CROSS-CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS: THREE COLLECTIONS OF AFRICAN VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN CANADIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

by

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Abstract

In recent years, revisionism in Canadian museums has created a space for the development of different ways of classifying and representing non-Western visual and material culture. Despite these changes, many mainstream or authoritative museums and other cultural institutions still operate largely as separate from the constituent communities to which the non-Western collections in their possession are directly related. This thesis investigates the complex relationship between three different types of collections of African visual and material culture in Canada, the institutions in which they reside, and the relationship to the constituent communities that have a stake in the reception of these collections. These collections include the ethnographic collection of African artifacts at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, and the African cultural collection at the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg. As this thesis makes clear, the very nature of incorporating, classifying and displaying African visual and material culture in Western museums, which are a direct product of the colonial era, is fraught with contentions. In light of this, the growth in cultural centres in Canada in recent years has the potential to inform mainstream museums, offering new ways of approaching and engaging with not only non-Western objects, but also their diverse constituent communities. By focusing on the discourse of museum representation in relation to African collections in Canada, this thesis posits that these collections can be understood as crucial sites for the promotion of cross-cultural negotiations between African and non-African Canadian communities.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my mother, Sandy Howard, who taught me how to live. For this gift, I am forever grateful. To my father, Gary Howard, who has always been my number one fan, and who has believed in me even when I found it difficult to believe in myself. And, to my best friend and husband, Corey Lynam, who has been and continues to be my rock.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Cross-Cultural Negotiations

The best way to think about the changing relations between museums and communities is to think about how the audience, as passive entity, becomes the community, as an active agent. This is a process in which self-appointed or delegated representatives of a community contest a museum’s perspective by articulating a community point of view.

—Ivan Karp “Museums and Communities,” 1992

Collections of African visual and material culture in Canadian museums are invariably the products of complex imperial, colonial, missionary, economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian relations. It is an ongoing struggle for many museums to make African collections comprehensible to diverse audiences, especially because few people working in Canadian cultural institutions know much about the complex realities of the continent (Vogel 1991).¹ My study, therefore, investigates the history and diversity of three different types of collections of African visual and material culture in Canada in order to advance more nuanced frameworks by which to understand the ways these African collections have been interpreted, represented and displayed in different types of cultural institutions.

¹ In recent decades the very idea of “Africa” has been opened up to question. While, at one level, Africa refers to the continental landmass, at another, Africa is a constructed term used in the West to reference a monolithic, static, timeless and unknown land. In addition, as Roy Grinker and Christopher Steiner point out, this idea of Africa has adversely affected how African nations, peoples, cultures and aesthetic practices have been represented in the West and its cultural institutions. As they note, “Africa has […] been elaborated and articulated negatively in Europe and North America in broad cultural
institutions. Utilizing the museum as a lens, I examine the changing nature of classifying and displaying African visual and material culture in Canada. This project emerges at a critical moment, when museums are grappling with new models designed to make museums more reflexive in their approach to collections as well as accessible and inclusive of the diverse communities to which the collections are related.²

My project is organized around three types of African collections in Canada: ethnographic, art and cultural. The ethnographic collection is represented by the Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, a large city with a diverse population. The connoisseur or art collection is embodied in the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, a medium-sized city with a predominantly Caucasian population. And the cultural collection is represented by the African collection of the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, Ontario, a small town with a substantial Black Canadian population. By investigating these three African collections in relation to their divergent communities and locations, in terms of their types and sizes, and in light of the exhibitions and displays they have generated, I assess their relationship (if any) to contemporary African Canadian communities. The three case studies, focusing on three types of African collections at three different cultural institutions, serve as platforms for discussing how these collections operate in larger social, political and cultural contexts. Each collection also functions as a product of its time and that time’s prevailing

² In the field of museum representation, the term reflexive refers to the ways in which museums analyze events and experiences by critically deconstructing the various layers of meaning to expose larger narratives and issues (Tator, Henry and Mattis, 1998).
classification system for non-Western objects. A case study approach is well-suited to my study, as each institution introduces a new set of issues and approaches in relation to exhibitions and displays. In order to critically engage these issues and approaches I analyze the ways each institution explains its collection in terms of larger historical and contemporary narratives.

Anthropologist James Clifford argues that since the turn of the century, objects of non-Western origin have been classified as either “(scientific) cultural artifacts” or “(aesthetic) works of art” in what he refers to as the “art-culture system” (Clifford 1988; Steiner 1996; Phillips and Steiner 1999, 3). Many museums (particularly ethnographic museums and art museums) continue to uphold these classifications as a regulatory system for categorizing non-Western visual and material culture as either art or artifact.

In this system, non-Western objects that operate outside these two categories of art and artifact are deemed “mass produced commodities,” “tourist art,” or “curios,” all of which are seen to be less authentic, less original and therefore less valued by museums and collectors (fig. 1).

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3 I use the terms Western and non-Western to describe a historical discourse and construct, not a geographical reference point. Traditionally, the binary West/non-West was used to describe superficial hierarchies, whereby the West was seen as a model the non-West should emulate (Hall 1992).

4 The debate surrounding the classification of objects as art or artifact has permedated the field of museum studies as well as other disciplines. See for example, Clifford (2007), Karp, Kratz, Szwaja and Ybarra-Frausto (2007), Levin (2007), and Shelton (2006).

5 The tourist art market for African art is ripe with contradictions, making the classification of “tourist art” or objects deemed to be inauthentic increasingly complex. On the one hand, tourist art in Africa is often classified as such based on the perception that it is derivative rather than original. Tourists, in their consumption of African art works, are not looking for unique objects, but rather, recognizable, familiar ones. According to anthropologist Kenneth Little, “tourists come to Africa with a perspective and story in mind and then try to find scenes that resemble these prior images that evoke recognition.
and an easy sense of familiarity” (Little 1991). The same can be said in relation to the particular objects that tourists seek to purchase in art markets. Similarly, as Christopher Steiner argues, “anything that deviates too far from the accepted canons of a particular ethnic style is judged to be inauthentic” (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 101). He uses the example of a Baule face mask, which traditionally is characterized by smooth patina, balanced proportions, and clear lines. According to Steiner, if a Baule mask features types of adornment that stray from the norm, such as multicoloured glass beads, “the mask would be viewed as inauthentic because of its originality” and lack of reference to traditional forms. At the same time, however, replicas of traditional forms of African art can also be seen as inauthentic because they are mass-produced and thus not original. Such evaluations and systems of classification of African art as “tourist art” or “inauthentic” are thus inherently contradictory, even though these systems permeate Western museums (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 101-102).
By utilizing Clifford’s notion of the art-culture system, I show how African collections have been classified within Canadian cultural institutions. For example, the ROM has classified the objects in its African collection as ethnographic artifacts, whereas the Art Centre refers to the objects in its African collection as works of art. The African collection in my third case study, that of the Cultural Centre, however, is housed within a different type of institution in Canada, one that is directly connected to non-Western communities. As a result, the African collection at the Cultural Centre is not easily classified within the categories of the Western art-culture system as a collection of art or artifacts. As my project explains, these three collections of African material culture are representative of the complex and often contradictory ways African objects have been classified based upon the institutions in which they reside: as ethnographic artifacts, in the case of the ROM; works of art, in the case of Queen’s University’s Art Centre; and as

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6 As Susan Vogel notes, “Western culture has appropriated African art and attributed to it meanings that are overwhelmingly Western” (1991, 192). In many ways, the Western museum classification system, which is a direct product of Enlightenment thinking, continues to reinforce hierarchies that reflect colonial attitudes towards non-Western cultures and objects (Phillips 2011, 95). These systems of meaning and value inform museums by sorting and defining certain objects as art, artifact, commodity or souvenir, and in turn by relegating such objects to the disciplines of art history, anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, history, or natural science. Disciplinary boundaries, therefore, dictate those objects that are included and those that are excluded from the Western museum system.

7 Much of the literature that surrounds the classification of non-Western material culture takes on this dualistic distinction between art and artifact by highlighting the ambiguous nature of these terms. Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner argue that by focusing on the ambiguities and inadequacies of such terms, scholars run the risk of “validating the very terms that require deconstruction” (1999, 5; Phillips 2011, 95-96). Instead, they expand upon Clifford’s art-culture system by adding to the art/artifact dichotomy a third category – the commodity. The commodity, which they describe as a “hybrid art form,” gained prominence with the rapid growth of the tourist industry during the Victorian era (1999; 9). Phillips and Steiner’s addition of commodity as hybrid art form offers an additional and expanded method for studying the ways that non-Western objects have been classified by Western institutions.
ongoing expressions of an existing culture, in the case of Amherstburg’s Cultural Centre (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 3; Phillips 2011, 96).

**Museum and Community Negotiations**

In recent decades, the practice of representing non-Western visual and material culture in Western museums and other cultural institutions has become increasingly contested, leading to intense critique and debate across many academic disciplines. In Canada, as a result of several high profile museum-based controversies since the 1980s, notably those surrounding the exhibitions “The Spirit Sings” at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1988 and “Into the Heart of Africa” at the ROM in 1989, more and more attention is being given to the politics of representation of non-Western visual and material culture. In many ways, Canada has become a leader in collaborative work between museums and Native North American peoples, which has resulted in a rethinking of the ways in which museums operate in relation to cultural diversity. Nonetheless, while the development of new protocols for working with Native North American peoples can be seen as a positive step towards more inclusive forms of collaboration and representation, there has been little reevaluation of the methods employed in representing and displaying African collections in Canadian museums. Meanwhile, the study of African visual and material culture is becoming more complex. With increased immigration of peoples from the African continent to Canada throughout the second half of the 20th century, African collections are now beginning to take on new meanings and political significance, and local African and African Canadian communities are becoming more involved with the ways these collections are exhibited and displayed.
Building upon Mary Louise Pratt’s book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation* (1992), Clifford advances the concept of the museum as a “contact zone” as a way to describe the relationship between museums and communities. Clifford argues, “When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull” (1997). The “push and pull” that he describes echoes many of ways in which the cultural institutions I consider contend with the African collections in their possession and the subsequent relations with constituent communities affected by them. While this “push and pull” between cultural institution and community often results in productive consultative processes and exhibition strategies, this is not always the case. Sometimes tension, or rather, friction, is created between a cultural institution and the communities that have a stake in the representation of the collections. Objects in museum collections have become sites of controversy and resistance as communities seek to restore important attachments and connections with certain objects of cultural significance. Expanding upon Clifford’s notion of museums as “contact zones,” Corinne Kratz and Ivan Karp coin the term “museum frictions” to signal the “varied and often changing set of practices, processes, and interactions” between museums and communities (Karp, Szwaja and Yabarra-Frusto 2006, 4). Contemporary communities are not only internally complex, but are also in a constant state of flux, rapid reconfiguration and change (Hutcheon 1995, 92; Anderson 1983).

Most discussions surrounding museum communities focus on what are often referred to as “ethnic” communities. My study is attentive to communities that self-identify in ethnic terms, but I also try to expand the concept of community to include
different types of communities that occur both inside and outside cultural institutions. In many cases, stereotypes are often used by museums to foster commonalities based upon superficial markers for specified “ethnic” communities or special interest groups outside institutions. “What these stereotypes produce for dominant cultural nationalist discourses,” as Shalini Puri argues, “is the fiction of one seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests pitted against another seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests” (Puri 1997, 121). It should also be noted, however, that within a particular community or group, there are often internal disagreements and competing views, which result in divergent interpretations of material in museum collections. As Karp points out,

Every society can be seen as a constantly changing mosaic of multiple communities and organizations. Individual identities and experiences never derive entirely from single segments of society – from merely one of the communities out of which the complex and changing social order is made. (1992, 3)

He adds that “museums’ audiences belong to many communities, often simultaneously” (12). The negotiations or frictions that occur between these different types of communities are increasingly recognized as being complex and multifaceted.

While “most accounts of museum-community relations focus on ethnic communities,” as Christine Mullen-Kreamer puts it, there are also internal communities within museums and other cultural institutions, as Constance Perin reminds us (1992, 377; Perin 1992). These communities are made up of professionals, such as directors, curators, educators, committees, and administrators, each of which makes up the audience for different ideas, opinions, perspectives, and interests. These museum or
professional communities are often not acknowledged as playing a central role in the construction of exhibitions and displays. Instead, as Perin observes, “‘the museum’ tends to be conceived as a single, cooperative agent” (1992, 188). Similarly, the curator of an exhibition is often viewed as an isolated authority rather than as someone who is part of a larger museum community (Vogel 1991). This can be challenging, especially when an exhibition is contested. In order to contextualize the complexities of each institution, internally and externally, therefore, my study examines a broad spectrum of exhibition strategies, from institution-driven and curator-driven to community-driven, for interpreting and representing collections of African visual and material culture (Lavine 1992, 149).

While collaborations between “in-house” museum communities and constituent communities outside the institution have become more popular, these collaborations are not without challenges. In many cases, the museum or professional communities may see these types of collaborations as threatening to their expertise and authority. At the same time, if a collaboration is intended, constituent communities often see a lack of adequate consultation as offensive and exclusionist. In addition, the politics of representing non-Western visual and material culture in Western cultural institutions is becoming increasingly contested, making collaborations difficult to implement. Communities often want to become more involved in the ways their histories, cultures, and identities are

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8 For example, in the case of “Into the Heart of Africa” at the ROM in 1989, constituent communities that were angered by the presentation and content of the exhibition targeted the curator rather than the museum or the larger museum community. In contrast, during “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in 1988, Aboriginal communities outside the institution targeted the museum itself, not the curators of the exhibition. These two examples, as I discuss later in this study, point to the differences between and complexities of the two cases.
represented to diverse audiences. As a result, the relationship between museums and communities is becoming more and more complicated. Many museums have begun to question their own position of power and authority and, in doing so, are re-thinking disciplinary boundaries, methods of display, and exhibition strategies. At the same time, museum audiences and communities are re-envisioning themselves as active participants instead of passive recipients of knowledge (Karp 1992, 12-13). Steven Lavine asks a key question: “How are museums to recognize and represent these divergent points of view within groups?” He goes on to argue, “Museum officials, accustomed to speaking authoritatively, must recognize that their choice of whom to hire and whom to listen to retains for them the cultural power to cast the terms of discourse about people and history.” As a result, he calls for an “adequate process of dialogue” in which the traditional authoritative voice of the museum is challenged and opened up to the “voice of a pluralistic society” (1992, 145).

In recent years, museums and other cultural institutions have responded to the challenges put forward by their various communities, and in the process have begun to acknowledged the importance of community involvement. While this more recent shift has been instrumental in opening up museums, there is the risk that this interrogation of institutional authority will devolve into what Sarat Maharaj refers to as “multi-cultural managerialism” (quoted in Rogoff 2002, 66). Often times, as my case studies illustrate, for occasional exhibitions or other special displays highlighting cultural events such as Black History Month, museums do one or more of the following: appoint a task force committee to identify certain members of the specified community that the museum has recognized as being part of its constituency; hire or add new staff members from the
these communities, although usually in lower-level or volunteer positions; or, as is most common, invite specified members from the museum’s constituency to view and comment on the exhibition after it has already been completed and to help market the show. Irit Rogoff refers to this as the “additive model,” whereby museums “bring in” cultural difference in order to appear more inclusive (2002, 66). Since the 1980s, this strategy has been used in various ways. However, while the museums’ efforts to address wider and more diverse constituencies may seem like a major step towards more inclusive practices, the process has been slow and often superficial. As Rogoff argues, “In relation to cultural difference within Western cultural institutions, we seem to have made a smooth transition from exclusion to inclusion, from xenophobia to xenophilia in one fell swoop and without unravelling ourselves or our institutional practices in the process” (2002, 66).

**Negotiating Terminology**

Throughout this thesis I refer to ‘Black communities’ and ‘African Canadian communities’ because these are the terms used both by members of the communities themselves and by specific cultural institutions. However, I am cognizant that the Black community, just like the African Canadian community, is a social construction that often does not allow for complexity and multiplicity. As Rinaldo Walcott points out, citing Renuka Sooknanan, “Black community is not a static category: it is complex and diverse” (2000, 140). It is, therefore, a mistake to think of such communities as possessing some form of sameness. Walcott explains that “in Canada, Black communities proliferate, constituted of continental Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, Black Canadians, and others who share certain histories, but who also claim divergent and sometimes antagonistic
narratives of the past” (2000, 42-43). He goes on to make distinctions between Black communities in Canada and those in the United States, noting the formative impact on such distinctions of Canada’s policy of official multiculturalism:

The policies and discourse of multiculturalism in Canada have allowed for a particular enactment of cultural difference, which in fact pre-empts any coherent or imagined national Black community. This obvious diversity is very different from the US, where a national Black community sponsors large lobby organizations, such as the NAACP and the Urban League, to promote ‘national Black interests.’ (2000, 42-43)

Too often, Joseph Mensah and Walcott argue, Black Canadians are viewed as sharing the same histories, traditions, and cultures, despite the fact that Blacks who have settled in Canada have come from many different countries, have arrived at different times, and occupy very different subject positions (Mensah 2002, 3; Walcott 2003, 150). Clifford asks tough questions in relation to how museums must contend with these challenges:

Who, after all, is best qualified by “experience” (what kinds?), by depth and breadth of knowledge (what knowledges?), to control and interpret an African collection? African Canadians who have never been to Africa and who may hold an idealized vision of its cultures? White Anthropologists and curators who have spent considerable time on the continent and have studied its history in depth, but have never viscerally known racism or colonization? Contemporary Africans? (From which ethnicity, nation, or region? Living in Africa? In Canada?). (1997, 208)

Here, Clifford brings to the forefront many of the tensions surrounding the nature of representing and displaying African collections in Canadian cultural institutions and the resulting conflicts and contestations between these institutions and the communities they seek to represent. Therefore, by keeping in mind Sooknanan’s argument that “the Black
community’ is a nebulous sign, which doesn’t allow for complexity,” I argue that the implications of Sooknanan’s, Mensah’s, Walcott’s, and Clifford’s observations are imperative to my discussion, especially when considering the various ways in which museums convey a “universalized” (Western) aesthetic when representing non-Western visual and material culture (quoted in Walcott 2000, 141).

**Chapter Breakdown**

One of the central goals of this thesis is to show the changes that each of the three case study institutions have made in recent decades in order to be more inclusive and to demonstrate awareness of diverse communities, audiences, perceptions, and expectations. By showcasing three very different institutions (authoritative ethno-logy museum, mainstream art gallery, and alternative cultural centre) and how they have dealt with African collections, which come out of often complex historical, political, and economic contexts, I illustrate the magnitude and scope of African collections in Canadian cultural institutions, as well as the magnitude and scope of the field of collecting itself. Borrowing from Clifford, I suggest that each of these three institutions “mix[es] the discourse of art, culture, politics, and history in specific, hierarchical ways. They contest and complement one another in response to a changing historical situation and an unequal balance of cultural and economic power” (1997, 110).

By taking into account the disciplinary boundaries that have been created and are maintained by Western insitutions, this study contextualizes how the three institutions I focus on interpret, categorize, and represent non-Western visual and material culture within such boundaries. In chapter 2, I examine the history of collecting and representing non-Western visual and material culture in Western museums and ongoing and growing
debates since the 1980s. I argue that as a result of colonial collecting history and subsequent postcolonial interventions, non-Western collections have taken centre stage in a much larger debate about who has the power to represent whom.

The second part of this chapter centres on the controversies and contradictions surrounding the representation of African and Native North American visual and material culture in Canada, with a focus on specific case studies within museums in the 1980s and 1990s. These controversies have led to a growing backlash against museum institutions as seen, for example, in the heated debates sparked by “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary during the 1988 Winter Olympic celebrations and the Barnes Collection controversy at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1994. The outcomes of both these events have shaped current forms of museum representation at the Glenbow Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, as well as museums and cultural institutions across the country. Here, I posit that the controversies that ensued at each institution can be viewed as instrumental in challenging museums to confront their positions of power and create new models for inclusive and reflexive ways of representing diverse cultural and material objects.

Following this discussion, I use chapter 3 to introduce the state of African visual and material culture in Canadian collections and to expose the complex and multifaceted issues arising from these collections. From here, I consider the key exhibitions of African visual and material culture at major Canadian cultural institutions, which have helped to expose such collections to a wider viewing audience. The significant exhibitions include “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” (1978) hosted by the National Gallery of Canada and “Beads of Life” (2005) at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. I use the exhibitions to
showcase the significant contributions they have made to the larger study of African visual and material culture in Canada.

The subsequent three chapters form the body of my thesis. For each of these chapters I utilize a case study approach to examine the intricacies of each major collection in relation to the corresponding institutional and disciplinary frameworks for understanding African visual and material culture. My first case study, which focuses on the ethnographic collection of African artifacts at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, forms the basis for chapter 4. Here I consider how the history and focus of the ROM as a museum of anthropology and “World Cultures” are played out in the representation and classification of its African collection. Following this, I examine how the demographic space of Toronto—an ethnically diverse and multicultural city—affects how the African collection has been exhibited.

In the second part of chapter 4, I explore the African collection at the ROM as a whole: where the artifacts in the permanent collection came from, and the reasons for collectors donating them to the ROM. I then analyze the exhibitions of the African collection mounted by the ROM both before and after “Into the Heart of Africa,” a controversial exhibition that, in 1989, marked a defining moment in the exhibition of African material at the museum. Following this section, I examine what has happened at the museum since “Into the Heart of Africa,” including the exhibition “Artifacts of History: Research and the ROM’s African Collection.” By contextualizing the aftermath of “Into the Heart of Africa” in relation to the reception of “Artifacts of History” I suggest reasons why the ROM placed its predominantly historic African collection back
into storage after “Artifacts of History” and, instead, shifted its focus to exhibitions dealing with African Canadian art, culture, and history.

In the fourth and final part of this chapter on the ROM, I look at the recent reinstallation of the African collection as part of the larger Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific, including the methods of displaying and representing the collection within the broader World Cultures Galleries. Here I argue that, by shifting the focus away from the predominantly historical African collection to contemporary African visual culture and African Canadian art, culture, and history, the ROM has repositioned itself to actively engage with local and contemporary African diasporic and African Canadian communities on several collaborative projects.

Utilizing the same methodology and framework established in chapter 4, my next chapter presents a critical analysis of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. I use this first part of chapter 5 to illustrate the ways in which the demographics of Kingston—a predominantly Caucasian community—has affected the methods for classifying and displaying the African collection and how it has been exhibited to reach a viewing audience which, for the most part, knows very little about the African continent.

Following my discussion, I use the second part of this chapter to explore the Lang Collection as a whole—the origins of the collection and the Langs’ motivations as collectors. The Langs donated their collection to the Art Centre in 1984. Since then, they have ensured a strong profile for the collection at the Art Centre through the establishment of a trust indenture to cover the costs of preservation, research, and display of the collection.
In the third and final part of chapter 5, I examine major exhibitions of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre, including events that took place in conjunction with the exhibitions, such as conferences, workshops, and public lectures. This research has allowed me to assess the degree to which the collection and its exhibitions have been used to foster cultural awareness of Africa and African Canadians, and so I also look at how the African exhibitions and related programs have been represented to the public. I use this history of the collection in turn to assess the current status of the collection.

Working in turn to bring the two institutions together in discussion, I employ the first section of chapter 6 to contextualize and contrast many of the ways in which both the ROM and the Art Centre interpret and represent the African collections. While in recent years, revisionism in Canadian museums has begun to create a space for the development of different ways of thinking about and classifying non-Western objects, many institutions, such as the ROM and Art Centre, still operate largely as separate from their constituencies. At the same time, there has been a parallel emergence of different types of cultural institutions in Canada, such as cultural centres, which operate as both a product of the Western museum system and in opposition to such institutions and their systems of classification. Cultural centres have the potential to inform mainstream or authoritative museums by offering new ways of envisioning, approaching and engaging with not only non-Western objects, but also their diverse constituent communities. They can be seen as a different type of institution or as standing in opposition to mainstream museums because they are directly linked to the communities from which they grow. While cultural centres can be seen as informed by the Western museum system, they are not a product of this system and their collections are not structured as such.
Thus, for my third case study, I use the second part of chapter 6 to analyze the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, Ontario, as an example of a community-based cultural institution with an African cultural collection. The Cultural Centre can be seen as an different type of institution in that it was created both by the community and for the community. I first examine the location of the Cultural Centre in Amherstburg and the reasons why this site is important. I also consider how the Cultural Centre functions as a major tourist site within the contemporary demographic space of Amherstburg as a site both for the encouragement of the local African Canadian community and for increasing ethnic awareness of Black Canadians among non-Black Canadians.

For the final part of this chapter, I consider the specifics of the African collection at the Cultural Centre and discuss how the collection came into being. I then analyze how the collection functions within the larger parameters of the Cultural Centre, including how it is classified, displayed, and represented to visitors in relation to the other exhibits focusing on Black Canadian history. I conclude this section by showing how the Cultural Centre contributes to the ongoing vitality of the local and contemporary African Canadian communities.

As my project makes clear, the very nature of incorporating, classifying and displaying African visual and material culture in Western museums, which are a direct product of the colonial era, is fraught with contentions. This study is, therefore, important because museums occupy a unique position of power in that they have the ability to influence the way people think about diverse African cultures. By focusing on the discourses of museum representation within the realm of collecting practices, I argue that
African collections are crucial sites for the promotion of cross-cultural negotiations between African diasporic and non-African communities in Canada.
Chapter 2

Literature Review: Representing Non-Western Collections in Western Museums and Other Cultural Institutions

Museums and their exhibitions have become controversial sites in a number of respects over the past few years. They no longer merely provide a pleasant refuge from ordinary life, nor are they simple repositories of received wisdom. Museums have moved to the forefront in struggles over representation and over the chronicling, revising, and displaying of the past. Museums today differ greatly from their predecessors.

—Steven Dubin, Displays of Power, 1999

“Cabinets of Curiosity” and the Rise of the Modern Museum

The pursuit of non-Western objects became increasingly popular from the 16th through the 19th centuries, as collectors strove to create encyclopedic collections of the natural and material world. Many scholars in recent years have studied how non-Western objects have been collected, classified and displayed in these early collections, also referred to as “Curiosity Cabinets” and Kunstkammer or Wunderkammer (Impey and MacGregor 1985; Stocking Jr. 1988; Pomian 1990; Thomas 1991; Pearce 1994; Bredekamp 1995; DaCosta Kaufmann 1978, 1993; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Hawks 2001). Their studies suggest that

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9 Samuel Quickeberg (1529-1567), a Flemish physician, was one of the first to employ the term Kunstammer (German for “art room”) and Wunderkammer (German for “wonder-room”) to describe European “Curiosity Cabinets,” which contained diverse collections of natural specimens, human-made objects, exotic animals, ethnographic artifacts, works of art, flora and fauna. These private collections were often displayed in large cabinets or in specified areas of the home. Quickeberg recommended that, to advance knowledge, early collectors create both systems of classification for objects and textual interpretations of them (Pearce 1994, 178-179). Throughout the early modern
many early collectors believed that by owning a collection of so-called exotic material culture—what we would now call non-Western material culture—they would be able to influence or manipulate materials and artifacts to inform their own ideas about the ordering of the world: “The Kunstkammer conveyed symbolically the patron’s control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction” (Florani 1991, 268). Many of these early collections were, therefore, seen as miniature worlds by which the collector could impose systems of classification informed by notions of power (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 105-106; Findlen 1994, 119; DaCosta Kaufmann 1978, 22, 28). Such collections emerged from the centre of the colonizer’s world, as Eileen Hooper-Greenhill notes:

As explorers, traders, missionaries and others voyaged across the world they brought back artefacts, many of which were to be drawn together in museums in such a way as to map out the world. The extremities, the margins, the peripheries and the limits of the known world were pictured and imagined. This picture was presented as a universal and complete worldview, with the home territory acting as the centre from which the world was viewed. (2000, 18)

The process of collecting and the act of owning a collection of exotic objects took on a new sense of urgency during the 19th century, when many people believed that races were “dying,” that indigenous cultures around the world were on the brink of extinction.10 There was, as a result, a desire to collect cultural artifacts from around the period, collecting artifacts of cultural significance from travels to colonial territories for display in curiosity cabinets became a common European activity.

10 Throughout this thesis I use the larger term, indigenous, to refer to peoples who claim both historical and cultural presence in regions prior to the arrival of Europeans. I also use the terms Aboriginal and Native North American when referring to peoples in Canada who comprise the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. I use the term Native American to describe peoples indigenous to the United States.
world to create miniature replicas of cultures that many thought would inevitably
disappear due to rapid industrialization and modernization (Bredekamp 1995, 72). 11 19th
century collectors, scholars have found, justified the removal of artifacts from colonial
territories as an effort to keep a record of these so-called vanishing cultures (Clifford
1988, 1997; Coombes 1994; Bredekamp 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Phillips and

It is evident that the non-Western objects in many 19th century collections came to
Europe as spoils of war. The act of collecting such material objects, therefore, became a
form of colonial conquest itself, whereby the objects collected represented material signs
of victory (Classen and Howes 2006, 209; Thomas 1991, 181). As Suzanne Preston Blier
notes, due to the rapid colonization of African nations during the 19th century, “state
treasures of kingdoms such as Benin, Asante, and Dahomey were taken to Europe as war
booty following the defeat of their rulers by European forces” (2008, 17). These so-called
“treasures” or “war booty,” which made up many private collections during this period,
became, as Carol Duncan, Ivan Karp and Corrine Kratz have shown, the basis for the
creation of early public and national museums in Europe. “The earliest national
museums,” they write, “developed from princely or private collections and cabinets of
curiosity, with collections expanded through colonial expansion, imperial plunder,

11 The increased desire for goods from the African continent culminated in what has been
referred to as the “scramble for Africa” in 1881, after the French claimed Tunisia, and in
1882, when the British occupied Egypt. In a conference in Berlin in 1884-1885, the
European colonizing states began dividing up the African coast, as well as the interior of
the continent. By World War I, the entire continent, with the exception of Ethiopia and
Liberia, was colonized by European states. The colonization of the continent also
coincided with a vast influx of African objects to Europe. These collections of African
objects began to fill museums in France, Britain, Belgium, Germany, and Italy
(Schildkrout and Keim 1998; Bickford Berzock and Clarke 2011).
scientific exchange, and aristocratic, elite, industrial, and state patronage” (Karp et al. 2006, 3; Boswell and Evans 1999). The many reasons for such objects appearing in European collections, therefore, exemplify the active projects of Europe’s colonizers in support of larger narratives about evolution and progress in relation to nationalist ideologies and the mapping of boundaries. These narratives actively severed objects from their original contexts. Susan Sleeper-Smith explains how museums later reconfigured the nature of these colonial objects through exhibitions and displays:

> Objects that were placed in museums were initially decontextualized and made to tell an evolutionary narrative about the progress of Western societies and the primitiveness of Indigenous communities. Museums functioned as powerful rhetorical devices that created dominant and often pathological allegiances to a cultural ideal. (2009, 2)

Thus, museums’ collecting and display strategies used not only nationalistic ideologies, but also scientific and typological classifications to justify generalized and derogatory views of non-Western cultures (Clifford 1995b; Phillips 2011). By presenting exhibitions and displays that upheld these particular worldviews for visitors, museums became

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12 In 1626, naturalist and explorer John Tradescant the Elder’s (1570-1638) collection formed the basis of the first museum in Britain, the Museum Tradescantianum in Lambeth, South London. Tradescant’s son, John Tradescant the Younger (1608-1662), eventually inherited the collection and sold it to Elias Ashmole (1617-1692), who in turn left the collection to Oxford University in the late 17th century. Tradescant the Elder’s collection eventually formed the basis of the first public museum in Britain, the Ashmolean Museum, which formally opened its doors to the public in 1677 (“History of the Ashmolean”). Similarly, the British Museum was established by physician Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), whose collection was acquired by the British government in 1753 (Wilson 2002).

