FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

BEYOND REPATRIATION

AFRICAN COLLECTIONS IN WESTERN-EUROPEAN MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of cultural objects, often stolen during the colonial era, are being returned to their countries of origin. Western-European owners of African artefacts and artworks have participated in this trend. However, many African cultural objects remain in Western-Europe and will likely never be returned to their country of origin for a multitude of reasons. This thesis explores how objects owned by Western-European museums that cannot be returned to Africa are treated within these museums. Additionally, the value of these objects and the cultures they are connected to is gauged and described and the thesis goes as far as to state that because of this value, these objects are owed a respectful display. The eventual aim of the thesis is to create an understanding of how these objects can be displayed in a way that is respectful towards all those who value them. It concludes that this can be done through educational, well-researched museum displays that place objects within a nuanced historical and cultural context.

PREFACE

As much as I love art, I love the museums that display this art more. A good museum, to me, creates an experience that is much more than the sum of the individual works being exhibited. Whether I visit a science museum, a modern arts museum, a fine arts museum, an archaeological museum or any other, I hope to leave feeling inspired and invigorated, armed with new perspectives through which to view and understand the world around me. Because of this great love for museums, I tend to be quite critical of the museums I visit. Not because they are bad by any means, but because they are not the *best*. I have never visited a perfect museum and I am sure I never will. However, I believe that a good museum is one that continues to reflect on its own collection and culture during all of its existence and adjusts course according to its own goals and morals. I hope to be part of this process of reflection in some capacity or another for the rest of my life, with this thesis being part of this endeavour.

I would like to thank professor Freddy Mortier, who was an endlessly patient advisor during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank professor Tom Claes for first introducing me to the topic of African art in Western-European museums during my search for a subject for my bachelor's thesis.

Thank you to Kato, Elcke, Julia, Silke and my parents, who helped me by proofreading my thesis, encouraging me to ask for help when I needed to and by tirelessly motivating me to work on my thesis.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

1 INTRODUCTION

Many articles on the repatriation of cultural objects stolen from Africa before 1960 note that demand for the return of these objects has increased in recent years. This is an unfounded observation to make. Demands for repatriation of looted cultural objects have been recorded throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century (Couttenier 2018; Liu 2016; Africamuseum n.d.) and we can assume that the first demand for repatriation was made the very first moment a cultural object was stolen and someone shouted something that might have translated to, "Hey, give that back". It is unclear if there was any increase in recent years.

What we can accurately say about recent years, however, is that the Western European countries that steward many of these contested cultural objects have become more receptive to the idea of returning them. In 2018, French president Emmanuel Macron made the promise to return looted cultural artefacts in possession of the French state to their country of origin (Marbot 2020). Thomas Dermine, the Belgian secretary of Scientific Policy promised the same thing about Belgian cultural property in 2021 (Debeuckelaere 2021). In both countries, a large majority of museum collections are owned by the government and objects were impossible to return by state museums before these promises were turned into policy (Debeuckelaere 2021; Marbot 2020). Through making these decisions, Belgium and France have taken on a pioneering role in debates surrounding the repatriation of looted African objects.

Despite these ground-breaking promises, we have yet to see even a fraction of looted objects owned by France and Belgium return to their country of origin (AFP 2021). The reasons for this are manifold and can differ on a case-by-case basis. Generally speaking, there are difficulties encountered on both the European and African side of these potential returns and not all of these difficulties are easily overcome. This means that for the foreseeable future, the hundreds of thousands of objects stewarded by Western museums are staying within the walls of these museums. Because it is often impossible to trace the origins of ill-documented objects, it is not always possible to know whether an object was acquired illegally. Since both France and Belgium only promised to return those objects that were acquired illegally with certainty, this means that these ill-documented objects are likely never going to return to their country of origin at all. In the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium, these ill-documented objects outnumber ones that were provably looted roughly forty to one. (Collections Database Tervuren n.d.; Debeuckelaere 2021)

We can therefore conclude that Western European museums will continue to be a primary place where African cultural objects are collected and displayed. This dissertation will explore the value of these objects, and will conclude that because of their significant cultural value, these objects must be displayed appropriately and ethically. To understand how these objects can be displayed ethically, several methods of display will be discussed, including examples and downsides of each. In order to offer concrete examples of each method of display, contemporary museum displays will be taken as examples. Our main example will be the Royal Museum for Middle Africa in Belgium, which not only stewards a large collection of African art, but which also aims to be – as is evidenced by its very name – a museum about Africa. The museum uses many different perspectives and methods to display its collection, offering examples of nearly all of the methods discussed.

These methods will eventually be combined to reach a list of considerations that contribute, according to us, to nuanced, meaningful and respectful displays of these objects and that avoid some of the issues found in these methods individually. The 1970 UNESCO Convention states that "cultural property constitutes one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture, and that its true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest possible information regarding its origin, history and traditional setting" (UNESCO 1970). Our considerations will aim to provide this "fullest possible information", despite the less than ideal geographical location where the objects are kept, far away from their original context.

The question we eventually aim to answer is what things we must keep in mind when displaying these objects, if we aim to display them respectfully and ethically. Of course there is no definitive answer to this question, since it depends on each museum that attempts to answer it and each object they attempt to answer it for. However, we aim to compile a list of things we believe museums should pay attention to when they display these objects and we will describe how we think museums should pay attention to these things.

1.1 Defining the cultural object

As we have only briefly touched upon so far, this dissertation deals with cultural objects brought to the West from Africa before 1960. This description implies several things about the objects at hand, and states some characteristics explicitly. These objects were acquired before the end of colonial Western rule in Africa, by Western Europeans in often chaotic and always unbalanced circumstances, where the power was firmly in Western hands. Although the introduction mentions objects that were looted, many of these objects were acquired by Western

Europeans through sales or even gift-giving and many more were acquired in ways that were never documented. Since these objects are displayed side by side in Western museums and are all potentially of great cultural value to the people who created them and many others, we will disregard the origin of these objects entirely in discussing the display of them, except for when possible repatriation of looted objects is discussed. As we will later discuss, the value of these objects is not determined by the way they were acquired, but by the significance they have to people, and therefore all objects that are culturally valuable should be displayed respectfully, regardless of how they were acquired.

Africa is a broad region with a varied past and diverse present. Since we will mainly study Belgian collections and museums, the origins of objects discussed can often be found in what is presently called the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The Democratic Republic of Congo has taken many names and contains a multitude of cultures and communities. When the culture of origin of an object is mentioned, this does not necessarily refer to the DRC as a whole or even to a community that is still alive in its colonial form today. Only in a legal context might we refer to the DRC as a whole as the "country of origin" of an object, since legal texts mainly deal with recognised states and not with the fluid communities within.

Relatively recent conventions such as the 2001 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage, and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage refer to these culturally significant objects as "cultural heritage". These conventions were concerned with both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Since this dissertation focuses only on cultural heritage which is material, displayable and tangible, this is not the term we will use. The 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, which concerned itself only with tangible cultural heritage, used the term "cultural object" (Liu 2016), which is most accurate for our purposes.

The word "object" implies a material, tangible presence, but gives no more information than that. The objects discussed in this dissertation are man-made and therefore unique and irreplaceable. Defining these objects as "irreplaceable" excludes some fungible tools such as crockery and weapons, but not all. The term "irreplaceable object" is still very broad and the objects contained in this description could be displayed in anthropological museums, fine arts museums and scientific museums alike. This suggests that there is some distinction between art objects, scientific objects and anthropological objects, and that we might better choose to discuss only one of the three. However, there is no way for us to narrow down this definition that would exclude any of these three types of objects. Objects such as masks, statues and

weaponry are displayed in all three types of museums indiscriminately, defined as art by one, as of anthropological relevance by another and as the subject of the exact sciences by a third. Since all of these different types of objects in each different type of museum have potential cultural value and therefore need to be displayed ethically, no further specification is needed for the purposes of this dissertation.

A final term necessary to be defined for the purposes of this dissertation is that of the word "cultural". This is such a broad and significant term that it can hardly be defined by one person. In this dissertation, the definition of culture used will be the one conceived by Boas, his students and the many scholars who built upon their work (Stocking Jr. 1966). This concept of culture was never described literally by Boas, but is defined most clearly in Ruth Benedict's work as a "more or less consistent pattern of thought and action… [Culture is] not merely the sum of all its parts, but the result of a unique arrangement and interrelation of the parts that has brought about a new entity… Culture shapes all our thinking, imaging and behaviour… For groups and societies, culture is energy, inspiration and empowerment" (Benedict 1935; Liu 2016).

By this conception of the word, cultures are unique, identifiable and more or less stable. It is essential to groups and societies' ability to thrive. This definition also allows for cultural interaction, exchange and influence and does not place cultures on an evolutionary ladder or baseless hierarchy. One person can be a part of several cultures and cultures can overlap and share with one another (Bashkow 2004; Benedict 1935). Other definitions don't necessarily allow for this kind of fluidity (Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Untereiner 1952).

An object that is significant to a given culture is therefore part of this culture's unique "more or less consistent pattern of thought and action" (Benedict 1935).

Since its re-opening in 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which we will use as a case study throughout this dissertation, calls itself the "Africamuseum". This name has been heavily criticised for being a much too general name for a museum whose collection features mainly objects from and research on Central Africa. Additionally, its full, official name remains the "Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)" and so going forward, we will exclusively refer to it as such (Anrys 2018). Another example we will often use, a statue displayed in the RMCA, is referred to in the museum's inventory system as "EO.0.0.7943". This is not the statue's

proper name. However, this name is used to refer to this statue in particular and not to any others, which might go by similar names or descriptions as EO.0.0.7943 and therefore, we will refer to this statue as EO.0.0.7943 throughout this dissertation (Volper and Baeke 2018). We will mainly use this statue as an example in our exploration of the value of cultural objects. This statue has been proven to be looted by a Belgian coloniser and has been demanded back by its source community (Africamuseum n.d.), meaning that we can study perspectives and interests that have not been recorded and therefore are not available for many other African artworks (Debeuckelaere 2021).

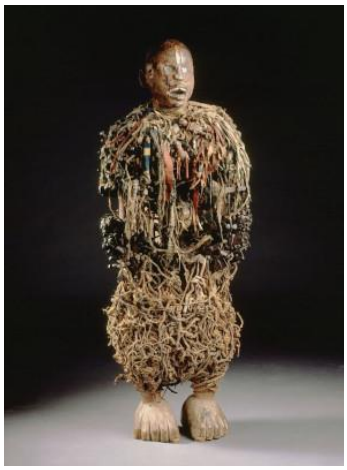

Figure 1, EO.0.0.7943, collection RMCA Tervuren, © the Royal Museum for Middle Africa and photo Plusj

2 THE VALUE OF OBJECTS, THE VALUE OF CULTURES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In his article on EO.0.0.7943, a controversial object in the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) that has been demanded back by descendants of the original owners several times since the 1960's, Maarten Couttenier poses the question, "What is more valuable: owning an object or the encounter?" This question was intentionally left unanswered in the article, more so meant as a rhetorical device to encourage readers to reflect on the value of immaterial cultural exchange (Couttenier 2018). For our purposes, however, it might prove useful to explore what exactly makes owning an object such as EO.0.0.7943 valuable and what makes a cultural encounter valuable. Throughout this dissertation, we will examine how these kinds of objects should be treated and how cultural exchange can enhance the way these objects are treated. Therefore, understanding why (and if) we should care about either of these things in the first place is a necessary beginning to our story.

2.2 WHAT MAKES AN OBJECT VALUABLE?

2.2.1 Beauty v. function

Object EO.0.0.7943 is described where it is displayed in the RMCA, in a room dedicated entirely to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic Middle-African statues made and "collected" before 1960, as "Nkisi nkonde-beeld (Yombe? Kakongo?) - 1st quarter of the 19th century. Wood (*Canarium schweinfurthii*). RD Congo. Registered in 1912. Collected by A. Delcommune (in 1878). EO.0.0.7943", simply denoting the materials it has been made out of, how long it has existed for and where it came from (Volper and Baeke 2018). Certain objects are more valuable because of their materials and age, however, throughout the exhibit, interpretive texts point out that the value of the statues doesn't stem from age or materials, but from one thing: beauty, which in turn is derived from skilful production by a talented, individual artist. The texts point out another thing an object could derive value from: function, but claim this is not a form of value that requires our attention (Volper, 2018).

When demanding back the statue in 2016, the descendants of the original owners made no mention of the beauty of the statue, or of how masterfully the statue was made. Instead, one chief, Chief Baku Kapita Alphonse, explained that:

> *The powers of the kitumba (statue) could be revived after restitution, and the object could thus be reused. He explained that the statue can talk, although only inaugurated chiefs are able to communicate with the kitumba. They feed it kola nuts every morning and evening. In addition to human traits, greater powers are attributed to the kitumba: it offers protection from bullets during warfare, for example, and has powers to turn a murderer deaf, as Chief Madelaine Tsimba Phambu explained (Couttenier 2018).*

These chiefs, descendants of the chiefs EO.O.O.7943 was originally stolen from, refer to the object's function, both to protect one during warfare and against criminals, and as a means to legitimise inaugurated chiefs, who might glean information from communication with the statue (Couttenier 2018).

This creates a difference of opinion between the museum and the chiefs that seems difficult to resolve. What makes EO.0.0.7943 valuable to the RMCA, its beauty, does not make it valuable to the descendants of the original owners and what makes it valuable to them, its function, is considered irrelevant to the RMCA (Couttenier 2018). Here we should briefly point out that in other exhibits in the RMCA, beautiful, skilfully made objects (such as tapestries, pot lids, cartoons and musical instruments) are displayed and celebrated for their function. Even within the RMCA itself, it seems, this difference of opinion occurs (Volper and Baeke 2018; Volper, 2018).

If we analyse this personally, what makes an object such as EO.0.0.7943 valuable, then, is a matter of opinion. One person, an RMCA curator, deems objects valuable based on their beauty, another person, an inaugurated Boma chief, decides an object's worth is derived from its function. We could assume that the RMCA curator might find beauty a very important thing in general and that the Boma chief might generally prefer things that are useful and functional for his work leading his community.

We could then consider that these personal opinions might be influenced by one's culture. Not only the RMCA curator, but his ancestors before him, value beauty over function. They built museums to celebrate the beauty of objects that have no other function than decoration, while functional items are relegated to kitchen cabinets and workplaces to be used until they lose their function and are thrown away.

Chief Baku Kapita Alphonse might come from a culture where items are valued for their function. They are displayed, used, repaired and maintained. Generation after generation, people are stewards to these items and ensure that they remain useful for generations to come.

This does not explain, however, why even within the RMCA, other Western curators hold opinions similar to those of chief Baku Kapita Alphonse and praise objects for their functionality. Other curators might praise those same objects only for their beauty. If there are disagreements on what makes objects valuable within one institution, there will most certainly be disagreements on value within a culture (Volper and Baeke 2018). This makes the question on what makes objects valuable much harder to answer. Perhaps beyond these types of value, which are assigned in a process that seems to be very personal, there is a broader value that affects groups of people regardless of what they personally deem to be valuable.

2.2.2 Cultural value

In 1978, the UNESCO founded the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in case of Illicit Appropriation (ICPRCP), which functions as a platform for nations to request the return of their missing cultural property and which aims to prevent illicit trade of these objects (UNESCO 2020). In the same year, the Director-General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, issued the elaborately named *plea for the return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it*. In this plea, he cites the value of cultural heritage as a primary reason for return:

> *One of the most noble incarnations of a people's genius is its cultural heritage, built up over the centuries by the work of its architects, sculptors, painters, engravers, goldsmiths and all the creators of forms, who have contrived to give tangible expression to the many-sided beauty and uniqueness of that genius. The vicissitudes of history have nevertheless robbed many peoples of a priceless portion of this inheritance in which their enduring identity finds its embodiment (M'Bow 1978).*

Regardless of beauty or function, cultural objects are tied to those who create them and the culture they are a part of. Their value is derived from this connection, which elevates them from mere objects to carriers of culture, identity and history. According to M'Bow (1978) these objects are a primary way to express culture and to preserve it and pass it down to future generations. This would imply that no matter the aesthetical or functional value an object might have for any given society, it will inherently have more value for the society that originally created it. M'Bow emphasises the importance of these objects to the cultural identity of a people. This does not mean that every single object that was created within a specific culture is of equal value to that culture: "These men and women who have been deprived of their cultural heritage therefore ask for the return of at least the art treasures which best represent their culture,

which they feel are the most vital and whose absence causes them the greatest anguish" (M'Bow 1978).

