



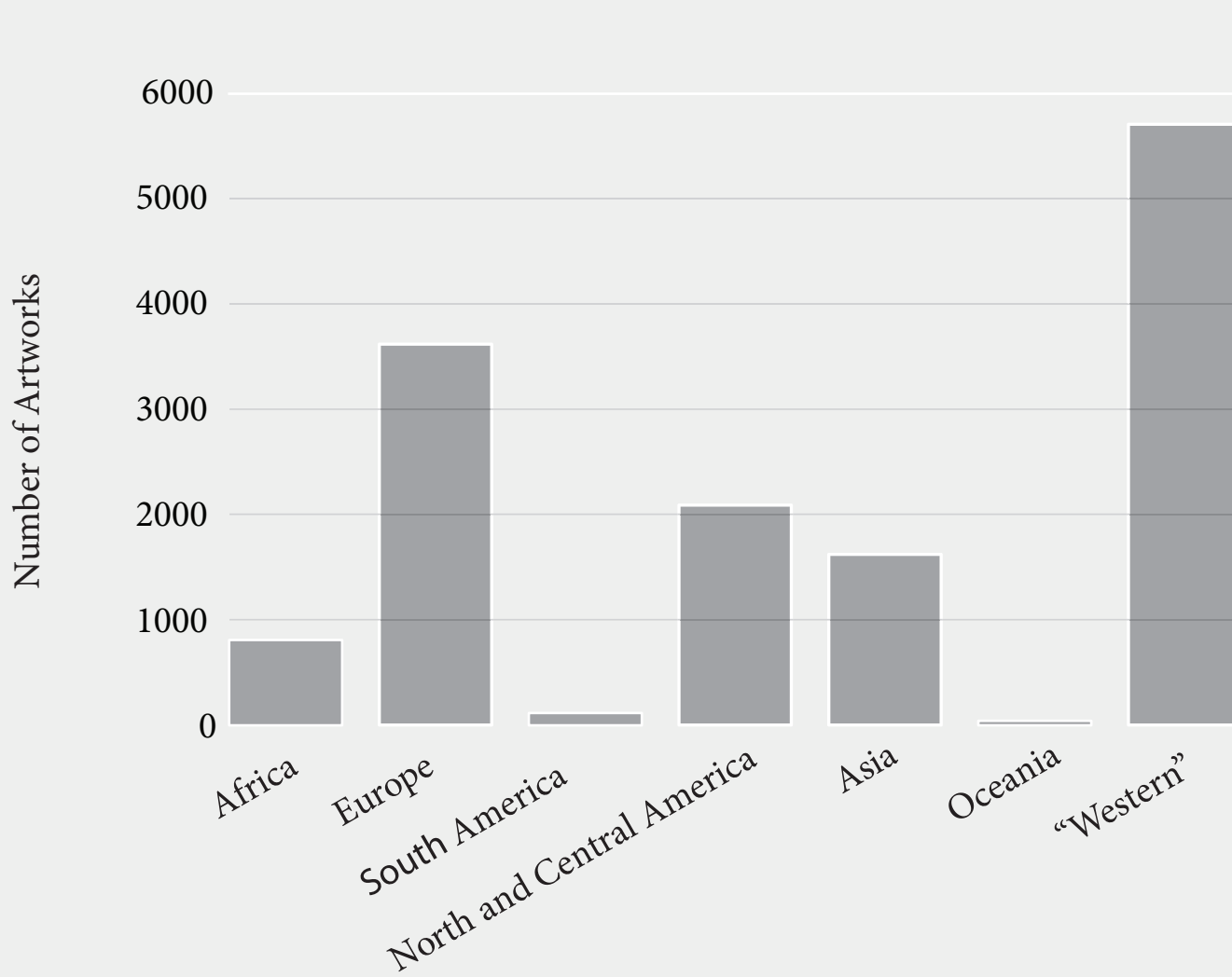
Geography and Provenance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

While working at the Met's MediaLab this past summer, I heard casual comments about the provincial makeup of the collection--that a large proportion of the work came from the western world and Europe in particular.

In analyzing a random sample of the collections data from the museum (~8300 objects), this was my first question. Is it true that the geography of collection skews towards Europe and the West?

