

Curatorial Contests and Display-Room Dramas:
Representations of African Art in North American Museums

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Curatorial Contests and Display-Room Dramas: Representations of African Art in North American Museums

Introduction

This summer I spent three months in Kenya interning on a research project led by Prof. John Galaty, an anthropologist specializing in pastoralist cultures and conservation in East Africa. His project examines how conservancies affect indigenous groups, such as the Maasai and the Borana, in Northern and Central Kenya. The research team travelled to various communities and stayed with them from anywhere between two nights to a week. We spent our days asking community members open-ended questions in either individual interviews or focus groups. The questions included: “what is the importance of wildlife?”, “what is the importance of conservancies?”, “where do you see yourself and your community in five or ten years?” and “what are some of the challenges that your community faces?” Anthropologists employ ethnographic research techniques, which entail observing and describing people from the perspective of living with, or closely alongside, them.

This was my first time participating in field research, and so I did not question the methods we used to study these particular African communities. To me, it made sense to stay with the community, have local guides and translators, and try to speak with a representative group of community members, ranging from chiefs to young girls. This field research opportunity gave me a chance to travel to, and interact with, remote Kenyan peoples, and as an African Studies student, an experience like this is essential and invaluable. However, upon returning to McGill, I learned that anthropological research methods originated from white men employed by the colonial state to learn about Africans, thus allowing the metropole to better dominate their colonies. This got me thinking about how Africa is studied. Political scientists, economists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists all have their respective models and frameworks for studying Africa. But what about the inter-disciplinary, and relatively new, field of African Studies? How do I, and how should I, study Africa?

As these questions emerged, I thought back to some of the interviews I conducted in Kenya. Out of the thirty or forty women I spoke with, around a third of them were doing beadwork as they answered me. This is not surprising, since the Maasai peoples of Kenya and Tanzania are known for their intricate, colourful and symbolic beaded necklaces, bracelets, arm bands and head pieces (*figure 1*). They often make this beaded art with the hope of selling it to tourists, or to a nearby conservancy which would then sell it to *mzungus*. It seemed that the agency, economic survival and livelihood of these women depended largely on the beads, which made me wonder when and how the tradition of Maasai female beadwork came about. In fact, in the late 19th century, as ethnic boundaries in Africa hardened and become more exclusive and politicized mainly due to colonial administration, East Africa simultaneously saw the introduction of coloured trade goods, especially cloth and glass beads.¹ This initiated a shift in

¹ Donna Klumpp and Corinne Kratz, “Aesthetics, Expertise and Ethnicity: Okiek and Maasai Perspectives on Personal Ornament,” in *Being Maasai*, ed. Thomas Spear and Richard Waller. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), 202.

African art which occurred parallel to politics of ethnicity. Women of different cultural groups (often referred to as ‘tribes’) began using beads as a political and ethnic symbol where colours and designs in beadwork signified ethnic distinctions.. As Klump and Krantz explain, the Maasai use “personal ornament” to make “one final public statement of ethnicity in areas of Maasai influence.”² This art form perceived to be so distinctly African in fact has European roots, and is highly politicized and ethnicized. It is involved in a network of knowledge—an African Studies student can learn an extraordinary amount about Kenya’s history and present through one small artistic endeavour.

This realization set me on a track to investigate how Africa can be learned about through its art. This is especially topical nowadays, seeing as the Royal Ontario Museum has recently issued a 27-year overdue apology for a “racist and demeaning” exhibit in 1989-1990 called *Into the Heart of Africa*.³ Certain African-Canadian community groups and organizations boycotted the show on the grounds that it romanticized colonialism while degrading Africans, who were depicted as “barbarous people” with “savage customs.”⁴ The Royal Ontario Museum has now been making steps towards greater inclusivity in their approach to African art.⁵ Clearly, conveying information about Africa through art can be a challenging task to fulfill without falling into common Eurocentric tropes. My goal in this project eventually became to investigate the various ways in which curators and art historians have successfully risen above these mistakes, or committed them, while attempting to teach the public about Africa through an art display. Upon the suggestion of Prof. Jon Soske, my supervisor for this assignment, I headed to the Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal and the Art Gallery of Ontario, to find out what each fine art gallery could teach me about Africa—that is, it’s peoples, cultures, traditions and its engagement with other global regions in the past and present. This essay is the result of that mission.

Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal: First Impressions

My trip to the Musée des Beaux Arts de Montreal (hereafter referred to as MBAM) was particularly timely as the African art collection had recently been relocated to the new Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion for Peace, which now houses all of the MBAM’s ‘World Cultures’ collections. This Pavilion was opened on November 19th, 2016, which happened to be the day I visited.

MBAM’s African art collection is entitled “Sacred Africa II” and features a grand total of 33 pieces, although there are over 500 more in the museum’s storage,⁶ with most coming from Congo, Gabon, Liberia, the Dogon region of Mali, Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire. The works dated from 900 BCE to the early 1900s, and I could not help but be concerned whether such a small collection could meaningfully cover such a vast time span. Perhaps this is why the curators chose

²“Aesthetics, Expertise and Ethnicity,” 202.

³ Jackie Hong, “Rom Apologizes for Racist 1989 African Exhibit,” last modified November 16, 2016, www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/11/09/rom-apologizes-for-racist-1989-african-exhibit.html

⁴ “Rom Apologizes for Racist 1989 African Exhibit.”

⁵ Charmaine Nelson, email to author, November 21, 2016.

⁶ “Archeology and World Cultures,” accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/archaeology-and-world-cultures/>.

to focus solely on “sacred” African art, and not utilitarian, decorative, contemporary or diasporic African art. (It should be noted as well that North African art was housed in the Islamic art section, and consisted of only a few Egyptian pieces.)

The first plaque of the exhibit explains that the value of African ‘sacred’ art is that it has influenced European art forms. The opening sentence of the very first sign states that “tribal art, particularly the sculpture of sub-Saharan Africa, inspired the pioneers of modern art in Europe to transcend the traditions inherited from ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy”⁷ (*figure 2*). Seeing as my experience this summer gave me a better grasp of anthropological concepts, I will briefly critique the foundation of MBAM’s African exhibit from an anthropological perspective. Anthropologists studying Africa are concerned with two main pathways of influence: dialectical encounters and the multi-directionality of global flows.⁸ Dialectical encounters are between two players, in which one influences the other or vice versa. This has and does occur in global networks, although a better representation of global ideational, financial, commercial, spiritual and even artistic flows is to understand them as multidirectional.⁹ African art, in its many forms, did not just influence European art, in *its* many forms. European, Latin American, Oceanic and African art have a long history of entanglement, inter-dependency and artistic influence. Dr. Susan Douglas, a specialist in contemporary Latin American art at the University of Guelph articulates that “art in Latin America can significantly demonstrate Africa’s legacy because it demonstrates how Latin America’s culture has developed and been influenced by Africa,” mainly through its roots in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁰ To posit that the value in African art lies only in its ability to influence Western art forms does not take into account innovative ways in which African artists have adopted Western art techniques into their works. For example, there is another explanatory plaque beside Yoruba *Ibeji* figurines, two wooden sculptures depicting twins, dedicated to the importance and sacred value of twins among the Yoruba in Nigeria. The plaque fails to mention modern changes in how the Yoruba depict twins through art, such as their use of photography. When one twin passes away, they use forms of ‘photoshopping’ to visually pretend that both siblings are still alive in the photograph.¹¹ This demonstrates just one case of how African artists have incorporated Western media art techniques into their own works. MBAM’s one-sided representation of Yoruba art depicts it, and as a result, its peoples, as unadaptable, historic and unchanging. It also insinuates that African art only has merit if it can better West art.

