Epsiode 7: Kim Kardashian, Marilyn Monroe & a Catalogue of Human Remains

I love beautiful dresses and hate rich people, so every year I think about writing about the Met Gala and then end up not doing it. And that's fine – usually the most controversial thing that happens is that a bunch of wealthy people seem to be fundamentally incapable of understanding a theme, despite it essentially being a themed party. While I could probably talk about that for 20 minutes, it wouldn't be very interesting. It would just be me going "what the fuck is this?" over and over again, until the theme music played.

But this year Kim Kardashian opted to show up to the Met Gala in the iconic sequinned gown Marilyn Monroe wore to serenade JFK at his 45th birthday gala in May 1962. For a woman who wore a lot of iconic gowns, it's probably one of the more famous. Rather than being attached to a specific film, it's instead attached to a moment in American history. Three months after the performance, Monroe died in her home. The next year, Kennedy was assassinated.

I didn't want to do another episode all about Kim Kardashian, so I thought we could take a different route and think about the loaning of an archival dress and what it means to wear it.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about Marilyn Monroe and museums.

Like I said, I really didn't want to do another full Kim Kardashian based episode, since I opened this season talking about her divorce. But it's really hard to run a pop culture podcast when you don't look at or think about the Kardashians, because even when nothing else is going on in the realms of pop culture, they're always up to something. Which I guess is technically what their job is? Or at least… how they get millions of dollars? But I digress. I thought we could use Kim Kardashian's wearing of Marilyn Monroe's gown to get a little weird and go down a personal favourite rabbit hole of mine – museums and the stuff in them. I was going to say "museums and museum collection policies" there but I could hear everyone groaning and reaching to turn the podcast off. I promise this isn't actually going to be me sitting here and reciting legalese to you. But I think the concern over the destruction of Marilyn Monroe's dress is an interesting starting point to think about the intersection of popular culture and museums, both in the sense of what we collect and how we select those items, and in the sense of blockbuster exhibitions – the kind

that cross over from being perceived as a high-brow cultural activity, to something enjoyed by the general public. If you're having trouble imagining what that looks like just picture a heist movie where they have to steal a big gemstone and for some reason the entire city population has shown up to see the exhibit, thus providing the thieves the perfect cover. That's the kind of blockbuster I'm referring to. I also want to do a little digging into the ethical questions around museum collections, which means we might jump from talking about Marilyn Monroe to the display of human remains. Admittedly that might give you some sort of whiplash, but to be fair, last time I spoke about something going on with Kim Kardashian I managed to draw a straight line between her and the war in the Ukraine, so I hope you won't have too much trouble trundling along with me. Let's get into it shall we?

Now, for those of you who actively refuse to pay attention to the 24 hour news cycle (I salute you, and am jealous), I'll give a brief recap of what happened with Kim Kardashian and the Met Gala. Essentially, in the lead up to the Gala Kardashian reached out to the auctioneer who sold the dress for $4.8 million in 2016. According to the auctioneer, Kardashian was initially offered a replica dress to wear, but "Kim doesn't do replicas". And so negotiations began – eventually Kardashian was allowed to wear the dress on the condition that it was not altered in any way, that she refrain from her usual body makeup and that she only wore it for the length of the red carpet walk before changing into a replica. She dropped a bunch of weight to be able to squeeze into the dress, and even then, the back wouldn't fully close, and had to be covered with a mink stole on the night.

The backlash was swift – as soon as it was revealed to be the actual Marilyn dress rather than a replica viewers took to Twitter to condemn the wearing of the dress, the crash diet it took to get into it and, my personal favourite, the wearing of 7-inch Pleaser platforms, the go-to heel of exotic dancers everywhere, with a piece of American history. Beyond the general Twitter bruhaha, conservators from a number of prominent institutions voiced concerns around the potential physical impacts on the garment and the potential consequences of showing the very wealthy that with enough money and Instagram followers, you can do whatever you like with whatever you like, and the only real barrier is clout.

