

Culture



“Into the Heart of Africa”

Royal Ontario Museum. 16 Nov 1989; Curator: Jeanne Cannizzo. Catalogue. 96 pp. \$19.95. “IRONY (AND, OF, IN) ARTIFACTS”

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EDITORIAL NOTE

By Stephen Inglis

Canadian Museum of Civilization

Visitors to major museum exhibits are accustomed to being offered a range of published material to orient, guide, enhance or memorialize their visit. Yet many of those who saw "Into the Heart of Africa" at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) got even more than they, or the museum, bargained for. In addition to a free brochure and a handsome companion book produced in conjunction with the exhibit, visitors left with a pamphlet distributed on the street in front of the museum building by supporters of the Coalition for the Truth About Africa. This six page pamphlet, deeply critical of the exhibition, may represent a new genre in "museum" publication; it certainly reflects some of the issues of representation and consultation now facing museums and particularly the anthropologists who work for them.

The Coalition, now made up of over fifty-three organizations, from African and Caribbean students to activists against apartheid and racism, claims that the exhibition "represents a clear and concise attempt to mislead the public and to further tarnish the image of Africa and African people". According to the pamphlet, the exhibit does this by "neglecting Africa's contribution to humanity" and emphasizing "the demise of Africa and Africans". There is an attempt to counteract perceived errors by reproducing quotations on African contributions to science, medicine, art, architecture, etc, and by recommending further reading. The writers object not to the artifacts and photographs but to the content of labels and text panels accompanying them which the pamphlet describes as "trite and condescending", vividly reminiscent of "a past that is still not past".

The latter statement reveals one key element in the controversy. Exploring the colonial and imperialist history of many museum collections, such as this one, can be painful for some visitors, regardless of how well it is done. It has been argued that "Into the Heart of Africa" reveals more about Toronto than Africa and surely more about Canadian values and interests during the periods discussed than about those of Africans, yet the response to the exhibit illustrates once again that the two cannot be separated. Canadian society now encompasses descen-

dants (whether actual or empathetic) of both sides in all previous colonial encounters. Placing the facts of exploitation and humiliation before the public in a courageous and innovative manner, such as is attempted in "Into the Heart of Africa", inevitably makes the museum a stage where the continuing legacy of racism and colonialism will be acted out.

No Canadian museum exhibition has generated such emotion since "The Spirit Sings". Opinions range widely from those of opponents who say the exhibit should never have been presented to those of supporters who see the criticism as an attack on the objectivity and academic independence of the museum. What follows are two reviews by scholars who live and work in Toronto and for whom "Into the Heart of Africa" became part of this experience.

"Into the Heart of Africa"

Royal Ontario Museum. 16 Nov 1989; Curator: Jeanne Cannizzo. Catalogue. 96 pp. \$19.95.
"IRONY (AND, OF, IN) ARTIFACTS"

By Michael Levin
University of Toronto

"Into the Heart of Africa" is an excellent presentation of a collection and of the complexities of the interpretative role of museums. The exhibit is based on the *in situ* collection of the ROM, which is largely the bequests of families of Canadian missionaries to Africa and Canadians who served in the armies of the British Empire in African colonies. The opposition between their mission and the achievements symbolized in the artifacts runs through the exhibit.

It is arranged in four rooms, two blue rooms, a grey room and the largest beige room. The beige room displays drums, masks and headdresses, weapons, musical instruments and offers mbiras (thumb pianos) to play and headphones to listen to African music. The smaller blue and grey rooms provide an entrance to the collection, its context and introduces its collectors and their African experiences. The connection of Canada to Africa and the imperialist sympathies of Canadians at the turn of the century are symbolized early in the exhibit in the first blue room in the blow-up of the 2c Canadian stamp of "Xmas 1898" picturing Canada at the centre of the Empire marked in red on a world map, over the slogan "We hold a vaster empire than has been".

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

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

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

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"INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA"

*By Hazel Da Breo
York University*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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