"Africa in the Museum: The Politics of the Display of African Material Culture at the Field Museum"

Kristin Otto
*DePauw University*

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“Africa” in the museum: 
The politics of display of African material culture at the Field Museum, Chicago

Kristin Otto
DePauw University
Bowling Green State University
Emerging Perspectives in Africana Studies Conference
Abstract:

In this paper, I will analyze how museum exhibitions use material culture to construct and present a narrative about Africa. Exhibiting material culture reflects the power, authority, and ideology of the exhibitor, sometimes at the expense of the displayed culture’s agency in representation. Museums have a particularly infamous history of distorting African culture in exhibits, often validating racist ideologies. Consequently, zealous museum critics have begun to question the relevance of museums in the future public education. The public, however, continues to visit museums and experience exhibits featuring African objects. Based on the challenges and controversies museums exhibiting African objects face today, I will explore how current museum exhibitions display African objects, and by extension how African cultures are constructed and represented in selected institutions.

This paper is an adapted section of a larger senior thesis involving multiple exhibit case studies. For this paper, I will focus on one case study at the Field Museum’s Africa exhibit. Africa uses in-situ displays to produce an experience for the viewer as they “travel” through various scenes in modern day and historical Africa and America. However, the perspective given to the viewer as a tourist at the beginning of the exhibit shifts dramatically when they suddenly encounter the era of slavery, distancing the viewer from a potentially powerful and resonant topic. The inclusion of the African experience of slavery reflects an attempt to include multiple perspectives of Africa for the visitor, but the execution of the transition in the exhibit distances, rather than connects, the viewer from Africa. Drawing from James Clifford, I argue that it is impossible for museums such as the Field Museum to holistically represent African cultures. However, a critical gaze reveals the strengths and areas for improvement in the museum’s constructed narrative, and the future potential for museums exhibiting African objects.
Museum representations of Africa have been the topic of critical attention ever since the unfortunate history of distorting and fetishizing African objects in exhibits during the colonial era. In his article “The Mirror and the Tomb,” Lionnet (2001) reminds us of the 1987 novel *La Goutte d’or¹*, in which Michel Tournier tells the story of a particularly unique museum visitor, a Berber shepherd named Idris. Idris travels from his native Sahara to Paris, and visits a museum. Inside, he comes face-to-face with the material objects of his own cultures, which have been transformed into visual interest pieces through the act of display. Tournier (1987) refers to the museum’s representation of Berber culture as a “taxidermist’s version of the Sahara” (p. 68). It can be difficult for a Western visitor to understand or assume the perspective of individuals such as Idris, even when confronted with the material representations of “the other.” In fact, unlike museum critics, visitors often do not question the information or perspective presented in an exhibition. Today, scholars criticize museum exhibitions featuring African objects for exoticizing, obscuring, isolating, or “patronizing” material culture, and question the value of museums for future education (Hudson, 1991, p.464).

In light of the controversial perspectives on museums, this paper analyzes how a museum exhibition at the Field Museum of Natural History uses material culture to construct and present a narrative about Africa. I will evaluate the “Africa” exhibition to analyze how it builds meaning and a narrative about Africa for the visitor. The evaluation reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the Field Museum’s approach. Drawing from James Clifford, I argue that it is impossible for museums such as the Field Museum to holistically represent African cultures. Using critical engagement allows us to view exhibitions like “Africa” as steps in a process rather than as static entities and easily discarded spaces.

¹ Translation: “The Golden Droplet”
Literature Review

In order to understand the controversy surrounding museum displays, it is necessary to recognize the power embedded in the institutions. Using material objects to represent cultures or aspects of a culture is ultimately a limited endeavor. It is the interpretation of objects through text and other didactics that allows museums, from ethnographic to history to art, to construct exhibitions around broad themes such as African cultures (Shelton, 2000). Since the objects cannot physically speak, the museum provides a narrative from which the visitor can learn and engage with the object (Alcoff, 1991-1992). However, the relationship between textual and visual components is often perceived as a neutral interpretation (Hallam, 2000). The voice of the museum, involving multiple parties such as the curator or exhibit designer, as the interpreter of the object is typically ignored; the viewer perceives the relationship between textual and visual components as neutral and exclusive.