Although many academics have attempted to define cultural value, M'Bow (1978) and UNESCO are the only ones we could find who do not limit this value in its scope (Angelini and Castellani 2019). Some, such as Throsby (2003) have attempted to reduce cultural value to a measurable, monetary entity while others, such as Klamer (2004) have claimed that the cultural value of an artwork can only truly be understood by experts. UNESCO and, by extension, M'Bow (1978), take a universalistic approach to the idea of cultural value, which is much more relevant to our purposes, since museumgoers are more often than not laymen and are not looking to make money from their visit (Kotler and Kotler 2000). For this reason, we will use M'Bow's Plea extensively in order to understand what makes cultural objects valuable to people. We are aware that UNESCO's approach to cultural value is not free of criticisms (Labadi 2013; Eriksen 2001), however, for our purposes, their perspective on the value of cultural objects is more usable than others.

According to M'Bow, objects that represent the cultural identity of a people most strongly, hold the most value. The idea that objects "whose absence causes them the greatest anguish" primarily should be returned, implies that objects might hold a more personal value beyond the cultural, although M'Bow doesn't further specify this value in his plea (M'Bow 1978).

This takes the value of these objects from a mere personal, superficial one to a common, ethical one. Value is not determined by one individual's preferences or goals, but is instead a stable fact. Although people can agree about the beauty or even functionality of an object, it is much harder to deny that objects are created within complex cultural contexts and have strong ties to those who created and inspired the object. The object's place in the world is no longer a neutral thing. People have a moral obligation to others and therefore, would like to treat the things that others value with the utmost respect. (M'Bow 1978; Liu 2016)

2.2.3 To return or not to return?

According to M'Bow, returning objects is the most respectful thing one could possibly do. He emphasises "how much a work of art gains in beauty and truth for the uninitiated and for the scholar, when viewed in the natural and social setting in which it took shape" (M'Bow 1978). To display an object in its place of origin, is to maximise its value for all who view it (M'Bow 1978).

Additionally, communities of origin might benefit from owning an object in a way they might not benefit from the object being stewarded by a secondary community. Ignoring the financial benefit that countries, especially those who have been deprived of resources for decades or centuries and now have very little to offer tourists, might experience if they can display objects created within their cultures to travellers, who might pay for museum fares, hotel stays and cab rides, there is another benefit to ownership of cultural objects (Hall and Tucker 2004) . M'Bow touches on this benefit several times in his plea and emphasises that for communities to experience this benefit, return of their cultural objects is essential. This benefit is the role cultural objects play in shaping, maintaining and affirming cultural identities (M'Bow 1978).

As Annette Weiner puts it:

> *Persons and groups need to demonstrate continually who they are in relation to others, and their identities must be attached to those ancestral connections that figure significantly in their statuses, ranks, or titles. To be able to keep certain objects that document these connections attests to one's power to hold oneself or one's group intact. For to give up these objects is to lose one's claim to the past as a working part of one's identity in the present (Weiner 1985).*

Cultural identity does not take shape in a vacuum, but in interaction with other cultures. Liu Zuozhen, in her book *The Case for Repatriating China's Cultural Objects*, explores the idea of recognition as an essential part of this process of forming and maintaining cultural identity (Liu 2016). If we look specifically at cultures and identities within Congo, we could argue that these cultural identities were oppressed and destroyed for centuries. This destruction was not internal, but happened specifically because an outside group refused to recognise Congolese cultures as equal to their own. For example, Belgian colonisers failed to appreciate traditional agricultural techniques used by the Congolese and the goals and dreams of workers and through this lack of recognition, were able to justify building rubber plantations that destroyed land and people alike. Not recognising other cultures to the same extent as one's own culture can have dire and lasting consequences (Reid 2019). Acknowledging a culture and its unique identity is essential to respecting that culture (Taylor 1989). By demanding acknowledgement now, African nations demand respect and insurance that the crimes committed against them during (and after) the colonial period will never be committed again.

Building upon ideas first introduced by Charles Taylor, Liu states: "Today most theories of recognition assume that people depend on the feedback of others in the society to construct their

identity; people who experience non-recognition or misrecognition will find it difficult to embrace themselves and to have successful relationships with others" (Taylor 1989;Liu 2016).

Congo is now (and has long been) asking this recognition in a simple and symbolic form: to have the ownership of objects that were stolen from them by those who did not afford them acknowledgement or recognition, returned to them. This is a minimal thing to ask, considering that the RMCA (Belgium's primary location for Congolese art acquired before 1960, the year in which Congo liberated itself from oppressive Belgian rule) possesses tens of thousands of objects that are not displayed in the museum and therefore might not be missed by the Belgian public the RMCA serves (Debeuckelaere 2021; Collections Database Tervuren n.d.). These objects are not displayed for a multitude of reasons, the main one being that there simply isn't enough space in the museum or in the attention span of viewers to display and view tens of thousands of objects (Vanderstichele 2018)

This same recognition could not be achieved without physical possession of these objects. The acknowledgement Congo is after goes beyond that of their current identity. Recognition of the identity that was forcibly stolen from them during the colonial period is necessary to repair this theft. To recognise a theft without returning what was stolen is a false recognition that does not help those wronged any further. Physical return is the only meaningful method of acknowledgement, according to both Lui and M'Bow (Liu 2016; M'Bow 1978).

Despite how meaningful returning an object to its original community might be, this only rarely happens. In 2021, the Belgian government returned official ownership of illegally acquired Congolese cultural objects to the Congolese government. The objects themselves will be returned in a slow, collaborative process between the Congolese and Belgian governments. The objects in question, however, constitute only about 1% (883 objects) of the collection of the RMCA. Another 58% of objects (50.000 objects) were acquired legally, while the final 41% have unclear origins. Although many of these more than 30.000 objects might have to return to their country of origin on moral grounds, there is no legal framework in Belgium for returning them, since only provably illegally acquired objects are to be returned to Congo. A coalition of Congolese and Belgian scientists is working to trace the origins of these objects, but despite their efforts, we might never know how most of them were obtained. (Debeuckelaere 2021)

An additional issue can be found in the very title of M'Bow's *Plea for the return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it*. He urges the return of this heritage to those who created it. In the case of the objects discussed here, "those who created them" are

often long dead and their offspring might be as well. Colonial rule destroyed entire cultures and communities (Moyo and Gonye 2022), leaving many of these objects, which have a rich and significant history in need of preservation, with no one to return them to.

Even in cases where the acquisition of an object can be traced to theft and looting, the object's return is not guaranteed. Congo is only requesting back those objects that they can steward safely. Should war, economic issues or natural disaster leave the country unable to take care of these cultural objects, none of them will be returned at all. Belgium might come back on their promise and not return the requested objects, something other Western countries have done before in these kinds of disputes (Reid 2019; Marbot 2020). Finally, the objects might not be returned to their exact place of origin, i.e. the place where said object would "gain much in beauty and truth", according to M'Bow. If EO.0.0.7943 is returned to the Congolese government, for example, it might never make its way to the city of Boma and to chief Baku Kapita Alphonse. It would not be displayed in "the natural and social setting in which it took shape", although it would be much closer than it is in Belgium (M'Bow 1978; Debeuckelaere 2021).

We must conclude, therefore, that there is a difference between where an object *should* be and where an object *can* be. We must look for ways to respect those who value the object most, even if we cannot return the object to them.

2.2.4 Room for compromise

M'Bow does acknowledge that cultures other than the one that originated the object might assign value to the object as well: "The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better" (M'Bow 1978). This implies that what makes these objects valuable to other cultures, is the cultural encounter that Couttenier talks about in his article on EO.0.0.7943 (Couttenier 2018).

Here, M'Bow takes a position that attempts to reconcile cosmopolitanism with his plea to return cultural objects to their place of origin (M'Bow 1978). Cosmopolitan views are often used to oppose the return of cultural objects. These views posit that since art is valuable to all, it therefore belongs to all (Merryman 1986). To make this art accessible to as many people as possible, it should be displayed in museums that are easily accessible to many. The museums where these works are currently displayed are often located in major Western cities and attract

millions of international tourists yearly, which would suggest that these objects are already in the place where they are optimally accessible to all those who value them (Liu 2016; Merryman 1986).

By saying that these objects "would have" enabled others to understand the community that originated them better, M'Bow implies that this is not currently the case. The cultural encounter experienced when we view these objects, is incomplete without their originators and the context they provide. M'Bow mentioned before "how much a work of art gains in beauty and truth" when displayed in its proper context (M'Bow 1978). This would mean that it is in the best interest of cosmopolitans to see these objects return to their place of origin, where their value is maximised, benefitting all.

M'Bow acknowledges that returning every single displaced object might not be necessary:

> *The men and women of these countries have the right to recover these cultural assets which are part of their being. They know, of course, that art is for the world and are aware of the fact that this art, which tells the story of their past and shows what they really are, does not speak to them alone. They are happy that men and women elsewhere can study and admire the work of their ancestors. They also realize that certain works of art have for too long played too intimate apart in the history of the country to which they were taken for the symbols linking them with that country to be denied, and for the roots they have put down to be severed. (M'Bow 1978)*

Beyond a cultural encounter that helps one culture better understand another, some objects might have become important to an unrelated culture's identity after having been in possession of said culture for decades or even centuries. M'Bow sees this conflict of value as a place where compromises need to be made. Although many objects are valuable to the culture of origin, some might not be returned to acknowledge the special value these objects have to the cultures that currently have stewardship of them, others might stay where they are to give all access to the art of this culture (M'Bow 1978).

We can ask how these compromises can be made, i.e. on what basis we could determine that one object is sufficiently related to a culture and another is not. This would tell us in clear terms which objects would be required to return and which would not be. However, answering these questions is not simple.

These compromises are part of the cultural encounter Couttenier mentions and so, now that we have established the value of cultural objects, we can once again ask, "What is more valuable:

owning an object or the encounter?" To answer this question, we will next examine the value of the cultural encounter.

2.3 THE VALUE OF THE ENCOUNTER

2.3.1 Which encounter?

Throughout the long and turbulent history between Europe and Africa, there are many examples of cultural encounters. Most of them were destructive encounters with predominantly negative consequences (Reid 2019). In contemporary encounters, attempts are made to right past wrongs and interact positively with other cultures, but this does not always come across as intended. Cross-cultural encounters are still experienced negatively at times, or as benefitting only one culture, for example in the case of intercontinental tourism (Wilson 2017). Through studying the negative effects of these contemporary encounters, predominantly those that happen in museums, we might be able to understand what people hope to gain from these encounters and how they go about these encounters. This way we can explore the value of positive cultural encounters without repeating mistakes already made by others. First, however, we must define the encounter itself.

When Couttenier asks, "What is more valuable: owning an object or the encounter?" (Couttenier 2018), we could understand this in two different ways . Either the encounter is, as encounters are traditionally understood (Wilson 2017), between two cultural groups, in this case the group that owns the object and the group that used to own it, or the encounter is between the object and anyone who interacts with it.

If we follow M'Bow's description of these cultural objects as representatives of a culture and its identity, these two encounters could be considered almost identical (M'Bow 1978). However, in an interview with Bruzz, Belgian-Congolese activist Billy Kalonji said of the (then not yet renovated RMCA): "The objects in the museum did not speak, they had been muted. An entire culture was locked up in the museum, the largest part of which was not even visible to the *(own translation from Dutch)*" (Vanderstichele 2018). Because of the way that the RMCA displayed cultural objects at the time, these objects could not represent any culture or speak for any identity.

Couttenier's article on EO.0.0.7943 was written before the RMCA reopened after its years-long renovation. Neither EO.0.0.7943, nor any other cultural object owned by the RMCA was being displayed. Encounters with these works and the cultures they represent were not possible.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that Couttenier was talking about the first kind of encounter, between two cultural groups (Couttenier 2018).

M'Bow suggests a similar kind of encounter in his plea: "The return of a work of art or record to the country which created it enables a people to recover part of its memory and identity, and proves that the long dialogue between civilizations which shapes the history of the world is still continuing in an atmosphere of mutual respect between nations" (M'Bow 1978).

Within a Boasian concept of culture (Benedict 1935), cultural encounters are of great value. Cultures pose no inherent threat to each other and there is no set hierarchy of cultures or progression of cultural characteristics. Encounters can promote understanding and enhancement of one's own culture, while also experiencing the acknowledgement of one's cultural identity by another cultural group (Stocking Jr. 1966).

Couttenier places museums at the centre of these cultural encounters. Research and local (in this case Congolese) expertise on the provenance and significance of objects can be integrated into exhibitions that involve these objects. Objects can be loaned and shared across continents. In cases where an object is returned, these cultural exchanges could be more valuable to Western museums and audiences than to the object itself. In cases where return is not possible, these encounters could provide a genuine and enduring attempt at compensation for the loss of the cultural object (Couttenier 2018).

The ownership and return of cultural objects is heavily regulated and often outside the control of those who display these objects. Those same curators, researchers, museum guides and exhibition designers are fully in control of the cultural encounters staged within their museum. They can reach out to their Congolese colleagues for information and can join forces with them to create exhibitions that facilitate cultural encounters between visitors and people a continent away. They can decide what voices audiences hear when they visit the museum and what these voices say (Couttenier 2018).

Cultural objects can thus play a significant role in these encounters. These objects cannot be made mute, as Kalonji describes them to be. They have to speak for and represent those who cannot be there to speak for themselves (Couttenier 2018; Vanderstichele 2018).

2.3.2 A case of a negative cultural encounter

Western museums that exhibit non-Western art have inevitably been a stage for cultural encounters in the past. In our interpretation, in a museum where objects are not allowed to speak

for their culture, they instead tell the story of those who silenced them. When those who feel connected to or are part of the source community of an object enter the museum, they encounter this other culture, which oppresses and mutes theirs. On the other hand, Western viewers imagine the objects to have a voice that tells them exactly what they, based on the choices made by curators and exhibition designers and their own flawed ideas about the culture being (mis)represented, expect to hear. These exhibits have the potential to challenge the views undereducated Westerners might have on other cultures (or even their own) (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2014) , but instead the Western visitor is left to their own devices and an opportunity for education is passed upon. Research papers explore both these encounters themselves and their consequences. We will study one such example in order to gain an understanding of how cultural encounters can go awry.

In his article *Staging Colonialism: The Mise-En-Scène of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium*, Murat Aydemir describes his experience visiting the then yet to be renovated RMCA. Only halfway through the museum, he is tired: "A strange fatigue takes hold of my limbs, eyes, and mind. The prospect of having to peruse another series of rooms makes my head spin" (Aydemir 2008). This is not an issue with the objects on display, but more so with how they are displayed: "What seems to bother me is not so much what I get to see as the walk I must walk, the trajectory I must trace" (Aydemir 2008).

At first, the museum made on him "a charmingly silly and quaint impression—what The Museum Key: A Visitor's Guide to the RMCA (2003) innocuously refers to as its "'Tin Tin in the Congo' quality"" (Aydemir 2008). This in itself is not ideal. A museum that aims to be scientific and anthropological in nature instead comes off the same way a Wunderkammer or an outdated work of children's entertainment would. A very serious subject – that of colonisation, in the case of Belgium paired with uniquely violent subjugation, constant political sabotage and genocide – is obfuscated by its spoils, displayed innocently without mention of their bloody acquisition.

Aydemir continues: "It takes a while for that first impression to evolve into something more sinister and nauseating. Much of that cumulative effect has to do with the path laid out through the museum's spaces: the steps it assigns, the junctures it forges, and the distinctions it makes" (Aydemir 2008).

At the time that Aydemir visited the RMCA, the museum offered two walking tours: one that simply followed the main exhibits and a secondary one that criticised this primary tour. As put

by Aydemir: the main expository agent tells the viewer: “Look! That’s how the primitives are.” The second, supplementary agent adds: “Look! That’s how we used to display the ‘primitives’” (Aydemir 2008). He does not see this secondary tour as compensation for the problems of the primary one, something the RMCA agrees with, as evidenced by their choice to omit this secondary tour after their 2018 renovation. Instead, this secondary exhibit reassures the Western visitor that they have nothing to do with these colonial views of the past. As Aydemir puts it “[It] merely serves as a convenient way to offer the visitor some temporal distance from the main exhibit, so that it can then be consumed nostalgically” (Aydemir 2008).

