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CURATING AFRICAN WORLDS

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CURATING AFRICAN WORLDS

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Exhibitions emerge from the conjunction of innumerable narrative, social, ethical, political, economic and technical circumstances and conditions. This is to say nothing of the effects of contingency, which today are as much likely to be mediated by a museum or exhibitions manager, or an educationalist, as a curator. Distinct from other museum professionals, curators ideally bring to their practice historical circumspection, a self-conscious awareness of the theory of their practice, an understanding of how meaning and knowledge are negotiated and mediated, and a finely tuned and trained sensitivity towards the process of cultural translation, as well as scholarship based on cumulative and specialised knowledge. While all curators might reasonably be expected to curate, not everyone who curates is necessarily a curator. The relationship between curators and exhibitions is however complex and neither the analogy with authors nor with directors adequately describes this aspect of their work. Whatever the practice in the past, the tendency today is for curators to work as part of a wider team designed to fulfil the multiple agendas and increasing commitments with which museums have been charged, and which are necessary to achieve high and competitive standards of presentation, realisable only through the utilisation of new technologies, good design and adequate scientific support. *African Worlds* was from its inception an idea-driven but object-centred exhibition which placed great emphasis on the curator as author. Nevertheless, the constant engagement and mediumship over the theory of the exhibition practice transformed this role early on into another which might better, but not adequately, be compared to that of a producer/director, who negotiates between different professional groups, assumes an advocacy role and cajoles research funding, while at the same time marshalling together variant interpretations into a coherent whole, sharing with designers the creation of a visual language, as well as transposing information between different mediums: texts and objects (Fig 1).

In this paper I shall try to document the process through which this role evolved and in so doing describe the negotiations which gave form and content to the exhibition. I shall use six sets of themes; general vs. specific exhibition; local vs. paradigmatic knowledge; object based vs. concept driven exhibitions; aesthetic vs. ethnographic exhibition; historical time vs. ethnographic present; global vs. continental coverage, through which

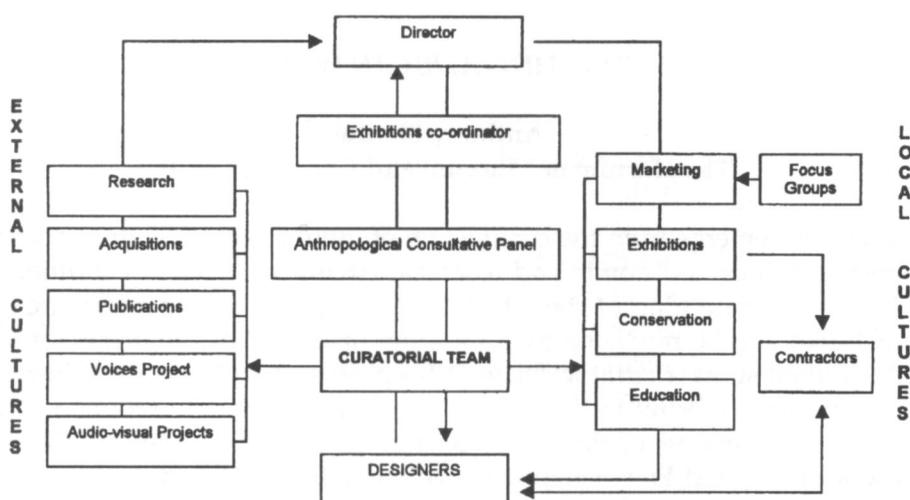


Fig 1

to focus on some of the negotiations and resulting practices endemic to this specific exhibition-making process.

General vs. specific exhibitions: the formulation of the exhibition concept

The Horniman's South Hall has always been dedicated to a general ethnographic exhibition which presented the diverse cultures of all five of the world's continents. However, the displays were removed in 1994 to allow remedial work on subsidence problems to take place, and it was not until March 1999 that the gallery reopened with *African Worlds*.

