

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kōz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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Orabona and Quadraro

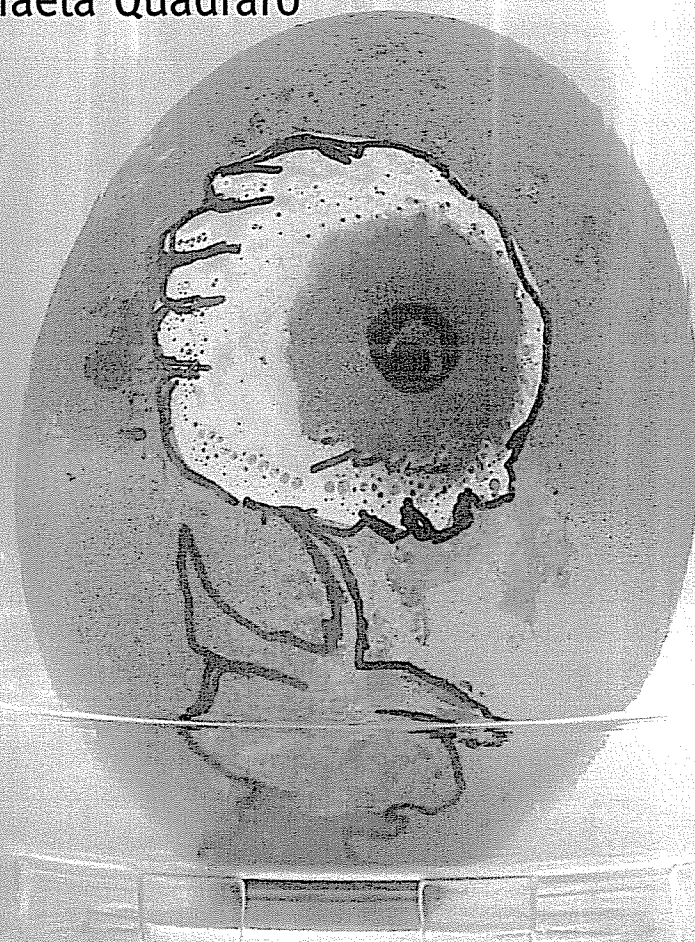
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examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

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RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums

fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

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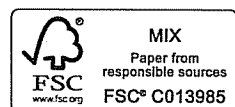
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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 15

What Museum for Africa?

Itala Vivan

The question above raises interconnected cultural and political issues begging to be answered, both in Europe and Africa. A vision opens up of a future embracing the past yet steeped in the present. Such a question finds a keen listener in the postcolonial ear, quick to perceive the jarring frictions resonating in our contemporary world. At this point in history, the former temples of European empires – museums invented by imperial hegemonies – have gradually lost their original mission as absolute indicators of a universalising canon. They are often unable to metamorphose into the convincing alternatives required by an era of major changes. This is particularly true when Africa is involved. Yet, throughout the processes of change and its representations, a need persists for places and sites where human cultural artefacts can be collected, discussed and offered to a mixed and diverse public sharing a common concern for knowledge. This addresses a widely perceived aspiration towards creating a dialogue via objects. Hence the urge to renew existing museums through a process of re-creation, as well as to invent entirely new museums featuring places and spaces suited to and expressive of our present, weaves a dialogue with interlocutors no longer as passive targets of the museum discourse, but as free and active subjects of their own cultural role.

A Vexed Issue for both Europe and Africa

This chapter asks what a museum designed to accommodate, preserve and exhibit African artefacts could be. How should such a museum be designed and organised if it is located in Africa, and thus addresses the very producers of the cultures it represents, or subsequent generations? And what if the museum devoted to Africa is in Europe, with European citizens as its primary constituency? The two horns of the dilemma spark from a single issue – breaking colonial stereotypes and creating new spaces for dialogue, insight and interaction. Our theme splits into two directions, variants of a common postcolonial discourse told as either heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narratives.

The theme expands further, because there are many existing museums in Africa, and even more in Europe, created to collect and display artefacts of African origin. How do these museums fare when submitted to postcolonial critique? For the purposes of this analysis, it is useful to select a few museums and ask whether and why they appear qualified and/or suitable to satisfy the needs of

postcolonial societies and waves of global diaspora. Existing museums belong to different categories and historical periods, and are therefore rooted in vastly different political and cultural concepts – art museums, museums of ethnography, archaeology, science; museums created in colonial times, like the Tervuren, or after the end of colonisation, like the Branly or the Sainsbury Room. And what about African museums in Africa, like the Fondation Zinsou at Cotonou, the Musée National du Mali in Bamako or the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg? What obstacles should be avoided? What precedents rejected? What lessons should we learn from experience? What theoretical basis should provide the foundation for an ideal museum worthy of being called postcolonial?