It lets viewers know that the story being told is not about them and that therefore and that all critical thinking is done with, granting them permission to simply be entertained. “Viewers initially put off by the exhibition may be sufficiently reassured by the marginal critical commentary to go on and enjoy the show” (Aydemir 2008).

Instead of educating the viewer or introducing them to the culture they came to meet, the secondary tour makes excuses for the primary one without compensating for any of its flaws. The viewer can then enjoy the curiosities of this pre-renovation RMCA with a clear conscience. All of this to say that the primary exhibition is teeming opportunities for painful, negative cultural encounters and that the secondary tour does not suffice to avoid these encounters in the slightest (Aydemir 2008).

Aydemir, as a viewer who is aware of Belgium’s violent past and has beyond that a broader post-colonial view on European history, comes to the RMCA not to meet the mythological Congo out of a Tin Tin adventure, but to meet the contemporary Belgian museum that curates this Congo. The resulting cultural encounter is one between current-day Belgian culture and someone who places himself outside of that culture. At the same time, Aydemir imagines how other visitors might experience the walking tour. These other visitors are part of contemporary Belgian culture and come to the museum to learn about Middle Africa, which the museum promises to have information on in its very name (Aydemir 2008).

For Aydemir and those like him, those who have come to the museum to encounter Belgian culture, the negative aspects of their encounter are obvious. Aydemir describes his fatigue and irritation. Instead of meeting a culture that has dealt with its past, or can at least acknowledge the need to do so, Aydemir faces a culture that at best ignores its past and at worst, stands by it:

> *While the animals, curiosa, busts, maps, snakes, and objects are all recognizable relics from a bygone era, the categories and classifications that inform the walking tour are*

> *far from relegated to the past. Indeed, each visit to the museum bodily actualizes them, reaffirms their awkward contemporaneity… In a nominally postcolonial present, Tervuren offers a mise-en-scène that conserves the ideological attitudes of nineteenth-century Belgian colonialism… As a result, the place ends up representing colonialism as present, as both existent and contemporary (Aydemir 2008).*

Aydemir points out several times that the RMCA references aspects of colonialism (such as the creation of ethnic divisions, the belief that European interference in Africa largely had a positive effect, the infantilisation of Africans and so on) that still make victims today and fails to connect those current-day victims with the past actions of Belgian colonisers. This results in a cultural encounter that leaves one party, in this case Aydemir, having to either silently endure misinformation and stereotyping, or to perform the labour of pointing out the issues that curators should have caught and corrected instead of him. The other party misses every opportunity to apologise for the past, improve the present and engage meaningfully with the Middle-African people they fail to represent (Aydemir 2008).

The encounter feels one-sided for both parties. Aydemir writes an extensive article in order to voice the opinions that the RMCA clearly had no interest in listening to. The RMCA curators designed their exhibition with what Aydemir considers to be only uncritical Belgian input and in such a way that no other input can reach them even as people react to their exhibition. Both encounter each other superficially, but no exchange is made. M'Bow pleaded that cultural objects would have helped those they were stolen from "to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better" (M'Bow 1978) In this case, no one gains greater self-knowledge or a better understanding of others (Aydemir 2008).

Aydemir then imagines how a Belgian visitor might experience the museum. He observes that "a crucial aspect of the mise-en-scène of Tervuren is that it unremittingly binds African subjects to places that are drained of time and history" (Aydemir 2008) This, combined with the secondary walking tour that severs the contemporary Belgian viewer from the colonial Belgian past, allows the viewer to be entertained by the results of a ruthless and cruel conquest without being confronted with any ruthlessness or cruelty. Aydemir speculates: "Consequently, the viewer can continue to indulge, in the words of historian Adam Hochschild, in "an Africa composed entirely of exotic costumes and pounding drums" (qtd. in Muteba Rahier 59), savor the museum's "Tin Tin in the Congo" attractions, get excited about the legendary meeting of Stanley and Livingstone in darkest Africa—while the genocidal horrors of Belgian colonialism are safely kept at bay" (Aydemir 2008).

Another one-sided encounter takes place. The Belgian visitor comes to the Royal Museum for Middle Africa and encounters not Middle Africa, but the imaginary version of it that they had already met in Western media, for example in the adventures of Tin Tin. The Belgian visitor encounters only Belgian curators, who do not challenge their view, but parrot it back to them. Again, neither greater self-knowledge, nor greater understanding of others is gained. No information is exchanged (Aydemir 2008).

Aydemir briefly observes another function a cultural encounter might have, one also mentioned several times by M'Bow in his plea: that of creating and shaping cultural identity. M'Bow sees this process as a mutual one, where two cultures treat and acknowledge each other equally and both gain equally from their exchange (M'Bow 1978). Aydemir is more cynical and cites Jean Muteba Rahier's *The Ghost of Leopold II*: "the project of … a colonial museum was intended also to 'educate' the Belgian public as to who they really were in contradistinction to the uncivilized Congolese 'tribes'" (Rahier 2003). To form their identity, Belgians did not learn from the Congolese, who had a greater diversity of languages and cultural identities at the time and had many periods of wide-spread unity among these identities throughout their history. Instead, they reduced these diverse and knowledgeable groups to a singular, inferior "primitive" and built their own unified identity on an imagined superiority over this Other. Again, this exchange is one-sided and benefits no one, not the people reduced to an inferior object and not those who build an identity on unstable and insignificant foundations that would not suffice to support a broad, meaningful and independent cultural experience (Aydemir 2008).

It is clear to see that the exotic Other (a concept constructed by philosophers such as Emmanuel Lévinas (1978) and Edward Saïd (1978)) built by these types of encounters is a mirage. As a metaphor we offer a Western curator who crouches behind a puppet theatre, raising a hand dressed up as the Other for a Western audience to see. The Western curator makes their puppet dance as the Other does and affects their voice to speak as the Other does – if the Other speaks at all – while the audience pretends that they are not watching a puppet theatre at all, but a veritable Other. In fact, they are watching a Western hand and listening to a Western voice. We argue that the Other is not present and not real. They do not exist.

Opposite the Other, there is the Self (a concept found in the works of Foucault (1988), amongst others, and contrasted with the Other by for example Moosavinia, Niazi and Ghaforian (2011)), also carefully designed by the Western curator. The Self is what the Other is not (Moosavinia, Niazi, and Ghaforian 2011; Burney 2012). If the Other is only a puppet, then so is the Self. The opposite of a puppet is still a puppet. This puppet is designed more carefully. Its clothes are

more detailed, its face more expressive, its voice much less squeaky. The audience recognises their own jeans and T-shirt, their own watch and sweatshop shoes. And yet it remains a puppet, one that ceases to exist when the puppet theatre's curtains close and a hand is pulled free from a lifeless sock.

Just like the Other, the Self that is built upon the Other is imaginary. The Other is reduced to only a few characteristics. If the Self is the opposite of those few characteristics, the Self will inevitably be a reduction as well, with only as many characteristics as granted to the Other. It only exists for as long as we can suspend our disbelief while watching the puppet theatre. The identities built through these one-sided encounters are not sustainable and not useful in cultural practice.

Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz define ethnographic displays as "displays about cultural similarity and difference". Although they believe that these ethnographic displays can be positive for those who view them and those they represent, they note that often complex societies with many similarities of our own are placed into a hierarchy based on what they lack (or seem to lack) as dictated by Western cultural priorities (Karp and Kratz 2000).

2.3.3 The makings of a positive cultural encounter

In the previous part, we discussed an example of a type of cultural encounter we would like to avoid, where all are affected negatively. Now we will discuss a case of a cultural encounter that benefits all involved, showing that encounters between museums and the cultural groups they aim to understand need not be negative experiences.

In an article about the term "propatriation", Emily Moore (2016) describes a cultural exchange between four American museums and the Tlingit Saanya Kwáan people of Cape Fox. In 2001, these four museums returned totem poles and house posts to Cape Fox. In return, the Cape Fox village corporation gifted each of the four museums a cedar log, the material these house posts and totem poles were originally made out of. In return, the museums commissioned Tlingit carver Stephen Jackson as well as Nathan and Dorica Jackson to carve these logs into totem poles that could take the places of those returned to Cape Fox and the surrounding villages (Moore 2010).

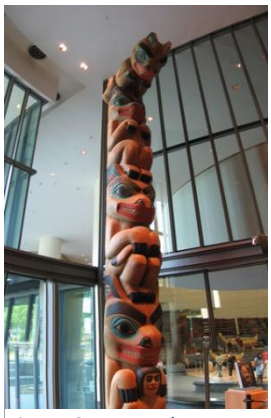

Figure 2, one such totem pole. Nathan Jackson, Dorica Jackson, Stephen Jackson, Kaats', 2004. Cedar and paint. © The National Museum of the American Indian. Photo Emily Moore

Although the exchange that takes place is physical, a much more important, immaterial encounter takes place between the Saanya Kwáan

and the four museums. By returning the totem poles and house posts, the museums acknowledge the Saanya Kwáan as people equal to themselves, with goals and values at least in part tied to the cultural objects the museums eventually returned to them. In gifting each museum with a cedar log the Saanya Kwáan acknowledge the relationship of museum curators and visitors to the totem poles. By commissioning Tlingit expert carvers, the museums acknowledge local expertise on totem poles and folklore and take on an opportunity to educate themselves and their visitors. Stephen Jackson takes on this role of educator by carving into each totem pole the origin story of the Tlingit Teikweidi clan, the people these poles were originally stolen from. The importance of recognition stressed by Liu (2016) becomes clear here. A crime committed because American settlers did not recognise the Teikweidi equal, is righted by descendants of those settlers, two centuries later, by representing and understanding the Teikweidi on the terms of the Tlingit themselves (Moore 2010). This idea of representing a culture on its own terms instead of the terms of the museum is further expanded upon in several essays in a book by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (2003) on collaborations between museums and source communities (Edwards 2003; Conaty 2003). These collaborations will be discussed further in the next part of this dissertation.

Even in cases where this material exchange is not possible, the immaterial exchange – that of interacting with and involving those presented in museums and allowing them a say in their own presentation – is an achievable option (Couttenier 2018).

The difference between the encounter experienced by the Saanya Kwáan and that experienced by Aydemir is stark. The "greater self-knowledge and better understanding" M'Bow hoped for is genuinely achieved by the Saanya Kwáan (M'Bow 1978). Everything missing from the RMCA before its renovation, is present in this exchange (Aydemir 2008). No longer is the cultural encounter one-sided. The Saanya Kwáan and the four museums engage in a dialogue, non-verbal at times, but always reciprocal. Both communities gain from the exchange (Moore 2010).

This, then, is what we hope to have in a cultural encounter: reciprocity and mutual gain.

In an article on cultural conservation, Richard Kurin (1991) claims that this is not only a pleasant cultural encounter, but a necessary one for the preservation and vitalisation of cultures, especially those that have suffered from erasure and damage by others. Kurin states that museum strategy is more important than ever considering the destruction of world cultures during the twentieth century. Kurin focuses mainly on the minority cultures targeted across the

United States, but we think his statements can apply to the Middle African cultures disrupted and destroyed by colonisers as well. There are two ways in which museums can contribute to the preservation of these communities: “The lesser goal involves the effort to collect artefacts and document lifeways before those cultures or memories disappear. The greater goal is for museums to play a role in the conservation of those cultures, to actually help those cultures survive in the contemporary world” (Kurin 1991).

Kurin notes that museums can offer a platform that represents cultures and that they have science and scholarship at their disposal to legitimise those represented on this platform. Throughout his article, he also describes two instances of living bearers of a culture contributing to exhibitions. These living representatives of cultures play an essential role in the preservation of their culture. As Kurin says:

> *If culture is to be conserved, it must live. It cannot be frozen in time and preserved by museums, anthropologists, folklorists, or historians. For a culture to live, its bearers must be empowered to practice that culture, to revise, transform, and adapt it to new and changing circumstances – to find new meanings for old practices and old meanings for new practices (Kurin 1991).*

This does not only benefit the cultures being platformed and preserved, but also the museums themselves. In order to avoid homogeneity among museum exhibitions and to create lively, relevant exhibitions that speak to a wide audience: “Museums have an interest in promoting the diversity and continuing creativity of human cultures. Exhibitions can be a vehicle for self-help, engaged in by those who stand both to gain and to lose by the way they are represented” (Kurin 1991).

Even when those who are being represented cannot be directly present, there is much more Western curators can do than simply display objects without proper context. as Couttenier states: “On several occasions, mute objects, documents and photographs have been presented to poorly informed visitors. Integrating provenance research and conflict in creative exhibitions in Europe and Africa, however, enables visitors to understand the complex, rich and sometimes restricted results of dialogue and encounters” (Couttenier 2018).

Additionally, transparency towards visitors about those stories that aren’t told in the museum can go a long way. Karp and Kratz discuss this briefly in the conclusion to their article. They point out that in a culturally diverse world, museum curators themselves are also cultural participants, whose views are inevitably informed by their cultural allegiance(s). Exhibitions

should not be treated as a culturally and politically neutral event, but as a product of culture and countless curatorial decisions (Macdonald 2010). These decisions are not absolute and final truths, but fallible, contestable sources of further debate. There needs to be room for those stories that were not included and for the inevitable question as to *why* those stories were not included (Karp and Kratz 2000). This transparency is the polar opposite of Aydemir's experience in the RMCA before its renovation (Aydemir 2008).

Although we earlier learnt that curators and source communities have very little control over where cultural objects are and can be, cultural encounters are firmly under their control. These cultural encounters, when conducted thoughtlessly, can have negative effects for all involved. However, a respectful and well-intentioned encounter benefits both parties and creates value beyond the sum of its parts. These encounters can achieve the "greater self-knowledge" that M'Bow discusses in his plea and "enable others to understand [those involved] better", a feat M'Bow insists requires the physical return of looted objects (M'Bow 1978). Since these objects often cannot be returned, but these encounters can nearly always be facilitated by museums, it seems museums have a moral obligation to stage these encounters and utilise them to compensate for past wrongs.

2.4 Conclusion

African nations have demanded back the cultural objects stolen from them for several centuries. Cultural organisations such as UNESCO and even some Western museums have supported and platformed these claims for return. Increasingly, Western nations agree that returning these cultural objects would be a crucial step in offering African nations justice for the crimes committed against them during the past centuries. Additionally, the argument can be made that these objects are of great cultural significance and should therefore be returned to the culture they are so significant to.

Because the provenance of many artefacts stewarded by Western museums is unclear and because law and many practical issues often don't permit it, the return of these objects *en masse* is postponed indefinitely.

Western museums are then left with tens of thousands of objects that are of great cultural significance to a distant culture. Since the most respectful thing to do, returning the objects, is largely not possible, it is necessary to search for the second most respectful thing to do. Since these objects are of such great value that they are representatives of the culture that created

them as a whole, the display of these objects needs to allow them to speak for their culture, so that those who visit exhibits containing these objects learn from this encounter. According to us, they might not only learn from the encounter, but face reality as it is instead of reality as interpreted by curators and institutions.

Before we explore how we can go about exhibiting an object in such a way, we will first discuss the many ways in which we can encounter an object in a museum setting.

3 WHICH OBJECT?

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We now understand that the objects we are discussing are valuable because of the place of significance these objects hold within cultures and communities. We also understand that when these objects are in our possession, it is respectful towards all those to value them, to treat them as ethically as we can. If we do so, these objects can facilitate valuable cultural encounters, as we have seen in the previous chapter. This makes the treatment and display of these kinds of objects an ethical issue. There are many ways to look at and treat an object. We will briefly discuss a few of these methods (specifically, the ones that we find to be relevant to the exhibiting of the cultural objects we are concerned with) to then conclude that combining aspects of all of these methods might help us find a definitive way to treat the objects we are discussing.

As we observed earlier, objects can be displayed for their aesthetic value, as often happens in fine arts museums, or for their function, as is witnessed in anthropological and ethnographic museum displays. This function is part of a historical and anthropological context that makes this object the subject of science. The first two objects we will encounter will then be the aesthetic object and the scientific object. We will also discuss the problematic object, which is the subject of legal issues and controversy and the symbolic object, which plays a part in emancipatory struggle within a world where globalisation increasingly happens through digital means. Finally, we will uncover the hidden object and ask questions about those objects that are stowed away in depots and museum basements.

This is by no means an exhaustive overview of every method and viewpoint through which ethnographic objects are displayed in museums. Each of these methods can also be explained and understood differently by different museums and museumgoers. There are as many methods as there are curators and as many viewpoints as there are viewers. In this overview, we aim only to make general observations on some of these methods and viewpoints, focusing on those aspects of each that are most relevant to our purposes here.

