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**Images of Africa:
Preliminary observations on
the African artefacts in major collection in Australia**

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As a number of you will be aware, for the past several years I have been involved in provenance research on African artifacts in Australian public collections. The aim of the project is not only a contribute to our understanding of Africa material cultures, it seeks insights into the attitudes and motivations of the collectors, into Australian museum acquisition policies over the past hundred years, and into the strengths and weakness of their collections.

My interest in the subject was aroused will serving as African consultant to the Museum of Victoria, as well as in an occasional capacity as expert witness on African artifacts under the provisions of the Australian Cultural Heritage Act. It may surprise you but in certain circumstances, African artefacts can fall within the provisions of the Act. However the effective administration of the Act, its application to individual ethnographic artifacts and any export restrictions which may be applied, are predicated on an understanding and assessment of their cultural significance for Australia.

I became accutely aware of the lack of information on what African materials were available in Australia when curating the Yoruba exhibition some years ago.¹ The findings of my research will eventually be published as a national registry of African artefacts in major public collections in Australia, similar to surveys of Oceanic material in Australia, sponsored by UNESCO a decade ago.² At the time there were plans for a survey of African artefacts but the project foundered for lack of funding. The Oceanic publications have remained standard reference works in the field.

This paper is by way of a preliminary survey of "research in progress". During the past two years I have photographed over 6,000 items and begun constructing a computer data base of provenance information. I anticipate a number of additional years research before it will be possible to produce more than a preliminary inventory. However, when the conference committee chose as its theme, "Images of Africa", I thought it might be fun to share some of my 'discoveries', as well as address the broader issues of the nature of the African collections in Australia. I can't speak on the New Zealand material, though I suspect my remarks will have parallels in your own collections.

¹ David Dorward, ed., Yoruba: Art in Life and Thought (La Trobe University, 1988)

² Lissant Bolton and Jim Specht, Polynesian and Micronesian artefacts in Australia: an inventory of major public collections 3 vols (Sydney: Australian Museum, 1984-85) and Oceanic Cultural Property in Australia (Sydney: Australian Museum, 1980).

I've been struck by the ways in which the older Australian museums tend to complement each other in the geographic and ethnic compositions of their collections. Zairean, Congolese and other equatorial African artefacts, so prominent in the Australian Museum (Sydney) are all but lacking in the Museum of Victoria's collection.

There has been a preoccupation amongst collectors and museum curators throughout the world with the acquisition and display of masks and ritual items. In part, this has been a reflection of the preoccupation with the 'exotic', a heritage in African artifact collecting that can be traced back to the 'curios' in royal collections of the late medieval period. In part, it is because masks and ritual items were viewed as 'art', analogous with Western artistic heritage. As a result, there has been a persistent bias toward viewing African material culture through one aspect, the religious element as exemplified in mask and sculpture. This tendency is best exemplified in Australia by the acquisitions of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

The division between 'art' and 'artifact' is reflected in the division of the collections of the Museum of Victoria and the Gallery of Victoria, when the two institutions physically separated in the 1960s. Until then they had been housed at the same premises on Swanston Street, along with the State Library. The African 'artefacts', along with the stuffed animals and natural history specimens remained with the Museum of Victoria, while the African masks and sculpture are in the Gallery of Victoria (albeit largely unseen). In other words, the collections constitute a cultural bifercation between ritual of "art" items of social and political control, on the one hand, and utilitarian artefacts, on the other. However, from the perspective of scholarly study of African material culture, in many ways the most valuable aspects of the Australian collections are their strengths in domestic artifacts, tools, weapons and personal adornment.³

Recent scholarship has done much to redress such biases. The concept of 'art', as a category, is increasingly acknowledged as Western or alien, with little meaning in an African cultural context. This is not to deny an indigenous notion of aesthetics nor the importance of the study of indigenous iconography.⁴ However, just as we are becoming increasingly aware of the value of more mundane material objects for illuminating the everyday life of people in the past in our own societies⁵, so scholarly attention is focusing on the study of African material culture as a means of understanding changes within African societies, trade and contact between groups and the impact of colonialism. In this context, the Australian collections of African artifacts are particularly valuable.