From Colonial Museum to New Museum

The museum was born within European cultures: it first followed the drive of the European Renaissance, and then the impetus of revolutions generated by the Enlightenment. With the boom of empires, it was transformed into an effective storeroom for the (self-proclaimed) universal civilising mission that supported colonialism ideologically. Rivers of ink have gone into describing the sources of such an institution throughout history (Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1992).

The museum has constantly changed: from the Galleria Celeste of the Gonzaga in Mantua – created to collect artworks according to the court's taste – to the giant collections of the Vatican Museums and the Musée du Louvre; from the *Wunderkammer* of exotic curiosities to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial expositions in London, Vienna and Paris. This flux shows an unceasing inner dynamism, with the museum as witness and example of its own time, even when it aims at enacting the past and celebrating memory, or when it undertakes the task of setting a perennial, universalising canon.

In our problematic and turbulent third millennium, vertiginous rhythms in technological innovation and unrelenting accelerations in communication have speeded up the world, a world demanding to be perceived, narrated and represented in a fluid space, open towards the future. Museums face new challenges along with new epistemological perspectives, as witnessed by a growing inventiveness in the creation of museums (Marstine 2006). To answer our question, it is necessary to plunge into the zeitgeist and adopt it – that is, to enable the museum to express its own time according to a principle of necessary subjectivity (Appadurai 1996). With regard to African cultures and their representations, the museum must become truly postcolonial, not only chronologically, but constitutionally.

From Europe's Imperial Exposition to the Museum

The prototype of colonial exhibitions was the great exposition of imperial times, still apparent in the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale at Tervuren. Established

in 1897–98 by King Leopold III of Belgium, the Tervuren, with its great variety of exhibits, remains a typical example of collections and displays structured as an encyclopaedia of empire. This is still true in spite of its fairly recent renewal. The poet Stephen Gray recently visited it. His postcolonial gaze reveals the accumulation of materials classified and enclosed in glass cases,

carvings (fetishes, masks,
with nails implanted or without, teeth, chips
of mirrors and beadwork,
incredibly naked and polished and later clothed)

prevented from telling their story and weaving the larger history of the ravages of colonialism to explain their relationship to Europe. He concludes bitterly:

Here no chains, chopped hands,
no shrunken heads on poles, nor the bullets that killed
the brutes, nor is one ever named.
... as we ... drive off in rain
the fat black rubber tyres bite and squelch
on the broken stones, I hear
the moan of those ten million souls we in comfort
take our ease and
sit upon, the progress of this great atrocity. (Gray 2009)

The Tervuren is a classic example of the systematic othering of the colonised world. Animal, vegetable and mineral exhibits are placed on the same level as scientific and ethnographic curiosities and various artefacts, all serving to illustrate the conqueror's power. Amputated from history, they are there to create wonder (Greenblatt 1991; Lionnet 2004), but also a vague repulsion mixed with a shiver of fear.

Strangely enough, the very recent Musée du quai Branly in Paris (2006) gives the visitor a similar impression. Hordes of beautiful artefacts assembled from former Paris public collections are displayed as a kind of non-European art that Jacques Chirac would have liked to (but dared not) define as primitive. Instead, they call it *art premier*, the same unfortunate adjective used for the Pavillon des Sessions (opened in 2000) at the Louvre (Amselle 2005; de L'Estoile 2007). The long controversy around the Branly bears witness to its extremely difficult birth, due to the resolute will of President Chirac along with the inspiration and active co-operation of the collector-merchant Kerchache. The result is a stylish building designed by Jean Nouvel, plunged into a dense garden recalling a savannah. The semi-obscure interior frames the African section – designed as a sequence of caves and walls in reddish clay. African critics and museologists were largely negative, criticising the de-historicisation of artefacts immersed in a sombre darkness, reminiscent of a colonial past (Musa 2007; Ndiaye 2007, 12–17; Traoré 2007).

Alban Bensa even described the Branly display as a 'loud and baroque scenario constantly reminding the visitor that these works are other and come from a remote otherness' (Bensa 2007, 169; my translation). Personally, I find the quai Branly display vastly disconcerting – technological forests darken Nouvel's windows, suggesting mysterious undertones. Artefacts are exhibited as exotic and remote, belonging to an indistinct otherness. There is no sign of a postcolonial renewal, in spite of its proud motto, 'The Branly, where cultures meet'.

