture's activities intersected with American State Department efforts to bring postcolonial South Vietnam into the Free World during the Cold War. Attention to the Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Arts' exhibition, "Art and Archaeology of Vietnam. Asian Crossroad of Cultures," also reveals narratives of power and knowledge associated with the collecting culture. Ultimately, these failed the collection by leaving it disregarded. [*Vietnam, handicraft, Smithsonian, collecting, diplomacy*]

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1 Introduction

Behind the scenes at museums the world over are thousands upon thousands of artefacts. These objects, removed from other lives, other places, other times, are neatly labelled, catalogued, and packed away out of sight, rarely displayed and infrequently studied. The processes by which these collections are formed remain obscure to many visitors and creator or source communities alike, perhaps because of their ubiquitous presence in the museum environment (Byrne et al. 2011: 4).

On August 7, 1962, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History registered "67 ethnological specimens" of handicraft as Accession 244852, a collection "gathered from living peoples in Viet Nam" that it acquired as a gift from the Government of Viet Nam through the latter's embassy in Washington, D.C. (*Memorandum* 1962). Since then, the Smithsonian has not named the collection anything besides Accession 244852. Nor has it exhibited or published the artifacts, which include a carved chest with bone shutters; wooden printing block; ceramic fighting cocks; lacquered, brass and silver trays; carved wooden, inlaid, and silver boxes; a brass perfume brassier; a brass tea kettle; a silver desk set; silver betel boxes and a spittoon; a chalk pot; tortoise shell fans; glasses; silver spoons; a brass powder case; a woman's scarf; an embroidered curtain; a coat with silver buttons; a pink dress with white flowers; material for a blouse and embroidered material for a coat; a silk patterned belt; a bamboo hat; and a conical hat. Although accession papers call the artifacts a collection, online registration records do not indicate that they comprise one. Nor do these records explain how the Smithsonian came to acquire the collection or why it affiliates it with Asian ethnography in the Anthropology Section of the National Museum of Natural History (hereafter, NMNH), rather than with The Freer Gallery of Art or the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery,

both of which specialize in Asian art at the Smithsonian.

This essay revisits a collecting culture exhibiting and then gifting and acquiring the artifacts on behalf of the Smithsonian. It identifies narratives of power associated with the collecting culture's activities and it seeks to explain why, ultimately, the collecting culture disregarded the artifacts, leaving them "neatly labelled, catalogued, and packed away out of sight," never displayed or studied (Byrne et al. 2011: 4).

1.1 The Collecting Culture

In a previous essay, I reported on my research tracing some activities of the collecting culture. The collecting culture consisted of Smithsonian-based scholars and museum staff who collected Vietnamese handicraft during the late 1950s with the aim of exhibiting it, and American and South Vietnamese government officials with whom they interacted and who engaged with Vietnamese handicraft in relation to American State Department efforts to bring postcolonial South Vietnam into the noncommunist Free World during the Cold War (Way 2015). The phrase "collecting culture" comes from Paul Michael Taylor, Director of the Smithsonian Asian Cultural History Program. In 1995, he explained that "'artifacts of diplomacy,' … the Japanese materials brought back from Commodore Matthew Perry's historic voyage to Japan," remained in need of attention, despite that they constituted the first major collections of Asian art and handicraft the NMNH acquired nearly half a century earlier. Taylor said the artifacts' "origins and collective meaning often have been poorly understood" (1995: iv). In redress, museum staff embarked on a study of what the artifacts revealed about their collecting culture (iv), resulting in a catalogue tracing the collections' origins to who presented them to whom, where and when, historically (Houchins 1995).

I treat the activity of the collecting culture concerned with the Vietnamese artifacts as an index of "the agency of those involved in moving the collection from source to museum site" (Byrne 2011: 308f.). Also, I treat the aggregation, gifting, and acquisition of the Smithsonian's collection of Vietnamese handicraft as "'processes' (rather than 'things') that create and transform vast social and material assemblages" (Clifford 1992: 154). As it turns out, the collecting culture's agency involved more than one institutional site, and its processes proved more complex than simply "moving" artifacts. The history of the Smithsonian acquiring the items of Accession 244852 encompassed Smithsonian museum professionals as well as South Vietnamese and American politicians, diplomats, and other government officials collectively ideating the significance of Vietnamese handicraft in events and activities that aggregated artifacts in the United States and, prior to this, in South Vietnam.

1.2 Narrative and Narrative Context

Ultimately, the "67 ethnological specimens" got caught between cultural diplomacy aiming to bring South Vietnam into the Free World during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the gradual failing of these aims. Even more, they fell victim to conflicts in the collecting culture's expectations about the cultural meaning and significance of Vietnamese handicraft. Overall, they acquired and lost narratives that made sense of their importance or their potential for importance.

By narratives and narrative context, I mean "culturally developed ways of organizing experience and knowledge" (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004: x). My account of examples builds on Kopytoff's scholarship about material culture. In focusing on the biography of things, Kopytoff emphasized that "what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use" (1988: 67). Uses of handicraft that I studied especially relate to the Smithsonian's "Art and Archaeology of Vietnam. Asian Crossroad of Culture" (1961) and its iteration as two traveling exhibitions, and to associated collecting practices in which South Vietnamese and especially American government and museum staff organized the meaning and significance of Vietnamese handicraft as artifacts and as evidence of their makers and nation.

Documents related to the "Crossroad Exhibition" cast museum staff and American and Vietnamese government officials as a "configuration or a social network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices" (Somers 1994: 616). These practices situated Vietnamese handicraft in narratives of politics, that is, power and authority emphasizing national interests in international and domestic contexts. They amounted to public political narratives, too, since they were "attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual," such as nations, national governments, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Somers 1994: 619).

In revisiting "culturally developed ways of organizing experience and knowledge" about Vietnamese handicraft and Vietnam, my discussion owes a debt to Clare Harris's research about national custodians of Tibet's artifactual heritage proving "pivotal in determining how Tibet has been imagined within museums and onward into public consciousness" (Harris 2012: 5f.).

