

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. I've been wandering around the storehouses of the Museum of Mankind in London, looking at its remarkable collection of African art and artifacts. African objects make up well over a quarter of the museum's total collection and a debate has been raging about whether these pieces should be in Britain or back in Africa where they came from in the first place. I asked Malcolm Macloed, the Director of the museum whether he got fed up by the criticisms levelled at his collection.

MALCOLM MACLOED

I sometimes feel that we get attacked for the wrong reasons, but for every person that writes and criticises us for having stuff and keeping it, and who asks why don't we send it back, there are five or ten or fifteen people who write and say, "thank you for letting me see it; thank you for letting us borrow it for our museum." There are, of course, always serious requests for the return of material from overseas countries. Now the situation is a very complicated one and a very sensitive one to many countries and new nation states and we do understand that. The legal position at the British museum is governed by an act and that act says that the British museum cannot remove from the collections and permanently alienate material which is in them. It can loan material but it is illegal for us to give material out of the collection permanently.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

People might argue that British expeditions sent out into Africa during which certain things were captured by force cannot be said to be legally aquired as you suggested. What would you say to that?

MALCOLM MACLOED

I think if you go into this it is very much a technical problem for lawyers. We certainly acquired the material subsequent to that in ways which were entirely legal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An argument has been made that perhaps those that give away these things did so in ignorance and subsequently it has been found necessary to have them back. Would you agree that often these things were given away in ignorance?

MALCOLM MACLOED

The difficulty with that is in many cases we simply do not know because you are talking about something which goes back 50 or 100 years. Suppose someone comes to us and says we found in our house a wooden stool that my grandfather brought back from Nigeria in 1890. Now how on earth are you going to reconstruct how that man came by that stool? I don't know. Certainly where we do have records you often find that these things were presented. We have in this collection some of the earliest material ever to be collected in Ghana. It was collected by a young man, Thomas Bowditch, who went to Kumasi in 1817 and he told the Asantiheni then that there was a museum in London, a British museum. Asantiheni arranged for his goldsmiths to make typical gold items and he was given a stool and little bits of pottery intended for the British Museum. So when we do trace it you often find that this is a perfectly reputable, sensible, normal sort of transaction.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I have just read in an extract from this paper that there is a gold stool that you have from Asanti. The coronation stool is made from gold so I supposed the reference is to the golden stool of Asanti and that you still keep the stool here.

MALCOLM MACLOED

Yes, I was very shocked when I saw that in an article because it was a statement made by someone in the Ghana High Commission and it is completely untrue. The golden stool of Asanti has never been outside Asanti since Okomfo Anokye brought it down from the skies for Osei Tutu. The furthest it has ever been from Kumasi is I think about 15 miles and it is now in Kumasi so there is this fantasy that the British Museum somehow has the golden stool of Asanti. It is extremely insulting to the Asanti people and it is extremely insulting to us because it isn't true, but it is one of these things that people think we must have amongst our great treasures hidden away.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Mack is a curator of the Museum who specialises in African collections. So I went across London to the museum's storerooms and asked him to show me some of his hidden treasures.

We are standing on the ground floor of what you call the storehouse of the museum. What exactly comes in here? I can see some stuff here all jumbled together - something that looks to me like a toy car with very large wheels.

JOHN MACK

Well the first thing, Alex, that happens when anything comes into the storehouse is that it has to be fumigated. That is that when it comes in here we have to be sure that we are not bringing in any bugs with it so that all the other objects that are kept here don't get infested with problems of that sort. And that goes for the object that you have just described which is a motor cycle from Northern Canada, that is going to be put on exhibition shortly. First it has to come here to be fumigated like everything else.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I can see the motor cycle that we have just talked about isn't very clean - the tyres are rather dirty apart from fumigation. Do you clean the articles before you put them on show?

JOHN MACK

That is a very good question. Of course many people think that what you want is new things all the time. If you are using things for an exhibition you really want to show the way people have used them, so very often they are indeed older things and if they are rather dirty then maybe you should leave them like that because that is after all the way you would find them - in this case in Canada but equally in Africa. In many cases we don't clean them because the dirt is part of the story of the object.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What fascinates me is how do you decide what articles to go for. There are so many things you can pick up anywhere and the world is such a big place, when do you stop and decide this is what I want for the exhibition?

