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THE WOMAN BEHIND THE GLASS:
REPRESENTATION OF PREHISTORIC
WOMEN AND GENDER IN
MUSEUM EXHIBITS

by

MEGAN ROSE RODRIGUEZ

Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

HONORS BACHELOR OF LIBERAL ARTS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2022

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Dr. Joci Caldwell Ryan, who has provided paths of research, academic contacts, and much support during the years of my undergraduate degree. I would also like to acknowledge the Drs. Naomi Cleghorn and Shelley Smith, whose wise advice has been of great help in the creation of this project and the completion of my degree.

I am also extremely grateful towards Ms. Bobbie Brown, who has been instrumental to my success within the Honors College and beyond patient with my many questions and emails during my four years at UTA.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my family, who have been nothing but supportive during my undergraduate years and were incredibly patient with my many trips across the state in order to gather data. Thank you for your support and many words of encouragement throughout and at the end of my journey in earning my Bachelor's degree.

April 22, 2022

ABSTRACT

SEEING OURSELVES BEHIND THE GLASS: REPRESENTATION OF PREHISTORIC WOMEN AND GENDER IN MUSEUM EXHIBITS

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

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This thesis investigates and analyzes the ways in which Texas museums represent women and gender in prehistoric human exhibits and how this relates to the manner in which modern women view their own past. This study aims to assess human evolution exhibits and their depictions of gender in prehistoric populations, especially images and portrayals of social groups and gender roles. This was done through in-person assessment of the ways in which humans were depicted in exhibits by means of photographing the exhibits and observing the physical appearance and activity of the humans depicted. The study found that Texas museums present prehistoric humans with unequal numbers of

men and women and with significant gender role division. This inequality in representation indicates an inaccurate portrayal of prehistoric humans as adhering to the same gender ideology and gender roles of modern Western society. This inequality in representation indicates and perpetuates an unsupported portrayal of prehistoric humans as adhering to the same gender ideology and gender roles of modern Western society.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Gendered Past

Across the modern world, the idea of a rigid gender binary and the ensuing gender roles have permeated much of society. Within this system, men and women are seen as distinct subsections of the human race, different in every aspect of existence, from appearance to personality. For much of human civilization, at least in the Western world, men have taken the role of the more powerful half of this binary and have used that power to create a worldview that places them at the top of any power hierarchy. Often referred to as the patriarchy, this ideology of men as the dominant gender has invaded every aspect of modern society and even our view of the past. While much of world history has operated under patriarchal values, there have been many feminist critiques of how historic women and gender relations have been misrepresented in both academic circles and in public education. As a pillar of public education outside of the school system, museums are often looked to as authorities in topics such as history and science, and as such are often one of the first targets for in-depth assessment of fair and accurate representations of the past. Museums are also the face of history and archeology in the public eye, and therefore must be able to inspire confidence in the accuracy of their information and their impartiality in presentation of information.

1.2 Purpose of Study

This study aims to better understand the extent to which Texas museums are affected by gender inequality in terms of representation of prehistoric humans and human evolution. There are few Texas museums that feature any depiction of evolution and human evolution in particular is a rare subject, although it is present. Therefore, those that do feature human evolution face even more pressure to present accurate information, as they are one of the few sources of information about the topic available to the people of Texas. An assessment of the prehistoric human exhibits within Texas museums may allow for the improvement of the quality and equality of exhibits and public education, as well as the betterment of the public's understanding of the natural world and human history.

1.2.1 Research Questions

Production of a comprehensive picture of the status of gender equality in Texas museum exhibits requires multiple lines of inquiry. As gender itself is a complex social construct with multiple definitions and parts that comprise a whole, this study must take into account not only what would be considered physical sex but also gender norms and ideology in terms of behavior.

1.2.1.1 Physical Sex

The first question required of this study is of simple numbers, of the museums surveyed, what is the balance of genders represented in prehistoric human exhibits? This provides the basis on which this study stands and allows deeper analysis of how Texas museums portray gender in the prehistoric era. Within this question is how genders are

depicted in order for the audience to recognize the figures in an exhibit as either male or female. To create an image of a man or woman, do museums use modern gender markers such as hair length or clothing to denote gender or do they rely on physical markers such as secondary sex characteristics or genitalia? These questions must first be explored before analysis of displayed behaviors and group dynamics can be carried out.

