Ali and Elvis: Deconstructing a 21st-Century Museum's Cultural Acquisition and Merger of Mid-Century American Icons

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ALI & ELVIS:
Deconstructing a 21st-Century Museum’s Cultural Acquisition & Merger
of Mid-Century American Icons

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deconstructs a 21st-century museum photography exhibition of two mid-century pop culture icons, Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley, to foreground the significance of contemporary institutional practices in the deradicalization of socio-historic narratives in the resurrection, propagation and merger of two fundamentally radical post-modern cultural symbols. I historicize each man within his mid-20th century milieu to analyze broader communicative themes within this current exhibition and chart a roadmap of boundary transgression in a complex parallel history. To calibrate Elvis and Ali’s legacies as social beings over a fifty year arc, I contemporize social contagion theory and foreground a carrier narrative mid-century media advanced in the characterization of each man as contagion. This deconstruction reframes Elvis and Ali’s photographic representation as an ethnographic study to provide a greater understanding of cultural manufacturing processes engaged to resurrect identity in the perpetuation of Ali and Elvis as American icons within popular consciousness.
Introduction

Acquisitions and mergers are commonplace in America’s capitalistic society. They are basic tenets of commerce in a corporate culture driven by profit, but they are not without issue. When two separate business entities integrate into one, a cultural shift is created as they negotiate shared values, beliefs and assumptions that influence behavior, attitudes and meaning in the new company. Negotiating a new landscape requires due diligence and study by participants to ensure a successful integration. Commerce and culture metaphors are not bound by the confines of corporate America. Shifting cultural viewpoints exist when new media is created by archival institutions as well. Perhaps, as an American Studies scholar, this is why my interest was piqued several years ago when a regional museum acquired and merged photographs of Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley into a single exhibition. This observation of a commonplace business practice struck me as a cultural mismatch—to my knowledge, the subjects had never been read together by an institution—and the resulting inquiry is a study of the cultural implications of integrating two of America’s most prominent popular culture icons. The implications of this new reading not only extends into an examination of how historical memory is constructed, but also offers insights into how the culture synthesizes, and thus perceives, notable figures in American history.

Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali have occupied stratospheric space in America’s cultural zeitgeist and public memory for more than fifty years. A scholarly assumption can be made that patrons who visited the exhibit were cognizant of their prominence in show business as “The King of Rock and Roll” and the fight business as “The Greatest,” respectively. Their continuing cultural relevance is easily measured by Digital Age...
analytics: a Google search (on March 21, 2014) returned 33,900,000 hits for Elvis Presley and 65,000,000 for Muhammad Ali, and trend measurements in Google news headlines indicate consistent activity from 2004-2014. When combined, the search results total nearly one billion—pointing to not only to a credible gauge of public interest, but a topical merger worth critical analysis as well. By examining the construction of this museum’s exhibit and how it propagates a new discourse on Ali and Elvis and historical memory, a new reading emerges of how mass media works as a communicative force to inform cultural identity.

While the Internet speaks to the enormity of America’s ability to permeate its pop icons into global culture and there is little doubt as to the impact made by Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley, connecting the mythos of each man within a bricks-and-mortar institution presented a unique challenge. The museum that undertook this challenge is the James A. Michener Art Museum located in Doylestown, PA. Offering a bold reworking of two, separate traveling exhibits—*Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* and *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer*—the Michener merged the cultural heavyweights and their respective exhibits in 2011 for one major documentary exhibition entitled *Ali and Elvis: American Icons*. The museum’s namesake, Pulitzer Prize-winning author James A. Michener, spearheaded a campaign to establish the institution in his hometown by donating works of art and over eight million dollars toward the effort. As a result, in 1988 the former Bucks County Jail was repurposed into a museum and a massive stonewalled repository that once contained criminals began to house the artifacts, paintings and creations of artists.

Connecting Ali and Elvis in a former prison seems a fitting backdrop for two men who had to negotiate tenuous relationships with society. Both icons were sometimes
referred to as criminals during their lifetimes—the former broke social mores with
sexually charged musical performances and the latter broke the law for draft evasion. A
continuation of that metaphor suggests the Michener Museum functioned as a cultural
warden in proffering them as artifacts for visitation. In addition to its permanent
collection of Pennsylvania Impressionism, the museum also presented exhibits on quilts,
cookbooks, paintings, and folk art that same year. Within that group, it is presumable
that *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* broke through as the museum’s blockbuster—a
confluence of culture, commerce and entertainment much like the real life of its two stars.

In a June 2006 *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* article on
museum exhibit experiences, writer Robert Bullock cites an article entitled “Pop Goes the
Museum” which notes that "More museums are using the kitsch and cachet of
contemporary phenomena to help balance the books and bring in younger crowds." ¹
This trend from highbrow to mass culture is not news to stewards of cultural heritage
attempting to defray operating costs by boosting revenue streams. According to the
American Alliance of Museums website of “America’s 17,500+ institutions only a small
fraction receive federal funding and over two-thirds reported economic stress at their
institutions in 2012.” ² Of note in this discourse is that Elvis’ own museum, Graceland,
receives over 600,000 visitors per year making it second only to the White House in visits
to homes on the National Register of Historic Places.³ And, Muhammad Ali opened his
own museum in 2005 at a cost of $80 million with the 93,000 square foot Muhammad Ali
Center.⁴ When asked why the Michener Museum connected the two travelling
exhibitions of pop culture icons, the only institution to do so, the director of education,
Adrienne Romano, stated in an email that “The curatorial staff decided to pair these
exhibitions together because they were two significant cultural icons whom they felt could draw some new audiences into the museum. The friendship of Ali and Elvis was not known at first.⁵ People could no longer purchase a ticket to an Elvis Presley concert or a Muhammad Ali boxing match, but by presenting imagery of them engaging in those activities for the *Ali and Elvis* exhibition, the Michener Museum contributed to a trend by museums to present entertainment.

In a subtle way, the one-dimensional white, red and grey walls filled with black and white photos of Elvis alongside a section containing mostly black and white photos of Ali worked to homogenize and de-radicalize two men whose histories are ones of pushing the boundaries of race, culture, and friendship. By separating the images in such visually stark manner, an opportunity to illustrate how each man’s legacy overlaps the other was somewhat lost. The pictures were static, but their subject matter was anything but in real life. Individually and as friends, both men navigated the borders of rock ‘n roll, sport, and social terrain during periods of great unrest—segregation, desegregation, civil rights and the Vietnam War—in American history. This curatorial intersection of multiculturalism did not overtly call attention to the huge shifts of culture and attitude that America turbulently adopted in order to advance to a point in the future where the public wouldn’t think twice about the significance of coupling two poor kids—one white and one African American—from Memphis, TN, and Louisville, KY, who made it big, in a major exhibition. Is this a problem or is it merely recognizing that the American public is nostalgic by nature? By reviewing the *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* exhibit’s entire framework in conjunction with its photographs and text, a new understanding emerges of
institutional methodology in displaying art and creating media for the replenishment of public memory as well as the perpetuation of these men as icons in a new century.

Extensive Google searches indicate that this appears to be the first time that Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali were read together culturally as an object-oriented exhibition of nearly 100 photographs. Yet, the thematic relationships and educational opportunities afforded by combining the two subjects were not examined to a significant degree. Historicizing its origins and cataloguing the creative components will inform a new reading of *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* and address pertinent questions: How did these two incredibly different, yet culturally significant Americans icons meet at this multicultural junction? Did the exhibit have a self-reflexive quality? Were critical reviews informed with new perspective? Did cultural consumers recognize the radicalism and uncanny similarities between the two icons? In a country where sports and entertainment transcend from origins as hobbies and pastimes to cultural and economic juggernauts, should conservators steadfastly foreground controversial topics when curating an exhibit on athlete-entertainer-icons or does pop culture subject matter only require a history-lite reading? I am interested looking beyond photographic borders to answer these questions. And, another very important one asked by Muhammad Ali himself, over twenty years ago to his best friend, photographer Howard Bingham:

‘If I walked down one side of the street and Elvis Presley walked down the other, who’d get more attention?’ That one was harder, and I told him, ‘Overseas, you’d have more people, but in the United States it would be pretty close; maybe even a little for Elvis.’ That didn’t bother him. All he said was, ‘I guess that’s right. Elvis has been dead a lot of years, so people would want to see if it was really him.’
Ali probably didn’t imagine that the administrators of a museum would pose a similar question in 2011, but his musing on the pair’s attention-getting capacity is worth consideration.

