Art and Fetish in the Anthropology Museum

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**ABSTRACT**

Between the 1920s and early 1980s an increasing number of African art exhibitions opened to the public in Western Europe and North America. In these exhibitions African religious objects such as masks and wooden figurines were reframed as modernist art. Focusing on the illustrative case of the National Ethnology Museum in Lisbon, Portugal, this article shows that these African art exhibitions offered a powerful alternative to the colonial, religious concept of the fetish. Early scholars of comparative religion claimed that the primitive fetish worshippers were unable to grasp the idea of transcendence. By elevating African religious objects (the so-called fetishes) to the transcendental realm of modernist art, curators of African art helped dispel the colonial concept of the fetish, and change mindsets and worldviews. In their struggle against the notion of the fetish, these curators also engaged with the concepts of art, culture and religion. Mounted on pedestals and bathed by light, the African religious objects became modernist cult objects: cultural artifacts elevated to a higher plane of religious and aesthetic spirituality.

**Keywords:** fetish, art, artifact, cult object, modernism, anthropology museums, African art.

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In an interview recorded in 2002, Benjamim Pereira, one of the original researchers and curators at the National Ethnology Museum (NEM) in Portugal, described how he came to terms with the negative view of Africa in mid-twentieth-century Portugal. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Benjamim Pereira and Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira, another of the NEM’s researchers, had been contacting many institutions and individuals who had lived and worked in the African colonies, hoping to acquire African objects for their recently created museum. Two cases struck Pereira as clear illustrations of the pervasive negativity of the time.

In the first case, a medical doctor who had resided in northern Angola, then a Portuguese colony, expressed interest in selling a nkisi, or power figure, to the museum. In preparation for the sale he instructed his employee to remove “all the rubbish (porcaria)” from the statue, by which his employee understood a thorough washing and the removal of the statue’s reliquaries. To the Portuguese medical doctor and perhaps his employee, the repulsive composition and appearance of such African objects may have increased their efficacy to the Africans who fabricated and employed those objects in their rituals, but it drastically decreased their value to the Europeans.

The second case occurred in the Seminary of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the northern city of Viana do Castelo. In 1969 the museum curators hoped to acquire several of the Kongo religious sculptures, some of them from the nineteenth century, which the Spiritan missionaries had brought from the province of Cabinda in Angola. Those religious objects were exquisite works of art, Pereira reported during our interview. The missionaries, however, had brought those objects from Angola for a very different reason. In Pereira’s words, they wanted “to show how those poor devils in Africa saw divinity,” and how important it was to “free the Africans from their stage of submission to a primary and inadmissible fetishism.”

Faced with this negativity, the NEM’s curators saw their task as one of elucidation and valorization of African religious objects too often misrepresented as “fetishes” (Figure 1). As Pereira explained, “it was very difficult to change a negative mindset in which everything that the black African did was always seen as unqualified.” People failed to see the beauty in those objects, to see, in Pereira’s words, “the aesthetic requisite that leads people to overcome the purely technological act and advance toward an aesthetic grammar with no relation to the object’s function.” Their mission was therefore clear: to portray Africa in a positive light by turning the so-called fetishes into works of art.

Pereira veered our conversation into a constructive direction. Today, the mere thought of a modernist African art exhibition immediately brings to mind the sharp postmodern critiques of such authors as James Clifford (1988a, 1988b), Sally Price (1989), and Hal Foster ([1985] 1998). Yet, as Pereira suggests, it would be an error to disregard the historical impetus and positive contri-
butions of the numerous African art exhibitions held in Western Europe and North America prior to the 1980s. Inspired by Pereira as well as the critical literature on the history of the notion of the fetish, I present the NEM’s African art exhibitions as an illustrative case of this broader historical phenomenon and exhibitionary complex. Over time, the repeated and systematic exhibition of African religious objects as African art helped dispel the colonial concept of the fetish.