Several great European museums have devoted their attention to African artefacts. The British Museum developed its Sainsbury Gallery (1999) for materials previously hosted at the former Museum of Mankind, as well as its own collections, including the wonderful Benin bronzes. Specialists have disapproved of various aspects of the Sainsbury Gallery. Christine Eyene, in particular, has criticised its 'ethnicising scenery' (Eyene 2007, 139; my translation) and the way ancient and contemporary works are exhibited one next to another without apparent reason. Furthermore, the Benin bronzes' captions do not explain their link to the slave trade.

In the last decade, however, the British Museum has undergone an interesting reorganisation due to its director, Neil MacGregor. His interpretation of the museum's functions opened new perspectives, in particular improving the approach to non-European exhibits. In a successful BBC broadcast followed by a book, MacGregor outlined the British Museum's mission: 'to tell the history of the world by deciphering the messages which objects communicate across time' – objects that 'speak of whole societies and complex processes rather than individual events, and sometimes have meanings far beyond the intention of their original makers' (MacGregor 2010, xv).

The British Museum's African collections have always been, and still are, adverse to categorisation, mixing items of ethnographic nature with works of enormous artistic value. This is the birthmark of most European collections, proof of the European reluctance towards reading African art. The European gaze marked Africa as the absolute other, hence the unwillingness of European art critics to evaluate African artworks as 'art' until their 'discovery' by the modernist generation of Paris artists. Yet even nowadays, established critics often seem embarrassed by the work of contemporary African artists, especially when hailing directly from Africa rather than from the diaspora. Museums in Africa could help in understanding and evaluating African art, as shown, amongst others, by the examples of the Fondation Zinsou, the Musée National du Mali and the National Gallery in Bulawayo. Thanks to the galleries in the Benin capital of Porto Novo, local artist Romuald Hazoumé's impressive works were exhibited in 2007 at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Slavery and Museums

In this light, it is worth exploring exhibitions on slavery within European museums of Africa. The bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade (2007) has seen a

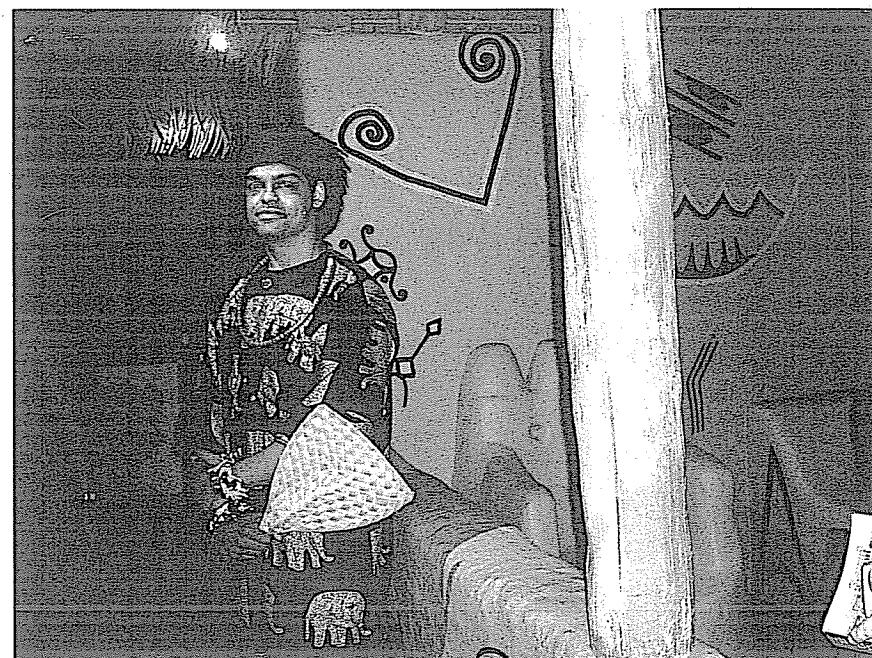


Figure 15.1 International Slavery Museum, Liverpool. Ibo village with young man (reconstruction). Photograph by Itala Vivan, 2007

number of initiatives, including the first International Slavery Museum – mounted in a wing of the old Maritime Museum in the port of Liverpool, formerly the hub of the triangular trade. It was a unique opportunity to invent something new in a field with no precedents. Unfortunately, curator and consultants missed the boat. They offered a display organised along lamentably old lines, starting with the reconstruction of a pseudo-African village similar to those in the infamous colonial expositions (Figure 15.1).