The Museum of Victoria was founded in 1858, and the Museum of South Australia in 1856, placing them among the oldest ethnographic collections in the world, contemporary with the first ethnographic museums in Europe, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden and the National Museum in Copenhagen. The famous Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford was not established until 1884. Yet the influence of Lt-Gen. Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, D.C.L. (Oxon.), F.R.S.,

³ Barrie Reynolds, "Artifactual Documents: Ethnological Museum Collections as an Ethnohistorical Resource".

⁴ Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker, African Art in the Cycle of Life (Washington: National Museum of African Art, 1988), pp14-25. Susan Mollin Vogel, Aesthetics of African Art: The Carlo Monzino Collection (NY: 1986)

⁵ Work in the home: catalogue of domestic objects held in the Museum of Victoria's history collection, by Liza Dale (Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1989)

F.S.A., (died 4 May 1900, aged 73) appears to have had a profound impact on at least one of the major Australian museums.

On the numerous occasions when visiting the Museum of Victoria I've walked through a hall past a display tracing the development of firearms. I had assumed it was a manifestation of the Anglo-Australian preoccupation with the 'Digger' and the role of the military heroic in Australian History. A mythology which has always struck me as a weak reed upon which to construct a sense of national identity. Unlike the American, French or even Soviet national myths, which laid claim to a Universalist cause the Australian national myth defines by exclusion, as much as inclusion. It is rather like the use of ethnicity in African nationalism, and can have little point of identity for the vast majority of post-war migrants to Australia. A plausible hypothesis, but wrong. Those serried ranks of firearms had been constructed to demonstrate the march of technology, very much in accord with the 'degeneration' theories of Lt General Augustus Pitt-Rivers.

As major in Grenadier Guard, Pitt-Rivers had undertaken a study to improve rifle-musket for British Army. In the words of Henry Balfour, Pitt-Rivers was

"... forcibly struck by the extremely gradual changes whereby improvements were effected..." Through noticing the unfailing regularity of this process of gradual evolution in the case of firearms, he was led to believe that the same principles must probably govern the development of the other arts, appliances and ideas of mankind".⁶

In 1873, Lt-Gen. Pitt-Rivers presented his extensive collection of 14,000 artefacts to the University of Oxford. Housed in annex to the University Museum in 1884, known as the Pitt Rivers Museum⁷ and, in accordance with his deed of gift, the collection was arranged on the basis of comparative technology and in evolutionary series. As The General explained;

human ideas, as demonstrated by the various products of human industry, are capable of classification into Genera, species and varieties, in the same manner as the products of the vegetal and animal kingdom".⁸

The Pitt-Rivers collection formed the basis for anthropological teaching at Oxford University for decades.⁹

The problem with degeneration theory was how to prove the sequence of development. In the absence or disregard of historical information, stylistic criteria were used, often focusing on ornamentation. In the absence of provenance data,

⁶ Henry Balfour, Presidential Address to the Anthropological Section of the British Association, 1904, in H. George Gray, Memoir of Lieut. Pitt-Rivers (1905)

⁷ Pitt Rivers Museum is not hyphenated, though the General added Rivers to his name following the inheritance of the Rivers Estate in Cranborne Chase in 1880. Artefacts from excavations at the Rivers estate, undertaken by the General, were housed at a second Pitt Rivers Museum at Farnham. As Bernard Fagg noted in his introduction to the reprint of Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Antique Workd of Art from Benin (NY: Dover, 1976), p. iii, "... be believed that aantiquities should remain in the neighbourhood in which they are found." No such constraint appears to have governed his attitude toward the collection of antiquities and ethnographic objects.