Before we discuss these methods themselves, we will briefly summarise the key concepts used when analysing these methods.

3.1.1 You and "I"

In order to analyse these methods, we must first decide what we are looking to analyse about them. In short, we are looking to see how these different methods and viewpoints contribute to the display of objects in a way that is respectful to those who value them. The 1970 UNESCO Convention states about cultural heritage that "its true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest possible information regarding its origin, history and traditional setting" (UNESCO 1970). We are then analysing whether these methods show us such an amount of information that we can appreciate the true value of an object.

Kurin (1991) states that, "Museum professionals generally define the challenge of museum work as how to understand and represent the whole by the part (Kurin 1991)" Judging these methods, then, we must figure out the potential they have for showing the whole (Kurin 1991). Is the method itself comfortable with displaying fragments or does it aim to represent these fragments surrounded by their missing parts? Does the method acknowledge omissions and difficult choices? Does the method obfuscate its author or does it place them in the conversation between the viewer and the viewed?

In *Double Exposures: the subject of cultural analysis*, Mieke Bal explores specifically this conversation, between the one who shows something, the "I", the one they show it to, the "you", and the one being shown, the "them". In many museum encounters, the "you" observes the things around themselves with a sense of independence. You are located in a neutral space, where these objects, this third person, simply exists, and you are observing them with only your own frame of reference to go off. The objects do not speak back to you (Bal 1996).

Many articles on museum encounters acknowledge only this aspect of the encounter. You observe the object which statically is observed. You form opinions on this object based entirely on your own experiences. You are not interpreting someone else's account. You are alone in this exhibition. You are having a conversation with yourself (Bal 1996).

Bal wants to highlight an often-ignored part of the museum encounter, what she refers to as the "gesture of exposing". A "first person", an "I", says "Look!" and shows something to you. You are not alone in the exhibition after all. This first person is with you at all times. They show you each object in the room, they wrote the museum guide in your hand and each informational plaque mounted along the walls and display cases around you. They – or rather "I" - decided where each object in the exhibition goes. They are telling you "Look at this, and then at this, and now at this. This is how it is." They have the authority to say whatever they want and they

inform your entire museum experience. For you, this conversation happens now, during your visit, but for them, this conversation has already happened. They imagined you and those like you visiting the museum and selected objects based on you and what they want to show you (and perhaps even what they don't want to show you) (Bal 1996).

We must uncover for each method the "I" that tells us to "Look!" and to "Look at it this way." This "I" is not one person, but a group of people working within an institution which works within a much larger society with an extensive history (Křížová 2021). Within specific case studies, we are uncovering a cultural practice, not judging the actions of individual curators to be successful or unsuccessful, satisfactory for our purposes or not. We are looking to say something about the display of objects at large, not about the work of one curator or group in particular. These works function merely as examples of broader cultural practices and are criticized as such and only as such (Bal 1996).

In order to understand each method, we must meet this first person and listen to what they have to say. We must imagine to be the second person, who has unlimited curiosity, but limited attention, and see how what is said is absorbed. Since we are hoping to display objects respectfully, we must find those methods that reach out a hand to the third person and involve them in the conversation and those which confuse the "I" for the "them" and conflate the curator's voice with that of the object. Bal spends less time on the voice of this third person, however in our story thus far, the importance of the object's voice has been stressed by many (Bal 1996; M'Bow 1978; Vanderstichele 2018; Aydemir 2008).

In 1971 Duncan Cameron posited that there are two positions museums might take within a society: that of the temple or that of the forum. The temple is a place where objects are displayed, observed and worshipped. Here, you are indeed alone. There is no "I", there is no "them" that speaks to you. The forum, on the other hand, is a place for conversation and discussion. Here, the "I" and the object they show you, speak to you. You might answer them, interrogate them and learn from them. Although fifty years later, no museum would admit that they position themselves as a temple (to the contrary, most actively state themselves to be a forum), those viewing the exhibition might still experience the exhibition in this way, as simply a room where one looks at objects, nods, and leaves. If an exhibit simply reflects the views of a museumgoer, then for that museumgoer, no clash of ideas takes place, no discussion is necessary. In order for the museum to be a forum, even for those with the same views as the museum, the clash of ideas must take place within the museum itself. When unsuccessful, the museum might simply confuse the viewer or leave the museum goer feeling as though the

museum has no identity or stance. When successful, the museumgoer feels as though they have been introduced to new ideas in the museum (Cameron 1971; Brown and Peers 2003).

We will observe what is said by exhibitions with varying methods, to viewers, about objects, and what objects might have to say for themselves. We will explore the spaces created by these exhibitions and observe their forum-like and temple-like qualities. We will attempt to see what is missing within the fragmented objects these methods display, and whether room is left to display these missing parts.

3.2 THE AESTHETIC OBJECT

In the RMCA, interpretive texts in the statue room tell us, "Many of the works shown here are arguably masterpieces of world art" (Volper 2018). "I" tell you, "Look! This is pretty!" Valuing objects for their beauty and craftsmanship is something that Westerners have been doing for centuries. Art historians have developed language that allows us to categorise objects by style and movement (Atkins 2013). This language was developed specifically to talk about Western art and, even more specifically, about visual and fine arts. We can, however, incorporate art from across the world into our study of the fine arts. Many of these artworks do not strictly fit the definition of "fine art", art for the sake of art, because, like object EO.0.0.7943, they serve a function (Volper 2018). However, the same can be said for Ancient Greek, Roman and Catholic statues and large pieces of churches and temples, which have a somewhat similar purpose to object EO.0.0.7943, but are now exhibited in fine arts museums where they are studied and valued nearly exclusively for their beauty, removed from the context that gave them their architectural or sacral purpose.

Here, we see the main consequence of this aesthetical view in action: in order to appreciate an object for its beauty within the confines of the definition of "fine arts", the main Western framework for analysing and appreciating beauty, the object is objectified. It is not allowed to exist outside of the Western gaze that observes it in art museums. By its very definition, "fine art" forbids art from having a function. In the case of EO.0.0.7943, and many of the objects displayed alongside it, an essential part of their history has to be erased in order to be welcomed into these exclusively aesthetical exhibition spaces. "I" tell you, "Look! This is pretty! Don't worry about everything else."

This erasure started as soon as these statues were collected by Westerners. Although these statues served various functions for those who created them, they could not serve these same

functions for Westerners. EO.0.0.7943 was originally stolen by a Belgian man as a hostage, a bargaining chip in a trade dispute. He recognised the function of this statue for the chiefs he was bargaining with and used it against them. However, when the dispute remained unresolved, the statue no longer served the Belgian man. He kept it anyway, not for its function, but for its beauty. Many other statues were collected without their function or origin ever being recorded, which suggests that those things were quite irrelevant to those who collected them (Couttenier 2018; Africamuseum n.d.).

The interpretive texts at the RMCA point out that we treat Western artists differently from African artists. We know Western artists by name (Volper 2018). We judge their works based on their biographies and intentions. We see new meaning in Frida Kahlo's works knowing her medical history (Herrera 2002). We discover an ugliness in Pablo Picasso's portraits of his wives after having learnt how much he despised them during their marriage (CaxiaForum 2019).

African art is treated, oppositely, as a collective endeavour with very little artistic or creative thought. The RMCA thinks this does African art a disservice. They reiterate: "The origins of certain objects are better understood when you focus on the personal style or the biography of an artist" (Volper 2018). They promise us that Belgian researchers are on the task and can tell us more about these mysterious artists we would like to understand, but nowhere in the statue room do we get to meet any of the artists whose works are being presented (Volper 2018; Volper and Baeke 2018). In our experience, the "I" tells you to get to know the artist of a work in order to understand it, but then withholds the knowledge they have about said artist.

This intellectual teasing happens several times throughout the exhibit. One text points out that Westerners know very little about the study and experience of aesthetics in Africa and goes on to say, "Many of the issues surrounding the notion of beauty in Africa, as developed in several studies, can be highlighted by the museum's collections" (Volper 2018). Here, according to us, the "I" again *almost* says something. The "I" *almost* shares the abundance of research the RMCA has done into the relationship between Africans and art. The "I" *almost* tells you, "Don't look at what I tell you to look at, look at what the objects tell you to look at." But alas, the "I" says *can be*, not *are* (Volper 2018). The RMCA starts a conversation, i.e. attempts to be a forum, and then leaves you alone, with nothing left to do (you cannot speculate on the artwork's function, since you have been told not to, you cannot explore the intentions of its maker as this information is withheld from you), but worship the art presented in the museum-become-temple.

What this exhibit teaches us, then, despite its failure to follow through on its promises, is that treating the cultural object as an aesthetic object allows us to exhibit it at least somewhat as a whole. The statues in the RMCA represent only fragments of their cultures, but the RMCA itself insists that these objects can be studied the way Western art is, with thorough inquiries into the motives and thought processes of their creators, which will reward us with a better understanding of their work (Volper 2018). An aesthetic object might lose the one layer of meaning when its function is denied, but gains many in being studied as all artworks are. Not only the artist's biography, but the symbolism they assign to their work, the stories they choose to tell, are laid bare. The art museum need not be a temple; it can easily be a forum where many facets of artworks are discussed, compared and appreciated.

M'Bow emphasises "how much a work of art gains in beauty and truth for the uninitiated and for the scholar, when viewed in the natural and social setting in which it took shape" (M'Bow 1978). What is more emblematic of this natural and social setting, what is a more valuable source, than the creator of the work? The aesthetic object speaks for its maker and its maker speaks for their personal history, which in turn speaks for a much broader cultural group.

In order to meet this creator and understand them clearly, without the noise of cultural expectations and prejudices impeding our encounter, rigorous study is in order. This study is scientific in nature.

3.3 THE SCIENTIFIC OBJECT

3.3.1 The object out of time

The study of people who are part of cultures other than our own far predates the RMCA's views of African artists as being of equal skill and creativity as Western masters, which has left the study of the art of these cultures neglected until recently (Stroeken 2013).

Anthropological museums have collected the majority of African artefacts located in the West and have displayed them not as art for the sake of art, but as objects that reveal things about cultures the Western audience might know very little about. Even in art museums, these revelations of habits and practices are explored. Modern art museums have long appreciated the beauty of these works, but find that when displaying them, the function of these objects adds excitement, especially in exhibitions several decades ago. In the heart of a nameless jungle, statues and masks supposedly play a role in mysterious, dark rituals imbued with a dangerous, magical energy (Konijn 1993). "I" tell you, "Look, how strange!"

Such a representation might seem dated now, but many anthropological museums are still criticized for the omissions and unnecessary mystery that riddle their displays to this day (Anrys 2018). These anthropologists are of an older school of thought that neglects the global causes for local events and isolates communities from the outside influences that have shaped them (Stroecken 2021). They display fragments and fail to make them whole. A cause for this failure is often identified in the context that is given to displays (Bal 1992).

Plaques beside objects provide useful anthropological information, such as what these objects were used for by which people. Pictures of the object in action might be included to help the viewer grasp the objects' use as wholly as possible. However, dates are not provided or not clarified. The object was used in some abstract past, but is it still used today? When were these pictures taken? Are they re-enactments? Was the use of the object affected by the crimes against humanity committed by colonisers? Was the community that used it disrupted by major historical events? "I" tell you, "Look!" and refuse to tell you anything else (Bal 1992).

These objects are never connected to time and history, leaving the museum visitor stranded in a temple full of fragments out of time, objects that are unable to speak for times past.

3.3.2 The object out of place

Another scientist might help complete the anthropologist's flawed account. The historian is aware of historical events and the objects and communities affected by them. While the anthropologist of old can describe to us details the historian might be unaware of, the historian paints a broader picture that might explain those details and give them new meaning.

A story such as that of the Leopard Men, displayed in the RMCA in the form of one of its most controversial statues, can be told completely devoid of nuance: a secret society of cannibalistic Congolese madmen kills innocents in the middle of the night. An anthropologist might record the eyewitness reports of a coloniser or a missionary, biased by their view of Africans as irrational and animalistic. The anthropologist might note that the secret society uses iron claws that leave wounds similar to those that a leopard attack might cause, which is taken as further proof of their inhuman cruelty (Bockhaven 2009).

A historian might point out that this society has never been proven to eat human flesh. Their attacks were not sudden or random, but were calculated attempts at preserving or gaining local power. Chiefs avenged those who wronged them and eliminated those who threatened them in a complex political system. The use of iron claws helped disguise these attacks, which were sometimes written off as leopard attacks and not investigated further. These secret methods of

conflict resolution allowed Congolese societies to consolidate their power without interference from colonial or local administration. Only placed in its proper time and context, the story starts to make sense as it takes on the form of the second account (Cyrier 2000).

This second version of the story, however, still lacks an essential aspect of these killings often mentioned in first-hand accounts. There is a ritualistic dimension to this process of power struggle. These killings are not executed by simply anyone and the collaboration between those chiefs that command Leopard Men and those that do not is as complex and significant as the killings themselves. Only in recent years have researchers acknowledged the rituals that those involved in these killings discussed during interrogations when these killings were first investigated over a century ago. Their full meaning remains hard to grasp with no eyewitnesses left to explain and contextualise the claims made during these interrogations, which might have only been a small piece of a much larger truth (Bockhaven 2018).

Contemporary schools of anthropology have adopted this broader view, that places local accounts into a global historical process that is essential to understanding even the most minor of cultural acts (Stroecken 2021). However, in this study of facts, information that is not entirely literal might get lost in translation.

This is an advantage the study of the object as aesthetical has over the study of the object as scientific. The object is made by a human being with layered intention. We have frameworks within the study of art to understand these objects not only in a literal sense but in a figurative one. Bal points out that when we see a painting of a man mounted on a cross, wounded and near death, we do not see it as a literal display of a cruel execution, but as a myth of a saviour soon to be reborn. Our worry for a dying man is negated by our knowledge that this particular dying man is part of a story not to be taken literally and will soon be alright. The symbolic, possibly folkloric or mythological meanings of art are often ignored or taken literally in scientific study. Even with our thorough study of an object's history and use, we might not be aware of the stories that surrounded it. We might confuse symbolical meanings for practical ones (Bal 1992).

Bal gives as an example a dog pierced by spears for a sacrifice by Siberians as displayed in the American Museum of Natural History. She imagines that this dog might be part of a story; the dog might be a metaphor, but instead an anthropologist or historian might take the dog as symbolising reality. They might record that the society that killed this dog was a cruel one with no sympathy for animals, despite that they might never have actually killed this dog, the same way that no one has ever actually hung a dying man from a cross above a doorway in each room

in their house. For Christians, the cross above the doorway does not symbolise reality, but a story. As such, any given belief the anthropologist, the historian or even the art historian, has about other cultures is at risk of being a misinterpretation, which will then be turned into a misrepresentation by museums (Bal 1992). We can imagine that a millennium from now, Catholics will be believed to be cannibals because the ritual of communion, eating Jesus' flesh in the form of a blessed piece of bread, will be taken literally by a well-meaning anthropologist, who will display the delicate golden plates off which they ate him in a glass case, along with the ornate cups out of which they drank his blood.

To study only the object's history or its practical purposes, then, will not suffice. A broader understanding of the object's meaning is needed. Beyond the literal, the deeper meanings of the objects need to be studied and understood. Those meanings might seem lost to time, especially in the case of ill-documented objects stolen from communities long gone. However, descendants of these communities are still alive today and hold knowledge that can provide necessary context to objects stewarded by museums (Brown and Peers 2003).

Billy Kalonji is a founding member of Comraf, an organisation that aims to connect members of the African Diaspora to the RMCA. During the museum's 2018 renovation, he worked with the RMCA in an advisory role, since the museum considered him to be a capable spokesperson for the Congolese Diaspora they hoped to represent in their collection (Destexhe 2019). He describes visiting the RMCA in the early 2000's with his mother. As they walked through the basement of the museum, where a large majority of the museum's collection resides, his mother recognised objects and explained their meaning. Many of the seemingly unavoidable misinterpretations and stumbling blocks one might encounter studying a culture of the past, could be righted by one woman's testimony (Vanderstichele 2018).