When in 1995 we began to consider how best we might re-exhibit the ethnographic collections, three clear options emerged: the Museum could organise a general ethnographic gallery based on geographical or cultural criteria as had existed previously; alternatively, it would have been feasible to have arranged a display drawn from the rich Asian holdings, about 26,000 items which constitute about 45% of the total collection; or there remained the possibility to devote the gallery to African visual culture, the second largest collection, amounting to approximately 17,000 objects.

The first option, although originally considered, and some initial sketches made,¹ was subsequently discarded as a result of the space constraints imposed by a 380 m² gallery and the limitations this would have imposed on the presentation of such a rich collection. After further discussion it was decided that Asia too would not be appropriate given that London already possessed three institutions devoted partly or wholly to Asian art. Africa, however, despite the many collections scattered throughout the

UK, the country's long and significant colonial engagement there, and the domestic presence of large immigrant populations, had no permanent museum gallery devoted to its visual and performative cultures. This was compelling reason enough to focus the new gallery on Africa. The decision was supported by Michael Houlihan, the then director, and Emmanuel Arinze, president of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, who saw the gallery as a means of reaffirming the achievements of Africans and people of African descent and providing a showcase through which part of their heritage could be kept alive for subsequent generations.

The African collections themselves have been accumulated through a rather peculiar and unique history, which like many other collection areas, sets the Horniman apart from some other UK institutions. Horniman himself, focusing on the preservation of items which in his eyes provided exemplary degrees of technical craftsmanship and artistic virtuosity, had limited his African interests mainly to Benin and Egypt. Even including the small numbers of objects he, or his father, John Horniman, acquired from northern and southern Africa, his African acquisitions never amounted to more than 13% of his total collection. Neither did the African collection grow significantly during the successive period, 1901-1947, when the Museum was administered by the London County Council and developed under the aegis of Alfred Cort Haddon and his evolutionary followers. Not until well after the Scramble for Africa, in 1947, with the appointment of Otto Samson, did the Museum enlarge its focus on African visual culture. Samson's German training led him to give greater emphasis to collecting figurative works and assisted his appreciation of stylistic traditions from countries that were outside the British zone of influence. It was, however, under the keeperships of Valerie Vowles (1976-82) and Keith Nicklin (1982-94), that the systematic collection of African material began. Samson had established a tradition of conducting fieldwork as a means of augmenting the collections, which was consolidated and expanded under future directors: Jean Jenkins made collecting trips to Ethiopia (1960s-70s); Valerie Vowles, to Botswana (1970-71); and Keith Nicklin collected in Nigeria (1980s, 1992 (with Jill Salmons), Kenya (1987, with Jill Salmons), Republic of Benin (1998) and Brazil (1998 with Tania Tribe). Furthermore David Boston, Samson's successor from 1965-1993, enlisted outside fieldworkers to collect on the Museum's behalf. These resulted in outstanding collections of everyday material culture from the Sua pygmies (Colin Turnbull), the Hadza (James Woodburn), the Samburu (Jean Brown and Cordelia Rose), the Tuareg (Jeremy Keenan) and the Xhosa and neighbouring groups (Eric Bigalke). In this way the Museum acquired important monocultural reference collections of the everyday material culture of specific African peoples.

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Since 1995, the Museum has reasserted its commitment to the acquisition policy established by Samson, while continuing to support the fieldwork strategies developed under Boston. For Africa, our policies have been re-focused on French-speaking countries where, in recent years, we have sponsored fieldwork in Mali, the Burkina Faso/Ghana border, Côte d' Ivoire and the Republic of Benin.

Another hallmark of the Museum's working practice has been the close and cooperative relations it has established to promote research and collecting with its sister institutions in Africa. Valerie Vowles' San collection was made with the cooperation of the National Museum and Art Gallery of Botswana; Eric Bigalke worked with the East London Museum in South Africa; Keith Nicklin routinely works with the National Commission on Museum and Monuments in Nigeria and his 1998 season in the Republic of Benin was conducted with the help of the director of the Musée d' Histoire de Ouidah. Jennifer Oram's 1997 fieldwork in Sierra Leone was supported also by that country's museum. Collecting among the Lobi was assisted by the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments worked closely with the Museum on two field projects which resulted in outstanding commissions from the Igbo area and a close and innovative relationship with the National Museum in Benin, which has grown from a joint project to re-interpret the Benin plaques in our collection by the Bini themselves. The Museum's historical relationship with Africa has been and is anything but that of a colonial treasury or a passive and unquestioning recipient of fine art and material culture, which the new exhibition needed to reflect through innovative relationships and sensitive practices.