To grasp the significance of this conceptual revolution from fetish to art, it is important to briefly consider the history of the term “fetish.” This concept derives from the Portuguese feitiço, which in medieval times referred to charms, amulets, spells, and other magical practices. The Portuguese explorers and merchants who traveled to West Africa in the fifteenth century applied the term feitiço to an array of African religious objects commonly found in the coastal communities. In the next two centuries, according to William Pietz (1985, 1987), feitiço developed into fetisso, a pidgin term that reflected the intercultural

FIG 1
environment found in the coastal regions of West Africa—the so-called Guinea Coast—at the time.

By the time the fetish concept returned to Western Europe, through the pen of Willem Bosman (1705), a Dutch merchant and travel writer, it carried a markedly negative and denigrating tone. Africans, it implied, were fixated on their “fetish objects,” seemingly unable to conceive of religious objects as the representation of a higher spirit, deity or god. Those “fetishes” were the African gods. In the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment philosopher Charles de Brosses (1760) crystallized this view in his concept of fetishism, as he termed the most primitive form of religion. One century later, August Comte (1853), the father of positivism, further developed the study of comparative religion. In his theory, fetishism lay at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, followed by the theistic phases of polytheism and monotheism.

Throughout this long history of denigration and misunderstanding, Europeans perceived the so-called fetish as the locus of an irreducible, untranscended materiality, to borrow again from William Pietz (1985, 7). In contrast with this negative idea of the fetish, any notion of religious transcendence seemed superior in every respect.3

By 1965, when a small group of researchers, including Pereira, finally established the first ethnology museum in Portugal, the northern European concept of the fetish had taken root in the Portuguese language via the French fétiche. As elsewhere in Europe, the Portuguese fetiche denoted an excessive fixation on materiality and an erroneous valuation of worthless objects. Based on Pereira’s account, the Portuguese fetiche was also imbued with aesthetic, sensory, and emotive overtones, being often described as filthy, hideous, repulsive, and frightening.

Pereira and the other museum curators framed their African art exhibitions as a response to the negative European concept of the fetish. They were critical of the colonial ideology promoted by the Portuguese fascist state (a state that remained in power from 1933 to 1974), and they saw their role as researchers, museum curators and educators as one of clarification and valorization of objects and cultures too often denigrated through the discourse of the fetish.

To this end, the curators took two decisive steps: they replaced the negative notion of the fetish with the positive concepts of art and culture, and they devised an exhibition program that radically differed in form and content from the colonial exhibitions typically held at colonial institutions ranging from Sociedade de Geografía to various branches of the Overseas Ministry. While the colonial exhibitions served to celebrate and justify the imperial project of Portuguese colonialism, the NEM’s African art exhibitions would celebrate cultural difference and artistic excellence.4
But the curators did not only engage with the modernist concepts of art and culture in a celebratory spirit, they also came to terms with some of the limitations that such concepts imposed on a curatorial project committed to dispelling the “fetish.” Whereas the categorization of African religious objects as cultural artifacts privileged the link with Africa but dematerialized the object, the category of art highlighted the material object and its formal qualities, but downplayed its African origins. Yet, the curators wished to highlight both the link to Africa and the sheer materiality of its objects. Their solution to this conceptual and curatorial challenge was to blend the categories of art and artifact. By redefining the African religious objects as cultural artifacts, the curators preserved the link to Africa; by redefining those same objects as art, they were able to both retain the focus on materiality and elevate those objects to the transcendental plane of a universal aesthetics.

Interestingly, the curators never researched in any depth the existing connections between materiality and transcendence in African religious life, as one might perhaps expect in an anthropology museum. Instead, they chose to undo the concept of the fetish by displacing the African religious objects to the European domain of modernist art. Mounted on pedestals and bathed in light, the African religious objects ascended to the realm of universal art. These objects were no longer primitive fetishes; they were cult objects surrounded by an aura of religious and aesthetic spirituality.