13 Typically, European museums were created as institutions of the state. Their collections and exhibitions, therefore, reflected nationalist ideologies (Duncan and Wallach 1980, 450; Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 131).
powerful knowledge producers. It is no surprise, as a result, that museums are not only a product of colonial pursuits, as many studies have argued, but are also directly related to the formation of the modern nation state and nationalist ideologies.

**The Modern Museum**

Since the rise of the modern museum in the 19th century, the museum has been advanced as a democratic space for the interpretation and storage of world knowledge, culture, and history. At the same time, as a number of scholars have noted, museums have served instead as nothing more than civic temples of high culture catering to the values of a small and elite portion of the population (Ames 1991; Karp 1991; Pearce 1992, 1994; Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Loukaitou-Sideras and Grodach 2004; Karp, Kratz, Szwaja and Ybarra-Frausto 2007; Mullen Kreamer 1992). Like many earlier collectors of the 16th to the 18th centuries, who sought to propagate their own world views through ordering and classifying visual and material culture, early museums acted as places not only for cultivating standards of taste, but also for playing out hierarchies of race, class, and gender (Bourdieu 1969, 1984, 1993; Osborne 1985, 42; Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach 2004, 54-55). Thus, museums upheld such binaries as white/black, rich/poor, male/female, civilized/primitive and modern/pre-modern to convey to their audiences notions of difference, which are now recognized as discriminatory ideas, while at the same time supposedly providing a democratic and unbiased space for the interpretation of many histories. According to Hooper-Greenhill, “many museums became divorced from the communities they were set up to serve.” She goes on to note that often museums “became inwardly focused and introspective institutions that turned
their backs on societies that no longer fully upheld the purposes for which museums had been founded” (2000, 21).

During the mid-19th century, the distinction between natural history museums and art museums began to take shape. In natural history museums, non-Western objects were increasingly used to define and categorize cultures based upon hierarchies of race, class and gender. While aesthetics were often acknowledged, the study of art was not the primary goal of such institutions (Vogel 1988; Duncan 1995; Conn 2000; McClellan 2007). At the same time, objects placed in art museums became largely divorced from any cultural origins, functions and context. Instead, objects were classified and valued based upon Western notions of beauty and originality. The distinction between fine art and ethnographic artifact has been intensely debated throughout the majority of the 20th century.14

**Critical Museum Studies**

Beginning in the mid-20th century, museums and other cultural institutions were increasingly criticized for prioritizing Eurocentric worldviews that explicitly marginalized non-Western cultures and minority groups. One of the earliest critical

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14 In Europe, the appreciation of African objects as fine art was for the most part limited to private galleries until the mid 1920s. It was, however, not until the later half of the 20th century that major European art museums began actively purchasing and displaying African art. Many art museums, such as Musee Barbier-Mueller in Geneva and Musee Dapper in Paris, began collecting and displaying African art in response to the interests of individual funders. For most of the 20th century, the display of African objects in public art museums in Europe was rare. By contrast, American art museums have been collecting and displaying African art since the 1880s. At that time, African art was often displayed alongside art by indigenous peoples of the Americas and South East Asia, in accordance with primitivist ideas. For example, the Hampton University Art Museum began collecting and exhibiting African art in the 1880s and the Cincinnati Art Museum began its African collection in the 1890s (Bickford Berzock and Clarke 2011, 5-6).
studies of modern museums was Pierre Bourdieu’s influential examination of the museum, and the role of education, class and habit in shaping both artistic taste and museum visitor behaviour (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969). In his study, which was translated into English under the title *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu argued that many people felt intimidated in art museums, even though these museums considered themselves to be democratic institutions, open to all. Bourdieu accused art museums of being both elitist and exclusionary and thus of reinforcing class distinctions. His study, therefore, sparked a much larger debate surrounding the politics of representation within the cultural sphere, laying the foundation for the critical study of museums that has developed since its publication (1969, 1984, 1993).

Since Bourdieu’s groundbreaking study in 1969 and the debates of the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a rapid growth in critical museum studies. Museums have become a focus for critical inquiry across many disciplines, including art history, anthropology, history, cultural studies, sociology, geography, and communications. The interdisciplinary nature of museums as the subject of scholarly inquiry has resulted not only in the precipitous growth in literature and theory devoted to critical museum studies, but also the development of various models for representation and display. Many scholars now analyze colonial discourses of representation, the ethics of interpretation and display, and positions of power. A central area of investigation has been the ways in which non-Western art has been appropriated into Western aesthetic discourse (Danto et al. 1988; Price 1989; Hiller 1994; Myers 1995; Barringer and Flynn 1998). Other scholars working in the postmodern and postcolonial fields have considered how non-Western objects have been interpreted and classified within Western institutions (Clifford
1985, 1988, 1997; Appadurai and Kopytoff 1986; Blier 1989; Price 1989; Kasfir 1992; Ames 1992; Steiner 1994; Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995; Vogel 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Dubin 1999; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006). These critical museum studies have consistently examined how museums are inherently bound to larger cultural, historical and political ideologies. Many deconstruct the museum to reveal the unequal power relations among them, the objects they interpret and represent, and the communities from which the objects originated. At the centre of these discussions is the nature of displaying non-Western objects of art and culture within Western museums. Such institutions have been heavily criticized for their treatment of non-Western material as primitive, timeless, and anonymous.\(^\text{15}\) As James Clifford and Anna Laura Jones suggest, the Western preoccupation with non-Western material culture and the pursuit of authenticity, purity, and uniqueness is nothing more than the explicit appropriation and absorption of non-Western material culture into the capitalist Western system of value and judgment—a system that ignores the alternative voices and meanings it claims to embrace (Clifford 1988, 202, 220, 221; Jones 1993, 205).

Many curators and institutions have been resistant to the reevaluation of these categories of authenticity and originality, often considered key to the evaluation of non-Western visual and material culture. Scholars such as Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1992), Anna Laura Jones (1993), James Clifford (1986, 1988, 1997), Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner (1999), Patricia Penn Hilden (2000), and Rogoff (2002a; 2002b) have written extensively about the notions of authenticity and originality underpinning the

museum’s system of hierarchies. The notion of authenticity in the West is often associated with artifacts deemed to be discovered or collected in pre-colonization or pre-contact periods, thus before Western influence was believed to have “tainted” artifact production. Jones notes that this “before/after scenario” has distorted non-Western histories and so “privileges pre-colonial objects in major collections and exhibitions.” This scenario is based on the idea, writes Jones, “that objects collected during the early contact collecting period were unaffected by Western influence, and [on] the persistent notion of timeless tribal styles” (1993, 20). In relation to this, Phillips has argued that professional anthropological collectors active during the great age of museum collecting at the end of the nineteenth century deliberately rejected objects that demonstrated processes of change and adaptation – the hybrid, the transcultural, and the commodified. They privileged items of material culture to which essentialist meanings of cultural difference could be attached and which could be regarded as permanent and unchanging. (2011, 98)

Therefore, the notion and pursuit of authentic non-Western objects served highly regulated political interests in the West (Ames 1991, 13). Many major museums still pride themselves on owning and displaying the most renowned, authentic, and unique artifacts, which in turn are seen to be accurate representations of other cultures, ethnicities, and histories.\(^\text{16}\) Thus, paradoxically, particular artifacts represent certain groups by speaking for what is absent in an exhibition. Artifacts become nothing more

\(^{16}\) As Spencer Crew and James Sims argue, “Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about Authority. Objects have no authority; people do… Authenticity—authority—enforces the social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds” (Crew and Sims 1991, 163).
than props for the construction of larger historical or cultural narratives (Bennett 1995). As Phillips argues, “The ways that museums sort objects along ethnic lines have become so naturalized—perhaps because of their very obtrusiveness—that they have been only partially interrogated, even in the climate of reflexive analysis” (2011, 96).

“Primitivism” and Non-Western Visual and Material Culture

The exhibition “Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,” which opened at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1984, has often been cited as a turning point in the history of museum display, laying the foundation for a complete restructuring of the ways in which Western cultural institutions represent non-Western visual and material culture. This exhibition and corresponding catalogue had enormous influence in shaping critical museology in relation to not only African, but also other non-Western and Aboriginal collections.

William Rubin, the curator of “Primitivism in 20th Century Art,” attempted to create universal and egalitarian criteria for formal aesthetic excellence by exhibiting African art in the same manner as works created in the Western tradition by such iconic modernists as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. In doing so, Rubin resisted previous exoticizing methods for displaying non-Western art, and instead used what Ivan Karp calls assimilating strategies. According to Karp, “assimilating is inherently a more subtle exhibiting strategy than exoticizing” (1991, 12). In order to assimilate African artifacts

and thus, seemingly, place them on the same level as modern, Western art, Rubin worked to illustrate what he saw as “affinities” between Western European and African art. For example, he displayed African artifacts that exhibited certain forms of likeness to modern Western pieces as either models or sources of inspiration for modern artists (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Catalogue cover, “Primitivism in 20th Century Art,” New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984. On the cover of the exhibition’s catalogue, a detail of Pablo Picasso’s 1932 painting, Girl Before a Mirror, was juxtaposed with a Kwakiutl mask.

By advancing the idea of affinity between the so-called tribal and the modern, Rubin attempted to assert a level of value for “tribal art” through association with the formal qualities of Western modern art, which was seen as being of value by Western audiences. In doing so, as Karp argues, Rubin completely ignored “considerations of content, such as iconography, or questions about intention and purpose, such as the religious role of an object, or even the examination of the contexts of production and use” (1991, 12). Furthermore, the producers of the pieces were not named in the exhibition. Denying or
omitting such information, critics of the exhibition believed, was further confirmation of conventional Eurocentric and voyeuristic methods for viewing non-Western art, as well as that of cultures and ethnicities marginalized by dominant discourses. In essence, the exhibition denied any acknowledgement of the issues of colonialism, political hegemony, race, class and power inherent in the display of non-Western objects in Western cultural institutions. As Patricia Penn Hilden has noted in relation to several exhibitions of African art in mainstream museums throughout the United States since Rubin’s “Primitivism” exhibition, “nowhere in these testimonies did any of the collectors so much as imply that a knowledge of Africa, of the realities of the people who made their objects, mattered” (2000, 16-18, 20, 22).

In the wake of “Primitivism in 20th Century Art” there has been an increase in studies that have specifically focused on the complexities of classifying and displaying African material culture in public institutions. These studies have explored the politics of representation in non-Western collections, the appropriation and recontextualization of these objects in Western collections and displays, and the increased blurring of boundaries between art, artifact, commodity and souvenir (Vogel 1988, 1991; Price 1989; Steiner 1989, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2002; Clifford 1988; Coombes 1994; Kasfir 2007; Bickford Berzock and Clarke 2011).

**Classifying African Visual and Material Culture**

The debate over the definition of art and artifact permeates the fields of art history, anthropology and museum studies. According to Clifford, “The history of collections (not limited to museums) is central to an understanding of how those social groups that invented anthropology and modern art have appropriated exotic things, facts, and
meaning.” He notes that discriminatory choices are behind “the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense” (1988, 220-221). The choices made around African collections in Western museums leave many questions today. Why did collectors choose to collect certain objects over others? What systems of value and meaning did the collector impose upon the objects?18 And, how have these objects in turn been classified within different types of cultural institutions—ethnological/anthropological museums, art museums, or even cultural centres?

To challenge the often arbitrary identification of non-Western, and particularly African material culture in terms of the Western categories of art and artifact, and in part, in reaction to “Primitivism in 20th Century Art,” Susan Vogel developed the exhibition “ART/artifact” at the Center for African Art in New York in 1988.19 This exhibition was of particular importance in drawing attention to the role museums and curators play in the shaping of knowledge and culture, and the discussion it engendered formed an even more nuanced exploration of the issues raised by the “Primitivism” show.

As the title of the “ART/artifact” exhibition implies, the Western preoccupation with categories and boundaries ultimately showcases the limitations of such systems. As Vogel explains in relation to her motivations, “this exhibition was not about African art or Africa. It was not even entirely about art. It was an exhibition about perceptions and

18 Many collectors imposed categories to privilege certain objects over others based upon historically constructed systems of classification. While these categories are now contested, they are still operative and contribute to the understanding of African material culture in the West.

museum experience, focusing on the ways Westerners have classified and exhibited African objects over the past century” (1991, 195). In essence, the exhibition focused on how museums condition the ways Western audiences envision and conceptualize both Africa and African art, while at the same time challenged the boundaries and false dichotomy between art and artifact.20

In many cases, objects once classified as ethnographic in natural history museums have increasingly been moved to art museums. This shift in the classification of objects reflects the power of museums to define their collections based upon carefully maintained categories and institutional missions and mandates. As Enid Schildkrout has noted, this more recent exploration of boundaries between art and ethnographic museums is becoming more complex:

It is commonly assumed that ethnographic installations present an overload of context while art museums present very little. Many recent exhibitions have disproved this… Ethnographic museums are working hard to take down what John Mack of the British Museum once so aptly called “ethnographic wallpaper,” while art museum curators are looking for field photographs and videos to explain the meanings of objects. (1991)

“ART/artifact” was structured to show viewers how the physical setting of a museum and the methods used to install objects ultimately dictates how one identifies objects as either art or artifact (Vogel 1991, 195).21 As Phillips has noted, “the art display focuses the

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20 Susan Vogel employed a similar technique of exploring the audience and the museum in her 1987 exhibition, “Perspectives: Angles on African Art” at the Center for African Art in New York.

21 Viewers of the exhibition initially entered a minimalistic, whitewashed gallery space (the “Contemporary Art Gallery”) where material objects were arranged without
viewer’s attention on the object’s singularity and formal properties through the use of dramatic lighting, neutral colours, minimalist exhibition furniture, and the avoidance of distracting texts and images.” By contrast, she goes onto explain, the artifact display “presents objects as representative types, specimens of culture from which information can be derived through scientific study. It communicated these meanings to the public with lengthy text panels, photographs, maps, dioramas, and films and videos” (2011, 56).

Until the 1980s, exhibitions of art and artifacts were seen, for the most part, as being mutually exclusive, even though, as Phillips points out, “their categorical opposition has always been something of a false dichotomy” (2011, 300). Vogel’s exhibition took these characterizations into account by playing into viewers’ expectations, while at the same time complicating and questioning them.

In many ways, the “ART/artifact” exhibition broke new ground by employing exhibition strategies that deliberately forced viewers to question the role of museums and their positions of power in defining, classifying and ordering African visual and material identification or explanation and displayed in the manner of modern art, with spot lighting. For example, a rolled up animal-catching net from the Ulele River region of Zaire (now the Republic of Congo), on loan from the American Museum of Natural History, was displayed in a minimalist fashion akin to displays of modern sculpture. The exhibitory tactics used for the net, which James Faris describes as “clearly artifact in the banal anthropological sense,” reveal the blurring of boundaries between art and artifact, based upon display techniques (Faris 1988, 776; Vogel 1991, 195-6). The second gallery space that viewers entered reflected a 19th century “Curiosity Room.” Here, African cultural objects were arranged amongst taxidermy, photographs, mineral specimens and preserved insects. Again, no labels or texts accompanied the objects and viewers were able to impose their own readings or understandings on the collection. After the “Curiosity Room,” viewers entered the “Natural History Museum Diorama.” In this space, a full-scale diorama of the kigango death commemoration was created. The diorama display echoed earlier world-fair exhibitions, whereby dioramas were created to provide viewers with cultural “context.” In the last section of the exhibition, the “Art Museum,” African objects were placed in plexiglass cases, postioned on pedestals, and accompanied by limited texts (Vogel 1991, 197; Farr 1988, 78).
culture. Scholars often point to this exhibition as the first one that put into practice many of the larger debates at play within museums and academia during this time.\textsuperscript{22} It drew attention to many of the questionable exhibitory methods still in place in Western museums, and demonstrated how similar types of cultural objects are often displayed in very different ways depending upon the type of institution: anthropological/ethnology or art. In other words, it exposed the ways in which non-Western objects are categorized and displayed in museums in relation to institutional strategies, mandates and ideologies.

The latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century has been marked by two distinct debates centered on the exhibition of African visual and material culture in Western museums: the art versus artifact debate and the debate over authenticity. The inherent contradictions within these debates have often resulted in heated exchanges, which have laid the foundation and been the driving force for change in museums and other cultural institutions, challenging viewers to question not only curatorial and institutional authority, but also their own perceptions about non-Western visual and material culture. And yet, despite the fact that many scholars and curators have used these debates to experiment with new approaches to classifying and representing non-Western visual and material culture and to reevaluate museological discourses, many museums and other cultural institutions have resisted change. Many continue to overlook the importance of deconstructing colonial legacies of representation and the coinciding Western historical narratives.

**Exhibition Controversies in Canada**

\textsuperscript{22} For more reviews of “ART/artifact” see for example, Francine Farr (1988), James Farris (1988), Philip Stevens (1988), and Enid Schildkrout (1991).
In recent years there has been an increase in the number of controversies surrounding exhibitions of non-Western collections in Canada. No museum is exempt from scrutiny as a presenter of information that has been shaped for the viewer. As Michael Ames notes, “Museums can no longer make undisputed claims for the privileges of neutrality and universality. Representation is a political act. Sponsorship is a political act. Curation is a political act. Working in a museum is a political act” (1991, 13). These controversies have undoubtedly affected scholarship from within the museum field. In this second section, I explore two key controversies in Canadian museum history: that surrounding “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1988 and that generated by the touring Barnes Collection exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in 1994. These two controversies, among several others in the 1980s and 1990s, including “Into the Heart of Africa,” led to what might be described as a crisis of representation in Canadian museums.23 Since then, museums and other cultural institutions have come under increasing pressure to redefine, redeploy and renegotiate their positions of power within the “art-culture system” (Clifford 1998; Phillips and Steiner 1999). These controversies suggest that cultural practices are inherently bound to larger social, cultural, and political realities both in Canada and globally:

All forms of cultural production must be understood in the context of how they were produced, by whom, at what historical moment, and with what

23 George Marcus and Micheal Fischer referred to the “crisis of representation” in relation to the situation of museum professionals, who can no longer make undisputed claims for representing objective truths and mimetic realities (1986). According to postmodern theory, images and objects are interpreted and inevitably bound by individual preseptives. All representations are, therefore, filtered through multiple narratives, subjective lenses and cross-cultural negotiations (Duncan and Ley 1993). I have chosen to omit consideration of the “Into the Heart of Africa” exhibition at the ROM in 1989 from this discussion because as it forms the basis of chapter 4.
social, economic, and political impact. Cultural practices cannot be separated from the environment within which they find expression. (Tator, Henry and Mattis 1998, 7)

In Canada, “The Spirit Sings” and the Barnes Collection exhibition have often been cited amongst the most controversial exhibitions. Like “Primitivism in 20th Century Art” in the United States, these exhibitions have been seen as major turning points in Canadian museum history. Taken together, these exhibitions not only challenged Canadian museum structures, calling into question unequal power relations, but they also directly challenged multiculturalism as state cultural policy by showcasing institutional and societal inequalities that multiculturalism was originally designed to disrupt.

While the main focus of this section is the controversies sparked by these two exhibitions, I also discuss changes that the institutions have made as a result of them. For example, the boycott over “The Spirit Sings” resulted in the creation of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples. It also fundamentally altered the way in which the Glenbow

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24 It is important to note that “The Spirit Sings” was bracketed by the controversial “Primitivism in 20th Century Art” exhibition, as well as by the reflective “Art/Artifact” exhibition, both in New York, which arguably heightened the tension surrounding museum representation and display of non-Western and non-mainstream art in Western museums. While these art exhibitions were experimenting with new and/or reflexive ways of representing non-Western visual and material culture, in Canada, this wave of reflexive museology had not yet taken shape. As Phillips has argued, during the 1980s in Canada, “virtually all permanent exhibitions of Indigenous arts were produced by museums or departments of anthropology, which displayed them according to the artifact mode” (2011, 56, 57).

25 Ironically, “The Spirit Sings” and the Barnes Collection exhibition were organized and funded through federal multiculturalism initiatives. “The Spirit Sings” organizers sought funding in connection with the Olympics by arguing that the exhibition would showcase Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism. The AGO secured a spot on the limited Barnes Collection tour by marketing the city of Toronto as a multicultural centre, thereby securing government funding.
Museum approaches exhibitions of non-Western visual and material culture, resulting in the groundbreaking African exhibition “Where Symbols Meet: A Celebration of West African Achievement.” Similarly, after the protests over the Barnes Collection show at the AGO, the institution increased its commitment to the display of collections of non-Western art, which is evident for example in the permanent gallery space dedicated to the Frum Collection of African Art. The AGO has also begun to confront its own position of power in its recent reinstallation of the permanent collection of Canadian art. As my discussion shows, it is evident that the controversies sparked by “The Spirit Sings” and the Barnes Collection exhibition have contributed to a major shift in the ways in which Canadian museums (both ethnographic and art) interact with and represent their perceived publics.

The Glenbow Museum

“The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples”

In 1988, as part of the larger Calgary Olympics celebrations, the Glenbow Museum launched the exhibition “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples,” which brought together cultural artifacts from several prominent collections of Native North American material in Canada, the United States, and Europe. One of the primary goals of the exhibition was to present a visual history of Native North American peoples in Canada (fig. 3).
The exhibition had been in the making since 1983, when a curatorial committee was established to create an exhibition for the Calgary Olympics celebrating and highlighting Canada’s First Peoples. While the Glenbow welcomed a range of individuals to the curatorial committee who possessed knowledge of both national and foreign collections of Native North American material culture, there was an overall lack of Aboriginal presence in the organization of the show.\(^{26}\) According to cultural historian, Heather Devine, one of the most disturbing issues in the initial stages of exhibition planning was the “profound sense of surprise and indignation expressed by some museum

\(^{26}\) The curatorial committee included Ted Brasser (Canadian Museum of Civilization), Bernadette Driscoll (John Hopkins University), Ruth Phillips (Carleton University), Martine Reid (independent scholar), Judy Thompson (Canadian Museum of Civilization), Ruth Whitehead (Nova Scotia Museum), and Bill Reid (a Haida artist, who attended some, but not all of the meetings) (Harrison and Trigger 1988, 6).
professionals, who did not appear to understand why an exhibition of this magnitude should be developed in partnership with Native people, or why museums should be cognizant of the contemporary socio-political experience of Canadian Aboriginal people” (2010, 222-223).

In early April of 1986, Shell Oil, the Canadian subsidiary of the Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell plc, announced its plans to help support and fund the exhibition at the Glenbow. Shortly after the announcement of Shell’s sponsorship, the Lubicon Cree of northern Alberta mobilized a boycott of the exhibition and a protest at the Glenbow. The Lubicon Cree argued it was contradictory for the museum to accept sponsorship for an exhibition of Native North American material from a company that was in a bitter dispute with the Lubicon Cree over drilling on traditional lands, which had been previously seized by the Canadian government. Many defended the Glenbow’s decision to accept corporate funding from Shell Oil. In defense of Shell’s sponsorship, one of the exhibition’s primary curators, Julia Harrison, argued,

27 Although Shell Canada is a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell plc, until the 1990s, Shell Canada, much like Shell Oil Company in the United States, operated independent of Royal Dutch Shell plc, which is based in the Hague. In the 1990s, Royal Dutch Shell plc began purchasing remaining stock in both Canada and the United States. Shell Oil Canada and Shell Oil Company are now fully owned and managed by Royal Dutch Shell plc.

28 When major oil companies began exploring and drilling in Northern Alberta in the 1970s the Lubicon Cree were forced from their land. During the 1980s, the Lubicon Cree began putting increased pressure on the Canadian government to resolve their land claims and recognize their rights to the land from which they had been forced to leave. Thus, when Calgary was awarded the Winter Olympics, the Lubicon Cree began trying to draw international attention to their land claims. However, their protest of the games went largely unnoticed internationally. It was only when Shell Oil announced its sponsorship of “The Spirit Sings” that the protest gained critical momentum (Phillips 2011, 49).
In an era of declining government support, cultural institutions (including universities) have no option but to seek outside support for projects they undertake. This does not mean that corporate sponsors play editorial roles in the theme and focus of the projects that they fund. Nor is there any evidence that the public confuses corporate support for a museum as a museum’s support for corporate policy. (1988, 8)

Others, however, sympathized with the Lubicon Cree and their struggles. In a very short period of time, the controversy over the boycott received widespread national and international attention. As Shelly Ruth Butler notes, “By highlighting the inappropriate and hypocritical nature of this corporate sponsorship, protestors raised awareness about unresolved land claims and the exploitation and marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada” (2008, 8). The increased attention over the boycott resulted in the Canadian Ethnology Society (CESCE) (now the Canadian Anthropology Society) passing a motion in November of 1987, prior to the opening of the exhibition, stating,

museums which are engaged in activities relating to living ethnic groups should, whenever possible, consult with appropriate members of those groups, and such museums should avoid using ethnic materials in any way which might be detrimental and/or offensive to such groups.’ We, the Executive of the CESCE, support the Lubicon Lake Cree people and other Native peoples in Canadian in their opposition to the Olympic exhibition, ‘The Spirit Sings.’ (quoted in Harrison 1988, 9)

The CESCE advised museums across Canada to consider their decision as to whether or not to lend artifacts from their Native North American collections to the Glenbow for the exhibition (Harrison 1988, 7). The CESCE was, therefore, instrumental in prompting the Glenbow and museums across Canada to confront their institutional power and their affect on the representation and display of Aboriginal and non-Western visual and
material culture (Jones 1993, 209). Many museums became divided over the issue. While some museums seized the opportunity to lend artifacts for the exhibition, which would be visited by many during the Olympic celebrations, others sympathized with the Lubicon’s position. Aboriginal groups across Canada wrote letters to museums asking them not to lend artifacts for the exhibition. In many ways, the issue forced individuals employed at museums to articulate exactly what they believed their role was in relation to collections of Native North American visual and material culture. Bruce Trigger, former Honorary Curator of the McCord Museum in Montreal, writes about the nature of the issues at stake and his take on them:

I have long believed that museums hold native artefacts in trust for Native Peoples; this heritage is not something that can be regarded as alienated from Native Peoples (although that is precisely how the original collectors usually viewed their acquisitions). I therefore, rejected the argument, which was put to me by some museum officials, that to support the boycott was to mix politics and culture, while to make the loan was to defend our academic freedom. In my opinion, what was at stake was whether the McCord museum aligned itself on this issue with Native People or with governments, corporate wealth, and the glamour of the Winter Olympics. Nor do I believe that museums can accept money from corporate sponsors and pretend to maintain their academic freedom… The sufferings that have been inflicted on the Lubicon people by the Alberta and the federal Canadian governments and by the oil companies that exploit their land have brought international shame upon Canada and are a warning to all of us about how ruthless governments and big business can become when they are not held to account by a vigilant public. (1988, 9)

Trigger goes on to argue that “academic freedom will have real meaning in the setting of publicly-financed museums only when it does not clash with the equally important
freedom of Native People to manage their own cultural heritage” (1988, 10). He requested that the McCord “demonstrate its sympathy with all Native People by withdrawing its material from this Shell Oil-sponsored exhibition.” When the Museum’s board refused to do so, Trigger handed in his resignation as curator of the McCord. In his resignation letter, he highlighted his feelings about the board’s refusal to sympathize with the Lubicon Cree:

It is a national disgrace that almost 500 years after the first Europeans explored the shores of Canada, the descendants of its first inhabitants should remain more marginal to our national life, more politically powerless, and more impoverished than any other ethnic group…. It is also unacceptable that attempts should be made to continue to subject these people to a paternalistic regime in which non-Native Canadians decide what is in the best interest of Native People. (1988, 10)

The increased attention to and sympathy for the Lubicon Cree, combined with the magnitude of a resignation from such a leading scholar at one of Canada’s most prominent museum institutions, sent “shock waves around the world” (Phillips 2011, 48). The relationships between museums and Aboriginal peoples both in Canada and around the world were profoundly altered (Clifford 1997, 204). In a recent assessment of the exhibition by Cherokee scholar Karen Coody Cooper, she argues that the “The Spirit Sings” marked a turning point in critical museology:

The exhibition was a watershed for North American Indian/museum relationships. Had it not been for the Lubicon boycott which drew worldwide attention and created a call for action to which Canadian museums responded in an enlightening fashion while the world watched, positive changes in policy and practice regarding First Nations (and, quite likely, indigenous people throughout the world) would have been, I
believe, slower to come, and not as extensive as the progress that has been made since the exhibition’s protest. (Coody Cooper 2008, ix)

**The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples**

Arguably, one of the most significant outcomes of “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow and the corresponding Lubicon-led protest and boycott was the creation of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples. In November 1988, the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations organized a conference at Carleton University in Ottawa to discuss many of the issues that arose during “The Spirit Sings.” The conference and the subsequent creation of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples marked a fundamental shift in power by placing importance on partnerships between museum curators, staff and Native North American communities.\(^{29}\) The Task Force created a workable report for use by other museums across the country (Phillips and Phillips 2005, 698; Devine 2010, 223). This was followed by a major joint report, issued by the Task Force in February 1992, entitled, *Turning the Page: Forging New Perspectives Between Museums and First Peoples.*\(^{30}\) The report issued guidelines for representing and displaying Native North American material culture in Canadian museums and other cultural institutions. According to the Task Force Report, “If museums are to achieve their goal of ‘interpreting the past, explaining the present and

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\(^{29}\) During the same period in the United States, the US Congress passed The Native Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to address the issue of repatriation of Native American artifacts.