Further descriptions in the MBAM’s African exhibit continue to highlight the spiritual, magical, and “tribal” value of the pieces. One sign points out that “many masks from Burkina Faso are representations of animal forms symbolizing spirits from the bush,” while another, describing sculptures made by the Dogon in Mali, says that “in their society governed by elders, with numerous priestly cults dedicated to the gods of the sky, earth and water, sculptures were

⁷ Wall text, *Sacred Africa II*, Montreal Museum of Fine Art, Montreal, Quebec.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 45.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dr. Susan Douglas, “Africa’s Legacy in Latin America,” last modified November 24, 2013, <https://modernlatinamericanart.wordpress.com/2013/11/24/africas-legacy-in-latin-america/>

¹¹ Anthony White, “The Trouble with Twins: Image and Ritual of the Yorube ere ibeji,” *Melbourne Art Journal* 5 (2010): 1.

commissioned from the blacksmith-carver and placed on altars, where their constant presence served as intermediary between people and gods” (*figure 3*). As Prof. Charmaine Nelson, an expert in African and Black Canadian visual cultural and art history at McGill University put it, the MBAM’s “hanging style,” which highlights Africans as tribal and spiritual peoples is all “very twentieth century.”¹²

Since the MBAM is one of North America’s top galleries—it had over one million visitors, the most in Canada, in 2014 and 2015¹³—it surely has a top-notch team of curators and art historians behind it. Despite these credentials, I cannot help but question the validity of some of these highly spiritual explanations. This is because in *African Art in Transit*, Christopher Steiner elaborates that African art cannot be intended for economic gain in order for it to still be perceived as “authentic” by Western audiences.¹⁴ This is a double-standard pertaining to African art: it is widely accepted that Western art can have financial motives for the artists, dealers, gallery-owners and investors. Though traders and dealers play the crucial role of mediators, brokers, negotiators and intermediaries between African artists and foreign buyers, it would be unheard of for a piece of ‘authentic’ African art to have an economic history, not a spiritual or ‘tribal’ one.¹⁵ African art dealers have thus been known to fabricate backgrounds of their pieces, in an effort to make them appear more ‘authentic’ to the European or American buyer, who inevitably has “a fascination for antiquity and things from the past” because this “runs deep in Western culture.”¹⁶ As a result, African art collectors lie about the sacred value or provenance of art to increase its value for Western art collectors. As Steiner puts it, they purposely reinforce the “authenticity” and follow a predictable “process of aesthetization” in which the sacred value and tribal provenance of a piece is exaggerated as this is what is expected of African art.¹⁷ Moreover, when African art was first introduced in Europe, it was treated with “curiosity,” but was soon taken on by anthropologists to represent “objects of knowledge” which allowed Europeans to glimpse into the world of the “primitive man.”¹⁸ The notion that all African art must have a spiritual value, coupled with the anthropological ideal of each African art piece serving as a conveyor of information about African culture, tradition and ritual, means that explanations of art given to Western collectors from African traders and dealers are often false. It is therefore hard to fully believe the profound spiritual and mystic history in every single piece in MBAM’s “Sacred Africa II” collection.

I wonder why the MBAM chose to focus on the spiritual, ritual and mystic aspect of African art. I feel as though this one-sided depiction only serves to promote stereotypes about Africans, for instance, that they are behind the times, that they lack the progressive mentality of Europe and America, and that they are technologically lagging. Naturally, some African art

¹² Charmaine Nelson, email to author, November 21, 2016.

¹³ Kate Taylor, “Quelle surprise! Montreal has the most arts museum visitors,” last modified May 8, 2015, www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/montreal-has-the-most-arts-museum-visitors-in-canada/article24334232/.

¹⁴ Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 100.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

pieces do carry important spiritual connotations, as can art from all over the world. But, the MBAM fails to acknowledge that this is not the case for *all* African art. Moreover, it emphasizes stereotypes about Africa—the warrior with a spear, the unclothed woman—through the few black and white photographs that accompany the sculptures (*figure 4*). Overall, the main flaw of “Sacred Africa II” was the conception of the exhibit itself: by only focusing on “Sacred” African art, this fixes Africa as a people or culture of the past. Viewers will still be fed the idea that while we in Montreal, Canada or the Global North have little connection with notions of sacredness, magic or spirituality, which are often instead linked with supposedly out-dated indigenous belief systems, Africans still believe in such things, and are therefore ‘behind.’

At the end of the exhibit, as the viewer is about to move into the Pre-Colombian art collection, it becomes clear that the MBAM curators realized, at the last moment, that their exhibit was entirely lacking in works that depicted a non-spiritual or contemporary version of African art. This must be why the final piece in the African art collection is from 2002, and is by Armand Arman a French New Realist sculptor with a “decided interest in tribal art.”¹⁹ His piece *Pearl Stringers* is an assortment of fifteen brightly-beaded masks, the only coloured works in the whole exhibit, which also offer a “nod to the world of the circus” (*figure 5*). To me, the choice to conclude with work by a European artist who had been influenced by African art, and not simply by an African artist, demonstrates a weak last-ditch effort to provide a “counterpoint to the older works,” as the placard explains (*figure 5*). The work in question made me leave feeling confused and a bit angry. Where did this idea of the circus come from? Was there not one single, contemporary African artist that could have been featured on this wall, instead of a European “with a sharp eye for the art of sub-Saharan Africa.”²⁰ Prof. Shelley Butler, a specialist in museums and cultural politics at McGill University, claims that the MBAM often takes a “universalistic approach,” which would explain this last-minute global aspect of the exhibit.²¹ However, I believe that this aspect was at best unnecessary and at worst detracted from the art that was actually from Africa.

Arman’s piece resulting in a lasting effect of “Sacred Africa II” which suggests that African art in the 2000s is actually just the appropriation or refinement of African techniques by Western artists. This brings me to my next question, which is what the MBAM could have done differently to have a more Afrocentric and less stereotypical exhibit.

What could have been done differently?

The ‘circus’ masks made by Arman resemble the Maasai beading I saw in Northern and Central Kenya—both through the use of brilliant colour schemes and minuscule glass beads. Maasai beading is a localized craft of great importance for the livelihood, independence and economic sustainability of Maasai womanhood, but it signifies a broader incorporation into the global networks of tourism and the souvenir trade as well. A piece of brilliant, bright and detailed Maasai women’s beadwork could have been a powerful statement should it have occupied this final, coveted position in the exhibition.

¹⁹ Wall text, *Sacred Africa II*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Shelley Butler, email to author, November 25, 2016.

Of course, that's just one idea for a modern-day representation of African art. There are countless others, and for inspiration, all that is needed is a look towards Okwui Enwezor, famed Nigerian curator, poet and art critic. Enwezor first came into the public eye as the mastermind behind *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to Present*, a 1996 exhibit of African photographers at the Guggenheim Museum.²² He has since gone on to direct the director Haus der Kunst museum in Munich and curate the 2015 Venice Biennale.²³ His work is a prominent and shining example of using African photography by African photographers to tell African stories. A 2014 Wall Street Journal profile claims that one of Enwezor's specialities is "historically driven, encyclopedic museum shows centered on topics such as African liberation movements in the 20th century, the arc of apartheid and the use of archive material in contemporary art."²⁴ Enwezor has worked with notable African artists and notable artists of African descent such as Glenn Ligon and Oscar-winner Steve McQueen.²⁵ Thus, the MBAM could have featured African photography, artistic depictions of major points in African history, contemporary conceptual African art or a clip of an African film in the place of Arman's masks. Enwezor's ideas give the inspiration for current, topical and varied representations of African art today.

Increasingly, the concept of 'African art' is being expanded to include art of the African diaspora. In *In Search of Africa*, Manthia Diawara considers his feeling of "identity fatigue" as an American-Malian in his writings.²⁶ This sentiment, along with a myriad of others that can accompany the African diasporic experience, is commonly reflected in art in the African diaspora, ranging from Diawara's writings to virtual arts, film and music, all of which forces viewers, art collectors, curators and scholars to reconsider what, exactly, is African art, and whether art produced by Africans outside of the continent occupies a place in this category. Clearly, instead of displaying *Pearl Stringers* by Armand Arman, it would have been far more appropriate for the curators of the MBAM's African art collection to show Maasai beading, or to follow in Enwezor's footsteps and use contemporary African-made art, depicting topics of relevance for that particular African creator, or even to reference emerging debates in the art world by featuring an artist from the African diaspora.

However, I must consider limitations in what the MBAM is capable to do given its resources. As Christine Kreamer, the Chief Curator at The Smithsonian's National Museum for African Art, explains, "each exhibit has its particular point of view, theme, objects, budgets, gallery sizes, deadlines, strategies for audience engagement, etc. All of that impacts the exhibition process and its implementation."²⁷ These constraints most certainly affect the ability of the MBAM to put on vast, profound and detailed African art shows, especially since, based on my day-long trip to the gallery, most people seemed to be there for special exhibits, so public interest in African art displays may be comparatively lower. (What's more, the Smithsonian's

²² Zeke Turner, "How Okwui Enwezor Changed the Art World," last modified September 8, 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/how-okwui-enwezor-changed-the-art-world-1410187570.

²³ "How Okwui Enwezor Changed the Art World."

