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Aesthetic or Ethnographic: Historical and Contemporary Dilemmas in Exhibiting African Art

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Aesthetic or Ethnographic:
Historical and Contemporary Dilemmas in Exhibiting
African Art

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Introduction

From years of observation, I have come to believe that the separation of institutions that display African art into the categories of "art" and "ethnological" (or "natural history") museums is based upon a false dichotomy . . . Warren M. Robbins, "Making the Galleries Sing: Displaying African Art."¹

This quote from Warren Robbins summarizes the theme of this paper. African art can not simply be placed into the category of ethnographic or art. However, this is the position that African art presently finds itself in, split between the anthropology museum and the art museum. Placing art into categories is an exercise all museums do, whether they are an anthropology museum or an art museum. However, the placing of art into categories is especially difficult when dealing with objects from Africa that defy both categories: ethnographic and art.

The art museum addresses African art aesthetically, while the natural history/anthropology museum addresses African art culturally. Neither institution acknowledges the other's approach to African art. A visitor can not fully appreciate and understand African art if they are not informed of both the cultural traditions and aesthetics behind the craft. Cultural and aesthetic contexts relate a great deal of knowledge and insight to the visitor. For example, it would be important for the visitor to know when examining a Senufo pot, that only women can make that pot. This contrasts with the European/American tradition in which potters are traditionally male. In addition, information relating to the aesthetics of Senufo pottery assists the visitor in understanding the pottery. The traditional rounded bottom of the pots enables the women to sit the pots on uneven ground or in a fire without the pot tipping over. The beautiful red and black

¹ Robbins, Warren M. "Making Galleries Sing: Displaying African Art."

color stems from the firing process that consists of covering the pots with grass and lighting it on fire. The pots are then removed from the fire with long poles, as the women know exactly when to pull each piece out, without the aid of a watch or timer. Both the aesthetic and cultural information would enable the visitor to have a better understanding of the pottery. Therefore, museums need to address both approaches to provide their visitors with a fuller understanding of African art. Providing both aesthetic context and the ethnographic information assists a visitor to understand African art in its full complexity.

This paper addresses the difficulties associated with the display African art as either ethnographic or an aesthetic object. To determine the best means of display for African art, it is necessary to look at the history of displaying African art in the museum environment. An examination of both the positive and negatives aspects of the display of African art in both the natural history/anthropology museum and art museum, serves to determine the best possible means of display for African art. Furthermore, new approaches of the display of African Art will be explored, including recent endeavors in information technology. Displaying African art as just ethnographic material or as just art is unsuitable because it belies the complexity of African art. Only a display that combines both an ethnographic and an aesthetic context provides the visitor with an opportunity to understand African art in its full complexity.

Chapter 1:

African Art and its Ethnographic Heritage

The Baule mask spotlighted in the museum case or hanging over the mantel has become "Baule Art," though everybody knows that once, in a different place, it was something else entirely . . . Susan Vogel, African Art Western Eyes²

This chapter examines the history of displaying African art as ethnographic material. First, the chapter traces the history of the "discovery" of African art by "Westerners." Europeans defined African art as ethnographic. The term *ethnographic* stems from the word *ethnology*, that is defined by the Webster's Dictionary as "the systematic recording of human cultures."³ Thus, any description of African art as ethnographic assumes that the given piece represents the entire culture that created it. Any piece of African art hence comes to embody the beliefs and values of an entire culture, rather than simply the individual who created it.

An anthropologist or a curator examines and defines a piece of African art vis-à-vis the region of its geographic and ethnic origin. Hence, each piece of African art is associated with an ethnic group such as Baule or Senufo, rather than the name of an individual. Defining a cultural group as the maker, rather than the individual, is unique to the ethnographic approach. By contrast, when categorizing Western art, the artist's name is never replaced by the continent and region where the artist lived or worked. If the artist is unknown, the title "unknown artist" is preferred over simply defining the piece by region; this expresses the significance of individuality

² Vogel, Susan. African Art Western Eyes. (1997). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 17.

³ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. (1984). Boston, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc. p. 427.

in Western art.

A Leonardo da Vinci painting such as the *Mona Lisa* would never be titled as "Italian art, Tuscan peoples" because the individuality of the artist matters significantly to Western culture. The painting is by Leonardo da Vinci. The region of the artist's origin is of secondary importance. Leonardo's paintings are not expected to represent Tuscan culture or Italian culture. The painting may or may not reflect the cultural ideas of the period during which the painting was created.

African art, however, is seen differently. African art represents a culture and region, which includes multitudes of individuals, beliefs, and practices. Discussions of African art do not rely on individuality. The phenomenon reiterates the underlying difference in how ethnographic materials and art materials are defined. For example, the text that accompanies an African mask reads: "Pendant mask, Nigerian, Court of Benin, 16th century, Ivory, Iron, and copper, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972." The label does not give the name of the individual artist nor does it refer to the artist as unknown.

Early anthropologists such as, E. Vatter, in *Religiose Plastik der Naturvolker (Religious Sculpture of Primitive Peoples)*, proposed a fundamental difference between African art and Western art. He hypothesized that the artist's role is not, as it has generally been in modern Europe, to express his own personality, but rather to serve the community. Further, he writes, "that the African artist is anonymous," an idea that remained unquestioned until recent years.⁴ Vatter's view set a standard that affected how African art was looked at and classified for decades.

Other anthropologists had their own theories as to what characterized African art as ethnographic, and therefore different from Western art. Raymond Firth, a sociologist, takes a functionalist approach to examining African art in his book *The Social Framework of Primitive Art* (1951). Firth sees the artist essentially as a craftsman, not working for aesthetic pleasure, but rather acting out a role in a complex social and economic system. He views "primitive art" as reflective of social rather than individual experiences.⁵

In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of scholars proposed that utility was the core difference between Western and African art. African art was so immersed in daily life that it could not be completely separated from it. Georges Balandiers writes in *Les Conditions sociologiques de l'art noir* in 1966, that "these aesthetic works are linked to a certain mode of social organization: they are, above all, instruments for religious 'technique.'"⁶ These scholars felt it was important to delineate the spheres of life in which African art played an important role. Kathleen Trowell, in *Classical African Sculpture* (1954), suggested two broad functions of African art. The first function was the enhancement of social status, while the second was communication with the supernatural. Another scholar, A. A. Gerbrands, in his book *Art as an Element of Culture Especially in Negro-Africa* (1957), devotes a chapter to outlining the functions of African pieces as religious, economic, and technological.⁷

Such definitions of African art as social and utilitarian had a lasting influence. Take for instance, a book written by an African scholar, Robert Brian, in 1980. Almost thirty years after

⁴ Willet, Frank. *African Art*. (1993). London: Thames and Hudson. p. 36.

⁵ Ben-Amos, Paula. "African Visual Arts from a Social Perspective." (1989) *The African Studies Review*. p. 4

⁶ *Id.*

Art as an Element of Culture was published, Brian reiterated the traditional view of African art as utilitarian. He writes, "Indeed, so functional is African art in this kind of perception that one experiences a kind of 'fission' when encountering what appears to be art for art's sake, an art freed of function."⁸

While anthropologists focused on the utilitarian aspects of African art, the art world began to perceive African art as art. In the early twentieth century, when sub-Saharan African art was first recognized in European circles as art, museums began to collect African art. This interest was based upon African art's perceived influence on modern painting. The groups that began to see African art in this new light, "art for art's sake," were not art historians, but rather ethnologists, ethnology museum curators, colonial administrators and teachers, anthropologists and missionaries, all of whom have contributed and in some cases still contribute to art scholarship.⁹

During the 1950s, private collectors and art museums revived the interest in African art that first surfaced in the 1920s. Yet this initial "recognition" of African art was not automatically accepted by art museums. Instead, curators continued to ask: "What is it?" "How is it used?" and "What is it for?" This information continued to come from ethnographic accounts. Hence, African art, when first displayed in the art museum, continued to be associated with ethnographic and anthropological contexts.¹⁰

African art's double heritage, a phrase coined by Monni Adams, as an ethnographic object

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Adams, Monni. "African Visual Arts From an Art Historical Perspective." (1989). *The African Studies Review*. p. 56

and an art object, is the underlying cause of the confusion associated with the display of African art presently. Does African art fit into a museum setting if it is both ethnographic and art? Art museums display African art as "art" devoid of its cultural context. However, this type of display may conflict with whether or not African art can be classified as art according to the Western definition of the word. Webster's dictionary defines *art* as "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects."¹¹ The word *aesthetic* is defined by the same Webster's dictionary as the "appreciative of responsive to or zealous about the beautiful" and the words *aesthetics* as a "branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste . . . with the creation and appreciation of beauty, a pleasing appearance or effect: beauty."¹² These definitions mean that African art would have to be looked at simply for its pleasing appearance and beauty. Therefore, African art would not be displayed in a manner that would reflect its spiritual and utilitarian meaning. A strictly "art" approach would take away African art's fullest meaning.

