Weaving potential space and acculturation: Art therapy at the museum

Andrée Salom

Abstract

Contemporary museum paradigms that address social responsibility, value diverse interpretations and promote communication create novel possibilities for cultural connections and exchanges. Evidencing these new roles, the Museo del Oro (Gold Museum) in Bogotá, Colombia, offered an art therapy programme to serve internally displaced indigenous women (IDIW) of Wounaan and Guambiano ethnicities. The qualities of museums as safe holding environments able to serve in processes of acculturation, surfaced in the course of the art therapy programme. This article bridges discourses related to museums, immigrant populations and the object relations construct of potential space through the common denominator of the interplay between internal and external realities.

Keywords

art therapy
museums
acculturation
object relations
art-based research
indigenous women
displaced populations

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**Introduction**

By acting as welcoming agents of the host culture, cultural institutions can play a valuable role for displaced populations, especially if they support a positive relationship with their motherland. Based on the contemporary reinterpretation of museums described below, this study investigates how museums can serve in acculturation processes as normalizing alternative environments to social service agencies.

Internally displaced indigenous women (IDIW) in Colombia are obliged to cope with a loss of everything familiar, and confront forced migration. The arts, as familiar venues, can be used to design interventions for facilitating IDIW’s adjustment to foreign territories. The guiding hypothesis of the presented art-based enquiry was that an art therapy experience at the Museo del Oro (Gold Museum) in Bogotá, Colombia, could offer IDIW of Wounaan and Guambiano ethnicities a safe holding environment to provide some ease in their process of acculturation. In concordance with the Museum’s educational charter, the programme was designed to offer experiences of well-being and self-discovery.

**Literature review**

The view of the museum as a forum (Cameron 1971) has been widely acclaimed, although there is still a lot to be done for museums to house unconventional perspectives (Lavine and Karp 1991). A paradigm shift towards museums that shelter multiculturalism, multiple viewpoints, social responsibility, open communication and knowledge exchange has been advocated (Anderson 2004). The important role that museums can play in supporting the well-being of communities through social service interventions that promote social inclusion, cohesion, interaction and a sense of belonging has also been highlighted (Camic and Chatterjee...
Museums have been found to promote optimism, hope, self-esteem, resilience and rest (Wood, in Camic and Chatterjee 2013). During art therapy experiences inside museums, spaces have been accommodated for therapeutic viewing, art-making and display of creations (Betts et al. 2015; Colbert et al. 2013; Deane et al. 2000; Linesch 2004; Peacock 2012; Salom 2008, 2011; Treadon et al. 2006).

The understandings of art spectators as passive audiences and of museum objects as having static meanings are outdated. Rancière (2009) defends spectators’ active role in respectively translating, interpreting, associating and disassociating from the art they witness. It is no longer centrally important for the spectators’ meanings to correlate with the artists’ intentions (Rancière 2009: 14–17). ‘The meaning of an object continues in the imaginative work of the visitor who brings to it his or her own agenda, experiences and feelings’ (Silverstone 1992: 35). The distinctions between objects in display and spectators’ subjectivity have been acknowledged, as have the interactions between them (Silverstone 1992: 35–36). Dynamic understandings of the museum experience make room for creating relational interventions that can rely on the rapport between museum visitors and that which they witness (Chatterjee et al. 2009; Lanceley et al. 2012).

Museums, potential space and acculturation

The meanings that arise when distinctive viewpoints transform through new experiences (Vygotsky 1978; Bhabha 2004) are central to object relations theories. Object relations directly address the issues of how outer reality is incorporated into the self, and how in turn outer reality is shaped by inner constructs (Melano Flanagan 2011): In particular, Winnicott’s (1971) concept
of potential space addressed this creative interplay. Potential space refers to the psychological ability to form symbols that grant an interaction between objective and subjective realms. By interacting with the outside world as guided by internal fantasies, an individual transforms the experience of the two realities (Jemstedt 2000).

