African Art at the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva (MEG)

by Boris Wastiau

In Europe, most African art in public collections is to be found in ethnographic museums. The role of these ethnographic museums in society has been open to debate for some years now. The majority have their origins in the colonial era and are more than 100 years old today. Major renovation projects have been carried out in some and many others are in the works. The Museum of Ethnography in Geneva ("le MEG") is one of those currently in the process of redeveloping its exhibition spaces, rethinking its museography and its role in society. After serving eleven years as curator in the Division of Ethnography of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, I have been appointed as curator of the departments of Africa and the Americas at the MEG, with a mission to contribute to their redevelopment. This change of institution, of country, and of tradition brings me to rethink the place of African art in an ethnographic museum and the role of ethnographic museums in general in Europe today.

In the 1990s, large ethnographic museums, often city museums or state institutions, had in many instances come to a standstill in terms of major exhibitions, whether permanent or temporary, and visitor counts dropped dangerously. This anomie may have had to do partly with the incapacity to adapt swiftly to the contemporary context of media, publishing, and marketing and the competition of television and tourism, which increasingly offered better “access” to non-Western cultures than the ethnographic museum ever had. The ensuing reactions and plans for renewed museums took very different forms, ranging from cosmetic changes to the dissolution of some museums and the creation of others. The best known and most controversial of these, the Musée du quai Branly in Paris (opened in 2006), has been discussed in these columns by Elizabeth Harney (2006). The Museum of World Cultures in Göteborg (opened in 2005) is also the result of the fusion of formerly distinct ethnographic museums, and the World Museum Liverpool offers a comparable posi-

(continued on page 4)
tioning with regards to “globalization.” In the latter, globalization accommodates a development of ties and exchanges with the local “communities” in exhibition making and educational programming. The African gallery, a fine sampling of the museum’s collections of nineteenth and early twentieth century art, is made relevant to local identities and histories through an interplay of text panels, quotations, and installations.

The British Museum’s Sainsbury African Galleries, among the largest galleries dedicated to African arts in Europe (opened in 2001), illustrates another trend: to reserve large, well-restored or newly built galleries for the exhibition of major artworks. The Pavillon des Sessions in the Louvre (opened in 2000) offers a more radical example of prestigious mise-en-scène of masterpieces. Other, seemingly different museographies for African collections in some German or Dutch ethnographic museums have something in common: While topics, scenographies, and nomenclatures may offer a varying degree of contextualization, the bottom line is always a modernist aesthetics of the mise-en-scène in the presentation of a classical selection of artifacts. The presentation more often than not represents a “culture” from a certain angle and at a specific point in history as representative of all the arts of this or that place or people. In most instances, as in the refurbished art gallery of the Tervuren museum (opened in 2005), iconic “top pieces” that were on show 50 or 100 years ago are still there under the (now carefully lux-controlled) spotlights. Only labels and glass frames are noticeably different in style.

Historicization of the collection and displays is often timid, giving hints at the origins of certain pieces but rarely developing a strong historical storyline. Such museums found it opportune to set up these new permanent art galleries to depart from their public image as dusty lumber-rooms and win new publics. They saw relative success at the same time that public interest in the non-Western arts developed and the art market soared throughout the first years of the 2000s.

The more positive aspects of these changes should be highlighted, though. Generally, they have been implemented with major conserved, inventory, and digitization campaigns that make information about the collections far more accessible than ever before to the scholar and to the layman. New facilities mean more exhibitions and a larger audience. Generally, there is more space, more objects on permanent display, more temporary exhibitions, more events, and more libraries for more visitors than in the museums that they replaced. At the Musée du quai Branly, their holdings in excess of 71,000 African pieces are accessible through the Internet. Acute jealousy in the face of the resources given to the largest projects certainly triggered a plethora of ferocious criticisms, but objective shortcomings in overall conception, design, and curatorship are neither more nor less dramatic than in the average museum now, before, or elsewhere. At the end of the day the result can in most cases be called an improvement.

At the same time, self-defined art museums that are far smaller in size have undergone less radical changes in their premises and exhibition style. The Musée Barbier-Mueller in Geneva has regularly produced African art exhibitions over the past thirty years, presented in numerous museums around the world rather than at home. The Musée Dapper, in Paris, is the only European museum dedicated exclusively to African arts. It has produced an average of two exhibitions per year over the past twenty years. Although strictly art-oriented and not an ethnography museum at all, it has offered since its inception a number of features that most anthropology-sensitive African art curators would claim as desirable: global coverage of all the regions of Africa in their collections and

threatened with dismantling at another university, chairs of African history disappeared not long ago and a whole department of "ethnic arts" is threatened with dismantling at another university. While this can be partly attributed to the increasing difficulty of fieldwork in Africa compared to other continents, deterring prospective research students from choosing African topics, it might also reflect a deeper change in attitude towards Africa today.