Sarah Scaturro, chief conservator at the Cleveland Museum of Art and former Met Costume Institute conservator, told the Los Angeles Times that she was frustrated by the setting back of years of progress in the archiving of historic costumes, saying "My worry is that colleagues in historic costume collections are now going to be pressured by important people to let them wear garments." That same Times article also quotes a variety people who work in museums and archives, and specifically with garment restoration, and they all say roughly the same thing: there's no way to wear a dress like that without damaging it, and so it is definitely damaged. The fabric is fragile and out of production due to its flammable nature. It's vulnerable to light, oxygen and the oils in human skin – in simple terms, that's why museum lighting is often very

low, the buildings are climate controlled, and you're not allowed to put your grubby hands all over the items. Even if it isn't overly ripped – which recent photographic side-by-sides indicate it might be – there's likely to be issues that appear under the microscope.

And then to add insult to injury, it wasn't even on theme! Sorry… I'm talking about the Met Gala. I do have to get that one small gripe in. The theme was Gilded Glamour, referring to the Gilded Age which ran from like 1870 to 1900, and in support of the Met's In America: An Anthology of Fashion exhibit. According to Kim, Monroe is "the most American thing you can think of" and this is what she would have worn if she hadn't gone as a silhouette of herself in all-black Balenciaga for the previous American theme in 2021. Never mind that 1962 is 62 years too late to be on theme dress-wise, and that the actual garment itself is probably more a masterclass in subtlety than the gilded excess referred to in the theme. But again, this podcast can't just be me getting mad about rich people not understanding theme parties.

So, if archivists and conservators across America are up in arms about the treatment of the dress, who was the lone hold-out looking at Kim Kardashian and saying, "This seems reasonable" and why are they so out of step with every other major museum on the planet? Ah, well here's the rub. Remember when I said the Monroe dress sold at auction for $4.8million? It sold to Ripley's Believe It or Not – a privately owned, for-profit "attractions company" which hosts a variety of themed locations. For example, the Ripley's site in Niagara Falls is shaped like an Empire State Building that has been toppled by King Kong. The Australian one in Surfer's Paradise is adorned with a nine-meter sculpture of the deadly blue-ringed octopus complete with glowing blue rings. While they do often host a collection of objects, they are also very much set up to entertain.

Why does an organisation with thematically decorated buildings have access to $4.8 million and a slice of bona fide American history? Ripley's originally started as a syndicated strip cartoon by LeRoy Robert Ripley in 1918. As well as being a cartoonist, Ripley was an amateur anthropologist. When he completed his world tour in the early 1920's he began to serialise his travel journal by illustrating outlandish encounters and "facts" gathered from his travels. As you might expect from a wealthy white man touring the globe in the 20s, he also began to amass a dragon hoard of colonial artefacts. As his column exploded in popularity, he set up an "odditorium" at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair to display his collection and it was a resounding success. These became touring shows and eventually the first permanent "odditorium" was established in Florida in 1950, one year after Ripley's death.

In theory, Ripley's could be a for-profit institution operating as a museum slash entertainment company and still respect the basic principles of garment conservation by not renting out a beautiful piece of Americana to the most famous and wealthy bidder. But they're a private company, so they don't have to. Kim Kardashian wasn't charged for access to Ripley's collection, she did donate an

undisclosed sum to two organisations selected by the company as "a goodwill gesture in appreciation of us allowing her to wear the dress" according to the Los Angeles Times. Presumably the publicity generated for Ripley's was also part of the payment.