Local vs. paradigmatic knowledge

I use 'paradigmatic knowledge' to refer to that body of formally codified and institutionalised information that western societies privilege over and above 'local' knowledges, or what it has sometimes termed 'folk' knowledge. Paradigmatic knowledge presents itself as independent of human agency and reproduces a privileged and hierarchical relation between exhibition makers and the objectifications of their subject; a subject that takes in a long and tortuous history of direct and indirect capitalistic colonialism; ideological effacements occasioned by empiricist social sciences; and the contemporary political and economic alignments of dominant and subordinate polities (Wolf 1982). Exhibition managers, public services personnel, funding bodies, educationalists and curators themselves—those who select which objects should be used to represent another culture, the manner in which they should be represented, the show's narrative struc-

ture and content and the modes of its public dissemination—are usually drawn from the established and vanguard sectors of the dominant class in western neo-colonial states, as distinct from those who are represented, who are consigned to muteness and representation through the voices of their foreign interpreters. Cultural colonialism has persisted after the official death of the old style European colonialism which continues to police the categories of 'us' and 'them' (internally, between metropolitan values and those of minority groups through what Gonzalez Cassanova has called 'internal colonialism', and externally between polities embodying other cultural beliefs and values) to preserve an increasingly fragile mainstream moral and ethical hegemony. Exhibitions about Africa are noteworthy by their effacement of these conditions.

The trend towards the de-colonisation of museums has been most apparent in the Americas, where increasingly well organised and influential first nation peoples have questioned the right of museums not only to unilaterally represent them, but to assume the mantle of being the legitimate heirs to their cultural patrimony (Ames 1992: 79; MacDonald & Alsford 1995: 20). The politicisation of anthropological and museological practice in the Americas, through the intervention of indigenous movements at various meetings of the International Congress of Americanists, and various indigenous declarations, particularly those of Barbados (1971, 1978), have forced Americanists to choose either to support or ignore the aspirations of indigenous peoples and work to develop democratic strategies to represent them. In Mexico, this led to a museological revolution headed by the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, which worked together with indigenous peoples on various innovative exhibitions, beginning with *Nuestro Maíz* (1981). This was the single greatest influence on our modest exhibition.

Nuestro Maíz first aimed to promote awareness and appreciation of the central role that the staple occupied during 3,000 years in most of the indigenous cultures of Mexico (Bonfil Batalla 1982: 7). The second guiding principle was to collect together local knowledge about the significance and uses of maize from throughout the Republic. Crucial to the project was to ensure that this knowledge was drawn, in as much an unmediated way as possible, directly from the voices and expressions of rural peoples themselves. The exhibition was based on living cultures, not separated from society nor seen as static or fossilised entities, but as changing creative tendencies and practices that were part of adaptive social and economic formations. The task of the curators was to collect together these diverse histories, instead of imposing the terms of an external ideology on them, which would have turned '... dynamic, interconnected phenomena into disconnected things' (Wolf 1982: 4). The curators strove to provide a

forum where what was nothing less than a world view could be expressed to the urbane citizenry of the Federal District. Attempts were made also to reverse the usual flow of information from subject communities to the metropolis by organising a text/photographic exhibition which travelled back to the villages that had contributed to it. Lastly, the Museum collected 130 monographs from different villages throughout the country, 30 of which were published to widen popular knowledge about maize and its common, unifying culture.

For *African Worlds*, the problem of the uni-directional flow of knowledge from the southern to northern hemisphere was partly addressed by providing a computer and internet facilities for visitor use at the National Museum of Benin, and ongoing work to put the exhibition on the World Wide Web. Publication of the large amount of original research done for the exhibition is being edited by Karel Arnaut and Joseph Eboime to be freely distributed to African museums and universities. These in turn, it is hoped, will secure more egalitarian cooperative projects with African museums.

