

Culture



“INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA”

Hazel Da Breo

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Two messages are directed to the visitor: this collection, the choice of pieces, the inadequacies of it, the emphasis on certain kinds of objects were the product of the ignorance and naïve religious and imperialist sense of superiority of the missionaries and soldiers, and that African cultures had a range of expression, creativity and aesthetic sensibility, not to mention knowledge, that was beyond the understanding of these agents of "Commerce, Christianity and Civilization". The captions elaborate the self-serving attitudes, motives, and blindness to African achievements of the collectors and clearly dissociate the exhibit from these attitudes of racist superiority.

Among the artifacts the Kota reliquary figures, the nail-figure from Angola, the Janus-faced mask from the Cross River area, the four-faces Igbo head-dress and the Yoruba diviner dance head-dress are interesting; the plaque of a Benin warrior and the Ashanti gold necklace are especially notable. Smaller objects, weapons, drums, combs and baskets predominate; captions and texts are helpful and provide a broad context. The curator has been scrupulous about the information on the source of the objects and intriguing on the different meanings that can be attached to the same objects.

The subtlety of the double message of the exhibit, about museums and how they come to have collections and about Africa, may be at the root of the present controversy. A definite condemnation of imperialism and colonial oppression is missing from the texts elaborating on the objects. Inverted commas indicate irony or distance from the explicit meanings of the words used. These signals of doubt may not be recognized, and first impressions created by the physical organization of the exhibit may also be contributing to unhappiness with it. The placing of the 'The Imperial Connection' at the beginning of the exhibit as an introduction to it may suggest values to which some observers are more sensitive than others.

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"INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA"

*By Hazel Da Breo
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The fatal flaw in the "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibition lies not in the actual production of the exhibition itself. Technically, in fact, it is a splendid display.

Impeccably designed, colour, floor space and wall construction create an environment completely complementary to each aspect of history addressed

by the Curator. The visitor passes from the silent, grey claustrophobia of the colonial era through to the spacious warm colour of Africa and her artifacts. Visually, the exhibition comprises a selection of artifacts of the most exquisitely compelling beauty. Thematically, the composition is precise. Having decided to focus on Canadian involvement in Africa, the exhibition holds to its premise like a tightly woven tapestry, never straying from its central position.

Historically, as the ROM speakers have been obliged to repeat, the exhibition is factually correct. It actually does exhibit events as they did unfold in that time, in that place, among those people. Yes, Canadians did in fact travel to Africa and ram-rod their "culture" up the collective African behind.

The fatal flaw may be read in the horribly painful silence following the questions asked not only by the Black Community in Toronto, but by a clear majority of visitors of all nationalities to the ROM: "Why choose to exhibit this now? How do you realistically expect this show to relate to contemporary Toronto in general and to Toronto Blacks in particular?" Within the silence is the unstated realization that the exhibition planners failed to adequately assess the potential enormity of negative response to "Africa".

The negative response centres specifically on two main concerns, these concerns being the very core of the exhibition. The first addresses the choice of theme, and the second the use of the visual image as illustrative of that theme.

Because the art was acquired by Canadians travelling in Africa, to display that collection as narrative of Canadian history would normally be a valid position. But the movement, particularly by Artists and Arts Organizations to correct the devastation performed on Africa and therefore on all black peoples by the Canadians and Europeans "travelling" there, has gained such momentum over the years that any public exhibition dealing with Africa and not taking a definite pro-Africa position is bound to receive a thumbs-down response.

Traditionally, museums speak with such an authoritative voice that they "preclude the possibility of anything but affirmation"¹. Viewers typically come to a museum not to question, challenge, or debate controversial issues, but for a history lesson at a glance, a confirmation of actual life as documented and preserved for our value-free absorption. Visitors go away from the museum therefore, with a certain unquestioning acceptance of what they have seen.

Knowing this, and in the anticipation of an exhibition about Africa that would affirm Africa's often

ignored glorious and dignified pre-slavery past, a majority of Black visitors did not make it past the first segment of the exhibition.

Holding to its theme, the introduction focused on Canadian personalities, highlighting their beliefs, attitudes, and "conquests"; in short, telling their history. Africa, as seen through their eyes was "barbarous"; the natives were "ignorant"; the continent was "dark"; Christian light begged to be shed on the "pagan nation".

Though some visitors read the irony implied in the quotation marks and could intellectualize their way through an appreciation of this presentation, many, many more were pained and outraged at the choice of focus. As always, the experiences of the first 15 to 20 minutes of the exhibition coloured the audiences' appreciation of the entire show and affected the ultimate response.

The sum of their outrage came squarely to rest on an image now known as "The Offending Photograph". Dominating its space, this larger than life illustration depicts a British soldier on horseback driving his spear through the shield and heart of a Zulu soldier who emerges on foot from the bushes. In the background, more British troops advance on the Africans who flee stumbling for their lives. So overwhelming is this image of disgrace and defeat that most viewers stopped dead in their tracks there, neglecting to read the accompanying text. The text explains that "... the Zulu (was) one of the best known and most feared African peoples in the British Empire. A twenty-thousand-strong Zulu army annihilated a column of the invasion force, killing hundreds of British soldiers..."². In other words, the use of this drawing in *The Illustrated London News*, 1879, is a typical example of the masterful propaganda designed to boost British morale and destroy the image of the Black. Likewise, the irony implied in juxtaposing displays of the highly valued woven silk cloths of the Asante people with a photograph of a European female presuming to offer these skilled craftspeople a "lesson in how to wash clothes"³ was not appreciated by most viewers.

Obviously, the subtleties implied in design and text, and the expansive, unambiguous and sincerely wonderful concluding exhibit of African artifacts were all completely over-shadowed by the negative mind-set created by the introductory historical perspective and accompanying visuals. Moreover, many of the visuals were photographs or illustrations in-

terpreted as photographs. And photographs, more than any other art form, are understood to capture an immediate, infallible truth. The unfortunate use of these photographs by the Museum comes across as an authoritative statement of Black Africa on its knees before White Europe.

The history lesson at a glance (emphasis on "glance") highlighted Canadian missionary and military activity in Africa, without clearly stating the brutal nature of their presence there and without clearly describing the magnificence and glory of pre-slavery African civilizations.

The exhibition's intent, though curatorially valid, was found unacceptable to a populace largely dedicated to correcting the negative stereotypical image of Blacks in Western culture. The role of the Museum in creating social values came seriously under question. Furthermore, the ROM'S response, not only to the Black demand that the exhibition be altered, but to mainstream media questioning the exhibition's motive, was handled so poorly that Toronto as a community was almost forced to conclude that the arrogance and immorality associated with an aggressive dominant culture was alive and working within the ROM.

Certainly, mistakes were made. Unfortunately, mistakes are all too common between large mainstream institutions making virgin voyages into diverse and unfamiliar cultures and members of the very cultures that the institutions believe they adequately represent.

A few unambiguous messages have finally been conveyed. Museums and communities must dialogue and interact in real, on-going terms. Cross-cultural understanding must be actively encouraged in every discipline and walk of life. And at this point in the earth's history, African art must only be used in the positive service of African peoples worldwide.

Hazel Da Breo, a student of Art History at York University, is a curator of Caribbean art.

Notes

1. Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" *Thinking Photography*, (MacMillan : 1982) p. 85.

2. Image: "Lord Beresford's encounter with a Zulu" *Into the Heart of Africa: Exhibition catalogue*, Jeanne Cannizzo, Royal Ontario Museum, 1989.

3. Image : "Mrs. Thomas Titcombe offering a lesson on how to wash clothes", *Ibid*, p. 30.