Vietnamese handicraft serves us as a "conduit for revealing social interaction" by highlighting cultural interchange that linked American Cold War interests in Vietnam with other American programs active there and with the American middle class at home (Byrne 2011: 307f.). As the Smithsonian exhibited Vietnamese handicraft and then acquired a collection, the American State Department dedicated hundreds of millions of dollars to facilitate Americans in government, business, and design establishing economic pathways to and from Southeast Asia. After Vietnam ousted France in 1954 and then divided at the 17th Parallel, the United States aspired for the new nation of South Vietnam to become part of the democratic, largely capitalist Free World. This would diminish the likelihood that South Vietnam would seek assistance from Communist North Vietnam, the People's Republic of China, or the USSR and perhaps become Communist. Some of the State Department's efforts targeted small industries and craftsmen in South Vietnam, including in the form of a major handicraft aid program. Like this program, at the Smithsonian, exhibition narratives augured support for American-Vietnamese relations. Moreover, records in the Smithsonian Institution Archives and National Anthropological Archives respectively show that exhibition personnel crossed paths with the aid program. Consequently, as Vietnamese handicraft served the Smithsonian and South Vietnam as a form of cultural diplomacy, at the same time, it featured as economic aid for the State Department. Initially, the Smithsonian and State Department embraced Vietnamese handicraft for what they perceived as its lack of modernity. As we shall see, in the end, this common account of its importance did not compel the Smithsonian to embrace handicraft in the manner of the State Department program.

These themes reveal little about Vietnam and Vietnamese handicraft from the perspective of their makers. Instead, the United States made sense of Vietnam on the basis of artifacts that the United States National Museum, also known as the Smithsonian, acquired from a collecting culture. The artifacts' changing fortunes reflect changes in American interest in Vietnam, compounded by the power and authority of institutionally practiced knowledge.

2 Aggregating and Acquiring Handicraft

Thus, it is important to resist the tendency of collections to be self-sufficient, to suppress their own historical, economic, and political processes of production. Ideally, the history of its own collection and display should be a visible aspect of any exhibition (Clifford 1992: 151).

The catalogue for the Crossroad Exhibition references an institutional author and committees associated with the exhibition project along with governments, governmental offices, programs, institutions, and armed forces. It provides a scholarly account of the exhibition theme, a checklist, and a few visual reproductions. Correspondence and memoranda from Smithsonian Institution Archives supplement what the catalogue reveals about narratives of Vietnamese handicraft. This archival material suggests a common pathway for the items of Accession 244852. After they were first exhibited in Saigon, they traveled from Saigon to Washington, D.C. as part of the Crossroad Exhibition.

2.1 Handicraft as Regional, Cultural, and National Knowledge, and as a National Subject and Museological Subject

The Crossroad Exhibition served as the reason why the collecting culture brought Vietnamese handicraft to the United States. The Smithsonian's former National Collection of Fine Arts organized the exhibition with the Government of Viet Nam and the Embassy of Viet Nam in Washington, D.C. Eventually, the Government of Viet Nam gifted handicraft from the exhibition to the Smithsonian through the NMNH.

The Crossroad Exhibition emerged from an earlier project called "Arts of Indo China Past and Present." Thomas Beggs, director of the NCFA, visited several American museums to identify potential Southeast Asian objects for this project tentatively scheduled to open in Washington, D.C. during 1955 (Beggs 1954). However, a letter from Beggs to Thomas P. Mack of the United States Operations Mission in Vietnam indicates, Beggs was alert to conflict in Southeast Asia. Interestingly, he worried about its impact on an exhibition narrative:

We are quite aware here of the unsettled conditions in Saigon and have been much concerned lest we find our-

selves with an exhibition, at the time of its circulation here, that might remind one more of distress and disaster than demonstrate the happiness of pre-occupation with peaceful craftswork and the wholesome creation of beauty (Beggs 1955).

As fighting between Vietnamese and French forces intensified, plans for the exhibition were tabled. Two years would pass before Beggs alerted Leonard Carmichael, secretary of the Smithsonian, that Kenneth Landon of the State Department's Oriental Division urged the Smithsonian to revitalize the project (Beggs 1957b). Beggs credited "the stabilization of political affairs in Viet Nam" along with President Ngo Dinh Diem's visit to Washington, D.C. [May 8, 1957] (Beggs 1957a). The go-ahead included the confirmation that participating organizations do not "appear on the official lists of subversive groups" (Carmichael 1957c).

However, Beggs's correspondence reveals that the focus of the exhibition had shifted. He writes,

> Two years ago an important exhibition of the art of Indo China, Past and Present, was proposed under the sponsorship of the Ambassadors of V[iet] N[am] and Cambodia and the Minister of Laos. Political changes and the insecure positions of these governments at that time caused our postponement of the venture. The re-establishment of a stable government in V[iet] N[am] has prompted a resumption of the plan as it affects that particular country (Beggs 1957a).

The "plan" would showcase the heritage and influence of culture on Vietnam: "it is proposed to place when possible objects of antiquity showing Indian influence in the alcoves on the East side and those showing Chinese on the West side" (Beggs 1957b). Additionally, the "Arts and Crafts of Viet Nam," as the new exhibition was called in 1957, would "reflect the essential character of the country in which they are made – its terrain, its climate, the habits and dress of its inhabitants are revealed by the material used and the way they are put together" (Beggs 1957b)

By 1958, the exhibition was scheduled to open in Washington, D.C. during fall of the following year (Beggs 1958b), although eventually, this timeline would change. Also, Beggs had contracted the archaeologist Olov Janse to travel in Europe and Southeast Asia and develop a checklist and secure loans for the exhibition. Funding from the Smith-Mundt Program, "designed to use U.S. dollar credits in foreign countries by fellowship and research grants" helped to support Janse's travel (*The Times of Viet Nam* 1959a). In addition to presenting artifacts that Janse secured loans for from Europe and South Vietnam, the Crossroad Exhibition would feature the fieldwork he undertook in Southeast Asia for the École française d'Extrême-Orient during the 1930s.

Documents do not identify individuals who selected handicraft for the exhibition that eventually was named "Art and Archaeology of Vietnam, Asian Crossroad of Culture." On the other hand, they tell us that the Ministry of Education in Saigon helped the Smithsonian "present life in Viet Nam today in terms of its arts and crafts" by virtue of "the best possible examples of contemporary Viet-Namese craftsmanship in lacquer, silver, ivory, wood and ceramics" (Carmichael 1957a). A year before the exhibition opened, the Smithsonian drafted a press release crediting the Viet Nam Government for its "special efforts to obtain the finest available examples of the work of living craftsmen who demonstrate traditional techniques and motifs of the country's great national heritage" (*Smithsonian Institution* 1959). It is likely that members of the "Viet Nam Organizing Committee" enumerated in the exhibition catalogue made these efforts. Beggs, if not also Janse, participated, too. Correspondence from Beggs reveals that the Embassy of Viet Nam invited him to "spend two weeks in Saigon selecting from collected arts and crafts work those items desirable for showing in Washington next October." In declining the invitation due to scheduling conflicts, Beggs alternatively sent the embassy "a list from the photographs and illustrated booklets" that it had given him (Beggs 1960d).