²⁴ "How Okwui Enwezor Changed the Art World."

²⁵ "Enwezor Changed the Art World."

²⁶ Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 13.

²⁷ Christine Kreamer, email to author, November 22, 2016.

National Museum of African Art has about one hundred more pieces than the MBAM's African collection, and it's own building.)²⁸ Besides these logistical limitations, Kreamer elaborates that other common mistakes made when displaying African art. These are more easily avoided and do not take a large source of funds to do so. They include "ignoring history; tending to portray peoples and cultures as static and stuck in time; underplaying innovation, creativity, change over time; ignoring the visitor experience and creating exhibitions with specialists in mind vs. the general public."²⁹ The MBAM does indeed portray Africans and their cultures as static, seeing as they are depicted merely as "tribal" and "spiritual" peoples. Moreover, at no point do the explanations alongside the works emphasize the skill of the artists, who were able to carve out extraordinarily intricate pieces, often, with tools from thousands of years ago. The MBAM therefore underplays innovation as well. To avoid these curatorial pitfalls, Kreamer recommends the strategy adopted by the National Museum of African Art. Instead of grouping works together by time period, which generally results in the avoidance of contemporary art and as a result, the stereotyping of Africans as living in the past, art is presented based on a theme. In Kreamer's words: "we tend to bring together traditional and contemporary African art into thematic shows that show the range of artistic response to a particular theme, and thus counters the traditional-contemporary divide, if you will." This "idea-driven" methodology is "focused on African contributions to the history of knowledge so that you can see how we tell stories and engage visitors with Africa's arts."³⁰ Some might say that "Sacred Africa II" is idea-driven, as it accentuates the spirituality present in African art. Unfortunately, contemporary spiritualities, non-tribal spiritualities and explorations of spirituality outside of traditional, historical carvings are completely left out, which leads me to believe that "Sacred Africa II" is simply an after-thought title given to the pre-existing collection of African art already on display at the MBAM. Stronger examples of idea-driven African art exhibitions are some of Kreamer's past shows for the National Museum of African art, such as 2007's "Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art," which ranged from African urban representations of current politics to ancient scripts. It explored the intersection of African art and various systems of communication, with sub-topics like "Inscribing the Body," "Inscribing Power" and "Ways of Knowing."³¹ In 2012, Kreamer put on "African Cosmos: Stellar Arts" to show celestial bodies and the phenomenon of lighting influenced and influences African art.³² These exemplify alternate manners of presenting African art that sheds light on little-seen aspects of African culture. Philip Zachernuk, a professor of history at Dalhousie University specializing in Modern African and intellectual history, sums up the efforts of the Smithsonian's 'Africa team' well by remarking that "they had clearly given their mission a lot of thought, trying to get past old pitfalls."³³

²⁸ Mary Jo Arnoldi, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Michael Atwood Mason "Reflections on 'African Voices' at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History," *African Arts* 34 (2001): 17.

²⁹ Christine Kreamer, email to author, November 22, 2016.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Inscribing Meaning," accessed November 25, 2016, <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/index1.html>.

³² "African Cosmos," accessed November 25, 2016, <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/cosmos/intro.html>

³³ Philip Zachernuk, email to author, November 23, 2016.

All this is to say that it would have been possible for the curators at the MBAM to devise an exhibit of African art that does not fall into the many common mistakes outlined by Kreamer. Surely, within the MBAM's 300-piece collection, there must be sufficient material to assemble a creative, relevant and insightful show on Africa that does not rely on Eurocentric conceptions of the continent.

It would have also benefitted "Sacred Africa II" to provide more detail about the works. The thirteen plaques gave a broad overview of themes like "Materials in African Art" and "Reliquary Figures," but this could have been enriched through the use of placards explaining individual pieces (*figure 6*). Providing visitors with more information may have made the curatorial team seem more knowledgeable, and their choices more thought-out, as opposed to stereotypical and somewhat inexperienced. The "African Voices" portion of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, which was also curated by Kreamer, employs a three-step labelling process: first, "Gallery texts" comment on main themes and overarching messages. Second, "Main texts" narrow down onto major stories in the exhibit, and third, "Subtexts" deliver information about a specific topic.³⁴ This method would have combatted the apparent laziness of the curators at the MBAM.

Finally, I would like to comment on the set-up of the Michal and Renata Pavilion for Peace, which houses "Sacred Africa II." Supposedly, this pavilion is especially peaceful as it houses spaces for world arts (which included exhibitions on South American, Central American and Oceanic as well as African art), and art education programs. This effort to represent art from around the globe, whilst engaging in art-based educational activities is a strong effort to promote art as a tool for mutual understanding and collaboration. But, this could have been more efficiently achieved had the exhibitions been organized in a way that truly explores how global peoples, places and things can co-exist. Peace is the notion that, though techniques, styles and materials differ between regions and cultures, they can work together to inform and enhance each other. Thus, a more powerful means of curating art to demonstrate peace would be to have representation from all global regions in one exhibit. For example, I searched through the entire "International Contemporary Art" collection at MBAM and found many American, Canadian, German and even a few Chinese and Japanese artists, but no African, nor Latin American, ones. Shouldn't the "universalistic approach" that MBAM is supposedly known for be especially prominent in an international display? (It would also like to mention that, since I was one of the first visitors to this new pavilion, I received a free gift bag upon entry. This contained a coffee table book about the pavilion as well as a CD "inspired by the collection of international art at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art."³⁵ The CD's playlist was composed of tracks from one Englishman, three Italians, five Germans, three French, one Polish, one Argentine and one Chilean. This lack of diversity simply reinforces that of the visual art exhibit.) Instead of keeping art divided by regions, it would be a unique undertaking to reflect how art from different regions influences each other by having them all equally featured in one exhibit. This would convey to youth passing through the MBAM on their way to educational programs that art from all over the world is equally worth display in a museum, much like all the world's peoples are equal. This, to

³⁴ Arnoldi, "Reflections on 'African Voices,'" 22.

³⁵ CD of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, November 2016.

me, is how the MBAM could organize the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion for a maximum 'peaceful' impact.

Am I being too harsh on the MBAM?

Matthew Robb is the Chief Curator at the Fowler Museum of Global Arts at UCLA, and after discussing the politics of representing Africa in North America with him, he pointed out that "much of the discourse surrounding the presentation of 18th and 19th century objects from Africa in museums is indebted to the set of decisions and responses made in the early 20th century."³⁶ Perhaps, then, I shouldn't hold the current MBAM curators fully accountable, seeing as their jobs are essentially to react to, and move forward from, the Eurocentrist conception of Africa that permeated the art trade of the late colonial period. The proof of this lies in the history of the MBAM's African art collection. It "comprises 565 pieces, most from sub-Saharan Africa. It was started in 1940 by curator F. Cleveland Morgan, who purchased the first African artifact for the Museum: a bronze mask from Benin. The collection was significantly expanded in 1975 by a donation of some 500 objects collected by the Jesuit priest Ernest Gagnon."³⁷ According to Mr. Errell Hubert, the interim curator of African and Pre-Colombian art at the MBAM, Ernest Gagnon's art purchases of the early 20th century was "following the work of great ethnologists of the time and a priest himself, [so] he was interested in the anthropological, and especially religious, value of African art."³⁸ This has left those in charge of creating displays of African art for the MBAM at the mercy of a collection of pieces collected with religious motives at the height of the colonial period. Once I made this realization, I started to feel that I had been too hard on the "Sacred Africa II" exhibit. It is possible that the curatorial team had been forced to make the most of a sampling of colonial pieces which had been collected with the express purpose of representing African spirituality.

Upon further discussion with Mr. Hubert, he made it clear that he was aware of the exhibit's flaws, but also inferred that the underlying cause of many of the problems facing "Sacred Africa II," beyond the initial problematic reserve of pieces, is simply that the MBAM does not provide it with the manpower or funding that it provides other exhibits. I get this sense because, not only did Mr. Hubert take up the job just this summer leaving him without the "answers for all [my] questions," he also told me that "the current display is a transitional one. The 'Sacred Africa' exhibition had first been elaborated in large part with the collection of Guy Laliberté which was then on loan at the museum but has since been returned to its owner. The rooms devoted to African art will entirely be redone for the fall of 2017."³⁹ I wrote earlier that since the MBAM is one of Canada's most famous art galleries, it must have a strong curatorial team behind its African exhibit. Evidently, this was a faulty assumption. In actuality, both the curator and the exhibit are transitional, due partially to an influx of art from the wealthy Quebecois founder of Cirque du Soleil, which has now been returned to its owner, leaving the

³⁶ Matthew Robb, email to author, November 28, 2016.