During the 1980s and 1990s, African art was shown in art museums with increasing frequency. Many anthropologists and art historians began to question if African art should or could be displayed as simply "art." Some scholars argue that if Africans themselves do not view the work that they create as "art," how can the Western world define it as such? Anthropologists point out that African peoples do not have a word that equals the Western definition of art. Susan Vogel, an art historian, has examined the differences between the Western definition of art and the

¹⁰ *Id.* at 60.

¹¹ Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. (1984). Boston, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc. p. 105.

¹² *Id.*

African definition. She writes that her "Baule friends and neighbors do not recognize a category of object that corresponds to "art," and do not identify an "art experience." Therefore, "art can not be described from the Baule point of view because their view does not include art in the Western sense of the word."¹³ She writes,

. . . eventually I was forced to recognize that their understandings and appreciation of these objects were the opposite of those I had learned from a Western museum culture; theirs focused on the spiritual presence associated with the object, and were only marginally concerned with the physical form of the object, while mine place high value on the tangible, man-made object and involved the suspicion that the metaphysical dimension was not available even vicariously.¹⁴

According to Vogel, Africans do not define the objects they create as art, and therefore, she questions how the Western world could define these objects as art. This theory, that if Africans do not have a word for "art," then the objects they create can not be considered to be "art" by Westerners standards, is not accepted by all art historians and anthropologists. Others argue that this is an ethnocentric view that undervalues African art. Proposing that Africans do not see their creations as art work undermines the creativity, artistic skills and vision of African peoples. Just because Africans do not have a word for art does not necessarily mean that Westerners and Africans view their art differently.

This controversy highlights the difficulties associated with the display of African art. An exclusive ethnographic/anthropological approach can not provide African art with its best context for display, providing the visitor with the fullest understanding of African art. Likewise, an exclusive aesthetic approach does not fully explain to the complexity of African art. Each isolated

¹³ Vogel, Susan M. African Art Western Eyes. (1997). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 64.

approach does not provide a context that fosters understanding of the art piece to visitors who are unfamiliar with African cultures and art. To provide a context that fosters the fullest understanding and appreciation of African art, museums must combine both approaches. However, to understand the approach taken by each museum, we must first analyze the history of the natural history/anthropology museum's approach as well as the art museum's approach.

¹⁴ Id. at 17.

Chapter 2

African Art as a Curiosity

Noah was the first collector. Adam had given names to the animals, but it fell to Noah to collect them: 'And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou vying kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. (Genesis 6.19-20).¹⁵

John Elsner and Roger Cardinal assert that individuals have been collecting objects from the beginning of time, such as Noah, who is perhaps the first great collector. They theorized that this need to collect touches every individual on some level, from little girls with doll collections, little boys with bug collections, to adults with porcelain collections and baseball collections. Collecting takes many different forms, and exists on many different levels. The theories and practices of collecting have continually evolved, from small to elaborate personal collections, to institutional collections such as the museum. The museum embodies and institutionalizes the ideals of collecting and preserving. To understand where African art fits into the present day museum, it is necessary to review the development of this institution.¹⁶

The first recognized "public," or non-private collection on a large scale, has become known as the cabinet of curiosities. The name stems from the theories and treatment of the objects that were collected. Pomian described the cabinet of curiosity as the "Hoarding of rare, exceptional, extraordinary, exotic and monstrous things," since the end of the Middle Ages,

¹⁵ Cardinal, Roger and John Elsner (eds.). "Introduction." (1994). The Cultures of Collecting. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 1

¹⁶ Id. at 2-3.

c. 1550.¹⁷

Cabinets of curiosity initially emerged from medieval concepts of aesthetics and allegory. These concepts were based on the inclusiveness of the European view of the world. The cabinets of curiosity did not distinguish between objects found in nature (natural curiosities), and those created by exceptional craftsmen (artificial curiosities). The Renaissance initially accepted the significance of collections as expressed through this medieval reasoning. However, at a later time, the theological reasoning of the Middle Ages was slowly transformed into the secular rationalization. Collectors now sought rare, exotic, and extraordinary testaments to a world subject to Divine caprice. The cabinets of curiosities became the “allegorical mirror reflecting a perfect and completed picture of the world.”¹⁸ The collector sought perfection, and between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the height of popularity of the cabinet of curiosity, their collections were far from being whimsical, but rather collections of great and rare objects.¹⁹

The cabinet of curiosity influenced the basic ideas that would govern collecting. Hence, the history of the cabinet of curiosity affected how African art is seen today. Objects were often treated more as curiosities and representations of the “other,” rather than testaments to the culture and the creators of the object. Curious objects had an aura of wonder, or even disgust, but were never meant to be truly understood or studied. Furthermore, objects created by man received the same treatment as natural objects such as insect specimens. These are some of the concepts that

¹⁷ Shelton, Anthony Alan. “Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collections and the Incorporation of the New World.” (1994). In John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.), The Cultures of Collecting. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 184.

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Id. at 203.

later influence the reception of African art.²⁰

The lack of distinction made between the natural object and the man-made object drew the attention of Thomas who writes about the "artificial curiosities" obtained by explorer Captain James Cook on his voyages to the Pacific. Museums sponsored explorations such as the one made by Cook in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a method to acquire artifacts. The artifacts collected from the native peoples of the Pacific by Cook, can be directly compared to the artifacts obtained from the native people of Africa. Official narratives of Cook's voyages illustrate ethnographic artifacts such as masks, clubs, spears, ornaments, and head-dresses in a decontextualized manner. In other words, the objects were divorced from their use. However, while these objects were presented with a lack of context, illustrations that depict accounts of Cook's landing on Hawaii are full of elaborate detail. These pictures were "saturated with human purpose, with human difference . . ." ²¹ The artifacts, however, were treated as specimens.

Thomas writes:

. . . though the objects are of course the products of human work and craft, they are abstracted from human uses and purposes; the very possibility of displaying 'weapons and ornaments' in a single assemblage indicates the extent to which the things imaged are decontextualized, and their use made irrelevant.²²

This treatment of the artifact stems from the treatment objects received in the cabinet of curiosity. The meaning of an ethnographic object is found or reflected in its functions; however, by decontextualizing the objects collected by Cook and other explorers, the museum stripped the object of its meaning. When the object is foreign or strange, it exacerbates the

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

decontextualization. In the 1770s, an African carving was novel and strange as were many of the other artifacts brought back by explorers.