1.2.1.2 Behavior

Beyond how the figures within exhibits appear physically, their depicted behaviors and how they are placed within groups also requires analysis in order to better understand how modern gender ideologies may or may not affect their natures. These behaviors include what activity they are performing, if any, or if they are meant to be simple models of how early modern humans are meant to appear. In addition to this, group dynamics are also an important aspect of behavior for these figures. This portion of the study looks at how figures are meant to interact with each other and with whom they are grouped together with.

These questions look deeper into gender representation and help form a picture of how curators wish for their audiences to view their exhibits and how they are meant to understand information displayed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Early Criticisms

Before museums themselves were evaluated for their accuracy in gender representations, feminist scholars criticized the ways that archeologists reconstructed the past. As it is impossible to know exactly how the past occurred, archeologists must interpret the past based on static and unforthcoming artifacts and create a narrative that satisfies their own research questions. However, the very act of interpretation requires the use of a living person's own worldview, their gender ideology, their religious beliefs, and even their socioeconomic standing. Interpretation often provides an ample doorway for misconstruction of the past and must be constantly guarded against. However, in the early days of archeology, most archeologists were male, and their biases often went unthought of and unchecked, making their way into official interpretations and the archeological record. This androcentrism was part of the foundation of early archeology, as very few women were involved in the field (Hays-Gilpin 2000). Feminist critiques of the fundamental inequality in archeology only gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s, relatively recent in comparison to the age of archeology as an academic field of study. These criticisms claimed that interpretations of the past, and prehistory in particular, were stained by the use of modern, Western gender ideologies. One of the main examples in these critiques is the gendered division of labor, such as the traditional idea of "Man the Hunter", or the interpretation of men as the hunters of a group, while women stayed at

home and raised the children (Conkey and Spector 1984). Feminist scholars of the time pushed for a larger degree of female involvement in archeology and inspection of personal bias when approaching interpretation of prehistoric sites.

2.2 Prehistoric Humanity in Museums

Museum curators, anthropologists, and educators alike have all questioned the efficacy of museums in educating the public on their own deep history and the evolution of humanity. As the public frequently does not engage with these concepts and topics within the school system, especially in areas where creationism reigns supreme, museums take on the responsibility of education. One of the largest obstacles that museums and curators face in teaching human evolution is philosophy and religion. Many religions teach some form of intelligent creationism in the origin of humanity, and therefore their adherents are often resistant or ignorant of evolutionary theory and in particular, human evolution. This resistance is especially strong in the “bible belt”, or a large portion of the Southern United States. Rural areas around the country are also places where human evolution is a topic not often broached by educators (Smith 2020). Therefore, when applying for funding or in attempting to attract visitors, museums must be able to create exhibits that teach accurate information without completely offending the sensibilities of those who are uncomfortable with evolution. Another challenge museums face in curating prehistoric human exhibits is the general misinformation and ignorance of human evolution held by the general public. This ignorance is evident throughout popular media such as the *Clan of the Cave Bear* series, GEICO commercials, comedy comics and many more examples of images of prehistoric humanity as a stooped, savage people. As these images are often the first encounter people have with ideas of early humans,

they are also often the only context the public has when approaching ideas of human evolution (Scott 2010). As these popular visuals are the connection most people have to prehistoric humanity, museums shoulder the responsibility of creating accurate exhibits in order to combat misinformed preconceptions and provide substantiated information. Thus, they must use all the tools at their disposal in order to meet the challenge.

Since the discovery of our own ancestors and cousins, humanity has sought to see our own faces reflected back in the images of past humans and hominins. Museums that feature topics on human evolution often have reconstructions of prehistoric humans on display, not only to better attempt to convey information, but also to engage their audience. However, like archeology, reconstruction is also an inherently subjective field. One interpretation of the source information, such as bone structure and size, only give a reconstruction artist so much to work off of and requires leaps in logic and educated guesses in order to create a fully fleshed representation of past peoples (Solometo and Moss 2013; Balter 2009). These reconstructions reflect how the artist imagines the individual to look and the preconceptions they hold about prehistory. Therefore, if they either believe in a modern gender ideology applying to the past or do not inspect their biases, they may imbue the figures within official museum exhibits with a problematic tinge of contemporary gender biases.