³⁷ "Archeology and World Cultures."

³⁸ Errell Hubert, email to author, November 30, 2016.

³⁹ Ibid.

MBAM's African gallery and the small team behind it with only its initial source of works from Mr. Gagnon.

These factors made me more sensitive to the limitations of "Sacred Africa II," however, I am still upset by the lack of African artists in the "International Contemporary" exhibit. Mr. Hubert explains that this is "due to the nature of our collection. We currently have very few works by contemporary African artists [...] It is something we are actively working on."⁴⁰ MBAM has an international reputation and is situated in a highly multicultural city. How hard could it be to find a contemporary African artist, either from the continent or the diaspora (and there is a large diaspora of Africans, particularly francophone West Africans, in Montreal) to produce art for the museum? Granted, I am not an expert on how the process for art requisition goes, but the MBAM has successfully forged links with many, many Quebecois and Canadian artists, so why not with African ones?

I have come to the conclusion that I was probably a bit too harsh on "Sacred Africa II" initially, as its many shortcomings can be traced to historical factors beyond the control of current curators. MBAM's international collection has room for much improvement, though, and the curatorial staff must be held accountable for this. It is one thing to portray a skewed and stereotypical version of Africa's past, but it is entirely another to leave it out of contemporary, globalized discourses and flows.

What did I learn about Africa through the MBAM's exhibit?

I consider myself, at the very least, minimally knowledgeable about the diversity of the peoples and places on the African continent. I know that Africans are not all "spiritual" or believe in mystic gods, as "Sacred Africa II" would make one believe. I know that not all African art consists of sculptures and masks, as "Sacred Africa II" would make one believe. And I know that African art has absorbed Western styles and techniques, such as Yoruba twin photographers and Maasai women using European glass beads, as much as Western art has adopted African influences.

In whole, I am a tad bit disappointed by the poor representation of African styles, colours and time periods at the MBAM. I am more than a tad bit disappointed by the finishing note of the whole exhibit, which is the "circus art" of a white French man. It insinuates that the main value of African art lies in what it can offer to the West.

That being said, I am glad that there is, at the minimum, a recognition that African art (as well as many other African practices) have been of service to the West. Historically, European and American scholarship on Africa has examined Africa-global relations in terms of how the West has bettered Africa. This discourse has been used to justify 'civilizing' colonial missions in Africa, and more recently, the work of international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and many smaller Non-Governmental Organizations on the continent. African art techniques are but one single, small example of how Africa has altered and expanded the mentality of Westerners. While this point is over-emphasized in "Sacred Africa II," it is nonetheless an important one. The multi-directionality of global flows, as an anthropologist would say, ensures that Africa shapes the West as much as the West shapes Africa. One plaque in

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the exhibit explains how notable European artists incorporated African styles into their own works: “The fact that they [African styles] were part of the collections of such celebrities as Pablo Picasso, Felix Feneon, Tristan Tzara and Helena Rubinstein lent such art added value. As a result, an entire body of work associated with influential 20th-century figures became highly sought after.”⁴¹ While I disagree with the MBAM’s constant insinuation that the value of European art is of greater importance than that of African art, and therefore, African art that can increase the value of European collections becomes more valuable in itself, I appreciate that it acknowledges how African art has been prominent in shifting, moulding and shaping European art and art collections. This, along with the spiritual underpinnings of many African art traditions, are my two main learnings from my trip to the MBAM.

Introduction, part II: a new city and a new gallery

Exactly three weeks after my trip to the MBAM, I visited the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto. Having grown up in Toronto, I have been to this gallery countless times so I have a sense of comfort there that I don’t have at the MBAM. I’ve been on many field trips and family trips to the AGO, and can fondly recall when it was completely made-over by Frank Gehry almost ten years ago. This renovation brought wood panelling to all the rooms, which brings the museum a feeling of warmth that the MBAM’s stark white walls do not have. As a Torontonians, I’m proud that the AGO is my home town’s fine arts museum, even if it only received 789,121 visitors in 2015 compared to the MBAM’s 1 million.⁴² Clearly, I am biased towards the AGO. Perhaps I only want to see the good in it since my family has been members for years and I do not want to feel like this was a waste of money. But, as its African exhibit proved, my preference for the AGO over the MBAM is well deserved.

Art Gallery of Ontario: First Impressions

Like the MBAM, the African artworks at the AGO are housed in a single room with a brown colour scheme to match many of the wood carvings. This is the extent of the similarities between these exhibits. The AGO’s African collection is entitled simply “African Art” which I thought was refreshingly frank. The curators were not trying to construe the art in any one direction; they did not attempt to interpret or twist around the art to make it tell some sort of narrative, for example, of sacredness or tribal mysticism as was the case with the MBAM. Instead, the first placard starts off with

The art in this gallery was created by many different cultures and people from south of the Sahara Desert in Africa during the 1800s and 1900s. These pieces were collected over several decades by Dr. Murray Frum, whose vision and passion built one of the world’s most significant private collections of African art.⁴³ (*figure 7*).

Despite the general title of the exhibit, it is clear that the pieces are from a very specific time period. Most were from the 1800s and 1900s, and the most recent was a wax figurine from Cameroon, dated to 1960 (*figure 8*). I was thrilled at the choice to display contemporary pieces.

⁴¹ Wall text, *Sacred Africa II*.

⁴² “General Information Fact Sheet,” accessed November 29, 2016, <https://www.ago.net/fact-sheet>.

⁴³ Wall text, *African Art*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario.

Common conceptions of African art tend to portray it as ancient tribal, magical sculptures, in other words, the exact pieces featured at the MBAM. These newer pieces counter that narrative. They show that Africans are still making art, furthermore, that it is worthy of Western attention. By choosing a specific time period, the AGO also legitimizes the small size of the exhibit—although it was still nearly double the size of the MBAM’s, with a total of 57 pieces on display. The strategies of the AGO and MBAM here are markedly different: while the MBAM had a smattering of pieces from different time periods and brought them together through the theme of spirituality, the AGO has many more pieces from a restricted time period and which reflect many different themes. I prefer the AGO’s approach as it is a more well-rounded depiction of African art seeing as the art did not only revolve around one theme and instead was bound by a recent time period.

The AGO’s exhibit also recognized the art for its artistic value. Not once did the MBAM mention the skill it takes to carve busts out of a single piece of wood or the innovative uses of various materials in modern and historical African art trends. But, the AGO demonstrates the opposite tactic with the first plaque, which, after mentioning Mr. Frum, says that

Many of these works are inventive interpretations of the human form, encompassing universal themes such as birth, survival, death and regeneration. Some pieces are used to show power and leadership, while others help individuals communicate with the spirit world. In many African communities, artworks are central to people’s daily lives.⁴⁴

(figure 7).

The immediate recognition of the “inventive” qualities of African art demonstrates that the curatorial team of the AGO appreciates the art for its artistic merit, first and foremost. The MBAM seemed too preoccupied with stereotypes about African art to care about the skill behind it. Art galleries are venues for art appreciation, and in this capacity, the AGO succeeds while the MBAM flounders.

The above explanation later elaborates on the multiple uses of African art: spiritual, as well as in daily life and in special proceedings to commemorate events such as birth and death. By articulating the importance of “universal themes” in African art, the AGO shows how African traditions are not radically different to art of the Americans, Europe or Asia. An anthropologist would point out that galleries that present African peoples as wholly distinct and completely unlike other cultures are playing into the politics of ‘othering.’ This separation between ‘us’ and the ‘other’ facilitates the production and legitimation of stereotypes, fear and inter-cultural tensions. By paralleling Africa and the world, the AGO reverses this process, in a process I’ll call ‘togethering.’ Every culture deals with contests of politics and power, and many of the pieces show that African politics is not limited to tribal conflicts, as is often thought. For instance, a carving of a door frame depicts a king who is decapitating an employee of his, who had slept with the king’s wife.⁴⁵ These sorts of tales permeate all regions and peoples, and so this artwork helps ‘together’ viewers as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes they may have held about African governance.

⁴⁴ Wall text, *African Art*.

⁴⁵ Video, *African Art*.