It is in this larger environment that the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva ("le MEG") is working on its own critical relaunch, repositioning itself on the museum scene vis-à-vis its public and the academic world. As an ethnographic museum, the MEG is dedicated to be(ing) a place for reflection on human societies, a place of questioning and research on the most important issues and concerns of our time. It is conceived by the curators as an observatory of the world of today and as a laboratory of museology. The MEG wishes to share its knowledge in a stimulating way with the largest public, in order to better understand how human ways of being in society, of acting upon the world, and of thinking come into being and transform over time. Our specific discipline is "ethnography," a term several European museums have dropped in favor of "cultures," "world arts," or nothing, thereby abandoning their former mission and often narrowing their focus to only part of their collections—most often the art collections. Museum ethnography is based on field research—in the broadest sense—and the MEG's exhibitions are the product of reflection on social phenomena and ideas. Exhibitions are seen not only as the product of scientific research but also as experiments in interacting with the public(s), as orchestrated events that generate questioning and positioning.

The MEG was established as a public museum in 1901 by Swiss anthropologist Eugène Pittard and came to its present location on 65–67 boulevard Carl Vogt in 1939. Its holdings are not particularly impressive by European standards, but nonetheless it remains one of the largest in Switzerland. We preserve, research, and enrich a collection of more than 100,000 artefacts, including 16,500 from Africa; more than 300,000 books; and innumerable documents, films, and photographs from the five continents, covering periods from archaeological times to the present. We are not just a conservatory, but a place for social intercourse, where we explore our relationships to the world through our collections, showcased and articulated in our exhibitions. Future displays will be conceptualized as permanent reference exhibitions, occupying less than one third of the exhibition space and comprising the most representative sampling of the collections, or as larger, temporary, synthesis exhibitions presenting current research. A third type of gallery will be reserved for short-notice programming of exhibitions on current events. All those will be backed by an active publications policy, starting from the existing collections: Tötém (a magazine), Tabou (pocket-format edited volumes; cf. Delcraz and Durussel 2007), and Sources et Témoignages (for the diffusion of archival material; see http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/meg/publications.php). Beside the "core business" of producing exhibitions, the museum offers space for public debate, live music, theater, and film.

The MEG is a place where, with humor and finesse, you are kindly but continuously reminded not to think in circles. We intend our questioning to promote freedom of thought, to provoke astonishment, and to stimulate reflection. Using our curiosity and our links with society at large, our museological experiments make use of the remains of the past (both our collections and their history) to think about the present and to tackle problems that relate to the daily life of almost everyone. Major issues being investigated today include aspects of violence, racism, power, and sex as well as emotions and aesthetics, taste or memory, life and death. Addressing these issues cross-culturally plays an important role in the comprehension of "the Other" within and without and we hope it contributes to social integration and cohesion. Recent exhibitions have included "Nous—Autres," a reflection on alterity and identity, and "Un Genevois autour du Monde," which featured photographs taken by traveller Alfred Bertrand (1856–1924) in the Upper Zambesi in the late nineteenth century and addressed issues of tourism and the production, use, and circulation of photographic images. The current major show, "Scénario catastrophe," analyses creative aspects of human responses to disasters past and present.
ethnographic museum collections are related to and hence exploited, after time-consuming collections, which can only be fully appraised, knowledge of the often large and understudied project-based curators. This approach has many tors and rising running costs, some adminis museums, with plummeting numbers of visi nomena. This is one of its major assets, for in a staff of about forty, it strives to keep a large International Archives of Popular Music. With a department of musicology that is associated interest in the institution. The MEG has one sand members, which is indicative of the local with harder hearts, we offered the museum “For needs to be cared for by larger audiences. “The MEG Needs Love” was the title of an editorial petition that will be advertised in the near extension, the MEG wants to machines, meeting rooms, and multimedia the other museums, a library, research, and media center, besides the exhibition gal- leries, meeting rooms, and multimedia the-ater. The desire to keep galleries exempt from any particular architectural style, so that each temporary exhibition can have its own design independent of the rest of the museum, will certainly distinguish this project from many others. Another reason to work with white or black boxes is the obvious fact that exhibition architectures, or even gallery architectures, change much faster than the buildings them- selves. So, instead of wondering how long we can be “in,” we prefer to bypass that problem in the future, especially considering the increasing difficulty and cost of making architectural changes. As far as the rest of the building is concerned, while ostentatious aesthetics and prestigious designs are not indispensable to a critical museography, here they may reflect the engagement of local donors and authori- ties. Of course it is expected that the enlarged building will be as intelligent as can be in its exploitation of light and volumes for the walk-throughs between the different exhibition spaces and facilities. The Vitruvian principles of *firmitas*, *utilitas*, *venustas* will be imposed on the project.