The way in which the cabinet of curiosity displayed objects decontextualized them further. In the second half of the nineteenth century, institutions arranged artifacts on walls in a fashion reminiscent of the printed images of that period, with an emphasis on symmetrical form. Furthermore, museums placed their "finds" or "discoveries" in glass boxes, isolating them as unique and "other", devoid of the object's ethnology. Michael M. Ames writes about the display of artifacts during this time period:

Museums preserve history and nature by taming them both, subjecting them to the technical control of the designers and fabricators and the conceptual control of the curators. Museums place history, nature, and traditional societies under glass, in artificially constructed dioramas and tableaux, thus sanitizing, insulating, plasticizing, and preserving them as attractions and simple lessons aids.²³

The immediate model for the treatment of artifacts in Cook's collections and museum collections, in general, derived from the conventions of natural history illustration. This is the theoretical foundation of the institutions that would come to display African Art. The European model of the museum was imported into the United States of America in the 1800s. These institutions emerged based on the European ideology of the museum.

The history of the American museum begins with the foundation of The National Museum of the United States, known today as the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian Museum was founded during the 1850s with a bequest from Englishman James Smithson. The Museum was

²² *Id.* at 120.

²³ Ames, Michael M. Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes. (1992). Vancouver: UBC Press. p. 4.

established in the American capital of Washington D.C., in accordance with Smithson's bequest "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." Today, the National Museum of Natural History represents the classical model of a distinguished museum, with its seven disciplinary departments representing biology, anthropology, and earth science. The Smithsonian became an umbrella for a number of museums focusing on a variety of disciplines. A case study of the National Museum of Natural History demonstrates the problems surrounding the display of African art in museum contexts.²⁴

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

The African Hall in the National Museum of Natural History opened in the early twentieth century. The hall was the product of the late Victorian thinking that advocated the primacy of Western civilizations and misinterpreted the actions and intentions of other cultures. Mary Jo Arnoldi, the curator of African ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History, pointed out that the first African hall, opening in 1922, adopted the vision of Africa and Africans held by one of its early donors, artist and collector Herbert Ward. The style of the exhibition tended to support "... an already popular discourse of misunderstanding about the African continent and its people."²⁵ Ward's gift of 2,700 objects and other material was installed in a manner similar to the style of the cabinet of curiosities. Objects were installed behind glass boxes, devoid of context, and complicated by the addition of zoological specimens. Further, the exhibit categorized

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Kreamer, Christine Mullen. "African Voices." (November/December, 1997). Museum

Africans in heroic, idealized postures. This exhibit remained on display for more than 40 years.²⁶

In 1961, the African hall closed for modernization. The modernization included the removal of the zoological specimens and most of the bronze artifacts. In order to provide the collection with diversity, the museum integrated the Ward collection into the new exhibit.

Although the curator attempted to incorporate greater diversity and use current anthropological thinking, by the time the exhibit opened in the mid-1960s, the exhibition concept had once again become obsolete. Functionalism, a prevailing anthropological theory during the 1960s, dominated the hall. Curators arranged African art according to the functionalist categories of weapons, ornaments, currency and domestic life, and divided the art according to geographic areas and specific cultural groups.²⁷

The functionalist model failed to convey the diverse ways in which African people used the objects and chose to live their lives. This model inadvertently communicated to the audience, who had little knowledge of Africa or its people, a sense of stasis and timelessness. This reinforced the misconception that non-Western cultures do not change and thus are radically different from Western culture.²⁸

This functionalist model pigeonholed the display of African art for another thirty years, not only by the Smithsonian museum but all museums that based themselves on the same theoretical ideas. In 1992, the National Museum of Natural History closed its African hall once again for renovation. This decision followed after almost a year of complaints that the hall's display

News. p. 51.

²⁶ Id.

²⁷ Id.

²⁸ Id. at 52.

neglected the rich and complex history of Africa, and that exhibit text described aspects of African cultures in terms that were outdated, misleading and offensive. The curators, aware of the many problems associated with the thirty-year old African hall, lobbied the administration for substantial renovations.²⁹

Curators, museum staff, and the public criticized the African hall for a number of reasons: the lack of documentation of Africa's long history, failure to mention Africa's contributions to world civilization, particularly in the areas of science and technology, and the lack of acknowledgment of Africa's active engagement in shaping world cultures. For instance, individuals and scholars criticized the hall for the absence of displays about Egyptian civilization, although Egyptian displays existed as part of the Mediterranean world in the museum's Hall of Western Civilization. Outdated anthropological paradigms reinforced stereotypes about Africa as timeless, unchanging and violent. Displays did not capture the diversity of African cultures. The displays contained text that used outdated nomenclature such as *bushman* and *pygmy* and used culturally loaded terms, such as *fetish*, *goblin*, *pagan* and *black magic*. It was also stressed that the hall suggested that the museum did not respect the subject matter and the cultures of Africa because of its lack of concern in depicting Africa as an alive, changing and vibrant place.³⁰

Under the mounting public scrutiny and pressure, the Museum administration was called before the U.S. House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds to respond to concerns about the African hall and to account for the quality and current scholarly content of the exhibits. The African hall closed later that year for renovations. The committee

²⁹ Id.

³⁰ Id.

decided that changing exhibit labels, painting the walls, and adding new lighting would not suffice; a complete renovation needed to take place. Development of a new Hall of African History and Culture was critical.

The Museum conducted audience research to determine how the new hall should target the interest of, and challenge the preconceptions about Africa held by the National Museum of Natural History's diverse audience. The research resulted in the themes, *African diversity and dynamism--historical and contemporary*. These themes will be the focus of the new hall. The hall will include a "History Pathway" that will concentrate on nine specific moments in Africa's history and highlight ideas and topics presented in four thematic galleries. The galleries examine work, wealth, living spaces, and the African Diaspora. The galleries will feature objects from the museum's collection, and present contemporary stories and comments from African men and women.³¹

The curators of the new exhibits recognize that African cultures, just as any other culture, are dynamic and changing. To ensure that the National Museum of Natural History incorporates the changing culture and scholarship, certain precautions have been undertaken. Changing elements have been incorporated into the "permanent" halls that will have a life span of two to three years. The life span of two to three years is based on the life span of conceptual frameworks in anthropology.³²

The National Museum of Natural History is considering a number of strategies that will keep the hall up to date. They are considering exhibit designs that allow easy access to case

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 54.

interiors, furnishings, and brackets so that objects and text can be changed. Other strategies include a changing exhibit component within some galleries. One idea for the changing component is a "Focus Gallery" that will be updated about every eighteen months. This gallery will originate from other institutions, local and regional, and will highlight particular areas of the permanent collection not appropriate for long-term exhibition. Another idea under consideration is an exhibit called "Africa in the News," which will present a broader and more comprehensive treatment of issues receiving media coverage and study. Furthermore, a resource center and a web-site, both of which can be updated on a regular basis, are also being considered.³³

These new ideas will bring the African Hall into the twentieth century. It is important for all museums to recognize the negative aspects of their halls or displays, many of which have been identified by the National Museum of Natural History, and take action. Natural history/anthropology museums have had a history of taking objects out of their proper context and exhibiting them as the "other," a curiosity to be looked at in wonder, not always in an educational light.

The problems associated with the display of African art in history/anthropology museum should not overshadow the advantages of this display setting. History/anthropology museums contextualize objects on display. This context provides information as to where the object is from, how the object is used, and who used the object. This context makes an unfamiliar object understandable and provides the viewer with a connection to the piece that they did not have before. Most museum visitors who visit the Africa hall or an African display may never go to Africa and may know little about Africa. Therefore, it is extremely important that a visitor

³³ Id.

experiences the object and has the fullest understanding possible. This is the only way a museum can foster the best possible understanding between the object and the visitor.

Chapter 3

African Art, Art for Art's sake

... most of those who work regularly with arts have become, over the past century or more, so steeped in this aesthetic emphasis that they cannot readily imagine that the works of art were once valued not for what they looked like but for the things that they were able to do --inspire, instruct, incite, inform, and more. Martha Woodmansee, "Courtly Ghost and Aristocratic Artifacts: The Art Museum as a Palace"³⁴

At the start of the twentieth century, art museums began to collect African art. This acquisition marked the acceptance of African art as art—art for art's sake. African art began to be displayed in the art museum, devoid of its ethnographic heritage. The theoretical foundation of the art museum now influenced the display of African art. This foundation greatly differed from the natural history/anthropology museum. This chapter examines the history and the theoretical background of the art museum. Furthermore, the chapter identifies both the advantages and disadvantages of display of African art in the art museum.