Artifact, or the Problem of Invisibility

Framing the African exhibitions as a movement against the “fetish” went hand in hand with a related endeavor: defining the ethnology museum in opposition to the colonial exhibitions. The ethnographic sections of these exhibitions displayed material objects from the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, inviting, if indirectly, an unfavorable comparison of those objects to the material culture of Portugal. In contrast, the NEM sought to exhibit a wealth of artifacts from around the world (including rural Portugal), placing all cultures on a par. The principle of universalism stood in sharp opposition to the racist colonial ideology. With Jorge Dias as director, the ethnology museum emerged from the start as a universal museum devoted to the study and exhibition of all cultures and societies, “European and non-European, on the same footing” (Veiga de Oliveira 1972, n.p.).

At first sight, undoing the concept of the fetish by reframing the religious objects as cultural artifacts seemed the perfect solution. Whereas the concept of the fetish suggested extreme alterity between Europeans and Africans, the concept of the artifact, or the item of material culture, celebrated cultural difference and placed all cultures on the same footing.
The concept of the artifact was also remarkably democratic. In the anthropology museum, theoretically at least, all the artifacts were equally valuable as material documents of cultural traditions. Borrowing an expression from the Swiss ethnologist and museologist Jean Gabus (1975), Veiga de Oliveira defined the museum artifacts as “witness objects” (objectos testemunho), or objects that speak to the cultural worlds previously witnessed in their places of origin (1985b, n.p.). This idea was at the center of the museum’s mission as a scientific institution. Veiga de Oliveira (1986–1988, 3) stated,

The Museum of Ethnology ... emerges and defines itself as an essentially scientific institution ... The objects are not isolated and inert material entities turned inward to themselves, but witnesses of the life and culture to which they belong. This fact confers upon them their anthropological dimension and true meaning; and it is those cultures that the museum researchers target beyond the objects themselves.5

Here lay an important strength of the anthropological approach to material culture, according to Veiga de Oliveira and his colleagues at the NEM. Not only did the category of the artifact prompt researchers and museumgoers to learn more about the cultural contexts that gave birth to the objects framed as artifacts, but learning about cultural context facilitated a better understanding of those objects.

This said, the foundational concepts of artifact and witness object posed problems of their own. While these concepts helped strengthen the scientific claims of the emerging ethnology museum, they also had the unintended effect of distracting the museumgoers’ attention from the material objects as such. Curators in anthropology museums do not always agree on the relative importance of artifacts and labels. Some curators strongly believe that the labels play a central role in the exhibition room, helping the museumgoers place the objects on display in a broader context. To my knowledge, no anthropology curator would readily refute the educational value of material culture in ethnographic exhibitions, or deny the value of materiality for the purpose of research. Curators know that the objects on display embody their own history and trajectory. Their material bodies consist of carefully selected materials; their form suggests the skillful movement of human hands; and their patina and physical condition show the passage of time, exposure to the elements, and the imprint of human intentions and desires. Missing and broken pieces are as revealing as the parts that survived the test of time because they testify to choices made or accidents incurred. Some objects exhibit numbers and letters inscribed on their surface by previous owners, a sign that those objects passed through several hands prior to their arrival at the museum, and crossed physical, political, institutional, and
conceptual boundaries. From the perspective of many anthropology curators, however, the museumgoers are not likely to decipher these material stories. The museum objects embody their own history and trajectory, and they serve as witnesses to past realities; they are, however, poor storytellers. This is “the problem with things,” Spencer Crew and James Sims, both at the Smithsonian Institution, state. “[Things] are dumb. They are not eloquent as some thinkers in art museums claim. They are dumb. And if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, they lie” (Crew and Sims 1991, 159).

Hence the labels, wall panels and catalogues that typically accompany the so-called artifacts in anthropology museums. These material add-ons speak on behalf of the artifacts. They also speak on behalf of the curators, helping them constitute their material objects as artifacts, and the museums in which they work as anthropology museums.