2.3 Representation within Museums

As museums that have prehistoric human exhibits do frequently feature human or hominin figures in their displays, curators must be aware of the implications that has on their decisions in the creation thereof. Unlike exhibits featuring nonhuman animals or

inanimate objects and phenomena, curators must take special care when depicting human figures; media of any form, but especially museum displays, does not exist in a vacuum, and does affect the worldviews and mindset of their viewers.

2.3.1 Gender in Museums

As humanity is an animal species with some amount of sexual dimorphism, distinction between the sexes is important in prehistoric human exhibits, however, it is also important that curators do not create a misleading narrative about the past through that distinction. Exhibits are inherently a means of communication, conveying information from researchers such as archeologists and historians to the public through the medium of reconstruction artists and curators. Information is often presented in the form of a narrative scene, a frozen moment in time that draws the audience into the past in order to see how prehistoric peoples lived in the far flung past. However, as with the source field of archeology, it is impossible to know exactly how prehistoric humans lived and therefore these scenes require the use of artistic license. In order to create these frozen moments in time, reconstruction artists and curators use their own ideas of how humans live in modern times. The most common result of this practice is the prevalence of museum exhibits that feature modern Western gender roles and ideologies in the context of early humans. This appears in the form of stereotypical depictions of women and gender roles, such as giving prehistoric women long hair and keeping men's hair short, or clothing women in hide skirts while men wear loincloths. While these appearances can be simple attempts to make women and men distinguishable to a modern audience, they do carry unsubstantiated ideas that make their way into how the public

views gender and does little to dissuade inaccurate ideas of natural gender presentations and performance.

2.3.1.2 Prehistoric Stories

These frozen moments in time often feature human figures performing tasks or interacting with each other so as to provide a more lifelike feeling to the displays. However, in these moments and actions, there is often a large degree of gender stereotyping embedded within. Even outside of the specificity of museum exhibits, prehistoric humans are often seen through the lens of traditional Western gender ideologies. Most people primarily engage with ideas of the deep past and human evolution through popular media such as cartoons and movies, which are rarely driven to be accurate and are generally rife with inaccuracies regarding prehistoric humans in general and prehistoric gender in particular. Such gender stereotyping appears most often in the form of “Man the Hunter” stereotype, wherein men are the most common figure and are frequently depicted as brutish men hunting some large creature, such as a mammoth. In popular movies that focus on prehistoric humans, such as *Year One* or *10,000 BC*, men are irrevocably tied to hunting, with scenes that either disparage men who cannot hunt or praise those who do well in taking down prey (Hendrick 2021). This association of hunting and usefulness with masculinity also underlies the association of women with either sex or gathering. Rarely within these depictions do women feature, and when they do appear, they are often either characterized as gatherers or in more explicit media, as victims of sexual violence, passive bodies with which masculine hunter mate. In both cases however, they are almost always accompanied by men or children (Hendrick 2021). In this context, women are not seen as their own characters and only

exist in relation to their role as mate or mother. This reduction of women to their sexual and reproductive uses is a major point of contention for feminist criticisms of depictions of prehistoric women in popular media and in museum exhibits. This conceptual schema of prehistoric life and gender roles is widespread and deeply entrenched within the general public's knowledge of early humans. Additionally, concepts such as "Man the Hunter" are used in order to sensationalize and create compelling plotlines and scenes, such as the rape scene with the French movie *The Quest for Fire*. Thus, to entirely flout these ideas and push for an image of prehistory that is less modeled after traditional Western gender roles would likely either confuse audiences or would be less palatable as entertainment.