The items selected exemplified what members of the collecting culture considered typical about Vietnamese culture. Conversely, the collecting culture's selections reflected the authority of its members' institutions and their interests and, by extension the institutions' respective governments. Not least was that the NCFA spearheaded the Crossroad Exhibition under the authority of the Smithsonian. Among individuals from South Vietnam were members of the Cultural Division of the Department of National Education, the Institute of Historical Research, and the National Museum. The Viet Nam Organizing Committee also included representatives from the Cultural Institute of Hue, the Schools of Applied Arts in Bien Hoa and Gia Dinh, respectively, and the Thu Dau Mat College of Fine Arts (*The Times of Viet Nam* 1960). A letter to Carmichael and Mr. (James C.) Bradley from Beggs indicates the Government of Viet Nam was purchasing items from the "selection of specific objects of present day arts and crafts work [then] being assembled in Saigon and Hue." Rep-

resentatives of the Embassy of Vietnam in Washington, D.C. participated with these individuals and with staff from the NCFA in shaping the checklist and aggregating handicraft in Saigon. As arranged by the State Department, the United States Operations Mission photographed the handicraft along with the art and archaeology that Vietnamese museums loaned the exhibition (Beggs 1959).

As the collecting culture assembled handicraft for the Crossroad Exhibition, it rendered it comprehensible in classificatory systems of academic scholarship and museological practice. These made sense of the items intended for the exhibition as one of three types of artifacts – ancient archaeology, art, or handicrafts, and in some instances qualified handicraft as ethnography or contemporary. Exhibition archives show Smithsonian staff referring to handicraft as "arts and crafts" as well as "ethnology and crafts," too. Together with their South Vietnamese colleagues, for the Crossroad Exhibition, Smithsonian staff and project personnel favored examples that seemed typical as opposed to exceptional, and contemporary rather than ancient.

The collecting culture may have used age, material, manner of making, or contemporary ideas about what constitutes types of artifacts to distinguish handicraft from art and ancient archaeology. Conversely, it noted qualities and traits that many of the artifacts shared, for example, heritage. Memos linked heritage to handicraft in bringing forth "traditional techniques and motifs of the country's great national heritage" (Smithsonian Institution 1959). In his lectures at the University of Saigon and the University of Hue, Janse referenced heritage in contemporary Vietnamese culture and ancient archaeology. He even suggested that heritage had the capacity to bring a new nation together: "'… there is a growing consciousness in Viet Nam, among your people and in your Government, of the value of your cultural and national heritage – a heritage of which any country would have a right to be very proud'" (Janse 1959: 12). In sounding these themes, Janse gave voice to international scholarly interest in Vietnamese heritage: "'Southeast Asia, and Viet Nam in particular, has been since time immemorial a crossroad of peoples and civilizations. The importance of archaeology of Viet Nam goes far beyond its national boundaries, and orientalists all over the world are genuinely interested in the matter'" (Janse 1959: 13).

The archaeology, art, and handicraft artifacts that South Vietnam loaned to the Smithsonian first had to "reach the Directorate of Fine Arts" in Saigon by May 31, 1960 (*The Times of Viet Nam* 1960). There, from June 1 to 20, the South Vietnam government exhibited them in the former French Chamber of Commerce, which then functioned as an exhibition hall and headquarters for South Vietnam's Trade and Industry Department (*The Times of Viet Nam* 1960). Handicraft was separated from archaeology and fine art. Examples appeared in rooms themed as "Mountain Tribes," "Applied Arts and Handicraft Room," and "Modern Applied Arts and Handicraft Products."

After traveling on U.S. Navy ships to the United States, the loans from South Vietnam joined Vietnamese ancient art and archaeology from European and American collections. The Crossroad Exhibition opened at the Smithsonian's Natural History Building on October 26, 1960, where it remained on view until December 8, 1960. Throughout 10 alcoves, it aimed to convey the history of Vietnamese civilization. Alcove 7, the "Ethnological Section," presented 18th- and 19th-century handicraft and art from Saigon. South Vietnam attributed some of the handicraft to mountain tribes, which it considered an "ethnic minority group" (*Liste des onjets [sic] ethnographiques* 1959 : ??). The remainder of that section consisted of paintings (lacquer panels and screens and oil paintings), sculpture (bronze heads and figures of Buddha, stone and ceramic heads, carved ivory figurines and dragons), ceramics (jars, bowls, and vases), textiles (costumes, rug, mats embroidered and appliqué), and items of miscellaneous materials (tortoise shell, mother of pearl, horn objects, instruments). When the Crossroad Exhibition closed in Washington, D.C. it traveled to American museums, universities, and galleries.

2.2 Acquiring Vietnamese Handicraft

Even before the Crossroad Exhibition opened, the Smithsonian considered acquiring items from it. Pursuing this, involved the Smithsonian's new associate curator in Ethnology Eugene Knez.

By 1960, Knez was representing anthropology in planning meetings for the exhibition because, as John Pope of the Freer Gallery of Art explained, the part of the Smithsonian that dealt with Asian art "does not participate in exhibition activities outside its own galleries" (cited in *Meeting Regarding Viet-Nam Exhibition* 1960). Nor did the Freer Gallery of Art acquire artifacts it considered ethnographic as opposed to aesthetically significant.

Smithsonian administration supported Knez's interest in visiting Saigon during early December 1960 to "obtain ethnological items for use in new exhibits that are planned for the Smithsonian Institution and visit museums and other agencies with a view to future collaboration in research work" (*Memorandum* 1962). In June, Knez had approached the Embassy of Viet Nam for help in redressing a collection gap:

> As you may have previously been informed, several new Asian exhibits will be permanently installed on the main floor in two halls of the U. S. National Museum. Certain traditional and modern aspects of contemporary life in Asia will be represented. The existing study and exhibit collections from Viet-Nam in the Museum unfortunately do not reveal many spheres of traditional social behavior, and generally lack up-to-date material. Perhaps some appropriate action could be taken to improve the Viet-Namese collections at the Museum with your guidance (Knez 1960).

The action and guidance Knez had in mind consisted of the Embassy commissioning Vietnamese scientists and scholars to assemble examples of "socio-cultural objects in Viet-Nam" (Knez 1960). Knez supposed that the Embassy would want its nation to be represented among other Asian nations in the esteemed halls of the U.S. National Museum.