No one has probably captured the label-centered perspective more clearly than G. Brown Goode, the late nineteenth-century ichthyologist who oversaw several Smithsonian displays. In an oft-quoted maxim, Brown Goode took his caption-centered perspective to its logical conclusion, claiming the following: “a museum is a well arranged collection of labels illustrated by specimens” (reported by Boas 1907, 924).

Needless to say, other museum professionals, including the NEM curators, would disagree with Brown Goode. As much as the NEM curators valued their labels, wall panels and exhibition catalogues, they never reversed the relation between object and label. Nor did they ever claim that objects are secondary to theory and research. While they actively promoted the anthropological study of cultural objects in their places of origin as well as the use of labels in exhibitions, they also insisted that the objects on display were the main actors in the room. While objects may require textual advocates to speak on their behalf, they are not mere symbols, synecdoches, vehicles, mediators, or even witnesses.

Other reasons explained the museum curators’ misgivings about the typical, label-centered approach commonly adopted in anthropology museums in the 1960s and 1970s. Much to the curators’ frustration, too little was known about the African objects housed in their museum. Over 20,000 objects had been transferred to the NEM from several colonial and missionary institutions, as well as private collections, but most of these objects had arrived with little to no textual information. Whenever possible, the curators identified the objects on display in their exhibits by place of origin, ethnicity, and object function. In some cases they were also able to provide the objects’ names in the vernacular, as in the following label from Peoples and Cultures, an exhibition held in 1972:
PUO mask
Tchassengue, Angola
KIOKO
Representation of a female ancestor
Red-painted wood topped with a woven hairdo
Height 24 inches

Whenever possible, the curators provided additional ethnographic and stylistic information in their exhibition catalogues, drawing on published research on similar objects from the same country or cultural region. In *African Sculpture in Portugal*, an exhibition held at the NEM in 1985, the objects’ history of ownership was noted in the labels and further explained in the catalogue. Yet the existing information, welcome and invaluable as it was, remained cursory and wanting for the most part.

The Portuguese curators also worried that an ethnographic approach to exhibiting might dematerialize the objects on display, making them invisible to museum visitors. In their opinion, many ethnographic exhibitions illustrated the common mistake of valuing the labels over the main objects, and devaluing the artifacts as mere illustrations of museum labels. Made invisible and dematerialized, the artifacts ultimately depended on the exhibition labels to remind the museumgoers of their material existence. “Red-painted wood topped with a woven hairdo. Height 24 inches,” reads the label quoted above.

During a conversation recorded in Portugal in 2015, Pereira described a small experiment that he conducted at the Museum of Man in Paris in the early 1970s. A magnificent statue stood on a pedestal in one of the exhibition rooms, and a caption attached to the wall provided contextualizing information. Pereira noticed that several museumgoers read the short label prior to looking at the statue. At best, the viewers appeared to perceive the object as an illustration of the written words; at worse, they never saw it.

To Pereira, this simple experiment revealed the main problem with the ethnographic approach to exhibiting, a problem that he did not wish to perpetuate. He wanted the visitors to reckon with the imposing presence of the African religious objects. The NEM’s mission of undoing the “fetish” required a presentation mode that foregrounded the African objects on display. In this mode, the African religious objects would no longer be reduced to mere label illustrations or, even worse, to inferior, primitive fetishes; those objects would be presented as powerful works of art imbued with religious and aesthetic spirituality.
Art, or the Problem of Transcendence
A few days before the opening of Peoples and Cultures in 1972, Pereira and Víctor Bandeira, an art collector, good friend and long-standing museum collaborator, decided to change the exhibition layout conceived by professional designers. “The exhibit resembled a warehouse,” Pereira told me. A large, visually imposing chiwara, or antelope mask, from Mali stood inside a heavy pine-and-glass case, its beautifully carved horns sticking out from the case. Pereira grabbed the chiwara and placed it on a wooden base. Now, the beautiful chiwara could shine and marvel.