The combination of both popular media and museum exhibits are often the only source of information on prehistoric humanity and human evolution that the general public has access to. Both interact and coincide to create narratives of early humans and paint the picture of a natural patriarchy, of man as an influential provider and protector, and of women as mate and mother, accessory to their male counterparts. These images and concepts are long-lived and have existed for nearly as long as society has been aware of our own deep past.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In order to best understand the extent to which Texas museums are affected by this pervasive use of traditional Western gender roles in depictions of early humans an assessment of gender representation must be conducted. As there are few museums within Texas state lines that feature human evolution or prehistoric humans at all, those that do are far flung across the state. Those chosen for this study are the Houston Museum of Natural Science, the Lubbock Lake Landmark, the Perot Museum in Dallas, and the Witte Museum in San Antonio.

3.1 Data Collection

In order to fully understand how gender is represented within Texas museums, the simple data collection method of photography and statistical analysis was required. At visited, extensive photos were taken of the prehistoric human exhibits. For those museums such as the Lubbock Lake Landmark and the Witte Museum in San Antonio, the subjects of analysis were simply any human figure that was visually depicted. However, the Houston Museum of Natural Science and the Perot Museum in Dallas feature hominins outside of the *Homo* genus and *Homo* species other than *Homo sapiens*. For the purposes of this study, only those within the *Homo* genus were photographed and considered for analysis.

At each museum all figures meeting the criteria above were photographed and the numbers tallied. The figures were divided into categories of apparent gender based on

markers such as long hair length, clothing such as skirts or loincloths, exposed breasts, and genitalia. These markers are occasionally insufficient to clearly determine intentioned gender of a figure and therefore a nonbinary category was required. This category is accompanied by an ungendered category for children, who often lack markers such as breasts or facial hair and wear similar clothing across scenes. In addition to these two categories, four categories in total were used: woman, man, child, and indeterminate. However, this study also assesses the behaviors the figures are meant to be displaying and the interactions between them in exhibits. To this objective, another set of categories were required. In order to assess the level of adherence to traditional Western gender roles within prehistoric human exhibits, the actions observed within scenes were sorted into categories of feminine, masculine, and ungendered. Activities and behaviors that were considered feminine included childrearing, plant resource gathering, weaving, and hearth tending. Activities considered masculine included hunting, intergroup conflict, and stone tool manufacture. However, not all activities and figures could be sorted into these binary categories and so the ungendered category includes activities such as resting, traveling, and in several cases, immobile figures meant to be type specimens to compare *Homo* species across genus.

3.1.1 Analysis

The four museums sampled in this study had widely varying numbers of human figures displayed within their exhibits. Due to this the averages and totals of human figures across all four were used instead of a museum-to-museum comparison.

	Houston Museum	Lubbock Lake	Perot Museum	Witte Museum
Women	5	14	2	9
Men	23	20	0	13
Children	0	5	3	10
Indeterminate	11	6	0	2
Total	39	45	5	34

Figure 3.1 Gendered Appearances

3.1.1.1 Gender Ratios

The proportion of women to men and of women to those of indeterminate gender is greatly skewed. Women appear in prehistoric exhibits much less frequently than do men and those who were not clearly marked as female. The ratio between women and men across all four museums is 15:28, with women appearing in displays around 24% of the time, while men appeared much more frequently at around 42%. When those without a clearly defined gender were taken into account, the ratio jumps to 2:5. Adding children into the data reduces women's appearance to less than a third of all human figures within the selected museums. Although there are some discrepancies in determining intended gender to take into consideration, the representation of women in terms of sheer numbers is highly unequal and much lower than that of men in prehistoric human exhibits.

3.1.1.2 Gendered Behaviors

Beyond simple appearance, the figures within each exhibit were also depicted with significant differences in their behaviors and interpersonal interactions. In order to best analyze the data gathered, three categories were created to sort behaviors. These include feminine, masculine, and ungendered. Children were excluded from this data set in order to simplify the analysis required, as children were most often inactive.