Another way in which the AGO thwarted stereotyping was by undertaking community consultation as was assembling the exhibit. Beside many of the pieces are explanations of their importance by African artists, teachers, media figures and writers. A diverse group of Africans was involved in the creation of this exhibit, which helped it shed light on the continent's culture in a fresh new way. In the explanation for a male figurine made in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1800s is a quote from Jean-Pierre Kasonga, a television producer from Kasai in the DRC, who says that "I find it particularly moving to see this original figure in a famous museum. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to experience first hand the beliefs of their ancestors. I am grateful to the Art Gallery of Ontario for making this possible"⁴⁶ (*figure 9*). Prof. Butler highlights that an important factor in determining the MBAM's fall into problematic representations of foreign peoples and cultures is the "kinds of programming and community consultation are linked to the MMFA [Montreal Museum of Fine Art]."⁴⁷ The AGO engaged in rigorous consulting with Africans across the continent and diaspora, while the MBAM did not (or, if they did, they did not make it obvious to the audience.) When she does her personal research on the representation of Africans in Western art, Prof. Nelson asks herself "who had the right to represent whom, and did Africans have the right of self-representation?"⁴⁸ In the AGO's case, they did, adding yet another layer of success to its African exhibit. I believe that all museums representing the works of another world region should follow Prof. Nelson's line of questioning to ensure cultural sensitivity.

Even though they had already put in a great effort—at least, great in comparison to the MBAM—the AGO went one step further in ensuring a just and inoffensive representation of Africans in its exhibit. They accomplished this by having Prof. Modesto Amegago, an expert in West African dance, cultural studies and cross-cultural aesthetics at York University,⁴⁹ lead the exhibit's "Opening Libation Ceremony" at its inauguration in November 2008. In this ceremony, he calls "upon the African intellectuals," "the ancestors" and others, to ask that "if we have offended anybody [...] may they forgive us," thus showing an understanding that art is controversial and can never be perfectly representative, but trying nonetheless to avoid committing cultural offence⁵⁰ (*figure 10*).

Visitors to "African Art" are able to watch this Libation Ceremony on one of three interactive screens or on the single full-sized television in the gallery (*figure 11*). On these screens, the public can also choose to watch videos on how African art inspires European art, mask-making and masquerade in Burkina Faso, Yoruba art and world view, as well as numerous videos in which art collector Murray Frum explains the requisition and meaning behind various pieces. In fact, Mr. Frum himself shows immense awe of the art, as he repeatedly notes the beauty and innovation of the pieces, along with the lengths he went to to acquire them.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Shelley Butler, email to author, November 26, 2016.

⁴⁸ "McGill University," YouTube video, 6:48, posted by "The Royal Society of Canada," November 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MH4FPGIwK0U>.

⁴⁹ "Modesto Mawulolo Amegago," accessed December 10, 2016, <http://dance.ampd.yorku.ca/profile/modesto-mawulolo-amegago/>.

⁵⁰ Video, *Sacred Africa*.

In my preliminary research for this project, I was struck by how tricky the African art trade is to grasp completely; it is “a complex economic system with its own internal structure, logic and rules.”⁵¹ It involves local artists, who occasionally act as dealers, though more often are in contact with traders who bring art from rural locales to urban centres, where other dealers then bring them into Europe. This process can also vary depending on where on the continent it is taking place.⁵² Mr. Frum mentioned in one of the videos in “African Art” that he acquired one portion of the king-decapitating-his-employee doorframe from a gallery in Baltimore, though was hesitant to do so as he was not sure it was the original. Eventually, a photograph brought to him by an art historian in Paris revealed the king sitting inside the doorway, with Mr. Frum’s frame on the left and the frame from Baltimore on the right.⁵³ This finally prompted Mr. Frum to trade two of his pieces for the other half of the doorframe.⁵⁴ I was glad that Mr. Frum’s insight conveyed this to the public, as it provides yet another platform on which visitors are expected to appreciate the works: firstly, the talent it took to make them, and secondly, the talent it took to get them to the AGO.

The use of multi-media allows visitors to glimpse into the behind-the-scenes of creating “African Art” and shows an additional level of care and forethought that the MBAM did not have. The curators put time into giving more information about the cultural significance, back story and journey of various pieces, either from African intellectuals or Mr. Frum. Conversely, the MBAM barely had plaques beside each one of the pieces. Moreover, by featuring the faces of Mr. Frum and African artists and intellectuals such as Mr. Amegago involved in the assembly of the exhibit, the AGO demonstrates a far higher degree of accountability for its work. It is clearly showing off the team behind the exhibit, thus making itself more vulnerable to criticism while demonstrating pride in all the work put into it. With “Sacred Africa II,” it took multiple attempts for me to get in touch with anyone affiliated with the exhibit, and after finally getting into contact with Mr. Hubert, I did not get a sense that there was a cohesive team behind the exhibit. No one at the MBAM prioritizes African art, which is why “Sacred Africa II” falls short in many ways. Contrarily, the AGO has a team of dedicated professionals, united under Mr. Frum’s admiration for African artistic talent, who’s attentiveness, concern for detail and respect for African artistic traditions and innovations is obvious. The AGO wisely chose to showcase Mr. Frum’s personality by putting him in the spotlight to make him the face of, and the man behind, all the artwork. A large panel called “The Collector Speaks” begins with Mr. Frum explaining the “unconventional” ways in which African artists depicted the human body and ends with him deciding that

It is no wonder that the boldness and power intrinsic to this art form inspired early-20th-century artists such as Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Henri Matisse and Henry Moore to create a new modern art. For me, too, the discovery of the roots of modernism

⁵¹ Steiner, *Art in Transit*, 10.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Video, *African Art*.

⁵⁴ Video, *African Art*.

in this art of African peoples has been an adventure that has provided an intellectual experience to be cherished.⁵⁵ (*figure 12*).

Here, Mr. Frum mentions the influence that African art has had on European artists, but he makes sure to anchor it back into the intellectual, modernist value of the art itself. Instead of entirely shifting the focus away from Africa as the Arman piece did, there is instead a mention of the crucial role of African art in the West but this is brief and the spotlight remains on Africa, making this a prime example of Afrocentrism within the AGO's exhibit.

My impressions as I circulated the gallery were incredibly positive—to the extent that I worried how I would critique it in this essay, in fact, I still have not been able to think of any shortcomings to write about here. However, I should note that my opinions of “Sacred Africa II” were heavily influenced by Arman's concluding piece, while the structure of the AGO's African art exhibit means that there is no concluding piece that taints the visitor's lasting impression. The room is a square-within-a-square, and visitors can choose whether they want to start with the works in the inner or the outer square. There are also two entrances to the exhibit, one through the Canadian Art section and the other through the gallery that looks out onto Dundas St. West. Because of this structure, there is no final piece. There is no piece that is deemed more worthy than the others to earn the prized last spot. Since I saw the inner square second, one of the last pieces that I saw was a beaded piece, like Arman's and like the beadwork I saw in Kenya, however this was a Luba stool from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The seat was intricately beaded with many of the same colour schemes I saw Maasai women wearing this summer, but the legs were actually carvings of naked women. A pamphlet about the stool uses a quote by Gilbert Nyamay ‘Antu, a Congolese teacher, who explains that “In the African tradition, women's tattoos are considered a thing of beauty. Naked breasts are a natural thing. They are not perceived as a form of nudity. This statue pays homage to the beauty and the work of African women”⁵⁶ (*figure 13*). This piece is a powerful reference to African beauty standards, which shape African life much like Western beauty standards, and to the role and status of African women. These are two major themes that are essential to grasping African lifestyles, cultures and histories, and so the fact that the AGO touches on these, while the MBAM fails to look beyond African spirituality, shows a more well-rounded exhibit. Other pieces, such as “Comb with Decoration in the Shape of a Female Head” from Angola or Congo and made in the mid-1900s, and “Mother and Child Bowl” from late 1800s Nigeria also show how utilitarian pieces have an artistic value, while intersecting with the subjects of women's beauty, femininity, motherhood and daily tasks such as grooming and food preparation (*figure 14*). Mr. Hubert would surely point out that spirituality is an important part of any culture and so the MBAM is underlining one key aspect of Africa in “Sacred Africa II.” But, the AGO shows that a successful exhibit can touch on many themes, because some of its works do indeed reference African spirituality, for example, the “Reliquary Guardian Figure” from early 1800s Gabon, but not all.

In whole, the AGO's “African Art” explores many facets of modern African life and because of this, was entirely different from the MBAM's “Sacred Africa II.” Instead of hammering home on the supposed mysticism, tribalism or primitivism of Africans, it bounced

⁵⁵ Wall text, *African Art*.