To address these queries, I will introduce social contagion theory to offer historical context of outsider introductions into mainstream culture and demonstrate the vital role journalism assumed in creating early editorial narratives that uniquely positioned each man’s iconic qualities in cultural transmittances to the public and how these archives now serve as institutional memory and historicize the use of media in current cultural propagation techniques. To underscore the relevance of social contagion, I will briefly analyze two editorial examples utilizing text and photography to historicize Ali and Elvis in their milieu with comparable photographic essays from *Life* and *Time* magazines. This mid-century historiography will then be connected with a critical examination of the art, methodology and media presented in the Michener Museum’s contemporary exhibit. In doing so, this thesis studies the stakeholders—the institution, curators, photographers, icons, press and public—in order to synthesize the multiple dimensions of museum-generated communication and cultural propagation that existed within this 21st-century union of famous mid-century icons.

The photographs in *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* were much more than just pretty pictures and warrant academic inquiry to amalgamate the subjects with an American Studies lens and enlarge the institutional fine print to encourage further scholarship of this unique cultural acquisition and merger. The two celebrities might have been presented under a single exhibition moniker, but the museum missed an opportunity to truly read them together on a personal and curatorial level. It should be noted this endeavor is not a
criticism of the Michener’s effort, which successfully sparked cultural study on my part, but rather an expansion of the academic possibilities and of bridging gaps within the exhibit for broader interpretation. A deeper examination of the back-story behind the exhibition is necessary to uncover the cultural upheaval, radicalism and social complexity that occurred during their respective journeys toward iconic status and illustrate how conservators selectively replenished public memory of their past. By deconstructing this new century presentation and historicizing each man within his mid-20th century milieu, an analysis of the cultural qualities of this moment can be compared to those at their time of birth as icons in order to make meaning of Muhammad Ali’s and the Michener Museum’s general question to the American public. While ‘who would get more attention’ is an interesting query, the more intriguing one is why?

**Social Contagion Theory and the Transmittance of Cultural Memory**

Among the first celebrities to benefit from television-generated exposure, Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali occupy space in the American mythos that transcends their accomplishments in music and boxing. To underscore the importance of media’s role in facilitating their societal infiltration, especially with respect to the radicalism each first embodied as mid-century outsiders, scholarship by Priscilla Wald foregrounds a historical example of media-generated notoriety surrounding the construction of Typhoid Mary’s identity in “The Healthy Carrier.” Wald analyzed an early 20th-century carrier narrative developed by the medical community and newspaper media concerning the effects of industrialization on social structure and the spread of communicable disease by individuals, contaminants that could threaten social order. Her analysis of social control and contagion is an appropriate framework in understanding the ways in which Ali and Elvis transgressed
against social boundaries because it specifically speaks to the modes by which ideas, and indeed history, are communicable through media. Her reconstruction of Typhoid Mary as a disease contagion resembles the cultural contagion spread when Ali and Elvis were positioned by media as carriers later in the century. This text is not being introduced as a historical record, but rather as a source to sample ideas concerning social contagion, social control and media-generated metamorphosis to make meaning of individuals like Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley as social beings. By examining Wald’s framework and then examining Elvis and Ali’s legacies within that framework, a new understanding as to their roles in representing communicable ideas to mid-century society emerges as well as commonalities between the two men as they migrated toward acceptance and iconic status in the new century.

In the early 1900s, modernity brought an influx of foreigners to America and the white middle class was feeling threatened by transculturation. Wald points to a transitional time in America when “people mingled with strangers, where boundaries were fluid, and where traditional spatial segregation according to class, race, religion, sexuality, gender, nationality held no purchase.” She posited that the actual Typhoid Mary was transformed by the media and the medical establishment from an individual into a social being, and therefore became a threat, because her pathogens could penetrate previously impermeable borders between social units—among classes, neighborhoods, municipalities, and even nations. As the physical manifestation of a feared disease, Mary was charged by the court of public opinion, given a dehumanizing epithet by the media, and held responsible for her actions, willing or otherwise, that implicitly threatened social health and control as she circulated amongst the population.
Typhoid Mary embodied the conjunction of challenges to the concept of Americanness represented by the demographic and social changes of an industrializing and expanding nation. Throughout the many accounts of her, her disease and in particular her status as a typhoid carrier are coded as gendered, racial, and class-based challenges to the family, to the nation, and most dramatically to white Americanness.¹⁰

Wald’s premise addressing the role of social beings at the turn of the century that disrupted society by creating medical epidemics is useful in assessing the cultural impact Elvis and Ali had fifty years later as social beings who created a behavioral epidemic. At that time, America’s landscape had shifted from the Great Depression’s poverty and isolationism into a post-war era marked by prosperity and consumerism. Mass affluence and advances in mass communication converged at a time when society was weary of war and interested in entertainment. This created a particularly ripe environment for popular culture and the revolutionary rise of Elvis Presley and Cassius Clay (Ali’s given name until 1964). Media—radio, television, newspapers, magazines and movies—were integral to this ascension as they began to compete for audiences and advertising dollars by pushing boundaries with adventurous editorial approaches and programs.¹¹ As non-traditional representations of music and sport, Elvis and Ali became prime subject matter for an industry in need of engaging content, especially that which appealed to a burgeoning, impressionable, well-funded youth marketplace.

While not embodiments of disease, Elvis and Ali represented “communicable ideas” and behaviors which could destabilize race roles and spread fear amongst white society.¹² When Elvis moved from town to town, he was unattached to local culture and custom, he came into contact with strangers, profoundly affecting them each time he performed as he shifted with ease between a sexually charged stage persona and a polite gentleman. He was
a new kind of white man—one that was unafraid to buy his clothes from Lansky’s, a Memphis store that catered to black men, one that was unafraid to quiver and shake with African rhythms while he sang songs originally recorded by black musicians as his mostly white audiences pulsed into a fevered pitch. White cultural critic Camille Paglia called Elvis “a revolutionary sexual persona,” a man who entered the dreams of whites and “transformed” the way they saw the world. Conversely, as a new kind of black man, a young Muhammad Ali flaunted traditional Jim Crow “good-Negro” conventions to keep quiet with his head down low and chose to loudly embrace his black identity and freedom: “I am America. I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky. My name, not yours. My religion, not yours. My goals, my own. Get used to me.”

He set the terms, not society, for his relationship with the public.

White America was under attack as cultural borders and racial hierarchies were being challenged by desegregation and the civil rights movements. With these social movements in the foreground, their lives and America were significantly changing. When they first appeared on the scene, Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali could not be contained and exhibited contagious behavior that a large portion of mainstream American society found unacceptable—they embodied transgressive racial crossing and rebellion and foregrounded the changing attitudes and morals of America’s adolescents. The media, in Typhoid Mary fashion, couldn’t help but assign them disparaging sobriquets: “Elvis the Pelvis” and “The Louisville Lip” officially left the nest and became mid-century carriers of culture disseminated by mass communication.
Mid-Century Exhibits – Transgressing Borders

In order to provide critical analysis of the photographs in the Michener Museum exhibit and reattach Elvis and Ali to transgression absent from the communicative text accompanying their photographic representation in the 21st-century, a visual connection must be established with how these men were depicted in their heyday. Since a large majority of the Michener Museum exhibition is drawn from editorial photos, mid-century print journalism serves as a suitable source for making this comparative presentation and provides relevancy to the framework of social contagion print narratives. Among the first editorial evidence of their objectification as news media phenomena is in the pages of Life and Time magazines. In the absence of mid-century museum exhibits to draw analysis from, reference is being made to these periodicals as comparable models of visual culture curated for public consumption. The August 27, 1956 issue of Life devoted a nine-page pictorial essay to the singer entitled “Elvis—A Different Kind of Idol.” In 1963, Time magazine displayed Cassius Marcellus Clay (Ali’s birth name) on its cover for an in-depth look at “The Dream” of a young boxer who was on the verge of
greatness. These mid-century narratives reconnect the images in *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* to the cultural climate that existed when their narratives were first developed, as well as foreground elements of transgression in their complex history, and demonstrate mass media as a communicative force in the establishment of public memory.