Consequently, the primary activity of museum exhibitions is not the presentation of meaning, but the construction of meaning. Much like Clifford’s argument for the fictional nature of ethnography (Clifford, 2013), I would argue museum exhibits are also partly fictional, in the sense that they express a particular (partial) point of view, which may be internalized by the viewer as a holistic truth. Exhibiting reflects the power, authority, and ideology of the exhibitor, sometimes at the expense of the displayed culture’s agency in representation. The voice the viewer “hears” comes from the museum, not the object or culture. The voice can still be educational as well as problematic.

Perhaps more so than any other cultural group, the display of African objects in museum exhibitions has been fraught with controversy caused by ethnocentric views and misplaced intent. Objects from Africa have been continually redefined under arbitrary categories at the
same time that exhibitionary practices have been transformed and racial categories have been redrawn. For example, acquisitions of African arts grew dramatically during the colonial era as Westerners brought back objects to be displayed in European museums. These objects were aesthetically and materially different than the European sculptural tradition, which allowed colonial powers to emphasize perceived racial difference through the construction of the category of “primitive art” (Banton, 2009). Colonial exhibitions of African arts validated the “civilized” European colonization of a “dark continent” through the presentation of “primitive” art (Coombes, 1985; Coombes, 1994). Many contemporary museums’ African collections are a product of the colonial era and must deal with the consequences of such historical representations of Africa.

The definition and classification of African objects remains a controversial debate to this day, centered on the distinction between the constructed categories of “art,” an object of primarily visual and aesthetic interest, and “artifact,” an object of primarily cultural and contextual interest (Vogel, 1988). While African arts like masks and figures are certainly aesthetically interesting, the objects often have functional purposes outside of aesthetic qualities and were not necessarily created with display in mind. Defining an African object as “art” or “artifact” affects the style of display in a museum exhibit, and by extension the viewer’s understanding of the object. The Field Museum’s exhibit incorporates objects designated as both “art” and “artifact,” with different styles of display according to the category, revealing the complication that no museum need be wedded to one category.

**Perspective and Methodology**

As stated, some scholars have long questioned the relevance of museums, and museum curators and staff are forced to reevaluate the role of museums in the public realm (Harris &
O’Hanlon, 2013). Based on the challenges and controversies museums exhibiting African objects face today, I will explore how the Field Museum’s “Africa” displays African objects, and by extension how African cultures are constructed and represented for the viewer.

I, like scholars before me, believe that any presentation of material culture is political, no matter the method of display. I draw from postmodern theorists such as Foucault, who argued that power is embedded in everyday institutions, and Clifford, who argued for the subjective, perspective-dependent truths of ethnography. I constructed a methodology to evaluate the exhibit, drawing from the examples of scholars such as Karp and Kratz (2000), focusing on particular characteristics of the exhibit, focusing not just on the message of the exhibition, but also how the structure of the exhibit hall and presentation styles help to convey this message.

My research is not without limitations. The Field Museum is not representative of all the exhibition styles and techniques for African objects, which limits the application of my conclusions. Furthermore, despite my efforts, I was also not able to obtain an interview from a curator at the Field Museum, limiting my understanding and conclusions about the exhibit’s design. However, I did include an institutional perspective based on secondary sources from when the exhibit was first installed.

The Field Museum of Natural History
The Disoriented Tourist: A Viewer’s Perspective

“Africa” (See Figure 1 in Appendix)
Experiencing the Exhibit

The Field Museum’s “Africa” exhibit is different both in aesthetics and content than any other exhibit of African objects I have visited. The in-situ displays and didactics clearly emphasize the importance of cultural context. Objects were displayed naturally, positioned in a recreated setting. “Africa” was as much about the experience of being in the exhibit as it was
about seeing the objects or reading labels. I learned more about the object from accompanying thematic texts or the context of the display than from the labels. Rather than display objects according to a guiding taxonomy or geography, the exhibit was arranged thematically around conceptual categories, which were outlined in guiding texts shaped like Africa (See Figure 4 in Appendix).

