about black South African journalist Nat Nakasa’s transnational experience had a profound impact on him. As a journalist working during apartheid, Nakasa hoped to flee a government system in which his writing would likely be banned or censored. Upon receiving news he had been selected for a journalism fellowship at Harvard, Nakasa needed to secure a passport but was refused one by the South African government. In order to go to the US, Nakasa accepted an exit permit that meant he could no longer return to South Africa. Moved by Nakasa’s harrowing experience, Wa Lehulere visited his grave in New York and recited poetry there, cutting a patch of grass, which he repatriated to South Africa, in hopes that he could keep it alive. This complex relationship between international borders, temporal movement, and physical exile pervades Wa Lehulere’s artistic practice, and is evident at the start of this exhibition.

Particularly for informed viewers, the suitcases filled with grass recall the Nakasa anecdote, which Wa Lehulere so eloquently described in the exhibition talk. But others need not know Nakasa’s impact on the artist in order to understand or appreciate Wa Lehulere’s work. The curatorial choice to exclude narrative artwork labels or interpretative wall texts strengthens the viewers’ experience of the work and aligns well with Wa Lehulere’s interpretation of history and time. Rather than look first, think second, read third, or any combination of these, a viewer has the opportunity to exercise each of these actions in a variety of ways, appreciating the works without a dictated path or explanation. Like Wa Lehulere’s perception of history, it is fitting that his works have not been distilled into certain frameworks or didactics. It should be noted however, that if viewers wish to learn more about Wa Lehulere’s work. The curatorial choice to exclude narrative artwork labels or interpretative wall texts strengthens the viewers’ experience of the work and aligns well with Wa Lehulere’s interpretation of history and time. Rather than look first, think second, read third, or any combination of these, a viewer has the opportunity to exercise each of these actions in a variety of ways, appreciating the works without a dictated path or explanation. Like Wa Lehulere’s perception of history, it is fitting that his works have not been distilled into certain frameworks or didactics. It should be noted however, that if viewers wish to learn more about Wa Lehulere’s work, an exhibition brochure is available at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2017 vol. 50, no. 4.

Exhibition Review

Origins of the Afro Comb: 6,000 Years of Culture, Politics, and Identity

The Fitzwilliam Museum
University of Cambridge
July 2–November 3, 2013

Reviewed by Jeremy Coote

The Fitzwilliam is the University of Cambridge’s museum of art and antiquities, with thirty-four galleries devoted to Classical, Western, and Oriental art. It is not a place visitors expect to find rooms filled with African combs. During the summer of 2013, however, its Mellon and Octagon galleries were devoted to “Origins of the Afro Comb: 6,000 Years of Culture, Politics and Identity.” Curated by Senior Assistant Keeper of Antiquities Sally-Ann Ashton, it was the Fitzwilliam’s major exhibition for 2013 and was publicized by banners throughout the city (Fig. 1). Even the most uninterested visitor to Cambridge could not fail to notice the exhibition was on; subliminally, at least, the message that “Afro combs” are worthy of attention—aesthetic and/or scholarly—must have got through to at least some tourists, natives, students, and dons.

The Mellon gallery was the main room, filled with combs from all parts of Africa (Fig. 2)—along with figures, masks, and photographs illustrating both the use of combs and African hairstyles in general. Many of the objects would have been familiar to readers of this journal; indeed, many similar objects were shown in “Hair in African Art and Culture” at the Museum for African Art in New York in 2000 (Sieber and Herreman 2000) and in “Doing Hair: Art and Hair in Africa” at the Wits Art Museum in 2014 (De Becker and Nettleton 2014). What distinguished “Origins of the Afro Comb” was its location, its focus on combs, and its narrative/historical drive—beginning with ancient Egypt and Sudan.

When I was asked to review “Origins of the Afro Comb” I hastily assumed it would be another frustrating exhibition reducing the myriad cultural traditions of the African continent to pale imitations of ancient Egyptian examples—no doubt giving prominence to an anonymous private collection, as was the case with a smaller exhibition “Triumph, Protection and Dreams: East African Headrests in Context” held at the Fitzwilliam in 2011–2012 (Massing and Ashton 2011). Pleasingly, however, I found there was far more to enjoy and to praise in “Origins of the African Comb” than to criticize. There were very few items from private collections and no more than one or two of these were anonymous. Instead, the exhibition drew on the more—or less well-provenanced collections of the University’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the British Museum, and the Petrie Museum at University College London, as well as those of the Fitzwilliam itself. Moreover, the sub-Saharan combs on display were not presented as pale echoes of those from ancient Egypt and Sudan; rather they were individually and appropriately labeled and contextualized. There were places where greater involvement of sub-Saharan specialists might have resulted in better information, but these were few and far between and—in the wider context—insignificant.

Amidst hundreds of combs and related objects from across Africa, however, the exhibition’s key objects were a 5,000-year-old bone comb, excavated from grave G78 in the southern cemetery at Abydos by archaeologist W.M. Flinders Petrie in 1898/1899, and a plastic Black Fist comb, one of thousands mass produced since the patent was first issued in the US in 1972 (Fig. 3)—hence “origins” and “Afro comb.” To fully appreciate

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the significance of these two objects, however, one needs to look beyond the exhibition itself. As explained by the Fitzwilliam's director Tim Knox in his "Foreword" to the catalogue, the bone comb had been used by Ashton in educational work with prisoners, in which she used her knowledge of ancient Egypt to deepen their interest in African culture. One of the project's key aims was "to encourage ownership of cultural heritage, in particular for black and North African prisoners, who have a direct link with ancient Egypt through their own cultural roots."