*August 27, 1956: Elvis Rocks the Pages of Life Magazine*

“Elvis-a Different Kind of Idol” reveals interesting judgment behind editorial decisions as to how *Life* presented this musical enigma who was shaking up the attitudes, fears, and behaviors of 1950s culture. At that time, the twenty-one-year-old white singer from Memphis, TN, was on the verge of creating a cultural revolution in the music industry and American society. Elvis had just started to appear on television shows (such as *The Dorsey Brothers’ Stage Show, The Milton Berle Show* and *The Steve Allen Show*), but he had not yet achieved the huge national audience of 60 million viewers that occurred in September for *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Just two weeks before that appearance, *Life* magazine came out with a major pictorial essay on Presley. It was his first extensive mention in a major national magazine. Figure 3 illustrates that beginning with page one, *Life* assumed a derogatory editorial stance toward Elvis, describing his performances as having animalistic characteristics and sexual undertones.
This small introductory blurb for the pictorial uses the words “hysteria,” “howls,” “disturbing,” and “ecstasy” to insinuate that there was something to fear in this young man. Similar to early century sensationalized newspaper accounts of Typhoid Mary in Wald’s analysis, *Life* article interlaced illicit ideas about sexual contagion, of young girls losing control, and of Elvis as the instigative public menace:

Wherever the lean, 21-year-old Tennessean goes to howl out his combination of hillbilly and rock ‘n roll, he is beset by teen-age girls yelling for him. All this the country has seen before with Ray, Sinatra and all the way back to Rudy Vallee. But with Elvis Presley, the daffiness has been deeply disturbing to civic leaders, clergymen, some parents…He uses a bump and grind routine usually seen only in burlesque…In Miami, one newspaper columnist called Presley’s performance “obscene.”

Even the choice of photograph for the title page illustrates how Elvis was pointing toward a new type of rock ‘n roll and undesirable behavior. As seen in Figure 4, he’s leering over his audience, intensely staring at the screaming girls as they grabbed his clothes while a policeman kept a watchful eye on this embodiment of outsider culture.
The disturbing affect he had on teenagers prompted immediate reactions from preachers and police to stop him from “impairing the morals of minors.” Rock and roll, especially a strain incorporating taboo rhythms and physical movements that originated from African slaves, was an unknown entity that appeared to inhabit Elvis Presley and infect his audiences with hysteria. However, unlike Wald’s account of Typhoid Mary, for whom being a carrier remained a stigma, Elvis’ carrier state made him appealing and attractive to teenagers and therefore a threat to middle class mores governing social conformity.

His repertoire included many cover songs of black music—Ray Charles’ “I Got A Woman,” Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right Mama,” and Willie Mae Thornton’s “Hound Dog,” to name a few. Yet, when black music was presented by his persona, the racial mixture was acceptable to a large segment of white teenagers, because of the package that it came in—a handsome, polite, white man. The establishment was put on alert: Non-white lower class culture was entering the house. The uncontainable air waves carrying Elvis’ voice and image entered the homes of whites that, in segregated America, were
impenetrable to black artists. His musical miscegenation constituted a cultural trespass into their living rooms. His shaking legs and gyrating pelvis broke down the doors of propriety and morality. He needed to be contained. He needed to be prayed for. As *Life* pointed out, the “all worked up” civic leaders, optimist club members and clergyman were rallying to contain Elvis and maintain social control: In the Figure 5 *Prayer for Presley* photo, the caption reads that the singer had achieved a new low in spiritual degeneracy.

![Figure 5: *Life* magazine August 27, 1956 article image](image)

It is interesting that Elvis, America’s ultimate pop culture icon, now recognizable anywhere in the world, encountered more resistance from his own race at the beginning of his career and was never fully accepted as a significant break-through artist during his lifetime. Perhaps, the opposition was due to the fact that Elvis made no secret about his relationship and appreciation for black culture and music, especially during his anonymous youth when he could easily go to Memphis’ gospel conventions and Negro clubs. Coming from an underprivileged background, he passed into a marginalized group’s world with little
resistance and absorbed its culture, carrying it back with him to white society. He crossed borders that were generally impenetrable for black artists.

A relevant subtext was simmering in the country. Just a few pages after the Presley article in Life, an editorial discussed the magazine’s decision to embark on an extensive photographic series to “paint a realistic picture of Negro-white relations in the United States.”23 The publisher wrote that the essays were to depict the “varied ranks of Negroes in the South…to show the pattern of their lives in a segregated society…and [to] show white men on many levels of southern society to document the way of life they seek to maintain.”24 Elvis made his own statement and eliminated one aspect of segregation by instilling an appreciation for black music in his white audiences. Whether they realized it or not, the audience participated in the miscegenation of musical cultures previously detached by years of separatist tradition. As Life correctly noted, he was a “different kind of idol.”25

March 22, 1963: Muhammad Ali Hits the Big Time

Figure 6: Time magazine March 22, 1963 cover image
When the March 22, 1963, cover of *Time* magazine featured an illustration of a shirtless twenty-one-year-old black boxer from Louisville, KY, named Cassius Marcellus Clay, the athlete’s major accomplishment up to that point had been an Olympic gold medal in Rome in 1960, but he was beginning to make a run for the heavyweight title held by Sonny Liston and the magazine editors took notice. The article introduced Ali to the American public as a fun-loving, family-oriented, clean-living and patriotic young man, who lived in five room brick ranch house with wall-to-wall carpeting in every room. Perhaps, the carpeting reference acted as a subtle hint to readers that Ali was not from a poor family. Nor was he a disrespectful minority who didn’t know his place in a racial caste system of separate but equal; he was a “tall, brown gladiator”27 who had conquered Rome and deftly handled Europeans who questioned the state of civil affairs in America. “He brushed off a Russian reporter who prodded him about the plight of U.S. Negroes: ‘Man, the U.S.A. is the best country in the world, counting yours. I ain’t fightin’ off alligators and living in a mud hut.’”28 This quote speaks volumes about his no-holds-barred approach to speaking his mind, even at a young age. The writer buried Ali’s hint of bias toward black African peoples by quickly inserting a pop culture reference about him walking on the Via Veneto with Bing Crosby.

This exclusion of journalistic analysis regarding his quote illustrates how media craft a particular kind of story which can position the subject as menacing or harmless, and foregrounds media’s role in the dissemination of social contagion discussed earlier. Wrapped within pop culture, Clay’s proclamation of Americanness was not implicitly threatening to white social order. He wanted the world to know that in his America things
were different—he came from a land of opportunity, not a jungle. Even at this early stage of his career, Ali confronted convention head-on and flaunted his freedom and blackness while at the same time enjoying all the prosperous trappings of white society. He wanted to be the heavyweight champion. He wanted to be rich. He wanted the American Dream, just like Elvis. After achieving financial success, the first thing both men did was buy a Cadillac for their mothers.

At this point in his career, Ali played by the rules and with the *Time* reporter: “I’m beee-ootiful, he croons. I’m the greatest. I’m the double greatest. I am clean and sparkling. I will be a clean and sparkling champion.”

His goal to become heavyweight champion of the world was a concept that *Time* could embrace as the reporter detailed aspects of Clay’s background, personality and physical prowess: “Boxing had been a bore for years—ever since the retirement of Rocky Marciano, a real, hairy-chested puncher. The mobsters and their stable of dull pugs were driving the fans away. But here was Cassius, young, handsome, as brassy as a Dixieland band.”

There was no mention of the animalistic characteristics or howling criticisms that Elvis suffered at the hand of *Life*. Ali’s lyrical gift of gab was referred to as poetry and of the four pictures in the article only two were of him boxing—one depicts a harmless narcissist posing in the mirror, and the second, as seen in Figure 7, is of a menacing aggressor in the ring who does appear truly violent.
The other two images (in Figure 8) portrayed a sleepy kid “finally acting his age” and the all-white Louisville businessmen that managed him. Analysis of the latter photo suggests a testimonial that White America endorsed or legitimized Clay—certainly an editorial comment which positioned him as a non-threatening cultural phenomenon of sport.