⁸ Lt-Gen. Pitt-Rivers, "Principles of Classification", in the Journal of the Anthropological Institute VI, 307 (1875)

⁹ T.K. Penniman, Man (1946) # 70.

resemblance in style is still used to ascribe place of origin of objects in collections. Interestingly, it was the study of the diffusion of the bow which Pitt-Rivers used to support his theories, which may partially account for the profusion of spears and other weaponry in all the older Australian collections.

Many of the earliest African artifacts in Australia were collected prior to colonial rule. Others were obtained during the first decade of colonial administration or during the great British colonial acquisition expeditions. Yet, with few exceptions, they have lain undisturbed in storage cabinets for the better part of one-hundred years. I unwrapped a gown at the Museum of Victoria to find noted pinned inside written by a District Officer in Northern Nigeria before the First World War.

The records are often in a similar state of neglect. The number of items 'misplaced' or 'missing' from inventory files are often considerable, while cabinets frequently disgorge un-catalogued artifacts. Occasionally "missing" pieces appear to have been loaned, misplaced and eventually inventoried into other collections. Its like a fascinating jig-saw puzzle. This morning I want to share with you just a few of the "gems" that have come to light.

Irronically, given my earlier remarks, I have opted for the familiar-- the ritual art of an African kingdom, rather than attempt in a few minutes to tease out the story of textile production or the changing form and fashion of Maasai water containers and Zulu beadwork.

In 18 January 1897 British expeditionary captured Benin City and over the course of the next several weeks systematically looted the artifacts. The pillage of Benin was in part official, the Foreign Office using the London sale of captured 'booty' as a means of recouping the cost of the punitive expedition. In addition, officers help themselves. The 240 Benin objects in Gen Pitt-Rivers's collection were purchased from the antique dealers, such as W.D. Webster of Bicester in 1897. Presumably that was how the material in the Museum of South Australia and the Australian Museum in Sydney, found there way to Australia.

A6523 Fine example of a Benin brass royal commemorative head¹⁰ with coral bead headdress and chokers. The winged projections symbolize the Benin ceremonial sword (*ada*). The winged headdress is said to have been introduced by Oba Osemwede ((ca AD 1816-1848)

note the small leopards (a royal animal) on the base.

[Need to take detailed photos of:

- (a) leopard and other items on base
- (b) other side,
- (c) full face

¹⁰ For illustrations of similar winged commemorative heads, see; Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Antique Works of Art from Benin (N.Y., 1976), plate 16, fig. 96 & 97; Sir C.H. Read and O.M. Dalton, Antiquities from the City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum (1899), IX, 5; F. von Luschan, Die Altertumer von Benin 3 vol. (Berlin & Leipzig; Museum fur Volkerkunde, 1919); Plates 59 & 60; figure from Linden Museum fur Lander und Volkerkunde, Stuttgart, in Philip J.C. Dark An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), plates 56-59, p. 27; British Museum, 1944. Af.41 & 97.12-17.1; fine piece from the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, illustrated in R.S. Wassing, African Art: Its background and Traditions (NY, 1988), p. 171.

(d) rear view]

A73539 carved Benin commemorative tusk (2 views)

Such tusks were often mounted atop commemorative heads such as that previously shown. For example, the commemorative brass head with ivory carved tusk from University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia, in Paula Ben-Amos, The Art of Benin (1980), p. 39. or W. and B. Forman and Philip J.C. Dark, Benin Art (London: Hamlyn, 1960), plated 71 & 72

A41813 ~~antiquities from Benin~~ brass staff of bird¹¹ used in Ugie Oro ceremony. Chiefs carry staff and beat on its beak with a brass rod in remembrance of prophecy of disaster by bird to Oba Esigie (16 th century) before battle with Igala. Esigie had bird killed and Benin was victorious. Esigie proclaimed, "... whoever wishes to succeed in life should not heed the bird of prophecy".

E76297 bronze cock, used to decorate the shrine of the Queen Mother.