	Women	Men	Indeterminate
Feminine	19	7	0
Masculine	4	20	5
Ungendered	7	29	14

Figure 3.2 Gendered Behaviors

This shows that women are overwhelmingly depicted as mothers and gatherers, tasks traditionally assigned to women, while men are most often depicted as either as hunters or as simple type specimens. Over 60% of female appearances featured them performing traditionally feminine tasks, while men are more split along ungendered and masculine, almost never being depicting performing tasks such as caring for children or weaving. Those of indeterminate gender were never shown performing feminine tasks and were most often cast as background figures. Women were also most often displayed with other women or children, with the rare depiction of a single female figure, while men featured in almost every display that was assessed.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The data reveals significant differences between the ways that Texas museums display women and men in prehistoric human exhibits. Women are largely underrepresented, comprising less than a third of all figures assessed, revealing an inherent inequality in terms of sheer appearances. When they do appear in displays, women are restricted to roles and activities that do not stray from modern gender ideologies. Men are not spared this restriction to modern gender roles, often only represented as hunters and little else.

Based on these findings, it is clear that Texas museums apply traditional Western gender ideologies to recreations of the deep past. While this perhaps could be simple outdated exhibits, the displays at the Perot Museum in Dallas and the Witte Museum in San Antonio were created within the last five years, while the Houston exhibit was created in 2012 and the Lubbock Lake Landmark has existed for decades (Gubbins 2018; Smith 2012; White Shaman Preserve 2022). Therefore, these museums are not simply outdated but were created through an inaccurate lens.

While these inaccurate displays may not have been created maliciously, they do perpetuate misleading narratives and misinform the public who rely on museums for education outside of the school system. Exhibits that portray use this modern ideology cater to the public's need for the familiar concepts to connect to and to simplify information for an audience that is limited in terms of scientific or sociological

literacy(Levin 2010). By casting women in the role of mother or gatherer, the public is more able to reconcile the image of a female hominin who lived thousands of years ago with the image of a modern *Homo sapiens*, perhaps their own mother or even themselves. Through this simplification of prehistoric gender roles, the public can better relate to populations that lived on a much different Earth than they themselves live on now.

However, this comfort in familiarity is dangerous and antithetical to the purpose of a museum. At a certain point, the ability to relate to the prehistoric populations within a prehistoric diorama becomes less a window through which to see the peoples of the past and more of a mirror which only reflects our preconceptions of human evolution and humanity in general (Levin 2010). While casting women and men in modern gender roles may allay discomfort or confusion in audiences, it is ultimately inaccurate and does a disservice to those who visit museums to be educated with well-researched facts and to learn about human nature beyond their own cultural lens.

4.1 Social Implications

In addition to simply being inaccurate, the clear misrepresentation of women within Texas museums has significant consequences for their audiences. By consistently painting modern gender roles as a concept that existed before organized civilizations were created, these museums imply that they are not cultural constructs or societal developments, but innate features of the human species. This is not only unsubstantiated by current anthropological and archeological research but is detrimental to current discussions of gender and women's rights. As public institutions of learning and agents of social change, museums have responsibilities towards their communities to oppose oppression and to serve the entire populace, no matter their gender or sex. They exert

influence through their choices of who to display and how, what is portrayed as natural or normal, which all serve to guide the public's opinion. Concepts of sexism and misogyny reflect social norms and values, even if they are not held by the entirety of a population. The choices of what will be featured in an exhibit reveal what a museum finds to be of worth and of cultural value, of what is defined as human culture and what is not (Sandell 2007). Exhibits that prioritize male figures over female do nothing to deemphasize patriarchal ideas of male superiority and the equation of humanity to maleness. The large discrepancies between men and women in number of figures in each display is telling of how decisions were made of whose stories were deemed important enough to receive attention and funding. When only or mostly men are seen as the example of the human past, it erases the presence of women and devalues their existence to modern audiences. Simple omission places women below men, the lack of representation in a cultural institution that is often an authority on what has cultural value and what does not is a social signal that reinforces androcentrism in modern society. Beyond simple representation, the perpetuation of modern gender roles on prehistoric populations creates a misleading narrative of the changing and dependent nature of societal gender roles and ideologies. As evidenced by populations around the world, gender roles and even genders themselves are not universal (Best, Williams, and Briggs 1980). These concepts change and fluctuate across time and cultures, subject to their own form of evolution as societies grow and become more complex. Therefore, the insinuation that there has always been a binary gender system that follows the idea of dominant men and submissive women is not only inaccurate but also irresponsible. It erases cultures that do not follow a patriarchal societal structure but also undermines years of efforts by feminists and

women's rights activists to refute the idea that women are inherently inferior and subservient to men.