The exhibit began, after an introduction at an autobus stop outside the main exhibit hall, with a section on community and family life set in a courtyard of Grand Yoff, a suburb of Dakar, during the Islamic Tabaski ritual. The exhibit then shifted to focus on arts and society, with sections focused on royal prestige arts and political arts in Benin City. A brief, optional diversion described the environmental context of the African savannah and the Great Rift Valley. The exhibit continued with a thematic focus on commerce, illustrated through a Tuareg camp and the exchanges made at Kano Kurmi market. From this point, the exhibit changed tone entirely to focus on the period of slavery and the experience of the African Diasporas in America. Although the time period of the exhibition seemed to be predominately modern-day (or at least modern day circa 1990s when the exhibit was originally installed), the exhibit still incorporated a large number of older artifacts as examples of the history of wide ranging cultures.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the immersive feel of the exhibit I occasionally felt slightly or dramatically disoriented. A change in geographic setting occurred with each shift in theme. The exhibit focused on lesser-known cultures in Africa, which was refreshing, but had the unfortunate effect of making it difficult to locate where I was in Africa. Only very small maps on the thematic wall text indicated the location of the setting. So with each change in location, I found myself wondering where I had jumped in the continent. Furthermore, the shift from the market to the slave trade was extremely shocking. There was little to no preparation for me to
understand the cultural and political forces leading to slavery until suddenly, I was in a holding cell. This was exacerbated by the fact that there were no more thematic guides to contextualize the environment. The exhibit as a whole was interactive and immersive, but I left the exhibit hall feeling as if I had travelled a great distance in time and space without knowing why.

**Institutional Perspective**

Since the exhibit’s installment in 1993, the main curator Deborah Mack has left the Field Museum, and as stated, I was unable to obtain any interviews from current staff. The only institutional source I could locate was the museum’s bulletin *In the Field* from November/December 1993 when the exhibit debuted. It includes a descriptive article about the exhibit and comments from the Field Museum President, William L. Boyd. The article and Boyd’s description highlight the immersive qualities of the exhibition by describing how the visitor will be “drawn into” the exhibit through exhibitions that produce a “you are there” experience with “true-to-life settings” (p. 1). Boyd says that the exhibit was designed in this way to “open new doors of understanding about African peoples, cultures, history, and daily life” (p. 2). Boyd notes that “Africa” is one of the Field’s steps towards an “interdisciplinary” approach to exhibition, incorporating a variety of perspectives and approaches to contextualizing Africa (p. 2). Clearly, the immersive techniques I noticed during my evaluation of the exhibit were an intentional move to connect the visitor with the object in ways the Field had not attempted previously.

The explanatory article on the exhibit includes a description of the path of the exhibit that I found useful in identifying the shifts in perspective I noticed. The description begins by saying, “Visitors enter ‘Africa’ by a lively and festive marketplace that is the recreation of a bustling street in Dakar, Senegal” (p.1), which establishes the initial perspective of the visitor. The
description goes on to describe each immersive setting by adopting a personal tone, using phrases such as “we meet a Senagalese family” and “we next explore the savanna environment” (p. 1). However, the tone of the description notably changes from a personal “you” to “the visitor” when describing the section dedicated to the era of slavery: “Finally, the African Diaspora section provides experiences that help visitors examine a number of questions, including how and why slavery happened” (p.1). Although the in-depth description of the exhibit only occupies about a column of the article, I still found the switch from “we” to a depersonalized “visitor” curious. The perspective shifts back to “we” when discussing how African descendants formed communities in America. The word choice distinctions, while slight, reflect a shift in perspective at the section on slavery, and an attempt to distance the “visitor” from the personal relationship with topics developed in other sections.