This one is similar to that in the collection of Jesus College, Cambridge¹² also from the Pitt Rivers collection.¹³

A41812 brass plaque, three figures earing vessels¹⁴ (sacrificial offerings?) with classic Benin wrapper, knotted on left. appear to be two chiefs with coral chokers and eagle feathers in coral beaded headdress, accompanied by lesser ranking third figure, possibly a servant of the Oba since he wears coral necklaces.

The design etched in background is *owen iba ede ku*, 'the sun never misses a day'¹⁵

¹¹ See *abianmwn-oro* in:
Metropolitan Museum of New York, reproduced in Paula Ben-Amos, The Art of Benin (1980), p. 75.

Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Antique Works of Art from Benin (N.Y., 1976), plate 46, figures 356 and 357. In Fig. 138, Plate XXIII, figures are shown holding bird staves and hitting their beaks of birds with rods.

See also "Antiquities from Benin in the British Museum", Plate XXIX, Fig. 3.

¹² Philip J.C. Dark An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), plates 24, p.12.

¹³ Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Antique Works of Art from Benin (N.Y., 1976), plate 24, figures 143-144.

¹⁴ It is reminiscent of the three figured plaque illustrated in W. and B. Forman and Philip J.C. Dark, Benin Art (London: Hamlyn, 1960), plates 7 & 8; Sir C.H. Read and O.M. Dalton, Antiquities from the City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum (1899), Plate XXVIII/2 and F. von Luschan, Die Altertumer von Benin 3 vol. (Berlin & Leipzig: Museum fur Volkerkunde, 1919), text illustration 76.

¹⁵ Paula Ben-Amos, The Art of Benin (1980), p. 28.

- E76295 Am less comfortable with this plaque from the Australian Museum collection-- need to do a deal more provenance research before I am satisfied that it is genuine. (???)
- E76290 Portuguese soldier
- The guilloche motif on the base is common in many of this type of free-standing figures.
- The piece shows considerable individuality but is comparable with other published pieces ¹⁶
- E76291 This trumpeter with the side-blown trumpet is a very nice piece.
- An excellent example. Such trumpets (*erere*) were used on ceremonial occasions, such as the *Ugie-ivie* ceremony at which the royal beads (*ivie*) were placed on the shrine of Oba Ewuare by the Iwebo Otu (ritual specialist) and revitalized with human sacrifice.
- This piece has the characteristic fibre hats worn by the royal trumpeters and the distinctive projection upward of the kilt on the left side, a special feature only occasionally found.
- It compares favourably with that from the British Museum¹⁷
- A18355 side-blown trumpet of ivory tusk, attributed to Benin
- Most of the ivory tusk side-blown trumpets I have seen from Benin have been carved and the mouth-pieces are different.
- E76293 Am also uncertain of the Benin attribution to this piece in the Australian Museum. I suspect it to be Yoruba, or possibly Igala. The markings on the checks and at the corners of the mouth would appear to be Yoruba.
- E76294 Finally, there is little doubt about this piece, a fine example of Edo brass-casting. ¹⁸

I hope you have enjoyed sharing with me these Images of Africa.

¹⁶ Nigerian Museum, Lagos, in Philip J.C. Dark An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), plate 31, p. 15; also, plate 16, illus 32 & 33.; or the British Museum piece in Paula Ben-Amos, The Art of Benin (1980), plate 26, p. 26 and Philip J.C. Dark, Benin Art (London: Hamlyn, 1960), plate 49.

¹⁷ Philip J.C. Dark, Benin Art (London: Hamlyn, 1960), plate 23.
Philip J.C. Dark An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), plate 44, illus. 95

¹⁸ cf; piece from City of Liverpool Public Museum, in Philip J.C. Dark An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), plate 63, page 30; also from Pitt Rivers Collection in Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Antique Works of Art from Benin (N.Y., 1976)p. 31, plate 15, illus 86-87; p. 43, plate 21, illus 126-127.