African Worlds attempted to grapple with representational problems, not unlike those encountered by *Nuestro Maíz*, in three ways. Shortly after the initial ideas for the exhibition had been formulated, the Museum established an international anthropology consultative panel (ACP) which met twice per annum, consisting of two curators from Africa, Joseph Eboime and Emmanuel Arinze; one from Trinidad, Kathryn Chan; and two from the UK, Keith Nicklin and John Mack.

The ACP was established to serve several key functions in the planning and interpretation of *African Worlds*, but it also exerted a wider influence on the way the Anthropology Collections and Research Group worked:

1. It decided on the final selection of objects for the gallery.
2. It provided a forum to debate and resolve ideological issues involved in the representation of African art and culture.
3. It formulated interpretative strategies for the exhibition.
4. It advised on additional research programmes and provided a network of contact through which these could be expedited.
5. It provided an effective means through which the meaning and significance of certain categories of objects about which there was little or contradictory published material could be clarified through dispatching field assistants with photographs to the communities or areas from which they had been collected.
6. It provided a network through which text could be written by African and Caribbean authors, and a means of peer review through which text could be written and approved.

An indication of the effectiveness of the Panel can be gauged by our joint decision at its first meeting to abandon the original geographic organisation of the objects in the display and in its place adopt a thematic approach. The Panel then worked to establish the most appropriate themes: *Patronage; Different Natures; Men/Women; Ancestors and Morality; Royalty and Power; Text, Image, History; Cycles of Life; Parody and Humour; and Creation and Recreation*. It was, however, the responsibility of the curators and designers, albeit in consultation with the ACP, to develop an appropriate design specification for the gallery.

The themes were each thoroughly debated in relation to the objects selected and were chosen in part to correct imbalances in the way African visual culture had been exhibited elsewhere in western galleries. *Patronage*, for example, was intended to introduce a very real sense of history and to chart changing relations of production and consumption as a result of European usurpation of traditional polities. The importance of the theme for the exhibition is highlighted by the inclusion of a case of Fon brass figures and a Shona stone sculpture, *Chaminuka Spirit*, sculptured by Albert Nathan Mamvura, inserted into the introductory panel to the gallery.

Different Natures was intended to represent masquerade not as another form of exoticism or as the manifestation of an overt primitivism, but as embodying ideas of nature and different ontological perspectives. *Text, Image, History* was meant to give examples of how images can sometimes convey as much, or more, information than formal written systems, and *Man/Woman* was intended to readdress popular misconceptions about gender in Africa. *Creation and Recreation* was particularly concerned to look not only at creation myths and the origin of particular categories of objects, but also the dynamics of recreating culture as a result of forced removal and exploitation under inhuman conditions in the newly formed communities of the New World. *Parody and Humour* introduced a cross-cultural perspective on satire, verbal punning and laughter, as important a part of our understanding of images as written texts, which is often missing from any western appreciation of African and related cultures. *Ancestors and Morality* provided a link between figurative representations and the ethical ideas held by different societies. It is quite extraordinary, and unintentional, how these themes provide direct links between objects in the exhibition and specific aspects of the philosophical and religious heritage of Africa and African-related cultures world-wide.

A second strategy for breaking free from the usual object/subject dichotomy, was to instigate the Voices Project to incorporate the lived and experienced memories, feelings and opinions of local Black communities about objects within the exhibition. This was supplemented by recorded quotes from makers, musicians, elders and dancers from the different soci-

eties where the Horniman had sponsored fieldwork, and specially commissioned videos which showed objects either being made or used.

The third strategy was to reserve an area in which artists, guest curators and community groups could curate their own exhibitions and installations in response to the permanent displays. Earlier, we had envisaged exhibiting objects in individual cases, standing at different heights and arranged in groups clustered in the shape of an arc, to allow a large central area for temporary interventions. However, as the concept had changed radically after the first ACP meeting, and subsequent discussions on design between myself, designers and the director produced new strategies that impinged on this space, it was agreed to accommodate what Houlihan described as a 'living gallery' on the balcony area which encircles the gallery. This space opened with an exhibition of the works of the contemporary Nigerian artist Osi Audu, *The Moon is the Eye of the Sky*, which used a videoed interview to communicate the artist's own interpretations of his works.