Many, if not most ethnographic museums in Europe have collections that were princi- pally acquired during the colonial period. Few have an active acquisition policy and only a happy few have the means to make acquisi- tions on the art market today. As far as ethno- graphic coverage is concerned, there is usually a huge gap between the collections of tradi- tional arts and artifacts and the contemporary material culture and arts from the same coun- tries. While all possibilities will be explored to reinforce the African collections at the MEG, classic and contemporary, the general orienta- tion will come from the exhibition program. I know of no museum today that can claim to develop its collections from all ethnic prov- enances and from all African countries. The museum in Tervuren, as well as the MEG, had been able to develop their collections along these lines up to the 1980s, boasting collect- ions from every single country in Africa. Ways are being investigated to share collecting activity between partner museums as a kind of “collective collecting.”

The problem of fakes and fraudulent copies of earlier forms was discussed recently in these columns (Homberger and Stelzig 2006; Cole 2007:5). I should say that I share this concern when I see the quantity of dubious pieces on the upper market, in museum collections and professional publications. Like all museums, including my renowned former institution in Tervuren, the MEG has accumulated its share of forgeries. As an ethnographic museum dedi- cated to working with all aspects of material culture, we will preserve those witnesses of a particular sort of human inventiveness. But whenever displayed, these objects should be clearly labelled or presented in a context where they can be interpreted without misunder- standing—unless, of course, there is a museo- logical need to create this confusion! Objects should be treated equally, as a curator’s basic duty is to facilitate equity of access to the col- lection and related information. The percent- age of artifacts or artworks in ethnographic museums known even to colleagues in the field is ridiculously small, and if there is one
thing ethnographic museums should do, it is to make their collections better known and available for research, publications, and loans. And here I do not mean making digital images available through the Internet or showing the tip of the iceberg here and there in a show, but making collections and archives physically accessible to researchers and encouraging loans. Making high-quality photographic reproductions available at reasonable prices for publications is also necessary. This will be a priority for me in the African department.

Research at the MEG tends toward three major domains of enquiry: a) the collections and their related archives; b) the museum as both observatory of social phenomena and laboratory for interaction with the public; and c) specific topics of exhibition projects. The MEG has opted to be a museum without borders to its fields of enquiry and without taboos, a museum of present social relations rather than a conservatory of past or dying societies. As such it will be constantly rethinking acquisitions, research, and exhibition curatorship critically. Its exhibitions are mostly cross-cultural but it also schedules area-specific exhibitions for each continent. It is intended to have exhibitions of African ethnography as well as African art, classical and contemporary, but always with a highly critical angle to the museography, with an emphasis on the understanding of ideas and social relations and the development of comparative approaches to social phenomena.

The next Africanist exhibition at the MEG is scheduled for Autumn 2008. On the one hand it will aim at assessing the potential of the African art collections, archives, and photographs. On the other hand it will be a reflection on the process of exhibition-making. Anthropologists and art historians will discuss the works selected, focusing on the social agency they once had. The curatorship of the exhibition will be made accessible for public scrutiny at various stages: from the work of “the eye” in the process of selection to the production of knowledge, from the making of photography to the production of a catalogue, etc. As such, the exhibition will reveal artworks as individuals that had precise functions in the social web of relations in their place of origin and will challenge the public to reflect on the works’ current conservation, use, and mise-en-scène years and miles away from their cradle. A specific museography cannot be described now as it will take shape as work on the collection progresses. As to which type of objects will be used, Central Africa, namely Gabon and the Congo, has been identified as a strong point of the collection, with an interesting conjunction of major pieces and archival documents. Particularly well represented are the Fang, Kongo, Teke, and Bembe (Fig. 2). There are also notable objects from the Sudan (Fig. 3), Maghreb, and West Africa (Fig. 4). Archives and photographs are likely to play an important role in the interpretation of the collection. Among those important resources, the albums of drawings and watercolors of missionary Fernand Grebert, who resided in Gabon from 1913 to 1932, were recently published (Savary and Perrois 2005). Photographs and collections made in Barotseland in the 1890s by the Swiss traveller Alfred Bertrand were recently exhibited.

A forthcoming major thematic exhibition in which African collections would feature along with art and artifacts from other continents deals with the anthropology of emotions, bridging art, aesthetics, and affective sciences. Another topic that might turn into an exhibition project is the notion of “first contact.” This would be an opportunity to develop a collaborative network of ethnographic museums to reflect on their role in society today. Beyond the study of “first contact,” cabinets of curiosities, and colonial museums, this exhibition would raise the question of whether ethnographic museums are capable of approaching contemporary “first contact” situations, like the arrival of African migrants crossing the Mediterranean who encounter a world that often does not correspond to their expectations. Is current museum ethnography capable of addressing the issue, of researching, documenting, and producing exhibitions on this major phenomenon? While contemporary arts, including African arts from the diaspora, have invested this field, what images, what objects, what testimonials, what ideas will ethnographic museums retain and what kind of understanding will they possibly develop?

**Boris Wastiau** is the curator of the African and American Departments at the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva. Boris.Wastiau@ville-ge.ch

**References cited**