Analysis

The Field Museum’s “Africa” constructs an experience for the viewer as they “travel” through various scenes in modern day and historical Africa. The recreation of the cultural context of the object through a technique called in-situ display profoundly influences the viewer’s experience and understanding of the content. Objects or didactics are often embedded in the surrounding, constructed environment (See Figure 2 in Appendix). In the first setting, for example, a hairdresser named Mariama has inspirational fashion magazines lying at her feet on a decorative cloth next to hairdressing tools. Not every object is placed in an in-situ location. Some are displayed in lit cases, but they are still understood by the viewer through the contextual environment. The in-situ displays recognize that material culture does not exist in a vacuum, but is constantly being defined in relationship to people and the surrounding environment.
The narrative of the exhibit moves forward by creating moments—seeing the preparation for the *Tabaski* ritual in the suburb of Dakar, working the Ethiopian smelting furnace, visiting the Tuareg camp, bartering at the Kurmi market—that engage the viewer with the material culture on display. These “moments” are often interactive and sensory, involving listening to music or manipulating an object. However, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes that moment-capturing is one of the dangers of in-situ display: “They are not a slice of life lifted from the everyday world and inserted into the museum gallery, though this is the rhetoric of the mimetic mode” (p. 20). The constructed environment and sensory experience imply to the viewer a replication of reality, when in fact the museum creates an idealized representation. The family courtyard in Dakar constructs a condensed and sterilized version of the *Tabaski* ritual (sheep are not actually being sacrificed), not a holistic representation. When walking through the space a visitor may lose sight of the fact it is the museum interpreting the objects and constructing the environment in order to convey a message.

Not only does the created environment obscure the voice of the museum, but also it occasionally eclipses the artifact itself. The colorful and interactive environment may overpower the purpose of displaying the object. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) writes, “There is the danger that theatrical attention will displace scientific seriousness, that the artifice of the installation will overwhelm artifact and curatorial intention” (p. 21). While the experience of seeing the objects “in context” certainly may contribute to the viewer’s understanding of material culture, the environment can seem at times more playful than educational. This has to do with the audience of the Field Museum, which draws a lot of families. The interactive exhibit environment caters to the audience through child-friendly spaces and label text. When I walked through the exhibit, I noticed it was easy to get caught up in the excitement of the environment as a whole, and I had to
force myself to slow down and look at the details and read the labels. Usually, as I was taking notes, children ran around the space, using the environment as an educational playground. As I was wandering through the plantation setting, one child, referring to the slave cell, asked their mother “Can we go back to the dungeon? That was fun!” While I do not expect a child to have the same understanding of slavery as an adult, clearly the immersive qualities of the exhibit sometimes created a playground environment that overshadowed the cultural context and curatorial meaning of the displays.

The Field Museum’s in-situ exhibition provides a particular perspective for the visitor that significantly affects the viewer’s understanding of, and relationship to, the objects and environment. A sign from the Ministry of Tourism welcomes the viewer to the exhibit, while a sign at the end of the family courtyard urges the visitor to “have a good trip” and “Have a great time traveling to other parts of Africa.” The signs imply the viewer is not a simple visitor, but a tourist. The perspective of tourism permeates most of the rest of the exhibit, as the visitor experiences the “moments” constructed by the museum. When the visitor enters the Tuareg camp, it is not as a member of the Tuareg ethnic group, but as an outside, observing visitor. When browsing the stalls at Kano Kurmi, it is not as a local, but as an outsider experiencing the market for the first time.

The framework of tourism constructed for the majority of the exhibit could not be maintained for the moment devoted to slavery. Suddenly the tourist leaves the market and arrives at a slave holding cell. This is the origin of my disorientation. I had understood myself as a tourist, and did not know how I had traveled back in time to the era of slavery. Was I supposed to be a tourist at a plantation or a slave holding cell? The thought was disturbing. While I would assume the link between tourism and slavery was not intentional, because the earlier “moments”
were all associated with an idyllic version of modern Africa, the exhibit offered no clue that the viewer had to change perspectives and time periods. As mentioned the exhibit provided relatively little information on the historical forces influencing the development of chattel slavery, only furthering the lack of context for the viewer. There were no more guiding texts to orient and alert the visitor to the shift, which corresponded to a shift geographically from Africa to America, but also removed the purposeful direction of the exhibit. As I noticed in my review of the Field Museum’s description of the exhibit, a shift in perspective was intended for the viewer, but not communicated.

In contrast to the earlier thematic sections, the context of the holding cell and slave auction implied the viewer was supposed to adopt a slave’s perspective. The material culture displayed in the plantation section had the potential to be powerfully resonant examples of slaves’ experiences, but objects like the whip and shackles were surrounded by cartoon drawings of figures rather than the more realistic photographic representations used elsewhere (*See Figure 3 in Appendix*). The cartoon figures had the dual affects of diminishing the reality of slavery and making the experience of slavery more comfortable for the visitor. The final picture of the African American family seemed to emphasize the achievement of the American Dream, again neglecting structural forces and institutionalized racism that still affect individuals of African descent in America today (*See Figure 5 in Appendix*). As a result, the slavery and African American community sections feel like an underdeveloped afterthought rather than a new, separate narrative.

