

Director's Foreword

ANTHONY ALAN SHELTON

PUPPETRY HAS LONG played a broad and varied role in societies worldwide—in theatre, children's play, learning, therapy and even exorcism ceremonies. But why, in the digital age, does this ancient technique of storytelling still have wide appeal that cuts across generations and cultures? Puppetry is performed in theatres, films, dance studios, festivals and on model stages; it is celebrated and theorized in literature, myths and philosophy; it provides models for animations and robotics; and, surprisingly, it is a common subject in prints, lithographs and paintings, especially in galleries in Budapest, Prague and Mexico City. Puppetry blurs the boundary between humans and androids, ether and matter, the organic and the mechanical, the animate and the inert; it abnegates the sanctity of life's divine origins. It challenges our impression of the world and the categories through which we classify and perceive it, creating the narrowest and most fragile zone of opacity, in which disbelief might temporarily be suspended and the unknown evinces trepidation. We experience suspense, disquiet and amusement through the movement and antics of the seemingly "enchanted" puppet bodies, and by extension through similar surrogate objects including dolls, artist's models, unnatural fabricated creatures, androids and their pictorial and filmic doubles. These devices seem able to lead us from the tepid to the secret, repressed world stitched together by ill-conceived occult powers, suspense, dread and often dark pleasures.

The international puppet collections at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) began to grow systematically in the 1980s. One important acquisition was a collection of Sri Lankan marionettes acquired in 1984 from the adventurer and photographer Jason Schoonover. In 2011, he offered the museum a collection of Vietnamese water puppets that he and his partner, Susan Hattori, had purchased in Ho Chi Minh City in the mid-1990s. Despite some internal curatorial objections on both occasions, the directors of the time argued for the greater inclusion of performative culture within the museum's collections, thus creating favorable conditions for the subsequent growth that has given MOA one of the best and most representative puppet collections in Canada. In the last decade that growth has largely been driven by curatorial research projects focused on the history and systematization of the collections, and their use in developing special exhibitions and public programs. The exhibition *Heaven, Hell and Somewhere In Between: Portuguese Popular Art* (MOA, 2015) required we acknowledge the influence of historical literary themes on folk culture. After a meeting with the director of the National Theatre Museum in Lisbon, we initially thought to commission two puppet sets from Jorge Cerqueira to represent characters from Gil Vicente's *A Trilogia das Barcas* and Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas*. Although only one set of ten large marionettes was commissioned at the time, European puppetry became a major focus for later acquisitions. Other puppet collections, like the

three Bamana sets and stages, complete with awnings and related masks, were also commissioned for specific exhibitions, in this case for *Under Different Moons: Conversations on African Visual Cultures* (planned for 2021, but modified to give greater emphasis to social justice issues and Black communities in Vancouver), which had originally included plans to bring puppeteers from Mali to the museum.

Nicola Levell, formerly a curator at the Royal Pavilion, Art Galleries and Museums, Brighton, and the Horniman Museum, London, and currently associate professor of Visual and Museum Anthropology at UBC, played the major role in researching, rationalizing and developing the puppetry collections at MOA. Tirelessly, she researched, sourced, purchased or commissioned superb sets of puppets from acclaimed makers, collectors and puppeteers in Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, China and Turkey; with the support of MOA curator Nuno Porto and myself, she also researched and championed the acquisitions of additional sets of puppets from Brazil, Mexico and Mali. Much of Levell's research was directed to her 2019 exhibition, *Shadows, Strings and Other Things: The Enchanting Theatre of Puppets*, which attracted over 110,000 visitors and won an Award of Outstanding Achievement from the Canadian Museum Association, with the jury acknowledging that the project "was nationally significant and exceeded the current standard of practice by going beyond the conventional approach." The exhibition astounded staff and visitors alike with the richness, quality and diversity of the museum's puppetry collections.

Among the puppet makers, puppeteers and collectors with whom Levell worked, I would like to especially signal out Marcus Sampaio, a Toronto-based collector, graphic designer and co-founder of the Brazilian puppetry collective A RODA de Teatro de Bonecos, for sharing with us his voluminous knowledge and personal network of friends and fellow collectors. It was through his intervention in November 2020 that MOA was able to acquire a full-sized Awaji puppet and a beautiful Japanese female puppet head from Robert Mangold, the Kyoto-based antiquarian and gallery owner. At the same time, and equally unexpectedly, we discovered that the Czech puppeteer, collector and theatre historian Petr Skacel, one of the founders of the Puppet University Prague, was prepared to sell part of his own collection of historical Czech marionettes to MOA. This collection of twenty-five superb Czech marionettes, representing an important tradition previously absent from MOA's collection, includes puppets by acclaimed makers Josef Allesy, Stepan Zalesak, Voltech Zack, Karel Krob and Václav Krčál, Jr., which together cover the period 1870 to 2017. Neither of these two recent acquisitions, which give the collection near worldwide coverage, would have been possible without Levell's earnest confirmatory research or the generosity of the Michael and Inna O'Brian Family Foundation, which funded the acquisitions. With this volume, it is our great pleasure to share this exceptionally comprehensive collection with puppet makers, puppeteers, theatre historians and the public from around the world.