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African Objects in Museums

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Research Statement: Revised

My project was inspired by digitized museum collections and the ways they enable new methods for investigating those collections, providing access to them, and presenting information about them. I am also interested in how provenance research connects to methods to decolonize museums. Along with making their collections more accessible through digitization, publishing information about the provenance of these collections is an opportunity for museums to engage with their association with colonial systems and motives for collecting and displaying non-Western objects. I wanted to use the StoryMaps tool to present my research because it is one of the many digital platforms that allow museums and scholars to visualize and communicate complicated collections data. I also wanted to center my project around the "map" as a way to visualize this figure's provenance "data" in a way that is more immediate: seeing its various locations as points on a map better emphasizes the global network surrounding the trade and display of African objects.

In thinking about this object, I was first struck by the comparatively little information we do know with certainty verses the information we cannot know. We know that it was owned, in 1926, by Jeanne Walschot- we have the address of her shop and we have her own words describing the figure. We know that it was then owned by Sir Henry Wellcome, we also have his employee's description of the figure. We know that it was donated to the Fowler Museum somewhere between 1965-66 and an account of its role in the museum since then. This all centers around European actors. I do think that the way these actors have characterized, traded, and displayed this object (or similar ones) tells an important history about changing Western perceptions of African culture that parallels and entangles the histories of both Africa and the West. However, I did not want to imply that the importance of this or any other African object lies simply in its appearance in a European collection. I wanted to begin, first, by explaining its importance and identity outside of and before any European context, which is often left out of a record of provenance.

The problem I ran into here, though, was that the information we have about this context largely comes from European traders, missionaries, and colonial officers. Even the Kongo individuals who assisted Karl Lamman did so from a newly converted Christian perspective. This was further complicated by our discussions of secrecy and the idea that much religious knowledge in Africa is earned rather than given. I wanted to convey that this figure came out of a specific religious practice and set of visual conventions, and to point some of them out. I used Wyatt MacGaffey's scholarship and other essays in *Astonishment and Power* to point to some of the conventions that may explain the choices of the artist. I also wanted to be accurate about the limitations of taking an art historical approach in examining this object: making educated guesses about the intentions of the artist, already a complicated task, is made more complicated by the secondary nature of sources of information about Kongo art and the secrecy that acts as a barrier to knowing more information than we are meant to.

I also ran into some difficulty when deciding what to call the object. At first, I referred to it as "Nkisi", but after reading MacGaffey's perspectives about when an nkisi is active and when it is not, and after our discussions about life verses death histories, I decided that it was no longer accurate to refer to this object as nkisi since that is no longer the purpose it serves. I thought about calling it a sculpture, but was concerned that this insisted that the object be interpreted as art, when really the aesthetics of the object are only one part of its whole. Object feels a bit too inanimate when referring to a sculpture that was once

active. After seeing the word "figure" in many digital collections (that is how the Fowler refers to this object now), I decided that this is perhaps the best and most neutral label to give it. I wanted to give some indication of this struggle through the "African object as" sections of my story map- to explain the various roles that make up the current identity of the object.

My exploration of provenance, a Western museum concept, inevitably became about Western museums. My research began with looking at the various actors who would have been responsible for taking objects out of Africa and back to Europe, especially in the 19th Century when much of this collecting took place. Here I relied on the essays of Linda Heywood, John Thornton, Hein Vanhee, and Jelmer Vos in *Kongo Across the Waters*. I also read the works of Raymond Corbey: *Tribal Art Traffic* and "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930". These introduced me to the historical contexts of trade with West Central Africa, missionaries collecting and documenting culture, and colonial officers taking objects due to national mandates and personal interest. I then focused on the relationship between Belgium and Congo, relying heavily on the work of Deborah Silverman who does an excellent job explaining the role that collecting played in nation-building in Belgium. I also read Maarten Couttenier's essay, "'One speaks softly, as if in a sacred place': collecting, studying and exhibiting Congolese artefacts as African art in Belgium," which discusses the early art/ artefact tension in the European presentation of African objects. Boris Wastau's article on Jeanne Walschot presented information about her motivations for collecting and how they fit into the broader Belgian relationship with Congo. I then, of course, turned to Frances Larson's *An Infinity of Things* to understand Wellcome's motivations for collecting non-Western artifacts. The book does a thorough job of positioning this, as well, within the broader framework of the developing field of anthropology and collecting as scholarship in the UK.

I was stuck on the idea of whether African objects are presented as art objects or ethnographic ones because I think it is at the heart of understanding how the West has justified and come to terms with its perceptions of Africa. There is plenty of literature available about the influence of African objects on European modernism and its display as art in the mid-twentieth century- I relied on essays published by the Met and Yaelle Brio's "African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde" especially. I also found Christa Clark's chapter, "From Theory to Practice: Exhibiting African Art in the Twenty-First Century" in *Art and Its Publics*, which gave a thorough historical framework. I was grateful to the Brooklyn Museum and MoMA for publishing their exhibition catalogs so I could further investigate the *Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* and *African Negro Art* exhibits. It seems no coincidence that a growing insistence on the aesthetics of traditional African objects in the United States coincided with movements defending African American rights and celebrating African American culture. Not all American curators exhibiting African objects as art were concerned with how it affected African American rights. If anything, from what I have read, emphasizing its perceived immediacy and simplicity was related to concerns about Western excess (especially after WWI). However, it did represent a significant shift away from using these objects as evidence for Western superiority. As this shift was occurring, African objects as art were a source of inspiration and empowerment for a growing African American art movement. The essay on "Kongo in Contemporary Art" in *Kongo Across the* Waters, scholarship discussing Christa Clarke's *African Art in the Barnes Foundation,* and (fittingly) an online exhibit on the Harlem Renaissance from the Smithsonian African American Museum via Google (https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/african-american-art-harlem-renaissance-civil-rights-era-and-beyond-smithsonian-american-art-museum/fALyo3o0fCnXJg?hl=en) helped introduce me to the connection between African art exhibits and the Harlem Renaissance. Carlee Forbes (Mellon Curator at the Fowler) has also provided a useful bibliography for continuing to learn about the connection between African objects as art and the Harlem Renaissance!