Stephen E Weil explores the display and treatment art received in the art museums. Weil writes, "A hierarchy exists in which unique works of art are positioned at the museum's summit as if by divine and unquestionable right."³⁵ Between the years 1905 and 1910, two art museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, turned away from their primarily educational focus that they had established in the 1870s. Both institutions determined, individually, that they would begin to emphasize aesthetic rather than instructional aspects of the art they chose to acquire and display. One individual urging museums to focus on aesthetics was

³⁴ Weil, Stephen. "Courtly Ghosts and Aristocratic Artifacts: The Art Museum as a Palace." (November/December 1998). Museum News. p. 45.

³⁵ Id.

Benjamin Ives Gilman, the long-time secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Art. Gilman wrote that a museum of science gathers primarily in the interest of the real, while a collection of art primarily is gathered in the interest of the ideal. Therefore, a museum of science is in essence a school, and a museum of art is in essence a temple. He believed that The Boston Museum of Fine Arts should be a temple.³⁶

The Met's decision originated among its board of trustees. The change envisioned by the board indirectly involved the ideological question of what weight should be given to the museum's educational aspects in the future. The Museum would no longer collect plaster casts and secondary works of art, but would now focus its attention and funds at acquiring "genuine" works of art. This change of focus is attributed to the time period from 1904 to 1913, when J. P. Morgan presided over the board. Calvin Tompkins, in *Merchant and Masterpieces*, characterizes this crucial time period for the Met as follows:

The concept of the museum underwent a fundamental change. No longer would the Metropolitan defer to European institutions, or limit itself to the utilitarian and educational ideals of the South Kensington Museum. Cast, reproduction, and second rate works of art might still retain some usefulness for artisans and students, but the emphasis had shifted unmistakably to the great and original masterpieces, the treasure that old Europe proved only to willing, after all, to relinquish.³⁷

Through the Met's effort to acquire only unique masterpieces, their focus shifted from education to aesthetics. Martha Woodmansee in her 1994 study, *The Author, Art and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, talks about the growing importance of aesthetics:

... most of those who work regularly with arts have become, over the past century or more, so steeped in this aesthetic emphasis that they cannot readily

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

imagine that the works of art were once valued not for what they looked like but for the things that they were able to do --inspire, instruct, incite, inform, and more.³⁸

Not all museums limited themselves to the limitless acquisition of exquisite things. At The Newark Museum, in Newark, New Jersey, John Cotton Dana developed his own theories as to what an art museum should collect. Dana was perhaps America's greatest advocate of the museum as a community based educational center. John Cotton Dana once said:

Probably no more useless public institution, useless relatively to its cost, was ever devised than that popular ideal, the classical building of the museum of art, filled with rare and costly objects...and its permits those who visit it to put on certain inducements of culture which, although they do not conceal aesthetic nakedness, inhibit the free exercise of both intellect and sensibility . . . some part at least of what it does be capable of clear description and downright valuation.³⁹

However John Cotton Dana and The Newark Museum remained the exception to the growing lure of aesthetics. The Met relinquished its role as an educator and focused on the aesthetics of art. The Met accumulated more and more exquisite objects. This new focus resulted in a hierarchy of art. Art was to be measured on a scale of aesthetic purity and commodity value. A ranking of high or low on this scale depended on the degree to which the object was free of utility, beyond its capacity to produce an aesthetic response. The museum assigned those objects suitable to simple contemplation to the top of the scale, and those objects with increasing degrees of utility to the bottom of the scale. Objects wholly utilitarian and perceived to lack any aesthetic value, generally, fell outside the art museum's collection.⁴⁰

At the bottom of this new hierarchy, sometimes separated into a smaller collections or

³⁸ *Id.* at 46.

³⁹ Grove, Richard. "John Cotton Dana." (May/June 1978). *Museum News*. p. 33.

⁴⁰ Weil, Stephen. "Courtly Ghosts and Aristocratic Artifacts: The Art Museum as a Palace." (November/December 1998). *Museum News*. p. 49.

departments of their own, are categories of objects such as Decorative arts. Decorative art is useful, and therefore must be placed on the bottom of the scale of aesthetic purity. In addition, Decorative art may exist in multiple copies, and is therefore considered not unique, and must be placed on the bottom of the scale of the commodity value.⁴¹

At the intermediate level of this hierarchy of art are craft objects. Craft objects may be highly regarded on the grounds that they are unique and are that they are entirely hand crafted by an individual, but are barred from the topmost rank because, by definition, they are useful. Also, placed at this intermediate level, are those objects that were created in multiples. This category includes tapestries, fine art prints, photographs, and sculptures made in limited editions. Although they satisfy the criteria of uselessness, these objects, by definition, are never unique and therefore are also barred from the uppermost ranks.⁴²

Finally, in this hierarchy of art, the rarefied works of art are those few objects that are placed in the uppermost ranks. These works of art score highest on both the scale of aesthetic purity and the scale of commodity. These works of art include autographed, hand-made paintings and individually carved sculptures. They are those works of art that rank last in usefulness and rank first in costliness, and are by far the most celebrated objects that an art museum collects and displays.⁴³

The art museum's hierarchy of art came to determine the context in which African art came to be displayed in. Attention now focused on the purely aesthetics characteristics of African art. To uncover how African art is displayed in the art museum and what changes have been

⁴¹ Id.

⁴² Id.

implemented in the display of African art, the next sections will examine the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met)

The Met's first major collection of African art was gifted to the museum in 1972 by Nelson A. Rockefeller in memory of Michael C. Rockefeller. The collection, however, was not displayed until the Metropolitan's Rockefeller Wing opened in 1982. The opening of a wing dedicated to African art in one of the most prestigious American art museums signified to many in the art world, that African art was now on an equal footing with the other world art. The Rockefeller wing signified the permanent acceptance of African art in the art museum. How African art was to be displayed in this new setting, however, was not discussed.⁴⁴

The 1982 installation of African art in the Met relied on dark colors and spotlights that created a dramatic setting. African art was displayed according to geographic origins in enclosed spaces that compelled the visitor to stop and contemplate each object. Text labels on the adjacent walls accompanied each piece, however, little information was provided beyond the origin and donor of the piece. The text did not offer any information as to what the objects were or what the objects were used for. The exhibition soon appeared outdated and was taken down.⁴⁵

A new permanent exhibition of African art opened at the Met in February of 1996. This

⁴³ Id.

⁴⁴ Brincard, Marie-Thérèse. "Reinstallation of the Permanent Collection." (Summer 1997). African Arts. p. 82.

⁴⁵ Id.

installation, like the older one, was organized by geographic origins. But within the new installation, a more coherent and fluid grouping exists. Approximately 100 objects were added to the 300 already on display. The new material represents the Benin kingdom, part of a gift made by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls to the museum in 1991. The objects gifted and displayed included architectural plaques and adornments of cast brass and ivory made between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The Benin collection is further represented by major pieces from the Michael C. Rockefeller collection.⁴⁶

Marie-Thérèse Brincard reviewed the Met's new installation of African art. Brincard notes that the addition of objects to the gallery's 6,200 squared feet of space did not create a crowded impression. The designer succeeded in creating an overall impression of openness, achieved through the use of double see-through vitrines. The use of wall colors, and a generous use of flood and spotlights, enhance the feeling of openness in the gallery. Others, however, may feel that the see-through vitrines are distracting. It is difficult to examine an African object when the visitor can look through the glass and see multiple objects in the background.⁴⁷

The wall text that accompanies the objects again offers minimal information beyond the geographic origin, ethnic group, and donor. The text fails to explain the cultural significance of the object to the visitor. While the physical space has been updated in the exhibition, the presentation of African art continues to stress the aesthetics of the objects. However, even the aesthetics of the objects are not being addressed in the accompanying text. Label text makes little reference to form, style, artist, iconography, or technique. Only by relating cultural and aesthetic

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ Id.

information in the text, can a visitor come to a fuller understanding of African art.

