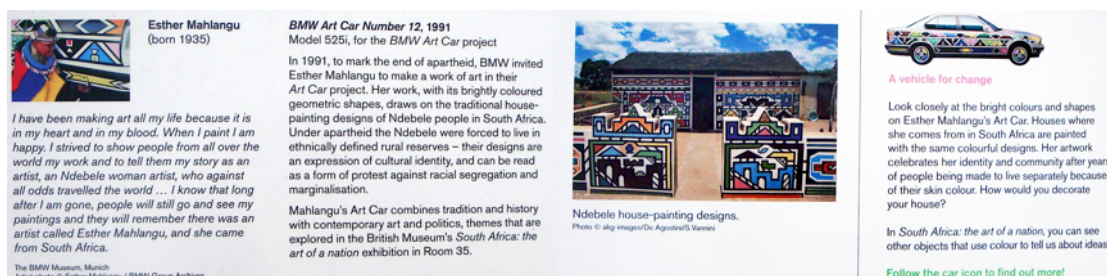


Contextual Review

In my literary review I looked at how examining patterns used on African pottery can challenge perceived boundaries between 'fine art' and 'decorative art'. For my contextual review I have visited two different exhibitions which display African arts and crafts. I went to the British Museum exhibition *South Africa: The Art of a Nation* and also visited the museum's permanent Africa collection. These two sets of galleries offer very different visitor experiences.



Figures 1 and 2: Forecourt of the British Museum advertising the *South Africa: The Art of a Nation* exhibition with Esther Mahlangu's BMW Art Car 535i Number 12 (1991) [Metal, paint and plastic] and the accompanying text.



The *South Africa* exhibition is principally chronologically arranged from pre-historical artefacts made circa 3 million years ago to contemporary post-apartheid art. However, this chronology is disrupted by carefully interspersed contemporary pieces, which are direct responses to the earlier works of art they sit next to, thus creating another dynamic narrative linking the past to the present. According to John Giblin, curator of this exhibition, "South African archaeology preserves some of the earliest evidence of artistic thought production anywhere in the world and...has one of the most vibrant contemporary art scenes art" (Giblin, 2016a) and this exhibition is an attempt "to link these two narrative points and tell the history of South Africa through art." (Giblin, 2016b)

Thus it is important to keep in mind who is writing the story or history, including who selects and curates an exhibition such as this one. My problem and sense of unease with this exhibition lies in this power relation. Within the context of an exhibition put on in the British Museum, which has historically had its part to play in creating and perpetuating a paternalistic outlook towards Non-western world arts, this is a revisionary approach towards African art with its own “stamp of European approval.” (Phokela, 2003) In a way this exhibition is less about South African art per se but a historical revision of the West’s interpretation of it.

I felt the approach of this exhibition restrictive as it seemed to be totally dominated by the conflict between white oppressor and black oppressed. This certainly is a major and important part of South African history but there are other more Africa-centric issues that don’t seem to have been addressed. Particularly in the final post-apartheid room I would have expected a more forward-looking display of artwork. However, all art here, too, with the exception of the beaded cloth dolls by the *Siyazama Project*, dealing with the AIDS and HIV epidemic, is dominated by issues of race relations and identity even though there are many other contemporary topics make up the lexicon of South African art. It would have helped if the three contextual short films, which the British Museum have on their website, would have been accessible at the exhibition (e.g. Bester, 2016 and Sibande, 2016).



Figure 7: Beaded cloth dolls by *Siyazama Project* dealing with issues and taboos surrounding HIV and AIDS and virginity tests.

Overall, I felt that this exhibition was another White Western-centric ethnographic narrative, which addressed the, possibly revisionist, needs of a white audience. This seemed to me to be confirmed by the lack of diversity of viewers. During my three hour visit only three ‘black’ visitors were among a host of educated middle-class South African accents. I got the impression that these, mostly fifty-years-plus, people were trying to capture part of their history and heritage through this exhibition. There was also little chance of anyone straying into this exhibition unintentionally as already a general ticket price of £12 would sieve out the less affluent or the disinterested.

In contrast, the permanent Africa collection in the British Museum has a much more universal appeal and, with no entrance fees, the local and tourist visitors are of varying backgrounds. Even though the first room is labelled “Contemporary Art of Africa” the remaining rooms are not ordered chronologically but loosely by materials and production processes. As in the *South African* exhibition, some contemporary pieces have been inserted among historical displays linking the past with the present. However, this is not done to make some critical statement but illustrate a continuation of making traditions. This more traditional ethnological approach to displaying art from another continent sits more easily with me, maybe because it doesn’t pretend to be anything new and one knows what to expect. After all, the British Museum, despite attempts to modernise, is still fundamentally rooted in British paternalistic tradition displaying the crafts and artefacts of other cultures with, possibly, reassuring familiarity.