The *Time* article suggests the type of mixed messaging—cocky, bold, playful, violent, and non-threatening—that appears common to Ali’s narrative arc and persona during the mid-century. Paradoxically, *Life*’s positioning of Elvis as a “gyrating howler” who was “deeply disturbing to civic leaders, clergymen, [and] some parents” indicates
segments of white middle class America’s initial reaction to him, one of their own, was significantly different from the initial reception given to Ali in these two examples of narrative. The prejudices and fears Presley faced as a corrupter of youth and carrier of black culture in the 1950s had somewhat lessened by the 1960s, but were still similar to the obstacles Ali would eventually encounter when he joined the Nation of Islam and was convicted of draft evasion. Calling attention to how the twenty-one-year-olds were editorially portrayed in these two articles—one mostly negative, the other mostly positive—functions to sample society’s earliest reactions to Ali and Elvis. Additionally, the articles provide a frame of reference for reattaching the Michener Museum exhibit’s photographs, which were largely editorial, to the social climate that existed when similar photos were taken and how media continues to inform public perception of these two men.

**Historical Memory and the *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* Exhibit**

After placing each icon within the framework of social contagion theory and historical context with regard to the radicalism they embodied at the time of their birth as icons, a more comprehensive perspective emerges of the relatively tame cultural qualities surrounding their extension into the new century as cultural kingpins when *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* opened at the Michener Museum. This history reframes their current photographic representation as an ethnographic study where their identities have intermingled and engenders far more cohesiveness between the two men. However, this connectivity is not confined to exhibit subject matter. The contemporary merger of Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali in museum space created points of contact between institutions, curators, photographers, press and public. By analyzing what each entity contributed to the
overall experience, broader themes within the exhibition become apparent and foreground a greater understanding of cultural propagation and the replenishment of public memory.

A roadmap for this examination begins with the winter 2011 issue of the Michener Museum’s official magazine, *Q Guide to Events and Programs* which featured *Ali and Elvis: American Icons*, the museum’s overarching title for two separate exhibits, *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer* and *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, booked to run simultaneously from February 19 – May 15, 2011. Descriptive copy for *Elvis at 21* states “What is so remarkable about Wertheimer’s documentary portraits of Elvis is how fresh and contemporary the pictures still seem, utterly unlike any other portraits of the endlessly scrutinized figure.” The blurb continues with “*The Making of an Icon* chronicles the life and times of a now-iconic figure that was simultaneously the most beloved and most hated man in boxing…the show tells the story of an American hero who has come full circle in the hearts and minds of people throughout the world.”

Further reading highlights ancillary programs—lectures, classes, book signings—offered in conjunction with each exhibit. For an additional two hundred and fifty-eight dollars in non-member fees ($125 for members), visitors could supplement their eighteen dollar (free for members) exhibition experience with the following add-on educational programs:

- **Curator’s Lecture**: Hava Gurevich, Muhammad Ali exhibition curator and Director, art2art Circulating Exhibitions
- **Curator’s Exhibition Lecture and Book Signing**: Michael Ezra, author of *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*
- **Elvis at 21 Meet the Artist Talk and Book Signing**: Alfred Wertheimer
- **Elvis at 21-Why Elvis Matters Panel Discussion** with exhibition curators: Chris Murray/Govinda Gallery founder and director
  Amy Henderson/Smithsonian Institution cultural historian
  Warren Perry/Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery researcher
Marquette Folley/Smithsonian SITES project director

- **Elvis Rocks** music presentation
- **Jailhouse Rock** movie screening
- **Photography and the Human Drama**, art history course


As a Digital Age institution, the Michener Museum made some of this archive available for public consumption via the Internet. However, the cost of taking full advantage of all educational material offered in conjunction with the exhibit most likely eliminated the opportunity for some to engage in broader discourse on many sub-topics: such as their striking similarities as self-made rags-to-riches success stories; the role photography and the press play in facilitating America’s media-generated celebrity culture; and the curatorial history of the exhibit. Those with enough wealth to spend two hundred and fifty-eight dollars and in possession of sufficient leisure time to partake in all programs could obtain the full museum experience. Significantly, as this experience offered a departure from conventional depictions of Ali and Elvis, historical memory in this case becomes dependent upon income and class. To its credit, the Michener Museum attempted to bridge this gap by posting some content to YouTube, Facebook and its website, but it must be considered that economic factors in cultural heritage have the danger of creating an exclusionary model counter-intuitive to the role of institutions with educational intentions. As non-profit museums search for ways to increase revenue, the commercialization of cultural consumers risks marginalizing members of society who do not have the means or time to access knowledge beyond the price of admission. These programs, combined with the exhibit, facilitate a greater understanding of how curators
and the Michener Museum framed Ali and Elvis, and by extension how the public perceived them. By analyzing each component of the production, a structural framework is established as well as thematic interpretations absent from a typical museum visit.

*Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon Curator’s Lecture*

*Hava Gurevich, exhibition curator and Director, art2art Circulating Exhibitions*

This presentation introduced a new theme to the Ali exhibit. A review of its contents reconstructs the Ali exhibit from the perspective of photographers who in essence were positioned as artists by the curator and the museum. Ali served as the main subject, but the photographers and style of photography were sub-topics as well. Hence, Hava Gurevich presented the curator’s lecture not as an expert on Muhammad Ali, but as expert on photography. Gurevich first met Ali in 1992 when she was hired as a freelance photographer to cover his 50th birthday party benefit. She recalled his warmth and magnetism in receiving guests and fans as he happily posed for pictures: “No matter how many other people were in the room he was always aware of where the photographer was and that what he was doing needed to be captured because…it’s not just about the moment right now, it’s about how the moment will live on.”

Ali’s recognition of his legacy and accessibility to photographers informed the *Making of an Icon* exhibit as well. Many of the photographers whose work Gurevich curated for the exhibit recounted to her that Ali was always approachable, personable and comfortable with the camera. In a discussion of the exhibit’s three sections, *The Rise of Cassius Clay*, *The Championship Years* and *The Making of an Icon*, it became evident that the diversity of photographic styles in the exhibit functioned as a metaphor for Ali himself, a man known in many realms. Because the exhibit contained images from over twenty-five
photographers—many of whom achieved fame themselves such as Gordon Parks, Steve Schapiro, Annie Leibovitz and Neil Leifer—from the disciplines of photojournalism, portraiture, sports photography, editorial and press photography, a multi-faceted cultural symbol’s story was told through multiple lenses.

Characteristics that define photojournalism such as the image’s context within history, the photographer’s attempt to capture truth, and the establishment of narrative were important considerations to Gurevich who said, “In order to tell Ali’s story, you can’t just tell it from one perspective. You have people who know him as a boxer, for his sport, and then there are the people who don’t know much about that but know about his involvement in civil rights and his refusal to go to Vietnam.”36 Since his life mirrored historical events, the photographs contained in Making of an Icon fell under a general heading of documentary style for their depiction of his personal history and highlighted the photographer’s utilization of elements such as composition, emotion and interpretation in capturing Ali’s public persona. Gurevich noted it was challenging to present the photography because it did not constitute the fine art one would normally see in a museum. However, in displaying these photographs, the Michener Museum positioned the medium within a self-reflexive context thereby foregrounding how photographers shape public perception of these icons, and how visitors must refer to their lenses to determine visual culture, which in turn serves to authenticate the genre’s choices and contributions to what becomes public memory.

Curator’s Exhibition Lecture and Book Signing:
Michael Ezra, author of Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon
The narrative arc of *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* is parallel to one found in a book of the same name written by the exhibit’s co-curator, Dr. Michael Ezra, a professor of American Multicultural Studies at Sonoma State University. Gurevich connected with Ezra after preparing Ali pictures for an exhibit at Hofstra University in Long Island, NY, in 2008. He had noticed that one of the photos misidentified a particular fight—with that typographical error began a collaboration with Gurevich’s company, art2art Circulating Exhibitions, that reorganized the Ali photographs loosely around the themes found in Ezra’s book: the pre-championship years, the management of his career (especially during the championship years), and Ali’s current legacy as an icon. This book and lecture provide material for thematic analysis of the exhibit and are necessary to research curatorial intent beyond the imagery contained within each photograph. Ezra’s 233-page book and 10-page lecture were summarized in nine brief paragraphs displayed as exhibit text trifurcated among three photographic sections. The text of each section is truncated below to understand the exhibit’s dramatic arc:

**The Rise of Cassius Clay:** [He] first entered into American public consciousness as a fun-loving, family-oriented, clean-living, and patriotic young man...Clay’s positive public image is captured in this series...the overall sense was that Clay was a good kid who valued family and community and was using boxing to earn a share of the American Dream.