Potential space, as a creative space that facilitates connections, expands throughout the lifespan. Initially, potential space arises as space begins to form between an originally fused mother and baby dyad (Winnicott 1971: 144). By being attuned to the needs of her baby and protecting the infant without the infant knowing, the mother facilitates a holding environment. Within it, the baby can develop a confident and relaxed relationship with the outside world that is supportive of symbol formation through creative play (Winnicott 1971: 146). Further along, relating potential space to the ongoing cultural life of an individual, Winnicott wrote that, ‘infants and children and adults take external reality in, as clothing for their dreams, and they project themselves into external objects and people and enrich external reality by their imaginative perceptions’ (1989: 57).

Linking museums to potential space Froggett and Trustram (2014: 9) conceptualized museums as containing environments, enabled as such by a staff that attended to the emotional needs of participants. Within the art therapy context, Thompson (2009: 161) wrote that, ‘the gallery can function as an intermediate “other” … providing another form of the “holding environment” for the client’ – or as Diaz (2011: 16) wrote, ‘for the art product’. Museums can house potential space as visitors’ inner frameworks interact with external reality to process events, create relationships, identify subjective experience and conjure intimate meaning.

More poignantly than museum visitors, immigrant populations are confronted with reconciling between inner and outer realities and challenged by concepts of ‘self’ and ‘others’.
Wong-Valle (1981) suggested that in order to acculturate into a host culture, immigrants must go through a progressive process from fusion with culture of origin towards an independent sense of cultural identity. She wrote that if actual and symbolic references to culture of origin persist, the immigrant can regulate the frustrations related to their separation from motherland, differentiate from the culture of origin with greater ease and adapt with more security in the new environment (1981: 50). Within child development, *object constancy* is defined as the stable internal representation of the mother even in face of her absence (Melano Flanagan 2011: 153). In the context of acculturation, Wong-Valle extended object constancy to the stable personal representation of motherland. The importance of referring to motherland within foreign territory points to potential space as crucial in the process of acculturation. Through the relaxed, creative, and lifelong aspects of potential space, the individual’s subjective experiences of distinct cultures can meet; personal interpretations of diverse cultures can interact.

Culturally safe holding environments become highly significant when considering current object relations theories. These highlight the importance of considering social forces from culture among the elements that shape humans’ internal representations (Melano Flanagan 2011: 153). Art therapists use a creative holding environment to create ‘relatedness and resonance’ (Robbins 1987: 71) within reparative therapeutic relationships. Similarly, in a culturally safe holding environment, the playful, alive and resourceful connection between cultures can facilitate the inner cultural junction. In turn, the internalized constructs built of the bond between cultures shape the acculturation process.

IDIW
As internal refugees fleeing from human rights disruptions and various forms of violence, IDIW migrate to different areas within their home country in the search for safety. The process of acculturation is complicated for IDIW for various reasons: The post-migration stressors that internally displaced indigenous peoples face directly involve difficult living conditions affecting mental health (Cohen 2010) and acculturation processes (Dunlavy 2010). These stressors include discrimination, economic concerns, depreciation of personal skills, inaccessible health care, language barriers, concern for family members, lack of emotional support, loneliness and poor housing circumstances (Dunlavy 2010: 11–35). Women experience higher acculturation stress than men, as do people with lower levels of education (Berry 1997). Furthermore, differences in mental health paradigms (Cohen 1999) complicate the adjustment process, which depends on the cognitive, affective and behavioural similarities between cultures (Triandis, in Arredondo-Dowd 1981).

*Integration* as an acculturation strategy includes conserving the original cultural identity and actively participating with the host environment (Berry 1997: 9). A greater integration with society is believed to help with adaptation as long as there are: a desire to participate and a receptive host environment (Berry 1997). The possible benefits of integration are problematic when looking at indigenous populations. *Separation* may be a better option by the standards of indigenous people who do not hold high esteem for some value systems within host environments (Montenegro and Stephens 2006: 1867), and who by conserving strong indigenous identities have a better chance of receiving financial aid from the state. In separation original culture is maintained and participation with others avoided (Berry 1997: 9).