4.1.1 Woman the Mother

While women are underrepresented in Texas museums, their relative absence is only part of the issue. When exhibits do display female figures, they are rarely depicted alone or in groups comprised of only other women. Most often they are cast in the role of mother or mate, observed only in the company of children or a single male figure. Comparatively, men feature in almost every display, depicted in solo scenes, male hunting groups, and larger mixed group scenes. This disparity draws connections to the now largely contested concept of "Man the Hunter", of man as a hunter and provider and woman as a nurturer and caretaker. While the response to this idea appears in archeological critiques in the form of "Woman the Gatherer", in Texas museums a more fitting moniker is "Woman the Mother", as women are rarely seen without a child in tow. The restriction of women to traditional female roles evokes patriarchal values of proper female traits and women's place in the gender hierarchy. Prehistoric women in Texas museums could fit alongside depictions of the stereotypical mid-twentieth century housewife, reduced to an outdated societal ideal of female value.

In a society where women are still resisting the equation of a woman's value to the wife she might be or the children she can bear, the implication that women are naturally bound for motherhood by trusted public institutions is counterproductive. While women may be uniquely capable of childbirth, men are fully capable of childrearing. Caring for children is not an inherently feminine skill, nor should it be as active fathers promote childhood emotional well-being. Modern hunter-gatherer groups such as the Aka

provide an excellent example of how men can perform quality childcare and provide a proxy for prehistoric hunter-gatherer populations. This variability in gender roles in the context of childcare refutes the evident claim by museums that women were tied to their children and men were not involved. Thus, the consistent portrayal of women as mothers is not archeologically substantiated.

4.1.2 Inclusive Repercussions

Beyond social repercussions in the normalization of patriarchal gender roles, exhibits with so little female representation, female audiences may struggle to connect with prehistoric human exhibits, finding no place for themselves in such androcentric depictions of the past (Gifford–Gonzalez 1993). This alienation from the shared human past is a failure on the part of the museum as a public institution to serve the entirety of their communities, not just the men. Men also suffer from the highly stereotypical depictions of gender roles within prehistoric exhibits. The oversimplification of men to hunter or type specimens also restricts them to certain roles and qualities. When men are only portrayed as aggressive hunters or as static type specimen, the suggestion is that men are less suited to nurturing or creation. The consistent oversimplification and reduction of women and men to traditional Western gender roles does a grave disservice to the complexity and variability of human nature.

These stereotypes of women as submissive nurturers and men as dominant providers influence current discussions on women's rights and critiques on patriarchal hierarchies. They are oft cited in arguments that claim that gender roles are natural and biological, that prehistoric peoples categorized gender and gendered tasks in the same manner that is seen today (Carrera 2012). While this is incorrect, gender and gender roles

are fluid across time and cultures, museums who portray humans in this light act in opposition to their accepted role of agents of social equality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed the extent to which Texas museums misrepresent gender and prehistoric humans in their exhibits. I have shown how museums curate exhibits and how their recreations of the far past are not only problematic but irresponsible to their communities. These exhibits present the past through the distorted lens of modern gender roles and do little to reduce the prevalence of stereotypes and caricatures of early humans in society.

5.1 Museum Practicalities

Specifically, these stereotypes include the idea of men as the hyper-masculine and famous image of “Man the Hunter”, a peon of masculinity in the time before civilization. The image of women as only mothers and mates also cater to the stereotype of women as nurturers before all else. These ideas reflect the gender ideologies held and believed by the museum curators and reconstruction artists who create exhibit displays. By casting prehistoric people in these roles, museums reinforce outdated models of gender roles as biologically determined, a natural way of being, not a cultural one. This issue is antithetical to a museum’s purpose, to inform and educate, as well to properly represent and serve all member of their communities. Museums in general are not only a place of learning, but also a place of representation for many minorities and marginalized groups, including women. As a public institution, museums have a duty to serve everyone within a community and to oppose oppression when it occurs. In this

responsibility, curators must design exhibits with intersectionality in mind and work towards inclusivity.