A few months later, Gus (Willard) Van Beek, the Smithsonian's curator of Old World Archaeology, asked Beggs to inquire if South Vietnam would present "one or more" of "five listed works" from the National Museum of Saigon. He pitched his request in terms of diplomacy – "a gesture of appreciation and good will" on the part of the Vietnamese government, "whether [to the] NCFA, the Division of Ethnology, or the Division of Archeology" (Van Beek 1960). Van Beek especially wanted the Smithsonian to acquire an example of ancient Vietnamese archaeology. Although the South Vietnam government declined his request, through its embassy it extended "a willingness to present examples of contemporary crafts work and possibly 'minority group' art objects to the Division of Ethnology" (Beggs 1960b). In this case, handicraft signaled the embassy's willingness to solidify mutual good will with the United States.

Knez followed up by asking the embassy about "the possibility of acquiring certain ethnological objects from the currently traveling exhibition of Viet-Namese cultural material for the permanent collections of the Smithsonian" (Knez 1961). Alluding to the difficulty of selecting objects from "lists or photographs," he mentioned "products of the Highlander and Cham handicraft." He checked plates in the exhibition catalogue "to indicate useful objects for the Smithsonian Institution." He suggested, "[a] few musical instruments with music books, and one or two objects to represent the various crafts would be acceptable" (*Memorandum* 1962). Previously, Knez had sent the embassy a list of items from the Smithsonian exhibition and the catalogue. He insisted, "[n]o item made primarily for export is requested" (Knez 1961). The list – a two-page document called "Items desired from Viet-Namese Collection" – appears in copies throughout the Crossroad Exhibition archives and in Knez's papers concerning the handicraft items that the Smithsonian would acquire (*Memorandum* 1962).

In March 1961, Knez repeated his request to the embassy for help in representing the everyday life of Vietnamese people within the "exhibit space on the main floor of the U.S. National Museum, e.g., India is sending twenty-one crates of high-quality ethnological items, and, for this reason I have assumed that perhaps Viet-Nam is similarly concerned" (*Memorandum* 1962). Whether or not he thought items from the Crossroad Exhibition would not suffice, his request reflected emerging ideas about the subject of cultural diplomacy: "the things they make, the things they do – the culture of a people is the life of a people, and cultural diplomacy is the act of successfully communicating to others a complete comprehension of the life and culture of a people" (Thayer 1959: 740).

By the end of 1961, the Embassy of Viet Nam wrote Beggs that the Department of Education in Saigon permitted the Smithsonian to maintain the items Knez requested from the Crossroad Exhibition in appreciation "for what you have done during our Cultural Exhibit" and to "continue to promote a better understanding of Viet Nam" (Phu Duc 1961). On February 8, 1962, the Smithsonian acknowledged the gift (Carmichael 1962). Officially, the items entered the Smithsonian as a collection on August 7, 1962, when the Smithsonian recorded the handicraft items as a gift from the Government of Viet-Nam, Department of Education (*Memorandum* 1962). The accessioning curator was Saul H. Reisenberg, department of Anthropology, NMNH, a specialist in the ethnology of Micronesia (*Memorandum* 1962). Papers attached include a "History of Collection" and documents linking the gift to the Crossroad Exhibition: "This collection constitutes a selection made and requested by the Division of Ethnology from a large loan exhibition of Vietnamese treasures –

largely archaeological – which was sponsored by the National Collection of Fine Arts in 1961" (*Memorandum* 1962).

2.3 Handicraft in Narratives of American Cultural Diplomacy

In the aggregate, these activities subjected Vietnamese artifacts to institutional and governmental authority, disciplinary and museological knowledge, and ideas about national heritage and diplomacy. At the same time, they intersected with diplomacy.

In the field of American diplomacy, new ideas about cultural diplomacy urged attention to everyday life. They encouraged increased opportunity for cultural exchange, motivated by nations desiring mutual support. Thayer explains,

> … foreign relationships are no longer only relationships between governments, or heads of state – foreign relationships are the relationship between people of all countries – and relationships between peoples are governed by the way people think and live, and eat, and feel and this represents the culture of a people (1959: 740).

Insofar as handicraft expressed "the way [Vietnamese] people think and live, and eat, and feel," it had the potential to foster relationships between South Vietnamese and American citizens. As "cultural materials," handicraft, along with the art and archaeology in the Crossroad Exhibition, helped to narrate an historical Vietnamese way of life that extended into the present day, which the Smithsonian and the Embassy of Viet Nam aimed to communicate to Americans. In this context, the artifacts conveyed the continuity of a way of life in a comprehensive manner. "[T]he things [Vietnamese people] make, the things they do – the culture of a people is the life of a people, and cultural diplomacy is the act of successfully communicating to others a complete comprehension of the life and culture of a people" (Thayer 1959: 740).

What is more, the exhibition conveyed the Smithsonian's support for a democratic South Vietnam. For one thing, the date of the opening cast the exhibition in a political framework. It opened in Washington, D.C. on the fifth anniversary of the establishment of South Vietnam (*News from Viet Nam* 1962). By celebrating this anniversary, the opening affirmed American support for South Vietnam's post-colonial status as a new nation as well as recognition of the years it had enjoyed this status.

Also, the exhibition had developed with an awareness "that internal affairs are also world affairs" (Thayer 1959: 743). As early as 1955, Thomas P. Mack of the United Special Operations Missions to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam advised Beggs, "since we are endeavouring to win their [sic] friendship and [the] trust of the Vietnamese people a request to exhibit their art in America would certainly serve as an indication of our sincerity" (Mack 1955). Two years later, Carmichael wrote Beggs that an exhibition about Vietnam "should do a great deal to cement friendship for this country not only with Viet Nam, but also with other countries in Southwest [sic] Asia" (Carmichael 1957b). As the planning proceeded, Beggs linked the exhibition's political significance to objects it would feature, namely, great works of art on the order of the "German and Japanese masterpieces." He recalled that after World War II, these masterpieces "did a great deal to restore good relations with our former enemies" (Beggs 1960a).

The Crossroad Exhibition offered the United States an opportunity to move beyond recent political conflict that could complicate Cold War alliances in Southeast Asia. These alliances linked the United States to its NATO allies in mutual defense against communism. They likely prompted the Smithsonian to acknowledge France as a supporter of the exhibition and of research that had made the exhibition possible. Interestingly, in making this acknowledgement the Smithsonian did not reference France's longstanding imperial presence in Vietnam covering the period when Janse's ties to the École française d'Extrême-Orient facilitated his fieldwork in Thanh Hoa as director of the Scientific Mission to Southeast Asia. Instead, Beggs lauded France as a champion of scholarship about Vietnam from which the world benefitted. "In assembling an exhibition of the art of southeast Asia," Beggs wrote Janse, "we become conscious of the great debt humanity owes to the French for our knowledge of the art of the early civilizations in that area" (Beggs 1960c). In this way, Beggs brought France into the arena of a Free World, where it would enjoy mutually beneficial political relations and support with South Vietnam.

