

Ancient and Modern

Exhibiting the Past in the Present

Thursday 18 March 2010

**An International Symposium at the Sainsbury Research Unit
University of East Anglia, Norwich**

Abstracts

"Ancient and Modern: Exhibiting the Hearst Museum's Alaska Commercial Company Collection"

Nelson Graburn, Professor Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley and Curator of North American Ethnology at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology.

This presentation will examine a problem common to many museums of art and ethnology: how to exhibit old collections of traditional material culture of peoples who are very much alive and active today. It examines the role and participation of the Alaskan Native peoples whose ancient traditions are to be exhibited, the design of the exhibition including the contemporary arts and material cultural traditions in the traveling exhibition, and the itinerary of the exhibit, including the problem of presentations in Native villages.

"We've always been Modern: Museums, Modernity and the Caribbean."

Wayne Modest, Keeper of Anthropology, The Horniman Museum, London.

Today's Caribbean is a region produced in large part by western modernity – a region populated by new groups of arrivants occupying a socio-cultural and economic environment that has been described as 'modern in some ways even before Europe itself' (Mintz 1996). At the same time, it is a region that has been described as 'not of the West', written out of narrative of Western modernity (Sheller 2003). In this regard the Caribbean is an ambiguous space. Scott (2004) describes the ways in which this ambiguity has been framed as: 'neither properly 'primitive' nor 'civilized', neither 'non-Western' on the conventional criteria nor unambiguously 'Western' (in short, neither fish nor fowl).' In this paper I will examine the material consequences of this ambiguity. By tracing early collecting practices in and of the region, I will show how this ambiguity helped to frame the region as a place of nature and not culture and produced museum collections both within the region and in places like the UK that are dominated by natural and pre-Columbian artefacts.

Encounters with Polynesia, past and present, in Britain and France

Steven Hooper, Director of the SRU and Professor of Visual Arts, and **Karen Jacobs**, Lecturer at the SRU, University of East Anglia, Norwich.

This paper reflects on the progressive ‘Polynesianisation’ of the exhibitions Pacific Encounters: art and divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860 (Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, UEA, May-August 2006) and Polynésie: arts et divinités 1760-1860 (Musée du quai Branly, Paris, June-September 2008) in which both speakers were involved as curators and researchers.

An important process in the making and displaying of these exhibitions was the progressive ‘enlivening’ of the old and rare pieces through engagement with contemporary Polynesians, notably artists and curators. Among notions to be examined will be explicit statements that artefacts can embody ancestors, who can be brought to life – to have effects in the world – through the actions of their descendants and their custodians. Art appreciation can be as much about social relations as about aesthetic considerations; person/object categories can be reassessed in the context of opening and closing rituals that are analogous to the awakening and putting to sleep of powerful ancestors who are embodied in the artefacts that were made, used and exchanged by them in former times. Multiple engagements in the exhibition process are embodied in a special volume of the *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, edited by Dr Jacobs, that is shortly to be published.

“Making Together: About the "Kwoma Red - mythical paintings from New Guinea" exhibition, Musée du quai Branly, Paris”

Magali Melandri, Assistant Curator for Oceania, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.

Between October 2008 and January 2009, the “Kwoma Red” exhibition, held at the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris-France), presented the paintings of three Kwoma contemporary artists from Papua New Guinea : Kowspi Marek, Chiphowka Kowspi and Agatoak Kowspi.

This exhibition was built around three principles : collaboration with the artists and the Kwoma communities, the affirmation of this culture’s future, and teaching the Kwoma myth of origin to the visitors as a means of understanding the world. Throughout the display, Kwoma myths and contemporary paintings (i.e.2002-2008) from the museum’s collection that were collected over the course of the 20th century were presented as complementary ways of making sense of the Kwoma world, from past to present.

This talk will present the development of this project and how deeply involved the contemporary artists were in transmitting ancient knowledge through new visual forms and towards new audiences, which has, for a long time, been the way Kwoma people conceive arts and culture.

Challenging the Dead Hand of the Museum Display: The Case of Contemporary Guro (Ivory Coast) Masquerades

Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, Curator and Head of Ethnography Division at the Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium.

In *Persona*, the exhibition presented at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) Tervuren, between April 2009 and January 2010, some showcases contained both new and old masks, based on their being used for the same, virtually unchanged ritual.

At times, it was a challenge to exhibit the results of field research. For example, in the Guro region (Ivory Coast), masquerades are popular (and sometimes involve political propaganda), but they also take place during important rituals such as campaigns against witchcraft, funeral ceremonies, and propitiatory cult events. Masks are used in dance performances and in competitions between their wearers, and these can only be related in a museum context through texts, photographs, music and videos. In spite of such efforts to communicate the dynamism of living cultures, exhibitions often come off as a kind of cenotaph, as if these cultures were dead. Museums thus tend to have a deadening effect on living cultures, placing them in a timeless and false past. How can we deal with this aspect of display, especially when we know that today's masquerades are profoundly influenced by modernity and urban culture?

“Re-membering Arts and Altars: Creating the Exhibit 'Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas”

Henry Drewal, Professor of Art History and African-American Studies, and Adjunct Curator of the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA).

Call and response is an enduring and widespread performance tradition in Africa and its diasporas. To encourage such dialogic activity, we re-created two altars -- one from West Africa and another from the Caribbean -- as spaces for interactivity. This talk discusses notions of "re-creation," "re-membering," and sensory experience, and some of the challenges and objectives of this effort to engage and enlighten audiences.