

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. We begin the programme in the United States and end in Botswana, but there's a strong link between them; and it's none other than the title of our programme. In Botswana the art gallery is housed within the National Museum. In the United States, cultural objects from Africa are generally to be found in ethnological museums which focus on the function of the item rather than its beauty, however skillfully or imaginatively it's been created.

But Paul Tishman collected items for their aesthetic appeal, and for this reason it's the internationally-known Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that chose to put on an exhibition of items from his collection. Before showing Anne Bolsover around it, the Curator of the Museum's own African collection, Susan Vogel, explained the Metropolitan's attitude to the arts of Africa.

## SUSAN VOGEL

We were one of the first art museums to collect African art and the collection was formed mostly in the West and from dealers. We never sponsored expeditions that collected, which is the way the anthropology museums tended to form their collections.

## ANNE BOLSOVER

Why do you think that was? Why this difference?

## SUSAN VOGEL

It may be that the European art museums have tended to be more conservative and have tended to stick to an older definition of art that did not include African art. It's interesting, for example, that the Louvre in Paris has refused a collection of African art and has wanted to exhibit it not in the main Louvre building but in another place. This museum, the Metropolitan, is interesting for being an art museum that's exhibiting African art on the main floor along with Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Western art and American art.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Perhaps we can talk in a little more detail about some of the pieces in the exhibition, maybe from each of the sections, some of the pieces that perhaps you like best?

SUSAN VOGEL

Well the exhibition is arranged geographically and so it begins, in this case, with Southern and Eastern Africa. It begins with a figure from Madagascar from a grave post and a figure from Southern Africa, a Zulu figure. Then it runs through Central Africa, pieces from Zaire, Angola and the Congo and then runs up through Gabon, Cameroon, Nigeria and across West Africa where the largest pieces are. My favourites would be hard to pick because there are so many. Tishman has a really striking group of head dresses from Nigeria that are wood covered with leather and there are a lot of different forms, some of them are very naturalistic and some of them are very stylised. I particularly like them. There are also some things from the Bale, there are two figures from the Bale of Ivory Coast, another special love of mine.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are the figures like?

SUSAN VOGEL

They are both female figures, one standing and one seated and they are made for traditional private cults.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Is there a theme at all for the exhibition or have pieces just been picked from all the regions to represent those regions?

SUSAN VOGEL

Well private collections don't usually have a theme and what we have shown is a cross-section, really, of traditional African art. It covers some of the most recent kind of things that are still being made for ritual use and it covers some of the very earliest. There's a stone figure from Zimbabwe, for example, from the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in the exhibition. There are some pieces from Benin that go back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How do these pieces differ from perhaps the more modern ones?

SUSAN VOGEL

Only that they are made from more durable materials. The more modern ones we can assume are rather similar to ones that were made in past times but that have not survived.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The exhibition's housed in a sequence of rooms, and the fact that the ceilings in these rooms are of differing heights has been put to advantage, because the carvings on show are also of very different sizes.

SUSAN VOGEL

There's a Dogon mask from Mali that's fifteen feet high, for example, and simply wouldn't have fit in the lower ceiling. Many of the larger pieces come from the Western Sudan. There's an almost life-size seated mother and child figure from the Bamina also of Mali. There's also a very large, must be five feet tall, bird from the Sinufa of Ivory Coast, all of those pieces are in the last part of the exhibition. Things from Zaire in the exhibition are somewhat smaller so that the largest Zairean figures are only about three feet high.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Would you say there's a big difference between the art from Southern or Eastern Africa and the art from West Africa?

SUSAN VOGEL

Not really. One of the striking things about traditional African art is that it has a kind of consistency within its enormous variety. There is something essentially African about it. I can be shown a piece that I have never seen before that doesn't look like anything I have ever seen before and still feel that it must be African rather than Indonesian or from some other part of the world. Not that that is always infallible but there is a quality, there's a vision perhaps that's fairly consistent.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Susan Vogel of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. And let's use that consistency she spoke of as a bridge to our second port of call. One common factor in east, west, central and Southern Africa is the musical instrument that at home in Ghana we call the Sanza. It's also called the Mbira or its sometimes described as the 'thumb-piano'. In this doleful recording from the Central African Republic it's being played by a man who's grumbling about his wife.