⁵⁶ Informational pamphlet, *African Art*.

around from daily life, to political systems, to fashion and beauty trends, to gender dynamics (and not once did it use the term “primitive” when describing these topics.) The multi-faceted collection of Dr. Murry Frum can be thanked for this, which leads me to wonder if perhaps I am being too generous with the compliments I am heaping onto the AGO curatorial team. It is possible that their jobs were made much easier than that of their counterparts at the MBAM because they had the good fortune of having Mr. Frum’s works in their toolkit, while the MBAM currently has only the smaller, older collection of Mr. Ernst Gagnon, a Jesuit missionary. On its webpage for the African collection, the AGO explains that “the [African] works have been assembled on the basis of aesthetic criteria rather than ethnographic or historical interest.”⁵⁷ I would suppose that it takes a certain volume of works to be able to do this. It is easy to find any sort of spiritual value in art and then link a small number of works together using that theme, but it takes a larger body of pieces to find ones that mesh well aesthetically. Thus, the breadth of Mr. Frum’s collection may really be the key factor for the success of the AGO’s “Africa Art.”

The AGO seems to be aware of this, as it openly boasts the quality and rarity of its African art collection by claiming that “the AGO’s collection of African art is not only the largest of its kind in a Canadian art museum, but also one of the most prestigious collections of African art in Canada.”⁵⁸ On another page of its website, it showcases its pride for its “renowned, recently donated Frum collection. One the world’s finest collections of sub-Saharan art.”⁵⁹ When it comes down to it, the AGO is incredibly lucky to have the support of Mr. Frum. His role was integral to the success of the exhibit, and the MBAM did not have their own ‘Mr. Frum.’ However, the MBAM also failed to recognize the artistic value of its art, to see it beyond its primitive, spiritual elements and to include multi-media or community consultations in the development of its collection. The AGO evidently did have a more creative and dedicated group of curators who were able to make the most of the fantastic initial collection offered to them. Despite this, I wanted to know more about Mr. Frum, and as coincidence would have it, my mother happens to know Mr. Frum’s daughter. They met when they lived in the same residence at McGill University, and Ms. Linda Frum has now been working as a Conservative Senator for Ontario since 2009, as well as on the Chair of the Senate’s Art Advisory Committee.⁶⁰ Her father passed away in 2013 but she was willing to speak to me about his relationship with the art world.

Murray Frum’s Vision and Guidance in “African Art”

Linda started off by explaining that her father was drawn to African art from a purely aesthetic standpoint. She revealed that Mr. Frum never actually visited Africa during his collecting years, though he once visited South Africa towards the end of his life, and had little interest in African culture.⁶¹ Some might say that this should discredit him as a worthy collector of African art, but I see this as the most unadulterated and untinged method of collecting art. He

⁵⁷ “About the African and Oceanic Collection,” accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.ago.net/african-oceanic-collection/>.

⁵⁸ “General Information Fact Sheet.”

⁵⁹ “About the African and Oceanic Collection.”

⁶⁰ “Senator Linda Frum,” accessed December 11, 2016, http://www.lindafrum.ca/Senator_Frum/Welcome.html.

⁶¹ Ibid.

bought African art simply for his attraction to its beauty, and not in order to extrapolate a ‘spiritual,’ ‘tribalist’ or ‘primitive’ meaning from it. This later gave room to experts to associate grounded facts to the works, such as their daily uses and political connotations. Because he believed that African art should be valued on an artistic level, he wanted it to be housed in an art museum. Mr. Frum “very much wanted to give to an art gallery as opposed to an anthropological or historical institution like the ROM [Royal Ontario Museum].”⁶² Since he felt as though his pieces demonstrated a high level of artistry and creativity, it would be “demeaning” if they were not appreciated from this perspective. The choice of the AGO as this museum was natural for him because he had “personal ties” there, having even served as the chair of its board of directors.⁶³ When I asked Linda whether he maintained relations with the curatorial team and oversaw the assembly of the exhibit, she laughed and told me that the curators probably wished he had given them more (or any) space to breathe. One of Mr. Frum’s conditions for donating was that he would be extremely involved in the mounting of the gallery—right down to the use of Shim-Sutcliffe architects to design the room.⁶⁴

Linda pointed out that many other galleries will say “date unknown” or “time unknown” beside African pieces, but not “artist unknown.” Mr. Frum worked fervently to recognize the individual artist, in order to counter the disconnection between the creator and the object that permeates the presentation of African art in the West. As a result, on the plaques beside each piece in his exhibit, there is either a specific name and personal details, such as “Ateu Atsa, active between 1840 and 1910,” or more broader information like “Bangwa Artist” or “Bamum Peoples”⁶⁵ (*figure 15*). (It is worth noting that the MBAM does not mention the creator through the use of the label “artist unknown” if the artist is indeed unknown.)⁶⁶

While not an artist himself, Mr. Frum “loved creating things. The creation of that gallery brought him personal satisfaction.”⁶⁷ Mr. Frum faced pressures from his own “artistic sensibility” and the fact that he the gallery would “remain associated with his name forever,”⁶⁸ but he turned these into a vision and motivation which was the driving force behind creating an exhibit that showcased African art for its beauty, pure and simple. These honest intentions led to a fair, principled and meaningful representation of Africans. One of the last things Linda told me during our phone call was that her father belonged to a “distinct community of art collectors, for who these pieces are the greatest treasures in the world.”⁶⁹ Mr. Frum’s upmost reverence of his collection comes across in the exhibit.

When it comes down to it, the MBAM’s African section not only lacked an initial collection as contemporary and unique as Mr. Frum’s, but it did not have a champion. It did not have someone with a profound appreciation for the beauty of African art, who could then translate that into an exhibit. The MBAM’s rotation of curators were obliged to resort to

⁶² Linda Frum. Interview by Sally Hough. Personal phone interview. Toronto, December 14, 2016.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “About the African and Oceanic Collection.”

⁶⁵ Explanatory plaque, *African Art*.

⁶⁶ Explanatory plaque, *Sacred Africa II*.

⁶⁷ Linda Frum.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

stereotypes to assemble a small collection of colonial-era sculptures which reveal nothing novel about African peoples.

What did I learn about Africa through the AGO's exhibit?

At the core of what the AGO conveys about Africa through its art is that African cultures, lifestyles, governance structures and traditions are, in many ways, quite similar to that of any other part of the world. By this I mean that African women in the 1900s took the time to care for their personal appearance, much like women in the West did, and much like most women do today. By this I could also mean that African rulers will resort to violence if they feel threatened, much like many other rulers around the world. Even though African art surely has its own distinct styles, techniques and trends (all of which are another learning point in the exhibit as they are praised in the plaques and videos) it tells truths that largely resemble truths applicable to anywhere in the world. Sometimes, it is easy to forget that humans and the lives we create for ourselves all bear certain fundamental resemblances, so this exhibit was special because it reminds visitors of that fact.

I have only been at McGill pursuing African Studies for two years, but in this short time I have repeatedly encountered cases of Eurocentrism in history and historiography, ethnographies and even contemporary news sources (for instance, at the very beginning of this project I was trying to research notable African anthropologists. Like any youth raised in the tech-age, my first line of inquiry was typing “famous African anthropologists” into Google. Apparently this was quite naive of me, as all I got was a slew of Americans and Europeans who had done work in Africa.) From my perspective, the biggest learning opportunity brought to me by the AGO's “African Art” was that it is indeed possible to represent Africa in North American museums in a way that values the continent instead of reducing it to a single element of it, stereotyping it, or providing misinformation about it. This is tricky to pull off, and thus why Curatorial and Museum Studies, Art History, Cultural Studies and Area Studies exist as fields of study. By using knowledge available, in particular, knowledge from Africans, North Americans can depict Africa so that visitors understand our profound likenesses as opposed to differences.

With all this said and done, I would like to provide some final remarks on this project. I will briefly reflect on what I learned, and where I hope to go from here, and where I hope African art exhibits will go in the future.

Where to go now?

