

Partial Revisionism: How the British Museum's re-framing of Africa reflects its own institutional interests and cultural bias. A review of 'Africa: Arts and Cultures', edited by John Mack

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Published to coincide with the opening of the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum, this book avoids the expensive, coffee table format characteristic of books on African art and culture. Attractively presented with high quality colour photographs, and written with jargon free text, this book appears to be aimed at the 'general' reader or visitor to the Museum. [1]

Africa is divided into four regions, each of which is given a chapter. North, North-east and the Sahara is covered by Christopher Spring and Julie Hudson, and the West by Nigel Barley. Editor John Mack provides the text for Central Africa, as well as for the East and Southern regions. Interspersed into each essay a wide range of writers, many of whom are African, contribute information on specific objects in the Collection. Apart from occasional lapses into what has been called the 'ethnographic present', most writers historically contextualise their subjects.

The book reveals an institution that is questioning the way that it looks at, and represents Africa. Mack writes that "New biases, previously invisible, suddenly become obvious." In particular, it raises questions about how books about and exhibitions on African art have often concentrated on Sub Saharan Africa, ignoring much of North Africa, including Egypt. In addition, the book reveals that the Museum is grappling with the question of whether or not it should represent contemporary African art.

In seeking to represent the continent as a whole, some new biases arise. Very noticeably the historical prominence of West African art, especially Nigerian art, is downplayed. Even within the West African section subheadings emphasise metal, ivory, textiles and pottery, with wood being treated as one of the materials used for masquerades. One consequence of these editorial decisions is that Nia Mahdaoui, a contemporary Tunisian artist, is given more space than Yoruba wood sculpture. If the rationale was to favour less celebrated examples, a point not made in the book, this is not consistently applied as most of the examples from Central Africa are well known. The Luba sculptures (No's 30, 31, 32), Kuba Royal Statue (No. 33) and

Chokwe Commemorative Statuette (no. 34) are all “usual suspects”. The Power Figures from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (No. 35 & 38, and Fig. 60) all make essentially the same point.

With regard to Egypt the institutional structure of the Museum curtails an unambiguous reintegration back into Africa. Mack writes that “In this book we have set out to review African arts and cultures ... concentrating on the Ethnographic holdings.” As a result Egypt, which has its own department, is represented by works from areas “based away from the Nile”, as well as by contemporary examples. Despite the exclusion of examples from Ancient (Nilotic) Egypt, a Roman sculpture found in Africa is included as an example of how the discourse surrounding art “made in Africa” has progressed (p. 12). However, the privileging of this example simply reinforces the view of Egypt as an adjunct of Imperial Rome.

The inclusion of examples of contemporary African art highlight some ‘blind-spots’ which reveal cultural bias. The sleeve notes that “outmoded notions of an authentically African art have led us to ignore much of what is actually happening in contemporary Africa.” However there is a huge leap between what has commonly been regarded as “authentically African” (i.e. mostly pre-colonial) and recent work which “reflects on tradition”. For example, there is a notable absence of late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century work, particularly from West and Central Africa, that comments directly on or reflects colonialism’s impact on ‘tradition’. In contrast the Islamic influence on the material culture of North and East Africa is given substantial emphasis. This tendency to devalue work reflecting European interaction, as presumably ‘inauthentic’, is revealed in the spurious description of sixteenth century Afro-Portuguese ivories as “airport art” (p. 90). Apart from the obvious point that these individually made, highly skilled works reflect none of the mass production typical of “airport art”, this remark reveals a perspective that privileges European patronage over other ‘foreign’ patronage or ‘external’ markets, both Asian and African, some of which would predate the Afro-Portuguese ivories.

The tendency to have a different set of rules for Europe in talking about Africa is also evident in that the book is relatively silent on some of the less savoury legacies of Europe in Africa. In covering the pre-colonial period Muslim and African complicity in the slave trade receives more attention than Europe’s involvement in it. Another example is that the book ignores the vexed political issue of the repatriation of cultural goods currently held in European collections. Instead we are presented with an example where colonial officials acted to repatriate objects to their source (p. 101). It is left to Edward Matenga, a representative of a national heritage institution in a former British colony, to obliquely address this issue through his observation that “The circumstances of the removal of this object from Great Zimbabwe are not known”. He follows this enigmatic statement by saying that “Indeed this is not surprising since, for example... [another work] from the same site mysteriously travelled to Germany before 1906.” (p. 170). Clearly what Matenga is implying is that the means by which indigenous work was ‘exported’ to former imperial and colonial powers may not have always been ethical. Notorious examples, such as the British Punitive Expedition of 1897, when Benin City was ransacked and its treasures taken to Europe, escape comment (and even the work is arguably under-represented in this book). Clearly the advent of this publication may have seemed an inappropriate

one to address, or at least acknowledge, controversial issues. However, one has to question whether amnesia is conducive towards addressing historical biases.

While this book is partially successful as a revisionist text, it inadvertently highlights that Eurocentrism remains one of the biggest challenges facing those involved in the representation of Africa.

Notes.

[1] John Mack (ed.), *Africa: arts and cultures*, (London: British Museum Press, 2000).