The use of photographs in the exhibition marks a new approach taken by the Met. Through the use of photographs, the Met attempts to incorporate some context into the exhibition. One photograph used in the exhibition is a 1920s photograph of a bare-breasted Luba woman with scarification. This photograph is displayed in the case devoted to "Emblems and Leadership" from the Luba area. The photograph accompanies a display of stools, pronged bow stands, and staffs. While there is also scarification patterns on the objects in the case, the connection between the photograph and the objects is not clear. In this case, the photograph detracts from the exhibition rather than enhancing it.⁴⁸

Art museums have traditionally provided minimal text and accompanying visuals in the display of African art. The Met currently seeks to provide African art with a more complete context. However, more needs to be done to properly provide meaningful context and insight. The use of material such as photographs needs to be chosen carefully or they can detract from the exhibition and confuse the visitor. The art museum is taking a step in the right direction, but needs to go a little further.

While the aesthetic of African art is important, the viewer should also understand the cultural significance of the objects. The Met highlights how African Art is being displayed in a traditional art museum. Newly created art museums attempt innovative approaches to the display of African art. One example of a new art museum taking innovative approaches to the display of African art is the National Museum of African Art.

National Museum of African Art (NMAFA), Smithsonian Institution

The National Museum of African Art was founded three decades ago by Warren M. Robbins under the umbrella of the Smithsonian Institution. Robbins asserts that he has tried to "foster both a recognition of the broader educational value of traditional African art and, related to it, a reconsideration of the ultimate purpose of the art museum in an egalitarian society."⁴⁹ The National Museum of African Art's mission states:

As a leading center for the visual arts of Africa, the National Museum of African Art (NMAFA) foster and sustains--through exhibitions, collections, research, and public programs--an interest in and an understanding of the diverse cultures in Africa as these are embodied in aesthetic achievements in the visual arts. The museum accepts into its collections and exhibits the art of all African areas, including the ancient and contemporary arts for the entire continent.⁵⁰

The mission statement calls for a change in the way museums display African art. The mission states that African art should neither be displayed in the context of natural history/anthropology, nor in the context of aesthetics, nor in the context of art education, but rather to combine all of these contexts. Only a combination of these approaches provides a fuller understanding of African art. Robbins writes that this will allow objects "to project well beyond the circumstances of their origin and to become implements of cross-cultural understanding."⁵¹ In contrast to art museums, which attracts essentially art-oriented audiences, exhibitions of "African art" draw a much broader cross-section of Americans having other social, political, or cultural

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Robbins, Warren M. "Making the Galleries Sing: Displaying African Art." (November/October 1999). *Museum News*. p. 37.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

motivations. Therefore, exhibitions that focus on multiple contexts will better reach this broader audience.⁵²

African art displayed in the art museum has many cultural meanings that need to be addressed. Within their original cultures, sculpture, utilitarian objects, textiles, and articles of personal adornment served important communicative functions. Now these same objects play a new, radically different and important communicative function in the museum. In museums the display of African objects conveys the creativity of African peoples. African objects provide a basis for conveying, across cultural barriers, an awareness of the moral, social, and spiritual values so powerfully reflected in traditional African art.⁵³

Robbins's focus has been on the educational role that museums and galleries can play if they move beyond a purely ethnographic or purely aesthetic viewpoint. It is possible for public collections of African art to serve effectively both professional (academic research) and public (educational) goals. A museum can factor into the display of African art aesthetic quality, authenticity, accurate classification, conservation, and original research. This type of display can be emphasized for the specialist, curator, and scholar. Many academics still, however, strive for certain purity in the public presentation of African Art. That is, they attempt to display African art devoid of context afraid it will interfere with the "purity" of the object.

Text does not interfere with the purity of African art. African objects were made to be used and consumed, not displayed. Therefore, the very fact that African art is displayed at all changes its meaning. Providing text does not further destroy the piece's meaning or "purity."

⁵¹ Id.

⁵² Id.

Exhibition text or labels provide crucial indications of how effectively a museum is communicating its message to its public audience. The purpose of the label in a gallery is to enlighten the visitor as to the piece's identity, meaning and purpose. The label must be composed in a manner to be relevant to the concerns and interests of those who are expected to read it. To be effective, the label should use understandable descriptive terms, and it should convey information that provides the viewer with an understanding of the purpose and meaning of the object. Labels should stimulate viewers to create personal connections with the object.⁵⁴

Text provides African art with needed context. However, more needs to be done in order to reach the visitor. African art needs a context that will let it stand for itself, not overcrowded with numerous objects or set alone in a display like modern art. There are a number of things a museum can do to create an expanded context for African art. The use of blown up photographs, slide show, or music may express the context and origin of African art.

A museum can create discrete spaces and groupings that help the viewer understand and give structure to a multitude of visual impressions. The use of warm earthen tones can suggest the colors of the tropical or subtropical environment. The stark white paint commonly used on gallery walls is not only totally uncharacteristic of Africa, but it blinds the viewer's eyes to the nuance of sculptural style and surface. White often makes the figures look darker and foreboding. Installing dramatic lights helps restore to certain works their original evocative power. This lighting would replace dark and often dreary anthropology displays where the work is not clearly

⁵³ *Id.* at 38.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

seen and the details and beauty of the sculpture are lost in the shadows.⁵⁵

In addition, the display case, a necessity due to security and protection purposes, also needs to be reevaluated. The display case separates the viewer from the object. This creates a visual and psychological distance between the work and viewer, who is usually unfamiliar with non-Western art. To transcend this barrier, galleries should be laid out with no objects in the center space, so viewers entering the gallery find themselves surrounded by the sculpture on all sides. If visitors feel that they are inside, the glass barrier becomes less obtrusive. Further, display cases should never be arranged so viewers may look through them, seeing objects beyond, thus causing distractions as is the case of the Met.⁵⁶

A new approach to the grouping of African art may also help the visitor to understand African art more fully. African art would be best displayed if multiple examples of certain categories of sculpture were exhibited together. Instead of isolating the aesthetic quality of one example of a Baule mask, a number of masks would compound recognition of their unique dynamism. It would also reveal the remarkable diversity within the one particular tradition. The display of six, ten or more examples of a Baule mask would help the visitor to recognize the difference of form and style in African art. It also places a mask that might be viewed as scary, in a more palatable context of related styles. The display then would stress the stylistic relationships, rather than the negatively perceived character, of any particular example. Exhibiting categories of objects in multiples is often seen as a characteristic of a natural history/anthropology museum. The incorporation of this feature into an art museum may enhance the aesthetic appreciation of

⁵⁵ Id.

⁵⁶ Id. at 41.

the object.⁵⁷

Instituting ideas such as these can enhance the display of African art in the natural/history museum and the art museum. In the art museum, this would render the artwork less aloof and forbidding. In the anthropology museum, it would make the object stand out, make it unique and therefore more significant. The National Museum of African Art can be considered a new style art museum. Its own theoretical history is vastly different from the traditional art museum, such as the Met. The new ideas that the National Museum of African Art incorporates into their exhibitions represent concepts that the natural history/anthropology museum and the traditional art museum could incorporate as well. The combination of approaches enables the visitor to examine African art on a number of levels, thus helping the visitor come to a fuller understanding of African art.

These are some of the new approaches and ideas that museums can look at to expand their display of African art. Presently, both the natural history/anthropology museum and the art museum are looking to a very different place to exhibit their art. Museums are now using the world-wide web as a new medium to exhibit African art. The web can be an exciting new place to find African art and it may be surprising how some museums are exhibiting African art on the internet.