Never again would the NEM’s curators present the African religious objects in such an “unbearably uncomfortable” space, as Pereira worded it. In 1976, thanks to an invitation from the International Association of Art Critics, associated with UNESCO, the museum curators had the opportunity to showcase some of those objects in a new exhibition with a revealing title: Modernism and Black-African Art. This exhibition coincided with the opening of the new museum building in its current location in Belém, just west of Lisbon; and it was a stunning success.

Modernism occupied two exhibition rooms: in the largest room, numerous African objects from different countries in sub-Saharan Africa, from Côte d’Ivoire to Mozambique, were presented as art; in the smaller room a small collection of African religious objects shared the same space with a few modernist paintings by Picasso, Modigliani and Nolde. Veiga de Oliveira (1985b, n.p.) explained,

This exhibition, in which the art of African artists, their anonymity notwithstanding, were presented on a par with the art of European artists, represented an attempt to remove the objects from all ethnographic context, giving the public the total liberty to discover their intrinsic formal and aesthetic values.

Not only did the NEM curators borrow European paintings from art museums, but they also drew on long-tried techniques from art galleries and museums in order to highlight the formal qualities of their African pieces. The curators individualized each object by mounting it on a pedestal or suspending it in midair in a pool of light. They went so far as to display their pieces without vitrines (a once-only curatorial reverie), allowing the museumgoers to interact with the powerful objects face to face. They also employed small mirrors to project light from below, and covered the floor and the display bases with the same grey carpet to reduce the sound of footsteps and the effect of shadows and reflections. The overall effect was reportedly stunning (Figure 2).

I interviewed several individuals who visited Modernism. They described this exhibition as a memorable event. Some of them returned to Modernism a few times before it closed in 1977. The exhibition catalogues sold out. Modernism was favora-
bly and enthusiastically reviewed in all the main Portuguese newspapers of the time.6

In Modernism, the category of art obfuscated that of the artifact, and universal aesthetics spoke louder than cultural specificity. Framed as artifacts or witness objects, the African objects would represent specific cultural traditions, and offer a bridge to those traditions. As art, though, those same objects drew attention to themselves. The curators expected their visitors to engage with the African pieces face to face, recognize their visual properties and artistic force through an act of contemplation, and let themselves be flooded with a heightened sense of wonder. Instead of exerting control over the artifacts by figuring them out cognitively, the museumgoers were asked to surrender to what the German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin termed the “work” of art ([1939] 2003). Brent Plate explains this emphasis: “work” in “art work” “is not to be understood as an object. Rather work is an activity; it is what art does” (2005, 85).

Wonder may well be, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, the “power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (2004, 546). But, as Greenblatt as well as the curators

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FIG 2
Modernism and Black-African Art, an exhibition held at the NEM in 1976. Photo courtesy of the Museu Nacional de Etnologia.
in Lisbon would agree, art installation techniques play a key role in the production of wonder and mystique. In the case of museums, the “work” of art is greatly enhanced by “the seductions of an elaborately crafted aura” (Smart 2000–2001, 4; Paine 2013, 107).

Framed as art, the African religious objects on display in Portugal were no longer mere illustrations of textual content. They were no longer mere metaphors and synecdoches that stood for something located far away. Proudly displayed in the museum as modernist art, the African religious objects ascended to the realm of aesthetic spirituality.

Conciliating Art and Artifact

One aspect of Modernism and Black-African Art troubled Pereira. He had envisioned African art to be the central focus in Modernism, but some of the museum visitors entered and exited the ethnology museum without ever visiting the larger room where the majority of the African objects were on display; other visitors hurried past the African pieces. The idea of juxtaposing the African objects with the modernist paintings of Picasso, Nolde, and Modigliani was intended to elevate those objects to the transcendental realm of universal art, thus undoing the denigrating idea of the fetish. Disappointingly, though, for some of the visitors, the modernist paintings seemed to overshadow the African art.

Modernism, however, was one of a kind. In the following exhibitions, the NEM curators always attempted, in Pereira’s words, to “conciliate art and artifact,” to “let the boundaries blur.” To convey contextual information, they employed labels, wall text and catalogues. To foreground material presence, formal qualities, and artistic merit, they employed art-display techniques, such as mounting the African objects on pedestals and bathing them with light.

