

Review Essay: Africa in LA: Two Recent Exhibitions at the Fowler Museum*

Butabu: Adobe Architecture of West Africa, Photographs by James Morris. Fowler Museum. April 22, 2007-July 15, 2007.

Makishi: Mask Characters of Zambia. Fowler Museum. January 14, 2007-June 17, 2007.

Reviewed by Samuel J. Redman

By the 1950s, the use of the term “primitive art” was widely accepted and examples of indigenous material culture were no longer simply confined to natural history and anthropology museums.¹ In the late 1950s, however, as the city of Los Angeles was beginning to split up its heretofore amalgamated county art and natural history museum into two distinct institutions, “primitive art” was left to the natural history museum and the anthropologists and archaeologists therein, while the new art museum took with it much of the classical material from Egypt, Greece and Rome. Into the early 1960s, the world of art museums widely shunned collections from indigenous cultures and it is a misconception that the modernists of the 1920s and 1930s gave instant recognition to indigenous artistic forms. Shortly after the L.A. county museums split, other art museums around the country, notably those in New York, began to prominently feature indigenous art in their galleries. Los Angeles and its museums had been left behind. Since the mid 1960s, art museums such as the L.A. County Museum of Art, have been attempting to fill in what were later perceived as gaps in their collections. Here, as elsewhere, “primitive art” objects such as blankets from the Navajo and African masks were quickly purchased by art museums across the United States.²

This visit served as my introduction to the museums of the city of Los Angeles. I came to the city in an attempt to better understand the way in which its museums defined themselves during the time period of American museum history that I am currently examining, the span between 1945 and 1965. I was also seeking to better understand how Americans understood “their” museums. It is now cliché to argue that museums make more sense when placed in context, but typically, museums in the United States are placed in the context of their Victorian and Gilded Age origins, rather than in subsequent era, with their own wider events and particular social and political milieus. Obviously, the Second World War mattered to museums, as did the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, and the constantly shifting economic development of the nation. This context, like the context of the American museum’s Gilded Age origins, should be studied in order to better understand what the museum is today. My guide to the history of the museums of Los Angeles was a man who was supremely qualified to lead such a tour, Charles Rozaire. Rozaire, now 79 years old, earned his doctorate in archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and has spent portions of his lengthy and successful career at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and the Southwest Museum, also in Los Angeles. He is currently a curator emeritus at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and is

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working on organizing his own personal archival materials gathered over the course of his archaeological career.

While I came with an interest in examining the split between what is now the Natural History Museum of L.A. County and the L.A. County Museum of Art, the Fowler Museum, established on the campus of the University of California Los Angeles in 1963, seemed an appropriate place for me to begin. The goal of the museum, as stated on its website, “was to consolidate the various collections of non-Western art and artifacts on campus.” The museum proudly claims to stand as one of the top four university museums of its kind in the United States.³ Sidestepping disciplinary divisions between art history, archaeology, and ethnography, the Fowler Museum (figure 1) chose instead to focus on “cultural history”. Today, many of its exhibits are discussed in artistic terms, yet an affiliation with anthropology is implied by the very nature of the museum’s shared space with the Costen Institute of Archaeology.

The Fowler Museum recently featured two interesting exhibits, both focusing on Africa. Each meanders between popular and scholarly notions of art and anthropology.

Butabu: Adobe Architecture of West Africa presented works by British photographer James Morris. It attempts to work around the problem of the unavailability of museum collections depicting large-scale architecture by instead utilizing fifty illustrations of distinct West African earthen adobe structures. In 1999 and 2000, Morris spent several months traveling throughout West Africa attempting to document these structures, which have been built for over 1,000 years and are annually repaired and strengthened by the surrounding communities. The museum describes the artists work in a somewhat anthropological or archaeological tone, arguing that Morris both attempted to document a “typological record” yet it also states that he provides the viewer with an “artist’s rendering” of the earthen structures.

Morris’ photos in this minimalist exhibit are technically stunning. Morris is successful in presenting visitors with a typology of West African adobe architecture, as the buildings that he depicts range from a gigantic mosque to a simple single family home of the Sahel region. The term *batubu* describes both the process of building these structures by moistening the earth, mixed with cow dung and decaying fish, as well as the human process by which communities band together in order to complete and renew these structures. The exhibit space features both a video and the fifty illustrations. While the video’s focus is the community that builds the structure, Morris’ photographs themselves focus mainly on the structures themselves.

Where Morris’ is most successful is in his depiction of the smaller structures that serve as familial houses. Here, unlike the majority of the portraits of monumental architecture, the viewer is allowed to see the gaze of the human subjects, surrounded by the unique forms of architecture. In this regard, the photographs straddle the line between artistic achievement and anthropological study.

The exhibition could perhaps have been improved by borrowing from another exhibition in the same museum, *Makishi: Mask Characters of Zambia*. This much smaller exhibition, presented in the museum’s space for showcasing new collections and research, made greater use of multiple media. The exhibit (figure 2), as its title implies, is mainly an attempt to showcase the museum’s

new collection of African masks; however it also utilizes a small television screen and photographs to demonstrate how the masks are used within their cultures of origin. The photographs in the exhibit also feature more complete labels, giving the audience more specific contextual details. I would argue that it would not have taken anything away from Morris' large-scale photographs to have given the audience two or three smaller television screens showing excerpts from the video shown at the entrance of the exhibit. I would also have liked to have been provided with more information about each structure that I was looking at in the images. This is especially important if Morris' truly aspires for his work to be understood as a collection of anthropological documents.

Overall, both of these exhibitions were very well done and Morris' achievement will no doubt be analyzed by future generations of artists and visual anthropologists, as well as by students of vernacular architecture in Africa.

Notes

1. Examples of both the display of indigenous material culture, and its avoidance, during this decade abound. An example of the discussion of its display can be found as early as 1950 in Erna Gunther (1950) "Material Culture, the Museum and Primitive Art." *College Art Journal* 9(3):290-294. The opening line of the article refers to "primitive art" as a "newcomer" to art galleries. Gunther also argues that natural history museums by this time were starting to recognize indigenous objects as art rather than artifacts. The transition to the recognition as indigenous material culture as art was neither immediate nor unanimous however, and by 1958, for example, the Cleveland Museum of Art still had its galleries divided up into five distinct areas, Classical and Egyptian, Oriental, Decorative, Near Eastern, and Paintings.

2. Noteworthy exceptions of this narrative exist. The Denver Art Museum is one example of an institution that has long been committed to collecting and maintaining American Indian material culture. In fact, Alfred Kroeber, the director of the University of California's Museum of Anthropology throughout the Great Depression and Second World War would frequently mention to would-be dealers of Native American materials that the Denver Art Museum was one of the only institutions in the nation that continued buying collections, even in the depth of the depression. See: University Archives, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Department of Anthropology, Cu-23, Box 185-186.

3. See: "About the Fowler, History>" Found at: <http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/incEngine/?content=cm&cm=history>, Accessed, May 29, 2007.

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Figures:



Figure 1: A promotional banner for the Butabu exhibition at the Fowler Museum. May 28, 2007. Photograph by Samuel J. Redman.



Figure 2: The entrance to the Makishi exhibition at the Fowler Museum. May 28, 2007.
Photograph by Samuel J. Redman.