**Conclusion**

**Reading “Africa”**
At the beginning of “Africa,” a section of text read, “By the time you get back to Chicago, you’ll probably realize that Africa is a lot closer than you thought.” While the interactive and engaging environment in the exhibit brings the engages the viewer with African material culture, the lack of focus on cultural and historical forces often distances the viewer from the topic at hand, while the perspective of tourism serves to distance the viewer culturally from the objects and experiences displayed. I applaud the Field Museum for incorporating perspectives that challenge the viewer’s concept of modern Africa, but the abrupt transition to the era of slavery made me exit “Africa” with a sense of confusion rather than closeness.

The Field Museum’s “Africa” shows museum skeptics do not lack historical or contemporary evidence for their critiques. According to the skeptics, uncertainty remains as to whether current museums can avoid the unfortunate echoes of history and combat the controversy surrounding the politics of display in the present. What these critics seem to forget is that there is no “perfect” institution, and that striving for a perfectly accurate representation of Africa would be an ineffective endeavor. I recognize the imperfections of exhibition techniques, and the challenges facing curators who attempt to respond to the thorny politics of display.

However, the unavoidable consequences of displaying material culture in a museum and the difficulties curators face do not mean that we, as museum audiences, should not question the perspective of an exhibition or allow museums to represent an object any way they want. This is why I conducted this study. “Africa” should not be passively accepted as accurate, or even adequate. But this cannot be achieved by simply thinking of a museum as an institution, which implies an element of permanency or immobility. By seeing a museum as not just a building housing objects, but also as a “method” or “contact zone” we can see how museum exhibitions such as the one I studied resemble a form of scholarly dialogue (Thomas, 2010; Harris &
Hanlon, 2013). They are responding to the historical representations of Africa and putting forth their own argument and perspectives about the objects. There are certainly holes in some of their arguments, which should be discussed and developed by a community of people committed to the topic. This paper represents an effort to contribute to that dialogue.

Despite its limitations, I would argue that the Field Museum of Natural History’s “Africa” holds vast potential to confront the public with new and innovative perspectives on African cultures. As Duncan (1995) writes, “Exhibitions in art museums do not of themselves change the world. Nor should they have to. But, as a form of public space, they constitute an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new ones” (p. 133). In order to live up to this high standard, museum exhibitions should be more than just informative. Curators should strive to design exhibits that question or challenge the viewer’s perspectives of Africa through subject matter, object choice, arrangement, and interpretation. Being in a museum exhibit does not need to be a comfortable, relaxing, or idyllic experience.

Furthermore, visitors need to not be satisfied as passive recipients of knowledge, but engage with and question the narrative provided by the museum. Visitors to “Africa” should read the exhibition like a story, not listen to it as if it were an ultimatum. Reading exhibits, examining not only the text on the wall but the display styles and the perspective provided, allows the viewer to see themselves as a part of the story, not just a temporary “visitor.” Although most Western visitors will not ever be able to assume the perspective of Tournier’s Idris in a museum, reading a well-crafted exhibition may allow a visitor to see how their perspective (and the museum’s) are only partially true. “Africa” may be an imperfect and incomplete story, but it is a story worth telling.
Figure 1: Entrance to “Africa” at the Field Museum of Natural History.

Figure 2: Example of in-situ display style at “Africa” exhibit in the Grand Yoff family courtyard, Field Museum of Natural History
Figure 3 (top): Image of the “slave traders” the visitor encounters after exiting the recreated slave ship and dock in the “Africa” exhibit. Note the cartoon-like appearance in contrast with the life-size pictures from Figure 12.

Figure 4 (bottom left): Example of the “Africa” guide with bulleted information outlining what the visitor can expect. These were not present after the market.

Figure 5 (bottom right): Final image in the “Africa” exhibit of an African American family at home, which appears to emphasize the achievement of the “American Dream,” right before the visitor exits.
References