\(^{30}\) The Task Force was chaired by Tom Hill, director of the Woodlands Cultural Centre in Brantford, and Trudy Nicks, curator of anthropology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Members of the Task Force consisted of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal professionals working in museums and other cultural institutions across the country (Phillips 2011, 12).
thereby illuminating choices for the future,’ they must express accurately and in context the cultural heritage and spirit of the civilization that they portray” (1992). When Native North American peoples are being represented in Canadian cultural institutions, the report advocated an equal partnership between museums and representatives from respective communities (Phillips 2006, 2011). The Task Force made several recommendations, including the following: participation of Aboriginal people in the governing process of museums; involvement of Aboriginal people in the planning, research, implementation, presentation and maintenance of all exhibitions, programs, and/or projects that include Aboriginal cultures; repatriation of Aboriginal cultural patrimony (human remains, sacred and ceremonial items, and other significant cultural objects); training of Aboriginal museum professionals; and implementation and recommendations through legislation and funding programs (Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association 1992; Devine 2010, 223). These recommendations have resulted in many positive changes within Canadian museums and have fundamentally changed the power dynamics not only between museums and Native North American peoples, but also between museums and non-Western cultures in general.

*Exhibiting Africa at the Glenbow: “Where Symbols Meet: A Celebration of West African Achievement”*

It is evident that both the controversies over “The Spirit Sings” at the Glenbow and the resulting Task Force on Museums and First Peoples profoundly influenced the way in which the museum has since approached its collections of both Native North American and non-Western material culture in order to employ positive social value. A direct effect

The Glenbow has the second largest collection of African visual and material culture in Canada. The collection comprises approximately 5,300 pieces, predominantly from regions of West Africa.31 “Where Symbols Meet” offers a Canadian example of how a museum with a large and diverse African collection and no in-house specialists in African visual and material culture can advance revisionist efforts to address its collection. Lacking expertise in the field of African visual and material culture, the Glenbow sought outside specialists, including Christaud Geary, Henry Drewal, Ray Silverman and Kate Ezra, during the initial planning stages of the exhibition. The Glenbow also worked extensively with individuals from African and African Canadian communities in Calgary, as well as with several Africanists from the University of Calgary (Micots 2008). Together, these individuals formed the Members of the West African Exhibit Community Group, which worked extensively with the exhibition’s primary curator, Denis Slater. “Where Symbols Meet” can arguably be seen as the first example in Canada of an exhibition focusing on African visual and material culture that was a product of extensive community consultation throughout.32 It is evident that the Glenbow recognized both its role as a major cultural institution in Canada and the need for consultation with constituent communities after the controversies sparked by “The

31 The African collection at the Glenbow was largely developed in the 1950s and 1960s by the museum’s founder, Eric Harvie, who commissioned numerous purchases from private collectors of African works (Benoit 2009).

32 While there had been previous exhibitions of African visual and material culture in Canada, such as the National Gallery’s “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” in 1978 and “African Majesty: From Grassland to Forest” at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1981, there had been no major collaborations and consultations prior to “Where Symbols Meet.”
Spirit Sings.” Because of the exhibition’s importance to the representation of African visual and material culture in Canada, and also its overall significance, an overview of the exhibition is necessary.

“Where Symbols Meet” represents one of the Glenbow’s first multidisciplinary exhibitions—combining historic ethnographic artifacts with contemporary works of art, including film, photography, sculptures and installation. Several of the contemporary works were commissioned specifically for the exhibition and are now included as part of the permanent African collection at the Glenbow (Micots 2008). The exhibition has not been significantly altered since its original installation. It is divided into four sections, entitled Social Achievements, Religious Achievements, Political Achievements and Artistic Achievements. The reflexive nature of the exhibit is evident throughout the show’s texts, which often disrupt previous notions of African material and cultural production. The introductory text to the exhibition states,

We often refer to Africa as if it were one country. In fact, there are 52 countries in Africa with over 1000 different languages… Today West Africa is a variety of landscapes from highly developed cities with skyscrapers and bustling seaports, to small villages only accessible by dirt roads.

The first section of the exhibition also provides viewers with contextual information intended to inform visitors about some of the complexities of life on the African continent. It includes historical reference to the devastation caused by the slave trade in Africa, the establishment of Christian missions and colonial administrations, and the legacies of colonialism still felt today throughout the continent:

Weakened by the slave trade, most of West Africa came under British, French and Portuguese rule at the end of the 19th century. Beginning in
Ghana in 1957, their countries have gained independence, sometimes peacefully, sometimes only after armed conflict. In general, the region is now governed by native rulers, although the legacy of colonialism lingers in the form of cash crop dependencies and crippling debts.

By establishing a clear link between the continual struggles in African nations and the legacies enacted by the destructive nature of colonialism, the text sets the stage for a more in-depth understanding of contemporary African cultures. For example, the display entitled “Community Connections” mentions the religious conversions forced on the peoples of Africa by Catholic and Protestant missionaries who believed that the only road to salvation was through abandoning traditional ways of life. These conversions profoundly altered traditional social structures as well as forms of material and aesthetic production.  

Throughout the exhibition, photographs provide viewers with visual information about the actual production of the artifacts on display. Most of the photographs in the exhibition are in colour, marking them as contemporary and resisting the conventional ethnographic display technique of exhibiting black and white photographs of African peoples, which often have nothing in common with the artifacts with which they are juxtaposed. Furthermore, the individuals and artists featured in the photographs are often named, signaling a departure from the belief that producers of African art are anonymous. This notion is directly confronted in the exhibition texts “Named Artists,” which states, “It is often assumed that the identity of the African artist is not known, leading to the

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33 Tunde Dawodu, who is a Yoruba member of the West African Exhibit Community Group, wrote the exhibition text for “Community Connections.”
common belief that traditional African art is anonymous. However, the works of individual artists can be recognized and identified.”

The exhibition also includes a section designed to provide viewers with examples of contemporary art production by African artists of the continent and African disporic artists participating in the international community. Thematic displays in this section include “Urban Art,” “West African Art,” “Traditional Art,” “Transitional Art” and “Contemporary Art.” Here viewers are confronted with photographs of and works by contemporary African artists such as Sokari Douglas Camp (fig. 4), a Nigerian artist based out of London, and Adadele Bamgboye, a prominent video artist who studied in the Department of Visual Arts at the Banff Centre in Alberta in the early 1990s.
Figure 4: Sokari Douglas Camp, *Masquerade with Feathers*. Steel, paint and feathers. Kalabari, Nigeria. Late 20th century.


By placing emphasis on African contemporary art within a global context, the exhibition deconstructs the dominant ethnographic method of representing African historical collections as static and unchanging.

The exhibition ends by asking viewers to question the relationship of the seemingly distant “Africa” signaled in this visual and material culture to its contemporary setting in Calgary, Alberta. By linking West African nations to Canada and, more specifically, Calgary, the exhibition provides an alternative way to think about the collection—in terms of larger transnational and transcultural exchanges. Many viewers
would probably not see an immediate connection between West Africa and Calgary. Nor would viewers assume that Calgary and the Glenbow would have one of the largest collections of African material in Canada. However, upon further reflection, connections can be made on many levels. As Cheryl Foggo, a member of the West African Exhibit Community Group, concludes,

A mountain gives way without struggle to a hill’s green softness. That hill passes quietly into a farmer’s field. Oil derricks intrude on the fields borders and cities fall somehow into the middle of it all. The surrounding vista is not as unfamiliar as we imagined. Canada’s West and West Africa. Similar landscapes, common economic fortunes… We have endured simultaneously agrarian cultures, which were interrupted and ultimately disappointed by the 1970s oil boom. The urgent search for how industry leads us in the same direction and towards the same conflicts: the need to conserve. The rollercoaster of technology versus the rights of indigenous peoples. Animals whose survival depends on our wisdom. We would not be who we are if not for our links with the complicated, rich and sometimes tragic history of Africa. Our broad cloth is braided with African strings. We know everything touches. In a world that grows more independent every day. Our every action is felt by someone far away. Our oceans touch. The same wind blows through our trees. African Music floats across the vastness and settles in our ears. Everything touches.

Thus, by connecting these seemingly distant spaces (West Africa and Alberta), the exhibition breaks new ground, calling into question the ways in which we think about the global circulation of cultural and material objects. The exhibition, therefore, reflects the Glenbow’s more recent and reflexive approach to representing and displaying non-Western visual and material culture, whereby community consultation plays a major role in the larger construction of exhibition spaces.
The Art Gallery of Ontario

The Barnes Collection

In 1994, the Art Gallery of Ontario seized the rare opportunity to host the Barnes Collection as part of its limited North American tour. The Collection is the product of a wealthy entrepreneur and owner of a successful pharmaceutical company, Dr. Albert Barnes, who collected art from the early 1900s until his death in 1951. During this time, he amassed a sizable collection of paintings by “Old Masters,” including works by Titian and Rubens, a collection of Modernist works by artists such as Monet, Manet, Van Gogh and Degas, as well as an extensive collection of African, Islamic, and Chinese art. Barnes firmly believed that great art was not limited to Western aesthetic practices but instead was the product of integrating different aesthetic elements from diverse cultures (fig. 5).

That Tiziano Vecello (better known as Titian), Peter Paul Rubens, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, and Edgar Degas are commonly referred to by their surnames is an indication of their status as Old Masters.

Barnes viewed the relationship between works of art from different cultures through the lens of modernism and in terms of Western systems of meaning and value, much as William Rubin did in his conceptualization of “Primitivism in 20th Century Art.”
Figure 5: Installation view of a small gallery in the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, 2005. Paintings include Modigliani, Demuth and Picasso with African sculptures, European religious carvings, hand-forged metal door handles and an early American ladle.


Barnes also believed that “an appreciation of the rich cultural heritage of African, and of African American art, could help change the perceptions, stereotypes, and biases of White America” (Tator, Henry, Mattis 1998, 66). During his lifetime, Barnes was an active supporter of the Harlem Renaissance and the National Urban League, and contributed to several publications advocating for better living conditions for Blacks, their social and political equality, and their freedom from oppression in America.  

36 When Barnes was a contributor to The New Negro, which was a anthology of writings edited by Alain Locke, who was known as one of the founders of the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance. Barnes also made several large donations to and supported the magazine Opportunity, which aimed to give voice to Black history and culture in America.
Barnes died in 1951, he left his art collection in its entirety to Lincoln University, a distinguished African American university in Pennsylvania. The terms of the donation, however, stipulated that the collection was to be used only for educational purposes and could not be sold, toured, loaned, divided or altered in any way.

In the early 1990s, however, the building that housed the Barnes Collection at Lincoln University was in need of major renovations and costly repairs, which the Barnes Trust and its corresponding endowment fund could not solely cover. Members of the Barnes Foundation’s committee lobbied and were granted permission to mount a limited tour of the Collection to raise funds necessary for the building renovations and repairs.  

The AGO was one of the institutions on the tour’s itinerary, the sixth major stop. The AGO had persuaded the Foundation to give it a place on the tour, beating out several

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37 Ironically, in 2006, only ten years after the renovations to the building holding the Barnes Collection, it was decided by the Barnes Foundation Board of Trustees that the Barnes Collection should be moved from its original location in the suburbs of Philadelphia to the downtown area. It was argued that such a move would allow access to the collection by a larger and wider audience, which was the original intention of the collection. According to Bernard C. Watson of the Barnes Foundation Board of Trustees, “We’re going to move the Barnes where it belongs, which is downtown on the parkway, where hundreds of thousands of people can enjoy it” (Mandak 2006). Currently, the original limestone building housing the Barnes Collection is located in Lower Merion Township, where zoning regulations allow the gallery to be opened to the public only three days a week and to only a maximum of 400 visitors a day. According to Joe Mandak, such regulations have caused “the foundation to teeter on the brink of bankruptcy” (Mandak 2006). Unfortunately, moving the Barnes Collection has caused major disputes among the members of the Board of Trustees, researchers of the collection and members of the public. Many see such a move as violating Barnes’ vision for the collection, while others argue that, without such a move, the foundation would be bankrupt. Disputes over the collection captured media attention that caused the debate to become even more polarized. In 2010, Don Argott released a film titled “The Art of the Stead” chronicling the heated debate surrounding the move and provoking further hostility. When the film was shown during the New York Film Festival it sparked a heated discussion. As one bystander put it, “people were yelling, screaming at each other. These issues bring out these emotions. I’m not sure why. But for some reason the Barnes stirs something up in people” (Rosenblum 2010).
other major museums in Canada, including the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, by marketing the city of Toronto as one of the most diverse and multicultural cities in the world. It argued that the citizens of Toronto would benefit from both an exhibition of such diversity as well as the underlying multicultural philosophies of Albert Barnes (Graham 1994). The AGO then lobbied the government of Ontario to help secure and match the funds needed for the exhibition to come to Toronto.\(^{38}\) Securing the funds for the touring Barnes exhibition was seen as a major accomplishment by the AGO and the city of Toronto, bringing together support for the arts from both the public and private sectors at a time of increased deficits and budget cuts across the province.

Unfortunately, when the exhibition finally arrived in Toronto in 1994, public reaction conveyed an overwhelming sense of disappointment. While many had been anxiously waiting to view the collection of African sculptures and Chinese tapestries, among other works, they were enraged to discover that the touring collection included only a selection of Barnes’ “French Masters” collection. The single reference to the extensiveness of Barnes’ collection of so-called “World Art” was a small photograph of the entire collection displayed in the exhibition to showcase the collection’s diversity. Overall, the touring exhibition suppressed Barnes’ theories of cultural and artistic diversity (Corbeil 1994, 62-63). As Carol Tator, Frances Henry and Winston Mattis note, the central question raised in all of this was, if Barnes was a pioneer in the area of cross-cultural study of the visual arts and passionately committed to the concept of integration of art forms from

\(^{38}\) The AGO claimed that the exhibition would attract hundreds of thousands of visitors and therefore would directly benefit the local economy, creating more jobs and generating enough funding to help balance the high operating costs that the AGO had incurred (Tator, Henry and Mattis 1998, 67; Graham 1994).
different cultural traditions, why was his collection displayed in such a way that the viewer is unable to see the formal connections between works created continents and centuries away? Why do we end up with a display of only French painters which undermines what Barnes was trying to accomplish? (Tator, Henry and Mattis 1998, 68; Drainie 1994, C1)

It was, therefore, no surprise that many saw the show at the AGO as an explicit form of cultural racism. Many were outraged because the AGO had marketed the city of Toronto as a diverse and multicultural centre to secure the touring collection. The lack of diversity in the exhibition and the focus on “French Masters” also echoed the AGO’s recent rejection of a request from Toronto’s Black community to hold an exhibition focusing on African art for Black History Month, while simultaneously also rejecting a proposal by local Asian Canadian artists to mount an exhibition focusing on contemporary Asian arts. The irony in these rejections by the AGO was all too apparent. Many picketed the show, arguing that for too long the AGO had focused solely on the “aesthetic excellence” of European and Canadian settler art and had thereby reinforced the racial hierarchies inherent in Western museums (Tator, Henry and Mattis 1998, 69).

**The Frum Collection of African Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario**

Since the time of the Barnes Collection controversy at the AGO, the gallery has slowly begun to open itself up to a more inclusive approach to collecting arts from around the world, moving away from its almost exclusive Western focus. For example, now on display in the permanent gallery are works from the AGO’s collections of African and Pacific/Oceanic art. Additionally, the AGO recently opened a permanent gallery space
dedicated to the display of African historic art from the Barbara and Murray Frum Collection, which was donated to the Gallery in 1999.\textsuperscript{39}

The original donation of the Frum’s African collection was unexpected, because the AGO was so heavily focused on Western art and did not possess a single piece of African art prior to the donation, nor did its curatorial staff include any specialists in the field who could research and exhibit the collection.\textsuperscript{40} AGO director Matthew Teitelbaum, however, argued that the acquisition of the African collection was part of a much larger plan on the institution’s part to reflect the city of Toronto’s increasingly diverse populations. “This is the first African art to come into the collection,” he stated.

\textsuperscript{39} Murray Frum is Chairman and C.E.O. of the Frum Development Group. He is currently chair of the Ontario Arts Council Foundation, chair of the Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund, a director of the Toronto Arts Council Foundation and Key Porter Publications. He is also a Governor of the Mount Sinai Hospital, Trustee of the Art Gallery of Ontario, member of the University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science Advisory Board and Stratford Chefs School Advisory Board, past president of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival and past chairman of Saturday Night Magazine. The Frum Collection has been exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, the AGO, the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museum in New York, Smithsonian Institute in Washington, National Gallery of Art in Washington and Baltimore Museum of Art. Barbara Frum (1937-1992) was a Canadian broadcaster and journalist, identified with her show As It Happens, on CBC Radio and The Journal, on CBC Television. In 1992, she died from leukemia.

\textsuperscript{40} At the time of the original donation of the Frum Collection to the AGO in 1999, many were confused as to why Murray Frum had decided to donate his collection to the AGO instead of the ROM. After all, the ROM had an extensive African collection, as well as staff who possessed some knowledge of African visual and material culture, whereas the AGO did not have a single piece of African art, nor any specialists. At the time of the donation, Dan Rahimi, director of collections at the ROM stated, “I am a bit surprised that the AGO chose to establish this collection at this time… Though we have a larger African collection, we were never offered anything. If we had been, we would’ve been interested in some if not all of the collection.” However, according to Frum, “The ROM’s interest is anthropological… I collected this as an art form. It’s a battle that was fought a long time ago. Anthropology doesn’t distinguish objects in terms of aesthetics, I do. I collected art objects, it’s important that be understood” (quoted in “African art belongs in AGO, Frum says,” Toronto Star, December 10, 1999, 1). It could also be argued that Frum’s decision to donate his collection to the AGO and not the ROM had to do with his ties to the AGO. At the time of the donation, he was a trustee on the board at the gallery.
It’s part of a larger movement. The direction of museums is to create public settings for many representations of art from different cultures and times. These are great works of art that have incredible formal and esthetic powers. They tell us deep stories about the origins of cultural difference. (quoted in “African art belongs in AGO, Frum says” 1999, 1)\(^1\)

The permanent gallery space for the African collection, which opened in 2008 (fig. 6), was part of a larger project to expand and broaden the AGO’s permanent collections and to slowly move away from the established Eurocentric focus of the institution.


\(^1\) Teitelbaum’s interest in the formal qualities of African art echoes those of Albert Barnes and William Rubin.
According to the AGO’s Director of Collections and Research, Dennis Reid, “as soon as you start moving beyond the traditional European ideas of art, things begin to open up” (quoted in Knelman 2005, A.03). With such a move, it is evident that the AGO was placing increasing emphasis on the diversity of its constituent communities in response to what was perceived as an increasingly diverse and multicultural city. As Teitelbaum puts it, the Frum Collection “makes the gallery a different place,” offering viewers “a more complex and layered story of the history of art” while at the same time “speaking to a broader audience” (quoted in “AGO Receives Valuable Collection of African Masks” 1999, R.9).

The Frum Collection comprises mainly sculptural art from West and Central Africa, dating from the early-14th century to the mid-20th century. The Frums, whose extensive collection includes not just African art, but also Canadian, European and Pacific art, began collecting African art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Referring to one of the works in their collection, Murray Frum describes his and his wife Barbara’s first purchase of African art:

We bought this in about 1972 in Montreal from Gallery Lapelle from a nice little man named Leon Lapelle. We saw it in the window and I thought it was a Mayan mask from Mexico and he told me that it was an African mask from the Ibo of Nigeria and that was all news to me. We liked it so we bought it and then we got some books that talked about African art and we were hooked. So this was the instigator you might say of the collection. (“The Frum Collection” accessed 2010)

From this first purchase in Montreal in 1972, the Frums began systematically collecting and buying sculptural pieces of African art from many of the major art dealers and
auction rooms in the United States and Europe. The Frum Collection, like the Lang Collection, which I explore in detail in chapter 5, is an example of a connoisseur collection of African art. Both the Frums and the Langs rarely collected art from their travels on the African continent. Instead, they preferred to collect their African pieces from established dealers of African art in major North American and European centres in order to establish and maintain the collection’s provenance.

The Frum Collection was widely exhibited before arriving at the AGO. For example, seventeen pieces from the Frum Collection were exhibited in 1978 at the National Gallery of Canada as part of the “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” exhibition. Then, in 1981, several works were shown at the AGO as part of the exhibition “African Majesty: From Grassland to Forest,” which was curated by African art scholar, William Fagg. Almost all of the pieces originally shown in the 1981 exhibition were part of the 1999 donation to the AGO and are now on display in the permanent African Gallery. The African Gallery space occupies 3,000 square feet and is located between the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre and the Samuel and Esther Sarck Gallery for Inuit Art at the AGO. The installation of all seventy-seven pieces came after extensive consultation and collaboration between African Canadians, curators, art historians, ethnologists and anthropologists. The African Collection has been assembled for display based upon aesthetic criteria, typical of art museum practices, rather than in a chronological or ethnographic manner (figs. 7, 8).42

42 Unlike “Primitivism in 20th Century Art,” where African art objects were displayed alongside Western works of art, the pieces from the Frum Collection were displayed on their own. Their manner of display echoes the conventional contemporary art gallery approach, which Vogel characterized in her exhibition “ART/artifact.”
Figure 7: Installation view of the Frum Collection of African Art displayed in the African Gallery at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Photo by James Dow.
Figure 8: Installation view (2) of the Frum Collection of African Art displayed in the African Gallery at the Art Gallery of Ontario.


Photo by James Dow.

The Reinstallation of the Permanent Collection of Canadian Art within the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art

Soon after the opening of the permanent gallery space for the Frum Collection of African Art at the AGO, the gallery also reinstalled and opened the permanent collection of Canadian art in the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art. The AGO’s Curator of Canadian Art, Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree) and then director, Dennis Reid, applied a revisionist approach to the permanent collection, which opened in 2009 as an installation including both settler and Native North American art. McMaster’s curatorial approach was to resist master narratives that privilege a Eurocentric position and instead to
structure the exhibition around three themes—myth, memory and power. In doing so, he offered visitors an alternative viewpoint, dominated by concepts rather than by history, which they must then navigate. The inspiration for the reinstallation, as McMaster states, was recognition of the “indispensable participation of the visitor” in the new exhibition. He goes on to note,

By understanding that the diversity and complexity of our time requires many many voices as well by interrogating various representations we maintain that we will get to understand new ways of seeing which in turn will take the visitors to new levels of self awareness and towards a diversity of voices. (2009)

In other words, by explicitly recognizing the diversity and multiplicity of the gallery’s constituent communities, the AGO confronted many of the larger issues that arose during the Barnes Collection controversy—in essence, a lack of respect for contemporary and local constituent communities.43

43 These issues were brought to the fore again in 1996 during “The OH!Canada Project.” The display was comprised of two main display areas. The first area featured the National Gallery of Canada’s exhibition “The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation,” which was on tour. The second area featured works by community-based arts groups including installations by Aboriginal, African Canadian, Chinese Canadian, and Latin Canadian groups, as well as pieces by artists of non-Western/non-European descent. The works included in the second area were positioned down the hall from the main gallery where the Group of Seven works were displayed. As Walcott argues, the location and placement of each area was “both a symbolic and actual representation of the organization of the nation,” which ultimately reflected the unequal representation of the dominant culture and the marginalized position of minority artists in Canada (1996, 16). Even today, the positioning of the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art beside the Thompson Gallery, which employs a traditional, modernist display approach in its installation, rekindles these issues (Jessup 1996). It begs the question, is the AGO really driven by a desire to create new modes of display that are more inclusive of diverse cultures, or is it patron driven?
McMaster explains that the structure of the reinstallation is not one common to museums over the last few centuries: “It does not have a strong chronological frame of reference. It is not just about our 250-year history. And, it is not just about men” (2009). The reinstallation, therefore, breaks new ground in a number of ways. First, it disrupts the conventional chronological ordering of permanent collections, so that the space throws into question the very idea of how history is constructed—who it is constructed by and for. By recognizing that there are always multiple and often contradictory ways to understand and represent history, the exhibit also allows viewers to approach the material from their own subject position. Second, it extends the historical timeline of art in Canada, which is usually limited to 250 years and guided by a contact narrative, to an 11,000-year visual history. In doing so, the gallery refuses the dominant Canadian historical narrative, which has been constructed in such a way that it privileges a settler consciousness. As Carol Schick puts it, “Heroic tales of successful occupation by White settlers are narratives that legitimize European, especially Anglo, claims of entitlement” (2005, 211). This myth of entitlement has had a lasting and detrimental effect not only on Aboriginal peoples in Canada, but also on settlers of non-European decent. The construction of the dominant narrative, therefore, allows for whiteness to be the assumed dominant marker of belonging, outside of which others are positioned. Thus, by reconfiguring the way Canadian art history is represented in the reinstallation, the gallery interrogates this dominant historical narrative. Third, the gallery investigates and critically questions the ways in which gender has played a role in the shaping of Canadian art history during the 19th century. McMaster contends that many of the artists who were denied representation happened to be women even though women were very much a significant part of the art world…
but often they were denied access into these important displays. So, in a
nod to the artists that were denied these representations we felt it
important for us to say this is the new Art Gallery of Ontario; this is a way
for us to show more women artists during this time. (2009)

To ensure that women are well represented in this section dedicated to the construction of
Canadian art history, over fifty percent of the works are not only about women but also
by women artists.44 In many ways, the reinstallation of the permanent collection at the
AGO signifies the institution’s recognition of its increasingly diverse constituent
communities—the very constituents that were ignored in the exhibition of the Barnes
Collection years earlier.

The controversies sparked by both the Glenbow Museum and AGO illustrated a
common problem in the relationship of museums to their perceived communities. It is
possible that the controversies, boycotts and scandals that erupted could well have been
avoided if the institutions had involved the communities they wished to represent from
the beginning. Instead, both chose to ignore their constituent communities in favour of
non-community academic expertise and institutional authority. Thus, the institutions, the
curators and the educational staff operated on the belief that they knew what was best for
and how to represent their constituent communities, instead of allowing the communities
to participate in how they were represented. At the same time, however, the controversies
that arose over these exhibitions and the subsequent task forces, conferences,
consultations, meetings and negotiations, were instrumental in forcing both institutions to

44 In the reinstallation, women are represented as producers of fine art, which is
commonly understood to consist of painting and sculpture. Female artists who produce
works of craft were not included in the installation. This exclusion of craft from the
reinstallation, can be seen on one level as reinforcing conventional categories of value.
confront their own positions of power and in turn open up to a more inclusive and reflexive way of approaching diverse cultural and material objects. Perhaps a productive way to look at the controversies and contestations in recent museum history is to consider what Phillips calls the “positive value of controversy.” She argues that the “revelatory power such events have had... has been due in part to the way in which they have illuminated the nature of the museums’ agency and its connectedness to larger social processes” (2011, 15, 16).
Chapter 3
The State of African Collections in Canadian Museums and Other Cultural Institutions

While there is increased attention given to African collections in Western museological institutions, particularly in the United States, in Canada the field of African visual and material culture has been largely neglected. Marie-Louise Labelle points to the complex and multifaceted history of African collections in Canadian museums and other cultural institutions, arguing that “African collections in Canadian museums are [...] in a precarious position, lacking specialists to study, document or display them, or make new acquisitions” (2005a, 5). While this may be the case, there are as many as 25,000 pieces from throughout the African continent represented in Canadian collections, although these collections are, for the most part, relatively unknown in Canada and internationally. These collections include the holdings of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, which houses the largest collection of African visual and material culture in the country, totaling over 8,000 objects, followed by the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, with over 6,000, and the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (MOA), with over 2,800. Other prominent collections of African visual and material culture in Canada are found at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in Ottawa, Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston (AEAC), Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, Barbara and Bill McCann Collection of African Textiles in Ottawa, North America Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, McGill University’s Redpath Museum in Montreal, Anthropology Museum of the Université de Montreal, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts,
Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, Museum of Vancouver, Maltwood Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Victoria, New Brunswick Museum in St. John, and Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia in Dartmouth.

**The Diversity of Artifacts in African Collections**

The diversity of African objects found in Canadian collections is striking. For example, the many African weapons include shields, spears, staffs, arrows and clubs, many of which were collected during the mid-to-late-19th century. The fascination with African weaponry points to the colonial legacy of bringing back to one’s home country souvenirs or “trophies” of war (Labelle 2005a, 7). The ROM, for example, has an extensive collection of such weaponry. In addition, missionaries who were stationed in Africa through the late-19th and early-20th centuries often collected small portable items, such as musical instruments, agricultural and household implements, dress and personal adornments, and toys, which now reside in Canadian collections. The highly aesthetic nature of many of these artifacts, combined with their portability, made them desirable to missionaries for promotional purposes. Missionaries could use these artifacts for lecturing and fundraising in Canada to entice members of their congregations to participate in missionary work in Africa (Hutcheon 1994, 45). The Read Family Collection of Curios from West Central Africa, now owned by the Redpath Museum in Montreal, is an example of such a collection. Canadian collections also include large numbers of souvenir objects made specifically for tourists, such as animal figurines made out of ivory, jewelry, wooden sculptures and baskets, as well as miniature objects such as
spears and masks. Many of these souvenirs were brought to Canada during the mid-to-late-20th century and subsequently donated to Canadian museums and other cultural institutions. This is characteristic of several Canadian institutional collections, including the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg and the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia in Dartmouth. And, finally, there are several collections of African art in Canada acquired by art connoisseurs interested in works from the continent. The majority of the pieces in these collections were purchased from prominent African art dealers in Europe and the United States in the mid-to-late-20th century who were often influenced by the modernist and primitivist art movements. The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art (now at the AEAC in Kingston), Barbara and Murray Frum Collection of African Art (now at the AGO), and Guy Laliberte’s Cirque du Soleil Collection of African Art (recently on display at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as part of the exhibition “Sacred Africa II”) are examples of connoisseur collections of African art.