⁵⁷ Id.

Chapter 4

“www.AfricanArt.com” African art on the Internet

The internet is revolutionizing the display of African art. As millions of people access the internet and search the world-wide web, information technology has become a platform to sell, advertise, inform, and entertain. This new medium is very relevant to the museum, becoming a place for the museum to reach a greater audience. Museums not only advertise their collections on the web, but they also create online exhibitions. The museum website has become a museum gallery. A museum no longer has to convince a potential visitor to travel across town or even state to their institution, because now the audience can visit the museum without ever having to leave their homes. Not only can audiences visit a museum without moving an inch, but they can do so across the country, across the continent, and at any time, day or night.

Though the internet can never replace the actual museum experience, it does provide an additional platform to display and educate audiences on African art. However, even this new exhibition space poses similar challenges to those faced by the traditional museum. What objects are to be displayed and what text should accompany the objects must be addressed. Such questions remain just as important as if these objects were on display in the physical museum. Hence, the electronic exhibition has both advantages and disadvantages. This chapter explores a number of websites, examining both the positive and negative aspects of electronic display. Whether the internet offers museums an alternative approach to the display of African art will also be examined. There are numerous museum websites on African Art available to the electronic

audience. Museums have approached electronic exhibits in a variety of ways. Some museums simply list directions and collection contents, others highlight exhibitions, and some create online exhibitions.

Bayly Art Museum, University of Virginia

Electronic Catalogue

The Bayly Art Museum at the University of Virginia maintains its own website called an electronic exhibition catalogue. The museum uses the website to routinely mount small exhibitions from its permanent collections. The electronic exhibits are undocumented except by explanatory labels which accompany each object. The electronic exhibition catalog is based on ASCII text files that are prepared at the time of the show, and incorporate images scanned from slides.⁵⁸

The Bayly Art Museum's electronic exhibition *African Art: Aesthetics and Meaning* is dated as of January 25 - August 15, 1993 (though the exhibit was still posted as of December, 1999). The main page lists the table of contents as follows:

Introduction
Elements of the African Aesthetic
The Exhibition
Bibliography
About the Electronic Catalog
Credits

⁵⁸ An Electronic Exhibition Catlog. Charlottesville, VA: Bayly Art Museum, University of Virginia. (12 December 1999.) <www.lib.virginia.edu/duc/exhib/93.ray.aa/African.html>

Clicking onto *Introduction*, the virtual visitor views a description of the exhibition. The introduction stresses the importance of looking at the aesthetics and related moral and religious values of African art. The viewer also learns about the moral dimensions of any piece of African art. This moral dimension is indicated by the fact that in many African languages the same word means both "beautiful" and "good." The introduction proceeds to explain that the objects displayed on the site both exemplify African aesthetic and moral principles as well as representing some of the finest pieces in the Bayly's collection. The visitor is then asked to "click here" to continue.⁵⁹

The next electronic page presents key elements of African aesthetic such as: resemblance to a human being; luminosity; self-composure; youthfulness; clarity of form and detail; complexity of composition; balance and symmetry; and smoothness of finish. The pages reference Susan M. Vogel's catalogue, *African Aesthetics*, New York: Center for African Art, 1986. From here, the visitor can click to see the exhibition.⁶⁰

The exhibition includes fourteen objects: a Soweï mask, Mende, Sierre Leone and Liberia; a Chi Wara Headdress (male), Bamana, Mali Republic; a Chi Wara Headdress (female), Bamana, Mali Republic; a EPA Headdress, Yoruba, Nigeria; a Akua'Ba Female Statuette, Asante, Ghana; a Bagle Mask, Wee, Liberia & Côte d'Ivoire; a Tankagle mask, Dan Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire; a Gelede Headdress, Yoruba, Nigeria; a Ere Ibeji twin figures, Yoruba, Nigeria; a Blolo Bla, Female figure, Baule, Ivory Coast; a Family Group, Makonde, Tanzania; a Heddle Pulleys, Senufo, Ivory Coast; a Heddle Pulley, with hornbill figure, Senufo, Ivory Coast; a Heddle Pulley,

⁵⁹ *Id.* at <www.lib.virginia.edu/duc/exhib/93.ray.aa/Exhibition.html>

⁶⁰ *Id.*

with spirit face, Senufo, Ivory Coast; a Heddle pulley, with face mask, Senufo, Ivory Coast.⁶¹

Each photograph is hyperlinked, that is it can be clicked onto, to an enlarged image with a caption. The captions are identical to wall text found in the museum. The text relates the object's name, the origin and the ethnic group that created the object. Each image is accompanied with a long description of the object. For example, the Soweï Mask, Mende Sierrre Leone and Liberia, Wood has the following descriptive text:

This mask is worn over the head of a female elder who dances for the Sande women's society. The mask displays and celebrates Mende ideals of female beauty and virtue: elaborately braided hair (cosmetic skills, sexuality); neck creased (full-bodied, good health; smooth, broad forehead* (nobility intelligence); lowered eyes (contemplativeness, restraint); well shaped ears; small nose; small mouth (not given to gossip); composed expression (inner serenity); smooth skin (youthfulness). All these feature are exaggerated in the mask, its three thick rows of braided hair, large neck folds, wide forehead, diminutive nose and mouth, and polished surface. The bird figure (missing its head & tail) perched on top of the coiffure has many meanings: clairvoyance, love, fertility, power, danger, discipline, prudence, and laughter. The mask's shining Blackness connotes the essence of female beauty and moral purity.⁶²

This in-depth description elaborates on the details of the mask, explaining its use and the meaning behind the workmanship. The description points out the aesthetic meanings of an object that looks very foreign and perhaps strange to the visitor. It explains that what the visitor considers ugly may be viewed as beautiful and significant in African cultures. Here, an emphasis on the aesthetics does not leave the visitor questioning what exactly that aesthetic is. Other descriptions include the importance of the object in the culture, what it represents and how the object is used. The description, in turn, explains and helps the viewer to connect with the object.

⁶¹ Id.

⁶² Id.

The text provided is more detailed than the text that accompanies an object in a conventional museum exhibition. The website as a medium allows more information to accompany the object, providing context for the viewer. The Bayly Art Museum combines the natural history/anthropology and art museum approach. The exhibit emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions as an art museum would, but also provides text to put the object into a context as the natural history/anthropology museum would.

Here, the website seems to foster descriptions beyond wall text, beyond the simple identification of the region, people, and year the object originates from. It does this without sacrificing the aesthetics of the object. The website provides further options for the display of African art. There are small discrepancies however. The site lists the same country by its French name and English name, Côte d'Ivoire and The Ivory Cost. This might confuse a visitor who did not realize that the two names are for the same country. This discrepancy can be easily fixed by taking a bit more care.