MUSIC EXTRACT - COMPLAINT: BIANDA

MUSIC EXTRACT - DUO DE SANZA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, this duet on two sanza comes from the Bisa people of south-east Upper Volta.

MUSIC EXTRACT - DUO DE SANZA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And we reach our final destination with yet another form of the instrument, the thumb-piano of Botswana.

MUSIC EXTRACT - BOTSWANA MUSEUM

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Music of Botswana recorded for the National Museum in Gaborone.

Doreen Nteta, the Director, sees the work of the Museum as central to Botswana's cultural policy.

DOREEN NTETA

Quite frankly speaking National **Museums**, museums or cultural organisations, are an important part of a nation. It has been said that a people without a culture is like a people without a soul.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I must say that I've always had the impression that Botswana is a rather staid country but Doreen Nteta makes the museum sound an extremely lively place.

DOREEN NTETA

We pride ourselves on being one of the most active museums in the world, not a traditional kind of museum. Traditional museums are where you can go in and look at rows and rows of curious objects, rows and rows of birds or animals or whatever it is that you want to see. But here, although we have very good exhibits and I know they are good because I have seen other museums around the world, we run a vital, lively institution for culture. We have lectures, we have dances, we have concerts, we have symposiums, we have tours for people who are just coming to look at the museum and we publish booklets and we have lecture series for students and for teachers. We also run art classes.

JEAN ROWTON

I believe that one of your other roles is also collecting the old traditional songs and stories to build up a 'bank'.

DOREEN NTETA

Yes, we have started a very good collection of traditional history. We have a very active member of our staff, Chacum Bulubusi, and we have started collecting mainly in Bitsobong in the north-east of Botswana and we hope to cover the rest of the country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I'm looking forward to hearing more about this project in a future programme but what about Botswana's art gallery? It is, in fact, under the same roof as the Museum of Culture and although there's something of the European dichotomy between art and culture it does sound as though in Gaborone the division isn't absolute.

DOREEN NTETA

People associate art galleries with Italy and France and Europe and great painters and works and it didn't seem likely that Botswana would have an art gallery. So they said: "Well you can have a museum as long as you have an art gallery with it". We think that was a very good move. So the art gallery is there for the purpose of collecting works of art, we collect mainly from Africa South of the Sahara. But the main purpose is to encourage people here to produce works of art and also to look at their works as works of art and encourage them and make them realise they have an artistic heritage also. So we do this by displaying, for instance, in the art gallery, objects that you wouldn't call art like a basket and ordinary beer brewing pots, sculptured pots, things like that. We also have some bead work. Now those are really ethnographic items. Some people argue that masks are also ethnographic items. So we have these so that the people, the Botswana who come in to look at the art gallery can look at the things and then realise: "Oh, so what my mother has is an object that the museum can use". So they shouldn't be ashamed of their old things but rather they should bring them to the museum and want them to be shown because they can bring their friends and show them and say: "This is the item that my mother had and it's on display in the museum". It has a place of honour because it's a Botswana object and because it's beautiful. So that's why we display these things and as I say it's to encourage the people. Then we also run art classes for primary school children who don't receive any education in their schools and these are run by volunteers, usually an artist or at the moment it's a group of artists from the Medey Ensemble. They do this with their free time and the children don't pay anything. The friends of the museum provide the material.

JEAN ROWTON

Are there any plans to do any exchanges with other galleries in the Southern African region?

DOREEN NTETA

Yes we are hoping that the visit of the Director of the National Art Gallery in Zimbabwe, Christopher Till, is going to open avenues on that line. The Zimbabweans have, of course, been very isolated during the war and their art and culture sort of came to a stand still and we are very keen to have some exchanges with the Zimbabweans.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Doreen Nteta, Director of the Botswana Museum talking to Jean Rowton. There's also the prospect, she tells us, of similar contacts with Mozambique. And for listeners in all three countries I have good news. From now on, there's every chance of hearing "Arts and Africa" loud and clear on a new wavelength. That's if you tune in to the Wednesday transmission at 1530 and 1730 GMT on 11.83 kilohertz. And not only listeners in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique but also in Malawi and Zambia. If any of you would like to send us any comments about reception in those five specific countries we'd be delighted to hear from you.

And here's some music so that listeners in Southern Africa can re-tune. More music from the Sanza, Mbira, call it what you will, it's providing our closing music. Goodbye until next week from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - SANZA MUSIC FROM SUDAN.