In the 1960's, the Fowler's exhibition of Wellcome objects as art objects was in the context of a growing involvement with the Civil Rights movement at UCLA and the establishment of cultural studies departments. Marla C. Berns notes this connection in her book about the Fowler, *World arts, local lives: the collections of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.* In the 80's Susan B. Vogel talked about the importance of presenting African objects at the Met as art on par with anything else being exhibited there. The implication seems to have been that for African culture to be respected in the West, it needed to be from an aesthetic perspective first. It was through acknowledging the artistic abilities of African cultures that the West could move away from insisting on their own superiority. Through describing some more recent museum exhibits and situating the mission of the Fowler within the broader reflexive trend in museums exhibiting African art, I hoped to draw some attention to this shift. I also read Vogel's reflections about mounting *ART/Artifact* and some reviews of the exhibit as well as Christa Clark's chapter and, of course, the *Exhibition-ism* publication to learn more about this shift in museums exhibiting African art.

I think the narrative that many museums in the West began collecting African objects to prove Western superiority is an important one to acknowledge out loud to museum audiences. At the same time, it continues to be important to acknowledge the agency and power of African culture apart from and independent to the West, which the Fowler and many other Western museums have done through exhibits and associated literature. As Mary Nooter Roberts points out in her essay in *Exhibitionism*, "Yet even if the ownership and display of foreign objects always ultimately reflects the exhibitors as much as or more than the producers, it is nevertheless important to consider how African peoples experience their relationships to objects and to the empirical world." (39). Following the example of exhibits like *Astonishment and Power* and *Kongo Across the Waters*, I wanted to book end the presentation with an acknowledgement of the ongoing evolution of African culture and art and the ways in which traditional objects continue to influence artists in Africa and the diaspora. The final reflections of the Story Map try to situate this project within the broader mission of the Fowler and provenance research:

> "Ongoing research at the Fowler and at other museums with African collections seeks to go beyond recording the context of the creation of an object, or highlighting its visual power. The challenge now is to research and present how these collections are a result of and represent networks of global cultural exchange. The provenance of objects like this one is much more than a list of locations on a map. Their existence in Western museums is a testament to centuries of trade, conflict, and diplomacy between Africa and the West. They are also a testament to the lasting power and influence of African visual cultural throughout the world."

I realize that my work and research, over the course of ten weeks, has only scratched the surface of the complexities surrounding African objects in museums, but my hope was to build a framework for a digital exhibit that better contextualizes collection provenance information. What I will continue to be interested in is how these complexities can be translated to the digital and what tools can best accomplish this. When visitors go to a museum, their interaction with collections is contextualized through an exhibit. When visitors see a collection online, it is sometimes just a series of images with minimal metadata. Digitizing collections provides exciting opportunities for access to these collections, but does a lack of accompanying metadata obscure these objects for non-scholarly audiences? Further, do museums have an obligation not only to provide contextual and provenance metadata, but to contextualize this provenance metadata? To be explicit about the history of museums collecting African and other non-Western objects? Considering that digital collections are the first entry point to museum collections for many, and the only entry point to "visitors" from other parts of the world, should more attention be paid to how they are

presented? And how does metadata and its presentation online avoid perpetuating a Western perspective about these objects and burying an African voice?

I do think it is important to record the history of the exhibition of African objects in Western museums and to make this history accessible to museum audiences. However, I recognize that the scale of this project is impossible to apply to every museum object. It might even be impossible for most museums to apply it to their general digital collections without having to significantly shift staff and budget models. I will be interested to see whether more museums do decide to dedicate resources to enriching metadata in their digital collections or to investing in databases that look more like the ones at the British Museum or the Met, with plenty of associated essays, timelines, and online exhibits. And to see what additional tools they decide to use.

I should state outright that I hope that more museums dedicate resources to contextualizing digital collections and improving access to them. I also hope to see more museums taking advantage of the uniquely flexible nature of digital collections in the context of reevaluating their role in the diaspora of African objects. Digital interfaces enable emphasis on the aggregate, to take a broad look at-for example- the dispersal of minkisi from Mayombe throughout various museum collections. They also allow opportunities to begin linking related collections and interpretations of collections. The Sierra Leone Heritage project (http://www.sierraleoneheritage.org/) is an example of linking Western and African collections together through object-centered databases. It also connects the Western interpretation at the British Museum with videos of the objects being used in real time in Sierra Leone. While this type of polyphonic presentation is difficult in the physical exhibit, the flexibility of the digital realm makes these grand ambitions more attainable.

Through future research, I hope to continue thinking about how museums and archives can collaborate with scholars and communities to build projects that contextualize and link collections. I hope that more communities can not only access collections, but research and metadata about the history of those collections. And that more collaborative work can be done to begin tracing and visualizing the complex networks of exchange centered around the diasporas of African, or other non-Western collections.

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