Over the past decades, many museums, especially in the United States, have turned these informal testimonies into formal practice. Involving source communities – those who originally created the works collected in museums – and descendants thereof in provenance research has become increasingly important to museums. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, who pioneered the study of source community collaboration, first collected works on this new relationship between museums and source communities in 2003. In their introduction, they state that this relationship might develop in stages. Museums enter these relationships to source communities from a position of power. They have been accepted as the sole authority on the objects they display for decades or even centuries. They gather and structure their knowledge academically and treat information that is not academic and that does not come from a recognised authority

as less-than. At this stage, any interaction with source communities would be an unbalanced one, where museums simply ask of these communities to legitimise current museum practices and where the community's influence is limited to small, digestible interferences. Source communities, which often already distrust museums, might be wary of taking part in these kinds of consultations (Brown and Peers 2003).

Kalonji describes such interactions between the RMCA and Comraf in the early 2000's. Comraf is an organisation that aims to connect the RMCA and the African community in Brussels (Busselen 2012). Whenever Comraf expressed a need for greater influence, the museum reacted with shock. They felt that *listening* to Comraf was enough, even if this did not result in any concrete changes to the museum's exhibitions or practices (Vanderstichele 2018). During its most recent renovation in 2018, the RMCA had similar interactions with six members of the African diaspora appointed by Comraf to play a consulting role in the museum's restoration. The interactions resulted in frustration and a sense of powerlessness on the part of the six consultants. (Verbergt 2018; Destexhe 2019; Anrys 2018)

At the same time, the museum's researchers work closely with Congolese colleagues in a much more equal and fruitful exchange. Both parties benefit from the results of the extensive research performed in many fields by these researchers (Vanhee 2022; Africamuseum 2022). This exchange is much closer to the partnership Peers and Brown describe: "At the core of these new perspectives is a commitment to an evolving relationship between a museum and a source community in which both parties are held to be equal and which involves the sharing of skills, knowledge and power to produce something of value to both parties" (Brown and Peers 2003).

In the museum, this research is mentioned, although the fruits of these researchers and communities' labour have not yet significantly altered the museum as a whole. Although some rooms platform source community voices that add new (and old) meaning and life to the museum's collections (here, "I" say to you not "Look!", but "Listen!"), other rooms, such as the statue room, still display objects that have been made mute by the removal of their context by curators (Volper and Baeke 2018). Information on many of these objects is provided by source communities. It seems only the museum's stagnation in a world that moves much more quickly, is keeping these interactions with source communities from reaching their full potential. The museum takes a step forward with each renovation, but this does not suffice to keep pace with the leaps and bounds researchers and source communities make while the museum stands still until the next great renovation (Africamuseum 2022; Brown and Peers 2003).

At worst, in our opinion, the scientific object is displayed mutely in a temple for a world that does not exist, removed completely from time and socio-historical information. At best, historians and source communities work together to display the object, a fragment of a culture, as a whole and museums reach their full potential as forums where these source communities and researchers converse with a broad audience.

This audience and these source communities might have questions, when the museum turns from an absolute authority to a voice among many. In the forum, where all are on equal ground, any voice can be called into question. Audiences might wonder why the museum is only implementing these changes now, why they trusted such a flawed institution for so many years and why they would put their trust into this same institution again. Source communities might wonder why the museum does not do more, since there always is more to be done. Why does an exchange of knowledge not lead to material exchange? Why does the museum not speak publicly on issues that affect the source community? Why does the museum exist at all?

The scientific object, once studied thoroughly by researchers and explained by expert source communities, is revealed as an object with a complex past that raises many questions and brings forth many problems.

3.4 THE PROBLEMATIC OBJECT

Once we view the object as problematic, many approaches allow us to address and even resolve these problematic aspects of the object. Different objects and different problems might require radically different approaches. Different institutions with diverse histories might choose to go about resolving these issues in a variety of ways. Since the RMCA, despite its great variation in viewpoints in its exhibits, is only a singular institution, we will examine cases of addressing these kinds of issues that took place in other museums (all of which we personally visited in 2020 or 2021). Although, again, we are only examining a few examples of this practice, we will attempt to examine a diverse variety of instances of museums addressing collections or objects that have been deemed problematic, either by the public, the museums themselves or by source communities. This way, we hope to gain an understanding of different ways in which objects that are considered to be problematic can be displayed.

In Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum, due to the Netherlands' particular colonial history, boasts a collection of Asian, predominantly Indonesian, artworks large enough to warrant their own small wing on the museum's ground floor, where the oldest artworks in the museum's

collections are kept. The Chinese and Indonesian works displayed here, in the Asian Pavilion, are much older than the medieval artworks displayed at the opposite side of the ground floor, with some of the Chinese works being the very oldest in the museum (Rijksmuseum 2012). Visiting this collection, we noticed that some of these works are marked as gifts while others are not. How these non-gifts made their way to the Netherlands is not specified, although in the case of reliefs and statues unceremoniously hewn out of Indonesian temples, one can begin to guess.

These objects tell the story of the Netherlands' past in Asia. Their (often successful) attempts at diplomacy through exchanges of expensive gifts and their much less diplomatic conquering of Indonesia (Stevens 2016; Mostert and Campen 2015; Eng 1998). Statues of gods and buddha are incomplete, either beheaded torsos or their severed heads are displayed as if whole. Decorative, often damaged, carved stone is strewn around the pavilion like a puzzle, ruins that might be assembled into a temple in the mind of the viewer.

Among these ruins, on the same pedestals and in the same cases, at first sight indiscernible from the others, are displayed other intricate works. These contain mysterious writings in an unknown language and display mythological objects that are much less recognisable than the floral motifs and daggers in other works. The writings on one work contain such strange symbols as "&", "?" and "#" while another piece of stone, its edges rough where it was presumably removed from a larger structure, depicts a Nokia brand device, each button sculpted carefully, its mysterious purpose unknown.

These works are part of a series by Taiwanese artist Tu Wei-Chang and have been made two millennia after many of the other works displayed at the Asian Pavilion, in the early 2000's. They depict modern-day culture in a way that is very similar to the remnants the museumgoers at the Rijksmuseum study to better understand the Indonesians of old (Wang 2020).

Without any museum texts that tell us about these objects' problematic past or our warped views on other cultures, Tu Wei-Chang, our "I", tells you: "Look at yourself!" In a very simple, yet effective gesture, the museum exhibit does not show us another culture, but our own interactions with the museum objects. We are asked if we view ourselves the way we view Indonesians who lived centuries or millennia ago: as creators of visually enticing things, removed from history and politics. The answer to this question will always be "no". When we see "?" carved into stone or a Nokia mobile phone, we know that these are not meaningless, mysterious utterances that exist only to be pretty. We know the history of these symbols and understand their context.

Even if the same cannot be said for the Indonesian symbols seen in the pavilion, Tu Wei-Chang's interventions remind us that this meaning and this context exists, regardless of our awareness of its specificities. Our problematic, reductionist way of looking at other cultures is subverted without us having read a single museum text. (Wang 2020)

Despite the efficacy of Tu Wei-chang's approach in answering one question, many of the questions a pavilion filled with questionably acquired ruins (likely only *ruin*ed during their acquisition) raises, remain unanswered. Each person who views his works might interpret them differently. This wordless method of addressing problems inherent to any colonial collection, which relies on museumgoers interpreting artworks without the help of museum texts or labels, is, in our opinion, limited.

We then climb up to the upper floors of the Rijksmuseum, where paintings, dioramas and furniture made from 1600 onwards are displayed, each work is accompanied by a plaque that details its maker, date and place of origin, as well as a brief explanation about the work. This is the most classical example of Bal's (1992) "gesture of exposing". "I" tell you, "Look!" and nothing further. A selection of one or two facts about each work is given and this selection is regarded as complete, with no significant gaps. The (predominantly Dutch) way of life depicted in these paintings is regarded, as Bal puts it, "as complete and as accounts. The combination of these two features describes the aesthetics at stake: realism, the description of the world so lifelike that omissions are unnoticed, elisions sustained, and repressions invisible" (Bal 1992).

A certain piece of context has been omitted throughout the Rijksmuseum's entire collection. The omission has gone largely unnoticed. The Rijksmuseum attempts to rectify this with an additional label added to certain paintings (these labels were added after an exhibition on slavery at the Rijksmuseum in 2021 and, although the Rijksmuseum itself acknowledges that this exhibition is only the first time that they have looked at slavery within their own collection, will be taken down a year after the exhibition), which white colour contrasts starkly with each wall colour, much more noticeable than the painting's traditional labels. These secondary labels detail the context of colonialism and slavery that is necessary to understanding many of the paintings in the museum, including some of the most popular ones. The labels explain how the opulent clothing and furniture depicted in many portraits was paid for by sugar plantations that relied on slave labour. Kings that rebelled against the oppressive rule of other nations over them, themselves oppressed entire nations on other continents. The tobacco and spices used in several paintings were acquired using violent methods. (Rijksmuseum 2021a; 2021b)

Through these texts, viewers are asked to see the issues with works that are not normally considered to be problematic. We do worry that the use of text, especially in quite a fine print and at eye level of only the tallest museum visitor, does reduce the likelihood of each museumgoer reading these plaques, although the non-verbal approach used in the Asian Pavilion might leave each viewer with a different interpretation.

The RMCA utilises both textual and non-verbal approaches in attempting to address the problematic objects and histories in their collection. A small nook in the new museum building, which grants entry to the old one, is devoted to controversial statues that depict Africans in decidedly racist ways. One such statue depicts a Leopard Man preying upon an unsuspecting victim. The man's mask is terrifying, similar to that of a medieval executioner, and the statue sensationalises a complex cultural phenomenon and buys into the stereotype of the animalistic, inherently violent black man. On a wall near the statue, a painting by Congolese artist Chéri Samba depicts the statue again, this time in a tug of war between those trying to remove the statue from the RMCA and those attempting to pull it inside. Without words, Chéri Samba addresses the controversies associated with this statue. The museum expresses its agreement, again wordlessly, by relegating this statue and others like it to their little corner of shame (DeBlock 2019).

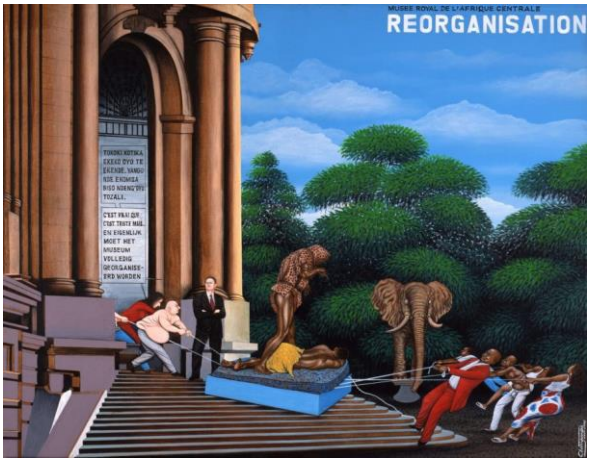

Figure 4, Réorganisation (2002), Chéri Samba © Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale

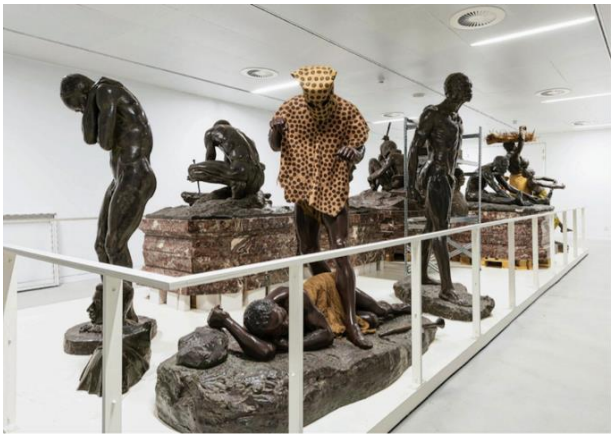

Figure 3, the Leopard Man sculpture, displayed alongside other controversial statues, collection RMCA Tervuren © RMCA Tervuren, Jo Van De Vijver

In other rooms, such as one that contains historical photographs placed in a chronology, or another where a set of shackles is displayed, text is used to explain Belgium's turbulent past. Many of the texts are quite diplomatic in their phrasing and lack strong visual cues to support them. The photographs kept in their one room become lost among each other and among the

longer texts explaining them, and might be, in our opinion, more effective tethered to objects that add to their meaning.

An example of an exhibition that unites the RMCA's disjointed attempts at addressing its issues, is the 100x Congo exhibition in the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp (Museum aan de Stroom 2020). This exhibition ran during 2020 and 2021 and studied the relationship between the city of Antwerp and a colonial collection that has been in its possession for a century. A thorough booklet provided at the entrance of the exhibition gave context for each of the over two hundred objects and pictures on display. However, thanks to the exhibition's design, these objects spoke even without this concise guide. Centuries-old Congolese artworks were combined with accounts of human rights atrocities committed by colonisers in Antwerp, black and white pictures of early exhibitions of these works and citations of Congolese and Belgian people on what they want and do not want a museum to be. At the end of the exhibition, a video of interviews conducted with these same people was shown. The floor of the MAS where this exhibition was held was made into a forum where "I" and you mainly listened as objects, photographs and words had a lively dialogue where not only Belgium's history, but also its future were dissected and recontextualised.

One thing we would like to note is an essential difference between this exhibition and the collection displayed in the RMCA. This exhibition was temporary. It lasted less than a year and most objects gathered to the museum for the exhibition do not belong to the museum. EO.0.0.7943 guest-starred as a controversial and sacral statue. Its turbulent history and its source community's demand for its return were acknowledged. Acknowledging these things has no further consequences for the MAS, which simply returned the statue to the RMCA in 2021. The complex questions of return and display the MAS posed and did not answer, were left for the RMCA to deal with.

Despite the exhibition's critical approach, many questions that would directly affect the exhibition itself, were not asked. For example, the MAS chooses to juxtapose historical information with African artworks. The African artworks they selected contribute very little to the conversation being had by citations and photographs around the statues, since the time period in which they were made and even the time period in which they were looted gets very little attention in the exhibition. The exhibition mainly focuses on Congolese people and objects in Belgium, not on Belgian interventions in Congo. Contemporary art made by Belgians of Congolese descent would have been able to actively participate in the conversation. Empty display cases and pedestals would have made a case for the restitution and respectful display of

these statues without exploiting them for their commodified beauty. The exhibition does not explain why they chose to display the statues instead.

The experience is made even stranger when you leave the exhibition and take the escalator up to the top floor of the MAS, where pre-Columbian South-American artefacts are displayed devoid of time and space, not in a forum but in a temple to the most outdated kind of anthropology. Here, the questions on acquisition and repatriation posed in the x100 Congo exhibition are not repeated and neither is the critical method of exhibiting.

Both the MAS and the RMCA have a problem in common, where different spaces in the museum approach similar issues in wildly different ways. This problem is usually explained by the complex and unwieldly structure of the museum itself. Different curators are responsible for different parts of the museum and have their own opinions on how objects should be displayed. The museum itself wants to avoid controversy in order to focus on other pursuits and decides against certain displays based on this.

3.4.1 The problematic museum

The RMCA is sometimes referred to as "the last colonial museum" (DeBlock 2019), even after its most recent renovation. One reason for this is that the museum's collection is inseparable from Belgium's colonial past. Another reason is that the museum itself is a shrine to colonialism. The museum's architecture is protected as Belgian heritage and cannot be altered (Onroerend Erfgoed Vlaanderen 1985). The references to colonialism integrated into the building, can therefore never be intervened with (DeBlock 2019). At the museum's centre, for example, a large room underneath a beautiful dome boasts several large statues, each displayed in its own alcove. These statues glorify colonialism. Civilised, gentle Belgians are depicted as bestowing the great gifts of culture, justice and Catholic religion upon the naïve, incompetent African, who is completely innocent, a blank slate in need of constant guidance by the wise coloniser.

These statues are a part of the museum's protected structure. The RMCA has attempted in several ways to open up a dialogue between these statues and modern, anti-colonial perspectives. During its renovation between 2013 and 2018, a new entrance to the museum was constructed. Before 2013, the room with its dome and its pro-colonial statues was the entrance to the museum and the first thing

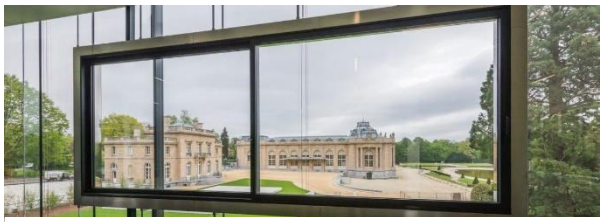

Figure 5, The RMCA, as viewed from the entrance building. Africa Museum, Tervuren © RMCA, foto Jo Van de Vijver

visitors were confronted with at the RMCA. By having these statues, with no further explanatory texts, at the very entrance of the museum, the museum told the visitor that they viewed colonisation as an act of benevolence. Even if the rest of the exhibition counters this, we would think this first impression will colour the visitor's experience. Now, the museum is entered through a separate building which addresses some of the issues the museum still has. It allows the museumgoer to literally look at the museum from a distance, preparing the viewer to look critically at the museum building itself, functioning as a forum for preliminary discussion.