Object-based vs. concept-driven exhibitions

Although temporary exhibitions which freely draw on loan material can easily be predicated on independent concepts, institutions with permanent collections rely, by practical necessity, on a more dialectical approach to exhibition interpretation.² Shared awareness between senior management, curators and designers of the historical importance of the collection and a joint belief that the gallery should be object-centred pre-empted discussion on this subject. The object, in designer Michael Cameron's words, was to be 'the hero'. Our commitment to an object-centred exhibition was however, an important criterion in the choice of designer and the museum was keen to find allegorical practitioners who had a demonstrable ability to manipulate objects to evoke different emotions and feelings and who shared a respect for artefacts as embodied texts. Lighting was crucial to this; in the final design Kongo power figures were uplit to enhance their commanding appearance; Pende *mbuye* masks were downlit with the light focused on their almost closed eyelids, spirits at the point of earthly death, to convey a sense of overwhelming melancholy. Shona headrests were juxtaposed against a dark, light-absorbent lapis blue panel, broken up by gold inlays to allude to the story told in the accompanying pamphlet about how much older headrests had been the prey of nineteenth-century European grave robbers who had formed their own company to systematically loot tombs for the gold sometimes wrapped around them. This visual language was meant to reinforce the stories reproduced in the booklets and on the text panels, and was an important strategy within the process of cultural translation.

It was also considered essential to convey a sense of alienation in the gallery: alienation in the sense that these objects were displaced, far removed from the conditions of their usage and original signification, and the subsequent gulf this engendered between viewers and objects (Plate 1); but also alienation, in as much as none of these objects could ever fulfil the public expectations encouraged by western education, which has imported them with an over-investiture of meaning. Museum objects are fragments; masks without costumes; figures without shrines; shrines without sacrifices; architectural pieces removed from their buildings, which can never provide the kind of general survey or re-totalise a particular aspect of history or culture that museums so much treasure. The meaning of objects is hybrid, and it is this tension between their previous lives and the stories of their removal and re-incorporation into foreign collections that denies us both the easy and comprehensive access we have been promised and the magic of a journey to an exotic land. Cameron has tried to express this alienation in the uncompromising modernism of the gallery design: red mud walls framed by steel; nextel, fibreglass and metal panels; underlit blocks of sandblasted perspex; large expanses of plate glass; and the use of non-parallel angles that configure some of the case displays



Plate 1 Central aisle, *African Worlds*. Photograph by Morley von Sternberg.

according to expressionist aesthetics. Africa is here, but it is framed and transformed through western institutions and western technologies. Nothing again can ever be like the conditions under which these objects were once used, venerated, worn, bartered, treasured or reviled by those who collected them.

Exhibition-making is a dialectical process which can only emerge from as inclusive a knowledge as possible of the contents of a collection and the different narratives its constituent elements can tell. Rationalisation is the next stage, during which criteria are selected to choose and embrace a particular series or order of objects and subordinate them to a master discourse. The narrative thus chosen is then tested again more specifically against the object order and other objects previously discarded. This process of to-ing and fro-ing between a collection and a suitable discourse eventually gives rise to a coherent system which embraces both objects and narrative into a rationalised order which possesses a transparent coherency not unlike that found in literature. The movement away from the curator as author to facilitator and director was nowhere more determined than through the increasing responsibility the ACP undertook to assume this role. Though genres may differ, even those which most strongly deny or try to expiate order, exhibitions, no more than other narrative structures, escape western or other rationalisation. Representation of the 'other' is therefore a constant decolonisation and recolonisation of the imagination where truth is measurable only by the persuasive quality of the coherence and intelligibility of the discourse and its moral authority: both qualities based on historical circumspection and the theoretisation of practice.

Aesthetic vs. ethnographic exhibition

Museum ethnography is littered with false oppositions and rhetorical debates that have precluded more serious discussion on the subject's historically compromised practices. None of these have been more pernicious than that which juxtaposes aesthetic against ethnographic display techniques which are then equated with cultural contextualisation and decontextualisation respectively.