I attended its inauguration and judged it negatively – in spite of occasional details showing goodwill and a certain perceptiveness, such as a dark room creating a blank interval within the exhibition symbolising the frightening Middle Passage (Vivan 2008).

The representation of slavery is a very special case. It directly implicates Europe and America as well as Africa. One cannot evade the necessity of involving history at every step of the display, even though the persistent shirking of responsibilities has dulled memory and awareness on one side, while on the other present-day racial experience has transformed the immediacy of pain into a dull throb. Very few material objects survive. An astute representation should be based on a strong and fearless conceptual imagination. How to represent the horror and atrocity of the slave trade, its peculiar tragedy as a prolonged holocaust? Art appears most

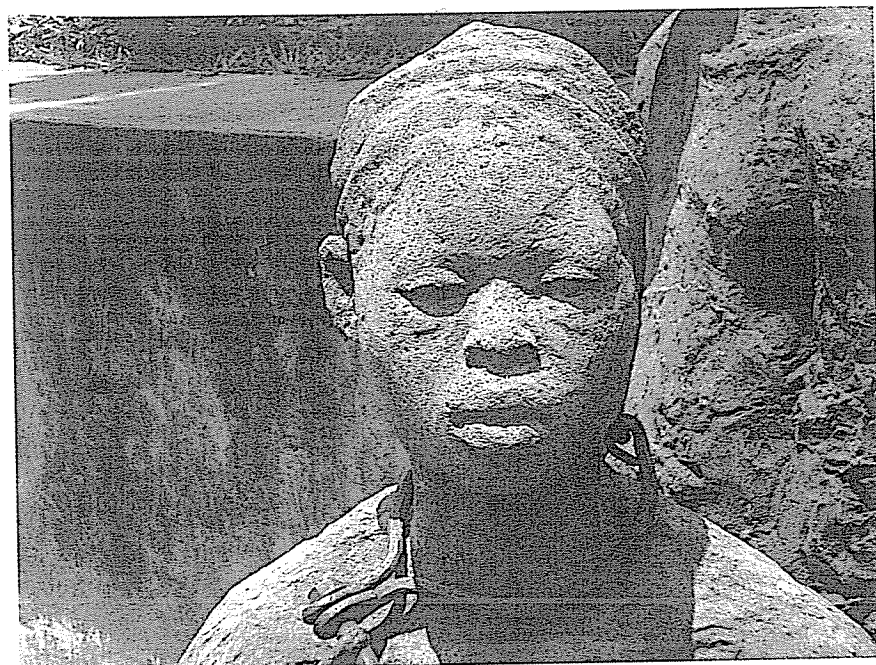


Figure 15.2 Zanzibar Slavery Memorial (detail). Photograph by Itala Vivan, 2010

effective in recreating slavery's abyss of de-humanisation – for example, the grey and lonely statues of a monument in Zanzibar (Figure 15.2).

The empty spaces of the *Maison des Esclaves* in Gorée cry out to the ocean as it licks the outer walls with a sinister rhythm. The Slave House in Cape Town stands as a concrete historical memory finally freed from a mask trying to erase slavery imposed first by colonialism and then by apartheid. But up until now, it has been impossible to create a meaningful museum of slavery able to go beyond the status of archive or memorial, or (as in the case of Zanzibar and Gorée) deeper than an evocation through sheer imagination.

The changes within European museums of Africa arising out of historical events, political suggestions and the popular imagination are a challenge to researchers. For example, Annie Coombes (1994) has examined Victorian and Edwardian England in this manner, unveiling underlying mentalities and social constructs.

Museums in Africa

The necessity of reinventing museums – if not altogether inventing new ones – is even stronger in Africa, although the institution is not indigenous to the continent.

There, until the end of colonialism, the few existing museums, including those in Egypt, were designed on European models, if not directly by Europeans. Following a concept used by Mary-Louise Pratt, James Clifford has called museums 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997, 192–3), indicating a transformational space where arts and cultures hitherto marginalised are supposed to be integrated (Ndiaye 2007). However, such an integration is still a long way off. The persistent duality between the 'self' of hegemonic cultures and the 'other' of Africa – with all its attending stereotypes – can only be overcome via postcolonial approaches that should work for Africa as well as for the West.