Preliminary Analysis

Geographic Distribution of Artworks



From the sample, there does seem to be a large skew towards European and Western art. The West accounts for almost 70% of artworks. *NB: The bar marked "Western" is the sum of Europe and North and Central America.*

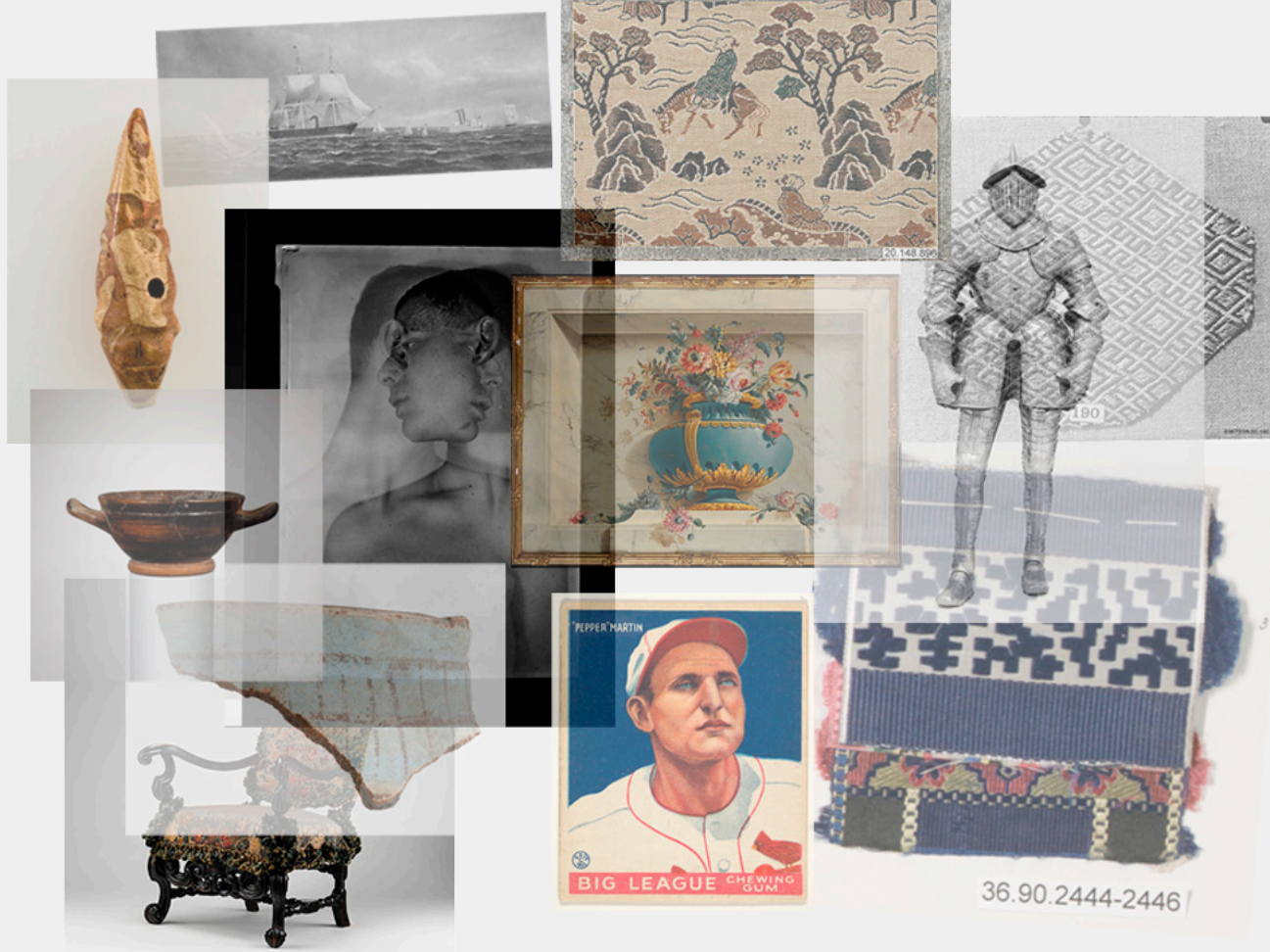
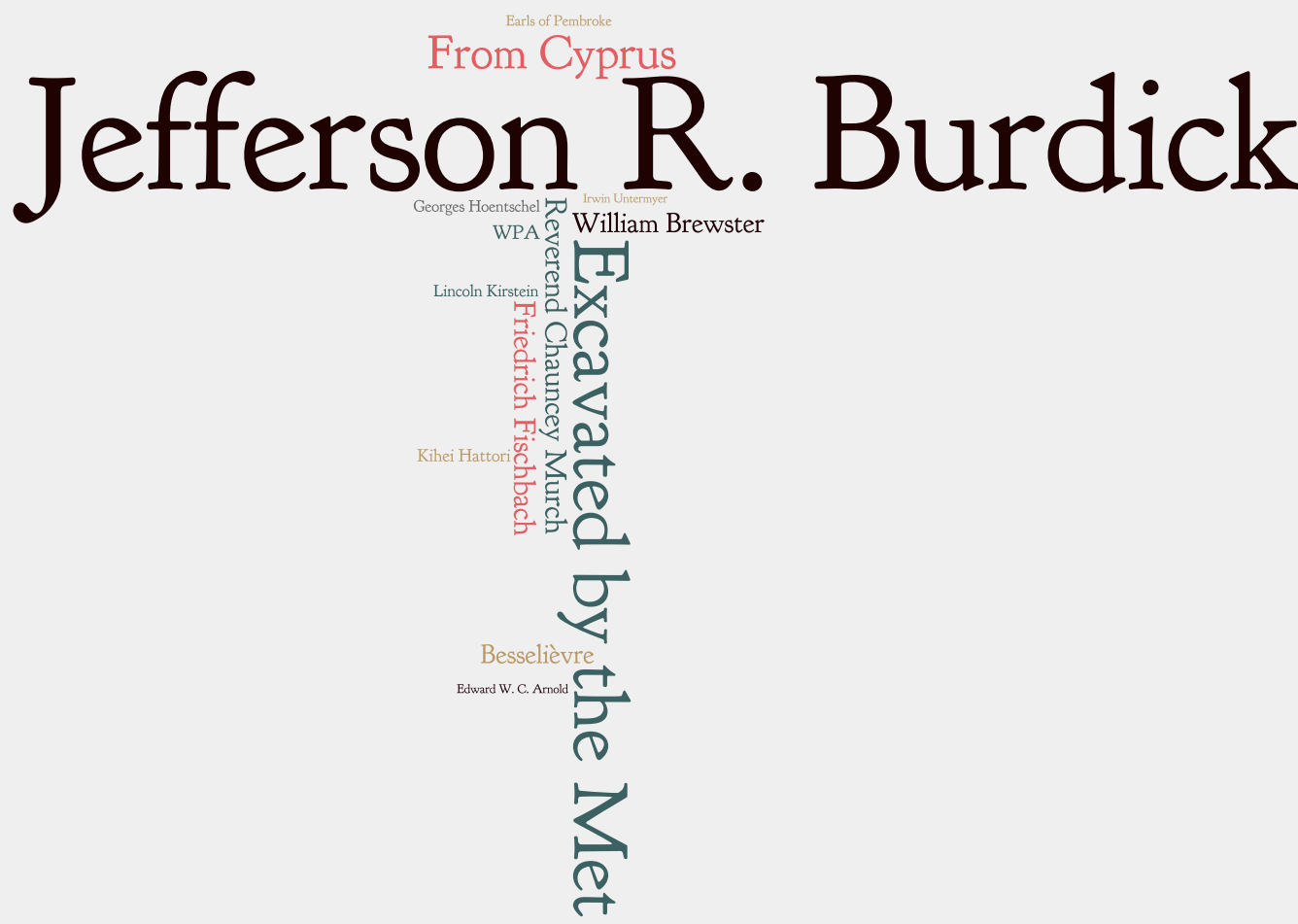
Confirming anecdotal information was satisfying, but it begged a larger and more important question: why?