Early on in the project, members of the Anthropology Collections and Research Group, and later the designers and project co-ordinator, visited museums in Rotterdam, Leiden, Antwerp, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris and Binche, to establish among themselves a common language and to examine concrete examples of different visual languages and their relationships to textual exegesis in specific genres of ethnographic exhibitions. This stimulated much discussion which continued throughout the project, with different members of the Group variously favouring the sociological

model, used in the Tropenmuseum's African display and for some of its temporary displays; ethnographic contextualisation, represented for example by Binche's Musée International du Carnaval et du Masque; and the cleaner, what was described as the more aesthetic, genre of display found at Antwerp or in the Tropenmuseum's permanent Indonesian exhibition. Disagreement eventually resolved itself through the simplified opposition between aesthetic and ethnographic displays.

The repeated reappearance of the debate caused some of us to deconstruct the categories from which it was made and ascertain a critical position. Aesthetic display models essentially equate a highly dispersed visual configuration of objects with minimal textual exegesis, whereas its ethnographic equivalent might juxtapose objects closely together using the criteria of complementary or similar use, mode of manufacture, or significance, with greater textual density. However, there could be no essentially natural or logical reason to support these two sets of relations between different modes of signification which, for much of the past 70 years, have circumscribed the limits of ethnographic displays. Beginning from this point, *African Worlds* constructed an alternative model which transposed the terms of the opposed equations to produce a formula that would match a low-density exhibition gallery to enhance the technical virtuosity or aesthetic form of the object, with a highly dense textual exegesis not unlike that previously realised in John Mack's *Emile Torday and the Art of the Congo*, nearly a decade ago (Mack 1990).

Ethnographic and aesthetic genres of exhibition both re-contextualise other societies and their modes of cultural expression, and it is this distance between 'us' and 'them'—a distance denied by the subterfuges of ethnographic naturalism pioneered by the Museum of Mankind and the Rijkmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, in the 1970s—that objectifies the subject, while rendering the process of its curation invisible. Furthermore, this empirical relation which insists on the radical break between object and subject, reinforces a monological narrative which, while purportedly scientifically describing other cultures 'out there', effaces their historical relations with our own societies. Emphasis on the objective presentation of other cultures usually ignores the stories about how the objects, which form the mode through which we view the 'other', finished up in European museums, and denies their epistemological hybridity. The implications of these effects on exhibition making has been explored in two previous papers (Shelton 1997; Levell & Shelton 1998) which summarise the area of debate on the importance of producing a paradoxical and ambiguous sense of presence and loss, meaning and its ellipses, physical nearness and distance, which must always characterise the alienated relations between ethnographic, as well as historical, objects and their viewers and

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interpreters. More recently, Nuno Porto's exhibition *Angola a Preto e Branco* at the University of Coimbra (Porto 1999) produced a radical sense of disjunction in its examination of the workings of the Dundo Museum in the context of Portuguese colonialism, by the use of distancing techniques such as photographic seriation and repetition, monochromatic design, steel exhibition furniture and strategies aimed to reveal the fabrication of photographic recording. Both roads from aesthetics or ethnography lead to alienation and it is its melancholy shadow that the designers were required to throw around the objects in *African Worlds*.

Historical time vs. the ethnographic present

While the ancient Greeks had fewer problems in perceiving the universal effects of time—Pliny opined 'out of Africa there is always something new'—the European Modern Period has denigrated African cultures as bound by timeless traditions: as static, conservative and unchanging, locked into inescapable superstition and error which, it was decided retrospectively in the nineteenth century, could only be broken and redeemed by colonial tutorship. The more immediate problem was that British anthropology until very recently shared this view of the pervasive dead hand of tradition (Wolf 1982: 18–9), if not the ideological solution which had been proposed for its redemption. It is not the supposed opposition between aesthetics and ethnography that had been transposed into the choice between ideological absorption or intellectual enlightenment, but the even more pernicious opposition between an ahistorical ethnography and historical perspective which predicates the choice between colonialising ideology and critical narrative.