However, museums struggle to present accurate exhibits that would fulfill these duties due to several obstacles. Due to the nature of the American public school system, many people first engage with the idea of human evolution and early humans through popular media before they do so in the educational setting of a museum. Therefore, it behooves museums to draw in visitors and to present as engaging experience as possible in order to compete with the images presented by media such as television or cartoons. To do this, they often fall back to familiar depictions of humanity that have a lower chance of confusing the audience, despite the lack of scientific substantiation. This connects to another issue regarding the accuracies of museum exhibits: funding.

Most museums are run as non-profit organizations and so are subject to the whims of sponsors and public funding (Starting a Museum 2014). When considering things such as renovating current exhibits to be more up to date in terms of accuracy or to create new exhibits to better suit the needs of the public, museums must consider how they will gain funding and take care to not alienate sponsors. As Texas is in the “Bible Belt”, there are those who object to the portrayal of evolutionary theory in public museums. This results in the general lack of human evolution exhibits within the state of Texas, even in museums that cater to topics of science and history (Smith 2020). While strides have been made in the area of general evolution, human evolution is a much trickier subject due to the notion of creationism. Therefore, many museums shy away from topics of human evolution and the deep past in order to avoid offending current or prospective sponsors. This caution possibly explains not only the small amount of human

evolution exhibits in Texas, but also the dependence on traditional gender roles within them. If museums are going to portray the contentious topic of human evolution, they may refrain from challenging common notions of gender in order to offend less sponsors.

5.2 Future Research

This study was limited by the number of museums within the state of Texas that featured prehistoric humanity and human evolution, as well as COVID restrictions during the research period. This prevented me from reaching at least one other Texas museum that featured a prehistoric human exhibit. The restriction to only Texas museums also restricted my field of view on the issues covered by this study, such as the effect of local religious beliefs on curatorship. These limitations could be overcome with a widened scope of research in the future.

Future research into this topic could be bettered by conducting research into more museums from more areas. These areas could include other states within the Bible belt, such as Alabama or Georgia, as well as more northerly states in order to create a comparison. Research into this topic could also be bolstered by the addition of interview data from both curators themselves and visitors to museums. This data would give me better data on how exactly the choices made by curators and artists affect the ways that an exhibit's audience views and digests displays and how that interacts with their own previously held conceptions of human evolution. Interviews with staff would allow better understanding of the choices that go into creating exhibits and of the ideologies and worldviews that may affect them. A more ethnographic approach may yield better results to the effects of the use of modern gender roles and female representation in prehistoric

exhibits on American audiences and their preconceptions and perceptions of innate human nature and society.

5.3 Final Thoughts

Gender and gender roles have been problematically misrepresented in the exhibits of Texas museums, creating misleading narratives of modern gender ideologies pertaining to prehistoric populations. Despite the advancements of our understanding of human evolution and our ancient ancestors and extinct cousins, museums have struggled to keep up and continue to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about the nature of human society. This has impacts beyond the simple accuracy of museums, as museums influence and hold power over the worldview of their audiences and signal who is worthy of representation and who is not. As audiences internalize messages from the continued presentation of modern gender roles as natural gender roles, they have significant influence on current discussions of women's rights and the harmful effects of the patriarchy on all genders. Thus, it is imperative that museums strive for accuracy in order to remain agents of social equality and paragons of public education. They must be able to convey unbiased information on our shared human past and tell stories that do not prioritize men while erasing women and their contributions to humanity from the public view.

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Megan Rodriguez is a fourth-year Anthropology student at the University of Texas at Arlington. She is a member of the University's Honors College and the Lambda Alpha Anthropological Honors Society, where she served as secretary. During her time at the university, she switched majors from History to Anthropology, and her interests follow suit in terms of their range. She has conducted research into topics of Korean history, women's and gender studies, as well as archeological history. She plans to pursue a Master's degree in Museum studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a career in museum curatorship or archeological field collections.