**Muhammad Ali-The Championship Years:** The 1960s and 1970s were super-charged political times and Ali became one of the most important symbols of his generation...He announced that he belonged to a black nationalist organization called the Nation of Islam...he publicly opposed the Vietnam war..was barred from boxing...and convicted for draft evasion.

**The Making of an Icon:** The 1980s were a difficult period...his boxing career ended, his spending habits, divorces and failed investments drained his finances, his health began to fail. Ali’s recapturing iconic
status during the 1990s and beyond is perhaps his greatest comeback.37

Institutional brevity on panels is understandable given space constraints, but the end result creates an information gap. As previously discussed, time and wealth constraints can impede accessibility to cultural data: for those who attended the lecture or read Ezra’s 233-page book, an expansion of the book’s thesis—an examination of Ali’s cultural image and perception as it related to business interests that managed him—would take shape when viewing the images, foregrounding a theory about the effects of commerce on culture with respect to Ali. Ezra specifically attributed paradigm shifts in the public’s acceptability of Ali to whom he generated wealth for during his career—the all white Louisville Sponsoring Group or the all black Nation of Islam. A new meaning surfaces concerning American society’s ability to rationalize a boxer’s conflicted history into harmonious self-identification with a sports hero. Ezra reiterated the importance of historicizing such a controversial figure:

By looking at the early stages of Ali’s career as the most beloved and most hated man in boxing we can begin to understand his meaning today. Ali is now a corporate pitchman and there is a great deal of money to be made in investing him with an unimpeachable moral authority. As a result, his historical record has been sanitized and repackaged to the point that Parade magazine can sincerely assert that Ali didn’t make racist statements while a member of the Nation of Islam.38

However, Ali’s current reincarnation as an American icon within the framework of Making of an Icon tends to sanitize his historical record as well. There is only one photo of him holding a copy of the controversial Message to the Blackman written by Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad, the title barely legible, the reference easily missed without careful reading of the panel text. His lecture sought to foreground the
dichotomy between Ali’s controversial history, such as his affiliation with the Black Nationalist movement, and his current revered public image as a statesman, humanitarian andponent of peace. Perhaps, limits in exhibition space and limited public memory may contribute to how little or how much information cultural institutions present in conjunction with a multi-faceted cultural symbol like Ali, or even Elvis. While the exhibit’s lectures, panel discussions and Internet posts were crucial in accurately remembering Ali’s numerous transformations and position within cultural heritage, it begs the question as to which aspect of the exhibit was more important—the heavily marketed photographs or the somewhat advertised more costly shoulder programs?

*Elvis at 21 Meet the Artist Talk and Book Signing: Alfred Wertheimer*

An interesting aspect of the exhibit was the juxtaposition of curatorial muscle behind each icon’s representation. Muhammad Ali’s long life was curated by two people and the contributions of over twenty-five photographers. Elvis Presley’s much shorter life was assembled by a multitude of cultural players—including the full weight of the Smithsonian Institution—and just one photographer. The resulting photographs document “citizen” Elvis Presley. Reviewing the discussions associated with *Elvis at 21* foregrounds a trope about the superstar that doesn’t resonate with his overly commercialized image—there was a time in his life when no one knew who he was, including photographer Alfred Wertheimer.

On March 12, 1956, twenty-six-year-old Wertheimer received a phone call from RCA Pop Record publicist Ann Fulchino who asked him to go to CBS Television Studio 50 in New York City later that week to photograph a newly signed artist, Elvis Presley, at his rehearsal for the Dorsey Brother’s television program *Stage Show*. He replied “Elvis who?” and asked to paid $50 for what he thought would be a standard publicity
assignment. When Wertheimer met Presley in March, his first single, “Heartbreak Hotel,” had yet to reach gold on the charts and his infamous hip-swiveling television appearance on *The Milton Berle Show* was several months away. He had graduated from Cooper Union’s School of Art and was in the early stages of his career as a photojournalist publishing in such magazines as *Life, Paris Match, Look* and *Collier’s*. Sensing his subject was special, Wertheimer turned a one-day photo shoot into a unique opportunity to document Elvis on the threshold of superstardom. 

*Elvis at 21* showcases Elvis in a pivotal year and it also showcases a photographic discipline, documentary realism—naturally lit, un-staged, black and white moments—by a young photographer who was granted unparalleled access to Elvis on the road, backstage, and in concert for several days in the summer of 1956.

This period was just prior to Elvis’ skyrocket ascent to nation-wide fame. He was a regional, southern singer who had never been to New York City. He was fresh. The national press hadn’t picked up on him yet. A month later “Heartbreak Hotel” would climb to number one on the charts and Elvis finally received small mentions in nationwide magazines: *Life* (April 30, 1956) proclaimed him “A Howling Hillbilly Success” who “howls, mumbles, coos and cries…” and *Time* (May 14, 1956) pointed to a “Teeners’ Hero” whose “hips swing sensuously from side to side, and his entire body takes on a frantic quiver…as if he had swallowed a jackhammer.” These initial characterizations by the press were comprised of personal criticisms and general slights of southern culture that would prove tame in comparison to the backlash he received after his gyration fueled appearance on *The Milton Berle Show*. The History Channel website recounts some of the reactions from the press:
“His one specialty is an accented movement of the body that heretofore has been primarily identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway. The gyration never had anything to do with the world of popular music and still doesn't.” (The New York Times) In the New York Daily News, Ben Gross described Presley's performance as "tinged with the kind of animalism that should be confined to dives and bordellos," while the New York Journal-American's Jack O'Brien said that Elvis "makes up for vocal shortcomings with the weirdest and plainly suggestive animation short of an aborigine's mating dance."42

At this point in the mid-century, the relationship between media and celebrity was in its formative stages but the connection between the two is important. Presley’s career narrative was widely driven by the technological instruments of media—radio, print, television and film. All four means of mass communication were becoming more sophisticated and converged to propel him into the homes of American parents who feared him and their teenagers who fueled his rise to super-stardom with their consumption of Presley products: concerts, magazines, records, and movies. Wertheimer’s 1956 images capture Elvis before he became a mass mediated cultural object. From June 29 through July 4 of that year, he asked Elvis if he could tag along, unpaid, while the singer appeared on The Steve Allen Show; performed a concert in Richmond, VA; recorded “Hound Dog” and “Don’t be Cruel” in New York; and journeyed to Memphis by train for a homecoming concert. He auspiciously shot over 2500 images.

Elvis gave Wertheimer intimate access to his life. There are pictures of him shaving, sleeping, listening to records with his high-school sweetheart, walking down the street alone, sitting at a lunch counter, and horsing around with his cousins in the pool. The photos provide rare glimpses of a twenty-one-year-old man who could still move
freely between the spotlight and his suburban Memphis ranch home. No one recognized or mobbed Elvis in these pictures. The gated entry to Graceland didn’t exist yet. He wasn’t “The King.” Girls cried and screamed at his concerts, but for the most part he was left alone when he ventured out in public—a visual that seems incongruous with current public memory. As seen in Figure 9, these classic post-war America images taken by Wertheimer document a society embracing the ideals of peace and prosperity, unknowingly mingling with a soon to be discovered cultural contagion that would challenge conformity and propel youthful audiences across the nation into pandemonium.

Figure 9: Elvis at 21 Exhibit Images: New York City; Memphis, TN; Penn Station, NY; Richmond, VA; Sheffield, AL.
(listed clockwise beginning with upper left photo)

Wertheimer’s photos, packed in a basement for almost fifty years, evokes a purity to Elvis absent from late 20th-century media that portray a much different and now
somewhat expected portrait of celebrity: a bloated, prescription drug addicted superstar consumed by the perils of fame who suffered an early death. That Elvis is not present in this resurrection which leaves room for a new memory to be instilled in America’s psyche.

*Elvis at 21: Why Elvis Matters Panel Discussion with Exhibition Curators*
*Chris Murray/Govinda Gallery founder and director, Warren Perry/Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery/researcher, Marquette Folley/SITES project director*

As the world’s largest museum and research archive, the Smithsonian Institution’s origination of *Elvis at 21* engenders powerful credence toward continued public acceptance of Elvis Presley as a major cultural symbol into the 21st-century. An examination of the curatorial themes developed by the Smithsonian surrounding the exhibit and revisited at the “Why Elvis Matters” panel discussion provides a better understanding of the sub-topics that were culturally propagated at the Michener Museum, a stop on the *Elvis at 21* national and international tours.

