

Culture

EDITORIAL NOTE

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EDITORIAL NOTE

By Stephen Inglis

Canadian Museum of Civilization

Visitors to major museum exhibits are accustomed to being offered a range of published material to orient, guide, enhance or memorialize their visit. Yet many of those who saw "Into the Heart of Africa" at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) got even more than they, or the museum, bargained for. In addition to a free brochure and a handsome companion book produced in conjunction with the exhibit, visitors left with a pamphlet distributed on the street in front of the museum building by supporters of the Coalition for the Truth About Africa. This six page pamphlet, deeply critical of the exhibition, may represent a new genre in "museum" publication; it certainly reflects some of the issues of representation and consultation now facing museums and particularly the anthropologists who work for them.

The Coalition, now made up of over fifty-three organizations, from African and Caribbean students to activists against apartheid and racism, claims that the exhibition "represents a clear and concise attempt to mislead the public and to further tarnish the image of Africa and African people". According to the pamphlet, the exhibit does this by "neglecting Africa's contribution to humanity" and emphasizing "the demise of Africa and Africans". There is an attempt to counteract perceived errors by reproducing quotations on African contributions to science, medicine, art, architecture, etc, and by recommending further reading. The writers object not to the artifacts and photographs but to the content of labels and text panels accompanying them which the pamphlet describes as "trite and condescending", vividly reminiscent of "a past that is still not past".

The latter statement reveals one key element in the controversy. Exploring the colonial and imperialist history of many museum collections, such as this one, can be painful for some visitors, regardless of how well it is done. It has been argued that "Into the Heart of Africa" reveals more about Toronto than Africa and surely more about Canadian values and interests during the periods discussed than about those of Africans, yet the response to the exhibit illustrates once again that the two cannot be separated. Canadian society now encompasses descen-

dants (whether actual or empathetic) of both sides in all previous colonial encounters. Placing the facts of exploitation and humiliation before the public in a courageous and innovative manner, such as is attempted in "Into the Heart of Africa", inevitably makes the museum a stage where the continuing legacy of racism and colonialism will be acted out.

No Canadian museum exhibition has generated such emotion since "The Spirit Sings". Opinions range widely from those of opponents who say the exhibit should never have been presented to those of supporters who see the criticism as an attack on the objectivity and academic independence of the museum. What follows are two reviews by scholars who live and work in Toronto and for whom "Into the Heart of Africa" became part of this experience.

"Into the Heart of Africa"

Royal Ontario Museum. 16 Nov 1989; Curator: Jeanne Cannizzo. Catalogue. 96 pp. \$19.95.
"IRONY (AND, OF, IN) ARTIFACTS"

By Michael Levin
University of Toronto

"Into the Heart of Africa" is an excellent presentation of a collection and of the complexities of the interpretative role of museums. The exhibit is based on the *in situ* collection of the ROM, which is largely the bequests of families of Canadian missionaries to Africa and Canadians who served in the armies of the British Empire in African colonies. The opposition between their mission and the achievements symbolized in the artifacts runs through the exhibit.

It is arranged in four rooms, two blue rooms, a grey room and the largest beige room. The beige room displays drums, masks and headdresses, weapons, musical instruments and offers mbiras (thumb pianos) to play and headphones to listen to African music. The smaller blue and grey rooms provide an entrance to the collection, its context and introduces its collectors and their African experiences. The connection of Canada to Africa and the imperialist sympathies of Canadians at the turn of the century are symbolized early in the exhibit in the first blue room in the blow-up of the 2c Canadian stamp of "Xmas 1898" picturing Canada at the centre of the Empire marked in red on a world map, over the slogan "We hold a vaster empire than has been".