Some of the black prisoners with whom Ashton worked remarked on the similarities between the ancient Egyptian comb and those they used at home. Knox writes: "It was another tangible link between the rich cultural heritage of the Nile valley all those millennia ago, and present-day Africa and the African Diaspora to America, Europe, and Britain" (Knox 2013:7).

That some people today "see" a link, however, does not mean that any such connection can be traced historically or art-historically. Indeed, I continue to be bothered by the suggestion that there is a single story to be told—of "origins" and "6,000 years of history"—as if each African comb, of whatever form and origin, is part of one story that has its origins in ancient Egypt and its modern apotheosis in the "Afro comb." In the exhibition itself this single story of "origins" was undermined by the telling of a number of other stories, particularly those relating to the development of the Afro comb itself, with its origins in the popularity of Afro hairstyles in the US in the 1960s and the development of the Black Power comb.

The exhibition cannot be faulted for its treatment of the individual objects within it; but its ostensible theme and supposed organizing principle should be challenged. I say "ostensible" and "supposed" because it seems to me that the underlying concept actually had less to do with "origins" and "history" and far more to do with "blackness." What held the exhibition together was not a spurious historical link between the objects displayed, but the fact that they were all made and used by black people—in ancient Egypt and Sudan, in "modern" Africa, and in the US. As a result, unsurprisingly, the exhibition had great significance, resonance, and meaning for its black visitors, of which there were many on the day I was there. From such a perspective, the scholarly—for which, read "pedantic"—concerns of a middle-aged, middle-class, white guy with precious little hair matter little, if at all. I can have my say here, explicating my concerns about the art-historical inappropriateness of presenting a wide range of African combs as somehow being the product of some sort of evolutionary process that began in ancient Egypt and reached its apotheosis in New York in the 1970s. That is clearly wrong in all
sorts of ways. Rather there are hundreds and thousands of histories, making up a complex diversity that must be addressed if one does not want to mislead and/or reinforce ideas about “the country of Africa.”

Arguably, however, such concerns are irrelevant in this case. Using a single story as a hook, ”Origins of the Afro-Comb” caught and held the imagination of its many and diverse visitors. Ostensibly about combs, it was, as its subtitle rightly suggested, actually about “culture, politics, and identity.” Its legacy should be the encouragement it gives curators of African collections in the UK to rethink their responsibilities and do things differently.

”Origins of the Afro Comb” was actually a joint exhibition with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which hosted, from July 2 to September 28, three installations by artist Michael McMillan. At the Fitzwilliam there was also a display of comb-inspired relief prints by Ghanaian artist Atta Kwami. There were also talks, drop-in and handling sessions, film-showings, lectures and a conference, an online audio slideshow “The Afro Comb and the Politics of Hair” hosted by the BBC (www. bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa–2396569), and an interactive website (www.fitzmuseum. cam.ac.uk/gallery/afrocombs).


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Susan Woolf: Taxi Hand Signs
South African Jewish Museum
Cape Town, South Africa
July 10–September 5, 2016
reviewed by Pamela Allara

Under the new administration of Director Gavin Morris, the South African Jewish Museum has expanded its cultural and historical installations to include temporary exhibitions by contemporary artists. For 2016, the museum hosted an ambitious, multimedia exhibition by Johannesburg-based artist Susan Woolf titled “Taxi Hand Signs and a New Shape Language for People Who Are Blind” that presented artworks based on the gestural language used to signal minibus taxi drivers. Because until recently South Africa’s public bus and train services have been inadequate, over the past half century a largely unregulated taxi/ minibus transport sector has developed that operates extensive commuter routes between the townships and inner cities. According to Woolf and J.W. Joubert, “apartheid, poverty, and ... deficit transport in and around cities, fashioned the explosion that is the taxi industry today” (Woolf and Joubert 2013:284). Simply put, the taxis that clog the city streets are visible evidence of an ongoing economic gap between rich and poor that the advent of democracy in South Africa has yet to close. But taxi hand signs, which commuters use to signal their desired destinations, are also evidence of the resilience and resourcefulness of South African commuters.

Woolf, whose work has addressed South Africa’s fraught history in both her masters and doctoral work, began in 2004 to systematically catalogue the taxi hand signs she observed during her commute by car between her suburban home and her downtown Johannesburg studio. As a white person—an umlangu—it took some determination as well as faith in the goodwill of the citizenry to go into the townships, the taxi ranks, and Johannesburg’s streets to interview drivers, queue marshals, and passengers and to record the individual gestures they were using. By 2007, she used the information she had gathered as the basis of a series of twenty-six brightly-colored gouaches of gloved hands making the individual signs (Fig. 1) that same year, the paintings were reproduced in a “Taxi Hand Signs booklet” that could serve as a reference for those who were unfamiliar with the sign needed for a specific route. By the time she completed her doctoral dissertation in 2013, Woolf had identified and documented a total

1 Susan Woolf
First Taxi Hand Signs (2008)
Lithograph, ed. 40, 49.5 cm x 61 cm
all photos courtesy Susan Woolf