Provenance

In looking for possible explanations, I turned to a field in my dataset I hadn't given much thought to before: provenance. The farthest reaches of an object's (often imperfect) historical record. Could I assess the geography of provenance of my sample? As most provenance records include a location, I tried to pull out those locations and assess their distribution. Of the almost 5000 records with provenance fields, roughly 30%

In other words, a huge proportion of artworks' historical records also begin in the West, and I suspect that more analysis would find this number to be significantly higher, due to poorly structured data in this field.

One thing I noticed was that even Egyptian and Chinese art had Western provenance. How does this occur? Who comes to own the work and how does the ownership of an Egyptian artifact come into the hands of an American museum?

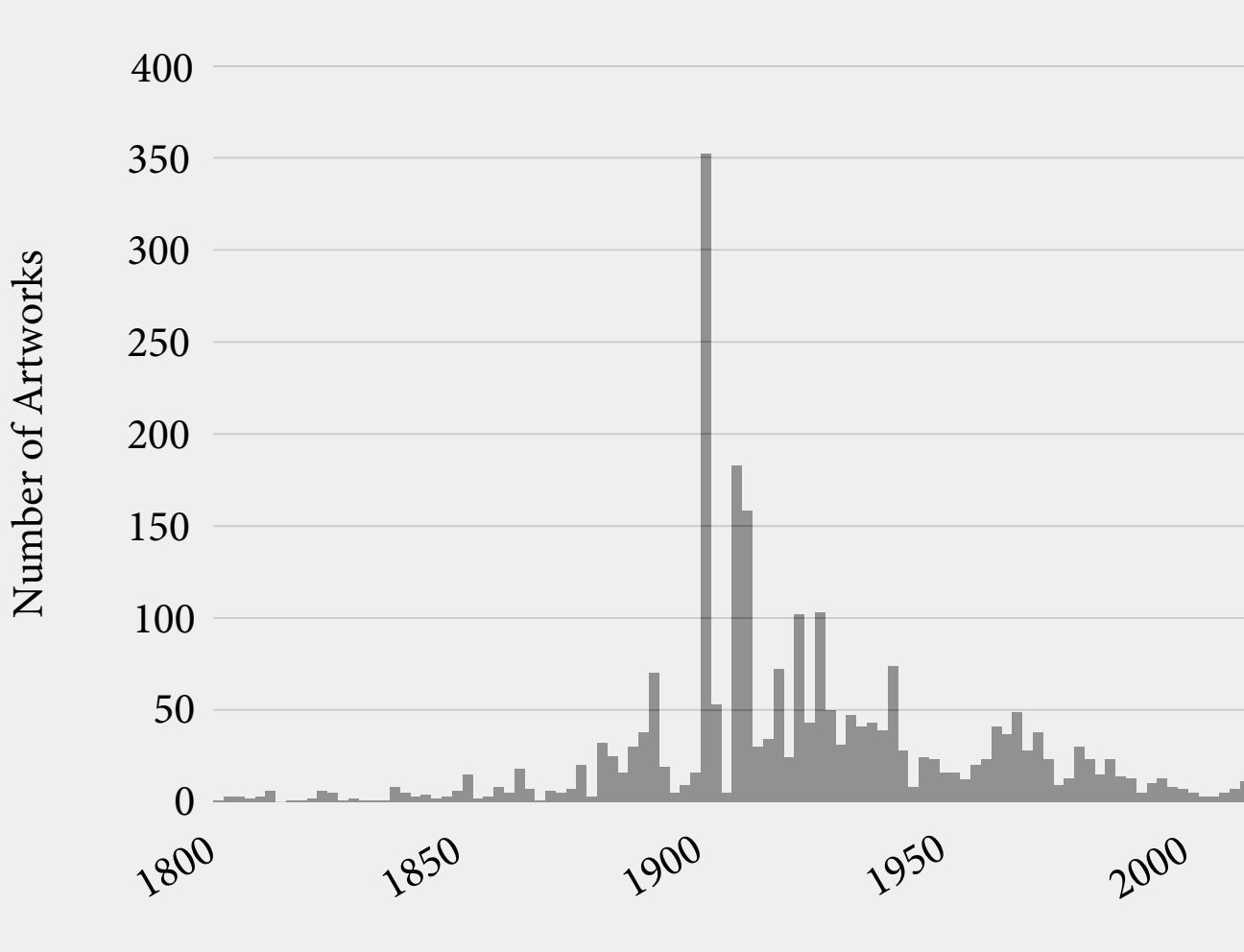


The word-cloud above represents data on the most common provenances in the sample. The larger the word, the more provenance attributions. Jefferson R. Burdick, a trading and baseball card collector, towers above the rest, but there is another source that is intriguing.

A large portion of the Met's collection in the Egyptian wing was actually discovered and excavated by Museum archaeological teams, sent across the world to uncover such artifacts and send them back to the New York. This not only complicates the provenance and geography of the collection from an archival perspective, but also an ethical one.

Timeline and Beyond

Most Common Years of Provenance Attribution



Other datasets that may help explain why the Met's collection represents the West so heavily in its history of acquisition. Why might so many provenance records begin at the turn of the century? What happened in 1900--the year with the most activity--to generate so many attributions? Perhaps it coincided with the expansion of the Museum, beginning in the 1870's? Perhaps there is a more global trend for art work discovery and commerce?

"Why" questions are always the most difficult (and interesting) to tackle and I hope to continue along this line of inquiry during the rest of my time at the Met!