

## Culture

### Exhibiting Cultures

Jeanne Cannizzo



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[See table of contents](#)

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## Exhibiting Cultures

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by *Stephen Inglis*

Canadian Museum of Civilization

The previous issue's Museology section featured two reviews of the exhibition "Into the Heart of Africa". These were a sample of the multitude of notes, articles, reviews and essays inspired by the exhibit and the controversy it provoked. The curator, Jeanne Cannizzo, while enduring criticism which at times descended to hostility, responded to the issues in several different ways. Included here are excerpts from her major curatorial statement, reflections on the development of the exhibit and some reactions it elicited.

INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA, a major scholarly exhibition, opened at Canada's largest museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, on November 16, 1989 and closed August 6, 1990. It offered the history of the museum's African collection through a critical examination of the role played by Canadians in the European colonization of Africa while displaying the rich diversity of African cultural practices and artistic traditions.

As has become clear from informal surveys of visitors' responses and a voluminous correspondence in the press, it has helped many Canadians better understand the historical roots of racism. It did not, as was alleged by a small group of protestors, promote white supremacy or glorify imperialism.

As the guest curator, it was my job and the purpose of the exhibition to interpret and display the Ethnology Department's own African collection, as it existed. That is, there was no question of a loan exhibition or fieldwork to gather more artifacts to update or supplement the extant collection, which had rarely been on display.

The dispersed content of the collection was a direct result of the history of its acquisition during the colonial era. The old catalogues contained many hints about the donors and the conditions under which

*Dans le numéro précédent, la rubrique Muséologie comportait deux compte-rendus de l'exposition "Into the Heart of Africa". Il s'agissait d'un échantillon tiré des multiples commentaires, recensions, articles ou essais provoqués par cette exposition et la controverse qu'elle a suscitée. La curatrice de l'exposition, Jeanne Cannizzo, qui fut la cible de critiques parfois belliqueuses, a fait face à la situation de plusieurs manières. Nous présentons ici des extraits de ses déclarations les plus importantes en tant que curatrice, ses réflexions sur l'élaboration de l'exposition ainsi que sur certaines des réactions qui s'en suivirent.*

their collections had been made. In particular, it became clear that the majority of the early donors were either Canadian missionaries, inspired by the exploits of David Livingstone, or Canadian soldiers who joined the British Army and campaigned against Africans resisting the imperial advance, or occasionally against competing European armies during what historians have described as "the scramble" for African colonies. These people returned home bearing souvenirs and trophies of their victories on spiritual and temporal battlefields. Those objects eventually ended up in the museum.

It is unusual to have such rich historical documentation and I wanted to use this dimension in some way. The collection also seemed to me an ideal one with which to address the sometimes voiced complaint by African scholars that North American museums and art galleries have not really acknowledged the consequences of the colonial period. Anthropology as a discipline has also been grappling, of course, with the issues of appropriation, decolonizing the field, representation and "studying up" and these concerns could be explored in just such a collection.

What I learned in the storeroom fitted in well with my own interest in the intersection of history and anthropology, and my research on museums and

their collections as forms of visual ideology, if we understand ideology as a cultural system rather than just a political phenomenon. If, as Geertz argued, an ideology is a kind of map which allows us to find a way through the dense and difficult terrain of reality, then, as I have written elsewhere (Cannizzo 1991) museums are full of such maps. This kind of analysis is particularly appropriate when the question is the meaning of objects to the public, in that museums are symbolic structures which render most visible our public "myths". In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, this was made clear. A museum collection may be thought of as a kind of cultural text, one that may be read to understand the underlying cultural or ideological assumptions that have informed its creation, selection, and display. Within such a collection, objects act as an expression not only of the worldview of those who chose to make and use them, but also of those who chose to collect and exhibit them.

Thus the particular strengths or weaknesses of the collection coincided with my own curatorial and anthropological concerns and emerged as an exhibition about "process" rather than "product".

The original feasibility study for the exhibition was quite explicit in proposing to look at the colonial history of the collection and to analyze the museum itself as an artifact existing in a particular social milieu and historical period. Such an approach would reveal something not only of African but also European sensibilities, and in so doing begin to question what museum collections really mean and what they represent.

In what material form these themes and ideas were to be made into an exhibition was not solely a curatorial responsibility. Rather a six person team, including an architect, graphics designer, co-ordinator, artist, interpretive planner and the curator had collective responsibility for the actual execution of the exhibition. This team had to accommodate itself to, and negotiate with, a much wider group of museum professionals on a variety of issues, such as conservation requirements, security regulations, public programming considerations, and recommendations from visitors' services and the registration department.

The core of the African collection at the Royal Ontario Museum is made up of objects amassed in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first of our own. As such, the collections are historical, and it is impossible even to suggest through these objects the complexities of African life at the end of the 20th century. What one can do is realize that the lifeways

of all peoples change; no one lives in a collective state of suspended animation.