45 Here I refer to souvenir art in relation to material objects created for the specific purpose of circulation in the larger network of world art exchange. In addition, I am cognizant that the categories of “souvenir” and “tourist art” have little to do with the actual objects produced, but that instead, as Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner argue, “the very process of collection … inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associate with the object in both individual and collective memories (Phillips and Steiner 1999, 19; Susan Stewart 1984). Sidney Littlefield Kasfir dates the rise of the African souvenir market to period after World War II and the independence decade of the 1960s when many African nations began to see a rise in tourism, which resulted in the increased production of reproductions or all-together new forms (for example, embellished Samburu tourist spears or Asante maternity figures with butterfly beadwork) (Kasfir 2007, 18-19).
**Origins of African Collections in Canada**

The majority of objects in African collections in Canada come from the lower two-thirds of the African continent. The objects’ modern-day countries of origin in West Central Africa are mainly the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola; in West Africa, notably Benin, Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, and Nigeria; in East Africa, primarily Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan and Kenya; and in Southern Africa, including Madagascar, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa. The most under-represented region in Canadian collections is North Africa. While Canadian museums do hold several very large collections from North Africa, including collections based on pieces from Egypt and Nubia, most museums separate such holdings from other African collections. According to Silvia Forni at the ROM, this is because collections from Egypt and Nubia are frequently classified as archeological collections—based on the relative age and the method of requiring the objects—whereas the majority of cultural artifacts collected from elsewhere on the continent date primarily to the late-19th and 20th centuries (2010).

Thus, the diversity of artifacts in Canadian collections hints at the complex relationships between African nations and Canada and, in turn, how such collections ended up in Canada. While no two collections are alike, some similarities among them are apparent. For example, the majority of African collections in Canadian institutions can be distinctly characterized based upon the motivation of the collector. The first group includes those acquired during military pursuits in Africa; for instance, those acquired by men who served in the British Imperial Army and who were stationed in Africa and later moved to Canada, or by those who fought in conflicts such as the South African War of 1899-1902. Another major group is composed of those acquired by Canadian
missionaries who resided mainly in Central Africa between the mid-19th and early-20th centuries. Others are a result of economic, diplomatic and humanitarian ventures throughout the continent. Then there are the collections of tourists who traveled to Africa throughout the 20th century. And, finally, there are those of commercial collectors who purchased art from commercial African art dealers located in either North America or Europe.

**The State of African Collections in Canada**

While the total number of African objects in Canadian collections may be as high as 25,000, this number has not changed much in the last three decades. This may be a result of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Export, Import and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which was implemented in the 1970s. Following its establishment, many Canadian museums refused to accept donations of African artifacts unless there was proof that the artifacts in the collections were acquired prior to the introduction of these regulations or were purchased from reputable African art and artifact dealers (Labelle 2005a, 5). The majority of African objects in Canadian museums were therefore acquired through donation or purchase prior to the implementation of regulations or were acquired from those who had proper documentation, such as certified art dealers. In addition, with museum acquisition budgets increasingly restricted due to funding cuts, there has been very little activity devoted to expanding existing collections or purchasing new collections of African visual and material culture in Canada. Furthermore, what funding does exist in Canadian museums has often been prioritized for expanding and studying Native North American collections in Canada. Labelle notes that “since the majority of ethnology departments at
Canada’s major museological institutions are dedicated to the study of Canada’s First Peoples, the development of African collections has not been a priority” (2005a, 5). “As a result,” Labelle observes, “the interest of museum professionals and the general public has not evolved significantly since the objects were originally acquired” (2005a, 6).

There is, therefore, an overall lack of specialists who study African visual and material culture in Canadian museums and universities. For example, Sylvia Forni, who was hired in 2008 by the Royal Ontario Museum, is the first permanent full-time staff member specializing in African visual and material culture to be taken on at a Canadian museum.46 Apart from Forni, whom I discuss in chapter 4, there are currently only two practicing historians of African art in Canada—Suzanne Gott at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, in a dual appointment in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies and the Department of Art History, and Elizabeth Harney at the University of Toronto in the Department of Art.47 As a result, the University of British Columbia Okanagan and University of Toronto are the only two universities in Canada that offer courses on African art taught by permanent faculty. The lack of specialists in African art and visual culture in Canada means that very few courses in the field are offered, affecting the number of students who go on to specialize and ultimately work with African collections in Canadian institutions, either in academic positions or in curatorial

46 Silvia Forni’s research focuses on the network of exchanges that have played a pivotal role in defining forms of regional cultural identity in sub-Saharan Africa. She is particularly interested in pottery production in the Ndop Plain, which is located in the North West Province of Cameroon.

47 Ruth Phillips, of Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, began her career specializing in African art but shifted her focus to Native North American art in the 1980s. Jacqueline Fry, of the University of Ottawa, also specialized in African art and was very active with the National Gallery’s African collection until her untimely death in 1991.
or research roles. For example, the three professionals already mentioned, Harney, Gott and Forni, trained in and studied at institutions in the United States, Britain and Europe, not in Canada.

There are, however, many more individuals in Canadian universities working in the field of anthropology who specialize in continental Africa. This may be because the study of African visual and material culture has traditionally been undertaken in the disciplines of anthropology and archeology rather than art history (Steiner 2002). While this situation is beginning to change in Western institutions, particularly in Europe and the United States, Canada has been slow to follow, even though there has been an increase in African Studies programs offered at Canadian universities. The University of British Columbia, University of Alberta, Carleton University, York University, University of Toronto, McGill University, and Dalhousie University all offer courses in African Studies, some towards degrees at the bachelor, master and doctoral levels. Similarly, there has been an increase in recent years in the number of African film specialists in Canadian universities, among them Boulou Ebanda de B’eri in the Department of Communications at the University of Ottawa, and Aboubakar Sanogo at the Institute for African Studies at Carleton University.

While the rise in the number of scholars in recent years can be seen as a step in terms of raising awareness of and interest in African visual and material culture, the production of scholarship within the field is minimal. Apart from a handful of exhibition catalogues produced since the 1970s, there have been no books or major scholarly texts written on African visual and material culture or African collections in Canada. In contrast, scholarship within the field in the United States is on the rise and focused on
African collections, including publications such as Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display. Released in 2011, it features thirteen chapters, each dedicated to a particular African art collection in the United States. It showcases the diversity, magnitude and exhibition of African collections in the United States, and the range of contributors is evidence of growing academic and institutional activity surrounding the collections.

In the United States, the history of building, representing and displaying African visual and material culture collections extends back centuries. Beginning in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, objects of African origin began entering American museums. While the majority of objects were put in natural history museums, others found their place in art museums. For example, the Hampton University Art Museum began its African collection in the 1880s, the Cincinnati Art Museum in the 1890s, the Brooklyn Museum in the 1900s, and the Cleveland Museum of Art in the 1910s. As Christa Clarke and Kathleen Bickford Berzock note, “These early museum collections of African art reveal a range of material collected and displayed during the initial phase of interest, a time when art museums were grappling with their own identity and when the distinction between “art” and “artifact” were still fluid” (2011, 6). In contrast to many of the African collections in Europe from the same time period, which were seen largely as an extension of the colonialist narrative and relegated to natural history museums, African collections in art museums in the United States were used explicitly for didactic purposes. American art museums, with their educational and civic missions, positioned African collections within a larger narrative of African American ancestry and history. Hampton University, for example, one of the first African American universities, promoted its African
collection as an important part of African American history (Clarke and Bickford Berzock 2011, 7).

Beginning in the 1920s, with the rise to prominence of modernist art in Europe and North America, there was increased interest in African objects as works of fine art. The modernist interest in African art resulted in a growing market for African goods entering the United States. By the mid-1930s, New York was a centre for African art dealers and collectors (Steiner 1989; 1991; 1996, 4). Perhaps in part due to its increased accessibility, many people began private collections of African art, often as an extension of larger collections of modern art. Many of these private collections then formed the basis of prominent African collections in American museums today.

The history of exhibiting African art in American museums has a rich and complex history. One of the most significant moments in that history was the 1935 exhibition, “African Negro Art,” mounted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In many ways, the exhibition can be seen as groundbreaking in the diversity of objects displayed. While, for the most part, highly sculptural works were preferred for the exhibition, other pieces such as textiles, jewelry, and utilitarian objects were also displayed. The exhibition featured minimal contextual labels and so emphasized the

48 Furthermore, it was during the 1920s that the cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance, began. The movement advanced the idea that African art was of particular importance to African American heritage and culture. Many museums and other cultural institutions located in areas with large populations of African Americans began exhibiting both private and public collections of African art (among them the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library). Other museums mounted exhibitions that displayed African art alongside African American art. In 1927, the Art Institute of Chicago held an exhibition in conjunction with the Negro in Art Week, which displayed works of African art alongside African American art as a way of fostering a sense of pride in African American heritage (Clarke and Bickford Berzock 2011, 7-8).
aesthetic appreciation of the objects (Steiner 1996, 4). While many criticized the museum’s minimalist display, the exhibition contributed significantly to expanded visitor perception of African objects as fine art (Clarke and Bickford Berzock 2011, 8-9).

Since the “African Negro Art” exhibition in 1935, there have been several exhibitions of African art in American museums and other cultural institutions. Tracing the history of these collections in the United States showcases the complex ways in which African visual and material culture has been classified and displayed in relation to changing perceptions. In contrast, the history of museum representation of African visual and material culture in Canada is far less complex.

**Major African Exhibitions in Canada**

Over the past thirty years, there have been only a handful of major exhibitions of African material and visual culture in Canada—“major” meaning exhibitions that have brought together African collections to showcase the diversity of the collections in Canadian cultural institutions. These exhibitions include “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” (1978) hosted by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, “Into the Heart of Africa” (1989) at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, “Beads of Life” (2005) at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, and “Sacred Africa” (2006), followed by its sequel “Sacred Africa II” (2008), both of which were mounted by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. All of these exhibitions took place in Ontario and Quebec. This may be because the largest numbers of collections of African visual material culture are located in these two provinces and because the close proximity of the provinces to one another made it relatively easier to bring the collections together for exhibition. It is also important to note that two of these exhibitions took place at national institutions—the National Gallery
of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. This is significant because exhibitions showcased at these institutions function on a national stage. Both “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” and “Beads of Life” were accompanied by elaborate catalogues, which brought attention to African visual and material culture in Canada and made significant scholarly contributions in an otherwise neglected field. Because these exhibitions made a contribution to the study of African collections in Canadian museums, they are addressed here.

“Twenty-Five African Sculptures”

In 1978, “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” opened at the National Gallery of Canada. Curated by Jacqueline Fry, the exhibition featured, as the title suggests, twenty-five African sculptures, including eight masks, two architectural elements, and fifteen works of statuary. The sculptures displayed in the exhibition were from West-Central Africa, including Mali, Nigeria, Zaire (present-day Democratic Republic of Congo), Guinea-Bissau, Gabon and Cameroon. It was the first major exhibition in Canada to showcase African sculptures as works of art, rather than as ethnographic objects. As Fry explains, “The objects in this exhibition will appear […] first of all as sculpture, despite the radical transformation they may have undergone in the transition from their proper physical and cultural setting to a Western art museum” (1978, 12). The exhibition was also the first in Canada to bring together pieces of African art from several private and institutional collections.  

49 The National Gallery of Canada did not have an African historic collection to include in the exhibition. As a result, the exhibition relied solely on African art from external collections.
collections in order to showcase the diversity of African art in Canada.$^50$ These included pieces from the National Museum of Man (now the CMC) and the ROM, the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art (now at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston), the Barbara and Murray Frum Collection (now housed at the AGO), as well as work from private collections, including the Leon and Louise Lippel African Collection in Montreal, and the Daniel and Nancy Mato’s African Collection in Winnipeg.

A catalogue, edited by Fry, accompanied the exhibition. The catalogue was written in French and English and included black and white photographs of each of the twenty-five art works in the show. Fry wrote an extensive introduction, which was accompanied by several short texts pertaining to each of the twenty-five objects, written by such prominent scholars in the field as Jean Laude, Professor of Art History at the Université de Paris; Keith Nicklin, Chief Ethnographer, Federal Department of Antiquities at the National Museum in Nigeria; Arnold Rubin, Professor of Art History at the University of California, and Robert Farris Thompson, Professor of Art History at Yale University. Ultimately, these Canadian collections of African art were placed on the map through a strategy of bringing together top scholars from within the field of African art for a project that resulted in a publication of those scholars’ contributions.

$^{50}$ Traditionally, visual and material culture from the African continent has been treated in the West in undifferentiated terms, despite the fact that the continent is home to fifty-six sovereign states and a diverse range of peoples and cultures. This monolithic treatment of “Africa” in such generalized terms only reinscribes 19th century colonial notions of the continent as “unknowable,” and thus “dark.” In recent years, many Western institutions have begun to question this conceptualization of “Africa” by showcasing the diverse and wide-ranging aesthetic practices found there.
“Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African Adornment”

Almost thirty years after the “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, the CMC opened the exhibition “Beads of Life: Eastern and Southern African Adornment” (2005). Curated by Marie-Louise Labelle, “Beads of Life” featured 185 beaded objects ranging from jewelry, clothing and other forms of adornment, mainly from South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Botswana, Sudan and Zimbabwe. The artifacts in the show were brought in from several museums across Canada, including the CMC, ROM, Royal Alberta Museum, Museum of Vancouver, UBC Museum of Anthropology, Redpath Museum, Textile Museum of Canada, Glenbow Museum, and Université de Montreal, as well as several private collections. Coinciding with the global interest in beadwork, this was the first major exhibition in Canada focused on eastern and southern African beadwork, which has traditionally been categorized as production of incidental value. Labelle explains the history behind the idea for the exhibit:

For several years now, beadwork from eastern and southern Africa has become more prevalent in publications dedicated to beadwork, in fashion shows or on Internet sites, and particularly in boutiques in large cities where it is sold in vast quantities both in Africa and around the world. However, until recently, beadwork was notably absent from international exhibitions of African art, relegated to the rank of craft that was not worthy of museological attention. (2005a, 1)

Labelle is a social anthropologist who undertook extensive fieldwork among the Maasai and Samburu of Kenya during the 1980s. The exhibition ran until February 26, 2006.
This exhibition sought to disrupt previous notions and common misunderstandings about African beadwork, as well as to create a space to showcase a variety of rarelyShown pieces of African beadwork from Canadian collections.\textsuperscript{52}

The exhibition, orchestrated by Labelle, was a result of a collaborative project by twelve Canadians of African origin who worked as consultants for the exhibition. According to Joseph Manyoni, one of the consultants of South African descent, while beadwork was one of the cultural practices suppressed in South African under both colonialism and apartheid, its status has changed: “Now, there’s a considerable resurgence of interest in beadwork as people repossess their lost dignity. It has been reintegrated into the mainstream of South African society and is now regarded as a symbol of pride and part of the aesthetics of being South African” (2005).

In conjunction with the exhibition, the CMC produced a catalogue written by Labelle. The catalogue, which makes a major contribution to the study of African visual and material culture in Canada, includes six chapters dedicated to the study of beadwork, clothing and ornaments from eastern and southern regions of Africa. The catalogue is illustrated in colour and black and white and is intended to introduce readers to traditions of beadwork existing throughout eastern and southern Africa. Labelle’s attention to the state of African collections in Canada highlights the precarious nature and history of such collections and the need for further attention to the field.

\textsuperscript{52} These collections include those from the Textile Museum of Canada, Redpath Museum, ROM, Vancouver Museum, UBC Museum of Anthropology, Provincial Museum of Alberta, Glenbow Museum, Manitoba Museum, New Brunswick Museum, Kelowna Museum, Anthropology Department of the Université de Montreal, Department of Museums and Collections Services of the University of Alberta, and the Anthropology Museum at the University of Winnipeg.
Prior to “Twenty-Five African Sculptures” and “Beads of Life,” relatively little was known about African collections in Canada, where they came from and the collectors’ motivations for acquiring the objects. These exhibitions have, as a result, provided an important foundation for further study in the field. While there have been few major exhibitions that have actually brought together multiple African collections in such a way as to demonstrate the magnitude of African collections in Canada, as my following chapters illustrate, there have nonetheless been several exhibitions of African visual and material culture since the 1980s that have showcased the permanent collections constituting my three case studies.
Chapter 4

The African Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

Increasingly, museums world-wide are recognizing the need to consider their societies’ multi-cultural compositions if they are to continue attracting adequate numbers of visitors and developing strong community support. The process of gaining and maintaining community trust is both vital and challenging.


The African collection at the Royal Ontario Museum presents a striking case study in an examination of the ways in which the museum, like many built at the turn of the 20th century, has interpreted and displayed a complex and often contested historical and largely colonial collection over the last century. While the African collection at the ROM is the largest of its kind in Canada, with over 8,000 artifacts and 3,000 images, prior to the exhibition “Into the Heart of Africa” in 1989, the collection had never been exhibited to the public. “Into the Heart of Africa” has often been cited as one of the most controversial exhibitions in Canadian museum history. The protest that erupted during the exhibition fundamentally altered the way that the ROM exhibits non-Western visual and material culture. Since then, the museum has engaged more actively with its constituent communities by providing space for community involvement. In doing so, it has been able to foster several collaborative projects with many of the groups that had previously felt alienated by “Into the Heart of Africa” and by the ROM as an institution. Additionally, the museum has shifted its focus away from its African historic collection.
to African and African Canadian contemporary work. This more recent interest in contemporary objects and exhibitions signals an important shift in the museum’s policies, as it struggles to redefine and renegotiate its place within Canada’s most populous, metropolitan and culturally diverse city.

The ROM: An Institutional History

At the turn of the 20th century, a small but influential group of individuals began planning for a museum in the city of Toronto that would hold collections of international reputation. Plans for the ROM came to fruition on April 16, 1912, after an agreement between the University of Toronto and the Government of Ontario was signed, marking approval for the construction of the museum’s first building, designed by Toronto architects Frank Darling and John A. Pearson. The collections from the Museum of Natural History and Fine Arts, which was established in 1857 at the Toronto Normal School, formed the basis of the new museum. The Honourable Duke of Connaught, then Governor-General of Canada, formally opened the ROM two years later on March 19, 1914 (Teather 2005, 4). Charles T. Currelly was responsible for creating the original art and archeology collections at the ROM, which were a result of his archeological pursuits in Egypt, Crete and Asia Minor (Dickson 1993). His interest in collecting art and archeology prompted Sir Robert Ludwig Mond, a wealthy chemist, industrialist and fellow archeologist, as well as Sir Edmund Boyd Osler, a wealthy philanthropist, to fund many of Currelly’s excavations abroad so that he could subsequently donate the

53 The list includes the Duke of Connaught (then Governor-General of Canada), Sir Robert Ludwig Mond, Sir Edmund Boyd Osler, Charles T. Currelly, and Sir Edmond Walker, among others.
collections to the ROM. Currelly, who was seen as a “visionary museum-builder,” was appointed the first director of the ROM in 1914 and held this position until 1946 (ROM “Our History,” n.d.). By this time the ROM consisted of five separate departments and was called the Royal Ontario Museum of Archeology, Geology, Mineralogy, Paleontology, and Zoology.

The original structure of the ROM has undergone several changes since the early-20th century. The first renovations began in the mid-1920s, as the museum had quickly become overcrowded. The new wing facing Queen’s Park, the seat of provincial government, which opened on October 12, 1933, created more room for the museum’s growing collections and staff.54 In 1937, Mond, along with fellow donor and benefactor Sigmund Samuel, funded the construction of a new library space, for which they donated a large collection of books, including a 400-volume series of rare books from China. In 1951, Samuel also funded the creation of the first Canadiana Gallery at the ROM. He later went on to fund a subsequent wing for the collection in 1958, marking the beginning of what became a tradition of Samuel family involvements at the institution. By 1955, the ROM’s five distinct museums of natural history were recognized under one roof as part of the larger Royal Ontario Museum. Then, in 1968, the ROM formally cut its ties with the University of Toronto, marking its movement towards self-sustaining governance as a separate entity within the provincial government. In 1978, a budget of $55 million was

54 The neo-classical architectural design of the ROM is characteristic of what Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach call “universal survey museums.” As they point out, “Museum architecture often recalls the architectural traditions of mausoleums and royal temples.” They go on to note that neo-classical and Roman design has been used by museums since the Renaissance “to symbolize state authority.” Thus, “the museum stands as a symbol of the state, and those who pass through its doors enact a ritual that equates state authority with the idea of civilization” (1980, 449-450).
allocated for the extension of the ROM to accommodate a larger space for collections and research, a designated area for curation, an in-house library facility, and other much-needed facilities and resources. The renovation was completed in 1984 and marked by Queen Elizabeth, who was invited to officially re-open the institution. The royal visit and ribbon-cutting ceremony by the Queen were seen by many as confirmation of the international and “royal” stature of the museum (ROM “Our History,” n.d.).

Renaissance ROM, the name given to the institution’s most recent renovation and expansion project, is the product of what the museum describes in sprawling terms as “one of Canada’s most culturally diverse campaigns with several community-driven fundraising initiatives championing the transformation of the Museum and supporting its international galleries and collections” (ROM “Renaissance ROM,” n.d.). The project, which began in 2002, is due to be completed in 2014 for the ROM centenary. The centerpiece of the project, the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, designed by British architect Daniel Libeskind and Bregman & Hamann Architects, was officially unveiled to the public in 2007 (Teather 2005, 3). Deemed the “Dawn of the Crystal Age,” the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal literally projects itself out of the original neo-classical building. Creating a definitive architectural contrast, the Crystal is conceived as a post-modern intervention, marking a new beginning for the ROM in the 21st century (fig. 9).

55 According to Lynne Teather, “The lieutenant governor of Ontario granted royal assent on 16 April 1912 to Bill 138, establishing the Royal Ontario Museum. Ironically, today’s ROM staff cannot find out how the prefix ‘Royal’ attached itself to the museum – perhaps its significance was so obvious at the time that no legal testament beyond its legislative act of creation was deemed necessary” (Teather 2005, 4).
Upon completion, the project will include the creation of twenty-seven new galleries intended to liberate the institution’s “many stranded collections” (Thorsell 2009). Today the ROM is the fifth largest museum in North America, and Canada’s largest museum of world cultures and natural history, boasting more than six million artifacts and over forty specific gallery spaces.

The ROM’s audience is diverse, varying by age, gender, education, as well as cultural and ethnic background. Exhibitions at the ROM are almost always bilingual, and in some cases, other languages are incorporated for appropriate exhibitions. The ROM frequently publishes and co-publishes a wide variety of exhibition catalogues and books pertaining to the museum’s collections and research. For the most part, all publications
produced by the museum are distributed by the University of Toronto Press and are meant to reach a wide range of audiences. Annually, the ROM attracts more than a million visitors through extensive public programming, including series of special lectures, courses and activities specially designed for both adults and children. There are also several school-specific programs for children throughout the school year. As a leading ethnographic authority in Canada, the ROM emphasizes cultural history ahead of chronology to reach wider viewing audiences. This is reflected not only in the permanent gallery spaces, including the new installation of the African collection, but also in the fifteen to twenty temporary exhibitions the ROM showcases each year.

The museum is located in the downtown area of Canada’s most populous and culturally diverse city. Toronto, on the north shore of Lake Ontario, has been building its dynamic profile for almost 200 years. It is the capital city of the province of Ontario, and was twice, for brief periods, the capital of Canada (1849–1852 and 1856–1858). The city encompasses a geographical area formally maintained by six separate municipalities: East York, Etobicoke, North York, Old Toronto, York and Scarborough. Serving the cultural and educational needs of a population of 2.5 million and its broad geographical base are approximately ten historical museums, including the York Museum, Scarborough Museum and Mackenzie House; several major museums and art galleries, including the ROM, Art Gallery of Ontario, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Textile Museum of Canada, Bata Shoe Museum and Ontario Science Centre; as well as several culturally-specific institutions and cultural centres, such as the Ukrainian Cultural Centre Toronto, Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, Zion Church and Cultural Centre, Council Fire Native Cultural Centre, Latvian Canadian Cultural Centre, and Chinese Cultural Centre.
of Greater Toronto. 56 Toronto is also home to five universities, including the University of Toronto (which consists of the St. George Campus and Scarborough Campus), York University (which includes both its Main Campus and Glendon Campus), Ryerson University, the University of St. Michael’s College, and the Ontario College of Art and Design University, as well as four major colleges: Seneca, George Brown, Humber and Centennial.57 It has often been cited as one of the most diverse cities in the world. Of the 2.5 million residents, approximately 49% were born outside of Canada, which, according to a recent census by the United Nations Development Programme, is the second-highest immigrant population among the world’s metropolitan cities (Kopun and Keung 2007).58 In addition, 46.9% belong to visible minority groups, and Toronto is home to Canada’s largest African and African Canadian populations.

Because the ROM is located in such a culturally diverse city, it must navigate strategically in order to relate to and open itself up to diverse audiences. Thus, the ROM is typical of many major museums located in large cosmopolitan cities in that it conveys to the larger public seemingly unbiased exhibitions and displays, which cater to the larger “cosmopolitan culture” (Clifford 1997, 121). The ROM first introduced the need for community consultation in its official “Policy on Multiculturalism and Bilingualism” in 1978. Under “Local Ethnic Communities,” the policy stated, “The Museum should explore ways to involve local ethnic communities in exhibitions and programs of an

56 There are, however, over 5 million people living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which accounts for approximately 25% of Canada’s total population.

57 This list does not include the several private colleges in Toronto.

58 Toronto is second to Miami. However, while Miami’s immigrant population is predominantly Cuban and Latin American, no single group dominates Toronto’s immigrant population (Kopun and Keung 2007).
ethnic nature” (Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 68). While the desire to create partnerships between the ROM and “local ethnic communities” was officially mandated in 1978, it was only after the “Into the Heart of Africa” exhibition in 1989 that the museum began to pursue what it described as “the development of a successful working relationship with its community” (70). However, in a report issued by the museum in 1990, it was noted that, while the ROM recognizes that “museums hold immense potential in their societies to positively influence peoples’ attitudes about the other cultures with which they share their world, locally and globally,” research is at the top of the museum’s hierarchy of priorities: “The tradition and mandate of this museum require that it maintain high standards of scholarly research as the basis of its exhibitions and programs” (70). Thus, while the ROM recognized the need for community involvement, it also maintained their “community consultation must fit into the current structure of the ROM’s procedures,” by which it meant “ultimate responsibility for exhibition planning and execution must remain that of the exhibit design team” (70). As I discuss later in relation to the ROM’s exhibitions featuring the African collection, the prioritizing of academic expertise over community consultation has been the subject of considerable controversy and debate in recent decades.

**African Artifacts at the ROM: The Growth of a Collection**

In 1901 Reverend William Ellis made the first donation of artifacts of African origin to what is now considered the ROM, marking the beginning of its African collection. At this time, Ellis donated seven artifacts, most likely from Madagascar. Since the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the ROM’s African collection has grown to over 8,000 artifacts and 3,000 images, making it the largest collection of its kind in Canada. Overall, the African
collection at the ROM is the result of an amalgamation of donations from a wide variety of private and public collections: families of missionaries who were stationed primarily in West Africa during the late-19\textsuperscript{th} to mid-20\textsuperscript{th} centuries\textsuperscript{59}; Canadians who served in the British Imperial Army; wealthy imperialists involved with the oil business in North-West Africa; and tourists who traveled mainly to the western and southern regions of the African continent throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Since the 1970s there has also been a series of donations of “commercial” African art from private collectors who acquired their collections from African art dealers. And, more recently, Silva Forni, who is the ROM’s first permanent curator of material from Africa, commissioned contemporary works of African art and visual culture for the collection. As Forni has noted, overall the ROM’s African collection can be seen as “scattered,” “uneven” and acquired “randomly” (Forni 2010a). The collection is, therefore, characteristic of many African collections in Western ethnographic museums in the sense that the collection is composed of over 100 years of donations from a wide variety of public and private sources. In general, the collection lacks formal documentation, as donor files are often incomplete or missing entirely. And, as Forni notes, the collection has essentially gone unmaintained for over a century.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} For example, there were several donations from private collections from missionaries, doctors and administrators who spent time in Africa during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and early-19\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

\textsuperscript{60} While this may be the case at the ROM, there are also several African collections in Canadian museums and other cultural institutions that were strategically and systematically acquired and include extensive documentation. For example, the Glenbow Museum’s African collection was acquired predominately by the museum’s founder Eric Harvey who catalogued the origins of the artifacts. There are also examples of individual African collections, which have been donated to particular institutions by families, such as the Lang Collection at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, the Read Collection at the Redpath Museum in Montreal, and the Frum Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario.
The African collection at the ROM, like those in many ethnographic museums, is kept separate from the Egyptian and Nubian collections. As Suzanne Preston Blier argues, “The great dynastic arts of Egypt… had largely been removed from consideration as African and were instead positioned culturally with the Near East” (2008, 17). At the ROM, the Egyptian collection and the Nubian collection, which opened at the ROM in 2011, are classified as archeological collections, whereas the African collection as a whole is classified as an anthropological or ethnographic collection within the larger World Cultures Galleries. According to Forni, it is also difficult to relate the Nubian

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Nubia represents the cultural and geographic area that includes parts of southern Egypt and northern Sudan. During the 1960s, the Aswan Dam flooded the majority of the southern region forcing Nubians to relocate elsewhere. As a result, the only accessible region of Nubia remains in northern Sudan. Although Nubia is mainly in Sudan, it has had a longstanding and complex history with Egypt. Thus, Nubia is often categorized in museums within larger collections and displays of Egypt. This is the case with the Nubian collection at the ROM.