They reproduced the same hybrid model in their catalogues: they showed single objects in high-quality illustrations while they provided information through captions and descriptive text. Both in the catalogues and exhibition halls, the curators showed works of art that were also artifacts, and artifacts that were also art. They never swayed in their conviction that art and culture belong together in the same indissoluble whole. In Veiga de Oliveira’s words,

[Culture and aesthetics] express one and the same reality. The function for which the material object was conceived and created ... defines and determines the law of its beauty; and its form will only be perfect to the degree that it mirrors and translates with exactitude the internal dynamism that shapes it. (Veiga de Oliveira 1985b, n.p.)

To express the same idea, Walter Benjamin once wrote, “The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition” ([1939] 2003, 256).
But not even in Modernism were African objects purely framed as art. There were no labels in the exhibition room, as mentioned, but there was an exhibition catalogue for sale in the museum shop. This thin catalogue was divided into two sections: in one section the exhibition labels were listed in numerical order, each object being succinctly identified, whenever possible, by country of origin, ethnicity and function. Object 2, for example, was described as a Nualu mask from Guinea-Bissau, known as nimba and used in funerary and agrarian ceremonies. In the other section of the catalogue, readers found a small collection of powerful images. Some of these images were black and white photographs of museum objects set in a black background: an Ashanti figurine from Ghana, a Baule mask from Côte d’Ivoire, a sculpted section from a Dogon granary door collected in Mali. Interspersed with these black and white photographs, however, a few color images printed in warm, saturated tones stood out. These images showed religious objects similar to those on display in the museum in their contexts of use in Africa. While the black and white pictures framed the museum objects as art, the color images helped the viewers place those objects in cultural contexts not too far removed, from the curators’ perspective, from the distant worlds once witnessed by the African objects on display at the NEM.

The NEM curators saw their African art exhibitions as a curatorial movement determined to show, in both display and writing, that African art and culture are inextricably bound to one another. In 1985, summarizing two decades of research and curatorship devoted to African art, Lima de Carvalho, then director of the ethnology museum, wrote in his opening note to the catalogue *African Sculpture in Portugal* (Museu de Etnologia 1985, n. p.):

> The exhibition to which this catalogue is attached is part of an ambitious line of action that has gradually developed in this museum: the study of Black African civilizations on the basis, to a large degree, of “objects” that are, at the same time, signs and witnesses and an aesthetic expression of [those] cultures [my emphasis].

This hybridity also surfaced in their definition of the perfect exhibit. Veiga de Oliveira (1986–1988, 4) liked to say, paraphrasing Jean Gabus, that a museum exhibition is “a spectacle and a lesson (um espectáculo e uma lição) or better: a spectacular lesson (espectáculo de uma lição).” The African art exhibits were hybrid spaces in which lessons were delivered in spectacular form, and spectacular installations promoted learning and education. The curators believed that the sense of wonder provoked by a spectacular show was likely to arouse curiosity and willingness to learn, and that, in turn, this learning experience was likely to foster a deeper engagement with African art. Greenblatt speaks to the same idea when he suggests that museums should strive to extend “wonder beyond
the formal boundaries of works of art, just as [they should strive] to intensify resonance within those boundaries” (2004, 545).

**The Cult Object**

In the process of representing Africa in the anthropology museum, the NEM curators did not only deal with the tension between art and artifact; they also grappled with the friction between culture and religion.

Let us briefly reconsider the type of African objects that the curators selected for display and redefined as African art. At first sight, their African art exhibits included a wide array of material objects. The category of Angolan sculpture, for example, encompassed not only masks and freestanding figures associated with religious practices and beliefs, but also staffs, axes, spoons, drums, combs, spears, smoking pipes, thumb pianos, throne chairs, pot lids, dolls, adornments, and water jugs. This said, religious objects such as masks and wooden figures were deemed visually stronger and more dense with symbolism than the numerous utilitarian objects that populated their collections. For this reason, the religious objects were given the focus of attention in the African art exhibitions.