Aside from the greasing of the wheels of capital, I think one of the reasons Kim was allowed to essentially yank a dress that didn't really fit from the archives to wear in a grandiose display of personal ego is because of the type of institution that Ripley's is. I mentioned earlier that the official collection of Ripley's was accumulated from 1920 onward and features an assortment of artefacts gathered from colonised nations. I'll come back to that point in a second, but the other thing that's important to note is that Ripley was also very into people. Or more specifically, medical anomalies and they way they manifested in some people's bodies. He collected images and painstakingly constructed wax replicas of people like Willie Camper, an 8.5ft tall, 488-pound African American boy, billed as 'Wee Willie' in the side shows he performed in; or of Grace McDaniels, who had a rare condition known as Sturge-Weber syndrome, which gave her significantly oversized lips which took up the full lower half of her face and were coloured by a port wine birth mark – her sideshow name was "The Mule Faced Woman".

If you're sensing something of a theme here, it's because Ripley's was essentially constructed in the grand tradition of the American freak show. The travelling freak show was a primary form of entertainment, particularly in rural America through the late 1800s and early 1900s. Most of the so-called "freaks" in these shows were regular people with physical differences that often precluded them from more mainstream work. They usually parlayed their features into theatrical acts – for example, after a long-winded introduction by a carnival barker to wind the audience up, Grace would reveal her face from beneath a veil to the audience who would react with shock and horror, or, as Ripley's is quick to point out, proposals of marriage. When the travelling freak show started to decline in popularity throughout the mid-to-late 20th Century, Ripley's was able to continue to capitalise on these people by integrating documentation of their bodies into a now-permanent collection. They slotted in neatly alongside Ripley's collection of colonial artefacts, because Ripley had taken the same approach to collecting abroad. Rather than taking objects, like statues or jewellery, Ripley often sought out items of great cultural significance. Now, keep in mind that we're talking about gathering items during a time when there was less pretence attached to collecting, and certainly less pesky legal and ethical frameworks to navigate around. All you really had to do was be a white guy in a foreign place and be willing to give a fistful of dollars to another white guy who'd just gotten home from committing genocide and had a couple of little trinkets to share. Ripley's purchases on his travels included items like shrunken heads, or tsantsa from the Jivaro peoples of Ecuador and Peru. Tsantsa were part of a religious practice. Ripley collected the first of over 100 tsantsa still held by the company from a trader in Panama 1923 – not to get too deep into but in case anyone was

not feeling uncomfortable enough with the purchasing of an actual human head, I would recommend looking into what the US was up to in Panama for most of the 20th Century. The tsantsa aren't the only human remains contained in Ripley's collection – they range from ritual items taken from indigenous people in Asia and South America particularly, to mummies from a variety of cultures and time periods, to sheets of human skin taken from sailors in the mid-30s.

And if you're thinking "Wow Alex! That's a lot of human remains – why is everyone not freaking out about that as well?", buddy I have some news about museums. Most major collecting institutions have some form of policy for handling the human remains in their collection – specifically because there was a horrific period of colonial history where white people were just out in the world taking human beings alive or dead and hauling them back to England and continental Europe for study. These forays into murder, kidnap and genocide were obviously rooted in colonial conquest, but they also generated trends among wealthy upper classes who had become extremely interested in privately collecting during the science boom of the late 1800s. Lord Smythington-Morse-Basilbush two mansions over would show off their most recent purchase human remains from a colonised nation and declare it to be of the utmost interest, and suddenly everyone was keeping up with the Morse-Basilbushes and doing their own grave robbing/ genocide combo so that they wouldn't be outdone. The tsantsa I mentioned earlier are a good example – an incredible trade in fakes sprung up around this practice because the demand from wealthy white people outstripped the actual supply dictated by religious and cultural practices. Which is why Ripley's proudly declares their heads to be genuine. Anyway, once those wealthy people died and were presumably banished to the hellscape of whichever god is real, chunks of their private collections would often be bequeathed to the newly minted public collecting institutions.