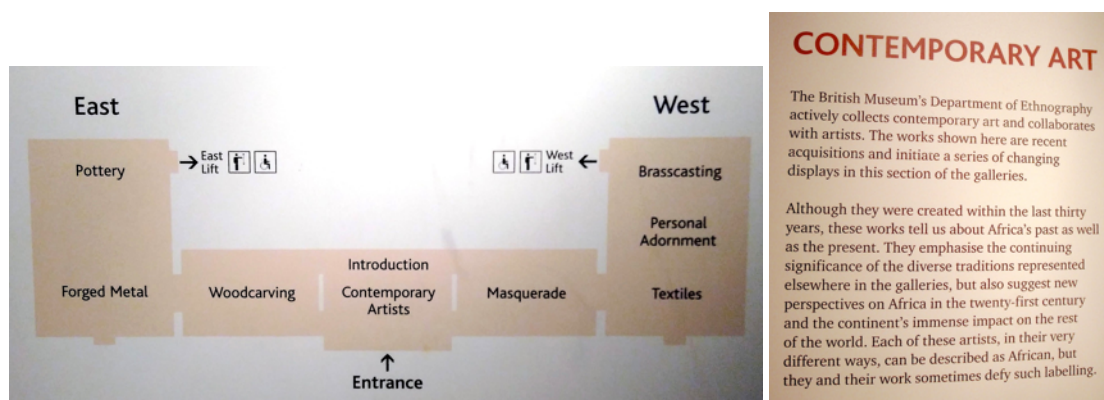


Figure 8: Floor plan of the Africa collection at the British Museum.



Figures 9 and 10: First room showcasing examples of contemporary art, including a pot by Magdalene Odundo, and accompanying text (top right).



Figures 11 and 12: Pottery and forged metal work are exhibited in the same room.

In hindsight, my expectations may have been misguided when expecting to find a challenging display and narrative of African arts and crafts in the British Museum. I saw a much better displays at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark when visiting last year's *Africa: Architecture, Culture and Identity* exhibition which showed large variety of displays which dealt not only with complex and diverse historical issues but reflected a very varied and complex present. This exhibition made for compelling viewing even though at times it was disturbing and uncomfortable.



Figures 13 and 14: Two examples of work at the *Africa* exhibition: *Project for Kinshasa for the Third Millenium* (1997) by Bodys Isek Kingelez (left) and *Louisiana Canopy* (2015) by Kéré Architecture (right).

An exhibition that stuck more closely to traditional 'fine arts' but also grouped its works along both chronological and thematic lines was the excellent *Afro Modern* exhibition in the Tate Liverpool in 2010. Like the current *South Africa* exhibition in the British Museum, issues such as colonialism, slavery and loss of identity were issues explored. However, they were mostly expressed through works of art produced by the people directly affected, thus giving space for their very powerful voices through their art and not mostly through starchy museum

explanations. To be fair, this exhibition stretched its geographic range further, including art produced across 'the black Atlantic'.



Figures 15 and 16: Two examples from the *Afro Modern* exhibition: *Bird Flew* by Wangechi Mutu (left) and *Tropical Night* by Christopher Cozier (right).

What struck me throughout all of these exhibitions was how marginalised ceramics are within the representation of African art: only the permanent Africa collection had a proper representation and there were only a few examples in the early chronology of the *South African: The Art of a Nation*. This confirms that pottery still tends to be marginalised within the art world as an area only really valued within ethnographic or historical contexts, not as a craft/art which can stand along with other 'ethnic' arts such as textiles and beadwork which seem to be recently gaining in recognition alongside African 'fine art'.

Contextual Review: Bibliography

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- * *The Sainsbury Galleries: Africa Collection*, (permanent).
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- * *Africa: Architecture, Culture and Identity*, (25 Jun – 25 Oct 2015).
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At the British Museum, London. Visited on 27th February 2013.
- William Kentridge: Other Faces*, (10 Nov – 17 Dec 2011).
At the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. Visited on 11th December 2011.
- Listening to Distant Thunder: The Art of Peter Clarke*, (20 Oct 2011 – 13 May 2012).
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Picture References:

Figures 1 and 2:

SCHOOP, M. *Personal Photographs* (10th December 2016).
Location: British Museum, London.

Figure 3:

ANGAS, G.F. *Portrait of Umzingulu, a Zulu chief* (1847) [Watercolour on paper].
[Online] Available from: <http://media.gettyimages.com/photos/angus-zulu-chief-dressed-as-a-warrior-south-africa-london-british-picture-id535780115>.
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Figure 4:

ANGAS, G.F. *Umpanda, King of the Amazulu* (1849) [Ink on paper].
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Figure 5:

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Figure 6:

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Figure 7:

SIYAZAMA PROJECT *HIV/AIDS Crucified, Female Figure and Sangoma Tableaux* (2002) [Textile, wood, wool, plastic, cotton].

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Figures 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12:

SCHOOP, M *Personal Photographs* (10th December 2016).

Location: British Museum, London.

Figures 13 & 14:

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Figure 15:

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Figure 16:

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