There is a lack of strategies to address the unattended mental health needs of indigenous groups (Cohen 1999), in spite of the multiple migration stressors that they face. Internal refugees
have been placed ‘among the world’s most vulnerable people’ by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Furthermore, Colombia has had the highest number of internally displaced people for four consecutive years (Norwegian Refugee Council 2013). It is imperative to create programmes addressing the emotional issues of IDIW. Through the arts, indigenous women carry a millenary cultural fortitude that they can rely on amidst any challenge. When keeping in mind that the most significant health influences lie outside of the health sector (Chatterjee and Noble 2013), cultural institutions stand out in their ability to play important roles for IDIW.

The experience and the results presented in this article bridged the perspectives described in this introduction: Themes related to subjectivity and objectivity connected the discourses about museums, the construct of potential space and the challenges of acculturation (Figure 1).
Method

The following art-based enquiry allowed an observation of the art processes and products created by the IDIW at the Museo del Oro.

Participants

The fifteen women who participated in the pilot study ‘Sharing Stories with Images and Materials’ were expert weavers who felt at home with art processes and supplies. Like most indigenous women of Colombia, they traditionally weave, knit and bead to create aesthetic objects, which support basic needs like food, clothing, transportation, storage and rest (Aguilar 2000). These utilitarian objects, mostly made from natural fibres, also have cultural functions. Woven patterns and colours express ethnic cosmologies. The women’s ‘Ways of knowing’ are intimately linked in the art forms – through which they interact with the environment and the community, produce financial income, and find a sense of identity and pride.

The group of Wounaan was composed of nine females ranging in age between 12 and 18. The Wounaan came from the lower San Juan River in the department of Choco, fleeing persecution within their territory. Many of the girls were separated from their immediate families, sent to study in Bogotá and join 160 members of their community. The level of Spanish spoken by participants varied. Group members arrived at the museum wearing clothing from the host environment such as jeans, tee shirts, sweat tops and tennis shoes. Most had cell phones with digital cameras, sometimes used to communicate with family members in Choco. Together they formed a tightly united group. The six Guambiano women came from the mountainous region of Cauca. One member was 17 years old, and the rest ranged in age from 30 to 40. Unlike the previous group, all women wore their traditional clothing, including warm thick woollen
skirts, bright indigo blue shawls, panderetas (traditional palm fibre hats), and mochilas (traditional crocheted handbags). The Guambiano group has been historically interested in higher education and political participation. Therefore, the 17-year-old, accepted into an anthropology department at a university, had an important translating role in the group. The Guambiano travelled to their native land every four months (more often than the previous group) and came to Bogotá for work/education.

**Objectives**

Art therapy has allowed immigrant populations to express themselves without having to speak the language of the host culture, work at their natural rhythms, explore original and host cultures through artistic containment, investigate cultural identity and receive psychological treatment in non-threatening means (Marxen 2003). Art therapy services have also provided refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with opportunities for processing acculturation, honouring heritage and grieving loss (Dokter 1998). The objectives of the sessions were informed by the acculturation challenges of participants and their interconnection with the larger community (Kaplan 2007: 15), the benefits that art therapy has offered immigrants and the role of museums as places that encourage multiple viewpoints. In cooperation with the Museo del Oro the general goal of the project was to provide an emotionally safe space, free of aesthetic judgment, open to emotional communication and supportive of participants’ history through art-making. The project undertook the creation of a cultural sharing experience, supportive of: teaching and learning art methods, validating strengths and experiences, expressing collective knowledge, exploring emotions, and sharing creations with each other and with the general public.

**Programme description**

The programme had originally scheduled each ethnic group for one art session and a
posterior communal display. We combined both activities into a single day, thus facilitating a
time commitment: It is not always easy for IDIW to use public transportation or to leave their
work and community responsibilities. Consequently each three-hour workshop consisted of three
stages. The initial stage proposed a cultural exchange through artistic exploration of materials
and techniques. This took place at a semi-private workshop room suited for arts and crafts.
Second came a visit through the museum galleries. During this stage, participants had the
possibility of enhancing the meaning of their display. Finally, back in the workshop room,
participants added detail to their exploratory creations, and prepared a final display. The
observations presented here focus on the art-making processes.

