



A CURATORIAL DILEMMA: AN EXAMINATION OF TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS COMBINING AFRICAN AND EGYPTIAN VISUAL CULTURE

Elizabeth Cummins
University of Nevada, Reno

ABSTRACT

This paper considers how three exhibitions in the 1990s and 2000s displayed ancient Egyptian and African art together to form a more “holistic” art historical approach to the African continent. The effectiveness of these exhibitions will be examined, as will how this information can aid current scholars and curators in the future.

The display of ancient Egyptian objects along with so-called “traditional” African art in museum exhibitions has always presented difficulties both for curators and museum audiences. The vast differences in time and geography make it nearly impossible to weave the threads of visual and didactic material, and each exhibition and permanent installation that attempts this endeavor tends to come under intense scrutiny—from Egyptologists, Africanists, and many others. This paper will examine three temporary exhibitions that combined Egyptian and African art in order to create a more “holistic” approach to the African continent. Whether these exhibitions were considered effective or perpetuating stereotypes can be seen in the polarizing opinions and reviews that followed. Have these exhibitions changed the way we present this material today?

“African art” as a category is itself problematic, as if art from different religions, economic systems, and social preconditions can be easily amalgamated into a cohesive whole. The need to find the balance distinguishing between unique African cultures and their common connections seems to be a difficult goal that is approached every few decades. And yet, each time the attempt is made, the ideas are presented as new and innovative, symptomatic of a collective forgetfulness of the public (and possibly the curatorial world) between the 1960s and 2000s regarding African exhibitions.

The ephemeral nature of museum exhibitions themselves places attention on the permanent material they leave behind: the exhibition catalogue. While the temporary exhibition is an attempt to display objects and information to the museum visitor, the exhibition catalogue

provides ample room for conflicting views and complex theories, as well as contextual information that aids the viewer (or, later, reader) in formulating a multifaceted interpretation of the objects.

The history of exhibiting African objects as art in the United States and Europe goes back to the early part of the 20th century, when modern art and African art became inextricably linked with the aid of a few specific European artists, gallery dealers, and tastemakers. Objects from Europe’s colonies were purchased in Africa and brought back to Europe, with some making their way to the United States. Even today, the frame of reference for “African art” for much of the public lies with African sculpture introduced alongside and through modern artists such as Picasso, Braque, and Matisse, who were inspired by these works.

Throughout its history, the Brooklyn Museum has been a forerunner for presenting Africa material in the United States. One of the earliest exhibitions presenting African art to the American public, *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (1923), exposed the public to African pieces that had been bought by the curator, Stewart Culin, in Europe. However, not included in this show—or even under the category of African art at this time—was ancient Egyptian art. By this time, Egyptian art had been an established academic field both in Europe and the United States for decades, and the Nile Valley was left for study by Egyptologists, while Africanists carved out their own field, focusing primarily on Sub-Saharan Africa. Since the 1920s, there have been a number of African art exhibitions but few included Egypt or, for that matter, Sudan, Ethiopia, or North African countries.

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Among the temporary exhibitions that did combine objects from both Egypt and “traditional” Africa are three dating to the mid-1990s and early 2000s: *Egypt in Africa* (August–November, 1996; Indianapolis Museum of Art), *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (June–September 1996; Guggenheim Museum), and *5000 Jahre Afrika, Ägypten, Afrika—Sammlung W. und U. Horstmann und Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* (September 2008–November 2008; Kulturforum, Berlin). These three exhibitions were chosen for examination because they represented a varied scale, ranging from a large international exhibition (*Africa: The Art of a Continent*) to smaller institutional shows (*Egypt in Africa* and *5000 Jahre Afrika, Ägypten, Afrika*). They facilitate a view of the continued history of display from the first exhibitions in the 20th century to their later counterparts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as possibilities that could lie ahead in the future.