First off, I am thrilled to have undertaken this assignment as it obliged me to explore the resources that two world-class cities have to offer. I tend to get stuck in my own little bubble in one of McGill's libraries, but this reminded me that there is a city out there with lots to teach me beyond the books. However, more importantly, this project taught me to inform myself and think critically about information that is presented to me. If I hadn't done so much preliminary reading leading up to my MBAM outing (texts such as *In My Father's House* by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In Search of Africa* by Manthia Diawara, *Being Maasai* by Thomas Spear (and with contributions from Prof. John Galaty, whom I worked under this summer in Kenya) and *African Art in Transit* by Christopher Steiner, were extremely useful in getting me to consider the politics of representing Africa in non-African settings, the connotations African art has inside and outside

of the continent, the cultures that produce this art and then the networks that bring it to museums like the MBAM and the AGO) I would not have questioned the merits of “Sacred Africa II.” I would not have known that the spiritual explanations African art traders provide to European buyers are often false,⁷⁰ nor would I have criticized the reduction of African art to its merely spiritual values. I would have trusted the MBAM’s curators and believed that all African art is made for some form of Godly worship. If anything, this whole project was an exercise in critical thinking, and I was very proud when my criticisms were echoed by experts in the field. The most gratifying moment was when I reached out to Prof. Charmaine Nelson and explained to her my uneasiness with the MBAM’s exhibit. I was nervous about how she would reply, as she has devoted her life to studying issues like these whereas I have given only a few months. But, when she replied with “you are very perceptive and your critique is on target,”⁷¹ this gave me the confidence to carry on with my harsh assessments.

Studying any area of the world from another area of the world is a difficult task, and so the underlying message to this entire endeavour is that students like myself must always think critically about what information is presented to them about the faraway region. Travelling to Kenya this summer gave me a tiny sliver of first-hand knowledge about Africa, but I have to be wary of what I am told about the continent since often it is swayed by stereotypes and historiographic trends like Eurocentrism. One answer to “where to go now?” is to keep being cynical, or at least, to keep questioning. My advice to students in a similar position would be that if information you are presented seems off in some way, as the MBAM’s “Sacred Africa II” did to me, trust your gut and seek out alternative sources of knowledge to confirm your hunch.

I would like to offer another answer to the question “where to go now?” which is directed at museums in Canada. In the US, there is a growing recognition of the African diaspora and its contributions to North American culture, life and arts. It is a frustration of mine that McGill’s African Studies curriculum does not offer any courses on the African diaspora, even though, in my opinion, to gain an understanding of a region, we must recognize communities who have left the region, and brought its cultural styles with them to wherever they settle. Canadian and American cultures have long been influenced by African culture, for example, through music, dance, folklore and cuisine,⁷² and museums should recognize this. The Smithsonian made waves when it opened a National Museum of African American History and Culture less than three months ago, which has already attracted over 600,000 visitors.⁷³ There is clearly a public interest in African diaspora culture, and this should be more prominent in Canadian museums. It would also help students like me gain a more well-rounded understanding of Africa if it is not provided to them by their university, or it would complement university curriculums such as University of Toronto’s African and African Diaspora Studies programs. There is an African Canadian Heritage

⁷⁰ Steiner, *Art in Transit*, 102.

⁷¹ Charmaine Nelson, email to author, November 21, 2016.

⁷² Dontaira Terrell, “The Untold Impact of African Culture on American Culture,” last modified June 3, 2015, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2015/06/03/cultural-influences-africans-american-culture/>.

⁷³ Benjamin Freed, “More Than 600,000 People Have Already Visited the Smithsonian’s African American History Museum,” last modified December 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/12/13/more-than-600000-people-have-already-visited-the-smithsonians-african-american-history-museum/>.

Museum in Regina, Saskatchewan,⁷⁴ but as Canada's most populated cities and as two of Canada's primary art galleries, the MBAM and the AGO could lead the way in the inclusion of African diaspora artists on their walls. Manthia Diawara poignantly expresses that a common and profound ill of Western society is "the refusal to see that black people have made and can make a positive contribution to world civilization."⁷⁵ I believe museums are one frontier through which this mentality can be combatted. The inclusion of African diasporas in galleries would not just help students like me, but it would better society as a whole for displaying the importance and beauty of diversity.

Now, I would feel like a hypocrite if I did not act on this issue myself. I am preaching the recognition of African diasporas as another facet in the study of Africa, while my own university does little to include African diasporas in its African Studies curriculum. So, I have reached out to Prof. Khalid Medani, the head of African Studies at McGill, with a list of almost fifty courses I would like to have added to our African Studies program, for instance, CANS 405: Diversity and Social Solidary in Canada, SOCI 212 International Migration and HIST 423 Topics: Migration & Ethnicity. He is very eager to broaden the courses in McGill's African Studies program, and so we are meeting early next January to get to work. I see this as one means of continuing this project.

In the end, the goal of this project was to find out what the MBAM and the AGO could teach me about African art. They both taught me many different things, as well as showing me the values and struggles of learning through gallery displays. As Carol Magee, Professor of Art History specializing in Africa at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill sums up: "Exhibitions can teach us many things. There is so much to learn about the art, cultures, and peoples of Africa and exhibitions are a wonderful way to do so." Visitors and curators just have to be aware that "the material should be presented as responsibly as possible, with as much respect for the material itself, the people it represents, and the audience it is speaking to."⁷⁶

Ms. Magee's message pertains to any methodology of studying Africa. I still have two-and-a-half more years of my undergraduate degree, and in that time, I'll look at Africa through anthropological, political, geographical, religious, gender and historical lenses, since when it comes down to it, African Studies uses a mix of these lenses to study a dynamic, vast and emerging region. It is my duty to make sure that I respect African cultures, histories, livelihoods and stories in all the essays, exams and presentations I have yet to do, regardless of the discipline I am working in. I only hope that in this attempt to explore the subject of art, I showed respect for the African art world.

⁷⁴ "Saskatchewan African Canadian Heritage Museum Inc," accessed December 13, 2016, <http://sachm.org/index.html>.

⁷⁵ Diawara, *In Search of Africa*, 276.

⁷⁶ Carol Magee, email to author, December 9, 2016.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Maasai beading in Samburu County, Kenya. Photographs by Sally Hough.

The women in the photos gave oral consent to being photographed prior to the focus groups they took part in.



Figure 2: Opening text of “Sacred Africa II.”

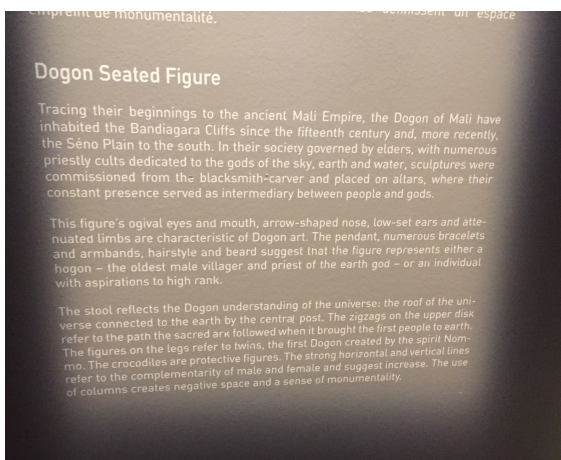


Figure 3: Explanatory text of “Sacred Africa II.”

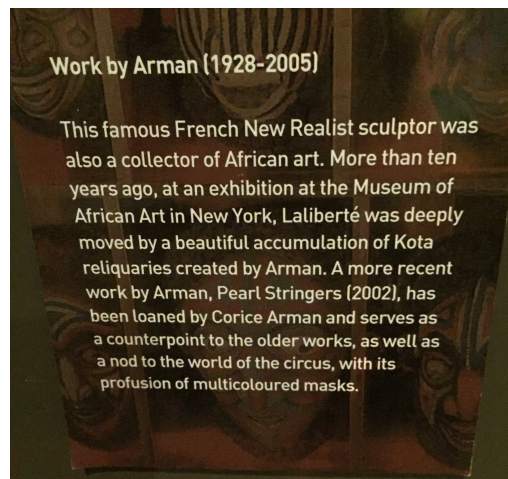
Appendix



Figure 4: Photographs in "Sacred Africa II."



Figure 5: Armand Arman in "Sacred Africa II."



Arman and African Art

Among 20th-century artists who have shown a decided interest in tribal art, the sculptor Arman (1928-2005) is undoubtedly the best example of an accomplished creator, collector and expert all in one.

Profiting from the decades of knowledge accumulated in the West, he established himself as an artist with a sharp eye for the art of sub-Saharan Africa.

Among other things, Arman challenged the tendency to categorize certain objects as "artists' study pieces," that is, works of often inferior quality serving mainly to inspire an individual's creative process.

Appendix

Figure 6: General wall texts in “Sacred Africa II.”

