

IS AFRICA CLOSER TO OCEANIA THAN TO EUROPE? VISIT TO AN EXHIBITION ON AFRICAN AND OCEANIAN ARTS.

“We Westerners are the ones who confer the quality of art to these objects. These statues should not return to Africa.” Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller (1)



Baule Mask, Côte d'Ivoire, musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

Seldom have I been to an exhibition where almost everything seemed to have been so well-planned and very carefully considered as the exhibition at the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris, entitled, *Afrique - Océanie, Les chef-d'oeuvres de la collection Barbier-Mueller*, 19 March - 24 August 2008.

To start with, the entrance to the exhibition premises in the very heart of Paris, in the eighth district, on the Boulevard Haussmann, a very busy area of Paris does not lead one to expect the calm and peace that reign in the premises once you have gone through the main gate. A slightly hilly driveway (used probably only for deliveries), with beautiful plants, leads you to the entrance of the exhibition building. You realize immediately that you are in the palace of a French noble. One can imagine open-air concerts and performances in the courtyard. Here is certainly an impressive ambience for exhibitions and other cultural activities.



Kintal-Loniake mask, Burkina Faso, musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva.

The African objects shown in the exhibition are some of the best that the African Continent has produced. Many of them are icons of beauty, elegance and provide a demonstration of the fine artistry and skill that exist in Africa. Each of the works would be, by itself, a sufficient reason for visiting the exhibition. The objects shown include statues, reliquaries, masks, totems, headdresses, pendants, swords, and other objects.



Reliquary figure, Fang, Gabon, musée Barbier-Mueller Geneva.

In looking at all these beautiful objects, one has to bear in mind the history of the relationship between Europe on the one hand, Africa and Oceania on the other. One has to presume that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, most

of these objects must have been stolen at one time or other from the original owners.

The catalogue and the useful booklet produced for the exhibition do not give much information about the mode of acquisition except that most of the African pieces were acquired in the second half of the XX Century. (2) The Oceanian pieces were acquired in the period of 1960-1980 from Eastern European institutions and as the pamphlet adds, with the blessing of the ministries of culture of the countries concerned. The information given is usually sketchy and relates only to time, for example, "XX Century", "XIX Century" and "XIX-XX Century". We would have appreciated getting information that is more precise on the mode of acquisition. It is also strange that at a time when many people are talking about the UNESCO and UNIDROIT Conventions, we are given little information in this respect and so we have no means of checking on the provenance of any of the various objects in the exhibition.

If one relates the citation that these objects should never return to Africa with the lack of information on the mode of acquisition, one starts wondering whether the contempt poured on Africa, Africans, and the rallying call to Europeans might not be a defence mechanism to prevent any inquiries about the method of acquisition. (3) If an object has been legitimately acquired, why will the owner even think of the possibility of its being returned to the previous owner? Why will the legitimate acquirer despise the producer of the product he loves so much?

Another thought that accompanied me in viewing all these objects was the statement made by Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller in a radio interview with Radio France:

"Certain anthropologists claim that an African or Oceanian who's deprived of his fetishes is a person who dies spiritually. Well, that's not true! Man is much stronger than that! If you take away a Sicilian woman's crucifix that she inherited from her grandmother, she doesn't give up her Catholic faith! She doesn't mope away in sadness. She goes to the next town, she buys a crucifix, she hangs it where the old one had been, and she returns to her prayers!" (4)

This is a remarkable statement coming from an art dealer who, as a member of the acquisition committee of the musée du Quai Branly, had made huge profits from selling to the museum some "276 Nigerian works of art for the sum of 40 million francs". (5) It will be very difficult to convince visitors to this exhibition that the exquisite objects displayed there, some very large, are easily found in Africa and that they can in anyway be compared to crucifixes worn by people in Sicily and can be easily replaced by a visit to the next town in Africa.

I kept asking myself even a more fundamental question. Why show African and Oceanian arts together? Is Africa nearer to Oceania than to Europe?

Alternatively, is this because of perceived similarities between the two different traditions in art and religion? It is true that Western art dealers and museums talk as if the two, Africa and Oceania were neighbours. Many museums group African art and Oceanian Art together. The French had a museum called *Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* where most of the stolen arts from these areas were stored until the musée du Quai Branly was established in 2006 and the objects transferred there. The only reason for grouping African art and Oceanian art together is the deep-seated conviction of many Westerners that these arts are primitive and should therefore be put in the same category. We know of no other situation where arts from different parts of the world are presented together, without any thematic connection. We have never seen any museum or collection group European and Asian arts together or Australian and American arts together.