Five Colombian women aged 55 to 25 facilitated the project. A psychology student, an
artist, and I, an art therapist, ran the first and last stages. An anthropologist from the Museum’s
education department guided the gallery visits. To support cultural understanding, a cultural
interpreter trusted by participants was present in all but the second group with the Wounaan. In
addition, the educational department of the Museum and indigenous leaders helped to coordinate
the meetings. Consent forms were discussed and signed by leaders of each community.

The art therapy facilitators worked from the premise that the group participants, like most
Native Americans, found a unity in mental, physical and emotional realms; understood the
difficulties of an individual as those of the community; did not expect healers to ask for self-
disclosure; and expected healers to diagnose, orient and formulate a healing ritual (Thomason
1991). Facilitators recognized that making decisions for participants and preventing self-
determination could feel patronizing, but that a non-directive style could be perceived as a waste

Facilitators were therefore confronted with the task of orienting by following the leading
cues of the groups. We intentionally opted to rely on silence and periods of ‘not-knowing’ as phases of art incubation, although art activities for each stage were prepared in case more structure was needed. To establish participants’ sense of safety and autonomy, attention to art processes and group dynamics informed the ongoing decisions made during the group sessions. Non-verbal communication was relied upon to surpass the difficulties of language barriers, follow the pace and guidance of the group-as-a-whole, avoid premature disclosure and respect the verbalization norms of each group.

**Materials**

We selected materials used in western style crafts, to promote an interaction between participants’ skilled creative knowledge and media commonly found in Bogotá. We chose this parameter to promote metaphors of cultural exchange. Western materials included charcoal, dry pastels, cardboard, kraft paper, clay, food colouring, brushes, glue, glitter and strings of sequins. To encourage participants’ teaching abilities and honour their techniques, we also provided materials used within the women’s traditional crafts, as discussed below.

**Results**

**Wounaan: A mural, beading and photography**

Where group participants sat, an eleven-foot piece of brown kraft paper covered the central table of the workshop room as an overlay. During introductions, facilitators openly expressed an interest in learning about the participants’ culture. Before proceeding to the art, a facilitator overheard a group member expressing her desire to draw Choco on the table covering. Following this cue, group leaders offered the art materials located at a nearby table and asked participants to draw their birth home on the mural paper (Figure 2). With little verbalization,
each participant worked individually or in a self-selected group. Collectively depicting the jungle they know as home, the Wounaan painted or drew images of trees, huts and water.

![Figure 2](image-url)

During the process, each woman spontaneously tied a string of colourful sequins (provided for art-making) around her forehead. One related them to crowns, another to the headpieces worn at ‘Sweet 15’ ceremonies in Choco. The girls agreed to be photographed with their sequin crowns, as they talked about the longing for ceremonies.

After viewing the museum exhibit, group members were invited to walk around the table and view their own creations. Facilitators then asked participants to choose if they wanted to unify, alter or complete the image. Some participants extended the earth, river, sky and mountain. They cut and re-pasted a piece of the mural, reorienting it in relation to the composition as a whole. Others worked on additional pieces to paste onto the collective mural. The group proudly set the long image on a glass wall visible to passers-by.

Participants contemplated the mural, complementing its lush representation of climate, vegetation and daily routines. One participant mentioned that she had drawn Choco, despite not having seen it for eight years. Another commented that she carried Choco in her heart. Pictures were taken of the girls in front of the mural. The mural in display later served to ignite a conversation about the differences between living in Choco and living in the Bogotá. For closure the Wounaan performed a traditional dance for the facilitators, using the mural as background. After profuse applause, the women thanked the facilitators and asked to be invited again.
Each individual’s art process was an integrated part of the whole, but the integration happened organically rather than through linear planning. ‘Mistakes’ were used creatively, all input was welcome and, from a host culture point of view, supplies were exceptionally well shared. We observe a fluid trust in the collective art process, which particularly stood out as culturally framed.

