

Review of the African Gallery at the ROM

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At last the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto has a permanent gallery for exhibiting African material culture. *The Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific* opened in April of 2008. It is housed in the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, which is the centrepiece of the "ROM Renaissance," an expansion project guided by architect Daniel Libeskind. A permanent African gallery was never established in the ROM's nearly 100-year history, despite the institution's status as a universal museum and the fact that it holds approximately 6,000-8,000 African objects, not including the significant Egyptian and Nubian archaeological collections. This absence was acutely felt by the public and museologists when a temporary exhibition called *Into the Heart of Africa* caused deep controversy at the ROM in 1989 and 1990. Indeed, while the new gallery can be assessed in terms of current trends in displaying Africa in other major museums, it must also be read as a specific response to the legacy of *Into the Heart of Africa*.

The new gallery includes about 400 objects, which are displayed in four large, deep cases (compare this to the Sainsbury African Galleries in the British Museum, which show about 600 objects in four rooms). The ROM's installation is framed by a notion of celebrating diversity, but the more subtle subtext is a plea for visitors to imagine the power and presence of aesthetic objects in everyday life in Africa, both historically and at the current moment. In this, the exhibit is gently reflexive, recognizing the alienating effects of museum conventions. But the exhibit is also authoritative, providing clear ethnographic information about material culture and creativity, visual power, architecture, spiritual life, everyday objects and community. Visitors will recognize some objects from *Into the Heart of Africa*, but gone is that exhibit's flawed attempt at representing voices of collectors and missionaries. Only one of the main labels (for an Igbo deity figure) refers to a collector. The labels are dense and small, so some visitors peer purposefully to read texts. The gallery does not create the sense of surprise and beauty that the new installation of dinosaurs does on a lower level of the Crystal. It does create a foundation—a sort of scaffolding—from which the ROM can potentially do more with African material culture and communities.



Photo 1: Royal Ontario Museum Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. © Royal Ontario Museum. All rights reserved.

I would hope that more personal and less abstract language can be eventually added to the display, even as a temporary intervention. For instance, what difference might it make if parts of the display were narrated from the point of view of African women? The gallery is the result of over two year's work, with anthropologist Michael Levin serving as an academic advisor and collaborating with an advisory committee made up of people with diasporic links to Africa, as well as ROM staff. Unfortunately, this process is not acknowledged in the exhibition (though it is in the press package). Compare this anonymity with a display in the First Nations Gallery in which members of the exhibition's advisory committee present and comment on artefacts that they have chosen. The new Africa gallery eschews the curatorial strategy of multivocality, which has been used effectively in African exhibits at the Horniman in the UK and the Smithsonian in Washington. The ROM's gallery was prepared with a (perhaps unconscious) feeling of caution: "there is no experimenting," said one person associated with exhibit, half-jokingly. But now that the scaffolding is in place, will there be room (and a budget) to play, build and tinker? The immediate



Photo 2: Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific Gallery, Royal Ontario Museum. © Royal Ontario Museum. All rights reserved.

curatorial goal of Silvia Forni to contextualize the artifacts with vibrant contemporary photographs and art is a step in the right direction.

A Conversation with Silvia Forni, Curator of the Royal Ontario Museum's First Permanent African Gallery

In April 2008, on the eve of the opening of the Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia Pacific at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, I interviewed Silvia Forni, Associate Curator in the Anthropology Section of the Department of World Cultures. Dr. Forni joined the ROM in early 2008 and prepared the labels for the museum's new African gallery.

Shelley Butler: How did you become interested in African art and objects?

Silvia Forni: As an anthropology student in Turin I read ethnographies on Africa and that fuelled my interest. For my *laurea* degree I wrote on Tuareg jewellery, combining my interest in social relations, objects and aesthetics. I did my Masters at Indiana University, focusing on anthropology and African art. For my doctoral research, I studied pottery in the Grassfields of Cameroon.

SB: In your writing, you are sensitive to how pottery mediates relations between women and men, and between domestic and public spheres.

SF: Pots are objects that are very "good to think with" in social terms. They are used in a variety of daily and ritual functions. Pottery is a creative activity open to women in the domestic sphere and pots are important in the political, official arena dominated by men. They are objects of tradition, but they are a fundamental means of livelihood, thus open to market influence and change.

SB: What did you do following your academic training?

SF: I worked as a researcher, a consultant and taught cultural anthropology and the anthropology of art at the University of Turin.

SB: You were also a curator for a missionary museum in Italy.

SF: Yes, this museum was near Turin, in Asti, one of the main centres of the Catholic religious order called the Salesians. They started their missions in South America in 1875 and built them halfway around the world. The museum was the result of this missionary expansion and collecting. Before I arrived, curators internal to the religious order had put the biographies of missionaries along the perimeter of the exhibition. This was the physical space upon which we could not intervene. It was such an uneven museum that the history of collecting had to be part of our display. But we also tried to introduce descriptions of local uses and meanings.

SB: Do missionaries still come to this museum?

SF: Sure, it's an important pilgrimage site. We also did programming with local schools.

SB: What are your plans for the ROM's African collection and the new gallery?