In 2019, the RMCA hired two Belgian-Congolese artists, Jean Pierre Müller and Aimé Mpane, who created a rebuttal for the undeniably problematic statues situated underneath the dome. Large, transparent veils are now suspended before each statue and contain similar archetypical depictions of Belgians and Congolese people. Each statue now has a counterpart on a veil: the deific Belgian being that gifts the Congolese security is overshadowed by the portrait of a Belgian paramilitary soldier, who killed Congolese rebels long after Congo officially gained its independence from Belgium. Hiding and revealing the Belgian that attempts to gift Congo civilisation, another veil reminds us that Congo already had civilisation in the form of art and religion. The greed of rubber companies and missionaries and the use of mutilation and rape to subjugate the Congolese, all omitted among the sixteen statues, are added to the narrative by the sixteen veils (Mpane and Müller 2019).

In other rooms of the museum, these kinds of architectural issues are awkwardly ignored or subtly addressed. A list of names of 1600 Belgian colonials who "died for the fatherland" is engraved into the wall. Leopold II's initials can be found forty-five times throughout the building's architecture. As Alwin Roes describes when discussing violence committed by those enforcing rubber quotas in the Congo Free State: "Violence and terror tactics were used as a deterrent and as means of enforcement and repression. Rape, torture, mutilation, cannibalism, surprise raids and summary executions were part of a repertoire of terror and psychological warfare. More commonly, failure to meet set quotas was countered by corporal punishment and hostage taking." (Roes 2010). Both Leopold II and some of these 1600 colonisers were involved to some degree in such crimes. Their names are not in need of commemoration and might be better ignored. The museum avoids to addresses initials and subtly counters the list of names through an intervention by Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba (Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika 2016), treating them as wall decorations like any other and continuing unrelated exhibits in these uncomfortable rooms (DeBlock 2019).

The museum, which used to be a temple to these people, barely acknowledges them and prioritises other exhibits. Although the past cannot be forgotten, it can be told in many ways and the museum chooses not to tell it from the perspective of these people any longer.

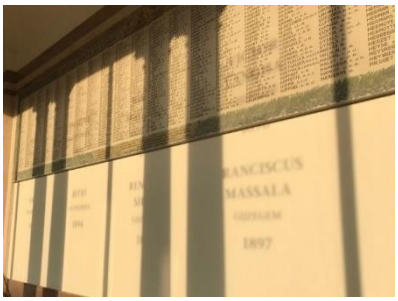

Figure 6, names of Congolese victims of colonisation are written on the windows in the Commemoration Room of the RMCA. Ombres by Freddy Tsimba (2016), Collectie KMMA, inv. no. 2016.45. © RMCA, photo Jo Van de Vijver

However, the museum's inherent ties to Belgium's violent past can be used in its favour. Many of those Belgians who directly committed crimes against the Congolese are dead or unknown. Even decades later, no justice has been served. This justice will forever be unattainable. No apology will suffice for such extreme crimes and no culprit is left to apologise in the first place.

The museum is designed and built by these culprits. Although it works to distance itself from Belgium's colonial past, it might also be able to unite that past with the present. The RMCA's unique position as "the last colonial museum" creates opportunities for symbolic reparations. Collaborations with Congolese researchers and source communities are a first step in a healing process that will never quite be completed, but that have, in our opinion, the potential to be meaningful to Congolese and Belgians alike.

3.5 THE SYMBOLIC OBJECT

Many interactions between people and cultural objects have a symbolical aspect to them, since these objects hold meaning and significance greater than the sum of their parts (Weiner 1994). Here, we will highlight a few of these actions in order to understand how looking at objects as symbols of larger movements can add to the way they are displayed. In both cases we will study, the objects are interfered with symbolically in order to attract attention to the repatriation debate. Since we have already established that repatriating cultural objects en masse is not currently feasible, we are mainly studying these cases in hopes of understanding how objects that stay within museums can symbolically offer solace to those who are deprived of them.

In 2020 Emery Mwazulu Diyabanzan walked into the Quai-Branly museum in France and attempted to leave with a funeral staff allegedly stolen by France from Chad during France's colonial rule there. Mwazulu was accompanied by four others, who helped him remove the staff from its display and who live-streamed his actions (Yeung 2020). In the Afrika Museum in the Netherlands, Mwazulu staged a similar act (Kool 2020).

In both countries, he was fined for attempted theft, a verdict he protested. Mwazulu defines his actions as "active diplomacy". Mwazulu observed that since its promise to return stolen artefacts to Africa, France had yet to return any (Yeung 2020). Out of the 46.000 objects kept at the Quai Branly that have been proven to be stolen from Africa (only a thousand of which are actually displayed in the museum), twenty six have been returned to Benin in 2021 (at the time of Mwazulu's protest, the French government had not yet decided to return these objects) (AFP 2021). For the other 45.974, no return is scheduled (Kool 2020). For this reason, Mwazulu defends a proactive approach to repatriations, which involves such striking actions as those staged in the Quai Branly and the Afrika Museum. It is clear that Mwazulu never expected to leave these museums with the artefacts he took from their stands, but that he used this action, which can be considered as an act of civil disobedience (an act of non-violent protest that breaks laws that are considered to be unjust in order to call for judicial change, considered to be a moral duty by Henry David Thoreau (1849), who pioneered the concept), to attract attention and breathe new life into to the dwindling repatriation debate in France and the Netherlands (Yeung 2020).

The act was symbolic and, in the case of the Netherlands, resulted in the beginning of a conversation on the Netherlands' colonial heritage (Kool 2020). Beyond museum attention, these acts also attract attention from a much broader public that might not have been aware of the urgency of the repatriation debate before. When asked about the importance of the return of cultural objects, Mwazulu takes a stance similar to that of M'Bow and Liu: "We believe that the first reparations must be sociocultural in order to allow the African people to reconcile with their past, with their history and with themselves" (Yeung 2020). Mwazulu's activism is rooted in decades-old goals that have yet to be achieved through legal means.

There are obvious limits to Mwazulu's approach. Museums such as the Quai Branly, which stubbornly remain temples to muted objects might only become more stubborn in the face of this kind of activism. Additionally, it is the French government that decides what happens to the collection of the Quai Branly, not the museum itself. The action does not offer any concrete results beyond brief media attention. Mwazulu's rightful outrage at having to pay an entrance fee to view objects looted from his ancestors has yet to be resolved.

Another symbolic "theft" might offer a partial solution. The looting of a famous bust of Nefertiti by Germans from an Egyptian dig site in 1912 is well-documented (Wiedemann and Bayer 1982). The bust now resides in the Neues Museum in Berlin, despite a century-long debate over its unrightful acquisition and demands for its return. In 2015, Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai

Nelles claimed to have covertly made a 3D scan of this bust, resulting in a media storm about this "3D-scanner art heist" (Hathaway 2016). The greyscale 3D scans, which they shared online, were heavily scrutinised and eventually turned out to be made by the Neues Museum itself. Cosmo Wenman, over the course of the next three years, managed to convince the Neues Museum to release these scans to the public and in 2019 he gained permission to make the full colour 3D scan of the bust available for free online (Machemer 2019).

Besides making the looted bust available to any Egyptian with access to the internet, this case contributed another important piece of information to the repatriation debate. As it turned out, it was common practice in many museums to make high-quality, full-colour pictures or 3D scans of objects in their care, for example, to aid with restoration. In some cases, these pictures or scans are made available to the public, such as in the case of the Closer To Van Eyck project, which collects high-resolution photographs of Van Eyck paintings routinely taken during the restoration process of these paintings (Konkijklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium 2012). The large majority of these resources, however, is not available to the public (Machemer 2019).

In cases where physical return of an object is not possible, the free dissemination of these scans or pictures might help source communities reconnect with their art (Hennessy 2009). There are many reasons why returning objects might not be possible, as we discussed earlier, and even when objects can be returned, such as in the case of looted ethnographic objects in France, they might not be returned for many years to come. This approach of digital repatriation might serve as a symbolic means of return, that acknowledges the special relationship of a source community to its art and that bypasses the complex legal and administrative obstacles objects face when being returned to their source community physically. In cases where objects are not meant for the eyes of all, for example because they are sacred or contain private information, the scans or images can be made available to source communities through password protected websites (Hennessy 2009).

This question, on the fate of objects that are meant only for the eyes of a few, is much broader. M'Bow emphasises that the value of cultural heritage derives fully from the value people place into these objects. Part of that value is assigned by the source community, but M'Bow acknowledges that part is tied to the ability of many to view and enjoy these objects: "[The people these objects should be returned to] know, of course, that art is for the world and are aware of the fact that this art, which tells the story of their past and shows what they really are, does not speak to them alone" (M'Bow 1978). Objects such as EO.0.0.7943, which would not be repatriated to be displayed, but to be kept by a few chiefs, might be objects M'Bow would

not want to see returned at all, since the world would be deprived of their value. Even if these kinds of objects are not returned, what is most respectful to the source community might be not to display them at all (Vanderstichele 2018).

This seems like a ridiculous request to make of a museum, which in its nature is meant to grant access to these works to as many people as possible. However, knowing that the majority of these museums have only a few thousand objects on display and ten thousands more hidden away in depots, it seems reasonable that the selection of which works to display takes into account these kinds of sensibilities. As a symbolic, ethical gesture, some objects might be hidden away entirely.

3.6 The hidden object

In her article *Telling, Showing, Showing Off*, Mieke Bal (1992) says of the museumgoer: "This model addressee reads the panels as *complete* and as *accounts*. The combination of these two features describes the aesthetics at stake: realism, the description of the world so lifelike that omissions are unnoticed, elisions sustained, and repressions invisible". Bal mainly means to talk about the panels that accompany each display and the omissions made when conveying information about objects displayed. Those same omissions are present in the selection of the objects displayed. For each object that we see in a museum, another is hidden away in the museum's basement, possibly never to be seen. This omission is often never addressed or explained.

Objects can be hidden for many reasons. Practical considerations such as space and preservation come to mind. In a museum with limited space, out of similar objects only a few might be chosen. Objects that are sensitive to light, humidity or unstable temperatures might be kept in rooms with environmental control. Those objects most popular to the public will undoubtedly be shown, while other objects are too aesthetically or informationally bland to ever make it into a museum exhibit. Ideally to us, museums would communicate about how these choices are made.

Museums do not shy away from displaying controversial objects, as is evidenced by the RMCA displaying both the Leopard Man statue and EO.0.0.7943, each contested for a different reason. We can therefore assume that museums and curators do not choose to hide objects from view with the intent to escape scrutiny or hide past mistakes.

If we agree with M'Bow (1978), Liu (2016) and many others that cultural objects are of great value and importance, we might argue that museums have a moral obligation to make these objects hidden in depots available to the public as much as is possible, since they are of great value to all and should therefore be accessible to all. This can be done through the dissemination of digital copies of artworks, as we discussed earlier, or through what Thomas Thiemeyer (2017) refers to as a "depot exhibition".

These exhibitions are largely explained by their name: the depot, which would usually be a closed off area accessed only by museum staff, is made available to the public and exhibited in a staged recreation of it, where objects are not displayed individually and thematically or chronologically, but are ordered arbitrarily and packed together. They are not accompanied by plaques that provide context, there is no "I" telling you to "Look!". Objects that might not be displayed together in the museum, are grouped together in storage, creating juxtapositions and connections that lead to a dialogue between objects and their meanings. In theory, the depot exhibition might solve many of the problems traditional exhibitions contend with and might create a form of exhibition where objects speak for themselves.

In practice, however, these depot exhibitions quickly take on the form of traditional exhibitions. Thiemeyer discusses this in his article. In the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia, storage exhibitions were spread out across several rooms, where objects were ordered neatly within glass display cases. Thiemeyer explains: "The curators, of course, had good reasons for the charming aesthetic of the space and its furnishings: The objects displayed at MOA had a colonial past. Some of them had sacred meanings, which is why a serial, nonstaged arrangement could have been seen as inappropriate" (Thiemeyer 2017).

When searching the RMCA's online database for ritual statues, a thousand results show up. Statues currently displayed in the museum are accompanied by a colour photograph of the statue, but others have only been photographed in black and white, suggesting that they have remained in storage for decades now, many perhaps since their acquisition by the museum in the 1910's (Collections Database Tervuren n.d.). While the method in which the statues are displayed in the museum, on pedestals inside glass cases, recognises that they are objects of great value and importance, the way their hidden counterparts are kept in storage might not. To see unique, sacral objects carelessly grouped together as "statues, wood" or "statues >30cm" is offensive to all those who value them for their unique characteristics and meanings (Thiemeyer 2017). Additionally, showing off a collection of nearly a thousand statues that have been kept

out of view from the public for over a century when the Congolese government is made to beg for the return of even one, might add insult to injury.

To display the statues respectfully, then, would be to turn the depot exhibition into the kind of exhibition seen at the MOA, where each object is awarded a space of its own and is placed on a pedestal or in a glass case. What this results in, however, is the contextless exhibition we have criticised several times already. The "I" tells you to, "Look!" and tells you nothing else. No museum texts provide an explanation for the use of objects, no plaques help us understand what time and place objects were used in. As we move through the depot exhibition, we move through a temple where muted objects are worshipped for their satisfying similarities, their relaxing order (Thiemeyer 2017).

In an interview with Bruzz, Billy Kalonji discussed a completely different experience he had visiting the RMCA's depots in the early 2000's. Comraf organised these visits specifically to allow members of the African diaspora in Belgium to access their heritage, however briefly. Kalonji visited the depots with his mother, who had grown up in Congo. She was shocked at the way the RMCA hoarded objects that colonisers had deemed to be worthless and had taken away to be destroyed. She could also tell stories about many of the objects being kept there. She recognised masks and knew what they were meant for. Kalonji says that he learnt more from his visit to the depots with her than he did from any visit to the RMCA itself (before its most recent renovation in 2018), despite the RMCA's attempts at didactics (Vanderstichele 2018).

With a knowledgeable guide, the depot exhibition might be able to provide people, especially those who value the objects kept in these depots most, access to these objects and to the stories and knowledge they lead to. Kalonji's mother might never have told these stories about these objects without having seen them first, since she believed many of them to be destroyed long ago. Without these visits, Kalonji might never have had the opportunity to hear and remember these stories, and they might have been lost entirely when his mother and those of her generation passed away (Vanderstichele 2018).

While the museum preserves the objects in their depots, they fail to gather and preserve the stories these objects tell. Objects displayed in the museum itself create encounters where these stories are told and shared. Source communities can contribute to provenance research and provide context for each object. The objects in depots rarely encounter anyone other than conservators. Researchers might take interest in a select few objects and source communities

might inquire about another few, but the sheer number of objects kept by the museum (searching the category "ethnographic objects" yields over 25.000 black and white results in the RMCA's database) is much too large for one museum to actively research, let alone stage encounters with (Collections Database Tervuren n.d.).

Documented guided tours through depots by members of source communities might be one way to create and preserve cultural encounters in the depot, however, practical and emotional difficulties arise. Many members of source communities might have passed away or might be deeply hurt by the very existence of the depot and might not have any interest in visiting it on the terms of the museum. However, if cultural objects are of great value to all, and especially their source communities, then the museum is morally obliged to provide access to these objects as much as is possible. Ideally, the access to these depots and the encounters that happen in these depots, would happen solely on the terms of the source community, and not on those of the museum's curators and staff (Brown and Peers 2003). The visits organised by Comraf are a good example of this. In online exhibitions, source communities should be involved as well (Hennessy 2009).

We thus conclude that the hidden object should not always remain hidden, although revealing it is a complex and likely lengthy process that will be part of the future of many museums.

3.7 Conclusion

Ethnographic objects have been displayed throughout different kinds of museums in different kinds of manners, their assigned meaning varying with each method of display. As we have outlined above, no singular method of display is without issues and at their worst, each method is better avoided.