Even though it belongs to the same conceptual field, museum practice in Africa differs from the West because of its past histories and present cultural conditions. Memory might need museums in order to survive, but the haemorrhage of art and artefacts from Africa – first caused by colonial plunder and then by greedy collectors and commerce – has been persistent and destructive. It has even been suggested that new African museums might have no objects (McLeod 2004). In the mean time, the wave of requests for the restitution of symbolically rich pieces mounts – but to no avail. One exception here would be the British Museum. At one point it sold Nigeria a small number of Benin bronze plaques and managed to sedate the reaction of public opinion by explaining they were duplicates. A feasible solution would be to develop a co-operative network through which African museums could obtain meaningful loans for long periods. A good example is the Branly's temporary loan of the Béhanzin throne to the Fondation Zinsou. However, there are concerns because the often precarious conditions in African museums make such loans risky.

On gaining independence, African countries focused on museums and made an effort to transform them into showcases of national prestige. Subsequently, weak cultural policies reduced early interest, negatively impacting on museums such as the Musée Monod in Dakar and the Lagos National Museum. There are instances of remarkable public initiatives, like the Musée National du Mali (Malé 2002). Furthermore, small institutions funded by private or international sponsors (like the Fondation Zinsou) appear fruitful. Françoise Vergès sought to create the *Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise* – where displays and installations were intended to represent Réunion's creolised society.¹

South Africa, a Special Case

Post-apartheid South Africa is unique. Old museums have been converted according to different concepts and principles, changing representational perspectives and including new histories. New museums were created to host stories previously suppressed and/or denied, and tell the long history of resistance and revolution.

¹ Unfortunately, recent political changes in the island's administration have brought an end to the *Maison* and closed it down.



Figure 15.3 Liliesleaf Farm and Museum, South Africa. Curiosity cabinet with memorabilia and documents. Photograph by Itala Vivan, 2012

Such a transformation might well be defined as utterly postcolonial in its essence (Vivan 2012).

Built to celebrate European art traditions, colonial wars and achievements, old museums excluded Africans – considered objects of conquests and bearers of what apartheid culture called ‘ethnic art’. The Cape Town South African Museum housed, amongst other artefacts, a group of plaster casts of the San people (Bushmen), sculpted based on real human beings in the nineteenth century. In 1993, artist Pippa Skotnes made an installation with the broken pieces of such casts – a gesture meant to deprecate the colonial gaze, denounce the KhoiSan genocide and celebrate a new approach to difference by releasing and raising voices from the past. However, the living San people disapproved, perceiving the artwork as offensive, causing a cultural incident in the history of racialised South Africa (Davison 1998; Skotnes 1996). This episode highlights the difficulty in dealing with the tortured history of a colonial past, raising the question of who authorises and narrates a memory which is very much alive in Africa.

Since 1994, nobody in South Africa has damaged or destroyed monuments, memorials and sites of colonial pasts, white conquests, or even apartheid triumphs. Public art collections were redesigned to accommodate African art of excellence.

Old buildings housed new selections of artists, while new museums were created for contemporary art without racial distinctions – in Johannesburg, for instance, Wits University created the Wits Art Museum. It was, and still is, an extraordinary flourishing of new museums varying in inspiration but convergent in scope.

I recently visited the newest offering, a strangely attractive museum near Rivonia, where the underground African National Congress leadership was arrested in 1963. The old Liliesleaf Farm and its surroundings remain an authentic witness to the legendary tale of the Black Pimpernel, Nelson Mandela. The restored farm and cottages emerge as a theatre of hide-and-seek – the sites of a risky mission full of adventures that have gone down in history. A unique blend of historical reality and secrets of the struggle create a strongly suggestive atmosphere. Some sections have been left empty, apart from life-size photographs; other spaces have been turned into technological distributors of information (Figure 15.3). This is a model cultural museum.

Again in South Africa, one can find an imaginative example of inventive cultural sites embodying postcolonial inspiration – the Tshwane Freedom Park, soon to include archives and a museum. Designed by a team of artists, architects and intellectuals, it sits on a hill facing the bleak Voortrekker Monument of Boer inspiration. Its stones and vegetation are entirely indigenous. Its design tells an alternative history: Africa as the cradle of mankind and birthplace of new liberties. Inner spaces of meditation and remembrance induce thought and contemplation. The meandering Wall of Names bears the names of thousands of people who died for freedom. Here too there were contestations, from those who wanted the Wall to include soldiers who fought in Mozambique and Angola against democratic governments.