According to Carol Duncan, the history of art in Western museums has been organized and constructed around a central theme of civilization. Often organized sequentially, the history of civilization is presented in many survey museums (among them the Louvre in Paris, the National Gallery in London, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) as beginning in Greece, Rome and Egypt. “Eastern civilization” is presented as a counterpart (1991, 100). In surveys of “civilization,” Egypt is situated at the beginning of Western civilization, and, as such, is separated conceptually from the rest of the African continent, which is understood in museums as non-Western. This separation of Egypt and, in many cases of Nubia, within the larger history of Western art from the rest of Africa also racially reconceptualizes these spaces as both white and Western. Thus, the positioning of Egypt as separate from the rest of the African continent and closer to the “Near East” can also be opened up to question. Geographically, the “Near East” is a term that has been used to define northeast Africa and southwest Asia. As Robert Nelson argues, the term Near East “makes sense only from some point to the West, such as North Africa, but we understand that this is the Near East from the perspective of a Europe that is unaware that Persia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Arabia lie to the southeast. Equally puzzling is the fact that the term has been adopted by the United States.” From this vantage point, as Nelson goes on to note, the Near East to the United States would “refer to Bermuda or the Bahamas” (1997, 30).

Archeological collections are often defined as those that have been acquired through recovery and are studied by documentation, whereas anthropological and ethnographical
collection to the larger African collection. This is because the Nubian collection at the ROM is archeological and comes from regions of Sudan, which is one of the most underrepresented areas in the African collection, thus making any cultural or geographical connection between to two collections difficult. Forni explains that, generally, “Sudan is one of those areas underrepresented in collections unless the institution has the chance to benefit from people who have intentionally collected in that area” (2010a).

The African collection at the ROM is one of those once “stranded collections,” as Thorsell has recently referred to it, which is now on display for the first time in the ROM’s history. The African collection has been included within the larger Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific, which formally opened in 2008 and is on display on the third level at the ROM. The African collection is displayed as part of the World Cultures Galleries along with such collections as the Daphne Cockwell Gallery of Canada: First Peoples; Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada, Bishop collections instead encompass those which have been acquired by other means and studied in relation to larger cultural facts and figures. The archeology/ethnography division is based upon disciplinary distinctions and, therefore, is a product of Enlightenment ideas of knowledge production. As such, these Western constructions and divisions have been applied to the categorization (and understanding) of that which is defined as non-Western visual and material culture. Similarly, the historical separation of Egypt (and Nubia) from the rest of Africa by the discipline of art history is still prevalent among Western museums and other institutions. For example, as Nelson notes, each year in the *Art Bulletin*, American and Canadian dissertations are listed according to “traditional categories.” Egypt is placed within the category of ‘Ancient Near Eastern and Classical,’ whereas ‘African Art’ is categorized as the rest of the continent (1997, 29). These categories do not follow continental divisions, nor cultural distinctions. Instead, they are created and maintained by the very disciplines and institutions for which they were created.
White Gallery of Chinese Temple Art; Prince Takamado Gallery of Japan; and the A.G. Leventis Foundation Gallery of Ancient Cyprus.64

**Exhibiting Africa at the Royal Ontario Museum**

While the ROM has been collecting African artifacts since the turn of the 20th century, it was not until 1989 that the ROM launched the first exhibition of its African collection, “Into the Heart of Africa.” Prior to this, the museum had only showcased small and rather brief exhibitions of African artifacts from touring exhibitions for special events, none of which included artifacts from the permanent African collection. These included “Africa Story” in 1961, a collection of 120 photographs taken by John Young during a four-and-a-half-month assignment in Africa funded by the Toronto Globe and Mail; “Africa, Antarctica and the Amazon” in 1965, a touring exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington (Nicks 2009); and “African Batiks” in 1970, organized by Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland, of a collection of batiks from the South African artist Louis Steyn.65 Other exhibitions included “Expedition to Cameroon”

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64 The following galleries are also included within the World Cultures Galleries: Wirth Gallery of the Middle East; Galleries of Africa: Egypt; Samuel European Galleries, Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles and Costume; Gallery of Greece; Gallery of the Bronze Age Aegean; Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery; ROM Gallery of Chinese Architecture; Gallery of Korea; Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Gallery of China; Matthews Family Court of Chinese Sculpture, and Bishop White Gallery of Chinese Temple Art. As well, the ROM now has several galleries dedicated to the study of natural history, including the Bat Cave (Philosophers’ Walk Wing); Life in Crisis: Shad Gallery of Biodiversity; Teck Suite of Galleries: Earth’s Treasures; Reed Gallery of the Age of Mammals; Gallery of Birds; James and Louise Temerty Galleries of the Age of Dinosaurs; and the Nature History Highlights; as well as two three specific Hands-on Galleries, including the CIBC Discovery Gallery, Digital Gallery, and Patrick and Barbara Keenan Family of Hands-on Diversity.

65 Batik is an art form in which waxes and pigments are used on fabrics to produce a variety of motifs. “African Batiks” was only on display from January 8, 1970 to February 11, 1970. Prior to the display at the ROM, an exhibition featuring forty batiks by Steyn

**“Into the Heart of Africa” and Into the Heart of Controversy**

“Into the Heart of Africa,” which opened in 1989, was the ROM’s first major exhibition featuring African artifacts from the museum’s permanent collection. The exhibition was also, for the ROM, a turning point in terms of the politics of representing non-Western cultures in Western museums and the debates surrounding levels of community involvement in museums. If we examine “Into the Heart of Africa” in the context of the ROM’s engagement with those issues, which the exhibit was the first to explore, it is evident that, in the wake of that show, the ROM changed the way it approached its exhibits of non-Western and non-mainstream visual and material culture. It is important to look critically at the events and controversies that arose during the exhibition to contextualize and understand the importance of the African exhibitions since that time.

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was widely exhibited in Canada between 1967 and 1969, including shows at the Edmonton Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Regina, Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatchewan, Alberta College of Arts in Calgary Alberta, Glenhyrst Arts Council in Brantford Ontario, Confederation Art Gallery in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and the Arts and Culture Center in St John’s, Newfoundland (“S.A. Artist’s Renditions of Ancient Art seen in Canada” 1967).
“Into the Heart of Africa” was significant for many reasons. It was a “first” for the museum: the first exhibition of the ROM’s permanent African collection, cultural anthropologist Jeanne Cannizzo’s first experience as a curator and the museum’s first major exhibition controversy. Because this was to be the ROM’s first exhibition focusing solely on its permanent African collection, not only was it important that the exhibition be a “blockbuster event” corresponding with an extensive program and publications; it was also a chance for the museum to demonstrate a more reflexive approach to representing and displaying non-Western collections.\(^6\)

The title of the exhibition, “Into the Heart of Africa,” had been established early in the show’s development. The original title for the exhibition was to be “Into the Heart of Darkness” in reference to Joseph Conrad’s 1902 publication *Heart of Darkness*, which explores the dark side of the European colonization of Africa. The novel, which was one of the most widely taught texts in universities across North America and Europe throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, is also widely critiqued for its racist undertones. In 1975, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe famously criticized Conrad’s novel during a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, claiming that it de-humanized African peoples.

\(^6\) There were a number of special programs corresponding to the exhibition, including a large number of screenings of documentary, such as *Behind the Mask* (BBC), *With These Hands: How Women Feed Africa* (Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Burkina Faso 1987), *Selbe – One Among Many* (Senegal 1983), *The Cry of Reason* (South Africa), *Masai Women* (1982), and *The Tree of Iron* (Tanzania 1988); as well as several videos on African History, including, *The Story of Africa* and *The Africans*; and animated films, among them, *Anasai the Spider*, *Cow Tail Switch*, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears*. The ROM also created a lecture series and invited scholars such as Dr. J.H.K. Nketia, a specialist in African museum collections at University of Pittsburg and Dr. Rowland Abiodum, a professor of Art History and Black Studies at Amherst College, Massachusetts. A series of concerts, performances, and workshops were also held (News release, November 8, 1989; African Collection Files, Royal Ontario Museum, World Cultures Archives).
denied them language and culture and in essence reduced them to metaphors for the larger reading of the dark continent Europeans sought to colonize. During a marketing survey for the exhibition prior to its opening, it was noted by several members of the Black community that “Into the Heart of Darkness” was an offensive title and should not be used. As a result, Cannizzo and the curatorial staff decided to change the name to “Into the Heart of Africa,” a title that, arguably, still carries strong reference to Conrad’s title and thus to the characterization that the members of the Black community found offensive (Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990). By referencing Conrad’s book in the title of exhibition without explicitly complicating and critiquing the underlying racist undertones of the book, the exhibition essentially reinscribes the very terminology it was trying to critique.

In addition, “Into the Heart of Africa” was to be launched only one year after the controversies surrounding “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples,” the exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, that was mounted as part of the larger 1988 Winter Olympic celebrations. The ROM, therefore, was well aware of the heightened climate surrounding the representation of both Aboriginal and non-Western visual and material culture in Canadian museums. The ROM hired Jeanne Cannizzo as guest curator for the exhibition because the museum had no in-house specialist in African cultures. Cannizzo’s background was in cultural anthropology, with a primary focus on African material culture in Sierra Leone (Da Breo 1989-1990, 37). Cannizzo’s overall curatorial approach could be labeled as critical and reflexive, as she sought to both critique Canada’s role in imperialist collecting practices in Africa as well as challenge the viewing audience to be more open to multiple readings of history. In
doing so, she sought to demystify the ROM’s status as an ethnographic authority and instead expose the political and cultural implications inherent in ownership of such a collection (Butler 2008, 8). “Generally,” Cannizzo commented after the event, “it is held by Africans that museums, galleries and other public institutions have not dealt successfully with the colonial past. I thought that we had the opportunity to meet that demand, to acknowledge the process by which a lot of these artifacts had been collected” (Cannizzo quoted in Da Breo 1989-1990, 37). For that reason, she sought to represent the context in which the artifacts housed at the ROM were collected, offering a viewpoint different from the conventional interpretation of the history of the artifacts. At another level, her approach to the exhibition would offer a critical perspective of the ways in which museums operate.67 As Cannizzo states in the exhibition catalogue, “Museums are themselves social institutions, which cannot be divorced from the historical context in which they developed, and their collections occasionally reflect the violence and disruptive social forces characterizing the European colonization of Africa” (Cannizzo 1989, 84). Throughout the exhibition catalogue, written by Cannizzo, she continually makes reference to the legacy of misrepresentation of African cultures in museums. For example, she states, “The partiality of museum collections has sometimes prompted stereotypes about other cultures of rather limited nature. This has happened to the Zulu

67 Since there 1980s, there have been several exhibitions dealing with collections of African visual and material culture that attempt to critically examine the role of the institution in collecting and displaying such collections. These exhibitions include “ART/artifact” (Museum for African Art, New York), “Baule: African Art/Western Eyes” (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut), “The Museums as Museum: Artists Reflect” (Museum of Modern Art, New York), “Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals” (Museum for African Art, New York), and “Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art” (The Museum for African Art, New York).
cultural identity, but the disproportionate number of their weapons in museum collections has obscured the many other facets of their collective existence” (fig. 10) (1989, 86).

Figure 10: Jeanne Cannizzo. 1989. Into the Heart of Africa. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum (front cover).

On June 28, 1989, prior to the opening of the exhibition, Sandra Whiting, a publicist from the Black community who was hired by the ROM’s public relations department, held a reception for invited members from Toronto’s Black community. Whiting had identified these individuals as influential leaders in the community who would be willing and able to offer comments and voice concerns about the exhibition before it opened to the public. During the reception, Cannizzo described the exhibition’s themes and contents at length, while Louis Levine, then Associate Director of Exhibits, fielded questions. At this time, several members of the audience voiced concern about a
number of issues, including “the content and images used in the brochure; the content of the exhibition; and the lack of community involvement in the development of the exhibition” (Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 10). As a result of issues raised during the reception, the ROM hired Woods Gordon Management Consultants to organize two focus groups, each consisting of eight “recognized leaders” in the Black community, and a reception to “obtain suggestions and advice for the marketing of the exhibition to members of the Black and African communities of Canada” (10). The reception was held in early June 1989. By this time, the ROM had received feedback from each of the receptions. The participants in each session came to an agreement that “the brochure, while perhaps neutral to a European audience, are perceived as highly negative, stereotypical and charged emotionally from their perspective” (11). In response to the issues that the members from the Black community had raised about the brochure, the ROM decided that despite the expense, it would have the brochure rewritten and reprinted. The museum also agreed to the suggestion that it hire more representatives from the Black and African communities to put together promotional material for the exhibition, act as tour guides or docents, and volunteers, so that there was a stronger Black presence at the exhibition and museum.  

68 The ROM hired Abdu Kasozi, an African historian from Toronto’s Black community to coordinate additional public programming events and public lectures. It should be noted that, before Kasozi put together the program, he consulted with three representative groups from the Black communities, including the Black Secretariat, the Canadian African Newcomer Aid Centre in Toronto, and the Jamaican Canadian Association. According to Kasozi’s report in 1990, “After long discussions, it was agreed by the organizational leaders of the three groups mentioned above, that despite its problems, the exhibition added a positive step to the image Canadians have of Africa. Because of this, they would develop a positive attitude towards the exhibition. Consequently, they would reach out to other Black and African organizations who were prepared to listen and convince them to participate in programs that expanded on the exhibition” (Kasozi
While the ROM did make an effort to involve members from the Black community prior to the opening of the exhibition, many felt that these initiatives were much too late in the game; there should have been community involvement at the initial stages of planning for the exhibition, not after it was already in production and near completion. Ayanna Black, the well-known poet, feminist, and activist, articulated the problem in an article in the *Toronto Star* on August 12, 1989:

> The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) is busy putting the final touches on an exhibition, *Into the Heart of Africa*, scheduled to open in November. The ROM has been planning this exhibition for two years, yet no blacks have been involved in the planning or employed on the exhibition team. No one from the black community was brought in until March, when Sandy Whiting, a publicist, was hired to do outreach and to develop a mailing list of Toronto’s blacks… Basically, the ROM wanted input to help market and sell the show, not to plan it. Sound familiar? The representatives of the black community were very disturbed by the ROM’s imperialistic attitude. I know because I was there. We were disturbed by the lack of involvement and consultation with the black community. And why should we be isolated from the team depicting our past? We want to maintain some control over the interpretations of our past, and we want to make sure contemporary African art is presented in a positive manner… After all, the exhibition relates to our culture, our history, our proud past—and a

(quoted in Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 10). As a result of this feedback from the above-mentioned groups, several other groups, including the Ugandan Canadian Cultural Association, Ghanian Cultural Association, Rwandese Cultural Group, Ontario Black History Society, Toronto Chapter of the Congress of Black Women, and Afro-Caribbean Group, were encouraged to and participated in the programming of events for the show (5). These events included a four-day event in which representatives from the Black community organizations involved were invited to come and speak to museum visitors about African cultures, as part of an African Cultural Day, and a nine-part lecture series. In many ways, it is evident that the museum used its institutional and cultural authority to place subtle pressure on these groups to help develop a more positive approach to the exhibition despite its problems (Riegel 1996, 87).
history that has been depicted by the majority of whites in a distorted manner. Why should we now begin to trust the ROM? (1989, H3)\(^{69}\)

Black raises many questions about the ROM’s decision to bring in representatives from the Black community after the show had already been completed. In many ways, this inclusion of community members can be seen as symbolic inclusiveness, in that the museum brought in these individuals for the purpose of appearing inclusive (Rogoff 2002a, 65). Furthermore, the very act of consulting with the community is acknowledgement that there was an overall lack of diversity within the institution. If the museum did indeed want to be inclusive of the Black community, it could have consulted with and created a dialogue with it from the beginning stages of the exhibition.

Despite the flurry of questions from the Black community regarding the exhibition, “Into the Heart of Africa” opened as planned on November 16, 1989. The exhibition included approximately 375 artifacts that had been collected mainly from West Africa between 1870 and 1925, as well as a series of photographs taken mostly by Canadian missionaries, focusing on Canadian missionary stations, military officers, and African people. The exhibition also incorporated an archival collection of newspaper clippings and articles highlighting imperialist advances from the time, as well as a collection of illustrations depicting explorers and missionaries in Africa. The exhibition itself was divided into five sections: “The Imperial Connection” (fig. 11), “The Military Hall,” “The Missionary Room,” “The Ovimbundu Compound,” and “The Africa Room” (fig. 12).

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\(^{69}\) Hazel Da Breo also echoed this argument in her article, “Royal Spoils: The Museum Confronts its Colonial Past,” which was published in Fuse Magazine (Winter 1989-1990), where she pointed out the overall lack of community involvement with the exhibition.
Figure 11: “For Crown and Empire” installation view of “Into the Heart of Africa,” Royal Ontario Museum. c. 1989-1990.


Figure 12: “The Africa Room” installation view of “Into the Heart of Africa,” Royal Ontario Museum. c. 1989-1990.

The first four sections of the exhibition focused on the role of Canadian missionaries in Africa, imperialist ideologies, the discourses of collecting, and how the museum functions in relation to larger colonial legacies. While these first four sections were intended to invite viewers to look critically at Canada’s colonial encounters in Africa, only the last section actually focused on African cultures and the multiplicity of cultural practices found on the continent (Butler 2008, 25).70

This imbalance in representation reflected a recent trend among Western museums and other cultural institutions to create or reinstall collections of non-Western visual and material culture in such a way as to demonstrate how the collections came into being. While this method of interpretation was used to present collections in a different light, the underlying focus was on the collectors—including the ROM itself, as institution and participant in imperial collecting practices—not the cultures that created or used the artifacts.71 And in many cases, that focus was misinterpreted by museum-goers. Furthermore, the exhibition did not present any alternative narratives by those who had been directly affected by the legacies of colonialism. Instead of providing the opportunity for African peoples to tell their stories about the consequences of this complex history

70 While this was one of the main criticisms that Cannizzo received in connection to the perceived lack of respect for contemporary African cultures, Cannizzo stated in the exhibition catalogue, “The core of the African collections at the Royal Ontario Museum is made up of objects amassed in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th. As such, the collections are historical, and it is impossible even to suggest through these objects the complexities of contemporary African life at the end of the 20th century. What we can do, however, is realize that the lifeways of all peoples change; no one lives in a collective state of suspended animation” (1989, 80).

71 At the same time, this self-reflexive critique can be understood as a way in which the institution positioned itself against the accusation that it was not being critical of this complex history.
through the objects in the collection as witnesses, the exhibition featured accounts from Canadian missionaries and soldiers and privileged a white, Western narrative.

Of particular importance in the ensuing criticism of the exhibition was Cannizzo’s use of irony throughout the exhibition to indicate critique of the context within which the African artifacts at the ROM were collected. She often used quotation marks to signal the irony of certain words or ideas, such as “the dark continent,” “savage,” and “primitive.” Many praised Cannizzo’s reflexive approach and the use of irony signaled by the use of quotation marks. For example, Christopher Hume, a writer for the Toronto Star argued that the exhibit did something different:

Ten, even five years ago, a show like this would simply have been a celebration of African tribal arts and crafts. Now the baskets, masks, spears and jewelry are balanced by displays devoted to the soldiers and missionaries who collected the artifacts and the context in which they operated. (1989, E3)

Many people, however, didn’t understand Cannizzo’s approach, nor did they think that the tone used was appropriate. As one protestor argued, “Putting quotation marks around those words is only sugar coating it and it doesn’t take away the meaning behind it” (Murray 1990, H3). Cannizzo’s use of quotation marks around historically constructed terms assumes an “insider” audience with a developed level of understanding of why the quotation marks were used and what was being questioned as a result. By assuming that the audience was educated in the very terms she sought to critique—terms that have been historically constructed in order to uphold racialized ideas and theories—Cannizzo also assumed that these constructions were no longer operative within the museum, which was not the case. As Henrietta Riegel argues, the use of quotation marks to symbolize irony is
“a risky trope,” which “can lead to very different results in museum exhibitions depending on who it is aimed at and who does the aiming” (1996, 83). While Cannizzo attempted to further complicate and critique these terms in the exhibition catalogue, few visitors actually read the twenty-dollar exhibition publication.\(^{72}\) As one visitor noted on one of the comment cards supplied for the exhibition,

Into the Heart of Africa fails as an exhibit, at least it does if we take the curator’s expressed aims to heart. In her guide published by the ROM we are shown how to “decode” the exhibit. Unfortunately this does not translate/transfer to the actual exhibit… few people will spend the $20 and time necessary to inform themselves. (Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 19)

Perhaps one of the most obvious issues with the exhibition was that, by questioning the museum’s collecting practices, as the quotation marks implied, the exhibition seemed to contradict the accepted position of the museum as cultural authority – even as it was implicitly asserting that authority to authorize its revisionist approach. Visitors to the ROM had become accustomed to viewing what they thought were truthfully rendered exhibitions and displays (Reigel 1996, 87). “Into the Heart of Africa” instead blurred the boundaries between what was fact and what was fiction through the use of ironic ambiguity (Hutcheon 1989). The presentation inverted the ROM’s authority, and while this was what Cannizzo set out to accomplish, the strategy confused many viewers. This confusion was enhanced because the ironic tone raised in the first four sections of the exhibition appeared to switch seamlessly to a much more celebratory tone.

\(^{72}\) In fact, Cannizzo’s use of irony in the catalogue further contributed to the ambiguous nature of this “risky trope” (Reigel 1996, 83). Not only were quotation marks used in the text to signify an ironic presentation of certain racially constructed terms; they were also employed, without distinction, for direct quotations from historical documents (92).
in the last section, which focused on the diversity of Africa aesthetics. In the wake of the controversy that ensued, the use of irony in the context of an exhibition featuring contested material culture brought to the fore complex questions for museum professionals: who can and should use irony as a discursive exhibition strategy (when, where, and how)? Who can or is able to interpret irony? (Hutcheon 1995, 90-91). As a result, “Into the Heart of Africa” challenged not just institutional powers, but also, as Cannizzo discovered, her own curatorial authority.

While the exhibition opened on November 16, 1989, negative response to it did not play out publicly until four months later. On March 10, 1990, a group of representatives from the Coalition for the Truth About Africa (CFTA) began protesting the exhibition outside of the ROM. CFTA handed out a six-page pamphlet entitled “The Truth About Africa,” which was meant to demystify the exhibition for visitors: 73

This pamphlet is not designed to sell you on any new product or idea, neither is it to turn you against the Royal Ontario Museum. This pamphlet is to inform you of a great injustice being brought against humanity. The ROM is currently presenting an exhibit entitled, “Into the Heart of Africa,” an exhibit, which according to the ROM, is a portrayal of African History. Yet the exhibit represents a clear and concise attempt to mislead the public and to further tarnish the image of Africa and African people. (1990, 1)

There is also reference to the use of terms employed by Cannizzo: “Terms like ‘Savage’ and ‘Dark Continent’ are buzz words of this sad and disgraceful presentation” (1). The pamphlet’s writers again illustrate that Cannizzo’s

73 See Appendix 1 for the full transcription of the CFTA’s “The Truth About Africa” pamphlet.
quotation marks, intended to signal a critical engagement with such phrases, were largely overlooked or misinterpreted (Hutcheon 1989, 1-2).

CFTA also argued that the ROM used racialized and stereotypical images that tarnished the image of Africa and African peoples. An example of this is an image that originally appeared on the front page of the *Illustrated London News* in 1879, which was reproduced as a wall-sized image and positioned near the entrance of the exhibition (fig. 13).


As Linda Hutcheson notes,

In a culture like ours, where visual images may indeed make more of an impression than printed text, and in an institution visited by school children of all races who just might not stop to read the contextualizing accompanying texts, the placing and size of this image were, at the very
least, signs of semiotic ineptness and curatorial or designer inexperience.
(1994, 47)

Furthermore, CFTA argued that the ROM showed a lack of respect for contemporary African populations both of the continent and within the global diaspora. While the exhibition may have been historical, it did not allow space for alternative voices to contextualize the violent legacies of colonialism and current forms of racism and marginalization of peoples of African descent.

CFTA continued to protest the exhibition every Saturday at the ROM’s main entrance until the exhibition closed in August 1990 (fig. 14)

Figure 14: Protestors outside the Royal Ontario Museum. c. 1990.

In a news release issued on May 11, 1990, the ROM reported,

On April 14, 1990 Coalition members entered the museum rotunda and blocked the entrances and exits to the museum as well as access to the shops, admission desks, cloakroom and café. The demonstrators refused to leave the premises after being directed to do so, and police assistance was required to move the demonstration outside of the building.74

This incident signaled the continually heightened tensions surrounding the exhibition. Later, on two separate occasions in May and June, the protests became violent, leading to several arrests. The controversy escalated further when protestors of the exhibition began to join forces with other protestors around the city of Toronto. The Toronto Sunday Star reported on May 20, 1990, that

marchers protesting cruise missile testing and demanding Innu rights met up yesterday with a group denouncing an exhibition on Africa at the Royal Ontario Museum. The two groups swelled the numbers of yet another demonstration, one protesting the shooting of a black teen by a metro police officer. (Black 1989, H3)

Thus, “Into the Heart of Africa” and the ROM, like the “Spirit Sings” exhibition and the Glenbow Museum in 1988, had become centre stage for a much larger debate, bringing to the forefront the issue of racism not only in Toronto, but also across Canada.

The protests over the exhibition gained momentum in July 1990 when Aboriginal peoples, including Mohawks who had been in conflict with police over the Oka crisis in

74 News release, May 11, 1990; African Collection Files, Royal Ontario Museum, World Cultures Archives.
Quebec, formed an alliance with members of the CFTA. 75 This alliance between Blacks protesting “Into the Heart of Africa” and Oka protesters was significant for many reasons. As Shelly Ruth Butler argues, the alliance directly challenged Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism by bringing into question larger issues of marginalization and racism in both Canadian society and its cultural institutions: “Indeed, when blacks and Aboriginal peoples came together in protest, they shared a goal of demonstrating against racism and domination in general, and against police racism and violence in particular. They voiced these complaints together, speaking as visible minorities in the Canadian mosaic” (Butler 2008, 82). The alliance also questioned the very institution that claimed to embrace and celebrate Canada’s multicultural mosaic, as “Into the Heart of Africa” was partially funded by the Ontario Ministry of Multiculturalism. Together, the alliance and the controversies ultimately reveal questions about whether or not the adoption of a multiculturalism policy has really done that much to combat institutionalized and societal racism, or whether it has instead been used as method for marginalizing disputes.

75 The Oka Crisis was a dispute over land between the Mohawk peoples from the community of Kanesatake and the town of Oka, Quebec. The dispute erupted when the town of Oka began plans to expand a local golf course and residential condominium development onto traditional Mohawk land. The traditional land included a burial ground marked by tombstones of Mohawk community ancestors. In 1977, the Mohawk band had applied for and filled a land claim for the sacred grounds, but their land claim was rejected in 1986 on the grounds that it failed to meet the required legal criteria. In 1990, the courts ruled that the golf course and development expansion could proceed. At this time, members of the Mohawk community began a protest and created a barricade, which blocked access to the land. The crisis escalated when Aboriginal peoples from across Canada and the United States joined the protest, effectively shutting down major access routes to the Island of Montreal. The protests fueled racial tension between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginals. On August 29, 1990 a resolution was negotiated and the expansion of the golf course and condominium development were cancelled. For Aboriginal peoples across Canada, the Oka Crisis and the controversy surrounding “The Spirit Sings” exhibition in 1988 were a testament to the heightened racial tensions in Canada at the time.
During the period between the first protests by CFTA and the official closing of the exhibition in August 1990, media coverage of the exhibition intensified. While reviews of the exhibition at the opening in November were generally positive, the tone had changed sharply during the protests. Many Toronto newspapers began publishing letters written about the controversies surrounding “Into the Heart of Africa,” letters that both supported and condemned the exhibition. Throughout the show’s run, the ROM collected comment cards from visitors and installed an Exhibition Comment Book, thus allowing the museum to catalogue visitor reactions to the exhibit for evaluation. As this sampling of comment cards shows, the reactions to the exhibition ranged from positive to completely disdainful:

Good presentation. What is everybody complaining about? (Caryn Maden, p.1)

Being of South African heritage, I took particular interest in seeing your exhibit. I was impressed with the overall presentation, collection, and use of video presentation to exhibit the collection. A job well done. (illegible, p.59)

This exhibit was perfect at making the British (and other) Empire(s) look like a bunch of misinformed bastards. Well Done!! (unsigned, p.135)

As a white Torontonian, I feel the exhibit should be removed if the Black community expresses hurt at the exhibit. Their anger alone should suffice. (Peter Halewood, June 10, 1990)

The blatant disregard for African culture, and the Imperialist perspective presented in this exhibit, exposed the lack of cultural respect that the ROM is willing to include in its work. As a student of cultural anthropology I am upset that the ROM would exhibit such a display without having proper
cultural context imbedded in the displays. (Michael F. Boutin, April 4, 1990)\textsuperscript{76}

In a very short period of time, between the opening in November 1989 and the closure in August 1990, “Into the Heart of Africa” became the most controversial exhibition in the ROM’s history.\textsuperscript{77} The level of controversy can be measured by the fact that four major institutions, which had planned to receive the exhibition after it was originally scheduled to close at the ROM—the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Vancouver Museum, Albuquerque Museum of Natural History and Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History—cancelled their plans to host it. It is clear, moreover, that the controversies sparked by the exhibition prompted the cancellations, as the museums were aware of the themes and scope of the exhibition when they originally agreed to host it. In fact, John McNeill, Acting Director of the ROM, noted in a news release about the cancellation of the exhibition tour that the other museums cited the “potential negative backlash in their communities as the key reason” for cancelling. He went on to state,

The ROM deeply regrets that the broader Canadian public will not be able to see this intellectually honest exhibition, which is ground-breaking in its critical examination of the Canadian missionary and military experience in turn-of-the-century Africa, nor will they be able to view some remarkable and beautiful African objects.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} Statements taken from “Into the Heart of Africa” Comment Cards and Exhibition Comment Book were reprinted in Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 17-21.