AFRICA: THE ART OF A CONTINENT

Africa: The Art of a Continent was first shown at London’s Royal Academy of Arts from October 4, 1995 to January 21, 1996 and then went to Berlin (Martin-Gropius-Bau, 1 March–1 May 1996) and New York (Guggenheim, 7 June–29 September 1996).¹ One of the primary aims of the exhibition was to display art from various cultural groups throughout the continent, including North Africa (and Egypt), as well as South Africa, another region often excluded from “traditional” African art. British artist Tom Phillips was responsible for assembling the objects that would comprise this massive exhibition, made up of almost eight hundred objects displayed in London, beginning with ancient Egypt and Nubia, moving south to Sudan and East Africa and then to South Africa. It continued clockwise on the African map by moving through Central Africa, the Guinea Coast, the Sahelian regions, and finally ending back in Egypt with Islamic art. It was lauded as “the biggest and most comprehensive exhibition of its kind ever held in Britain” which celebrated “an entire continent in all its diversity.”²

However, the show came under much criticism for its display, which focused on the aesthetic and formal aspects of the objects with little attempt to contextualize them or provide background information for visitors.³ Little had changed from the display of African art from the early gallery and museum shows in New York of the 1920s. Reviewers appreciated the efforts to incorporate Egypt as well as North and South Africa but felt that the show fell short of gaining new ground.

When the exhibition made it to the Guggenheim numerous changes were put in place to bring the objects into context. The object list was reduced greatly, and efforts

were made to contextualize each geographic section. In the Guggenheim catalogue, a number of essays were written by important scholars, including an introduction by Cornel West, who states,

This monumental exhibition is unprecedented in the history of the art world. Never before has there been gathered such a rich and vast array of African art objects and artifacts from such a broad time span. And rarely has any exhibition embraced the artistic treasures of the whole of Africa, from Egypt to Ife to Great Zimbabwe.⁴

Egypt was the opening and closing of the show but at extremely different times in its history. The ancient material, to which most people have some reference, welcomed visitors, while the Islamic material, mainly from the Fatimid and Mamluk periods, closed the show. No efforts were made to show contemporary arts of Egypt or Africa at large, continuing the tradition of Africa as separate in the world, not only in space but in time.

EGYPT IN AFRICA

In 1996, the Indianapolis Museum of Art presented an exhibition entitled *Egypt in Africa*, with the aim of presenting ancient Egypt “within a broader African context without adhering to the concept of a unified African culture.”⁵ The curator, Theodore Celenko, made it clear that this exhibition reorganized the way in which Egypt was seen not only in a larger context for the exhibition but also for the permanent collection by making changes to its installation after the temporary exhibition had left the galleries. (This meant including North Africa on the African permanent collection map, as well as displaying ancient Egyptian objects in both the Classical and African galleries.) The complexities of the subject are shown clearly in the catalogue, which offers a number of opposing views concerning subjects such as masking, the origins of the Egyptian writing system, and the beginnings of the Egyptian state. This was an ambitious and admirable attempt to give Egypt back its African nature.

While much different from *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, in that there was no attempt to represent Africa’s entire history, this exhibit did not place the history of Egypt within a broader African context, leaving it to stand outside of or next to Africa rather than within it. Celenko also decided to present the collection through “Africanisms”, or cultural features that first presented themselves in the world in Africa. These “Africanisms” include maternity images, headrests, masking, ancestor worship, divine kingship, among others. Celenko then states that the

“purpose of the various sections focusing on proposed ‘Africanisms’ is to present similarities among cultures and to suggest past interactions, however indirect, remote, and unprovable some of them may be.”⁶ Therefore, there is little if any evidence to connect objects that are placed side by side in the exhibition, only an “indirect, remote, and unprovable” connection. The benefit for the museumgoer is small, but does the desire to turn the viewers’ attention away from a Mediterranean- and Near Eastern-centric view of Egypt toward one focusing on Africa outweigh the presentation of loose, unproven ties between objects? This is difficult to say, but the exhibition was a necessary step toward making ancient Egyptian studies a more inclusive field than it has been in previous centuries. Nonetheless, the opposing views among scholars and weak comparisons of objects could be confusing for visitors unfamiliar with either ancient Egyptian or African art history. The true depth of this exhibition lies in its catalogue, which most visitors probably did not see or buy.