Generally speaking, across these many methods, an object that is displayed in a way we hope to avoid is an object that is displayed as a fragment instead of a whole and which is mute instead of speaking.

Instead, we aim to display fragments made whole by the rich context that surrounds them. These objects should speak rather than be spoken for and should engender dialogue and encounters between museumgoers, curators and source communities.

How exhibitions of objects can achieve such goals, will be discussed in the next chapter.

4 THE OBJECT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

During our study of different methods of displaying objects, we have repeatedly asked several questions. We have asked for any given display what “I”, “you” and “they” say about it and what is being said to them. We have explored whether objects were displayed as a whole or as a fragment. We have asked whether these objects were being displayed in either a temple or a forum and whether they facilitate positive cultural encounters.

For each of these questions, we consider one answer preferable to others. We hope that “I” speaks transparently of their research and offers “you” information that encourages and facilitates further investigation. We hope that objects get to speak for themselves. We want to see objects displayed as whole, instead of being accepted as mere fragments. When we enter a museum, we hope to enter a forum instead of a temple and in that museum, we hope to star in positive cultural encounters which are mediated by the objects and their source communities, whom are given a voice in the museum.

Each method of display we explored offered ways in which to answer these questions exactly as we hope to see them answered and each method displayed pitfalls to be avoided. We will now attempt to unite the positives of each method in order to attempt to formulate an answer to our question on how we can ethically display African art in Western-European museums. For each aspect that we judge to be necessary to consider, we will describe the ways in which we think these aspects can be successfully utilised in order to improve displays. The first aspect we will look at is the objects itself and the ways in which this object can be made to contribute to conversations on the context of both the exhibit (a small display containing multiple objects spanning part of a room or one room) and the exhibition (which contains several exhibits and spans multiple rooms or an entire museum). Secondly, we will explore the other partners present in this conversation: the museumgoer who views the object and the curator who presents it. Thirdly, we will look at the institutions that steward these objects and the source communities that hold knowledge about them.

Lastly, we will touch on ways in which to resolve practical objections against these methods.

4.2 THE EXHIBIT: MUSEUM TEXTS AND MUSEUM SUBTEXTS

While discussing the object viewed as problematic, we briefly touched upon the use of museum texts and non-verbal approaches to provide context for these objects. Since we are looking to display objects as a whole, providing this context and providing it in a way that reaches as many museumgoers as possible is essential. Displaying one object as a whole is a rather ambitious undertaking, however, creating exhibits out of multiple objects engenders conversations between them and allows objects to take on new meaning (Bal 2021). The ultimate goal is that exhibits cannot only stand on their own in terms of the information they provide, but that they can create meaning and conversation beyond the literal texts and presentations they are made up out of.

In the introduction to her book on museum texts, Louise Ravelli (2006) points out that both texts and the manner in which objects are presented can say a lot about these objects. We will first explore what she and others say about museum texts and will then look further into the non-textual presentation of objects.

4.2.1 Objects that are spoken for

Studies on museum texts focus mainly on the texts utilised in science and natural history museums (Hapgood and Palincsar 2002; Frykman 2009; Serrell 1996). However, they tend to be interested in the educational value of museum texts, something that we are interested in as well. These sources tend to prioritise the educational value these texts provide for children, although they acknowledge that these texts should also serve to inform and aid adults in museum learning as well (Hapgood and Palincsar 2002; Frykman 2009).

Among these texts, there are differences in availability. Explanatory texts and labels found throughout the exhibit, each accompanying one or a few objects, are directly accessible to museumgoers, but are often supplemented by museum guides for sale in the gift shop, exhibition pamphlets available at the entrance of each exhibition, audio guides, websites and even apps.

There is very little research available on how each of these sources of information is used by museumgoers, especially paid or unpaid guides, either in book or app form. In the case of research concerning museumgoers' experiences with app guides, museumgoers are expressly asked to use the app and report their experiences (Kontiza et al. 2018; Ha et al. 2021; Turan and Keser 2014). There is hardly any research on whether museumgoers would spontaneously choose to use these apps during a museum visit. Audio guides have a low user rate, according

to the few studies that attempted to map this user rate (Gottesdiner and Vilatte 2011; Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017; Lee 2017).

In 2001, J.K. Smith and Smith (2001) studied the amount of time museumgoers spent looking at artworks at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This study was recreated fifteen years later by Smith, J.K. Smith and Tonio (2017) at the Art Institute of Chicago with a larger sample size. Both studies concern themselves with the amount of time viewers spend looking at works in art museums. The first study observed how 150 participants looked at six different paintings while the second study did the same for 456 visitors and nine artworks (J. K. Smith and Smith 2001; L. F. Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017). Out of these nine artworks, seven were paintings, and two were objects. The two objects were a 12th century statue depicting buddha and a set of 16th century German armour. Besides the time spent looking at each artwork, the second study also measured the time spent looking at the label accompanying each work. Out of 456 participants, 210 did not read the labels at all, while those who did read the label, spent an average of fifteen seconds looking at it. Noticeably less time was spent on the labels for the two objects. The label that was looked at longest, on average, was not the longest label in word count. (Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017)

Another study found that the presence of labels alongside paintings did not significantly alter the way participants viewed these paintings (Smith et al. 2006).

As we concluded earlier, we are of the opinion that in order to display an object respectfully and ethically, it needs to be displayed with an adequate amount of information that provides context for the object. Given that audio guides are used infrequently and it is unclear whether mobile apps or physical booklets are used at all (Kontiza et al. 2018; Ha et al. 2021; Turan and Keser 2014; Gottesdiner and Vilatte 2011; Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017; Lee 2017), museum labels are a primary way to reach museumgoers. However, we must immediately accept the limits of these labels, since only roughly half of the sample of visitors at the Art Institute of Chicago read them (Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017). The average silent reading rate for adults in English is estimated to be 238 words per minute for non-fiction (Brysbaert 2019). By this estimate, in a fifteen second span, under ideal circumstances, a museum label containing less than 60 words can be read in its entirety by the average adult. This means we have only a very limited space for offering context for cultural objects. Additionally, these experiments on reading speed were conducted in a quiet location where as few sensory distractions as possible were present (Brysbaert 2019). In a museum, sensory distractions are everywhere. The area surrounding each label is filled with objects of interest and other museumgoers may pass by

and speak to each other. Although no research has measured the reading speed of an average adult in these conditions, it might be prudent for us to cut these 60 words the average adult can read in fifteen seconds in ideal circumstances (Brysbaert 2019), in half for museum circumstances.

I note here that some people reading these labels might be children instead of adults, however, I would expect that children visit museums accompanied by either a relative or a teacher, who can aid them in reading these labels. Even in cases where labels are meant specifically for children, researchers recommend guided, educators and parents aid children in reading these labels (Hapgood and Palincsar 2002; Frykman 2009).

I would like to offer some perspectives on how the limited label-space museums have can be utilised before exploring how information can be communicated even to those who do not read museum labels.

Ravelli (2006) recommends taking into consideration the goal and intended audience of a text. She points out that natural history museums tended to use very concise labels in the past, with the intention of conveying information on objects to scholars and peers, who could use this minimal information to extrapolate and research each object's context and meaning (Ravelli 2006). I would note here that objects of natural history might generally require a different and possibly more simple approach than objects of cultural history, since these objects often have meanings that are less emotionally contested.

Ravelli (2006) goes on to say that "a thematic, open, educationally oriented exhibition, aiming to appeal to a wide range of visitors" (exactly the type of exhibition relevant to our purposes) requires longer museum texts, which not only contextualise objects, but explicitly aid in the interpretation of the object. This last remark, where Ravelli (2006) states that a label should offer a "basis for the interpretation" of the object, might help resolve the conflict between concise and informative labels. What information the label might not be able to give in order to save on words, it might be able to offer the viewer through tools that help the museumgoer find more information.

Susanna Hapgood and Annemarie Palincsar (2002) explore the use of text in this kind of interpretation further. They point out that many aspects of an object can be thought about and reflected upon and that each viewer can respond to objects based on different aspects; one might focus on the aesthetical values of an object while another might connect it to an event in their personal life. The purpose of Hapgood and Palincsar's research is not to highlight a specific

aspect of an object to the viewer, but to use text to invite the viewer to assume an investigatory stance. This investigatory stance in a museum setting is defined, according to Hapgood and Palincsar (2002), as a continuous process which centres an exercise of asking questions and answering them through systematic observation and data gathering.

They explore how museum texts can aid especially in asking interesting questions. They propose doing this through including second-hand investigation in museum texts. These second-hand investigations should display how scientists go about researching objects in order to encourage the museumgoer to explore the object as well (Ravelli 2006). Here, the "I" makes themselves known to you and encourages you to join them in their active interaction with and interrogation of the object.

I would like to give an example of this kind of interrogation. The texts in the statue room in the RMCA could easily be adjusted to help engender this investigatory stance. Instead of noting, for example, that "Little is known in the West about aesthetic notions in Africa" and that "Belgian researchers have played a pioneering role in [the area of studying African art and artists]" (Volper 2018), the museum could raise some of the questions these Belgian researches undoubtedly asked themselves. Such questions could include: Do Africans view art in the same way Europeans do? Did Congolese artists make these statues to be beautiful? What might have been the artist's intentions when creating this statue? How would Congolese people display this object?

A second-hand investigation might involve texts that describe the process of researching these questions through comparisons, interviews and surveys. Summaries and results of existing research could be included.

I would say that in case a museum would aim to foster this investigatory stance in its visitors, it might be in the best interest of the museum and the visitors, for the museum to display much more information than what the average visitor might absorb. Our average adult visitor might read no more than thirty words per object and might skip some labels altogether (Brysbaert 2019), since J.K. Smith, Smith and Tonio observed that nearly half of the adults they observed in the Art Institute of Chicago did not read labels at all (Smith, Smith, and Tinio 2017). However, those who do read labels, might be encouraged by these labels to seek out more information on the objects they observe. Since the museum is an institution that generates scientific research, it is in a place where it can provide this additional information. This

additional information might also contain accounts and observations by members of source communities.

We concluded in the previous part that input by source communities can be a valuable resource for curators and museumgoers alike. This input might help contextualise objects that would otherwise have no context and, more importantly, allows museumgoers to encounter cultures and perspectives other than their own (Clifford 1997). These second-hand investigations create a space where source communities can point out ways of looking at and understanding their objects that curators or researchers (through no fault of their own) might not think to include (Brown and Peers 2003).

I think that these types of questions and second-hand investigations might also aid adults in mediating museum experiences and encounters for children.

Questions and information that help foster an investigatory stance help convey context and wholeness in fewer words. However, even brief labels might not be read by many museumgoers. This need not be a problem, since there are ways to convey information without making use of texts.

4.2.2 Objects that speak

J.K. Smith, Smith and Tonio's (2017) research concludes that the average museumgoer looks at artworks for around 28 seconds, although for the two objects they observed, this time was markedly shorter. Falk (1993) notes that this time decreases as people move through exhibitions and experience 'museum fatigue', leading them to spend less time on each artwork they observe. In another article, Falk (1997) finds that museum visitors glean a lot from these brief encounters and were able to learn from science exhibits even without labels or lengthy interactions with individual displays. This would suggest that, although brief interactions with labels are only valuable to some visitors, brief interactions with well-curated exhibits are valuable to many.

Mieke Bal (2021) points out that "Meanings and effects, affects and appreciation are not inherent in artworks but are events that occur, in the present, when visitors engage with the art on display." She does not propose that this interaction is mediated through labels, but instead that exhibits are designed in such a way that visitors can interact directly with objects. This kind of active interaction with artworks is essential to her, since it is the primary way in which exhibitions generate value for audiences: "the art has something to say that touches more directly on the lives of people in the present" (Bal 2021). The modern art that she curates and

displays is something that audiences can relate their own experiences to. Even if this art was made long ago, contemporary viewers can interpret it in relation to their own lives through engaging with the artworks actively and critically (Bal 2021). The ethnographic objects that are the subject of this thesis are quite different from these modern artworks and might seem at first glance less relatable. However, these works contain histories and personal stories that many of us have never otherwise learnt (Van Nieuwenhuyse 2014).

Ravelli (2006) states: "Organisation is itself an important resource for making meanings within exhibitions. Thus, exhibitions make meaning through the relative placement of elements, contributing to particular information values." The placement of objects not only communicates the meaning of these objects, but also delineates the role of the museumgoer during interactions with the object: "In particular, the nature of the exhibits within the exhibition contribute to the ways in which visitors are enabled, or prevented, from taking up particular roles and relations within the institution" (Ravelli 2006).

An exhibit where objects are placed separately behind glass cases along a hallway or room that the museumgoer can traverse in one, linear path, places the museumgoer into the role of a passive observer. This passive observer, according to Ravelli (2006), is presented with knowledge that they are not supposed to question. The museum, an institution that holds authority, is a place where the museumgoer absorbs the knowledge of this authority with little input from their own experiences or frame of reference.

According to Ravelli (2006), displays that activate are preferable to passive ones: "the more active displays suggest a correlation with knowledge as a process and activity, associated with material processes which include the visitor" (Ravelli 2006). This idea of knowledge as an active process is similar to that of the investigatory stance.

Mieke Bal (2021), in a chapter in the book *Experimental Museology* describes three ways in which visitors can be "shocked into an active engagement with artworks". In this chapter, she discusses as an example a fine arts exhibition that displayed paintings and video installations. However, many of the techniques she proposes have less to do with the contents and meaning of artworks and more with the way in which we look at them and can therefore be relevant to our purposes.

There are three components she aims to experiment with. The first is time; Bal aims to have visitors look at artworks longer in order to appreciate and understand them better. Secondly, she aims to mix media and forms of art that are not normally displayed together and thirdly, she

wants to mix up chronology, since it is a predictable way of displaying artworks that leads to laziness and passivity in audiences. (Bal 2021)

In an exhibition she curated in the Munch Museum in Oslo, she conducted these experiments. In order to slow viewers down, she placed artworks at lower heights than is usual and provided seating near them so that museumgoers could observe them more intimately and for longer. Some artworks hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room instead of being displayed on the walls, literally getting in the way of the linear path museumgoers usually follow. Paintings and video artworks were displayed together and audio recordings of poetry being read aloud played through most rooms, creating conversations and connections between artworks. Artworks were displayed outside of their usual chronology, encouraging museumgoers to connect art through factors other than time. (Bal 2021)

In the case of the exhibition curated by Bal, this attempt at slowing down viewers in order to encourage them to engage more deeply with the art exhibited, was successful. After positive reviews that highlighted this languid way of engaging with art, the exhibition attracted more viewers than originally anticipated. Bal concludes: "Slowing down, demanding time, concentration and contemplation, it turned out, was not an elitist, not only an aesthetic issue, but a popular one" (Bal 2021).

Bal (2021) discusses here the idea of "bringing works in one another's proximity, so that they can mutually speak to one another, thus modifying the sense and effect of each." Ravelli (2006) observes three ways in which exhibits can engender these kinds of conversations between objects: organisationally, interactionally and representationally.

The organisation of an exhibit contains the physical placement of objects and the paths woven between them (Ravelli 2006). Falk (1993) researched the impact of this organisational aspect of exhibiting on visitor behaviour and found that exhibition organisation significantly influenced visitor behaviour and learning. Bal found that the organisation of her own exhibition impacted the amount of time visitors spent with each artwork in the exhibit (Bal 2021).

The reading of an exhibit as an interaction between objects and museumgoers is one we touched upon before. This aspect of an exhibit determines whether a visitor will take on a passive or an active role and whether an exhibit is considered to be an authority or a conversation partner (Ravelli 2006). This aspect goes hand in hand with the final aspect, that of the exhibit as representation.

Each exhibit represents how a subject is viewed and how knowledge about this subject can be approached (Ravelli 2006). The statue room in the RMCA is a very simple example of this. The statues in this exhibit are presented as art, which is to be viewed passively by the museumgoer. The exhibit presents itself as the ultimate authority and any input or questions from the visitor are unnecessary. The exhibit conveys very clearly, by allowing visitors to view statues from multiple sides and presenting them near each other, that these objects are to be understood and studied by their appearance. Knowledge about these objects is based on aesthetics and not on their context and use.