*Elvis at 21* co-curator Chris Murray, founder and director of the Govinda Gallery in Washington, DC, said, “These photos are about America at a crossroads of culture. They are more than just pictures of a relatively unknown singer. They are about the 50s and the south. The Elvis that I loved, that changed American music, is the Elvis in these photos when he still had a solitude and serenity to his life.” The solitude Presley displays in *Elvis at 21* was absent from his life for the next twenty-one years until his death in 1977. His life was divided by the number 21—an equal amount of pre- and post-fame years. Had it not been for Murray’s happenstance at seeing one of Wertheimer’s photographs on the cover of music critic and Elvis biographer Peter Guralnick’s novel, *Last Train to Memphis*, and his inquisitiveness in learning more about the picture, the
pre-fame RCA publicity shots might have stayed hidden for even longer than half a century.

In the exhibit’s fifty-six (a deliberate number) photographs from 1956, Elvis permitted Wertheimer a closeness that preserved images of him before the trappings of fame molded his life and the public’s perception of his persona. Wertheimer bore witness to the transformation of a regional rock and roller from the South into national superstar, a cultural phenomenon on his way to global recognition as he transformed a musical genre, changed the meaning of celebrity, and (with assistance from the media) created a seismic shift in popular culture. Even John Lennon recognized his revolutionary impact famously stating, “Before Elvis, there was nothing.”45 The genesis of *Elvis at 21* began with a simple phone call in 1956 and another in the new millennium when Murray decided to call all the Wertheimers in the New York City phone book. He amazingly found “the” Wertheimer, whom he now represents at his gallery, and thus began *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer*, developed collaboratively in 2009 by the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and Govinda Gallery, and sponsored by The History Channel. The exhibit premiered in Los Angeles on January 8, 2010--the 75th anniversary of Elvis Presley’s birthday--and embarked on a four year national tour.

The Smithsonian’s role in originating the exhibit reinforced the institution’s role as a cultural influencer of the public’s perception of Elvis. In his introduction to the exhibit catalog, Warren Perry, Smithsonian researcher and co-curator, described the photographs in *Elvis at 21* in mythological terms (perpetuating his ethos as an American hero):
Elvis’s story is the Horatio Alger tale of the atomic age in which hard work, good fortune, and a nice smile yield results that rise exponentially beyond the middle-class definition of success.\(^{46}\)

He recounted in Homeric terms how Elvis’s train trip to the “big city” in 1956 was an Odyssey where he transcended his common roots as the son of a poor southerner and conquered America’s television and recording industries. First, Elvis good-naturedly defended Steve Allen’s attempts at condescension and belittlement (by famously dressing Presley in the top-hat and tails of a “high class” musician as he sang “Hound Dog” to a basset hound) to win over a national television audience, and then he directed a legendary recording session producing the only single where both sides—“Don’t Be Cruel” and “Hound Dog”—went to number one on the charts. By the end of 1956, the record sold four million copies and Elvis’ image was transmitted to over 60 million people—at that time the largest single television audience in history—while he sang before a frenzied studio audience on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. After this ground-breaking appearance, “*The New York Times* … indignantly wrote that Elvis Presley had ‘injected movements of his tongue and indulged in wordless singing that was singularly distasteful.’ Over stimulating the physical impulses of the teenagers was ‘a gross national disservice.’”\(^{47}\) Reviews like this in conjunction with Perry’s characterization of Steve Allen as cultural gatekeeper serve as a reminder of Elvis’ initial marginalization by some in elite media. He was still an outsider.

Yet, television’s capacity to carry physical proof of Elvis’s artistic impulses, the embracement of African American music and rhythms, transgressed borders that exposure in radio and press could not. Television provided a custom-made communicative vehicle for his contagion. The Smithsonian’s recognition of television’s importance as an emerging “cultural denominator” reattaches Elvis to a mid-century interpretation of social contagion
theory. However, in this instance, the medium helped package Elvis as a desirable carrier of new music and risqué dance movements. In the Elvis at 21 catalog, Smithsonian cultural historian Amy Henderson points to how television was a key player in transforming mid-century culture: “The frenzied reaction of the television studio audience not only fed his fame, but broadcast a ‘way to behave’ that motivated crowd exhilaration as his fame mounted.”

Wertheimer’s photography of Elvis performing on a television show foregrounds two mediums within one frame that significantly contributed to the diffusion of Elvis as a cultural symbol. Concurrently, the Smithsonian’s recognition of technology’s role in establishing a prominent cultural symbol underscores America’s reliance since the mid-century on utilizing mass-media as a communicative force to inform cultural identity.

*Jailhouse Rock movie screening*

In addition to the curator lectures, it offered a free screening of Presley’s third film, *Jailhouse Rock*. The selection of this Elvis to star in this movie supports a rock star as criminal construct within Priscilla Wald’s social being definition discussed earlier. *Jailhouse Rock* reinforces this paper’s hypothesis positioning Elvis as social contagion that was both dangerous and appealing to society. He had the capacity to set people free from rigid social conformity regarding music, dance, and sexuality, but for those who this type of liberation he needed to be contained, even when he appeared on film.

When the movie was released in 1957, mainstream America could safely view Elvis Presley behind bars where he was in rock and roll jail navigating a treacherous cultural transition between old, folksy music and rebellious youth-oriented rock. The short-fused, surly Vince Everett character in *Jailhouse Rock* was sent to prison for landing one punch too many in a bar brawl, but Elvis Presley, the singer/actor who portrayed him was also fighting
(his way to fame, fortune and King of Rock and Roll status) and achieved criminal status for a much different reason—the musical menace was shaking up attitudes, rhythms and teenage behavior in 1950s America. Elvis’ management contributed to this shifting landscape by taking a multi-media marketing approach that utilized all available mass communication technologies to promote the singer. Even though rock and roll was part of the counter-culture his management was savvy in capitalizing on his commercial appeal with America’s youth who also spent money going to the movies. The establishment didn’t quite know how to control this publicity assault or the effect he had on their children.

Hollywood provided one answer in *Jailhouse Rock* by putting Elvis behind bars--the only safe place for him and the country to negotiate a cultural limbo between old and new music created by his shifting hips and America’s changing tastes.

The Michener Museum contained him in a jailhouse as well, except this time mainstream society was encouraged to visit. The film and museum wardens literally threw a party in the county jail, with Elvis’ raw, provocative, defiant rock and roll film performance of the title track on full display. As Vince Everett, Elvis’ immense talent and sensual stage persona was no longer restricted to vinyl, airwaves or prison. *Jailhouse Rock* allowed Elvis and the music to escape those confines. His hips were on full head to toe display no longer cropped by anxious censors on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Perhaps, the inclusion of a television taping in the movie signaled Hollywood’s wink to mainstream America that Elvis, his new style of music, and the audience that loved both could not be tamed. He broke free from prim and proper social convention and miscegenated his musical DNA, originating from the South and African American rhythm and blues, into mainstream culture.
Analysis of Muhammad Ali & Elvis Exhibit Photographs

The Michener Museum’s exhibit of *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* with *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* and *Elvis at 21: Photographs by Alfred Wertheimer* featured almost 100 photographs. With consideration now having been given to the academic shoulder programs offered in conjunction with the exhibit an understanding of cultural and capital synchronicity within 21st-century heritage paradigms becomes apparent--information is readily available for those who choose to purchase upgrades. These modules make it possible to experience the exhibit with an informed lens. An optimal upgrade to the *Ali and Elvis* museum experience would have been a discussion that placed the pictures side-by-side, impossible at the time due to the exhibit’s dichotomy. When the photographs are read together, Ali and Elvis touch points discussed previously such as contagion theory, boundary transgression, parallel histories and media’s role in assigning cultural meaning become more visible. It is especially interesting to view the photographic composition which suggests the sanctification of Ali as compared to the subtle criminalization of Elvis in some of these photos. Ali’s virtuous public image was in direct conflict with his radical convictions and alienated fans; whereas Elvis possessed a non-threatening personality but his rebellious public image only attracted more of them. The table below in Figure 10 reconstructs a selection of exhibit photographs to illustrate how display techniques can easily shift perspective and narrative within a cultural merger.
**Comparison of Images from Ali and Elvis: American Icons**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ali, Elvis and Early Television:</strong></th>
<th>Ali positioned as a gladiator; Elvis framed by a sheriff and a basset hound.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Icons at Home:</strong></td>
<td>The American Dream pays off—a Cadillac for Ali and a Harley for Elvis. The rock star chooses the more rebellious ride and look.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-reflexively Crafting an Image:</strong></td>
<td>Both men understood the importance of image in the construct of a successful career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composition Depicts Non-Threatening vs. Threatening Cultural Symbols:</strong></td>
<td>- Ali harmlessly kisses a baby; Elvis’s steals a sexual kiss.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- The sport’s hero is framed by children; the rock star is framed by police.