And yet, the inevitable reduction of the entire field of African material culture to the African religious objects, “authentic” as the latter may have been by the curators’ own definition, generated some unease. The African art exhibitions were, after all, part and parcel of an ethnology museum devoted to the study and exhibition of all cultures in their multiple material expressions. In a passage on collecting, Veiga de Oliveira (1971a, 47) clarified:

> Certain categories of objects—for example weapons, sculptures, etc.—exert a strong fascination upon the collector, and often become objects of special preference; and the same happens with all attractive, rich or rare objects, the common, simple and everyday objects being disregarded. These criteria are evidently wrong, and we should refuse any such biases. All objects in a culture are of interest for the purpose of studying that culture.

The museum curators oscillated between two poles: the pole corresponding to the concept of multiplicity and mutual equivalence, that is, the relativist concept of culture with a lowercase “c” (all objects, like all cultures, are of equal value); and the pole corresponding to the concept of singularity and hierarchy, associated with the elitist concept of Culture with an uppercase “C” (some objects are more valuable than others, particularly those objects associated with “spiritual life,” an important category in the museum’s object classification system). In their African art exhibitions the curators clearly valued the sacred over the profane, and the aesthetic over the utilitarian and mundane. There were even moments when Veiga de Oliveira gave in to this form of elitism, referring to sculpture
and other objects of cult and magic as “superior and richer forms of material culture” (1971b, 32). Again, these were the objects that represented Africa in the museum.

There is another reason why the curators favored the spiritual over the mundane and utilitarian in their careful selection of African objects for display. By valuing the spiritual over the utilitarian, and the singular over the multiple, the curators were able to fuse the two categories of art and artifact, thereby creating a third category: cult object.

The African “cult object” is a hybrid: it is an African religious object elevated to the transcendental realm of universal aesthetics, and it is also a modernist artwork that once performed religious functions in Africa, and whose “auratic mode of existence,” in the words of Walter Benjamin, “is never entirely severed from its ritual function” ([1939] 2003, 256).

The African objects exhibited in the museum were neither decontextualized artworks that provoked a universal aesthetic response nor mere artifacts that stood for particular religious beliefs and ritual practices. Objects such as nkisi, kimba, pwo, ibeji, or chikunza, to name but a few African objects on display at the NEM, were both religious and artistic, as well as African and universal. They were rooted in the oldest and most honorable of African religious traditions, but they were also, and on account of their history, as Veiga de Oliveira put it, “one of the greatest and deepest forms of spirituality of our times, a form of spirituality that partakes in the universal values of Man” (1968, n.p.).

This emphasis on the idea of a universal, religious-aesthetic spirituality helps explain why the curators never attempted to replicate the original milieus in which the religious objects interacted with ritual participants in Africa (as some visitors might expect in an anthropology museum). The curators were not interested in replicating original encounters and experiences, real or imagined, or even evoking “an historically appropriate object-audience dialogue,” as Gary Vikan, the curator of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, is reported to have said apropos of his 1988 show Hole Image, Holy Space: Icons and Frescoes from Greece (Branham 1994/1995, 37). Instead, the Portuguese curators sought to evoke the experience of spirituality and transcendence in the exhibition room, an experience that was greatly enhanced with the aid of art-style installation techniques. In other words, the curators hoped that the museum visitors would experience their African art exhibitions as solemn, spiritual spaces filled with the aura of cult objects.