For the second session, the women were expecting supplies for weaving characteristic chaquira (plastic bead) ornaments. The industrially produced chaquiras represent a culturally hybrid technique adopted by the Wounaan. The museum provided beads, industrial thread and traditional weaving boards. Wounaan members instructed group facilitators on the weaving system. Fostering the cultural exchange, all women, including facilitators, wove aside each other at a semi-private sunny patio. Every individual started a design of personal choosing (Figure 3), posteriorly finished. The general atmosphere was slow, quiet and meditative. Small conversations sprouted alongside the main activity. The women played Christian music on their electronic devices. Group members sporadically stood up to take pictures of the group at work or in playful poses. The dynamic that arose as participants and facilitators took photographs of each other seemed to say, ‘I see you through my lens; you see me through yours’.

Figure 3
The photographs taken by a facilitator were projected for the women as a means of closure for the two-day workshop. At the request of the women, the projection was replayed. Because verbal processing was limited, the photographs proved to be an important way of mirroring back to the participants their images of Choco.

**Guambiano: Weaving with modelling clay**

Following introductions, there was at first a prevalence of silence and uncertainty about the needs of the group. Attention to non-verbal initiatives eased the progression into a cultural conversation. The facilitators proposed a sensory exploration using dry pastels that was initiated but not fully engaged with. The group was sufficiently tolerant of uncertainty and change to wait until a useful material and/or metaphor emerged for participants. Some group members requested to work with industrial modelling clay instead. Facilitators distributed the modelling clay and began a guided exploration of the materials’ physical qualities to help participants relax and play. After a period of appraising the clay’s temperature, texture and weight, participants were asked to make long rolls of clay. The exercise was meant to continue, but some participants did not undo the rolls when prompted.

The art leader commented on how the rolls resembled the form of traditional thread for weaving. With this metaphoric cultural mirroring, Guambiano participants took the lead and began to shape the industrial clay in autonomous ways. Each participant sculpted an object that alluded to the textiles characteristic of the Guambiano community: flags, traditional clothing, *mochilas*, a weaving machine and other elements of fabric crafts were portrayed. A few participants used the colourful clay rolls to knit traditional knots and patterns (Figure 3 and 4).
Facilitators also made clay sculptures. I weaved various coloured roles of clay together and flattened the weave into a slab. The individual rolls joined yet maintained their distinct colours, mirroring the contact between different women as inspired by the participants’ artwork.

Figure 4

As the artwork emerged, so did a conversation among the participants, in their native tongue. Artistic representations from their motherland may have eased the relationship with the host environment (Wong Valle 1981) because eventually a conversation arose in Spanish. It centred on gender issues, the role of women in the community, men’s expectations, and the skills needed to be a wife and a mother. Women talked about their desire for independence and work (framed within the migration), their hardships, and the support offered by family members and community. In spite of cultural differences, all women present could apparently relate to the content of the conversation.

After viewing the galleries, the women expressed diverse opinions about them through discreet conversations in accordance with their traditions. They consensually titled their individual pieces and arranged a display of their work for others to see (Figure 5). By the
display, the Guambiano proudly sang their cultural hymn. During closure spools of yarn were offered to mirror and honour Guambiano weaving crafts.

Figure 5

**Analysis of the results**

The strong cultural identity of each group pervaded each encounter, and group leaders were aware of conflicting agendas. On the one hand, group participants took an initiative to teach about their traditions within the context of the museum. On the other hand, the facilitators wanted the encounter at the museum to provide an emotionally safe space for the women. A therapeutic holding environment, which prioritized the ‘ways of knowing’ of the group members, ultimately resolved the leaders’ perception of the double agenda. As facilitators relinquished the goal of processing emotions, the museum was able to house an encounter respectful of participants’ rhythms, creations, languages, history, cultural heritage and points of view. The integration of artistic skills was also possible because of participants’ willingness to teach,
explore and share within an environment where artistic judgement was not encouraged (Figure 6).