- Elvis’s sneer in the back of a cab, in public, is more sinister than the one of Ali in a gym, a less threatening environment.

- Controlling contagion (the carriers and the infected) with bars.

Evidence of Racial History:

Ali holds Message to the Blackman; Elvis sits at a segregated lunch counter where an African American woman must stand.
Famous Friends

Even though the images in *Ali and Elvis* weren’t in a fully integrated display, the cultural acquisition and merger of these men in a 21st-century institution became even more intriguing upon the discovery at the end of the exhibit that they were good friends. Two photos indicated an exchange of gifts—Elvis presented the champ with a custom-made rhinestone robe; Ali responded with a signed pair of golden boxing gloves. The accompanying text panel, written by Adrienne Romano, pointed to their friendship and hinted at the potential for discovering broader themes within the exhibit:

Ali and Elvis had other things in common besides fame and the resulting adoration of their fans. Both men came from underprivileged backgrounds; both also publicly addressed issues of race, and they struggled to balance the opportunities and challenges of their celebrity. Perhaps due to these shared experiences, combined with admiration for what each other had accomplished, Ali and Elvis became friends.50

Scholarship appears non-existent on the friendship. Little is known about their relationship except that they made an equal decision to keep it for themselves, out of the press, and the public eye. In 2012, Ali biographer Thomas Hauser wrote an essay about the two men entitled “Elvis (and Ali)” but it focused on Elvis’ career arc and drew comparison to the parallels he shared with Ali as a superstar and agent of change—not their friendship. Their
sports and entertainment career trajectories rarely crossed, but “The King of Rock & Roll” and “The Greatest” journeyed similar paths as they went about changing American culture in the ’50s and ‘60s. When they finally did meet in the ‘70s (appropriately enough in Las Vegas which at the time was a cultural crossroads for boxing and entertainment), they formed a unique friendship and cultural union.

I was there the time Elvis presented Ali with the robe, and it was really something to see,” recalled Ferdie Pacheco, Ali’s fight doctor. “Elvis came in to Ali’s hotel room with the robe, ‘The People’s Champ’ written on the back in jewels. ‘They were looking at each other like roosters. ‘You look good, Ali.’ ‘Yeah, you’re looking good, Elvis.’ So here they are and they really wanted to be friends with each other, but they didn’t know what to do. They didn’t know how to connect. 51

The fact that in the early 1970s they chose to be interracial friends and continue to cross boundaries between black and white societies is another indication that they shared more than mutual appreciation. America was still adjusting to a new social order caused by the civil rights movements of 1960s. By being friends, Elvis and Ali demonstrated that they had already adjusted and were not afraid to show it—another radical move in each of their lives. Perhaps, it was a closeness built on mutual upbringings or the vagaries of celebrity. On face value it appears to have been one that had no sense of color boundaries—a radical move considering both had grown up experiencing racial segregation.

Elvis at 21 curator Warren Perry, a Memphis native, offered this perspective when questioned about their friendship during the panel discussion: “I would have been more surprised if they weren’t friends. As we say in the South, poor ain’t got no color.”52 It is interesting to note the equality of their childhoods despite the social inequality that came with being born white or black at that point in American history. Elvis and Ali grew up only 385 miles apart in southern river towns. Each came from modest backgrounds and in
adulthood each acquired fame and wealth in pursuit of the American Dream. As they crossed the socio-economic borders between poor and rich and black and white, both men lived their lives in the public eye while attempting to balance the opportunities and challenges of celebrity—Elvis was charged by the court of public opinion for corrupting America’s youth, and Ali was charged by the court of law for not supporting America’s Vietnam War. Yet, each achieved astounding success and overcame setbacks in their lives to become two cultural giants of the 20th-century all while maintaining a small, personal alliance.

They must have connected on many levels during their brief friendship because nearly 40 years later, Ali honored his friend when he chose to put the white, rhinestone-studded boxing robe emblazoned with “The People’s Choice” that Elvis gave him in 1973, on permanent display at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville. Ali once offered this analogy of his friend: "People don't realize what they had till it's gone. Like President Kennedy - nobody like him. Like The Beatles, there will never be anything like them. Like my man, Elvis Presley - I was the Elvis of boxing."
Exhibit Response

In a Digital Age where culture is diffused instantly and intentionally, even when presented within traditional space, measuring the effect of mid-century photography on new-century society can be accomplished with the assistance of an Internet search engine. Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali’s exhibition in the twenty-first century incorporated social media such as YouTube, Facebook and the Internet, not available to the editors of the previously discusses mid-century pictorial essays in *Time* and *Life* magazines. In keeping with technological advances, real space museum curation is indeed reliant upon these tools to promote interest well beyond traditional media’s sphere of influence. However, the diffusion of culture via the Internet challenges physical models now in place for experiencing artifacts in person and with other members of the public. As traditional museums increase their online presence and virtual museums become more prevalent, the interactivity of these new social spaces must be weighed against the isolating effects of cyberspace in limiting cognitive and emotional attachment to physical objects.

One benefit of social media is to produce accessible content and engage the public prior to their visit to a museum. The Michener Museum took full advantage of these tools in launching a multifaceted campaign to generate audience interest by posting videos of curators on YouTube, photographs of Elvis sightings on Facebook, and trivia contests on Twitter. As such, the *Ali and Elvis* exhibit produced editorial content from a variety of sources--press, public and curators all contributed to the creation of new media surrounding the exhibit. However, for the purposes of academic discussion, the response of journalists and the public is more useful in gauging the exhibit’s cultural messaging
and demonstrates the evolution of social perception in comparison to earlier narratives examined in the mid-century exhibits of Ali and Elvis in Time and Life magazines. By aggregating samples of this media, a stream of consciousness is useful in identifying what cultural meanings developed as a result of this photographic merger.

AP: “Elvis, Ali photos tell stories of two American Icons”
In a culture saturated with celebrity magazines, paparazzi and red carpets, it's hard to imagine capturing an image of a young Elvis Presley alone on the sidewalk in New York. Or a picture of Muhammad Ali at play with neighborhood kids in a parking lot. No screaming fans, no camera flashes, no entourages…Peterson, the Michener curator, said he didn't find out until after booking them [exhibits] that Presley and Ali had actually crossed paths…”I can't say it was part of our grand plan," Peterson said. "(But) it made us feel we were kind of on the right track."55

The Morning Call: “Ali and Elvis exhibit reveals volumes”
Elvis Presley and Muhammad Ali are the very essence of 20th-century American icons -- revered, worshiped, beloved, and sometimes, in the case of Ali, even hated. They shared fame and notoriety as their lives unfolded in separate ways, each triumphant and each ultimately tragic…”Pairing the Ali and Elvis exhibits gave us an opportunity to expand the horizons of a show that might have featured a single personality," says Brian Peterson, Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest chief curator. "Here are two icons whose lives unfolded quite differently. With Elvis there's this sense of fragility and sweetness, with Ali there's his confidence, his charisma, his over-the-top personality. He became beyond a role model -- he became a symbol. Each show tells its own story."56

The Philadelphia Inquirer: “Ali & Elvis, together again”
When Muhammad Ali was training for a fight in Deer Lake, Pa., in the 1970s, the boxer was visited at his Schuylkill County compound by one of the few people in the world as famous as he. "A few years ago, Elvis came to see me at my training camp, stayed two weeks," Ali told TV Guide in 1979. "I said, 'Elvis, do me a favor. I got a guitar.' " The Greatest wanted The King to help him stir up a little trouble. He persuaded Presley to come with him to a bar in nearby Pottsville… It's an instructive tale not only because it demonstrates that the Michener - which is the only institution where the two traveling exhibitions have been paired - is not the first place in Pennsylvania where the two towering Southerners spent meaningful time together. They really
were friends, or at least simpatico acquaintances, with a mind-blowing degree of fame in common…”

