

Foreign Gods in Vienna – Addressing the Exhibition in Leopold Museum

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Few readers would know that the late Rudolf Leopold (1925-2010), founder of the Leopold Museum in Vienna, had an interest in African and Oceanian arts and even those aware of this, would hardly know that he assembled a collection of some 600 artefacts from Africa and Oceania. An exhibition in the Leopold Museum, entitled *Fremde Götter: Faszination Afrika und Ozeanien* (*Foreign Gods: Fascination of Africa and Oceania*), which ran from 23 September 2016 to 9 January 2017, demonstrates the extent of this interest (cf. Leopold Museum Homepage). Many of these artefacts may be viewed in this exhibition which offers a variety of objects: masks, chairs, spears, boats, etc. from numerous peoples in Africa and Oceania. Many Yoruba, Baule and Bambara artefacts as well as Asante and Fante fertility dolls are displayed. Dogon masks are also represented.

What the exhibition does well is to show the extent to which modern art owes much of its inspiration and style to African and Oceanian arts. The juxtaposition of non-European art and works of acclaimed Western artists such as Picasso, Fernand Leger, Kirchner, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein, Max Ernst, Constantin Brancusi, Amedeo Modigliani and others shows how much European artists copied from African and Oceanian models or if you prefer, how much non-European art inspired them.

It is true that the story of the influence of African and Oceanian art on the European avant-garde has been told several times before, especially since the publication, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* by William Rubin (1984). But since there have been attempts even by artists such as Picasso to play down the non-European influence (cf. Kerchache 1995, Madeline/Martin 2006, Stepan 2006), it is worth having the story retold until it becomes part of the

¹ A first version of this text, under the heading "Foreign Gods In Vienna - Exhibition In Leopold Museum", originally appeared in *Modern Ghana*, 07.12.2016, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/741563/foreign-gods-in-vienna-exhibition-in-leopold-museum.html> [13.01.2017].

general education of the Western world that is usually inclined to dismiss any idea of contribution to the modern world by non-Europeans. When we also learn that Brancusi who had been heavily influenced by African art even destroyed some of his earlier works that showed African influence, then it becomes evident that the story must be repeated often. Jacob Epstein has stated:

Brancusi, some of whose early work was influenced by African art, now declares categorically that one must not be influenced by African art, and he even went so far as to destroy work of his that he thought had African influence in it." (Epstein 2007 [1940]: 164)

The inability or unwillingness to inform their public about the contribution of non-Europeans to human progress, has led to the extraordinary belief in many Western countries that only people of European descent have contributed to progress. This erroneous conception has resulted in increasing racism and demands for deporting non-Europeans from Western countries.

For those who have not seen many exhibitions on African art, this exhibition is not a bad introduction. I was nevertheless not overly impressed by the general quality of the African artefacts, which does not match that of other exhibitions taking place in Brussels, Berlin, Geneva, London, Paris, Vienna and elsewhere. I could not help feeling that the exhibition smacks of the old ethnology museums. The spears from Oceania that confront the viewer when she enters the exhibition seem to want to remind us that we are dealing with wild and dangerous backward peoples. Too many objects are cluttered together even though the display halls are very spacious. Leopold seems to have had a great fascination for the Yoruba ibeji twins for there is large collection of them in the exhibition. But must one display all the ibeji that Rudolf Leopold collected?

We were intrigued by the title *Fremde Götter (Foreign Gods)* and were wondering whether we will see shrines and statues of gods. Nothing like that caught our eyes and hardly any of the objects we saw reminded us of gods except perhaps a kota, a Yoruba divination or oracle plate and a dance staff of Eschu, also called Elegba, the trickster god of the Yoruba. We recall that Western ethnologists have suggested in the past that many objects in

non-European societies were charged with spiritualism and were worshipped by the people. Veneration of ancestral objects was confused with worshipping the objects. There is also the old European belief that most African sculptures represented gods and were called fetish. The European missionaries contributed to the belief that these objects were devoted to pagan gods and evil spirits. They urged Africans converts to Christianity to burn their artefacts but at the same time the missionaries carefully collected them and sent them to Europe. Some museums in Europe owe their beginnings to such collections or benefited from collections by Christian missionaries. It is then clear why the curators chose the title *Foreign Gods*; they probably wanted to appeal to the latent European desire for exoticism. A straightforward title such as *African and Oceanian Arts* would perhaps not have attracted a large crowd. It would also have put these arts on same level as Western arts.

This exhibition demonstrates once more that Vienna holds a lot of African art. The other Vienna museum that also has many pieces of African art, especially the famous Benin Bronzes, the *Völkerkundemuseum*, now *Weltmuseum*, has closed its African Section for some 16 years, 2000-2016. Could one imagine a section of a museum dealing with Western art being closed for 16 years? Apparently the renovated *Weltmuseum* will open in autumn 2017.

What I missed in the exhibition is precise information about the methods for the original acquisition of the large number of artefacts. Were they part of the colonial loot or gifts from grateful potentates or simply purchased in an open art market? Naturally, there is not a word about restitution in the exhibition. The Leopold Museum is not unfamiliar with issues and questions regarding restitution of looted artefacts.