SF: I'm interested in building up the collection by identifying a specific area where there is an interesting contemporary production or by collecting thematically.

SB: As opposed to collecting geographically?

SF: Yes, because it is virtually impossible to aspire to cover the entire continent. There are so many things we cannot acquire today.

SB: So you're not acquiring masterpieces?

SF: Exactly. I don't think it makes much sense to spend a million dollars on one African object. Mind you, if the opportunity presents itself, I am not going to refuse it. If objects are beautiful and compelling they are more likely to engage the public. However, in this museum it's important to build collections that are well documented from the anthropological point of view.

The committee that developed the permanent display chose to display as many objects, stories and meanings as possible, rather than highlight a few beautiful objects. It is a very classic ethnographic display, yet it aspires to introduce elements of contemporaneity and change. I'm interested in building the collection by adding art and objects that reflect contemporary developments.

SB: Does the ROM have contemporary or older pots from Cameroon?

SF: No, there are very few pots. My first collection trip to Senegal will be to collect pots produced by Casamance villagers as well as the work of an internationally known clay artist, Seni Camara, who creates large sculptural figures using traditional techniques.

SB: At the missionary museum your constituency was not local. How will you work with the African and diasporic community that is based in Toronto?

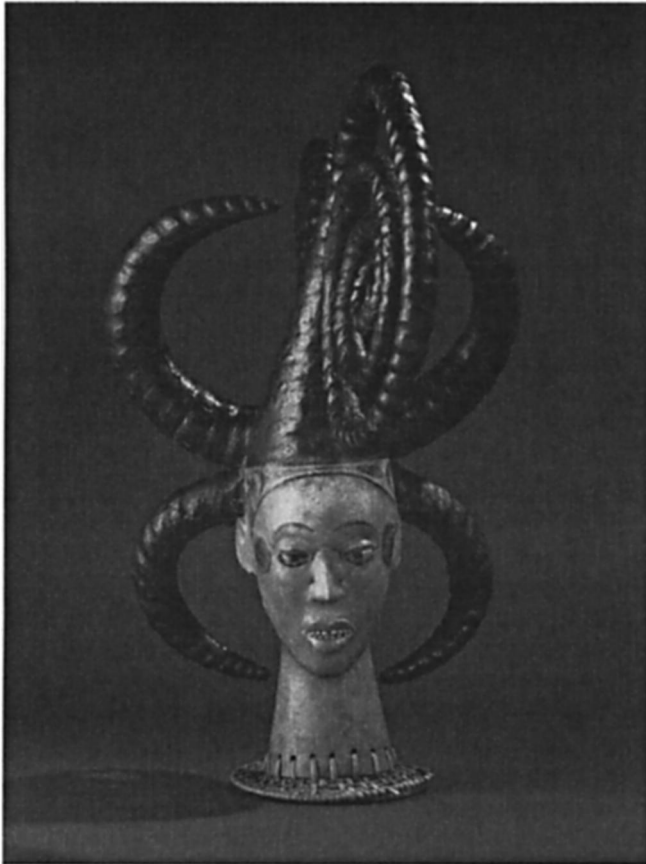


Photo 3: Headdress Ejagham, Ekoi, Nigeria: wood, antelope skin, pigment, bone, 19th–early 20th century. © Royal Ontario Museum. All rights reserved.

SF: I hope to engage these communities through exhibitions and programming. I hope that once the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario) has their own Africa gallery we can coordinate programming so that Africa and the African diaspora become a consistent element of the city's cultural offerings—because you can only go so far with exhibitions. Museum shows take a long time to plan and they are expensive.

It would be great if the community forms a Friends of Africa group. This works well for other departments at the ROM. One challenge with the African community is that it's really African communities. These communities have different agendas, ideas and perceptions. I hope we can gather all these people together and think of possibilities.

SB: Programming initiatives can enliven an exhibition. Yet, programming sometimes does not work, as you noted in your review of *Africa: Capolavori da un continente* (Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent), which showed in Turin in 2003.

SF: Yes, the problem was that the main exhibit and programming initiatives were not fully integrated. The Africa exhibit was in an old format which presented the objects as masterpieces conceived in Western terms. The objects

were in a dark environment with very little contextual information. A section on primitivism and modern art was the only room in which the walls were painted white.

SB: So the exhibit echoed MOMA's *Primitivism and Modern Art* exhibition from 1984 without taking into account the criticisms of that show?

SF: Yes, there was no awareness. And the media touted this as a show that finally portrayed African art. Yes, it was nice, but it missed an opportunity to say something new about Africa. The exhibition was powerful and other voices that wanted to present different issues connected to Africa were not as powerful. Certainly local African communities were not involved in the planning and I don't know if community members even saw the show.

SB: Tell me about the ROM's African collection and how it is displayed in the new gallery. Does the ROM hold many pre-colonial objects?

SF: We do have a number of pre-colonial objects and this is something journalists always ask about, but this is not the majority of our holdings.

SB: I'm sorry to repeat that predictable fascination with the pre-colonial!