Michener Blog “Tell Your Story” Comments:
Joe: I really appreciated the variety of Ali photographs featured in the exhibition. In response to this photograph of Ali with the young boys, it really represents how many people Ali came in contact with, young and old, and how accessible he made himself to everyone…He has shown me that through his persitance [sp] on his beliefs and regardless of the challenges he encountered, he was able to accomplish his dreams. (Posted February 22, 2011 at 11:24 am)

Stephen: Ali was the greatest. I watched most of his fights on TV and he was the greatest heavyweight fighter!! Good exhibit! (Posted February 26, 2011 at 1:36 pm)

Terri: He would always come on a beautiful summer day. We would stand in front of Sly’s Barbershop, sweating with excitement knowing he would arrive at any second. you dare not leave for to miss him would leave you with all the neighbor stories of what he wore and his giant smile and how he winked at you going into the shop. we would jockey for position and smash our faces against the glass as we watched him get a haircut. it was like christmas in north philly. its was the greatest!!! (Posted April 6, 2011 at 1:40 pm)

Debra: I am so glad The Champ had ABC Sports and Roone Arledge and Mr. Howard Cossell through which to publicize his, Ali’s transition from Clay to Ali and his triumphs as both personas (Posted May 15, 2011 at 1:23 pm)

Michener Facebook page comment:
Cathy: Great Exhibit…Highly Recommend! (Posted March 26, 2011)

Within these texts, themes materialize touching upon fame, friendship, celebrity, nostalgia and fandom. Additional articles from regional press singled out the photographers, exhibit specifics, curators and historical context. Adjectives such as charisma, gregarious, incandescent, boyish, squeaky-clean and fragile pepper the articles written when the exhibit opened in 2011. The descriptive language, especially for Elvis, is in contrast to editorial comments written in the mid-century--none of the new century
media proved negative. A few articles recognized the similarities between the two, the cultural impact they made, and reattached them to the social upheaval and controversy at the time of their birth, but the dominant narrative focused on reaffirming their qualities as artistic, nostalgic and historic representations of American icons. Overall, the collective public conscious embraced Elvis and Ali as mainstream carriers of American identity. This aggregate of public memory will now become part of a permanent memory concerning the two. As the reach of Internet content is limitless and incapable of being redacted, search engines will perpetuate these narratives as the most recent layer of historical memory attached to the mythos of Ali and Elvis.

Conclusion

In deconstructing *Ali and Elvis: American Icons*, an opportunity presented itself to investigate a fifty-year-old cultural propagation assembly line where two components—The Greatest and The King—happened to connect for the first time in an institutional setting with a variety of contributors—curators, artists, media and society— influencing the resulting public memory and contemporary perception of these two mid-century cultural symbols. At its most basic level the exhibit presented the artistic work of photographers who documented the public and private moments of two incredibly famous Americans, preserving a generational memory of two post-modern Horatio Algers who respectively boxed and sang their way out of poverty. The assignation of Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley as *American Icons* in the new century signaled that curatorial leadership acknowledges the importance of their contribution to the cultural and social zeitgeist of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as contemporary society’s identification with and support of two prominent pop culture symbols.
However, the process of manufacturing icons for public consumption is tricky—the original models tend to lose their rough edges and shock value, and most notably their historical context. As they transcended economic barriers of success with their talent, each also created a seismic shift in American culture on their way to being granted iconic status within this country and around the globe. At the time of their birth as icons, they were transformative figures: two contagions, polarizing men from the South, who transgressed boundaries and challenged social convention, they trespassed onto America’s psyche and shook up established cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. By reattaching transgression and applying a social contagion framework to the construction of their mass-mediated identities, this paper sought to highlight the cultural implications of omitting such history within a traditional display paradigm that abbreviates socio-historic narrative in a selective replenishment of public memory.

An examination of the overall exhibition blueprint for *Ali and Elvis: American Icons* foregrounded how wealth and consumerism dictate many aspects of cultural consumption. As institutions continue to negotiate commerce and culture paradigms, access to history which subsequently informs public memory becomes dependent upon means. Institutional practices encourage purchasing educational upgrades to fill-in missing details or expand upon snippets of socio-historic narrative found on text panels, thus placing barriers to the replenishment of public memory. A less advertised option is self-motivated scholarship to research free content available online, but that too is dependent upon access. It is understandable that heightened cultural experiences within non-profit bricks and mortar institutions present challenges—financial concerns most
likely inhibit their ability to implement low or no-cost educational programs in conjunction with exhibits—but institutions must continue to try and bridge this gap.

This study began with a question from Muhammad Ali: if he and Elvis were walking side-by-side down the street who would garner more attention from the public? It would have been difficult to make a selection had that truly been the case within the presentation paradigm of *Ali and Elvis: American Icons*. The photographs were divided, but their lives were not. While their separate histories and cultural identities have been extensively mediated in popular media, an opportunity was missed by traditional leadership to make meaning of their cultural impact by utilizing a communicative display option. Muhammad Ali and Elvis Presley could have been *read* together as opposed to just being *presented* together. This paradigm would have afforded all the stakeholders a new opportunity to experience a fully integrated merger of two notable American icons. When viewed through a stereoscopic lens, their iconic identities converge and manifest in a more comprehensive snapshot of personal history clashing and assimilating with society’s culture and history.

In their resurrection as new century American icons, it’s clear that Muhammad Ali wasn’t just a boxer and Elvis Presley wasn’t just a singer. Ali and Elvis, scions of sport and entertainment, possess two of the most recognizable faces on the planet. The Michener Museum did well to pair them together as significant cultural icons, but in utilizing a traditional museum presentation paradigm of displaying objects with minimal text, it became incumbent upon visitors to be proactive cultural consumers to fully experience the history that encompassed their real life identities and make meaning of curatorial cultivation in their representation as icons. This new reading of institutional
methodology focused on bridging gaps and distilling multiple dimensions of communication between cultural stakeholders—the institution, curators, photographers, icons, press, and public—to foreground propagation practices and interactions which have the power to inform historical memory. Within this framework, best practices emerge for the replenishment of public memory, and unexpected moments of cultural serendipity might occur as demonstrated by analysis of *Ali and Elvis: American Icons*. The Michener Museum’s acquisition and merger was a curatorial blockbuster with an unintended benefit: due diligence of all the deal’s components uncovered a parallel consciousness they shared as American icons and friends who were unafraid to look American society in the eye and say, “here I am.”

Figure 13: *Elvis at 21* exhibit photo by Alfred Wertheimer
Figure 14: *Muhammad Ali: Making of an Icon* exhibit photo by Gordon Parks
Endnotes


5 Adrienne Romano, email message to author, May 5, 2011.


8 Ibid. Note: Mary Mallon was an unmarried Irish immigrant who worked as a domestic and was identified as the first person in the United States to be an asymptomatic carrier of the typhoid fever organism


Alfred Wertheimer, Photographer, *Elvis at 21: Meet the Artist Lecture part one*, YouTube, 1:00:00, March 1, 2011, accessed http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=joljacnHYRo.


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Profile
Lynn Farley is the director of media and promotion for Lehigh University’s premier performing arts center where she directs and designs advertising, publicity and marketing campaigns to achieve recognition for Guest Artists, Music Department and Department of Theatre performances. This work advances the center’s mission to educate and inspire students of the arts on campus and in the community and includes projects such as arranging talks at local elementary schools, partnering with Kappa Kappa Psi to develop pre-show children’s lectures, and mentoring LU students interested in marketing and design. Prior to her position at Lehigh, she was a television producer for networks such ESPN, USA, NBC, Nickelodeon and CBS among others, where she accumulated extensive experience in sports and entertainment programming.

Education
B.A. Radio Television and Film | Temple University  
M.A. American Studies | Lehigh University

Courses
Television Production  Photography  
Sociology of Cyberspace  Newswriting  
Graphic Good  Community Study through Documentary Film  
Rock and Roll Film  Reel American History

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Inducted into Kappa Kappa Psi Band Fraternity as Honorary Member  
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