\textsuperscript{78} “Planned Stops of the Royal Ontario Museum Exhibition ‘Into the Heart of Africa’ Cancelled by Other Canadian Museums Venues,” news release, September 20, 1990; African Collection Files, Royal Ontario Museum, World Cultures Archives.
Exhibiting the African Collection After “Into the Heart of Africa”

The events that took place during “Into the Heart of Africa” sent shock waves through the museum world (Phillips 2011, 48). The controversy and protests became, for many involved in the field, alarmingly personal. Enid Schildkrout, curator of “African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire,” which opened at the Museum of Natural History in New York in 1990, confessed that “many of us working in the field of ethnographic exhibitions, particularly African exhibitions, tremble with a sense of ‘there but for the grace of God go I’” (1991, 16). As the curator of “Into the Heart of Africa,” Cannizzo was targeted personally and was labeled a racist. Even after the exhibition closed, she faced criticism. People—both students and members of the public—began to attend a class she taught at the University of Toronto the year after the exhibition closed, where they verbally harassed her. Protestors also went to her house. As a result, she resigned her teaching position at the University of Toronto soon after (Vincent 1990; Butler 2008, 89). She eventually left the country for Scotland to escape the controversy. She continues to live and work in Scotland where she is an honorary fellow in the Social Anthropology Department at the University of Edinburgh. She no longer teaches courses nor curates exhibitions that focus on African visual culture.

After “Into the Heart of Africa” closed its doors in August 1990, the Exhibits Division of the ROM put together an evaluation project to contextualize and evaluate both the exhibition and public response. The project, titled “‘Into the Heart of Africa’: An Evaluation,” involved members of the ROM’s Exhibitions Division, Marketing Division, Outreach Services, Interpretive Planning Section, Print and Advertising divisions, Programs, Tourism Marketing, and Data Collections departments. The project culminated
in a seventy-one-page document that outlined the controversy and audience reactions, examined community consultation and made recommendations for future exhibitions:

It is the intention of this study to evaluate the Africa exhibit from the perspective of the visitor, and to determine whether the exhibit has met its objectives, and done so within the mandate of the institution. (Crawford, Hankel and Rowse 1990, 26)

The study and the resultant creation of a working document about the controversy signaled an important step. The ROM wanted to determine if there were fundamental problems with the design and execution of the exhibition that could have been addressed. It subsequently decided to make some major changes to its mandate so that it could facilitate active involvement with its constituent communities.

Despite the controversy sparked by “Into the Heart of Africa,” the ROM gained some insight into ways of approaching exhibitions of sensitive cultural material. For a museum such as the ROM to come to terms with, and to renegotiate, its own position of power, it has had to create a more open dialogue with its constituent communities. By consulting and collaborating with community groups to address issues of representation and display, museums are becoming better equipped to confront contested material. In most cases, collaboration with cultural and ethnic communities reduces the potential for public controversy by allowing such communities some control over their representation. “Into the Heart of Africa” can, therefore, be seen as a critical turning point for the ROM in the sense that, since this exhibition, the ROM has developed many productive working relationships with its constituent communities.

“Artifacts of History: Research and the ROM’s African Collection”

The first exhibition launched after “Into the Heart of Africa” was “Artifacts of History:
Research and the ROM’s African Collection,” which opened on September 3, 1994. The exhibition featured recent research on the ROM’s African collection by two prominent African scholars, Rowland Abiodun and Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivelo, as well as established Cuban scholar, Juan Mesa. Together, these individuals collaborated with the ROM’s Ethnographic Department to create a Community Advisory Committee, which would oversee the development of the exhibition. According to the museum’s media representative, Patricia Sculthorpe, in forming the committee, the ROM “sought a cross-representation of continental and diaspora community members, and welcomed representatives who expressed positive and negative comments on Into the Heart of Africa.” The Advisory Committee included such individuals as Pat Case, a representative of the Toronto Board of Education Department of Race Relations; Dickson Eyoh, the coordinator of African Studies at the University of Toronto; Judith Burfoot an African Studies student at the University of Toronto; and Sophia Ruddock, a member of both the African Caribbean Students Association and the Coalition Against “Into the Heart of Africa.” Over the course of the two-year consultation process prior to the opening of the exhibition, committee members were given the opportunity to review all the exhibition texts, marketing material and artifact lists. They were asked to identify objects and areas that were culturally sensitive as well as provide feedback on all stages of the display’s development (1994). This consultation process, therefore, differed considerably from that which occurred during “Into the Heart of Africa,” where community consultation took place only during the final stages of the exhibition and only

to help market and sell the show. “Artifacts of History” instead was understood as a product of an ongoing process of negotiation between the ROM and its communities.

The timing of the exhibition coincided with the thirty-seventh annual meeting of the African Studies Association, which was held in November 1994 and was hosted by the University of Toronto and York University. The meeting brought approximately 2,000 African scholars and artists to the city of Toronto. The ROM recognized this meeting as an opportunity to showcase its African collection as well as to invite scholars to offer their expertise on certain aspects of the collection, welcoming interest in potential future research projects. An early memo for the exhibition highlights the research value of the museum’s collection:

The ROM’s collections are strongest in central and west African material with little breadth in artifacts from eastern, and southern Africa... The artifacts here come from more than 35 cultures. About some of these artifacts a great deal is known, and about others, almost nothing. The ROM depends on researchers, guest curators, and community members who use the collection to help the ROM document and place the artifacts in a cultural context. Over the years much has been written on the collections but the artifacts remain a tremendous potential resource for furthering an understanding of African heritage.80

The two main themes of “Artifacts of History” as described by the institution, were “the use of the ROM collection in ongoing research projects” and “the scope of material available for future studies.” Following these two themes, the exhibition was arranged in four sections. The first section, “Santeria: Yoruba Culture in Cuba,” was

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guided by Juan Mesa’s research, which dealt with the Yoruba as a constituent of the larger Afro-Cuban diaspora. The second section, “The African Artist’s View of the Colonizers,” highlighted research by Rowland Abiodun. In this section, the museum’s exhibition committee explained, the ROM’s artifacts were “juxtaposed with photos of artifacts from other museums to demonstrate the importance of multi-institutional information exchange and open access to researchers.”81 The third section of the exhibition, “The Use of Photographs in Recording Social Change on Madagascar,” used photographs from the ROM’s collection taken in the 1850s by Reverend W. Ellis in Madagascar, to foreground Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivelo’s work. And finally, the fourth section of the exhibition included an assemblage of those artifacts from the ROM’s African collection about which there was little information. This section was meant to draw attention to research possibilities at the ROM, inviting future scholarly attention and acknowledging the need for collaboration in order to more fully understand the African collection. Patricia Sculthorpe noted,

“The use of our collection by outside researchers is very important since financial constraints have made it impossible to hire in-house expertise for these collections… Both conference delegates and general visitors will be invited to add information about the collections display via comment cards which will be available in the exhibition. (1994)

“Artifacts of History” was the first exhibition to be mounted by the ROM after the controversies of “Into the Heart of Africa,” and while many were happy to see the museum taking steps to address the issues the earlier exhibition raised, many were still

very wary, even though the ROM had consulted with members from the Black communities in Toronto throughout the exhibition process. The ROM was aware of this unease and developed a strategy for dealing with it. In a memo dated September 9, 1994, Sculthorpe created a list, to be distributed to the ROM’s staff, of recommended responses to anticipated and possibly sensitive questions from the media prior to the opening of the exhibition. For example, when asked, “How does the local African community feel about this display at the ROM?” She suggested the following response:

Two years of community consultation have led us to believe that the community is very supportive of this display. Of course, as with any national, ethnically, or racially defined grouping, it would be wrong to assume that all those included think alike. The people who worked with us for the past two years have been enthusiastic and supportive of the exhibit. They have also been very honest in stating that they cannot guarantee that every member of the Black community will agree with them. Nonetheless, in making an effort to include people who objected to Into the Heart of Africa in the community consultation process, we hope we have done everything possible to ensure the display is sensitively and accurately mounted. (Sculthorpe 1994)

In many ways, this memo distributed by Sculthorpe suggests that the ROM’s intent was to manage dissent, as opposed to being open to criticism or questions from the public.

While “Artifacts of History” can be seen as marking the beginning of a new era for the ROM, unfortunately, it is the only exhibition after “Into the Heart of Africa” to focus solely on the ROM’s permanent African collection. The ROM managed to come to terms with the problems inherent in “Into the Heart of Africa” and began the process of mending its fragile relationship with many from Toronto’s Black and African Canadian communities. However, the questions and comments surrounding “Artifacts of History”
and the ROM as an institution were a testament to the volatile nature of exhibitions involving sensitive artifacts from a constituent community. After “Artifacts of History,” the museum began to shift its focus to address one of the major criticisms that had arisen during “Into the Heart of Africa”—a lack of respect for local and contemporary African Canadian populations living in Toronto and surrounding areas. Therefore, since “Artifacts of History,” the ROM has shifted its focus away from the permanent African collection, which ultimately went back into storage until 2008, to historical and contemporary African Canadian arts, culture and history. It began building a stronger and mutually beneficial relationship with local and regional African Canadian communities, with a variety of exhibitions focusing on different aspects of African Canadian history and identity. Many of these exhibitions and programs, although they do not include the African collection, are important to highlight because they illuminate the complex nature of the relationship between museums and their constituent communities. In shifting the focus away from the permanent African collection to past and present African Canadian arts and culture, the ROM has embarked on several collaborative projects and exhibitions with groups who previously felt alienated both from the ROM as an institution and by “Into the Heart of Africa.” These exhibitions include “Something to Hope For,” “The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom,” “Stitching Community,” and “Position As Desired.”

“Something to Hope For”

As part of the celebration of Black History Month in February 2002, the ROM opened “Something to Hope For,” which was a product of the newly established Ontario Regional Museum Program and was presented in conjunction with the Buxton National
Historic Site and Museum. The exhibition, which was displayed in the Sigmund Samuel Canadiana Gallery foyer at the ROM, was intended to metaphorically transport viewers to the Buxton Settlement (also known as the Buxton Mission and Elgin Settlement) located south of Chatham, Ontario. The exhibition included a collection of photographs, artifacts and storyboards, which were meant to provide viewers with an understanding of what the Buxton Settlement would have looked like during the mid-to late-19th century.

The Buxton Settlement was established in 1849 as a safe haven for fugitive slaves fleeing from the United States, and was referred to as the last stop on the Underground Railroad. Abolitionist Reverend William King and members of the Elgin Association were responsible for securing over 9,000 acres in North Buxton for both fugitive slaves and free Blacks who came to Canada in the hope of building a better life. During the 19th century, the Settlement became home to over 2,000 people. Today, the majority of the population of the village of North Buxton is descendant from the original settlement. The exhibition sought to create a link between the original settlers to the area and the accomplishments of their descendants (ROM “Something to Hope For” 2002). By allowing individuals from the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum the chance to exert some level of control over how the history of this area was represented, the ROM demonstrated its awareness of and desire to solicit expertise from outside the institution.

The placement of the exhibition in the Sigmund Samuel Canadiana Gallery was significant. To this point, the Canadiana Gallery had been devoted to showcasing the ROM’s permanent Canadian collection and had been dominated by a white-Anglo presence. In this positioning of the exhibition featuring the Buxton Settlement, which has played an important, albeit unrecognized role in the larger construction of Canadian
history, the ROM marked the show as an intervention. The exhibition privileged this regional history, while at the same time revealing the ongoing vitality of the descendants of the original settlers. This is significant, as Rinaldo Walcott notes: “The most recent migrations have taken precedence in the popular imagination and therefore authorities tend to locate blackness as new to the nation” (Walcott 2002, 150). Scholars who discuss Black Canadian identity rarely consider the fact that Blacks have lived in Canada since 1628, when David Kirke, the English leader of the expedition that captured New France (now Quebec), brought Black slaves to settle with him.\(^{82}\) The lack of historical representation of these important regional histories in Canadian cultural institutions, therefore, often occludes the long-standing histories of Black populations in rural communities across Canada, especially those in southern Ontario and Nova Scotia.

“The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom”

“Something to Hope For,” which was on display until August 2002, was meant to complement the larger exhibition, “The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom,” which had opened earlier in the Heritage Gallery of Canada’s Peoples. The ROM had developed the larger show as a collaborative project with Parks Canada and the Ontario Black History Society, both of which regarded it as a way to advance the history of Canada. According to the exhibition news release,

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) was a metaphor for the legions of brave and compassionate souls who worked together to aid in the safe

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\(^{82}\) As Calliste has pointed out, the history of Blacks in Canada began with the legal foundation of slavery in New France between 1689 and 1709. During this time, slaves were brought to New France as hard laborers. At the same time, both free and fugitive Black slaves were brought in large numbers to Nova Scotia by British families immigrating from New England (Calliste 2005, 89; Winks 1971, xi).
passage of enslaved African Americans, who were escaping from unjust laws and racial oppression in the southern American states. They fled mostly at night, running from “station” to “station,” where they would receive illegal shelter and food from Quakers and others sympathetic to their plight before moving on. When they made it to the Northern free states, and many as far as Canada, they finally began to believe in freedom. But with the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, every northern American was bound by law to return known slaves to their masters. From that point the Underground Railroad to Canada had many more passengers, for Blacks in Canada had been free as immigrants since 1793. (ROM “The Underground Railroad 2002, 1)  

The involvement of Parks Canada and the Ontario Black Historical Society marked an intersection of interests. Parks Canada manages a Canadian Commemorative Program, which promotes recognition of persons, places and events of national historical significance. It is also dedicated to the research and preservation of Canadian Cultural Heritage. Thus, it manages several information portals, such as the Black History Portal, Canada’s Ethnocultural Communities: Recognizing Diversity in our Nation’s Past, Recognizing our History, Asian Heritage Portal, and An Approach to Aboriginal Cultural Landscapes (Parks Canada). The Ontario Black History Society is a non-profit organization, registered as a Canadian charity, which describes itself as

83 However, it should be noted that, even though Blacks have resided in Canada since this time were legally “free,” this did not mean that there were no slaves in Canada. There were many slaves in Canada until the end of the 19th century.

84 The Parks Canada’s mandate is as follows: “On behalf of the people of Canada, we protect and present nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage and foster public understanding, appreciation and enjoyment in ways that ensure their ecological and commemorative integrity for present and future generations” (Parks Canada). Parks Canada also provides resources to the education sector, including The Teachers Resources Centre, which provides teachers with useful links and resource
dedicated to the study, preservation and promotion of Black History and heritage. The Society aims to foster interest and encourage the interest of Black History through: Recognition, preservation and promotion of the contributions of Black peoples and their collective histories through education, research and cooperation; sponsorship and support of educational conferences and exhibits in this field; and promoting the inclusion of material on Black History in school curriculum. (Ontario Black History Society)

In 1979, the Ontario Black History Society successfully initiated the celebration of Black History Month to take place annually each February in the city of Toronto. In 1995, Black History month became recognized across Canada (Ontario Black History Society). In other words, both Parks Canada and the Ontario Black History Society have an interest in advancing the dissemination of the Underground Railroad story within the larger narrative of Canadian history at the ROM. Moreover, the project itself was initiated on the recommendation of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to the Minister of Canadian Heritage (ROM “The Underground Railroad” 2002). Parks Canada, the Ontario Black History Society and the ROM created an Underground Railroad Consultative Committee, which included members of Toronto’s Black communities who had been identified as leaders by the Ontario Black History Society and who would be willing to offer assistance with the project.

According to a Communications Strategy Report commissioned by the ROM, the exhibition was unique in the sense that it was “the first time that the urban settlement aspect of the UGRR story [had] been addressed” (ROM “The Underground Railroad” guides for teaching all grade levels about different aspects of Canadian cultural history (Parks Canada).
2002). The exhibition was organized around the format of experimental theatre, which included a twenty-five minute multimedia show, video projections, theatrical lighting, sets, and related artifacts. The exhibition was meant to be viewed through the eyes of Deborah Brown and her husband Perry, who had escaped slavery in Maryland in the 1850s and fled to Canada. Through Deborah’s and Perry’s personal narratives, visitors to the exhibit were able to metaphorically travel with them to the large urban centre of Toronto. A news release states that “through Deborah’s journey North, we see the Toronto of the 1850s and 60s as she saw it, learn the inspiring story of the Underground Railroad refugees that settled in York Township, and discover the contribution they made to their new community” (ROM “The Underground Railroad” 2002).

The exhibition was marketed as an educational tool, and local schools were encouraged to plan a visit to the ROM to see the exhibition. Together, the ROM, Parks Canada, and the Ontario Black History Society developed a series of lesson plans and teacher guides to coincide with the Ontario curriculum for Canadian students of middle school level (Grades 6, 7 and 8), which includes the history of the Underground Railroad. The lesson plans were developed and incorporated into such subject areas as Social Sciences, History, Geography, English, and Music. The guides provided teachers with resources and background information about the history of slavery in Canada, which they described under such headings as the New World, the slave trade, slavery in Canada and legislation against it, Black Loyalists, maroons and refugees, the Underground Railroad, Toronto settlements, African Canadians in the Civil War, and emancipation and the aftermath of the Civil War. The exhibition, therefore, became a jumping off point for
larger classroom discussion about not only the Underground Railroad, but also the importance of Black history in Canada.

“The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom” was on display in the ROM’s Heritage Gallery of Canada’s Peoples until March 16, 2003. Like “Something to Hope For,” which was installed in a space that called attention to show’s revisionist status, this exhibition was placed as an intervention in the ROM’s Heritage Gallery of Canada’s First Peoples as a way to call attention to gaps in Canadian history. In addition, the installation of this exhibition in a gallery space traditionally devoted to Canada’s First Peoples, which most Canadian museums consider to be reserved for Aboriginal representation, signaled awareness of a strong Black presence in Canada stemming back centuries. By foregrounding this history, which has been largely neglected in larger constructions of Canadian history at such institutions as the ROM, the exhibition and coinciding education programs created space for the representation of this urban migratory history. Recognizing its lack of material and artifacts devoted to this complex and multifaceted history, the ROM utilized the Ontario Museums Program to call attention to this absence, providing space, and through the classroom lesson plans, a means for the dissemination of this history.

“Stitching Community: African Canadian Quilts from Southern Ontario”

More recently, the ROM launched the exhibition “Stitching Community: African Canadian Quilts from Southern Ontario.” While the exhibition, which opened in early 2010, was part of the ROM’s celebration of Black History Month, it was extended for eight months, closing in early September. “Stitching Community” was on display in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada and showcased quilts produced between 1848 and
1976, as well as a series of photographs, black cloth dolls and quilting tools, all of which were loaned to the ROM from the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum and the Ontario Black History Society.

According to the Museum, the exhibition was intended to examine “the role of African Canadian women in reinforcing community ties in new and unfamiliar settings” (ROM “Stitching Community 2010). It also addressed how family and social networks were created and strengthened through quilting in both rural and urban areas of southern Ontario. In this sense, Mark Engstrom, Deputy Director of Collections and Research argued, “This exhibition [gave] voice to the African Canadian community responsible for helping to shape our country’s history” (ROM “Stitching Community 2010).

“Stitching Community” was divided into four sections. The first three sections—“The Arrival,” “The Community,” and “Coming Home”—addressed the complex role that ethnicity, gender, class and religion play in traditions of quilting and textile arts in the Buxton Settlement. The quilts on display in this section were loaned from the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum (ROM “Stitching Community 2010). Perhaps the most significant of the quilts on display was the Nine Patch Quilt (fig. 15). It was not only the oldest in the exhibition; it was produced in 1848 by one of the first enslaved Black women brought to Canada and freed by Reverend William King, who was responsible for establishing the original Buxton Settlement. The exhibition advanced the quilts, therefore, as a tangible way to trace this history.
The fourth section, titled “The African Canadian Stitching Community in Toronto,” presented quilts loaned by the Ontario Black Historical Society as examples of quilts made in the urban setting of Toronto. The juxtaposition of the urban quilts in this section with the rural quilts in the first three sections was intended to demonstrate that quilting
was not just a rural phenomenon, but that it was also an important creative tradition in large urban centres, especially important in creating community ties.

**Position As Desired/Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection**

Continuing to explore the complexity of African Canadian art, culture and history, the ROM launched “Position As Desired/Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection” in late 2010. Silvia Forni co-curated the exhibit with Kenneth Montague of Wedge Curatorial Projects, which is a Toronto-based arts organization dedicated to increasing public awareness of African and diasporic artists in Canada. According to Forni, this exhibition is

a great example of the kind of collaboration allowing the ROM to expand its mission, offering a more nuanced presentation of the issues that reflect our visitors’ interests and concerns. In introducing the topic of black identity in a multicultural setting, the ROM hopes that a new dialogue emerges with multiple voices and stories. (2010b, 15)

The exhibition was split into three sections. The first, “An Historical Perspective,” consisted of a series of historical photographs dating from 1896 to the present. The second section, “Exploring Identity Art in the 1990s,” examined Black identity in Canada through larger notions of community, history and memory. This section featured photographs by African Canadian artists Buseje Bailey, David Zapparoli, Michael Chambers and Stella Fakiyesi. The third and final section of the exhibition, “Featured Contemporary Artists,” showcased contemporary artists Christina Leslie, Megan Morgan, Dawit L. Petros and Stacey Tyrell. Here, artists dealt with the ways in which they had reconciled their position both within the diaspora and in Canada (Forni 2010b).
The exhibition was on display in the Wilson Canadian Heritage Room in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada. Forni explains that the choice of this gallery was significant because it created a break in the traditional Eurocentric display space:

Until recent times, the permanent display of the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada focused mainly on the objects and portraits of the European settlers in Canada. Yet, within this space, a dialogue is possibly and—today—most welcome. Different visions from the Eurocentric narrative of nation building are now included in the exhibit texts, different images now appear beside the portraits of the white fathers and mothers of the country. While the curatorial intent to include multiple voices and stories is beginning to be realized, the historical formation of the collection limits the inclusiveness possible for the permanent display. (2010b, 15)

“Position As Desired” was, therefore, positioned directly in the centre of the Wilson Canadian Heritage Room within the larger Sigmund Samuel Gallery (figs. 16, 17).

Thus, like “Something to Hope For,” “The Underground Railroad,” and “Stitching Community,” “Position As Desired” creates a viable shift or intervention within the larger Canadiana galleries at the ROM. In doing so, it draws attention to the absence of many histories within these spaces, and within the larger museum. This shift is important for many reasons. Notably, it reveals the limitations of the ROM’s permanent “Canadian” collections. It also draws attention to the ways in which certain histories have been marginalized within the dominant historical narrative in Canada. While African
Canadians have resided in Canada for centuries, their histories and stories have been largely silenced. This is not only evident in Canada’s historical texts, but also in Canadian museums and other cultural institutions—the very institutions that claim to embrace the diversity of perspectives identified with multiculturalism.

By partnering with other institutions and groups, such as the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, Parks Canada, Ontario Black History Society, and Wedge Curatorial Projects, the ROM has worked to bring outside expertise and constituent communities into the museum. These collaborations challenge the traditional hierarchical and authoritative voice of the ROM and facilitate the representation of “new” histories (Mullen Kraemer 1992, 376). The ROM’s recent installation of exhibitions of African Canadian art, culture and history in spaces from which, traditionally, they have been excluded, demonstrates an awareness of and desire to deconstruct the racialized and exclusionist frameworks within which the institution has operated in the past. At the same time, however, each of these exhibitions, while creating a space for alternative narratives, were on display for only a limited time. Once each exhibition was finished, the narratives they presented disappeared from the larger dominant narrative at the ROM (Phillips 2011, 100-101). Irit Rogoff cautions that the “infinitely expansive inclusiveness practiced by so many exhibiting institutions is actually grounded in an unrevised notion of the museum’s untroubled ability simply to add others without losing a bit of the self. It is based on a romantic belief that we can simply insert other histories into the grand narratives of Modernism…” (2002a, 66). This “additive model” that Rogoff describes allows for museums to appear inclusive without actually interrogating the very
institutional practices and processes that excluded other cultures and histories in the first place.

**The Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific**

Recent exhibitions show that the ROM is committed to creating both a respectful working relationship with local and regional African Canadian communities as well as a viable space for the dissemination of African Canadian histories. However, since the controversies over “Into the Heart of Africa,” one of the ROM’s most significant undertakings has been the official opening, in 2008, of a permanent gallery space for the African collection. The display, which is made up of material from the larger Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia-Pacific, is located within the new Michael Lee-Chin Crystal. The new gallery space occupies 7,500 square feet of the third level at the ROM (fig. 18).  

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85 Level 3 at the ROM includes the following galleries: Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas and Asia Pacific; A.G. Lenentis Foundation Gallery of Ancient Cyprus; Sir Christopher Ondaatje South Asian Gallery; Wirth Gallery of the Middle East; Galleries of Africa: Egypt; Gallery of the Bronze Age Aegean; Gallery of Greece; and Samuel European Galleries.
The gallery is named after benefactors Shreyas and Mina Ajmera of Woodbridge, Ontario.\textsuperscript{86} Shreyas Ajmera has been a prominent member of the ROM’s Board of Governors since 2004. In 2006, Shreyas and Mina announced that they would donate $5 million to the Renaissance ROM Campaign, which would bring the total funds raised to $201.7 million.\textsuperscript{87} “In making this donation,” said Ajmera, “my wife and I are proud to

\textsuperscript{86} Shreyas and Mina Ajmera own Seenergy Foods Ltd., which is currently one of the largest North American suppliers of high fiber, low fat, specialty, and vegetarian food. It is based in Woodbridge, Ontario.

\textsuperscript{87} According to the ROM’s Winter 2008 Newsletter, the Ajmera’s donated $5 million to the ROM’s capital campaigne because they were inspired by Daniel Libeskind and
support an institution that speaks to the importance of diversity and inclusiveness at a time when the world needs these bridges of understanding between cultures” (ROM “Renaissance Rom Campaign” 2006). More than 1,400 artifacts from the four permanent collections are in the new gallery space, many of which are on display for the first time. “The opening of this new gallery is an occasion for celebration. It has enabled us to bring old collections out of storage and present new acquisitions and research,” said Trudy Nicks, Senior Curator of Anthropology in the ROM’s World Cultures Department and coordinating curator for the new gallery space (ROM “Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery” 2008).

The new gallery space is a product of extensive work by a curatorial committee, which included staff from the ROM’s World Cultures Division, consulting and visiting experts from a variety of fields and advisory committees comprising members of the constituent communities from each of the four geographical regions present in the gallery. In a press release accompanying the exhibition’s opening, director and CEO William Thorsell explained its role: “Our curatorial team, working closely with its advisory committees from many of the diverse areas represented in the gallery, has chosen spectacular and important pieces to illustrate the cultural traditions of indigenous peoples from around the world” (quoted in ROM “Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery” 2008). Nicks acted as head curator for the gallery as well as the primary liaison between the museum and members of the committees. Michael Levin, Professor Emeritus in the University of Toronto’s Anthropology Department, who specializes in social anthropology of West African cultures, led the curatorial team responsible for the African

William Thorsell’s “innovative vision for the ROM and Toronto” (ROM Newsletter, Winter 2008).
collection. By the time Silvia Forni was hired by the ROM in January of 2008, the new
gallery space was near completion. As a result, she did not participate in the initial design
of the African gallery space. Forni did, however, take part in the production of some of
the labels for the African section, although she saw it as a difficult task because she had
not had time, as she put it, “to live with the collection” (Forni 2010a). Forni is currently
leading the curatorial team in adding to and reworking the permanent African display
space within the gallery.

Visible from outside the entrance to the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, where the
gallery is located, is a Sirige mask, which stands four metres high. For the Dogon peoples
of Mali, the Sirige mask represents a link between the mortal and the spirit worlds. In a
Western context, the highly aesthetic quality and monumental size of the Sirige mask
makes it an obvious choice for display; it is intended to attract visitors’ attention. Upon
entering the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal and the Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery,
visitors encounter a significant object from each of the distinct geographic zones of the
gallery. For example, a 152-centimetre-tall Sejien hornbill figure from the Senufo
peoples of the Ivory Coast is displayed alongside ancestral flutes from Papua New
Guinea. The entrance panel to the Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery reads,

The ROM collections include objects that represent the artistic and
cultural traditions of indigenous peoples from many parts of the world.
This gallery reflects the range of these collections and the many stories
they can tell. It is a space rich with symbols of heritage and identity that
continue to have meaning in the 21st century. It is a space which celebrates the diversity of humankind.\footnote{88}

The gallery itself is composed of one large room divided into four distinctive zones, each marked by case and text background colour. Displayed in “Africa: Themes and Collections,” which includes four large glass display cases, are more than 400 artifacts from the ROM’s permanent African collection, including masks, headdresses, crowns, tapestries, weapons, stools, and utensils. Together, these objects are meant to showcase the diversity of the creative traditions of the African continent. The collection combines artifacts ranging from those collected during the 19th century to contemporary pieces, such as a beaded tapestry depicting the first free elections in South Africa in 1994 (fig. 19).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{image19.png}
\caption{Christina Nkuna. “Vhotelati, Nceka.” 1994-1997. 142cm x 113.5cm. South Africa. Bead embroidery on printed textile.}
\end{figure}

Source: Courtesy of ROM Images. Image number ROM2003_688_2

\footnote{88} In many ways, the inscription on the entrance panel and this focus on diversity simply reinscribes the ways in which many Western museums see themselves as having the power to represent the world in its entirety.
Forni notes, “The African section is a dense and rich exhibit, featuring both historical and contemporary objects. While many of the themes create connections between cultures from all over the continent, individual pieces are visual statements of the extraordinary diversity of African artistic traditions. Many of these objects have only been shown in temporary exhibitions,” she states, “and it is very exciting to see Africa become a permanent part of the multifaceted cultural offering at the ROM” (quoted in ROM “Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery” 2008).

The African collection has been arranged thematically in the gallery space. This thematic method of display, one of the most common for African collections, resonates particularly closely with permanent ethnographic displays of African visual and material culture in Western museums (Forni 2010a). These larger thematic categories, such as “Creative Traditions,” “State Power,” “Spiritual Life,” “Creating Community,” and “Everyday Life,” effectively allow smaller and more specific sub-categories to be articulated. They also provide significant flexibility for combining and highlighting certain cultural groups within each. This flexibility is especially useful in the display of the ROM’s permanent African collection, which lacks geographical consistency. For example, while the museum’s African collection is rich in artifacts from West, Central and South Africa, for the most part East Africa is underrepresented (2010a). So, artifacts from distinctive cultural groups can be combined in the thematic displays, while allowing for attention to culturally specific detail throughout. The display text explains, “As aesthetics are not separated from daily life, neither can they be detached from their cultural sources.”
The African collection is divided into two distinct sections. The first section, “Africa: Themes and Collections I,” introduces visitors to the diversity of aesthetic production on the African continent. This section is split into four subsections: “Creative Traditions,” “Representations of Power,” “Everyday Life—Architecture,” and “Spiritual Life.” The display panel at the beginning of section gives a sense of the richness presented:

Africa is a vast continent with extraordinary cultural diversity. African peoples have developed rich aesthetic traditions that are an integral part of their daily lives. Birth, death, authority, exchange, warfare and religion are relevant concerns for peoples in Africa, as elsewhere. These issues are often the impetus for elaborate creative presentations.