In the context of *African Worlds*, the ACP agreed on the incontrovertibility of an historical perspective. However, given that most museum ethnographic objects only bear the date when they were collected or, more usual still, when they were accessioned, precise dating is problematic. In the absence of historical documentation, a broad chronological schema was adopted by which objects were identified as being late nineteenth century or early, middle or late twentieth century. Such an approach at least allowed some sense of historical movement to be registered. This was further strengthened through purchasing contemporary or near contemporary objects which were juxtaposed with older material to illustrate stylistic and technological changes as a result of global cultural encounters (a modern Gelede mask, painted in bright gloss colours, with a superstructure supported by four carved torches; a Dogon mask decorated with French writing; an oversized Kurumba antelope mask made for tourist consumption, but still having required a blessing before it could leave its place of manufacture).

Historical change was also introduced into written texts. The gallery guide contains a timeline that shows the succession of African civilisations which is reiterated on the introductory panel. Two of the nine themes used to discuss objects—*Patronage* and *Text, Image, History*—were designed specifically to include a strong historical component, while changes in initiation rituals as a result of market forces or education and new political and symbolic meanings of objects have been highlighted under other themes.

Lastly, history has been reincorporated into the story of the continent by reappropriating ancient Egypt, Kemet, as an essential part of African history: a strategy also adopted by the Indianapolis Museum of Art in its recent exhibition *Egypt in Africa* (1996). The Egyptian case at one end of a rampway which cuts through a central avenue of cases, dominates the central vista, reminding visitors that Egypt has always been part of the continent's history. This is reaffirmed by the inclusion of an ancient Egyptian headrest alongside nineteenth and twentieth century Shona, Tonga and Somali versions, and by the inclusion of Egyptian votive figures in the section on metalwork. This latter area also includes Benin brass plaques and examples of Ethiopian metalwork, further emphasising the historical dimensions of the continent and the effect of external influences. That these influences were not one way is strongly reiterated in another area which, through three reconstructed altars from the Republic of Benin, Brazil and Haiti, points to the influence of the continent's religious and spiritual thought on the wider world.

Global vs. continental perspectives

'You are not a country Africa, you are a concept ... You are a glimpse of the infinite.' Ali Mazrui's thoughtful and provocative statement welcomes visitors as they enter the gallery, preparing them for the realisation that *African Worlds* is not only about the many different cultural worlds of continental Africa, but about the worlds that Africans re-established for themselves elsewhere on the globe after the cruel and inhuman triangular trade forcefully captured them, sold and resettled them into slavery. It is also about the many voices of the Black community in or near London which have been transcribed on the text panels and which tell their own reactions to the objects around them.

Colonial ethnography differentiated ethnic groups, which their members had not themselves always acknowledged, on the basis of language (on a continent where bilingualism was common), and established a directly equitable classification of artistic styles. This allows museum displays still to distinguish stylistic categories, abstracted from historical considerations, and present a picture of African peoples living in hermetically

sealed and solitary isolation from each other, detached from trade, political and familial alliances, religious pilgrimage routes and the vicissitudes of an inclement history responsible for massive forced resettlements. Such a view clearly stems from an ahistorical ethnography as well as a particular type of art history, and again eradicates the possibility of discussing hybridity, interculturality and the wider effects of globalised communication networks which link together and provide the possibility for the widespread dissemination of images among continents, nations and ethnicities (well illustrated by the three shrines in the exhibition).