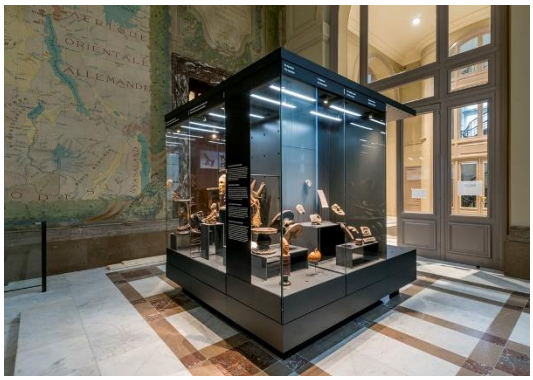

Figure 7, the room where statues and masks are displayed in the RMCA © KMMA, photo Jo Van de Vijver

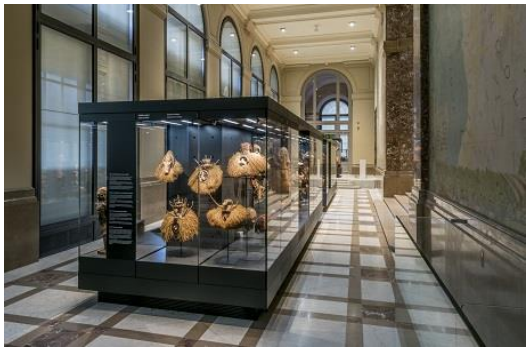

Figure 8, the room where statues and masks are displayed in the RMCA © KMMA, photo Jo Van de Vijver

Presenting these objects differently, for example in an arrangement with related objects, such as kola nuts chiefs might have fed these statues and the headwear and staffs that might have belonged to these chiefs, who relied on these statues in their daily lives (Couttenier 2018), conveys a different approach to them. Here, visitors would be encouraged to look at the statues from an anthropological standpoint instead of an aesthetical one.

The *Modern Egypt Project* in the British Museum, active since 2014, displays modern household objects and advertisements alongside Egyptian archaeological finds. Each of the modern items contains a depiction of the same figures depicted in many ancient sculptures and finds (Stevenson 2019). Here, we are encouraged to look at ancient objects as inspirations for modern commercial pursuits. Knowledge is no longer an absolute truth, as it was in our aesthetical and anthropological examples, but an activity which requires comparison and critical thought.

In presenting any kind of view, or multiple views, within an exhibit, transparency is key. Beverly Serrell (1996), in her work on communication within exhibits, points out that a lack of clarity alienates viewers. This is not to say that viewers are lazy or not up for a challengingly arranged exhibit. On the contrary, viewers, as noted by Bal (2021), enjoy an exhibit that shocks and surprises them. However, the exhibit needs to be organised in a way that is clear to the

museumgoer and that does not confuse them. I would phrase this as such: confusion about how an exhibition is organised or what interactions and representations the exhibition is trying to create, should not distract from the challenge of exploring and understanding the exhibition itself.

Each of these exhibits is part of a broader exhibition, which must aid in creating this clarity for visitors (Serrell 1996). Ravelli (2006) notes that the organisational, interactional and representational elements of each exhibit only work in as much as they function cohesively and coherently within a larger whole. This larger whole is an exhibition that tells a broader story than each individual exhibit does.

This exhibition creates the expectations and attitudes in visitors that each exhibit must 'shock' and 'shake up', according to Bal (2021).

In order to connect multiple meaningful objects and exhibits into an equally meaningful whole, exhibitions have to be organised thoughtfully and carefully (Shelton 2000). An exhibition theme can tie together a great variety of perspectives and statements. An exhibition can even have the clashing of ideas as a theme. This clash of ideas, which might otherwise leave museumgoers confused, will instead lead the way through each exhibition and make clear to museumgoers that some questions do not have clear-cut answers. (Bal 2021)

4.3 CONVERSATIONS IN THE MUSEUM: CURATORS AND VISITORS

The role curators take on towards visitors, if we agree that museum labels should offer visitors a wealth of information and that exhibits and exhibitions should introduce visitors to this information in a structured and clear way, is that of educator. Museums are considered to be a major place for learning and communicating information to a wide variety of people with diverse ages, backgrounds and motivations (Roberts 1997).

In their extensive research into museum learning, John Falk and Lynn Dierking (2000) described two important aspects of museum learning. The first is that museum visitors learn from museums within a particular personal, sociocultural and physical context. Visitors draw from their personal experiences and knowledge in order to understand museum displays (personal context), they traverse the museum with others, be it family, friends or another group (sociocultural context) and they experience the physical space of the museum, from the museum building itself to the parking lot (physical context). Secondly, the learning visitors do in the museum is directed by their own choices. This means that what visitors choose to learn in a

museum depends on their personal goals, motivations and interests, as well as on the contexts mentioned before (Falk and Dierking 2000).

Both the contexts that surround visitors as well as the choices visitors make seem to be entirely out of the control of the museum and its curators. Even the museum building can often not be altered in any significant way, since many European museum buildings are protected by national or international heritage laws (Diependaele 2019).

However, understanding the motivations of museum visitors might help guide curator's practices in what information they provide to visitors and how they provide it. Melinda M. Mayer (2005), based on the findings of Falk and Dierking, amongst others, writes: "Good theory should lead to museum education practices that enable visitors to make illuminating and personally meaningful choices when interpreting works of art."

This supports our idea that museums should provide much more information than the average museumgoer might require, in order to ensure that those who seek further information will not have to miss out on it. The role of curators in providing this knowledge is highlighted further by Lisa C. Roberts (1997) in her *work From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, where she pleads for museums that build narratives based on what meaning they can provide to visitors.

These narratives are not limited to informational labels accompanying singular objects or exhibits, but guide viewers throughout the entire exhibition or museum they visit. Although Roberts (1997) emphasises the importance of prioritising visitor experience over curatorial goals when constructing meaningful educational content for visitors, this content is still created by curators. Therefore, curators play a large part in the conversations and encounters museumgoers participate in when visiting a museum.

The role curators play is broad. They determine which objects are displayed, how they are displayed and what information accompanies them. In a series of workshops on new museum ethics held in 2011, 2012 and 2013 by the British Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, museum transparency was an important topic. Much of this transparency revolved around curators communicating what decisions they make and why they make them, in order to turn the museum curator from an unquestionable and one-sided source of knowledge to a partner in a dialogue who can be called into question and held accountable for their decisions. (Marstine, Dodd, and Jones 2015)

We would also interpret this transparency as simply having curators be visible through the labels and texts they write. Passive tense can be traded for more subjective statements. Gaps in knowledge can be addressed directly.

This type of transparency can have positive consequences for all involved. Janet Marstine (2012), who was involved in the workshops, writes: "Museum transparency has the capacity to critique and redistribute power and resources." She argues for 'situated revelations', a kind of transparency where information is not simply provided to museum visitors, but is explained, contextualised and translated by curators. This way, visitors don't need to be museum experts themselves in order to critically view the information offered to them by museums. (Marstine 2012)

Through this radical transparency, knowledge sharing can become a reciprocal process that generates new meaning of its own. The curator does not simply lecture the visitor; the visitor speaks back (Brown 2010).

Although this is a cultural encounter, it is not the exact encounter we are after. The encounter between curator and visitor often takes place within one culture. Although knowledge and ideas are exchanged, the shock that Bal (2021) was after is not achieved. Jane Bennett (2001), in her work on how these kinds of encounters (among other things) can inspire ethics in people, emphasises this 'shock value'. She puts importance into the unexpected sees the most interesting encounter as one with something that you "are not fully prepared to engage" (Bennett 2001).

We would argue that what is missing from these encounters, are voices that go beyond singular curators. The institution at large adds meaning to each exhibition it presents and so do source communities. Both are inevitably involved in the conversation between visitor and curator and the exchange of knowledge that takes place between them, since both hold much knowledge of their own. We will further explore their respective roles.

4.4 THE MUSEUM AS AN INSTITUTION: ETICS AND EMICS

Ravelli (2006) concludes, after examining how objects in museums can be made to speak for themselves through labels and exhibiting tactics: "It is of course the institution as a whole which is the ultimate source of meaning making." She refers to these institutions as 'spaces which speak', although she does not elaborate *how* they speak or what they say (Ravalli 2006).

The International Council of Museums (ICOM), which unites museologists from 141 countries, has increasingly defined museums not by their task of collecting material culture, but by their social role. The act of being a ‘space that speaks’ is no longer an accidental by-product of a museum fulfilling its function, but a function of the museum in its own right. (Brown and Mairesse 2018)

This role has been shaped through postmodern interests such as feminism, neo-Marxism and postcolonialism, as well as applied ethics. Modern museum ethics centres social responsibility in museum practice. The museum is expected to look outward and contribute to the well being of society through transparency and self-reflexivity about the institutional authority museums hold. This is achieved through two processes at once: internal work (the self-reflexivity mentioned above) and external work, where museums reach out to others, most importantly to source communities. (Marstine, Dodd, and Jones 2015)

Both this internal and this external work take place through museum practice, i.e. through the collecting, display and researching of objects (Marstine, Dodd, and Jones 2015).

Western European museums that display African collections, inevitably take on an etic perspective towards these collections. In anthropology, this etic perspective refers to a perspective that looks in from the outside, as opposed to an emic perspective, which comes from within (Harris 1976).

European curators are not part of the African communities that created their collections and so they attempt to understand and depict African objects based on observations made of Africans by them or other Europeans, for example anthropologists. In the past, this outsider perspective was placed above the emic perspective in museum academics. It was considered to be deeper and more objective than superficial and irrelevant ‘local knowledge’. This ‘local knowledge’ has gained importance as decolonial movements grew and spread their influence within museums (Shelton 2000).

Currently, these perspectives are valued equally by many museum scholars, although museum practice tends to lag behind and has difficulty processing ‘unscholarly’ perspectives in the same way it processes data provided by curators and Western researchers, whether that data is objective or subjective in nature (Lynch 2011).

Personally, we have nothing against the etic perspectives utilised and presented within museums, however, we believe that these etic perspectives are greatly enhanced by emic ones, to the point that an exhibition that contains no emic information is lacking to us.

James Clifford (1997) was one of the early promotors of the museum's task to collaborate with source communities in his essay *Museums as Contact Zones*, with the contact zone being the space where museums and source communities meet. Robin Boast (2011) criticises this concept of the contact zone. Although he recognises its potential, he believes it does not suffice as a framework for true collaboration between museums and source communities. The contact zone is located within the museum and mediated by the museum. Although it can function as a place where source communities speak, it is not required to be a place where the museum listens. The museum still holds all of the power. Source community collaboration can only reach its full potential when this idea of the contact zone is deconstructed and museums no longer view themselves as the ultimate mediator of each encounter. This would require a decentralisation of the museum's knowledge and power, according to Boast. (Boast 2011)

This process has proven to be frustrating on both the part of the museum as well as that of the source community. After the completion of the RMCA's most recent renovation in 2018, a staff member of the RMCA wrote an opinion piece for Knack as a reaction to dissatisfaction within the African community over the results of the RMCA's renovation. In this piece he expresses his own frustrations after having collaborated with the Afro-Belgian community for most of the RMCA's renovation. He feels that after having listened to Comraf, the organisation representing these Afro-Belgian communities within the museum, it is unfair for the museum to receive as many criticisms as it does. Additionally, many of the things Comraf was frustrated with (such as the allocation of budgets, the lack of new personnel and the overall goal of the renovation), were decisions made by the government, not the museum. (Verbergt 2018)

The idea that museums are all-powerful is often untrue. They have limited budgets, limited staff positions and are under strict control by the government (Verbergt 2018). We believe that their power to mediate contact zones and empower source communities is not as unbounded as people such as Boast (2011) make it out to be.

However, many of the criticisms source communities have about museums are, in our opinion, valid despite this powerlessness museums might experience. Within the limitations defined by government decisions, museums still have more power than the source communities they consult with. They can use this power to push against government limitations, with source

communities as their ally. They might push, for example, to allow Comraf to have a permanent office within the RMCA, which could decrease the power imbalance between the RMCA and Comraf steeply. Comraf instead fights for this position alone, without the RMCA's support (Verbergt 2018).

Additionally, there is work museum staff can do in order to more successfully communicate with source communities. Politically charged words might seem innocent to those who have never attempted to decolonise their own work, but might be very offensive to source communities (Lynch 2011). Bernadette Lynch (2011) notes that museums have a tendency to 'close ranks' when faced with criticism from source communities. This defensive reaction is again something that can be resolved through internal work and improvement.

Verbergt (2018) notes that he is aware that the RMCA is slowly moving forward in a world that changes much more quickly and seems to be prepared to continue this internal and external work.

Continuing this work is completely worth it, in our opinion, and one of the most important and valuable tasks of the museum. Roland Barthes describes interdisciplinarity as producing a new object, which belongs to no one (Parker et al., 2010). This new object which results in this case from the collaboration between source communities and museums, can have great value for visitors and curators, as well as museums and source communities themselves. Shelton (2000) is one curator who describes these source community collaborations at their most successful, as an 'enrichment' of Western-European museum collections (Boast 2011)

4.5 Practical objections

As we have seen, museums face many difficulties when it comes to returning looted cultural objects. Some of these issues are particular to repatriation cases, such as the difficulty to trace the origin of certain objects. Other issues apply to museums more broadly. For example, the fact that many museums and museum collections are owned by the government, affects museums in a multitude of ways. We already discussed how allowing source communities a permanent seat at the table can be difficult for this very reason.

There are a multitude of reasons why some of the methods we discussed might not be feasible for museums. We will not discuss the many reasons for this specifically, but will instead posit the idea that implementing every single idea we offered might not be the highest priority for museums, necessarily, meaning that these difficulties need not be overcome overnight.

G.K. Chesterson (1910) once said: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly”. We willingly face the risk of slightly misappropriating this quote to get our point across, that point being that it is much more important to attempt to display African objects respectfully than to succeed at this attempt on the very first try. Although immediately implementing any of the methods we proposed might be impossible for any museum, implementing minor ways to respect African objects more respectfully could be possible for all.

If source community work is worth doing, it is worth doing even in small measures. If providing clear context for artworks is worth it, it is worth it even if only a few labels are changed or added to. Many Western-European museums are already in the process of decolonising and improving their methods of exhibiting African art and continue to work towards more ethical displays with each minor intervention and large renovation.

4.6 Conclusion

In order to display objects respectfully, many aspects of its display must be taken into account, such as the ways in which the object can speak within an exhibit, the conversations curators and museumgoers have about an object and the role museums and source communities play in giving meaning to the object. Since the manner in which these aspects should, according to us, be taken into consideration offers an answer to the main question this dissertation set out to answer, we will discuss these aspects further in our overall conclusion to this dissertation.

5 CONCLUSION

Large collections of African artefacts will inevitably be kept and displayed in Western-European museums for the foreseeable future. In this dissertation, we have asked ourselves what things we must keep in mind when exhibiting these objects.

In order to do this we first explored whether these objects are valuable enough to warrant special treatment. We concluded that, since these objects are representatives of their makers and their culture of origin, they should be treated respectfully in order to show respect to those creators and that culture. Since these objects function as cultural representatives, they can also engender cultural encounters that are valuable in their own right. Displaying these objects respectfully and in a way that facilitates cultural encounters therefore becomes an ethical duty.

We then explored some of the ways in which these objects are currently displayed in order to discover which aspects of displaying objects contribute to their respectful and ethical display. A compilation of some such aspects was explored further in the final chapter of this thesis.

First and foremost, we hope to display objects as a whole, despite their fragmented nature. In order to do this, objects must be displayed in broader exhibits that add context to objects through text and through non-verbal cues. Texts must be crafted carefully and must offer more information than the average viewer might absorb in order to stimulate those who would like to learn more about specific objects. Beyond museum texts, objects should speak for themselves through displays that challenge viewers, encourage them to take their time viewing objects and that shake up their expectations of the museum as a place that orders objects chronologically and by medium or style.

We think it is important that the museum is a place where knowledge is exchanged through lively conversation, between curators, visitors, source communities and the museum itself. The museum functions as a forum where valuable cultural encounters take place. In order for these cultural counters to take place successfully, all involved must get their proper chance to speak. The museumgoer must be informed transparently, the curator must be present instead of hidden, the museum must remove itself from its ivory tower on order to listen and exchange knowledge equally, the source community must be offered a chance to not only collaborate on temporary exhibitions, but to be a voice which is present in the museum durably.

These types of changes will not be made to museum practices overnight, but this does not need to be the case, either. We find it most important that museums attempt to be respectful towards

the objects they steward and all that these objects represent. That this respectful display is not perfect on the first try is no problem, since museums passionately continue to try again.

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