SF: The earlier objects were acquired before the foundation of the museum or bought from traders in its early years. Many important collections were compiled in the colonial period from missionaries or officers. Strengths of the collection are in central and west Africa, even with later acquisitions from individual collectors and travellers. In the permanent gallery we also have a section on South African Ndebele beadwork, which is a recent acquisition.

SB: Does this highlight a new strength in the collection?

SF: Yes, the South African collection allows us to present the history, use, techniques and the cultural meanings of a specific art form. These are objects that are related to gender, to age, that change in response to markets, and they are beautiful.

SB: Are there pieces that could be in an art gallery?

SF: There are some very nice pieces. I wouldn't call them masterpieces as I don't like that term. But they are meaningful and beautiful. The new gallery is a good permanent display in that it features many important creative traditions of the African continent. But this is really an ethnographic collection. We have daily objects that show different facets of traditions and practices. For example, we have lots of weapons, shields, metal currency and objects of wealth and power.

SB: And these were prominent in *Into the Heart of Africa*, the controversial exhibition that the ROM showed in 1989 and 1990.

SF: Yes and they're still part of the display. But we display them taking into consideration the concerns of our advisory group. One issue that came up was how the image of warrior-hood was represented in a display of currency. The advisory group didn't like one historical photograph

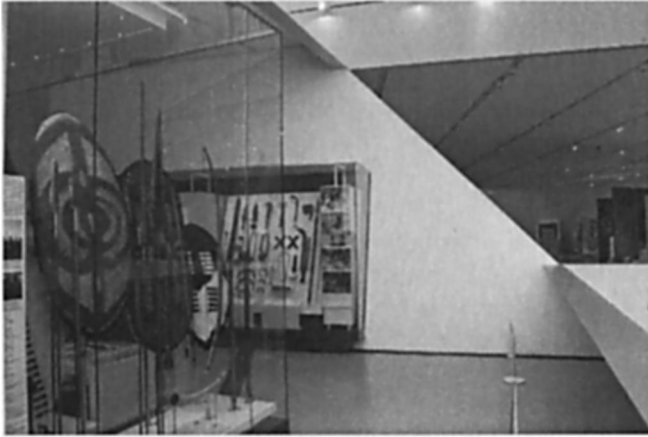


Photo 4: Display Cases in the Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific Gallery, Royal Ontario Museum. © Royal Ontario Museum. All rights reserved.

of a large liganda blade—which is a large non-functional currency blade used mostly as bridewealth—because according to them it showed Africans as savage warriors. So I found different images for the currency display. In the end, we found a solution.

But I wanted to address the idea of the warrior as part of current public and ceremonial displays of manhood. The display includes images of contemporary performances. You find doctors and lawyers who, when they go back to the village, participate in local ceremonies in warrior attire.

SB: Do the slanted walls and lighting of the new gallery provide challenges?

SF: Yes, the slanted walls and layers of light make it difficult to make objects visible in deep cases. But it is good that the African gallery is located in the new Crystal. It is part of a new beginning and this is significant because of the *Into the Heart of Africa* controversy. Displays create and present objects. I believe this display is going to have agency here in Toronto. Recently I was interviewed for French radio by an immigrant from Ivory Coast who was proud to see the African objects at the ROM displayed alongside treasures from all over the world.

SB: Is reflexive museology included in the new gallery?

SF: Reflexivity was a component in the development of the gallery though it is not directly addressed in the display. Because reflexivity is about ourselves so if you're

presenting a museum of world cultures with limited gallery space, it is difficult to articulate a reflexive approach and at the same time say something about the objects and cultures.

SB: Is the new gallery multivocal?

SF: No, you need to be set up for it to do it well and I don't know if it was possible here. This could be an interesting strategy to adopt through programming. But to do a multivocal permanent display is a huge mission. Multivocal permanent displays are more successful in settings where the public can approach a topic from different perspectives in different institutions, like Washington or London.

SB: Can you influence publicity? I ask because the promotion for *Into the Heart of Africa* was so problematic as it undermined the exhibition's critical intent.

SF: Overall we have good communication, but sometimes it takes some effort to find common ground. Our publicists ask us for "highlights" since that is what the media want. But highlights don't make sense in a gallery like this.

SB: Can Africa be displayed in other parts of the ROM?

SF: I hope so. The ROM has a large temporary exhibition hall that can host shows on Africa and then there is the Institute of Contemporary Culture that can be a venue for African artists. And, there are the education programs and the outreach exhibits that hopefully will make Africa an important presence.

SB: Thank-you and good luck with your future endeavours.

Further Reading

Butler, Shelley Ruth

2008 *Contested Representations: Revisiting into the Heart of Africa*. Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Forni, Silvia

2003 *Africa: Capolavori da un continente*. *African Arts* 36(4):82-84.

2008 *Containers of Life: Pottery and Social Relations in the Grassfields (Cameroon)*. *African Arts* 40(1):42-54.

Websites

ROM African Gallery: www.rom.on.ca/exhibitions/wculture/americas.php.

Art Gallery of Ontario, African and Oceanic Collection (opened 14 November 2008): www.ago.net/african-oceanic-collection.

ROM Institute for Contemporary Culture: www.rom.on.ca/icc/index.php.