5000 JAHRE AFRIKA, ÄGYPTEN, AFRIKA—SAMMLUNG W. UND U. HORSTMANN UND STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN

Significantly more recent than the previous two exhibitions, *5000 Jahre Afrika, Ägypten, Afrika—Sammlung W. und U. Horstmann und Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* was on view from September 18 to November 30, 2008 at Kunstforum der Berliner Volksbank. The preface to the exhibition catalogue encourages the visitor to “become acquainted with one of the largest and most important collections of art from Africa, but also to enter into an extraordinary dialogue” —presumably the one between the ancient Egyptian and African material.⁷ It specifically states that “it does not point out historical connections and paths of cultural transfer” but “reveals interesting formal and stylistic analogies from both cultural circles.”⁸ This shows an interesting shift in the display of material, giving the museum visitor the job of making their own connections among artworks. Little to no context is given, and the viewer is then left to extrapolate what they can from a few didactic panels.

Thus even though the exhibition does not point out these “paths of cultural transfer,” the juxtaposition of the objects lets the viewer assume that there is one. Jung states:

The presentation of African artworks from the last three hundred years in conjunction with works from ancient Egypt between 4500 and 2500 years old delivers a blow to Eurocentric historical constructions that marginalize Africa both geographically and historically, making it a place of exotic, primitive art.⁹

The implication appears to be that only the pairing modern African objects with ancient Egyptian ones can rescue “primitive” African art from a lowly status and bring it “up” to the heights of Westernized Egypt. Is this the only way to inform the public that African art should be considered—that it is worth acknowledging as art only in relation to a culture that is part of the “traditional” (i.e., Western) art history canon?

One specific example from the show, which often appears when African and ancient Egyptian objects are displayed together, is that of headrests. There is an entire section of the exhibition/catalogue devoted to this object, and it shows African and Egyptian headrests together, making it a game for the viewer to pick out the country of origin for each one. The oldest headrests from the “traditional” African collection which appear in the exhibition come from a Dogon village in Mali.¹⁰ Dating to the 11th through 13th centuries CE, this wooden headrest is compared with an Old Kingdom column-style headrest from Egypt. The catalogue then expounds upon the possible connections and influences from Africa to Egypt, even though there are no *ancient* African examples still in existence. This is tenuous terrain—was there influence between the two at all, or did these parallel examples develop independently from one another? Headrests appear in many different cultures that would seem to not have had interaction. For instance, examples from the Edo and Meiji periods in Japan (1603–1912 CE) were also created to provide protection for elaborate hairstyles that could be destroyed during sleep. By seeing these objects side by side, however, the visitor assumes a connection other than parallel development arisen out of a common utility.

Another section of this exhibition focuses on masks. Masking is undoubtedly an African tradition, but when placed side by side with ancient Egyptian art, the comparison is somewhat muddled. The juxtaposition of a Ptolemaic funerary mask with an *Emangungu* mask (which would have been worn by a young man during an initiation ceremony) from Congo is successful only aesthetically, with its vertical composition and emphasis placed on the eyes (Figure 1).¹¹ The ancient Egyptian use of funerary masks is not addressed, and the visitor sees this work only within the parameters that they are given, with little context to highlight the very different uses of each.

CONCLUSION

The success of an exhibition lies within its ability to create a conversation among scholars and visitors that moves toward an advancement of understanding the material presented in a way not previously accomplished.