Johannesburg’s Constitution Hill is another model example of a new postcolonial venue – created on the site of the old English Fort, former symbol of colonial power, and infamous prison before and during apartheid. The very building of the Constitutional Court is a visual representation of the principles of freedom, transparency and inclusiveness it embodies. Next to it, the old prisons for men and women have been transformed into a cultural museum. Here the new generations can read their past while enjoying the beauty of luscious gardens and a stunning view over the city of gold, Egoli, the African name for Johannesburg.

South Africa is an example of how museums can play relevant roles in the process of nation-building, especially when communities have to deal with a past of divisions, struggles and wars induced by colonial oppression.

Abandonment and Transformation

The House of Wonders in Zanzibar – a stately building originally erected as a private princely palace – is now a cultural museum hosting Swahili cultural artefacts in an effort to celebrate tradition and create unity (Figure 15.4). The exhibits refer back to a world of mixed races and cultures. The activities in Zanzibar’s Stone

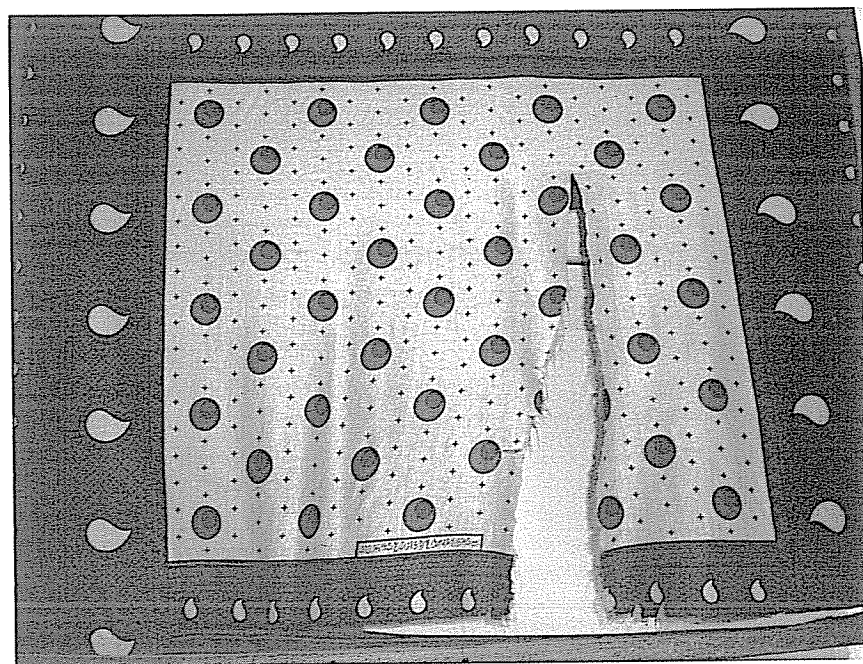


Figure 15.4 The House of Wonders, Zanzibar. A torn and dusty kanga, symbol of neglect and decay. Photograph by Itala Vivan, 2012

Town are portrayed, and the history of commerce along the coasts of East Africa is told, featuring life-size and model dhows (Sheriff 2000). Unfortunately, the whole museum has fallen into disrepair and many precious items have disappeared.

Similar situations are regrettably frequent in African museums, abandoned by public institutions or mismanaged by the state, even though they are full of treasures. This is the case with the Lagos National Museum. There, extraordinary Nok statues are left to disintegrate in open courtyards. The derelict sites, monuments and museums often (but not necessarily) originated in the colonial era. They may have been abandoned out of hatred for colonialism. Examples include Italian-style buildings in Asmara and a plaque for the Italian soldiers who died in the battle of Adua. Even Saint-Louis in Senegal has fallen victim to a similar attitude: it was once a superb colonial settlement, now a melancholy old town.

Public African indifference to old African art is not due to carelessness. It is symptomatic of cultural schizophrenia, writes Yacouba Konaté (2007), referring to African artefacts being discarded, sold or thrown away as garbage by their owners due to the pressure of colonial value systems. As suggested by Frantz Fanon, this situation needs to be counteracted by a cultural integration of the African self: a process that could find an ideally fluid space in the museum.

The postcolonial museum should be innovative and situated in local cultures, needs and customs, refraining from imported and compulsive models reminiscent of colonial rule and hegemony. It would thus become a viable cultural experience and practice for the societies it is addressing. Its shape and structure could result in a space for social experiments from below, open not only to material artefacts, but also to the immaterial heritage of African cultures, including their oral traditions and literatures.

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