It goes on to explain that “a wide range of objects from different cultures are organized and juxtaposed thematically to highlight the variety of conceptual and formal responses that compose the aesthetic language of the continent.” The juxtaposition is obvious in the way historical objects are displayed alongside contemporary ones in order to showcase the complexity of the larger subthemes. For example, in “Representations of Power,” 19th and early-20th century regalia, such as crowns and other weaponry, are displayed alongside a section dedicated to contemporary art and politics in South Africa, which features a doll and wall hanging depicting Nelson Mandela. In addition to the range of objects displayed in each case, colour and black and white photos are included side by side, often showcasing the actual production of the objects displayed. The second display section, “Africa: Themes and Collections II,” is also divided into subthemes — “Creating Community” and “Everyday Life” — each of which explores the inherently complex and imaginative visual and spiritual belief systems present throughout the continent.
Recent Acquisitions at the ROM

While the permanent gallery space for the display of the ROM’s African collection opened as recently as 2008, it has already undergone changes, including those affected by new acquisitions, led by Forni. The fall of 2010 marked the ROM’s official “Season of Africa,” which included two major exhibitions, “El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa” and “Position As Desired/Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge collection,” as well as significant additions to the ROM’s permanent African collection.

In December 2010, the Museum unveiled three new African collection acquisitions, which had been incorporated into the larger Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery. Key pieces from each of the three collections replaced previous thematic displays from within the “Africa: Themes and Collections” cases. The new acquisitions included a collection of puppets, masks and musical instruments donated to the ROM in 2009 by Ester Amrad Dagan. These objects are illustrations of the ways in which performances are integral to community life throughout the African continent. A new selection of Yoruba ritual art and divination objects from the Jack and Iris Lieber collection was also added to the permanent collection.

In addition to the Dagan and Lieber collections, the ROM also recently acquired two “proverbial coffins” from Ghana, which were commissioned by Forni in 2008 during a research and acquisition trip to the country. The two coffins represent the elaborate funeral ceremonies of the Ga peoples who live on the coast of Ghana in the greater Accra area. These proverbial, or fantasy, coffins illuminate the lifetime achievements of the deceased. One of the coffins, which is referred to as the Mercedes-Benz Coffin,
showcases a common motif usually associated with economic wealth and status. It was created by prominent Teshie coffin maker Paa Joe, whose coffins have been exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide. Eric Adjetey Anang and apprentices in the renowned Kane Kwei Workshop in Teshie, Ghana, made the second coffin, which resembles a large fish, a popular motif signifying the importance of fishing among the Ga peoples (figs. 20, 21).

Figure 20: The hollow body of the fish coffin is formed using numerous sections of sculpted wood panels. Once pieced together, they are sealed with putty and sanded to create a smooth surface.

Large, colourful and distinctly contemporary, the two coffins are displayed within the larger African Gallery. They are evidence of the ROM’s recent, more active approach to expanding its historic African holdings to include contemporary African material culture.

In addition to the contemporary coffins, the ROM also recently commissioned Ghanian contemporary artist El Anatsui to produce an original metallic wall hanging, titled *Straying Continents* (2010) (fig. 22), for the ROM’s permanent collection. He made it in conjunction with his exhibition, “El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa,” which opened at the ROM on tour from the Museum of African Art in New York.
Anatsui, who is known for his glittering tapestries made mostly of bottle caps, explores the transformations wrought by cross-cultural exchange on indigenous African traditions. After the exhibition closed at the ROM in early 2011, *Straying Continents* was moved to the African gallery within the Shreyas and Mina Ajmera Gallery, remaining as part of the larger permanent display.

These additions to the African gallery indicate that the ROM has taken on a more active approach to acquiring new objects to expand its holdings. This differs from the last one hundred years when the ROM acquired African pieces randomly, primarily through

Figure 22: View of the ROM’s latest acquisition, *Straying Continents* by El Anatsui, now on display in the Shreys and Mina Ajmera Gallery of Africa, the Americas, and Asia Pacific.

donation. As a staff member put it on the ROM Blog of May 19, 2011, “Both El Anatsui’s work and the Ga Coffins help us to redefine how we think of African culture.” These works, therefore, represent the ongoing international traffic in art and artifacts, which showcases the ways in which Western and non-Western cultures, traditions and practices are entangled and intertwined. By privileging the acquisition of contemporary African art, such as the proverbial coffins and El Anatsui’s wall hanging, rather than the historic collection, the ROM is also responding to larger questions, which have been the subject of debate among museums generally. When and where—if at all—should contemporary works of African art be incorporated into existing collections of African visual and material culture in Western museums and cultural institutions? (Bickford Berzock 2002; Jules-Rosette 2002). The African gallery space, which displays examples of African historic and contemporary art side by side, not only confronting this debate, but also shows that this juxtaposition can be effectively accomplished through thematically organized exhibitions and displays.

By shifting the focus away from the permanent African collection to past and present African Canadian arts, culture and history, and more recently, contemporary

89 As the boundaries between art/artifact, art museum/ethnographic museum become increasingly blurred, so too are those of collections and exhibitions. While historic collections of African art have been displayed in American art museums since the late 1800s, African contemporary art has less often found its place in ethnographic museums (Clarke and Bickford Berzock 2011). The internal organization of many ethnographic museums presents many challenges for the placement of African contemporary art, as the majority of African collections are displayed based upon cultural groupings or regions. There is often a disconnect between historic collections, many of which are tied to complex colonial histories, and African contemporary art. Kathleen Bickford Berzock has articulated the problem in relation to the Art Institute of Chicago, which holds both historic and contemporary collections: “Which department or departments should be responsible for contemporary African art? How do we avoid duplication department to department? And what are the collecting and exhibiting priorities of each department?” (Bickford Berzock 2002).
African art, the ROM has been able to embark on several institution-driven collaborative projects with groups that previously felt alienated from the institution. These more recent exhibitions and collaborations signal a change in the ways in which Africa is interpreted and represented in museums as well as other Western institutions in recent years. James Clifford refers to this change as indication of

an awareness of Africa as not simply “out there” (or “back then”) but as part of a network, a series of relays forming a diaspora… This diaspora has well established, branching routes and roots in slavery, in migration from Caribbean, South American, and rural North American places, and in current circuits of commerce and immigration from the African continent. In this context, the museum’s contact work takes on local, regional, hemispheric, and global dimensions. (1997, 202)

These far reaching implications challenge museums and the very nature of exhibitions in terms of larger issues of race and representation, inevitably opening up the possibilities for multiple narratives to be not only voiced, but also heard.
Chapter 5
The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston

We knew when we acquired the Lang Collection that we were getting something special. But we fully expected to take a number of years to build up interest. The public events we have staged have shown that there is even more interest there, and ready to be tapped, than we thought.

—Brenda Large, “African Art Gift to Queen’s Already Becoming a National Resource,” 1985

In contrast to the collection of African visual and material culture at the Royal Ontario Museum, which is directly linked to audiences drawn largely from the multicultural city of Toronto, the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, in Kingston, Ontario, is situated in a medium-sized city with a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon population. Thus, the Art Centre differs from the ROM in terms of the level of involvement the institution has with the constituent communities that have a stake in the reception of its African collection. While the ROM, in the wake of “Into the Heart of Africa” has begun to be more inclusive of its African and African Canadian constituents, allowing for more community-based collaborative exhibitions, the Art Centre does not lend itself to the same level of engagement with a viewing audience which, for the most part, knows little about African art. Furthermore, unlike the African collection at the ROM, which is part of a larger collection of non-Western material culture, the African collection at the Art Centre offers a sharp contrast to the institution’s established focus on Western art. As a result, the Lang Collection,
which is one of the largest private collections of African art in Canada with over 574 works, remains largely unknown and thus has received minimal attention from African art specialists. It offers an example of how a large collection of objects acquired primarily for their perceived aesthetic quality has been dealt with within a medium-sized institution with limited knowledge of or specialists in African art. Thus, I use the Lang Collection, which has been classified as a connoisseur collection of African art, as a lens through which to examine how the institutional narratives of the Art Centre, as well as the curatorial approach by curator Jacqueline Fry and her relationship with the Langs, has shaped the collection, its representation and reception.

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre: An Institutional History

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre officially opened in 1957 after benefactor Agnes Etherington (1880–1954) left her neo-Georgian mansion to Queen’s University to be used as both a university and community art gallery. Etherington had also been the driving force behind the Kingston Art and Music Club, which laid the foundation for the Art Centre. Her passion for the arts fueled her interest in stimulating the arts at Queen’s University, in support of which she established the George Taylor Richardson Memorial Fund (in memory of her brother who died in World War I); it became a significant funding source for the arts at Queen’s and contributed to expanding the art gallery’s holdings (Smith 2006).

To accommodate the Art Centre’s growing collections, the former family home has undergone a total of five renovations and expansions since the original donation of

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90 It was not until her later years that Etherington decided to leave her home to the University upon her death.
the house. The first addition was in 1962, the second in 1975, and the third in 1978. In 1988, the Art Centre underwent its fourth renovation, which included the creation of a new gallery space for permanent display of the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art. The most recent addition, in 2000, a 1720-square metre, $8 million capital campaign project, created eight new exhibition galleries, a new public programming studio space, an atrium, a gallery shop, an art rental and sales room, and increased the vault storage and archival area; it also included a much-needed restoration of the original Etherington House. In a similar manner to the Renaissance ROM’s centerpiece, the Michael Lee-Chin Crystal and new gallery spaces, the new contemporary gallery at the Art Centre, which is attached to the Etherington House, stands in sharp contrast to the original neo-Georgian building and ushered the Art Centre into the 21st century (fig. 23).

Figure 23: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario.

Today, the Art Centre accommodates approximately fifteen exhibitions annually, a wide variety of school and public programs, artists’ talks, performances, symposiums, public
lectures, workshops and other special events for Queen’s University and the Kingston community (AEAC, “About the Art Centre,” n.d.).

The Art Centre is located in the city of Kingston, Ontario, halfway between Montreal and Toronto, along the north shore of Lake Ontario where the Cataraqui River meets the St. Lawrence River, which contains the Canada–US border. Kingston’s strategic location has been of vital military importance since 1673 when Fort Frontenac was built. As the first capital of Canada, in 1841, Kingston was home to the country’s first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald. Nicknamed the “Limestone City” because of its abundance of historic limestone buildings, the city of Kingston is steeped in history, boasting more than 700 properties registered as Heritage Properties and another 500 properties identified as having “cultural heritage value.” Located within the city of Kingston are two universities and one college: Queen’s University, which is one of Canada’s oldest universities, founded in 1841; the Royal Military College of Canada, currently the only military university in Canada; and St. Lawrence College. Kingston is also home to over twenty-five museums, as well as several art galleries and studios.

The population of Kingston’s city proper is approximately 117,207, while the population of the metropolitan area is over 152,358. According to the Government of Canada’s most recent census, in 2006 94.2% of Kingston’s total population was Caucasian. The remainder consisted of visible minorities, of which 1.7% were Chinese, 1.2% were South Asian, and 0.8% were Black (Kingston Social Planning Council 2009). The percentage of visible minorities at Queen’s University is correspondingly low. As

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91 Today, Kingston is home to the Canadian Forces Base (CFB Kingston), which includes the Canadian Forces School of Communications and Electronics, the Canadian Forces Military Communications Training Centre, the Royal Military College of Canada, and several other units.
Etka Singh notes in relation to the lack of diversity amongst both the student body and faculty at Queen’s, “One does not need to spend too much time on Queen’s campus to realize that our student diversity is… very homogenous.” (2006, 1).

The Art Centre’s permanent collection is among the broadest and most diverse of Canadian university art galleries. Currently, the Centre holds some 14,000 objects within its permanent collection, which includes Canadian historical and contemporary art, the Mary Robertson Collection of Inuit Art, the Bader Collection of 17th century Dutch paintings (100 works exploring Rembrandt and his larger school), a large graphic holding of Renaissance and Baroque drawings, European prints from the 16th to the 20th centuries, and the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art. With the exception of the African collection, the scope and focus of the Art Centre is predominantly Canadian and European art.

The Art Centre plays an active role within both Queen’s and the larger Kingston community, providing an abundance of public programs for adults, families and children, as well as a school program, all of which have been a vital part of the Art Centre for over twenty-five years. As the official art gallery of Queen’s University, the Art Centre is a valuable resource for Queen’s faculty and students. Admission to the Art Centre is free for students of Queen’s and there are several ongoing collaborative projects for students supported by the Art Centre and the Department of Art, including internships for...

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92 According to an equity census conducted at Queen’s in 2003 by the University Advisor on Equity at Queen’s, 9.4% of Queen’s faculty is of visible minority status (Singh 2006, 1). Such incidences included the assault and physical intimidation by Queen’s students of a faculty member of a visible minority on campus. As Joy Mighty, previous director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Queen’s University notes, “As despicable as this racist incident was, the reality is that it was not an isolated event. Every day, racialized faculty, staff and students at Queen’s experience varying degrees of harassment, discrimination and other manifestations of individual and systemic racism” (2008, 1).
undergraduates and a practicum for graduate students. Students from Queen’s can also take advantage of many of the Centre’s volunteer opportunities, as well as join its student committee. Several members of the staff at the Art Centre are also adjunct professors within the Department of Art: Jan Allen (Interim Director and Curator of Contemporary Art), Alicia Boutilier (Curator of Canadian Historical Art), and David de Witt (Bader Curator of European Art). For the most part, the focus of the Art Centre reflects the focus of the Department of Art, which is largely Western, European and Canadian. The Lang Collection of African Art is one of the largest private collections of African art in Canada. While this may be the case, neither the Queen’s community nor the local public has demonstrated much interest in it.

The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art

Justin and Elisabeth Lang

The Lang Collection of African Art represents almost five decades of collecting by Justin and Elisabeth Lang. Justin was born in 1906 in the region of Bavaria, Germany, in the town of Treuchtlingen, and Elisabeth (von Taussig) was born in Vienna, Austria. They met in Amsterdam where they had both fled to escape Nazi Germany. Justin had pursued career interests in chemistry, and began working for a company in Nuremberg, where he also became active with the Social Democratic movement. When the Nazis came to power, he was flagged and blacklisted because of his affiliation with the movement and because he was Jewish. He decided to flee the country and went to Amsterdam. At the same time, Elisabeth was also forced to flee her home in Vienna when the Nazis invaded. She, too, went to Amsterdam, where she met Justin. When the Nazis were threatening to invade Holland, Justin and Elisabeth were forced to flee again. While Justin was able to get a visa to go to Canada, Elisabeth could not, as she had no legal destination. As a result, Elisabeth was sent to an internment camp in Havana, Cuba. While she was in Cuba, an Austrian official recognized her as the granddaughter of the well-known personal financer to Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. The official helped Elisabeth escape Cuba on a sugarcane boat, which was heading to Canada. Elisabeth

93 Justin had pursued career interests in chemistry, and began working for a company in Nuremberg, where he also became active with the Social Democratic movement. When the Nazis came to power, he was flagged and blacklisted because of his affiliation with the movement and because he was Jewish. He decided to flee the country and went to Amsterdam. At the same time, Elisabeth was also forced to flee her home in Vienna when the Nazis invaded. She, too, went to Amsterdam, where she met Justin. When the Nazis were threatening to invade Holland, Justin and Elisabeth were forced to flee again. While Justin was able to get a visa to go to Canada, Elisabeth could not, as she had no legal destination. As a result, Elisabeth was sent to an internment camp in Havana, Cuba. While she was in Cuba, an Austrian official recognized her as the granddaughter of the well-known personal financer to Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria. The official helped Elisabeth escape Cuba on a sugarcane boat, which was heading to Canada. Elisabeth
Elisabeth immigrated to Montreal in the early 1940s where they were able to obtain refugee status. The couple married in 1941 and had two sons, John (1946) and Robert (1949). While in Montreal, Justin started a small business trading chemicals and minerals used in industry, which eventually became Minerals and Chemicals Ltd. of Montreal (Capreol 1982). As the business grew and the Langs gained financial stability, they slowly began purchasing pieces of art. Elisabeth, who had always been interested in the arts, had her first encounter with African art in a second-hand shop while she was in Holland in 1938, before coming to Canada (Fry 1985, 11). She recalled the moment in an interview with Norman Biron in 1987.94

One day I went to a modest Dutch secondhand dealer where in a big bin of copper I found a sculpture that enthralled me. The dealer sensed this emotion to the point that he encouraged me to take the object, confident that I would pay off the cost of this treasure despite my small earnings. This was my first piece of African art. At the same time, I was visiting museums that helped me get to know more and more African, Indonesian and pre-Colombian art… In short, primitive art, so to speak, became my passion. (quoted in Biron 1987)

This first sculpture, which African art specialist and close friend Jacqueline Fry later identified as a “termite-eaten Baule statuette,” marked the beginning of a lifelong collecting journey for the Langs (Fry 1985, 11). In addition to collecting African art, the Langs amassed a large collection of Canadian art, including works by Jean-Paul Riopelle, arrived in Montreal in 1941, where she reunited with Justin, who had already received refugee status in Canada (Biron 1987).

94 For the full translation of this interview, see Appendix 2.
Emily Carr, David Brown Milne, Marie-Cecile Bouchard, and Paul-Emile Borduas, as well as collections of Inuit and First Nations art (10).

The Langs purchased the majority of their African collection from private dealers, including Tribal Arts, Klejan, Hautebar Gallery, and Christie’s in New York; M. and Mme Garcia Galerie 62, Rasmussen, and Galerie Arglies in Paris; Wurtle Gallery in Vienna; The Arcade Gallery in London; and several private and commercial galleries in Zurich and Brussels.\(^95\) The Langs, therefore, could be classified as connoisseur collectors, in the sense that they sought out aesthetically pleasing works of art from established African art dealers, instead of collecting African art directly from the continent and the artists who produced them.\(^96\) The lack of works collected from the continent or directly from the producers is not unusual for Western collectors of African art. The Lang Collection, therefore, differs significantly from the ROM’s African collection, which represents over a century of active collecting from a variety of sources, predominantly from the African continent.

According to Fry, two periods clearly distinguish the Langs’ collecting practices: the first from 1952 to 1970 and the second after 1970. The first, which Fry has termed the “emotional” period, was strongly influenced by Father Gagnon of the University of Montreal and his theories on African art, specifically his lecture during the late 1940s in Montreal on Teilhard de Chardin and African religion. Father Gagnon, who became a

\(^{95}\) This information was obtained through the Lang Collection Files, Catalogue Database, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

\(^{96}\) Here I refer to the Langs as connoisseurs based on their collecting practices in which they chose to purchase works of African art informed by their own particular aesthetic judgement and taste. The Langs also amassed a sizable collection of books about African art in order to inform their understanding of the works.
close friend of the Langs, influenced Elisabeth’s collecting practices and emotional investment with the objects. Of this period, Fry notes that Elisabeth treated “a work of art as a channel of a very personal message and it was the success of this communication, whether the object involved be majestic or humble, which provoked the aesthetic emotion” (1985, 11). The second period, can be distinguished by more “active research and critical reflection” about the African art the Langs chose to collect (11). This period was undoubtedly influenced by the Langs’ relationship with Jacqueline and Philip Fry, both of whom held academic positions at the University of Ottawa within the Visual Arts Department and specialized in the arts of Africa. This second period, characterized by the Langs’ more systematic or “disinterested” approach to collecting, was guided by the Frys’ scholarly investment and formalist approach to African art.97 The Frys had become quite close to the Langs after meeting them at a symposium in Montreal in 1969. The collectors trusted the Frys’ experience and opinions, which in turn guided their acquisitions (Hale 2006, 49).98 It was also during this period that Justin Lang began to take a more active role in the collecting process; prior to this period, Elisabeth had been the primary collector of African art.

While the Langs began their collection of African art in 1938, their first trip to Africa was not until 1970 (51). It was probably no coincidence that the Langs decided to

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97 Fry’s approach to the Lang collection and African art in general can be seen as formalist in that she often emphasized compositional elements, such as design, shape, texture, and colour as opposed to the cultural context and historical significance of the works. This is evident in not only Fry’s writings, but also the exhibitions of the collection she later curated at the Art Centre.

98 As Catherine Hale has noted, the Langs friendship with both Jacqueline and Philip Fry influenced both the types of African art that the Langs collected and their subsequent trips to the continent (2006, 50-53).
travel to Africa after meeting the Frys, who encouraged the Langs’ decision to take a more active approach to their collecting. Between their first trip to Africa, which coincided with their son Robert’s trip to the continent as a freelance photographer, and their decision to donate their collection to the Art Centre, they made several more trips to West Africa. While in Africa, they traveled throughout Ghana, Togo, Dahomey (now Benin), Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast and several parts of East Africa (Biron 1987). Although the Langs made several trips to Africa, Elisabeth explained that their interest in being in Africa was not formed by a search for African objects to add to their collection:

Although we brought back from Africa many small pieces, we mostly went there to study the customs, the traditions and to discover their big festivals… We no longer go to Africa to collect as there are fewer and fewer authentic objects… The population has become mostly Muslim or Christian, which has led to the abandonment or to the destruction of pieces, even forgetting of the origins that permitted certain works. (quoted in Biron 1987)

The Langs’ interest in so-called “authentic” objects was in pieces that dated from pre-colonization period and were thus perceived as untainted by outside influences, such as Muslim or Christian traditions; their view of such objects was shared by many Western collectors of African and other non-Western arts during this time. Their understanding of the work also reflected the guiding principles of many Western institutions that privileged such objects in exhibitions (Jones 1993, 208; Kasfir 1992, 41-43).

As the Langs’ collection grew, in 1978 Elisabeth decided to open her own art gallery on the prestigious Greene Avenue in Montreal, which she called Galerie des 5 Continents and which included, as the name suggests, works of art from the five continents (fig. 24).
In 1978, Fry chose to include a few sculptures from Elisabeth’s collection of African art at Galerie des 5 Continents in an exhibition she was curating at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in Ottawa, entitled “Vingt-cinq Sculptures Africanes dans les Collections Canadiennes” (Garvie 1987, 16). No doubt Fry’s relationship with the Langs and knowledge of the collection influenced her decision to include the pieces in the show, which ultimately placed the Lang Collection on the map as one of the most prominent...
collections of African art in Canada at the time. Thus, with Fry’s help, Elisabeth established herself as one of the most prominent dealers and connoisseurs of African and Canadian art in Montreal.

**The Lang Collection of African Art**

Overall, the Lang Collection of African Art that now resides at the Art Centre includes 574 African sculptures from approximately eighty different cultural groups, which span over nineteen countries in Africa. The collection is largely focused on West Africa, with the majority of the pieces from the Akan and Ashanti peoples of Ghana; Yoruba peoples of Nigeria; Dogon and Bamana peoples of Mali; Baule and Senufo peoples of the Ivory Coast; and Songye, Lega, Suku, Luba, Yaka and Kuba peoples of what is now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo (formally Zaire). The Langs chose to collect mainly sculptural pieces from West African nations, including wooden masks, figurative carvings, ivory carvings, gold weights, and gold, brass, and bronze jewelry. The remainder of their collection includes musical instruments, household accessories, utensils, tools, and toys. The pieces in the collection date from the early-19th to the mid-20th centuries.

The collection is unique: the Langs did not restrict themselves to single, exceptional sculptures, but instead collected several examples of the same types of

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99 “Agnes Etherington Art Centre Announces a Major Gift of African Art,” press release, April 30, 1984; Lang Collection Files, Catalogue, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

100 “Art Centre Announces Major Gift of African Art,” Queen’s Gazette XVI, no. 15, May 8, 1984; Lang Collection Files, Lang Material, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

101 This is with the exception of a terracotta figure from Mali, which dates somewhere between the 14th and 17th century (Lang Collection, Catalogue Database, Agnes Etherington Art Centre).
sculptures, each of which exhibited slight visual variations. Maureen Garvie notes that, as a result, “the Lang Collection is particularly rich in several examples of one object or type, making it unique as a learning resource” (1987, 17). Similarly, Fry characterized the Langs’ collecting as an “almost museological attempt to construct differentiated series” (1985, 11).

The Langs originally kept their collection in their Montreal home, which became overrun with art, even after the opening of the gallery in Montreal. According to Elisabeth, “It was all over the house, on the stairways, lying on the floor. The whole place was filled with art” (quoted in Garvie 1987, 16). Fry wrote that “in the Langs’ Montreal home, the different rooms—kitchen, bedrooms, living room, study—seem to have lost their specificity through the omnipresence of African Sculpture” (1985, 10). It was at this time that the Langs began to plan for the future of their collection. They realized that they were getting older and wanted to ensure that their collection of African art would be properly cared for after their deaths. They had approached both of their sons with the idea of taking over the collection; however, neither child felt that he would be able to accommodate a collection of such magnitude in his private home. The Langs thus began discussing the fate of their collection with their friends, the Frys. While the ROM and Montreal Museum of Fine Arts had established African collections at the time, and would

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102 In many ways, the Langs’ attempt to create a museological collection echoes collecting practices during the early modern period, whereby collectors would try to create encyclopedic collections to catalogue and classify the material world. As I previously noted, Samuel Quiccheberg (1529-1567) made one of the earliest known references to this type of collecting practice.

103 Elisabeth’s description of her home being literally overrun by African art is also reminiscent of private collections of so-called exotica and naturalia during the early modern period, whereby collectors would display non-Western visual and material culture throughout the home or in curiosity cabinets.
have seemed like a likely fit for the Lang Collection, the Frys instead suggested that the Langs consider donating their collection to the University of Ottawa, where both Jacqueline and Philip held academic positions, and could be directly involved with the collection. It is evident that the Frys wanted to ensure the integrity of the connoisseur collection by depositing it in an institution where it would not be overshadowed by an existing collection. At that time, the University of Ottawa did not have an art gallery. However, the Frys thought that the donation of the Lang Collection had the potential to provide the impetus for a gallery space to be opened, with the Lang Collection playing a central role. With the Langs’ blessing, Philip Fry wrote to the University of Ottawa to see whether or not it would be interested in the donation of the Lang Collection. Initially, the university responded positively to the prospect of receiving the collection, but after two years of negotiations, the university decided it would not be able to support renovations to any existing campus buildings to create a gallery, nor would it be able to financially maintain the collection (Hale 2006, 63).104

In 1982, when the University of Ottawa decided to decline the donation, the Langs began pursuing other possibilities. It was at this point that they began to consider the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, encouraged again by Philip Fry, who was acting as guest curator of an exhibition of Canadian artist Robin Collyer’s work and was familiar with the Art Centre. The Langs’ son Robert had also attended Queen’s University for his undergraduate degree, graduating from the Faculty of Arts in 1971.

104 The Langs’ decision to donate their African Collection to a university art museum is important. Unlike Canada, during the later half of the 20th century in the United States, there was an increase in donations of African collections to university art museums. This increase reflects the broader establishment of interest in Africa and African art by universities. Thus, many institutions began actively pursuing private collections and making acquisitions of African art for educational purposes.
In addition, as Maureen Garvie notes, “Kingston was geographically a good location, midway between the Langs in Montreal and their sons and families in Toronto” (1987, 16). Because the Art Centre’s focus was predominantly Western art and its collections contained no examples of African art, it seemed an unlikely fit. At the same time, it was also argued that the Lang collection offered a way to expand and diversify the institution’s holdings.

The Langs liked the idea of donating their collection to the Art Centre, and found especially appealing the prospect that the collection would serve as a resource for research and teaching for Queen’s staff and students. When the Langs decided to pursue the possibility of donating the collection to the Art Centre, Philip Fry contacted Robert Swain, then Director of the Centre, to see if the institution would be interested in acquiring the Langs’ collection. Swain was very interested and made arrangements to meet with the Langs soon thereafter. In June of 1982, Swain gave the Langs a tour of the Art Centre, after which they presented their portfolio of photographs detailing the African collection to Swain. Swain later described his reaction:

It is a natural condition, I make it known publicly now, a natural condition for directors of art museums to drool at the possibility of acquisition. It is a sickness, I confess, and I tried as hard as possible to control my salivation as I turned the pages in the photo albums, each leaf revealing object after object of incredible power and beauty.105

After Swain conveyed to the Langs the Art Centre’s genuine interest in their collection and presented them with a formal acceptance letter from Queen’s University, the

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105 “Remarks for “Visions and Models” Opening, Introduction by Robert Swain,” Agnes Etherington Art Centre, February 1, 1985; Lang Files, Box 5, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.
negotiations to acquire the collection began. This included an official appraisal of the collection at the Langs’ Montreal home by external evaluator and prominent African art scholar Susan Vogel. Over the next five years, the collection was transferred to the gallery in accordance with the capacity of the small museum’s staff to handle it (Farr 2010). The Langs had set up a Trust Indenture to cover that majority of the costs for transferring the Collection to the Art Centre, as well as the maintenance of the objects.

Swain officially announced the donation in a press release from the Art Centre on Monday April 30, 1984 (fig. 25).

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106 In September 1982, it was announced that Susan Vogel would be appointed as the new Executive Director of the Centre for African Art in New York. Swain wrote to Vogel in October 1982, asking her if she would be interested in traveling to Montreal to evaluate the Langs’ Collection of African art. Vogel agreed and arrived at the Langs’ home in Montreal in March 1983 (Robert Swain to Susan Vogel, 1982, letter; Lang Collection Files, Legal, Insurance and Evaluation, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives).

107 Lang Collection Files, Legal, Insurance and Evaluation, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.
In his announcement, he noted that the donation of the Lang Collection had the potential to make the Art Centre “a national centre for the study and exhibition of African art.”

The announcement was widely publicized, often with a focus on the monetary value of the collection: $1.8 million. According to Swain, in the Lang Collection Queen’s.