The question of the return of artefacts that were looted or stolen during the colonial era must be recognized by all as an essential part of the history of art of those formerly dominated or subjugated areas of the world. There are uncountable sites on the internet that discuss issues relating to the Benin Bronzes, the Kohinoor diamond and other looted objects. There have also been several conferences on restitution issues and the United Nations and UNESCO have passed several resolutions urging the return of artefacts to their countries of origin. ICOM's *Code of Conduct for museums* contains several provisions including the need for museums to take initiative in the

restitution question. Can one really talk about African art and ignore the major issues of restitution as if nothing had happened since colonial days? Can one simply ignore the independence of the African States that raised the issue of art objects looted or stolen under colonial administration?

We left the exhibition feeling that some of the best pieces of the Leopold collection may have been sold in Dorotheum auctions and that what we have in the current exhibition may be the lot that remain, the left-overs as it were. Were the curators under an obligation to organize an exhibition at all costs? The Leopold Museum may well consider whether it would not be better to concentrate on modern art, collect modern African art where there is no such issue of restitution and where the general opprobrium of loot and violence does not feature prominently.

Some readers may wonder why the art of Africa is treated together with the art of a region, located many thousands of miles away from Africa. The answer is fairly simple: Westerners who have over many decades considered themselves as superior human beings, have considered Africans and also the peoples of Oceania as being at the bottom of a scale of human development, with the 'white' people on top. The philosophers of the European Enlightenment, such as Kant, Hume and others have reinforced this racism with their false theories about human development (cf. Opoku 2008a, 2008b). This racist conception which influenced many ethnologists (when they were not the originators) seems to prevail even in our days, albeit in more subtle ways.

Many westerners continue to attribute to Africans and other peoples, usually of darker pigmentation, a primitiveness from which it appears we will never be able to escape. How else can we explain that exhibitions still take place, branding us as primitive peoples with their primitive art, with or without inverted commas? Many auction houses that make huge profits from selling looted African and other arts continue to advertise our artefacts as works of primitive art, that is, the works of primitive peoples.

Disrespect for Africans and all things African can also be seen in the attempts made to compare Africans to children or their art to child play. Paul Klee is cited in the exhibition as saying,

'There are primitive beginnings in art, such as one usually finds in ethnographic collections or at home in one's nursery'.

'Es gibt nämlich noch Uranfänge von Kunst, wie man sie eher im ethnographischen Museum findet oder daheim in der Kinderstube' (Wolf/Grosenick 2004: 58)

Many of our contemporary Westerners do not feel inclined to combat these prejudices which they do not consider important. Indeed many do not recognize the prevalence of racism at all in various spheres of life.

Elisabeth Leopold, widow of Rudolph Leopold, writes in the catalogue of the exhibition, under the title 'Love of Aboriginality' the following:

*'When I watched the film *The Tribal Eye-Behind the Mask* by David Attenborough I felt that we perceive the way of life and the emotions of the African people, their culture, their religious beliefs, their customs and traditions and therefore also their masks and sculptures like a foreign world. At the same time, their objects are highly fascinating, as they resonate within us as from afar, like the mystical and mysterious, like an original childlikeness. The great often abstract carvings reflect the essence, the souls, the deep connection to the aboriginal [...]*

The African people have been shaped over centuries and millennia by the climate and landscape of their continent, by rocky hills, deserts, savannahs and scrubland, but also by a fantastic fauna. They have a deep belief that the souls of the dead live on; they do not doubt the soulfulness of all living beings.'

*'Als ich den Film *The Tribal Eye-Behind the Mask* von David Attenborough gesehen hatte, begriff ich, dass wir die Lebensweise und Gefühle der Afrikanischen Menschen, ihre Kultur, ihre Religiosität, ihre Sitten und Gebräuche und somit auch ihre Masken und Skulpturen wie eine fremde Welt empfinden. Zugleich aber sind sie in höchsten Masse faszinierend, denn sie bringen wie von Ferne etwas in uns zum Klingen, wie das Mystisch, das Geheimnisvolle, wie eine ursprüngliche Kindlichkeit. Die großartigen, oft abstrakten Schnitzereien sind Spiegelbilder der Wesenheiten, der Seelen, der tiefen Verbundenheit mit dem Ursprünglichen [...]. Der afrikanische Mensch ist über Jahrhunderte und Jahrtausende hinweg geprägt worden von dem extremen Klima und den gewaltigen Landschaften des Kontinents, von Felsbergen, Wüsten, Savannen und Buschland, aber auch von der fantastischen Tierwelt. Er hat eine tiefe Gläubigkeit, dass das Wesen der Toten*

weiterlebt, er zweifelt nicht an der Beseeltheit alles Lebendigen' (Wipplinger 2016: 13-15)

The translator of the original German text seems to have sensed that such a text should not be published in our days and tried to minimize the possible damage it could cause. So where the German original writes about 'extremes Klima', the English version leaves 'extreme 'out and 'gewaltige Landschaften' is rendered 'landscape'. The reference to 'original childlikeness' clearly throws us back to the early ethnologists with their arrogant and condescending attitude towards non-European peoples and their cultures when some even thought, Africans could not draw properly. We are also reminded of the early attitudes towards modern art where some people thought any child could draw what Picasso and other modern artists were producing. Could the editor of a catalogue for an exhibition in a modern art museum not influence this?

African art then remains for many Westerners, what they still continue to describe as, primitive art, with or without inverted commas. This exhibition may not reduce or destroy such false convictions but would cause many to pause and think about the values to be attached to such loaded descriptions when they remember the development of modern art and African contributions thereto.

It is certainly praiseworthy for Westerners to exhibit African art, primitive or not. But it would surely be even better if some of the many African artefacts in the West were returned to Africa to be displayed by Africans within their own culture and to stimulate further developments.

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