**Elements that Contributed to the Safe Holding Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Wounaan</th>
<th>Guambiano</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>References to mother land present in the art work &amp; met with receptivity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to mother land present in verbal communication &amp; met with receptivity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to mother land represented in dance &amp; met with receptivity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to mother land represented in song &amp; met with receptivity</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to mother land present in outfit &amp; met with receptivity</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately asked for a second encounter</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Led and set rhythms</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed pride about displaying at the museum</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDIW actively taught about cultural traditions</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDIW actively engaged with host culture (as represented by art supplies, museum personnel, museum exhibit)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in the creative process</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic judgments, and emotional disclosure NOT encouraged</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different materials art processes &amp; content choices available (conducive to making decisions, having options &amp; agency)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness from facilitators to learn from participants</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptivity to participants’ norms, skills, creations, languages, history, cultural heritage, collective nature &amp; points of view</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptivity to participants acculturation challenges</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6**

During the first session the Wounaan parted from representing their culture using fibre weaves or *chaquiras* ornaments. Through spontaneous play they incorporated glittered foam boards, dry pastels and modelling clay to represent Choco. An involvement with these materials (plus stringed sequins) provided a symbolic means of relating with a receptive host culture: participants’ shaped industrial art supplies that were malleable to their internal representations. The art processes bolstered stories and references about traditional rituals and native land.
During the second session the museum housed the instruction for weaving the *chaquiras*, thus honouring participants’ knowledge.

Photography was used in both sessions. Through spontaneous snapshotting, different viewpoints were metaphorically included within the museum. Apart from acknowledging differences, photography also provided a symbolic meeting between cultures: a technology from the host culture (photography) captured images of participants, their traditional art processes and the mural of native land. The video projection allowed participants to see themselves representing their heritage within a foreign environment. In this manner photography (representing host culture) highlighted participants’ roots and ability to convey them. The connections that occurred through the art methods and the images (as symbols of culture) showed that an in-between space where different cultures could meet was not only possible but that it could lead to a creative encounter.

The knitted clay rolls, made by the Guambiano, show a reliance on internal representation of mother culture (knitting) as a way to interact with a material from the host culture (pink modelling clay). Through the engagement with the material participants imprinted their tradition into the new environment. The outcome presents a transformation in how the weaving legacy and the pink clay had been previously used. For the duration of the encounter new shapes materialized as the Guambiano’s projected knowing reinvented the use of clay. Counting on participants’ traditions expanded creative repertoires in an imaginative way.

Because I can ultimately attest to my own metaphorical constructs only, I briefly reintroduce the two pieces of art that I made in response to my encounters with the groups. In the aforementioned examples, I learned a new practice (beading) to express a familiar geometric design, and reinvented my use of modelling clay. I inhabited *potential space* and created outside
of habitual patterns. My internal constructs threaded with the new external reality established by my relationship with the Wounaan and Guambiano.

During each one of the sessions of this pilot project, a symbolic process of cultural contact was noted: participants adapted to and incorporated materials from host culture to represent images and techniques from their culture of origin (Figure 7). Ingenious art processes resulted as participants’ internal perspectives enriched external reality. Trust in the creative processes permitted a holding environment filled with artistic exploration beyond usual patterns, reminiscent of potential space. Presenting the creations to the general public extended the cultural contact to museum visitors, prolonged the voices of participants within the museum and generated a sense of accomplishment in the groups.

![Interaction of Artistic Symbols](image_url)

**Figure 7**
Discussion

During the art therapy sessions at the museum the women related to the host culture (embodied by museum, museum personnel, group facilitators and industrial art supplies) precisely by presenting, referencing and being rooted in their culture of origin. The literature suggested (Wong-Valle 1981) that by referring to motherland acculturative stress is diminished. Such references permeated the art created and the communication in the groups.