Themes of mutual benefit and friendship especially infused American recognition of the Government of Vietnam's sponsorship of the Crossroad Exhibition through H. E. Tran Van Chuong, its ambassador, its embassy, and the "patronage of leaders active in the promotion of learning and the exchange of knowledge with friendly oriental peo-

ples" (Beggs 1958b). The Smithsonian treated the exhibition as a showcase for nations collaborating on a project of mutual interest and an example of the United States befriending a nation of Southeast Asia. "An exhibition of this kind with the wide participation on the part of the United States should do a great deal to cement friendship for this country not only with Viet Nam, but also with other countries in Southwest Asia" [sic] (Carmichael 1957b).

The exhibition aimed to achieve this by showcasing things – artifacts – of ostensible interest to the people of South Vietnam and the United States. They were meant to convey that Vietnamese history and the historical basis for key ideals embraced by the American Government and nation, converged. This narrative treated ancient Vietnamese culture as a foundation for the sovereignty of South Vietnam and its inclusion in the contemporary, noncommunist Free World. Maps in the exhibition catalogue illustrated pathways of trade and migration resulting in the deposit of objects in the area that became South Vietnam. These objects, many that Janse discovered during the 1930s and 1940s, served South Vietnam as visual markers of its ancient heritage. Conversely, the new nation could point to them as a heritage foreshadowing what it could or ought to become – a great civilization in commerce with the contemporary world. Primarily, however, the exhibition's examples of Oc Eo culture demonstrated significant exchange with Mediterranean cultures via India and the Middle East. The material results of these connections, such as coins, cameos, medallions, glassware, statuary, and other artifacts, offered proof that at one time, the area that became South Vietnam was not subservient to the north or wholly dependent on trade with China. In the year prior to the exhibition opening in Washington, D.C., Janse promoted this theme in lectures about the Oc Eo site in South Vietnam providing proof of "the earliest and most eastward penetration of Hellenic-Roman civilization. It brushes aside the idea of Viet-Nam as a mere Chinese subculture" (Gieske 1959). *The Times of Viet Nam* (1958, 1959a–c, 1960) along with American newspapers pushed this idea by publishing accounts of Janse's research in publicity about the Crossroad Exhibition.

By associating these artifacts from the Mediterranean world with South Vietnam, the Crossroad Exhibition supported claims for South Vietnam to remain an autonomous economic and cultural region, separate from what became North Vietnam and the larger Communist bloc (Lockhart 2013). Even the illustration of the bronze drum of Dong son on the cover of the Crossroad Exhibition catalogue broadcast ties between ancient Vietnam, Asia, and the West via the Black Sea. In the catalogue, Beggs described connections between the Dong son civilization with the Funan people thriving in the area that would become Cambodia and South Vietnam, that is, near the "terminus of the Greco-Roman trade with the Orient" (Beggs 1961: 10).

These ancient pathways of trade augured support for American-Vietnamese relations, insofar as the United States traced its own political and cultural ideals to the ancient Greco-Roman civilization. In other words, if Vietnamese archaeology and ancient art showed that in ancient times the southern area of Vietnam linked to the Hellenistic world, then should not the nation of South Vietnam join with the United States in a Free World based on ideals of this Mediterranean civilization, such as representative democracy and free expression? This, at least, was the suggestion at work in the exhibition and catalogue. They traced histories bringing South Vietnam closer to the West and to civilizations and ideologies that Americans held dear. These histories catalyzed the artefactual "culture of a people" to relate heritage to the present day and the present day to mutually beneficial diplomatic relationships between Americans and Vietnamese.

3 Marginalizing Handicraft from Exhibition Narratives

After the Crossroad Exhibition closed in Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian toured it in the United States. This activity shifted the narrative significance of its handicraft. The word "crossroad" in the title denoted cross-cultural influence along ancient, trans-continental pathways connecting the region that would become South Vietnam with the Greco-Roman world. "Art treasures" provided evidence of the region having served as a cultural crossroad. In addition to bearing weighty histories, these treasures demonstrated the movement and influence of styles of artifacts and alluded to the ability of powerful rulers to mobilize far-flung trade and cultural exchange. Upon their return to Vietnam, the American Ambassador remarked, "These treasures … have created one more powerful bond between our two nations; [t]here are few bonds stronger than art and beauty shared and few bridges which more effectively span the distance between continents" (Nolting 1962).

In contrast, the Smithsonian perceived handicraft as evidence of a people, place, and tradition occurring doubly outside – removed from the ancient crossroads and from contemporary contexts of modernity. In the Crossroad catalogue, Beggs criticized the mechanization of craft production in South Vietnam and rooted it in a timeless tradition (1961: 12). Also, he encouraged manual artisanry remaining faithful to traditional processes and materials: "Much that is pleasantly exotic in Vietnamese handicraft today can be traced to the persistence of old cultural traits" (Beggs 1961: 14). His ideas about the importance of tradition for the vitality of Vietnamese handicraft resonated in the United States and internationally, too. Like Beggs, McLaughlin associated machine mass production with modernization and worried about its impact on Asian craft: "Everywhere in Asia new factories are springing up, turning out in almost dizzying quantities volumes of household articles ... at prices far below levels the handworker can afford to meet," sparking "speculation in various countries about the dilemma of the crafts workers and the rise of unemployment among them" (1958: 37). At the core of Beggs's and McLaughlin's anxiety was the concern that South Vietnam was altering how artisans made handicraft. Ostensibly, using machines and synthetic materials such as plastics would extinguish the native industry or transform it into something qualitatively different. UNESCO's account of its 1958 symposium about the waning of traditional cultures in Southeast Asian nations that adopted democracy after World War II also touched on these concerns. According to symposium participants, the "problem" of Southeast Asia consisted of the vulnerabilities of its traditional cultures becoming "enfeebled" by Western technologically-driven production (Purachatra 1958). If this occurred, the industrialized West would lose a mainstay of handmade things from Asia that it needed to connote the values and experiences it perceived to have lost as mass produced and distributed goods became the norm in the material culture of everyday life.