The classification of African and Oceanian arts as primitive is long established in European and American intellectual traditions but apart from the assumptions of primitivism, there is no justification for that. Any argument based on similarities can be easily shown not to be the basis of classification here. There is surely much similarity in style and material between a lot of French and German painters but have we ever seen an exhibition entitled “Arts from France and Germany” or a museum for German and French arts?

Since the exhibition rooms, (we do not call them halls because they are somewhat small), are linked to another, it is not always easy to know whether one was looking at African art or Oceanian art. The uninitiated may come out thinking she or he has seen African objects when in fact they were Oceanian. True, the objects were clearly labelled and the explanations on the walls should help the visitor who reads carefully. However, why should one even have to ask the question whether one is looking at African or Oceanian art? An exhibition limited to one area would have made matters much clearer right from the entrance to the display. The collection has more than enough objects to devote an entire exhibition to one of the two areas.

Despite the above comments, we recommend the exhibition for the elegance, beauty, and the excellent craftsmanship that both the African and Oceanian objects display.

The exhibition makes one realize that many valuable art works have been taken from Africa to Europe and that the struggle to recover at least some of these objects will be extremely long, with open and direct resistance from those who believe they have a duty to save African cultural objects from the Africans. The visitor's guide to the exhibition states in its introduction as follows: “*Private*

collectors, ethnologists, enthusiasts and those who wanted to protect these works from deterioration and destruction brought about by time and ethnic wars, on the one hand focussed on an in-depth study of utilitarian or ritual objects that have become masterpieces in their own right". (6)



Horse Rider with Sceptre, Ife, Nigeria, musée Barbier-Mueller Geneva.

In the last decades, many writers have stopped using the term “primitive art” because of its obvious derogative connotation but some still use it with inverted commas. Many have used substitutes such as “non-Western art”, some prefer “primary arts”. Although “arts premiers” has gained grounds, especially among academics and museum officials, many of the dealers in African art still use the old term, “art primitif”. It may well be that once you have made a fortune with “art primitif” you cannot easily abandon the terminology that may be useful to a dealer who also has art objects from Oceania and elsewhere. Barbier-Müller uses the old term “art primitif” without any embarrassment. (7) Indeed, in a video, which accompanies the announcement of the exhibition, Barbier-Mueller describes his first encounter with African art at the home of his future father-in-law. Barbier-Mueller refers to the “savage world” which fascinated him at the age of 22 and adds that he has not lost his fascination for this “savage world.” (“monde sauvage”) <http://www.musee-jacquemart> . Should Africans understand “savage world” as a compliment to our ancestors whose memories are revered and enshrined in our statutes and other cultural objects? Should we reject the insult to our cultural icons which is an insult to all of us? What may have been permissible for a man of 22 years in the 20th Century is not necessarily acceptable for an elderly person in the 21st Century.

In an essay in the exhibition catalogue, entitled “*Le musée sans territoire*”, Laurent Wolf, refers to a previous exhibition “*L’Homme et ses masques*” in which masks from Africa, Oceania, Asia, North and South America and Europe were put together with very discrete information about their origin. (8) Laurent Wolf uses this to conclude that the average visitor to such exhibition needs not

much information. This “deterritorialisation” as Wolf calls it falls into the same category as “decontextualization” as well as all the other theories that would make more information unnecessary in such exhibitions. They all aim at one objective: to make the origins and original functions of all these African cultural and religious objects irrelevant and to dispense with the need to explain the modes of acquisition utilized. Europeans are condemned to develop such theories so long as African peoples exist and claim the return of their cultural objects. By making the context of these objects irrelevant, many awkward questions are avoided. One for example, avoids discussions on the violence done both to the African peoples and to the very objects some Europeans claim to have saved from destruction. In many places such as in Benin, Asante and Dahomey there was actual violence accompanying or preceding the acquisition of cultural artefacts. In other cases, there was the structural violence in the colonial system that was not very far away when the colonial administration or its representatives sought some object. We recall that in France, the so-called *Loi Griaule* allowed members of the Djibouti-Dakar expedition to take from the French colonies whatever they thought was necessary for the advancement of knowledge. We know even more from the diaries of Michel Leiris, *Afrique Fantôme* how the members of the expedition went about collecting and stealing objects. Many of the collected objects are now in musée du Quai Branly but many are also on the private art market in Paris and elsewhere in Europe and America.