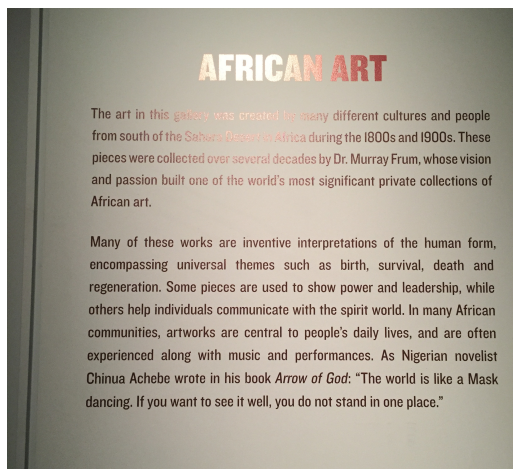
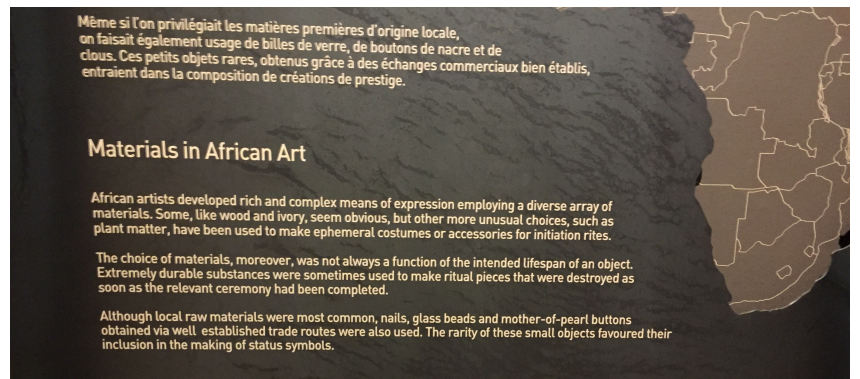
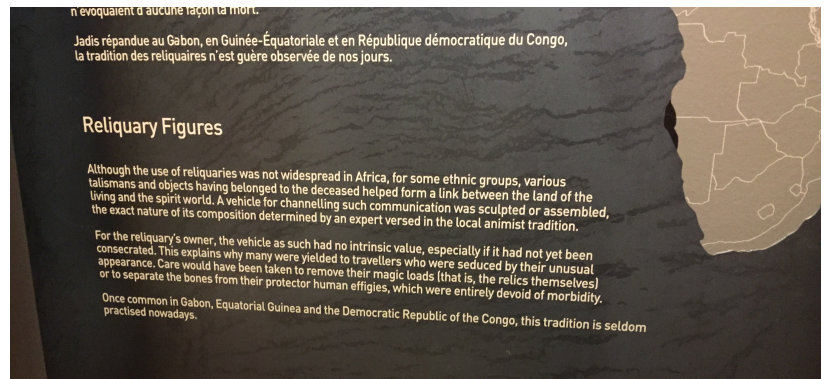


Figure 7: Introductory plaque to “African Art.”



Figure 8: Cameroonian wax figurine from the mid-1900s in “African Art.”

Appendix

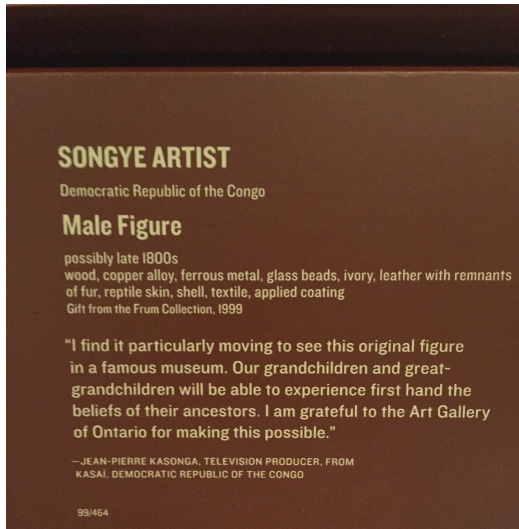


Figure 9: Quote from Jean-Pierre Kasonga about a Congolese sculpture in "African Art."

Figure 10: Screenshots of the Opening Libation Ceremony of "African Art."

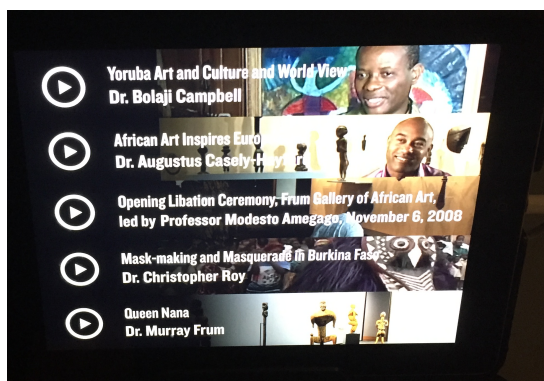




Figure 12: “The Collector Speaks,” wall text in “African Art.”

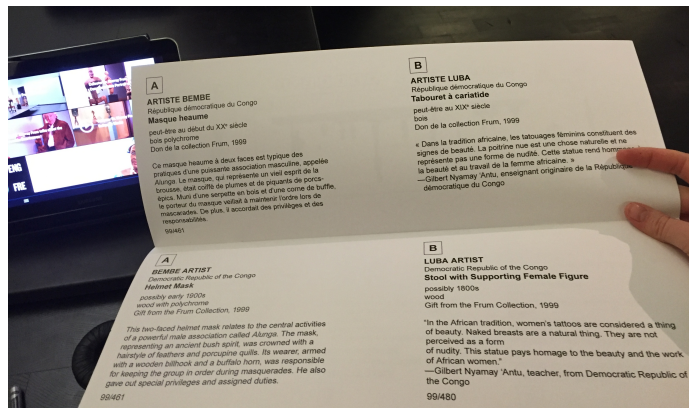


Figure 13: Pamphlet explaining Luba Stool in “African Art,” with an interactive video screen in the background.

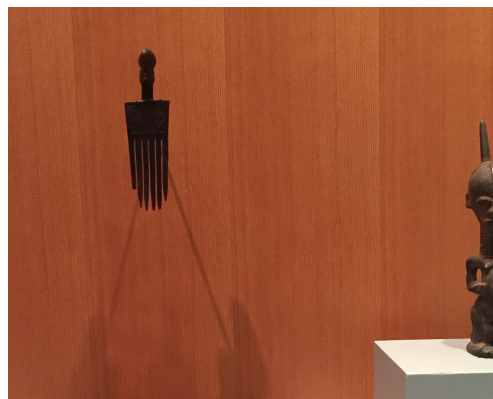


Figure 14: Comb and bowl; utilitarian pieces in “African Art.”

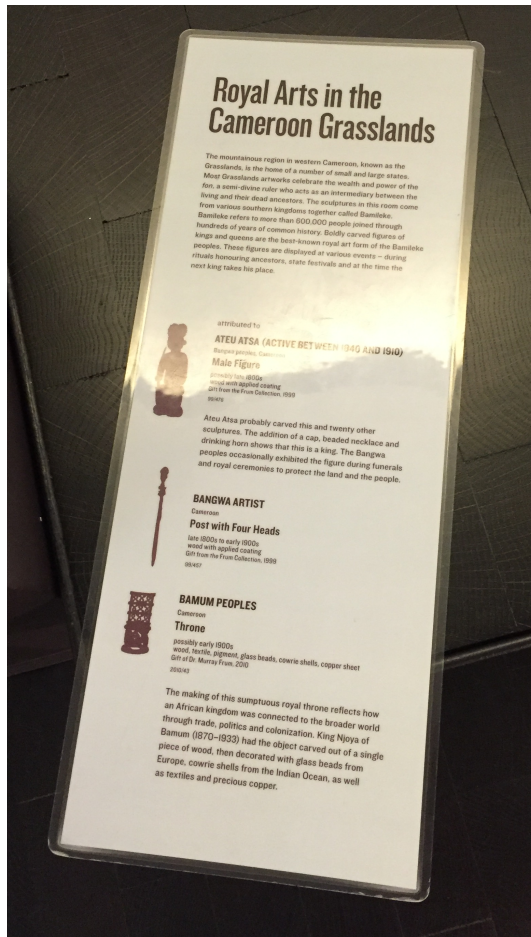


Figure 15: Write-ups citing specific artists and origins of African art pieces in the AGO.