These distinctions in the significance of ancient "treasures" and handicraft dropped the latter from narratives of history of civilizations – the "crossroads" – and historical change. Consequently, they helped to cast handicraft as an artifact that was valued less than archaeology and fine art. In practical terms, these divergent narratives for archaeology and fine art versus handicraft created a fork in the road for the Crossroad Exhibition. To tour the United States the exhibition divided in two. Ancient archaeology and art traveled to major American art museums for presentation as "treasures." Those classed as handicraft consolidated as a "Contemporary Crafts Exhibition" intended to educate Americans about Vietnam as a present day albeit timeless place, people, and culture. Between February 1961 and November 1961, the latter exhibition circulated to Ferris Booth Hall, Columbia University (New York), Brandeis University Library (Massachusetts), Michigan State University (East Lansing), and The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, venues that, for the most part, emphasized education and anthropology as opposed to aesthetic appreciation. Unfortunately, expectations concerning the formation of a Vietnamese ethnological collection at the Smithsonian further diminished the importance of the handicraft that circulated in the "Contemporary Crafts Exhibition" and became Accession 244852.

4 Ethnographic Requirements and Failures

4.1 Defining Vietnamese Ethnography and Ethnological Collection

> … generally speaking the system still confronts any collected exotic object with a stark alternative between a second home in an ethnographic or an aesthetic milieu. The modern ethnographic museum and the art museum or private art collection have developed separate, complementary modes of classification (Clifford 1992: 149).

Lacking value in an aesthetic context as art and in an historical one associated with ancient archaeology, based on Clifford's assertion, it fell to ethnology at the Smithsonian to provide Vietnamese handicraft with an interpretive home for appreciating its significance. Nevertheless, handicraft artifacts associated with the Crossroad Exhibition failed NMNH staff expectations regarding what constitutes ethnographic material. At the same time, moving into the early 1960s and beyond, its efficacy for fostering cultural diplomacy likely diminished, too.

As he communicated with the Embassy of Vietnam about acquiring "certain ethnological objects" from the Crossroad Exhibition, Knez took pains to enumerate the types of artifacts he considered authentically "ethnological": "... I refer to a wide range of objects, costumes, utility ceramics, ritual objects, agricultural tools, folk art, and other objects that have been used by Vietnamese people in their daily life" (*Memorandum* 1962). In addition, Knez clarified the meaning of "ethnological collection": An ethnological collection, particularly for exhibit purposes, must consist of objects that

can be placed together in a culturally meaningful association. The collection should not be a random group of objects but rather be objects to illustrate a facet of life (*Memorandum* 1962).

In his correspondence, Knez guided the embassy in understanding how the artifacts he hoped to acquire from them would cohere thematically. He even offered examples of a Vietnamese ethnological collection. "Perhaps one such collection might include those tangible objects used in a typical Vietnamese kitchen, preferably from a lowland village" (*Memorandum* 1962). On top of this, Knez favored artifacts from rural places rather than towns and cities, which indicates that, like Beggs, he sought nonindustrially manufactured handicrafts made of materials local if not indigenous to a region. On the other hand, Knez indicated interest in "new and foreign influences [that] have appeared to combine, modify, and at times replace the old" features of traditional things crafted for the home (*Memorandum* 1962). Yet, he insisted that these artifacts express Vietnamese ways of life at home. Thus, a Vietnamese ethnological collection "could depict the Vietnamese medium or religious professional" or it might highlight practices of raising children. Knez asserted, "To paraphrase a phrase used by a well-known anthropologist, the theme of an exhibit based on this sort of material could be 'Coming of Age in Viet-Nam'" (*Memorandum* 1962).

4.2 Questions of Documentation, Themes, and Indigeneity

Anthropological culture collectors have typically gathered what seems "traditional" – what by definition is opposed to modernity. From a complex historical reality (which includes current ethnographic encounters), they select what gives form, structure, and continuity to a world. What is hybrid or "historical" in an emergent sense has been less commonly collected and presented as a system of authenticity (Clifford 1992: 152).

Accession 244852 entered the Smithsonian lacking information that Knez expected. He thought the scientific value of an ethnological collection increased with good documentation – "local name and English equivalent; specific place of origin; function; name and address of craftsman; material used in manufacture; technique employed in manufacture; prototype if known; additional information" (*Memorandum* 1962). This documentation would render artifacts knowable from the standpoint of museological practice and ethnography.

Although Knez suggested narratives that Vietnamese handicraft gifted from the Embassy of Vietnam might convey, in the end, Accession 244852 also lacked these "culturally meaningful association[s]." Its artifacts do not illustrate a typical Vietnamese kitchen, religious professional, "Coming of Age in Viet-Nam," or another theme. Nor do they show an evolution of objects and practices (Clifford 1992: 150). To be sure, the collection consists of artifacts that may represent objects or activities in everyday life. Yet, it is not clear that they were "used by Vietnamese people in their daily life" (*Memorandum* 1962).

When Knez shared the list of artifacts he desired from the Crossroad Exhibition with the Embassy of Viet Nam, he explicitly stated, "No item made primarily for export is requested (*Memorandum* 1962). Knez wanted artifacts made in Vietnam for use by Vietnamese people in their everyday lives, taking place in rural settings. However, South Vietnamese government officials purchased some from handicraft centers aiming to serve markets beyond their immediate locales. Thus, some of the handicraft items in Accession 244852 likely were made for export in towns and cities, perhaps even for transoceanic export. Neither were the items old or constructed with unusual materials or techniques. Even more problematic was this qualification appearing in the "History of Collection" attached to Accession 244852: "This collection constitutes a selection made and requested by the Division of Ethnology from a large loan exhibition of Vietnamese treasures – largely archeological – which was sponsored by the National Collection of Fine Arts in 1961. Much of the material is of Chinese design" (*Memorandum* 1962). Paradoxically, the Crossroad Exhibition from which many of the handicraft items came had aimed to redress prevailing ideas that Vietnamese culture essentially derives from China.

"Where and when do museums look, when framing the authentic" Asia, or Southeast Asia, or Vietnam? (Geurds 2013: 2). In outlining what makes a Vietnamese collection ethnographic, Knez mentioned "new and foreign influences" impacting traditional handicraft made for the home. He treated ethnographic authenticity as "a binding doctrine, finding its expression in closely contained culture histories" (Geurds 2013: 4). His tendency to favor authenticity in "objects that have been used by Vietnamese people in their daily life" in a village likely having at least a somewhat contained cultural history probably further diminished the ethnographic importance of Accession 244852 for Knez, because nothing about it in-

dexed an indigenous culture or original inhabitants or their descendants. So also would the likelihood that some of the artifacts were made for export and signified China as much as Vietnam have rendered the collection uncontained culturally, in other words, not limited to the area of the south or meant to stay there.