National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

Website

The National Museum of Natural History approaches its website as an information tool, detailing floor plans, programs, departments, and research facilities. The website does not include detailed images of objects or exhibitions, but rather, it informs the visitor as to what is available in its facility. When visiting the website of the National Museum of Natural History, the virtual visitor is introduced to the enormity of the museum and its collections. The website lists the

Museum's permanent collections as *gems, fossils, birds, mammals, and human cultures*. The museum is a maze of the human and animal worlds.⁶³

Searching for the African hall in the Museum's online directory was difficult. While floor maps detailed the exhibits, it was particularly difficult to find exactly where the African hall is located. The first floor map included the listing for *African Elephant/Rotunda, Asian cultures, Dinosaurs, Fossil lab, Human evolution, Native cultures of the Americas, Pacific cultures*, and more, but no listing for African cultures. The ground floor listing included the *Baird auditorium, Birds of Washington D.C., Naturalist Center that includes Earth Sciences, Life Sciences, and Anthropology* and more. The second floor listing includes *the zoo, butterfly habitation Garden, origins of western culture, reptiles and amphibians*, and more.⁶⁴

Exactly where the African hall is located is left in question, as far as the floor maps detail. Searching under "African hall" in the website's search engine provides the visitor with information regarding the hall's renovation. A paragraph explains that although several new exhibits have been added recently, many of the permanent exhibits are between ten to thirty years old. Presently the Office of Exhibits is working to upgrade and renovate many of them. Some areas need the adjusting of labels, adding videotapes, displaying information on current research, and discussing environmental issues. In other halls the exhibits themselves will be upgraded, allowing for objects to be displayed in new contexts. Other halls, such as the marine life hall and the African hall, need to be completely renovated. The website lists the future halls to be renovated as the gem hall, human culture halls, and the exhibit on early cultures. The site informs the visitor

⁶³ National Museum of Natural History Page. Smithsonian Institution. (10 March 1999.) <www.mnh.si.edu/>

on general museum information but does not provide any in-depth information on the exhibitions or in particular, African art.⁶⁵

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Website

The National Museum of African Art features a comprehensive website. The site lists the Museum's permanent and temporary exhibitions along with a small description of each exhibition.

A listing of the permanent exhibitions include the following: *Ceramics at the National Museum of African Art*; *The Ancient West African City of Benin, A.D.*; *The Art of the Personal Object*; and *Images of Power and Identity*. A temporary exhibition listed, *African Art Western Eyes*, can be viewed online with appropriate software.⁶⁶

Each listing for a permanent exhibition can be clicked onto. When this is done, a more detailed description of the exhibition appears. Clicking onto the permanent exhibition, *Ceramics*, provides a detailed account of some of the 140 ceramic works from the exhibitions. Among the most important of these pieces are a group of 85 vessels from Central Africa. The exhibition also discusses "The Art of Form and Decoration." These paragraphs describe the process of ceramics from retrieving the clay, to the firing of the vessels. The paragraph description comes with a photograph of women in the process of creating ceramics. The women are leaving their pots out

⁶⁴ *Id.* at <www.mnh.si.edu/virtualtour/floormap.html>

⁶⁵ *Id.* at <www.mnh.si.edu/museum.puhprogs.html>

⁶⁶ The National Museum of African Art page. The Smithsonian Institution. (10 March 1999.) <www.si.edu/nmafa/exhibits/crrexhb.htm>

in the sun to dry before firing. Clicking onto this photograph enlarges the image and provides a caption that reads: "Lulua Pottery near Kanaga, Democratic Republic of the Congo."⁶⁷

The exhibition *Ancient African City of Benin* can also be clicked onto. Clicking onto this exhibition provides the visitor with an introduction to the exhibition and divides the exhibition into three sections, the Oba, or King; works revealing the rituals and regalia of the royal court; and items that stylistically reflect the presence of foreigners, particularly Europeans. On the bottom of the web-page there are a series of images and captions. When the visitor clicks onto one of these images, a larger image appears with a description of the meaning or message behind the object. An example of one image that can be clicked onto is "Benin Palace Ancestral Altar, dedicated to Oba, Benin City, Nigeria." The description explains the city-state of Benin and the history of the court, as well as brass casting.⁶⁸

When clicking onto the exhibition titled "The Art of the Personal Object," a series of images with captions appear. These images and captions are listed as follows: a man carving, *introduction*; cup, *leisure*; chair, *rest*; bowl, *home*; stools, *stools*; headrest, *headrest*; snuff, *snuff*; pipes, *pipe*. When an image is clicked onto, it is enlarged and a detailed description of the object follows. Clicking onto the image of a man carving with the caption *Introduction*, provides the visitor with an introduction to African art by Philip Ravenhill, curator. The introduction states the exhibition: "celebrated the creativity of African artists who have made utilitarian objects of great beauty." These objects are both used and seen by the African community. At the bottom of this

⁶⁷ *Id.* at <www.si.edu/nmafa/exhibits/ceramics.htm>

⁶⁸ *Id.* at <www.si.edu/nmafa/exhibits/benintwo.htm>

page the visitor can click onto the other images seen previously.⁶⁹

Clicking onto the bowl with the caption *Home* enlarges the image of the objects and provides the visitor with a description of the artist's home. The bowl's origin is from the Nyro peoples, Uganda, Wood. Home is described as being not so much a physical space as a social place. Home represents both a family space as well as a place where outsiders enter, and therefore, the objects in the house are to be shared with others. At the bottom of the page, the visitor can once again click onto the images seen previously. As before, clicking onto the image of a *Headrest*, c. 1890, Tsonga peoples, Mozambique and South Africa, enlarges the image. Text lists the importance of African Headrests in Tsonga society. The accompanying text describes the headrests as being designed to cradle the neck and support the head. The headrest protects coiffures and elevates the head for sleeping. The text reads: "The support for the Head is generally a curve rectangle, but the legs, pedestals, and decoration demonstrate the cultural invention of form and the elaboration upon form that is the work of the individual artist."⁷⁰ Again, at the bottom of the page images can be clicked onto that will be accompanied by a detailed description of the object.

The National Museum of African Art's website highlights traveling and permanent exhibitions at the museum, in order for visitors to get an idea of what each exhibition is about. Even if the visitor never physically visits a museum, he or she may still have a positive experience with African art. This website provides more detailed text than wall text can provide in a physical museum. The website is able to pass along more information to the visitor than may be possible

⁶⁹ *Id.* at <www.si.edu/nmafa/exhibits/persplash.htm>

⁷⁰ *Id.* at <www.si.edu/nmafa/exhibits/persfive.htm>

in an actual museum. This provision of extra information and context is a very positive aspect of the website.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met)

Website

The Met's website provides context and educational information for African art not available in a physical museum. The Met's home page has a number of icons that can be clicked onto, one of which is *Education*. Clicking onto this icon, another Education page appears. A heading on this page reads, *Looking at Art*. Under this heading is an image with a list of themes. When clicking onto the theme *Symbols in Art*, the following page reads:

Some artists create meaning in their work by using symbols. Some symbols like the American flag, which reminds us of the United States, have a meaning that is easy to understand because we are familiar with them. Other symbols need to be explained. To learn more about symbols in art, click on an image.⁷¹

Two images appear on this page, an Asian sculpture and an African sculpture. Clicking onto the African sculpture enlarges the image and provides a caption that reads "Mother and Child" Mali, Bamana Peoples; 15th-20th century. A description of the sculptural piece and how it was intended to be seen follows. The image is sectioned into boxes that isolate certain characteristics of the sculpture. The visitor can click directly on the box or on the captions below the image. The captions are as follows: *Hunter's cap, face, child, arm knife, beaded band and stool*. Clicking onto the caption or the box enlarges and highlights that particular feature and

⁷¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art page. (10 March 1999.)

provides the visitor with a description of what the characteristic symbolizes. For example, when clicking onto the *Hunter's Cap* the visitor learns it symbolizes *Strength and Power*. The description reads, "This type of headdress is worn by male hunters or warriors, but never by female members of the community. Its appearance on a female sculpture refers to the extraordinary powers and physical strength represented by this figure."⁷² When clicking onto the face of the sculpture, the following text explains to the visitor that the face symbolizes control. The description of the face reads: "This figure presents an image for viewers to emulate. Her broad shoulders and erect posture indicate her physical (external) power, while her contemplative facial expression suggested her internal power." Each characteristic is described in a like manner. This type of detail relates important information to the visitor and provides valuable insight to the aesthetics and the meaning of African art.⁷³

Additional educational web pages can be found under different headings. Clicking on the title page "What makes a portrait a portrait?" brings up a page that juxtaposes a European portrait with an African mask. Clicking onto the African mask provides the visitor with a larger image of the mask along with descriptive text. The mask is captioned as being a "Pendant mask, Nigerian, Court of Benin, 16th century." The text explains that the artists who carved this ivory mask wanted to emphasize the important role this individual played in Benin history. This mask is an idealized image of a royal woman at the court of Benin. The description reads, "The mask oval face is adorned with symbols of power derived from images from the sea and of the sea god Olokun. Circling the head are images of *mudfish*, which live both in water and on land and