It is no longer possible to approach the numerous men and women who visited the NEM’s African art exhibitions, and invite them to share their memories and experiences. We may, however, get a glimpse of at least some of those experiences through the news coverage of the time. For instance, in a review of Modernism published in the daily newspaper Expresso on December 23, 1976, a reporter wrote:
Conclusion

From the vantage point of postmodernity, we may argue that the African art curators attempted to disparage the old, problematic concept of the fetish by introducing the newer, yet equally problematic concepts of art and culture. However celebratory in tone and universalist in spirit, “art” and “culture” were often voiced in a patronizing tone that omitted critical differences: of culture, religion, wealth, power, and perspective. Similar to many anthropology museums prior to the 1980s (prior to the so-called crisis of representation in anthropology), the Portuguese curators did not include African voices in their exhibits—voices that could, if not reduce the gaps of knowledge concerning objects collected in the distant past, at least fill that void with contemporary perspectives of Africans living in Africa or Europe. The modernist concepts of art and artifact were more inclusive and edifying than the notion of the fetish, but they were nonetheless tied to the project of colonialism. The modernist stance allowed for the positive representation of Africa in African art exhibitions only insofar as the curators kept a tight control over the terms of representation.

Equally important is the fact that both the fetish and cult object were concepts built on a dearth of knowledge. Since its invention on the Guinea coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the concept of the fetish has been a fantasy of Europeans with hardly any knowledge of Africa. The concepts of art and cult object were similarly built on the unsteady foundation of ignorance. The great anthropology and art museums of Western Europe and North America held staggering numbers of African objects collected since the nineteenth century, but these objects arrived with little to no information. The NEM was not alone in this regard. The solution offered by the NEM’s curators came from a position of authority and exclusion of other points of view, to be sure, but it also came from a clear awareness of how little they knew about Africa and the African objects housed in their museum.

Yet, we should not throw the baby out with the bath water. The African art exhibitions curated at the NEM and other anthropology and art museums in the age of late modernism played an important cultural, social and political role. In Portugal, the African art curators reflected on the strengths and limitations of “art” and “artifact,” the need to combine these concepts, and the relation between “religion” and “art.” They also elevated the African religious objects to the transcendent realm of modernist art, thereby overcoming the old European idea of the fetish as untranscended materiality. Their critique of the Portuguese con-
cept of the fetiche was in itself a commendable feat in a country then terrorized by a fascist state.

At the same time, however, we also know that the anthropology museum curators in Portugal and elsewhere did not single-handedly dispel the common European belief in the fetishism of Africans, as Latour describes the so-called moderns (1993, 3; 2011). Nor did they put to rest five long centuries of fetish discourse and disdain toward Africa. The continuous fascination with “African art” in anthropology and art museums—first the fascination with modernist African art, and, more recently, the equally strong fascination with the so-called contemporary African art created by African artists of international reputation—might be a telling sign that the concept of the fetish has haunted the anthropology and art museums for the last hundred years. One thing is certain: while anthropology and art museums have been an inextricable part of the long, vexed history of the “fetish,” they have also struggled with their colonial history and fought against the negative concept of the fetish. We need to listen to these curatorial voices in a challenging conversation that is still ongoing.

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notes and references


2 Key references on the concept of the fetish in religion and/or art include De Brosses (1760); Keane (2007); MacGaffey (1994); Masuzawa (2000); Mitchell (2005); Picton (2014); Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988); Sansi (2007); Shelton (1995); Silva (2011, 2013).
For the relation between materiality and transcendence, see Keane (2007), Meyer (2012), and Pietz (1985, 1987).

For a discussion of the art-culture system, see Clifford (1988b), Fernandes Dias (2001), and Price (1989).

All quotes in the Portuguese language were translated into English by the author.

A brief comparison is warranted between Modernism and Black-African Art, held at the NEM in 1976, and “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1984. While both exhibitions rested on the juxtaposition of traditional African art and Euro-American modernist art, they were received in dramatically different ways. While Modernism was received with acclaim, Primitivism unleashed a torrent of pointed critiques, being often described as the end of an era. For an introduction to Primitivism from the perspective of its curators, see Rubin (1984). For a discussion of this controversial show from the critical perspective emerging in the mid-1980s, see, for example, Clifford (1988a) and Foster ([1985] 1998).

For a discussion and critical appraisal of the notion of authenticity in African art, see, for example, Willet (1976) and Phillips and Steiner (1999).