The recent history of postcolonial South Vietnam also vexed notions of Accession 244852 as an authentic representation of life in southern Vietnam. During 1954 and 1955, that area saw the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the north, motivated by the Geneva Accords and Western nations – the United States, England, France – to go south before the 17th Parallel divided Vietnam into a Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and a Democratic Republic of South Vietnam. Would it have mattered to Knez if artisans from the north who only recently arrived in the south as refugees assisted by the United States and Europe made the handicraft artifacts the Smithsonian acquired? What if the items came from the north? An invoice associated with Accession 244852 from the Saigon Institute of Historical Research lists candlesticks, a candle-base lion, incense burners, and a pot of slaked lime from Bat Trang along with items from Tho-ha and Dai-La, that is, places located near Hanoi, not Saigon (Buu Lam 1960).

Referencing the future of Accession 244852, Carmichael reassured the Viet Nam Embassy, "[t]hese beautiful and useful objects will be placed in exhibits now being designed for the Museum currently undergoing reconditioning and enlargement" (Carmichael 1962). During the 1960s, the NMNH exhibited ethnological artifacts from India, Pakistan, China, Japan, and other Asian nations. Yet, Vietnamese handicraft did not feature in the installations. Any number of failures in their documentation, thematic relevance, and indigeneity would have troubled exhibiting and making sense of Accession 244852 in the ways Knez insisted.

5 Additional Problems of Narrative Context for Handicraft

5.1 Points of Narrative Convergence: The Crossroad Exhibition and Handicraft Aid Program

Since the turn of the century objects collected from non-Western sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artifacts or as (aesthetic) works of art. "Other collectibles – mass-produced commodities, 'tourist art,' curios, and so on – have been less systematically valued; at best they find a place in exhibits of 'technology' or 'folklore'" (Clifford 1992: 146).

There is good reason to believe that Accession 244852 consisted of artifacts "less systematically valued" also because they called to mind handicraft that artisans in South Vietnam made for export as part of an American economic diplomacy project.

During 1956, highly optimistic about the future of American-Vietnamese relations, the State Department's handicraft aid program aimed to raise the quality of handicraft made in South Vietnam. It would join makers and products there with markets in the region and especially in the United States. The State Department's International Cooperation Administration contracted the industrial designer Russel Wright to direct the program. In South Vietnam, he assessed handicraft production in refugee camps, cooperatives, and factories. He collected examples to take home, too. During 1956 and 1958, at international trade expositions in New York City, Wright displayed Vietnamese handicraft to promote investment and trade to American business and commerce (Way 2013). Wright also promoted Vietnamese handicraft to consumers more directly. During 1958 and 1959, with the support of the Embassy of Vietnam, he circulated an installation of Vietnamese handicraft to upscale department stores located in major American cities.

A key part of the aid program consisted of American designers returning to South Vietnam to educate artisans there in making handicraft to suit American middle class tastes. Technical assistants from Japan travelled to Saigon and elsewhere in South Vietnam to facilitate handicraft design and production, too. Especially at first, the aid program targeted Vietnamese artisans who migrated from the north to what would become South Vietnam. Many lived in refugee camps where they continued to make handicraft. Wright made a special plea to American designers to engage with the program and provide work for these refugees in exchange for building a handicraft industry or testing "ideas which the high cost of skilled craftsmanship prohibits them from experimenting with in the United States" (Wright 1956).

Interestingly, the Smithsonian and Wright both subjected Vietnamese handicraft to American practices of knowledge, collecting activity, and diplomacy. They expressed power and authority

by collecting and presenting Vietnamese handicraft to Americans. Both operated largely at governmental levels and with government staff in the United States and South Vietnam. Both had connections with the American Friends of Vietnam. What also linked the Smithsonian's and the aid program's interests in Vietnamese handicraft is that both made much of President Diem's visit to their respective events. During August 1959, Diem attended the opening of the Handicraft Development Center in Saigon, which Wright helped to establish. In Saigon, Diem viewed the South Vietnamese iteration of the Crossroad Exhibition during June 1960.

Something else closely connected the Crossroad Exhibition, Accession 244852, and the handicraft aid program. Smithsonian staff knew about the latter program. Beggs wrote Wright to inquire about meeting him and securing his assistance in developing "an exhibition of arts and crafts to be shown in America during 1959" (Beggs 1957c). The following year, Beggs told Annemarie Pope, director of SITES, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service that he hoped to attend the opening of Wright's traveling Vietnam department store exhibition at W. & J. Sloanes in New York City (Beggs 1958a). The next month, as Janse reported to Beggs from Saigon about selecting art and craft for the Crossroad Exhibition, he encouraged Beggs to liaise with Wright "so all our activities could be coordinated" (Janse 1958). Furthermore, some items in the exhibition and Accession 244852 came from handicraft centers in South Vietnam. Invoices from the Smithsonian Institution Archives list locations associated with these (Buu Lam 1960). In South Vietnam, Wright helped to establish handicraft centers in Saigon and Boun-Kroa. Especially the former garnered press coverage in Saigon, Southeast Asian, and American State Department mass print media.

It is possible that the South Vietnamese Government purchased handicraft from centers associated with Wright – especially the Handicraft Center, Saigon – for the Crossroad Exhibition. In the "Contemporary Crafts" section, the exhibition catalogue credits the Handicraft Center, Saigon, with 16 pieces, including a lacquer cigarette box, wooden urns, leaf and fish shaped wooden dishes, a silver tea-strainer, child's plate and spoon, a silver tray, necklaces, bracelet, pipe, chalk pot, and an ivory elephant tusk carved with the Trung Sisters. The story about the Trung Sisters involves them leading a military rebellion against the Chinese 40 A. D., which speaks to Vietnamese sovereignty, a theme the American State Department promoted in the face of the potential spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. The Government of Viet Nam gifted some of these items to the Smithsonian in Accession 244852, for example, the silver "chalk-pot with engraved flowers and chain attaching the stick", which is now catalogued as E400726-0.

One other thing linked the American government-led efforts at bringing South Vietnam into the Free World via its handicraft. Wright's lectures and notes for publicizing the handicraft aid program seem to anticipate Beggs's appreciation of Vietnamese handicraft. According to Wright, artisans in South Vietnam could redress the deleterious impact of machine-made products by using local, natural materials (Wright 1955). They could ameliorate the "machine-made character of man-produced buildings, clothing and all possessions [that] creates an environment of monotony, sterility and lack of human warmth which the human being cannot tolerate with relief" (Wright 1960). Wright's insistent championing of handmade and traditional features of Vietnamese handicraft dovetailed with Beggs's appreciation of its un-modern, nonindustrial qualities.