African cultural objects, which are mostly kept in the depots of American and European museums, were surely not made for that purpose. They were meant to be in the open and in the societies that produced them. Some would have been surrounded with great reverence and respect in their original societies. How does their sojourn in damp and dark European and American museum depots conform to the respect and affection that some pretend to have for our cultural objects? Some of these objects even had their dresses and other decorations on them removed. Violence to those objects that represent our gods, ancestors and our cherished ones is, with all due respect to the museum directors and private collectors, violence to us, the living ones. It is the continuation of the violence and humiliation that we knew in slavery and colonialism. Would there ever be an end to this?

The contempt displayed towards Africans and the disregard for their feelings and the desire to recover some of their stolen cultural objects is exemplified by the statement cited above that it is the Europeans who confer the quality of art on African cultural objects.

It is not easy to reconcile the disparaging remark and the condescending attitude of Barbier-Mueller with the following statement by him in the preface to the book, *African Masks - The Barbier-Mueller Collection*:

“An attitude of respect towards the sacred sculptures that embody the values of a society is the key to understanding them. These masks represent much more than objects capable of giving aesthetic pleasure.” (9)

How does one reconcile respect towards the sculptures with contempt for the peoples and societies that produced them?

This self-serving ideology is shared also by many others such as those who signed the preface to the catalogue to the exhibition, *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, (ed.) Barbara Plankensteiner (10) when they wrote about “*steady changes in the attribution of meaning and value*” and “*continuation of shifts in meaning*”. In other words, the Benin bronzes, which had been stolen by the British Expedition force in 1897, had gained by being kept illegitimately in Europe. This is surely an interesting argument to present to people who have been violently deprived of their religious and ritual art objects and are now demanding their return.

Some of the supporters of the view that African objects only became art objects when the Europeans stole them, go so far as to argue that most African languages have no word or concept of art. However, does the designation or denomination of an object take primacy over the object or the concrete manifestation of the phenomenon? Can art exist without the objects that are included in the concept of art? Does the fact that some societies may not have words or concepts such as murder or manslaughter imply that such phenomena do not occur in those particular societies? How much do supporters of this line of reasoning know about African languages?

Could African art ever have existed without the societies and the artists that produced the art objects? Bargna has stated truly that the admiration for African art does not exclude racism and other forms of disparagement. (11) Some of these dealers in African art admire the art objects but not the society and artists whose skills and artistry made them possible. Some of the dealers and collectors feel they have greater affinity to these objects than the Africans who produced them.

Many Europeans would agree that African art inspired Picasso, Juan Gris, Arman, Braque, Matisse, Vlaminck, Kandinsky, Kirchner, Modigliani, Paul Klee, Moore and Giacometti and others but they do not realize or take into account that some of these masterpieces now held in Europe could also inspire young African artists who now have no chance of seeing the masterpieces of their culture. These artists will not be given visa to enter Europe by European governments that are now instinctively allergic to Africans after they have exploited African countries for a long period, under slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.

How long will the best of African art continue to be in the hands of Americans and Europeans? How long will African art be described with pejorative words by those who are holding them?

Kwame Opoku, 26 July. 2008.

NOTES

1). Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller, “*Ce sont nous, Occidentaux, qui conférons à ces oeuvres une valeur d’art. Ces statues ne doivent pas retourner en Afrique*”
www.artscape.fr

2) *Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie: Fleurons du musée Barbier-Mueller*, Hazan, Paris, 2008.

3) See the mention of Barbier-Mueller in, Colin Renfrew, *Loot, Legitimacy and Ownership*, Duckworth, London, 2006, p. 55

4) Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, University of Chicago Press, October 2007, p.156

5) Sally Price, *Ibid.* p. 156.

6) The pages of the visitor’s guide are not numbered but this citation appears on the second page of the English introduction.

7) Iris Hahner, Maria Keckskési and Lázló Vadja, *African Masks - The Barbier-Mueller Collection* Prestel Verlag, Munich, 2007, p.6.

8) *African Masks - The Barbier-Mueller Collection*, p. 6.

9) *Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie*, pp. 29 - 41.

10) *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*. Barbara Plankensteiner (ed), Snoeck, Ghent, 2007

11) Ivan Bargna, *Afrika: Kunst und Architektur*, Michel Imhof Verlag, Petersberg, 2008, p.16 - 17.