It was to this end that INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA was conceived of in two parts. One, the exhibition, dealt with historical context and objects. The other, a series of lectures with African scholars, symposia on current issues in political life, dances by cultural groups, musical performances and films by African directors, dealt with the lived experience today. That public programming, and hence visitors' views of modern Africa, were partly shaped by two consultants, one an African historian from Uganda, and the other a community arts organizer from Toronto. These events all gave Africa as it exists today a presence in the museum, a correction to the static and historical nature of the collections themselves.

The exhibition opened to good reviews: the Toronto Star (Canada's largest circulation newspaper) called it "A show with edge" and on the same day, November 17, 1989, the Globe and Mail (the national newspaper) described it as "a revealing journey through time and space".

However, four months after it opened, a group of some 25 protestors held a demonstration in front of the museum denouncing the exhibition as "racist", one which presented "a colonial and white supremacist view of Africa". These demonstrations became a weekly event, held between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. every Saturday for the rest of the remaining 5 months of the exhibition's run. Unfortunately the protests escalated and there were violent confrontations with the police. Eventually the demonstrators had only one non-negotiable demand, the closure of the exhibition.

Media coverage was intensive and in some cases, inaccurate. Thus, one anthropologist arriving from the United States was quite surprised to see what he described as a number of black visitors peacefully viewing the exhibition. Presumably he had thought there was a general boycott. Another colleague was surprised, after reading newspaper accounts, to find no demonstrations at all during her visit and joked that "Saturdays only" must be a manifestation of Canadian culture. It is more likely to be a function of the small number of demonstrators. The protestors, who called themselves the Coalition for the Truth About Africa, claimed to have the support of some 26 groups. However, a study by two members of the Black Business and Professional Association pointed out that six of these groups no longer supported the Coalition by the end of the show, and that of the remaining twenty groups, fifteen gave as their ad-

dress that of the same student group. They concluded that "few of these 20 groups appear to be fully constituted and broadly representative organizations. For example, none of the national associations of people from Africa or the Caribbean belong to the Coalition, nor do organizations such as the Black Business and Professional Association". It is also clear from their report that other members of the black community, including some who had not seen the exhibition, expressed concern and were unhappy about the museum's response.

Explanations offered by cultural critics and arts analysts on how these events came to pass are of some interest to anyone involved in public culture.

One approach focussed on the wider political context in which the exhibition opened. Relations between the African-Canadian community and the Metropolitan police were very strained by a recent shooting of a black youth. Thus, this argument goes, the exhibition gave people a highly visible, if inappropriate, venue for expressing their anger over this incident.

The general argument that the political context partially determined the demonstrators' reactions to the exhibition is a valid one. For if, as the exhibition argued, the museum itself is a cultural artifact, then, as with individual objects, the context in which it is viewed will be influential. Of course, the museum could neither anticipate nor control that kind of event. It could perhaps have been better prepared for an "image" problem which emerged. The Royal Ontario Museum is sometimes portrayed as an elitist institution, both in terms of its internal subculture and its research-oriented, scholarly approach to exhibitions. It might have been impossible for people with that view of this particular museum to perceive the subtext critical of the museum itself.

Another commentator suggested the exhibition was in the wrong sociotemporal space as well. Writing in the *Globe and Mail* for February 2 of this year, on what he called "the rise of the new puritanism", the critic suggested that "this was an Eighties kind of art exhibition - ironic, allusive, detached - that had the misfortune to be mounted at the Royal Ontario Museum on the eve of a new decade".

These context-dependent arguments all have merit but are not sufficient in and of themselves. Another line of analysis which seems to have gained wider acceptance is that the exhibition was beyond the ability of some of the protestors to understand.

There is, however, another approach to explaining all these events which does not revolve around

whether or not the demonstrators were capable of understanding the grammar of the text. One art critic expressed it this way, in an article dated May 19, 1990 from the *Toronto Star*: "Either the protestors haven't seen the show or they are deliberately distorting the truth to suit their ends." This analysis attributes a conscious political agenda to the protestors, and indeed if their pamphlets and other materials are examined, it becomes clear that the demonstrators rejected the exhibition because they rejected the basic anthropological and museological tenets which underlay it.

The kind of celebratory exhibition desired both by the Coalition for the Truth About Africa and the evangelical sect is not where current museological theory is leading. Indeed, "a good museum always will direct attention to what is difficult and even painful to contemplate". More explicitly, this exhibition anticipated the calls for exhibitions which expose the historical processes which formed museums. Writing of the British Museum, Tawadros has argued that beyond the labels about place and date there "exists another context, hidden from the naked eye and unexplained by the wealth of information surrounding the museum's exhibits. It lies in the historical and ideological fabric of the museum and at the same time extends beyond the unseen but essential context in which objects and artifacts, specifically those from non-European cultures, are collected and displayed within the space of the museum that needs to be examined and reassessed". It is precisely this context which *INTO THE HEART OF AFRICA* exposes to critical examination.

Very sadly, what happened to the exhibition has already induced in some museums a curatorial retreat from thought-provoking ideas for exhibition. Self-censorship will undoubtedly make for more "traditional" displays, and so our museums will become even less places of dialogue and critical discourse.

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