<www.metmuseum.org/htmlfile/education/fudo.html>

⁷² Id. at <www.metmuseum.org/htmlfile/education/bamana.html>

symbolize the Oba's roles as a semi-divine leader." The description continues with explanations of other symbols found on the mask. These educational web-pages provide the virtual visitor with an excellent tool to understanding the aesthetics and meanings of African art.⁷⁴

A final educational web-page "African Kingship: A Family Guide," provides an educational exhibition guide for families.⁷⁵ The guide points out to children what to look at in the exhibition and explains what they are looking at. First, the page prompts the visitor to enter the exhibit at a specific point in order for the online guide to line up properly with the objects the visitor is looking at. Then the guide points out particular objects. The first objects the guide asks the visitor to look at, appears in frontal and profile view. The map explains what the objects in the case represent. The guide reads:

The sculptures of heads in this case are from the kingdom of Benin, which today is a part of Nigeria. The ruler of Benin is known as the Oba; the people are called the Edo. The oldest head is on the right; it was made in the sixteenth century, about four hundred years ago. Next to it, you will see a head from a few centuries later. What do you notice about the later head? You probably observed that it has more jewelry, perhaps to make it more kinglike . . .⁷⁶

The Met's website adds dimensions to the exhibit of African art not available in the physical museum. Visiting these web pages before visiting the African gallery can educate the visitor and foster an understanding of African art that might not take place without the contextual background the web pages provide. The family guide is also another excellent tool to helping children as well as adults understand African art. The Met's website adds an educational level not found in the museum. Through the web-pages the Met takes a new approach to exhibiting

⁷³ Id.

⁷⁴ Id. at <www.metmuseum.org/htmlfile/education/portrait.html>

⁷⁵ Id. at <www.metmuseum.org/htmlfile/education/kingship.html>

African art.

Chapter Conclusion

It is clear that different museums use their websites in different manners. From strictly an information page, to virtual exhibitions, to educational pages, websites add dimensions to the museum experience. By using the web, museums can also take different approaches to the display of African art not possible in the physical museum setting. The website allows museums to experiment with the display of African art. As the internet expands, the museum website is sure to become even more popular. This makes it extremely important to display African art properly on the net. From the websites discussed in this chapter, it is evident that museums are using their websites to expand the information available about their exhibitions and African art.

Many of the websites focusing on African art examine the aesthetics of African art as an art museum would. However, they also provide the social and historical context that a natural history/anthropology museum would. These sites combine both approaches, thus enhancing the exhibitions. There is much more detailed information available on the web-page than on the simple wall text of a museum. This all adds to the virtual visitors understanding and appreciation of African art. Hence, the internet expands the way in which individuals learn about African art and culture.

⁷⁶ Id.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: The Best of Both Worlds

The many-layered objects we call African art enclose fuller dimensions of meaning and greater depths of response than either of these approaches alone can accommodate.
Warren M. Robbins, "Making the Galleries Sing: Displaying African Art."

African art can not be displayed in an isolated setting. This paper examined the presentation and display of African art in the natural history/anthropology museum and the art museum. It analyzed the theoretical background of each institution and African art's place within each setting. Both the negative and positive aspects of each museum's approach were analyzed. Innovative approaches taken in the display of African art by the natural history/anthropology museums and art museums have also been considered. This examination demonstrated that either a strictly ethnographic museum or a strictly art museum approach can not accommodate the complexity of African art.

New approaches to the display of African art have begun to be implemented in both the art museum and natural history/anthropology museum, in particular the two museums that have been discussed in this paper, the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of African Art. The combining of approaches enables the visitor to understand better and appreciate more fully both the beauty and functions of African art. The context provided by the museum affects how viewers internalized African art.

One of the best ways to understand how context affects the visitor's perceptions of African art is through an exhibit *Art/artifact*, curated by Susan Vogel. This exhibition emphasizes

⁷⁷ Robbins, Warren M. "Making Galleries Sing: Displaying African Art."

the important role that context plays in exhibiting African art. The exhibition placed African art in a variety of contexts such as the cabinet of curiosity, the natural history/anthropology museum, the installation, and the art museum. To demonstrate the impact of context, Mijikenda funeral posts were placed in each of the settings. The meaning of the posts changes with the differing contexts, thus illustrating the importance of context.

The exhibition begins with a re-creation of the curiosity room from the Hampton Institute, circa 1905. The re-creation shows a mixture of zoological and ethnographic "curiosities" typical of the period. Glass cabinets and cases filled with many objects of unequal aesthetic interest line the walls. This style of presentation or display suggests that African objects do not have complex meanings and implies that every object is of equal value and interest. The Mijikenda posts rest in the corner of this room. The rather casual presentation of these objects suggests that they are not very valuable, and does not suggest the visitor should regard them as works of art.⁷⁸

The cabinet of curiosity is followed by a re-creation of a display of African art that could be found in any typical ethnographic museum. The exhibit contained a variety of African objects in glass cases and as props in dioramas. The multiple African objects displayed in the glass cases, in the same manner, indicates that all these objects are to be regarded equally. In reality, some are fine works of art and others are ordinary. In this re-creation, the Migikenda posts serve as props in a diorama of three figures sitting and interacting in front of a backdrop. While the diorama allows the museum to show many aspects of material culture simultaneously, such as social interaction and environment, it does not demonstrate the importance of the posts. The

(September/October 1994). *Museum News*. p. 31.

⁷⁸ Vogel, Susan M. "Always True to the Object." (1990). In Ivan Karp and Steven D.

presentation discourages viewers from signaling out the post for special attention and makes its boundaries unclear. What exactly is the viewer supposed to be looking at, the posts, the cloths, or the gourds? In this context, the Mijikenda posts take on a "banal appearance."⁷⁹

The ethnographic display is preceded with a re-creation of African art within an installation context. In this context, African art is now being viewed for its formal qualities only. No information was provided beyond the object name, ethnic group, and geographic origin, such as "Net, Ande people, Zaire." These objects exist in the installation as pure form—as if their form alone constituted their meaning. In their original contexts the raffia textile was a woman's skirt; the rope bundle on the platform was a Zande hunting net, tied up for storage or transportation; the metal blade served as currency in the payment of bride wealth in Kasai. A separate installation included the Mijikenda posts displayed as art. Each post stood separately on a metal post with a spotlight highlighting the piece. Here, posts from many graves have been assembled to create an aesthetic and spectral presence unlike anything ever seen by the Mijikenda. These posts may have or may not have been viewed as aesthetic objects by their makers and users.⁸⁰

The final re-creation is of African art exhibition in a typical art museum setting. In this context, each object is isolated so that it can be contemplated as a work of art. The presentation under Plexiglas suggests that each work is unique and valuable, and therefore must be protected. Here the Mijikenda posts appear again, and in this context they appear as abstracted figure sculptures.⁸¹

Lavine (eds.), Exhibiting Cultures. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press. p. 198.

⁷⁹ Id.

⁸⁰ Id. at 199.

⁸¹ Id.

The exhibition exemplifies the important role context plays in the interpretation of African art. When African Art appears in different contexts, such as an art museum or ethnographic museum, the meaning of any given piece may differ considerably. Therefore, African art needs to be displayed in a manner that fosters the best means for understanding and appreciation. The context that can best foster this understanding and appreciation is through the use of both an aesthetic and ethnographic approach. By examining the presentation of African art in both the art museum and ethnographic museum, I have shown that a combination of these approaches best serves the complexity of African art. African art must be positioned in a museum environment that best fosters understanding and appreciation of its aesthetic and ethnographic particularities to provide a fuller understanding of the complexity of African art to the visitor, whether he or she be in the museum or on line.

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