Clearly it is difficult to appreciate how any exhibition about Africa, or any other part of the world for that matter, particularly when mounted in a multicultural city, can treat the continent as isolated or immune from global influences. To do so merely replicates the effects of ethnic/stylistic classifications of peoples and objects, on a much grander scale. Paradoxically, however, many museums possess only historical collections made prior, say, to the 1960s. Such collections do not represent Africa, but a period of European collecting, and are often insufficient to convey even very specific, meaningful aspects of African culture. At the Horniman, Keith Nicklin had instigated the collecting of contemporary African visual culture, particularly with the aim of documenting changes in the use of materials and stylistic borrowings (three Ekpo masks, collected in the 1980s, representing the idea of malevolence through the image of Darth Vader are particularly memorable) but, as with most other museums, collections that provided a testament to the African presence in Europe or the New World were conspicuously missing. The Horniman sought to correct this imbalance by sponsoring field research and collecting not only in Brazil and Haiti, as already mentioned, but also in Trinidad, where Kathryn Chan acquired extremely well documented examples of Midnight Cowboy hats together with a sampling of the verbal duelling that occurs between them in the context of Carnival. Undoubtedly Carnival is something that needs to be incorporated much more fully into the gallery than it is at present, as are samples of printed textiles manufactured in Europe and sold throughout Africa, and the material culture of Black Europeans. These were much discussed projects, but were not realised at the time because of money, time and the already overstretched organisational capabilities of two curators coordinating nine field projects using outside personnel. Nevertheless, they remain important areas for future research and collecting.

The Voices Project, carried out by Patti Peach, was an attempt to render visible the presence of large numbers of people of African and Caribbean descent in the London area, and incorporate their views and immediate impressions of some of the objects that were going to be represented in the gallery. Out of a sample of about 30 interviews made with different people

chosen at random, material from twelve³ was included on the text panels. This material sometimes conveyed great pathos, such as Ayan Ayandosu's thoughts that: 'When I look back at all these masks in the Museum, I feel very sorry, they're not being used ... To me a masquerader is like a musician. A musician cannot play on his own'; sometimes they were critical of what museums do: 'Many people brought many things into this part of the world, without knowing what they are' (Oloye B.A. Adelakan), or Emmanuel Arinze and Joseph Eboime talking about the looting of Nigerian antiquities: 'We ... appeal to the conscience of the world for a meaningful dialogue for a peaceful resolution of this shame of history'. Some provided new information about objects: 'Imborivungu is believed to make people rich in terms of money, childbearing, good farming, etc. And, when using these things, you will make sacrifices with animals' (Amaa Bai). Other interviews uncovered lost recollections of lives in Africa: 'Now that I am working in a museum, I think back and wonder what happened to all those things of my childhood' (Victoria Lawson). The material was always powerful and poetically expressed and insightful, and attested to the great generosity of peoples to share what were often personal feelings with curators and the wider general public. 'The fact that you may not be from a particular culture doesn't mean you cannot understand and appreciate something as deeply as somebody who is from that culture' (Eki Gbinigie). So rich was this material that we soon incorporated it not within the texts but alongside a photograph of the interviewee, as a preface that foregrounded each object label, to provide a kind of poetic hinge that brought together objects with the three text levels (descriptive case labels; inventory details, and thematic text presented in booklets). These voices, taken directly from our local communities, breathed new life into the exhibition, which more than counterbalanced our conscious purge of some of the more familiar and perhaps comfortable illusions about Africa in the popular conscience.

Taken together, these curatorial strategies not only represent a response to the philosophical problems of exhibition making, but also to their attendant political and ethical issues. They are the response of one museum which, deeply concerned about the divide between the countries of the northern and southern hemispheres, the one-way flow and concentration of information, the schism between interpretation and practice and issues of democratisation, has profoundly embraced the vision of museums as places of dialogue where members of different cultures can 'sit well with each other'. Finally, the academic debates these issues gave rise to, the seminars and conferences which were a direct response to the problems with which we were grappling, and subsequent publications, clearly demonstrate the central and evolving role curators have in realising the

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very real and important principles of an institution's mission statement and the core values which gives it its purpose and the style of its engagement with all the different societies that converge through its portal.

Notes

1. Natalie Tobert had worked on a proposal for a cross-cultural display based on the natural elements, while I sketched a more conventional thematic approach.
2. Nevertheless *African Worlds* is only the first phase of the Ethnography Redisplay, and will itself be read as the fourth part of a wider, reflexive exhibition on the history of collecting and displaying the collections which will open in 2001 to mark the Museum's centenary.
3. The exhibition used original texts from 36 different people. Twelve of these were drawn from interviews with local people; twelve originated from interviews with people in Africa, the Caribbean and Brazil; and twelve were written by professional authors.

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