At the same time as the general public were becoming privately interested in the bodies of colonised indigenous people, the field of medicine was rapidly evolving, and surgeons were just starting to come into their own. The demand for cadavers for eager medical students far outstripped the supply, which was impeded by pesky theological questions about the separation of the body and the soul after death (a religious concern not extended to the colonised, you'll note). As such, there was a long tradition of corpses of dubious-at-best provenance being utilised for medical learning and research. These scientific explorations into anatomy, surgery and medicine also resulted in a variety of remains that have ended up in collections. These include things that seem like likely by-products of this practice – human skeletons or preserved flesh used for early teaching. But it also includes remains that are less immediately obvious, for example anthropodermic books – or books bound in human skin.

If you're interested in pursuing that line of thought, I highly recommend Megan Rosenbloom's 'Dark Archives' which is specifically about this practice, but I digress. The reason I'm talking this

through is that, as our understanding of humanity has evolved, so too have the attitudes toward human remains held in museum collections. Policy here serves to separate major public institutions from their "odditorium" roots by re-framing collecting practices as being of the utmost scientific value. To utilise a famous example, the British Museum's human remains policy, has an 8-page document outlining, in nice academic language, what constitutes human remains and why they don't have to return them if they don't want to. They also keep a public log explaining each decision not to repatriate the remains of the indigenous people in their collection (usually something racist about scientific value of the collection and the fact that the Museum can provide better care for the item). Writing about Ripley's, Cathlin Bryn Goulding notes that most cultural consumers are soothed by the new ways in which museums and other cultural institutions present themselves. They use academic descriptions and give context to provide the illusion of scientific study and curation to the items in their collection, even when those items might involve things we should feel morally confronted by. A good example of this is the early 00s popularity of the touring Body Worlds and Body Works exhibitions, which feature plastinated cadavers in a variety of poses. Given that the bodies were new and explicitly for display, they were subjected to an ethics review process prior to display, which did uncover that, in the case of Body Worlds it was impossible to link the cadavers to their consent forms and death certificates, and in the case of Body Works, there was no consent – the cadavers used were 'unclaimed' bodies from China, many of which are alleged to be political prisoners according to NPR.

But these exhibitions continue to be hugely popular, in spite of this because of their endorsement by large institutions that people feel soothed by. The thing that puts Ripley's oddly out of step with the rest of the museum world is that they still treat the human remains in their collection with the same macabre, colonial "wow, would you look at that!" gusto as they did in the early 20th Century. The tsantsa are still listed as a major selling point of the collection on their website, despite other collecting institutions who have the heads in their collection moving to repatriate them to the Jivaro. Ripley's hasn't learned to hide their motivations in academic language – Goulding notes their collections often seem to be "organised by exclamation", beckoning the viewer over with outlandish statements.

As popular culture moved on from the 'actively stealing human beings and human remains for fun and entertainment' portion of human history, Ripley's collection focus has expanded to include artefacts from popular culture, like movie costumes and musician's personal items, or contemporary historical moments. They have the contents of Lee Harvey Oswald's bedroom in storage, for example. But their focus on people and their perpetuation of outdated colonial attitudes, means that organisation continues to occupy a space somewhere between a museum and cabinet of curiosities. Which is why I'm sure Ripley's vice president of licensing and publishing, Amanda Joiner, felt that there was a little more leeway to actually provide an item from the collection to Kim Kardashian for use – while it's technically

a historical artefact for preservation, adding a Kardashian to the mix ups it's 'curio' factor, enhancing its place in the odditorium. The modern freakshow is the spectacle of fame, or something.

Well… I did it. I drew a line between the dead bodies and Kim Kardashian, like some grim little detective. Everyone clap. Honestly, I probably have like another 30 minutes in me about the place of museums in popular culture, but Wesley would probably kill me if I surprised dropped an hour-long episode on them. Anyway, if you have opinions about the privatisation of public history by the rich and powerful, talk to me about them next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

This episode premiered on 12th July 2022.

Episode written by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey.

Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: lee snipes)

Visit us:

Web: www.popcultureboner.com

Twitter: @popcultureboner

Instagram: @popcultureboner