5.2 Points of Divergence: The Handicraft Aid Program and NMNH Ethnology

With these many points of convergence, we might expect that personnel for the Smithsonian's exhibition project and staff at the NMNH collaborated with the handicraft aid program in acquiring Vietnamese handicraft. On the contrary, precisely because the Smithsonian exhibition project and NMNH intersected with the handicraft aid program, it is likely that at the NMNH Knez discounted as an indigenous Vietnamese ethnography collection those artifacts that would become Accession 244852.

Wright treated Vietnamese handicraft as goods that Vietnamese artisans made for Asians and as an export commodities for Americans. To this last point, through English-language mass print media circulating internationally, the Government of Viet Nam promoted the status of Vietnamese handicraft as a commodity. It proclaimed, for example, "[d]uring the past few years the American public has seen examples of Vietnamese handicraft, ceramics from Bien Hoa, lacquers from Thudaumot, tortoise shell from Ha Tien, etc. They could be seen in the shops of Saigon, or even some large cities of the United States, in exhibits arranged by the Embassy of Viet Nam" (Van Chuong 1960). Knez wanted handicraft made in Vietnam for Viet-

namese people. He explicitly rejected export commodities for a Vietnamese ethnology collection: "No item made primarily for export is requested" (*Memorandum* 1962). If some of the handicraft the Government of Viet Nam gifted to the Smithsonian came from the Handicraft Center in Saigon, it likely connoted cultural hybridity if not simply export commodity. Through the Center, handicraft aid program personnel promoted items engaging with American modern design features. They aimed to apply American ideas about what was traditional in Vietnamese handicraft to shape its creation in Vietnam for export to the United States. In a draft for a lecture he presented in late October 1958, at Design Derby, "a competition to inspire and stimulate designers in the Western hemisphere" sponsored by the Designers and Decorators Guild in South Florida, Wright explained that Americans live in "our times," which necessitates that "these countries" in Asia are "adapting their design and their handicrafts to an expression of transition to 20th century life" (Wright 1958).

In expressing these ideas about an international network of production and consumption linking Vietnam and the United States, Wright underscored his State Department remit: foster economic diplomacy by increasing the circulation of the American dollar to areas of Southeast Asia that were vulnerable to Communism. Doing this would advance the overarching goal of bringing Southeast Asia into the noncommunist world of capitalism and democracy. Although Wright promoted cultural differences between the United States and South Vietnam, nevertheless, at a time when the United States used trade as diplomacy, he focused on establishing and integrating economic pathways linking two nations representing what he and others perceived as having different strengths – the United States, an industrialized economic and political world power that provided South Vietnam with economic management and related design and craft skills, and South Vietnam, a traditional culture rooted in an agrarian way of village life that contributed indigenous materials and artisans willing to work to the United States.

For Wright, handicraft mattered less as a conduit for understanding Vietnam as a place and people, which Knez desired for an ethnological collection, and more as a location to produce items that Americans should be encouraged to purchase for their homes. After all, along with economic diplomacy Wright championed Vietnamese handicraft as a sign of American desires. As much as he honed in on the making of handicraft in South Vietnam, Wright facilitated Vietnamese handicraft belonging in middle class homes. In this context, Vietnamese handicraft mirrored American diplomatic interests intersecting with domestic interests. In contrast, Knez urged the Viet Nam Embassy to facilitate collecting handicraft to represent a Vietnamese kitchen.

Although Wright and Knez both embraced Vietnamese handicraft for the qualities that distinguished it from American goods, the narrative arc of their respective projects compelled them to advance different accounts of its meaning and significance. Given the connections, linking the Crossroad Exhibition and handicraft aid program that the commodity aspect of the latter writ large in American diplomatic relations with South Vietnam must have made it difficult for Knez to embrace the "67 ethnological specimens" of Accession 244852 as an ethnological collection representing "objects that have been used by Vietnamese people in their daily life" (*Memorandum* 1962).

6 Conclusion: Narrative Failures

Museums have frequently been seen as a conduit for a dominant ideology, the function of which is to conserve the social order and normalize a narrative of nation-building, imperialism, corporate power, and elitism (Fyfe 2006: 38; Francis 2015: 50).

The collecting culture that aggregated, traveled, exhibited, gifted, and accessioned 67 Vietnamese handicraft artifacts for the Smithsonian supported if not American nation building, American world building. It conveyed handicraft along the lines of diplomacy aiming to strengthen American-South Vietnamese relations in the Free World. Its Crossroad Exhibition helped to "normalize a narrative of nation-building" using American power to identify and bring nations into the Free World through cultural projects that in this case linked South Vietnam to American historical ideals and celebrated its recent political sovereignty.

The collecting culture at work in the Crossroad Exhibition may be seen as part of a dominant culture that generated and expressed narratives contributing to its power. Taking this further, the collecting culture aligned the meaning and significance of handicraft with "a dominant version of history, silencing the experiences and values of others in the process" (Macleod, Hanks and Hale 2012: xx). Some of those silenced include the makers of handicraft artifacts.

About the diplomatic goal of mutual understanding Thayer explains,

You can't effectively communicate the culture of one people to another without completely understanding those with whom you are communicating. It *is* the requirement of mutual understanding which is the basis of successful cultural diplomacy, and it is this requirement which helps make cultural diplomacy so vitally important today (1959: 740).

Accession 244852 lacked a story line that would ensure its artifacts could help to establish "mutual understanding" and bring Vietnam into the Free World. It failed to generate interest regarding how it might support alternative narratives of ethnographic significance, and it lacked attention to what it revealed about its makers.

Clifford espouses, "… it is important to resist the tendency of collections to be self-sufficient, to suppress their own historical, economic, and political processes of production" (1992: 151). For the Smithsonian to do this regarding the Accession 244852 requires narrating its relationship to a collecting culture and its intersections with a nation – South Vietnam – that no longer existed by 1975. In the end, without an account of how they related to South Vietnam, the handicraft artifacts could not "successfully communicate to others a complete comprehension of the life and culture of a people" (Thayer 1959: 740). While failing as authentic ethnography, they failed as much as the diplomacy they may have aspired to facilitate also failed, and eventually saw the violence of war erupt. If "the way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events" (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004: x), the lack of story surrounding Accession 244852 has served as its enduring plot.

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