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Examination of the aforementioned three temporary exhibitions exposes issues concerning the display of African and ancient Egyptian material together that must be addressed by curators going forward. In the future, Egyptologists must be exposed to a larger African narrative in order to become the curators and academics who can link Egypt with Africa more broadly. It also highlights how little has changed until very recently. A collective forgetfulness seems to have shrouded past display of African objects, and the dialogue concerning these works has not advanced significantly in the last one hundred years.

In the winter of 2015, two exhibitions were shown concurrently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Kongo: Power and Majesty* and *Ancient Egypt Transformed: The Middle Kingdom*. The fact that the Metropolitan provided equal billing for both shows—one historically African, the other Egyptian—places a separate but equal emphasis on

the two cultures. Even the banners were similarly designed, probably with the thought that visitors interested in one would be interested in the other and, too, that they could be displayed together (Figure 2). The move toward more thematically concentrated temporary shows is more effective for the visitor, but that leaves the permanent collections—as well as temporary exhibitions focused on thematic issues—with the responsibility of making connections among Egyptian and other African cultures and presenting them effectively to the viewing public and to the professionals working within these fields.

The topic of attitudes concerning what is African art is a vast and daunting subject that is impossible to cover within such a short paper. Definitions of what is essentially Sub-Saharan, Egyptian, African, etc. are constantly shifting. However, the need to examine prior efforts made towards this goal is imperative for future endeavors to gain ground and move forward.



Mumienmaske
Mummy Mask
Ägypten/Egypt
Ptolemäisch-römische Zeit,
100 v. Chr. – 100 n. Chr.
Ptolemäer-Roman Period,
100 B. C. – 100 A. D.
Leinen, Gips, bemalt und
vergoldet/Linen,
gilt and painted plaster
H. 49 cm
Ägyptisches Museum Berlin
ÄM 36627



'Emanungu (Maske)
Mask
Bembe
Demokratische Republik Kongo
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Holz/wood
H. 36,5 cm
Provenance: Walschot, Gent



Maske
Mask
Mbole
Demokratische Republik Kongo
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Holz, Pigment/wood, pigment
H. 44,8 cm

Figure 1: Pages 96 and 97 from *5000 Jahre Afrika, Ägypten, Afrika – Sammlung W. und U. Horstmann und Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, comparing a Ptolemaic mask (AM 36627) with two masks from Congo (Bembe mask on the left, Mbole mask on the right).



Figure 2: Banners of two contemporaneous Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibitions: (top) *Kongo: Power and Majesty*; (bottom) *Ancient Egypt Transformed: The Middle Kingdom*. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; www.metmuseum.org.

NOTES

- ¹ The exhibition used two different catalogues: (London and Berlin) Tom Phillips (ed.), *Africa: The Art of a Continent* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995); (New York) Cornel West, *Africa: The Art of a Continent, 100 Works of Power and Beauty* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996).
- ² Nancy van Leyden, "Africa95: A Critical Assessment of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36.1–2: 237.
- ³ There was also controversy with the objects chosen for the show. A number of unprovenanced terra cotta vessels from Mali were taken out of the show at the last minute under pressure from the British Museum, who threatened to remove all of their loans if the pieces from Mali were allowed to stay. See Christa Clark, "African Art," *Art Journal* 56.1 (1997): 82–87.
- ⁴ Cornel West, "Introduction," in Phillips (ed.) 1995, 1.
- ⁵ Theodore Celenko (ed.), *Egypt in Africa* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1996), 17.
- ⁶ Celenko 1996, 17.
- ⁷ Peter Junge and Dietrich Wildung (eds.), *5000 Jahre Afrika, Ägypten, Afrika—Sammlung W. und U. Horstmann und Staatliche Museen zu Berlin* (Dortmund: Kettler, 2008), 6.
- ⁸ Junge and Wildung 2008, 6.
- ⁹ Junge and Wildung 2008, 14.
- ¹⁰ William J. Dewey, "Headrests," in Junge and Wildung 2008, 132.
- ¹¹ Junge and Wildung 2008, 96–97.