The museum as a therapeutic holding environment, like a museum as forum, was intended to foster communication. By viewing the galleries through a subjective lens, creating personal storylines through non-verbal means, dancing, singing, exhibiting at the museum and communicating with others the Wounaan and Guambiano women added to the Museum’s collective heritage. In turn, the museum as a holding environment supported participants’ visual narratives, validated participants’ leads, decisions and collective nature, as participants and facilitators played with materials, shared skills and reciprocally created together non-verbal communication unfolded. Participants’ artistic references to native culture, their willingness to share and their expressed pride about exhibiting at the museum support the hypothesis that the art therapy project at the museum could provide some ease in the process of acculturation, even in the face of acculturative challenges.

The interaction between participants’ perceptions of host culture and culture of origin extends Winnicott’s (1989) insights about the cultural life of the individual to the process of acculturation. The juncture took shape through participants’ resourceful solutions to the inadvertent artistic challenge of using unfamiliar materials to represent their legacy: a micro challenge in the process of acculturation that led to the conception of the museum as a
microcosm of the host culture. As is characteristic of potential space, artistic innovation emerged from the symbolic interaction of self and other.

Different influences affected the results: the object relations framework (Froggett and Trustram 2014; Melano Flanagan 2011; Winnicott 1898; Wong-Valle 1981), informed facilitators’ view of the experience and inevitably permeated the interaction. Consequently, the materials presented unavoidably led to a symbolic interaction amongst cultures. A conscious intention to include IDIW’s origins, norms and skills, an intention not always found outside the microcosms of the experience. Despite these influences, participants had agency over the processed and contents of their creations.

In all instances the content centred on culture of origin. References to culture of origin may support the use of either separation or integration strategies, depending (in part) on the receptivity of the host environment. Given the holding environment, I deduce that a selective integration was adopted. Selective integration (punctual, controlled, determined by space, time and acquaintance) may provide a strategy for IDIW to expand their cultural repertoires while permitting as much separation from the host culture as needed. Only gradually built trust with IDIW may clarify the meaning that they attributed to the exchange (before, during and after the encounter) and clear the facilitator’s assumptions of meaning.

This exploratory study initiated an interdisciplinary conversation at the Museo del Oro that may be fine-tuned over time. Further communication can permit an ongoing adjustment of the project’s objectives and methods as established by participants’ emotional needs and practical necessities: exhibiting or teaching at the museum could represent a financial gain for participants. It would be interesting for IDIW to determine the materials and processes used, destiny of the pieces created, demography of their audience, timeline for display and parameters
of curatorship. A continuous artistic dialogue inside the museum could provide a sense of permanency that is lacking in the ever-changing circumstances of IDIW. With more permanency issues of acculturation could be attend to in more depth and the differing needs amongst ethnicities could be addressed. The non-verbal leadership style of the art therapy section of the project, which differs from some directed pedagogies of museums, can be clarified to further integrate art-viewing with art-making and -exhibiting. Studying the oscillations that happen between particular viewpoints and narratives in display can provide additional information about how museums may serve in processes of acculturation.

Conclusion

The museum was conceived as part of an art therapy holding environment meant to ease the participants’ forced migration from motherland. The art experience elucidated the role of museums as welcoming agents of the host culture to IDIW. Through potential space, the interplay of the women’s culture of origin and their perception of the host environment emerged in art form. It has been proposed that through enduring healthy alones a connection to others can arise (Jemstedt 2000: 130). The art showed that by being grounded in tradition, new forms emerged for participants and facilitators through their contact with each other. The art therapy/museum experience invited participants into a relationship with host culture, which is grounded in a respect towards culture of origin.

Non-verbal rapprochement between traditions adds to humanity’s heritage. It is the role of museums to preserve humanity’s heritage (De Montebello 2005). As museums become therapeutic holding environments grounded in emotional safety, they will host the weaving of the museum as forum. The non-verbal properties of art therapy can be of central help.
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