JOHN MACK

The easiest way to answer that is to think of an exhibition. If we take as an example one that I did recently myself in Madagascar, we knew in advance the kind of thing we were going to be able to exhibit. So if we had a house I knew the kinds of things I wanted to put in the house and those were the kinds of things I was interested in buying. In that case those were every day things, pottery and domestic objects of all sorts,

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not the sort of things that you think of as being the antiques of a museum.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So then what happens after the fumigation?

JOHN MACK

Well the next stage is that the object has to be formally registered as part of the collection of the museum and all the information that we can collect about it is all written down in one place. If you would like to come upstairs I will show you exactly what we do next. Now here we are Alex in the place where we do all the cataloguing of the objects. You can see in front of you two registers in fact, one from 1909 which has some material from Zaire in it and the other register is from 1971 and that is obviously one of our more recent ones.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now here is an object that I would like to see. It is in the older register of 1909 and it is described as a stool cut from the solid in the form of a ram. How can I by looking at this register find out where the stool is?

JOHN MACK

Well you have selected it and I can then find from the number of the object exactly where it is located. That is done by these file cards in the cabinet next to you here. Just to show you it works let's have a look and see. Here we are, so we look up the file card until we come to number 9, and then we read on it that it is in rack 7 and cavity 46. So we just go down to rack 7 and walk along to 46 and hope it is there. Let's go and have a look. Here we are rack 7 and cavity 46, there it is! Let's get it out! You can see that it is described as a stool though these days you would want to call it a back rest because you clearly don't sit on it; you sit on the ground and rest your back against it. Also we can say a little bit more about it because we now know that in the part of Zaire where it comes from rams' heads are usually associated with chiefs so we know that it is probably a chief's back rest.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you got any objects from Ghana here?

JOHN MACK

Yes certainly. We can go over there if you like and you can see that it is all readily accessible. This is the part of the stores where the West African material is kept and these racks here may be of interest to you.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh yes I can see there are boxes here all from Ghana and Asanti in particular. Have you anything from the coast, say Accra? I come from that area and would like to see something from there.

JOHN MACK

Ok let's go down to the bottom where that should be and see what we have got. Here we are - we have found a box with Ga material in it if you would like to give me a hand to get it down. Here's all the tissue paper I was telling you about. Well, have you ever seen anything like that before?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Here is something that looks like a fetish doll to me. It is a figure of a woman. Where does it come from - ah - from the Gold Coast near Assini. How old is this one?

JOHN MACK

It came to us, according to the label in 1896.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Good gracious.

JOHN MACK

But of course, we can't be sure how long it had been before we got it. So that is only the date that it came here, we can't be sure of its age beyond that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It looks very very old because it is split in the middle almost. And it is wearing this shame band. Could it have come from, say a fetish grove, or something?

JOHN MACK

Well it could have done. As I said, the older the object, the harder it is to be sure.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where did you get it from?

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JOHN MACK

We could look it up in the registers as well of course, but we happen to have a good label here. It says: wooden figure of a woman, Assini gold coast in 1986 given by Sir A F Franks to the museum in that year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And it seems to have real hair on its head.

JOHN MACK

Yes it does. Would you expect that nowadays? No you wouldn't.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

No, you would expect it to have raffia for hair. It is rather extraordinary - real human hair - it makes me shiver. What happens when obviously you will be restricted by space as you are collecting more and more things. What do you do when you are full up here? You are more than three quarters full now.

JOHN MACK

Yes, we are getting full and we are already looking to a building next door. We may be able to take over part of that and continue our policy at the moment which is to try and collect as many every day things as we can from Africa. We are now working in three or four countries on that basis. We work through the local museum system in those countries and we make collections for ourselves and collections for those museums. We have African museum curators coming here all the time for training and to see the sort of storage conditions that we have and the sort of principles that we try and apply to the treatment of objects. So we are very much engaged in Africa at the moment.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Does it matter to you what size the object is before you collect it? I can see some big artefacts there - huge carvings from somewhere in Nigeria?

JOHN MACK

Yes it does matter. I for example, collected a house from Madagascar. So it matters in the sense that it is an absolute nightmare trying to get the thing to London, but once it is here, of course, it is a triumph, because the house itself is authentic and people can come and look at it and begin to get a sense of other people's lives which is after all the most important thing about the whole operation.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was talking to John Mack of the Museum of Mankind in London. Now Arts and Africa is also running out of space. I'll be back next week with another programme. Until then, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.