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108 “Agnes Etherington Art Centre Announces a Major Gift of African Art,” press release, April 30, 1984; Lang Collection Files, Catalogue, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

109 For example, the announcement of the donation of the Lang Collection was published in the Canadian Collector, Whig Standard, and Queen’s Gazette in April 1983 (Lang Collection Files, Announcements and Press Releases, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives).
University would acquire the largest private collection of African art in Canada. The collection was therefore promoted in terms of its potential as an educational resource, one of interest, the press reported,

to scholars in the fields of African studies, and cultural anthropology, and to students of religion, aesthetics, and the sociology and history of art, as well as the origin and development of Modern Art. It is a major addition to the resources of Queen’s University. It will be a major attraction for the Kingston community at large, as well as an educational opportunity for the elementary and secondary schools in the region.110

In addition, Swain noted, “Even when not on full exhibition, the collection will be in open storage so that it can be seen by scholars” (Hutchison n.d.).111

In conjunction with the announcement of the Lang Collection donation, Swain announced the appointment of Fry as Affiliate Curator for African Art at the Art Centre. She was given a three-year contract beginning in December 1985. Her experience as the head of the Department de l’Afrique Noire in the Musee de l’Homme, Paris, and as a professor of Art History at the University of Ottawa, where she specialized in African art, as well as her close relationship with the Langs and her familiarity with the collection,


111 In this regard, Swain’s interest in marketing the Lang Collection for future research projects anticipated the ROM’s later marketing in 1994 of its permanent African collection through the combination of the exhibition, “Artifacts of History: Research and the ROM’s African Collection,” and the African Studies Conference, during which the ROM solicited interest from outside scholars for potential future research projects.
made her an appropriate choice for the Art Centre and the Lang Collection. Furthermore, the Langs provided the funds for her appointment through their Trust Indenture (Gold 1986). As part of the contract with the Art Centre, the Langs had also requested that their collection be exhibited at least twice a year.

While both the Kingston and the university communities appreciated the quality of the donation, in general, the acquisition inspired mixed reactions (Farr 2009). Many believed that the wisdom of donating such a collection to the Art Centre, which had previously focused its collecting primarily on Canadian and European art, was questionable; the centre had neither an existing collection of African art nor a resident specialist in the field. After the Art Centre announced the decision to accept the Lang Collection, a few individuals from the local Kingston community approached the staff about their concerns. They believed that the Art Centre should focus its energy on the arts.

While it can be argued that Fry was a good fit, her close relationship with the Langs complicated her position as curator of the collection. While the Langs friendship with Fry in many ways points to the ability of the Langs to exert some level of control over the collection and how it was represented at the Art Centre, it also draws attention to Fry’s ability to shape how the collection was represented and, ultimately, understood. It should also be noted that there was overall a lack of specialists in African art in Canada, other than Ruth Phillips, who taught at Carleton University. Thus, Fry’s appointment at the Art Centre does not come as a surprise.

112 While it can be argued that Fry was a good fit, her close relationship with the Langs complicated her position as curator of the collection. While the Langs friendship with Fry in many ways points to the ability of the Langs to exert some level of control over the collection and how it was represented at the Art Centre, it also draws attention to Fry’s ability to shape how the collection was represented and, ultimately, understood. It should also be noted that there was overall a lack of specialists in African art in Canada, other than Ruth Phillips, who taught at Carleton University. Thus, Fry’s appointment at the Art Centre does not come as a surprise.

113 Lang Collection Files, Legal, Insurance and Evaluation, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

114 Before the official donation of the Lang Collection in 1984, the Art Centre had only hosted one exhibition of African art, the 1959 show, “African Sculpture.” This traveling exhibition, which was organized by the National Gallery of Canada, featured African sculptures from the Segy Gallery in New York and was on display at the Art Centre from October 4 to 25, 1959. Between 1959 and 1984, when the Lang Collection was officially donated, the Art Centre did not display any touring exhibitions featuring African art (“Records of exhibitions mounted at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre,” July 1984; Agnes Etherington Art Centre Exhibitions Fonds, Box 1, 1959, Queen’s University Archives).
of the majority culture of the region—the predominant Anglo-Saxon population (Hale 2006, 67).

While a few individuals from the Kingston community were concerned about the possible impact the African collection would have on the larger focus of the Art Centre, African specialists at Queen’s University had misgivings of their own. In a letter addressed to Swain, a group of Africanist scholars at Queen’s wrote,

As members of the Queen’s community most directly and professionally involved in African studies we were, however, surprised (to say the least) to learn of this gift through the Whig Standard, especially since neither the Art Centre nor the Department of Art History has ever shown any previous evidence of interest or competence in the field of African art.\textsuperscript{115}

The group was also particularly angered that they had not been invited to the official opening of the Lang Collection. “Indeed, assembling a cocktail party of 250 in so small a community, without inviting a single one of us (even inadvertently) suggests willful exclusion! … It is worth recalling,” the writers added, “that the administration of this university turned down our request for support in bringing the 1984 meeting of the Canadian Association of African Studies to Queen’s.”\textsuperscript{116} The group saw this oversight as both contradictory and hypocritical; it made no sense to accept a donation of African art while refusing to support African scholarship. Additionally, as a link between Queen’s

\textsuperscript{115} Colin T. Leys, Bruce J. Berman, J. Barry Riddell, Ivan Varga, Robert Stock, and Christopher Youe to Robert Swain, May 4, 1984, letter; Lang Collection Files, Lang General Correspondences, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

\textsuperscript{116} Leys et al. to Swain, May 4, 1984, letter; Lang Collection Files, Lang General Correspondences, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.
and the broader African studies community, they recommended that their involvement with the collection be solicited:

For a start we would suggest the appointment of an advisory board to deal with the development of exhibition, research and teaching uses of the collection that would include all of the professional Africanists at Queen’s. From there we can lay the grounds for the development of a cooperative and fruitful relationship.\footnote{Leys et al. to Swain, May 4, 1984, letter; Lang Collection Files, Lang General Correspondences, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.}

Swain responded that from a management perspective the creation of such a group would pose administrative difficulties. Furthermore, he noted, “We manage our collection quite well without the aid of an advisory committee and see no necessity for one in this instance. We are however interested in ideas you and your colleagues may wish to suggest and look forward to receiving them.” In many ways, Swain’s reaction to the group suggested the degree to which the Art Centre favoured institutional authority over broader community involvement with the collection. As a result of Swain’s decision to not include the African studies community in the representation and display of the Lang Collection, no such advisory board was created, nor was any relationship with the African studies community established.\footnote{The university eventually agreed to fund another Canadian Association of African Studies Conference, which was organized by Bruce J. Berman in 1988. In the end, the Art Centre played a major role in the conference, which was organized by Berman, who had originally addressed the letter to Robert Swain in 1984. The Art Centre mounted an exhibition corresponding to the conference theme, and invited scholars from the conference to the formal Opening Ceremony for the newly renovated gallery dedicated to the permanent display of the Lang Collection in 1988 (Swain to Bruce J. Berman, June 25, 1984, letter; Lang Collection Files, Lang General Correspondences, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives).} This decision not to involve the African
studies community is important within the larger context of the history of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre, as there has been little involvement of African scholars with the collection since.

One of the most disappointing responses to the announcement about the donation of the Lang Collection, according to Dorothy Farr, was from the Queen’s Department of Art. Farr believes that the Department of Art was never overtly supportive of the donation, nor did it at any point show interest in the collection. Since the donation in the early 1980s, according to Farr, the department has not made any attempt to hire faculty with an interest in African art or offer classes on African art or any other non-Western art, nor has there been much interest in the collection from graduate students in the department. While the Art Centre has raised the issue of hiring an African scholar within the Department of Art, and students have inquired about the department offering courses on African art, Farr maintains that these indications of interest in the field have not been met with a positive response from the department (Farr 2010; Hale 2006, 69). The Department of Art does, however, have an established commitment to the study of Native North American art, both historic and contemporary, as well as in collections of Aboriginal art in Western collections. Farr’s notions bring to question whether the Art Centre’s collections and focus should dictate whom the Art Department hires. While many of the Art Centre’s collections are used for teaching purposes, the lack of African art specialists does not allow for the Lang Collection to be utilized by the Art Department to the same extent. Furthermore, the lack of specialists in the field of African art in Canada presents another problem. In the United States, the situation is much different. African art has become commonplace in American art museums, including university
museums and galleries, since the late 19th century (Bickford Berzock and Clarke 2011, 6). In many cases, the inclusion of African art in American university museums has paralleled increased interest in African art history as a discipline. In Canada, however, African art as a distinct field in art history at Canadian universities is still largely underdeveloped.

**Exhibiting African Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre**

Prior to its arrival at the Art Centre, several pieces from the Lang Collection had been included in exhibitions elsewhere in Canada: “Poules de Metiers a tisser d’Afrique Noire” at the Université de Montreal (1974); “Mask without Masquerades” at the Dalhousie Art Gallery for the Canadian Association of African Studies (1974); “Sculpture Rituelle de l’Afrique Noire,” an exhibition circulated by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1974); and “Twenty-Five African Sculptures,” hosted by the National Gallery of Canada (1978). Beginning at the Art Centre in 1985, a range of sculptural works from the Lang Collection of African Art have been exhibited, for the most part, in the African Gallery. Of the twenty-plus thematically organized exhibitions of the Lang Collection arranged by and hosted at the Art Centre over the last three decades, only three have been accompanied by separate exhibition catalogues and

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119 In the United States, 1957 has often been sited as the year in which the distinct field of African art within a discipline of art history was established. It was in 1957 that Roy Sieber, at the University of Iowa, became the first person to graduate from an art history program with his doctorate in African art history. Almost ten years later, Robert Farris Thompson earned his doctorate in African art history from Yale University. Both Siber and Thompson went on to create programs in African art history at distinguished American universities, Siber at Indiana University and Thompson at Yale (Bickford Berzock and Clarke 2011, 10-11).

120 “Exhibitions in which Lang pieces have been included, 1974”; Lang Collection Files, Lang Exhibition Files, Appendix 1, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.
extensive corresponding events: “Visions and Models” (1985), “Visual Variations” (1987) and “Heroic Figures” (1988). The fact that these exhibitions, which have undoubtedly been the largest to date, were the first three shows of the Lang Collection after the original donation is no coincidence. The three reflect initial excitement over the collection, as well as Swain’s intention for the Art Centre, and thus by proxy Queen’s University, to become a new centre for the study of African art in Canada. While interest in the first three exhibitions, all of which were curated by Fry, showed promise in terms of making Swain’s vision a reality, the excitement over the collection subsequently dwindled significantly.

“Visions and Models: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection”

The official unveiling of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre, on February 1, 1985, included the opening of the inaugural exhibition, “Visions and Models: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection.” Monique Vezina, Minister of External Relations, came from Ottawa to officially open the event. The exhibition was organized with the financial assistance of the Ontario Arts Council, the Lang Endowment, and Alcan Canada Products Ltd (Large 1985, 6-7). It consisted of a selection of sixty-four sculptures highlighting the Lang Collection, organized by guest curator Fry. “Visions and Models” was intended to remain open until the end of March; however, because of its positive reception it remained open an additional month. Fry wrote the catalogue for the exhibition, which included her introductory text and “Preliminary Notes,” and a foreword by Swain. The catalogue, written in English, included black and white photographs of the pieces in the exhibition. “Visions and Models” was primarily marketed as the first of
many exhibitions showcasing the Lang Collection and therefore presented only a small sampling of the collection. The exhibition text also emphasized the possibilities for future exhibitions of the Collection. As Fry explains,

> The present mode of presentation opens the door to other approaches. In fact, such a collection, which is both heterogeneous and coherent, may be considered as a source of visual propositions but also as a laboratory for research and reflection. Without going beyond relatively inexpensive perspectives, one can imagine periodic exhibitions accompanied by publications produced by researchers in the fields of history, anthropology, or the philosophy of art… A complete list of projects would be too long to present here, but we might suggest several without exhausting the range of possibilities offered by the collections. (1985, VIII)

In the first chapter of the catalogue, Fry considers many of the inherent problems with the often rigid Western categories of art in relation to the presentation and display of non-Western visual and material culture (1). Throughout the remainder of the chapter, she attempts to paint an image for readers of the geographical, political, and cultural complexities of the African continent, while relating how such dimensions allow for the production of diverse aesthetic possibilities. It is obvious from the manner in which the exhibition text is written that it was meant for an audience with a limited understanding of the African continent and African art in general. This is often one of the biggest issues curators must deal with when creating exhibitions of African art, a Western audience that, for the most part, knows very little about the continent. Fry provides a rich image of the area from which the collection was drawn:

> Sharp divisions fail to render the subtle variations between one type of landscape and another: from the meanderings of rivers and their tributaries
to meadows, high plateaus, mountains, hills, valleys, bushlands, forests, steppes, and the progressive encroachment of human settlement. Every area in which a community has been established, whether it be recent or longstanding, provides a combination of images which add their own connotations to the world vision elaborated by the human inhabitants. (1-2)

The remainder of the catalogue consists of a chapter on the “spirit” of the collection, in which Fry discusses the Langs’ persona as collectors. According to her, the Langs differed from the typical collectors of their time, who she characterized as being profoundly influenced by the notion of the exotic and thus motivated by “exceptional” pieces or “one-of-a-kinds.” To Fry, the Lang Collection instead possessed a “rare quality of emotional freshness,” as many of the pieces had “been lived with” (10). She explained that the Langs were most interested in collecting pieces that they enjoyed and that had also been previously enjoyed. The catalogue ends with an illustrated overview of a selection of the sculptures displayed in the exhibition.

“Visions and Models” was also featured in the first edition of *Currents*, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre’s bulletin, which highlights current exhibitions, activities, news, events, and upcoming shows. Corresponding with the exhibition, a series of educational programs were organized in February and March 1985 by the Art Centre’s Education Officer, Catherine Gold. The events included a Schools Program, which provided a one-hour tour of the exhibition, as well as studio activities on African arts and cultures for local students from both elementary and secondary schools; a Seniors Program, including a lecture by Elisabeth Lang about her experiences building the African Collection; a performance by the Pro Arte Singers of Kingston under the direction of Brian Jackson, which also included the performance of African Sanctus by David Fanshawe; as well as
two Studio Workshops scheduled during the local schools’ winter break, which allowed children to participate in a mask-making workshop inspired by the exhibition (Large 1985, 6).\textsuperscript{121} In total, the events organized in conjunction with the exhibition brought in the largest recorded audience to the Art Centre.\textsuperscript{122} Swain remarked on this interest:

We knew when we acquired the Lang Collection that we were getting something special. But we fully expected to take a number of years to build up interest. The public events we have staged have shown that there is even more interest there, and ready to be tapped, than we thought. (Large 1985, 6)\textsuperscript{123}

In addition to these events, Dorothy Farr (then chief curator of the Art Centre) organized a one-day feature symposium, “The Art of Africa,” which took place during the show’s run. The symposium attracted several international scholars, and over 100 people gathered at the Art Centre for the symposium, which also served to confirm heightened public interest in the collection.

\textsuperscript{121} “Inaugural Exhibition of African Art Collection Opens February 1 at Agnes Etherington Art Centre,” information sheet, January 22, 1985, 6; Lang Collection Files, Lang Material, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives; “Related Public Programs, February/March 1985;” Lang Collection Files, Lang Material, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.

\textsuperscript{122} The success can be measured by the number of visitors to the Art Centre for each event. This included 2,000 school children for the “Schools Program,” 375 people for the musical “Performance,” and over 100 people for the “Symposium.”

\textsuperscript{123} “African Art Drawing Enthusiastic Crowds to Art Centre,” News from the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, March 13, 1985; Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives.
“Visual Variations: African Sculptures from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection”

The second exhibition of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre, “Visual Variations: African Sculpture from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection,” opened at the beginning of March 1987, also curated by Fry. The exhibition was funded by the Museums Assistance Programme of the National Museums of Canada and the Ontario Arts Council. As the second exhibition of the Lang Collection, it was thematically centered on variations of ceremonial and domestic artifacts from West Africa, grouped into twelve specific themes: utilitarian combs, pulley-holders, pipes, fly-whisks, whips, spoons, divination instruments, fertility, twin figures, masks, headdresses.124 Visitors were invited to “compare aesthetics, constructions and uses of objects,” while considering how “historical, political, economic and social characteristics” had played a role in the shaping of the artifacts (Farr 1987).125 Fry wrote the accompanying catalogue, which included both English and French text and was illustrated in colour and black and white. Unlike the text of the catalogue for “Visions and Models,” this catalogue was much shorter, although, Swain argued, it was nevertheless a “contribution to the continuing discourse on African Art and its interpretation in a western context” (VII). The catalogue included a modest foreword by Swain, followed by an introduction by Fry, and an illustrated sampling of the artefacts displayed in the exhibition.


125 Dorothy Farr, 1987, “Visual Variations: African Sculptures from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection,” Currents 3, no. 2 (March/April); Lang Files, Box 7 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.
In Fry’s introduction, similar to her discussion in the “Visions and Models” catalogue, she presents the inherent difficulties with representing African art in a Western context:

In setting up an exhibition, how does one choose a perspective flexible enough that the scandal of the absent artist not escape attention, that the limits of interpretation be accepted, and yet, at the same time, that the quality of sculptural inventiveness and its intellectual context be brought to light? (VIII)

Furthermore, she drew attention to the contradictions that presented particular challenges in her study:

One risks falling into a network of contradictions that imprisons us in the ethnocentric trap. On the one hand, there is the type of ethnocentricity in which Western histories and theories of art are inappropriately applied to cultural systems foreign to them. Thus, the danger exists of applying the Western notion of formalism to objects whose aesthetic qualities owe their existence to a precise network of cultural conventions, rather than to any explicit and deliberate attempt to explore strictly formal relations. (1)

It is obvious that Fry is attempting to reveal the continual negotiations necessary when representing the arts of Africa to audiences unfamiliar with them or the history of their collection. On several occasions she refers to the absence of the artist’s or maker’s voice in the exhibition and text; an overall lack of documentation around the producers of African arts is one of the inherent constraints within the field.

Throughout the catalogue, Fry returns to her earlier emphasis on the problems and limitations that can arise in exhibitions of African art in Western art and cultural institutions. While not explicitly referring to the “Primitivism” exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, she is clearly taking the criticisms of such an exhibition into
account and attempting to differentiate her approach. The remainder of the catalogue outlines how the theme of the exhibition was organized to offer the audience a breadth of information about the artistic diversity amongst the different cultural groups of West Africa and their production of sculptural variations. She concluded by calling for a “less arrogant perception of modes of life other than our own and to a new way of seeing the products of this ‘this remarkable sculptural vision’” (7).

“Visual Variations” was on display at the Art Centre until May 1987, after which it toured the country for the next seventeen months, stopping at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon (now the Remai Art Gallery of Saskatchewan), Concordia University Art Gallery in Montreal, York University Art Gallery in Toronto, and Dalhousie University Art Gallery in Halifax.126 Overall, the exhibition was very well received at each of the institutions to which it traveled.127

While the first two exhibitions of the Lang Collection were successful, further exhibitions were put on hold for one year, while the Art Centre underwent renovations to better accommodate the African collection. During the initial donation, the Langs had

126 “Agnes Etherington Art Centre Traveling Exhibition Publicity and Attendance Report,” February 15, 1988; Lang Files, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.

127 The exhibition of “Visual Variations” at the Dalhousie University Art Gallery coincided with the “African Worlds Program” (September – November 1988), which was organized in conjunction with several events marking the Centre for African Studies at Dalhousie University’s 10th anniversary, as well as the 200th anniversary of the first Black Nova Scotian returning to Sierra Leone, in early 1987. In planning the “African Worlds Program,” the University worked closely with members of the local African Canadian communities. “Visual Variations” was well received at the Art Gallery, with approximately 2,000 people viewing the exhibition while it was on display (“Agnes Etherington Art Centre Traveling Exhibition Publicity and Attendance Report,” February 15, 1988; Lang Files, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives; Timothy M. Shaw to Robert Swain, March 7, 1985, letter; Lang Files, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives; “Experience Africa,” Dal News, September 7, 1988; Lang Files, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives).
requested that there be a permanent gallery space so that the collection could be on
display at all times.\textsuperscript{128} While plans for the creation of a distinct gallery space for the
collection had been in the works since 1984, construction of a gallery did not begin until
1987. The Art Centre was able to secure funding for the renovation project from the
Federal Department of Communications, the Provincial Ministry of Culture and
Communications, Queen’s University and private sources. Larry Richards, Dean of the
University of Waterloo, had been hired to draw up the architectural plans, and
renovations to the Art Centre and the new gallery space for the Lang Collection were
completed in spring 1988 (fig. 26).\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{128} The Lang’s specified that they would like to have approximately thirty-five pieces
from their collection on display at all times (“Letter to Mr. Monroe Abbey of Montreal to
Robert Swain listing the understandings between the Langs and the Art Centre as per
reference to the collections donations (article #11); Lang Collection Files, Legal,
Insurance and Evaluation, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives).

\textsuperscript{129} The funding for the construction project came from the Federal Department of
Communications ($32,000); the Provincial Ministry of Culture and Communications,
with the special assistance of MPP Ken Keyes ($75,800); Queen’s University through the
office of Dr. Tom Williams, Vice Principal (Institutional Relations) ($30,000); and from
private sources ($19,000). The overall funding package received was $156,000
Lang Files, Announcements and Press Releses, Agnes Etherington Art Centre Archives).
Figure 26: Donor Justin Lang (in wheelchair) and his son John Lang tour the inaugural exhibition at the Agnes Etherington celebrating the opening of its new Gallery for African Art. c. 1988.


“Heroic Figures: African Sculptures from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection”

The official unveiling of the new gallery, titled the African Gallery, coincided with both the opening of the third exhibition of the Lang Collection, “Heroic Figures,” again curated by Fry, and the convening of a Canadian Association of African Studies Conference at the Art Centre. The opening ceremony, which took place in May 1988, included dignitaries and political figures such as Flora MacDonald, then federal Minister of Communications; Ken Keyes, MPP for Kingston and the Islands; Kingston Mayor
John Gerretsen; Queen’s University Principal David Smith; and Justin and Elisabeth Lang, as well as conference delegates and media correspondents from around the province.\textsuperscript{130} Both the attention that the exhibition received and the fact that the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference was held at the Art Centre point not only to the significance of the Lang Collection, but also to the positioning of the Art Centre as a new locus for African art in Canada.

The choice of the Art Centre at Queen’s for the 18\textsuperscript{th} Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association of African Studies is significant, as the Lang Collection was a focal point of the conference. The conference attracted approximately 250 delegates from twenty-two countries, sixteen of them African. Stephen Lewis, Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, officially opened the conference. Among the distinguished keynote speakers for the conference were Thabo Mbeki, anti-apartheid leader and head of the African National Congress (ANC) Information Centre in Lusaka, Zambia; Maryinez Lyons of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Jean Leger, of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, who worked as a technical advisor for the South African National Union of Mineworkers. The theme of the conference was “Domination, Resistance, Liberation,” and it featured over 160 papers, panels and round table discussions, formal academic presentations, and several opportunities for informal exchanges on related discussion topics, including Canada’s role in opposing apartheid.

development aid to Africa, the role of African women in grass-roots development, science and technology in Africa, and AIDS (Hutchison 1987).

The Lang Collection and the “Heroic Figures” exhibition were displayed in the new permanent African Gallery. Funding for the exhibition came from the Public Programme Division of the Canadian International Development Agency, the Canadian Association of African Studies, the Ontario Arts Council, and Queen’s University. The theme of the exhibition was organized to correspond with the conference themes of domination, resistance, and liberation. The exhibition featured forty-two sculptural works from the Lang Collection, including figures, masks and headdresses from West and Central Africa.

The corresponding exhibition catalogue, *Heroic Figures: Sculptures from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection*, includes a foreword by Dorothy Farr and an introduction by Fry, followed by three chapters, one by Nkiru Nzegwu, entitled “Overcoming Form-Content Tensions in Appreciating African Art Forms,” a second by Jean-Claude Muller, entitled “Works of Man, God and Nature: Some Little-Studied Aspects of African Aesthetics,” and a third highlighting pieces from the exhibition. The catalogue includes black and white illustrations throughout and was written in English with a translated French text insert. By bringing in two scholars from different

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131 David MacDonald, Canadian Ambassador to Ethiopia, was the invited speaker for the official closing ceremony on May 14, 1988 (Bill Hutchison, 1987, “Anti-Apartheid Leader to Speak at Queen’s,” *Whig-Standard* n.p.; Lang Files, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives).

132 Nkiru Nzegwu (Ibo origin) was, at the time of the publication, completing her PhD in Aesthetics at the University of Ottawa. She had received her Masters in Philosophy from the University of Ife in Nigeria. She is a practicing sculptor. Dr. Jean-Claude Muller is a professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Montreal.
backgrounds, one an artist and African art historian, the other a social anthropologist, Fry sought, as she put it, to “expand beyond the samples of the exhibition to broaden points of view concerning the role of art in traditional and contemporary African societies.”

Many of the topics covered at the conference emerged from the current stream of debates surrounding issues on the African continent in the recent past and present, such as colonial legacies, world aid, AIDS, famine, drought and apartheid. It would have been appropriate, therefore, for the exhibition to display objects of both the past and the present, thus coinciding with the conference themes of domination, resistance, and liberation. However, as Fry explains in the introduction, a good representation of contemporary objects was not possible:

Unfortunately, within the exhibition’s framework, it has been impossible to obtain a sufficiently coherent representation of contemporary works from politically engaged artistic movements, since some of these artists work only at home, while others work in a context of colonial domination or even exile. Consequently, we have chosen images rooted not in present realities, but rather in past traditions. (1988, 1)

The limitations of the exhibition’s “framework” that Fry speaks of are puzzling. At the time, there were several well known African artists living outside the African continent, including in Canada, whose works dealt with issues of domination, resistance, and liberation. Such an assessment of contemporary African art—that it was inaccessible

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133 Fry, “Heroic Figures,” September 18, 1987, memo; African Exhibitions, Box 7, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.

134 The majority of the objects in the Collection were acquired by the Langs between 1950 and 1970, which coincided with the height of struggles for liberation and independence across the African continent. While this may be the case, this complex period was not referenced in relation to the collection.
because contemporary artists work at home, or in the context of “colonial domination, or in exile—seems strange in a catalogue that includes text by contemporary sculptor Nkiru Nzegwu of Nigeria. The exclusion of contemporary African art, coupled with the notion that such works were inaccessible, resonates closely with many exhibitions of African art in the West. Perpetually citing inaccessibility to contemporary art positions African art as being rooted in the past. One of the major criticisms of contemporary Western exhibitions of Africa art, therefore, was that there was no attempt to establish continuity between past and current practices by linking the historical to the contemporary. Fry’s omission and explanation illustrate key question within the field of African art: should contemporary African art be exhibited alongside African historic collections, and if so how should the two be related? (Vogel 1991; Bickford Berzock 2002; Jules-Rosette 2002). An exhibition coinciding with a multi-disciplinary African scholars conference would have been an ideal venue within which to bring other collections into play, or even to include an example of sculptural art from Nigerian artist Nkiru Nzegwu, who contributed to the catalogue.

While Fry’s discussion of the inaccessibility of contemporary African art is puzzling, her inclusion of Nkiru Nzegwu and Jean-Claude Muller as contributors to the catalogue signals an important shift. By including Nzegwu, and Muller, a social anthropologist specializing in West African nations, Fry makes an effort to be more inclusive of multiple perspectives in relation to African aesthetic practices.

In her essay, “Overcoming Form-Content Tensions in Appreciating African Art,” Nzegwu discusses the continual tensions between non-Western “contextualist” and
“formalist” approaches to understanding and appreciating ekpo masks produced by the Ibibios of south-eastern Nigeria:

The fundamental problem of both approaches derives from the underlying assumption that form qualities of works of art and the cultural context are somehow distinct… Contextualists expect that knowledge of the culture will cause us to better appreciate ekpo masks, while formalists assume that formal qualities cause appreciation. (Nzegwu 1988, 10)

So she concludes, “In appreciating the works of art of a culture, such as ekpo masks, it is important that one know what the artistic style is, what artistic and cultural tradition it grew from, what mode of representation was employed and what is its underlying principle of design” (12). The inclusion of Nzegwu’s perspective as an Ibo woman living and practicing sculpture in Canada in the catalogue for an exhibition that includes several Ibibios sculptures signals recognition of the importance of contemporary perspectives. Adding another dimension to the catalogue, Nzegwu discusses the difficulties she personally encountered when she moved to Canada and had to “learn the art of another culture,” and how she realized that an understanding of both formal and contextual backgrounds is indispensable in understanding contemporary art.

In Muller’s catalogue essay, “Works of Man, God and Nature: Some Little-Studied Aspects of African Aesthetics,” Muller seeks to demystify common approaches to studying African aesthetics in relation to outmoded ideologies of Western art history. He discusses the difficulties posed to the study of African art by ethnologists. “In fact,” he says, “given two types of masks of equal aesthetic value, the ethnologist will choose to analyze the one whose social function is the most important or the most spectacular. In his eyes, context takes precedence over aesthetics” (Muller 1988, 15). The remainder of
Muller’s text considers the multiple and often contradictory meanings imposed upon African objects as they travel from one context, to collectors, museums, art historians and ethnographers in another.

While the exhibition catalogue is an important contribution to the study of African art in a Canadian context, and although the exhibition was well received by members of the conference, the coinciding opening of the new African Gallery was not without controversy. On August 10, 1988, Swain received a letter from Jeffry Piker of the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony that voiced serious concern about the lack of a Black presence at the formal opening ceremony for the Lang Collection at the Art Centre earlier that year. Piker begins his letter by praising the Art Centre for acquiring the Lang Collection of African Art:

We strongly applaud that you have given permanent display space to African art and culture. In fact, your gallery is one of the few places in Kingston were one can go to see non-white, non-western heritage and culture displayed with respect and pride. This is indeed a very important contribution for our community – and we thank you for it!135

He then states his main concern:

An all-white opening for a permanent collection of African art – at Queen’s, in Kingston, in Canada, today in 1988! – is, we want you to know, a glaring mistake. Whether the tradition is African or Islamic, French or Hebrew, Chinese or Anglo-Saxon or whatever – in the Canada of today, in the Queen’s and Kingston of today, we all must work together in an active way to undo the racist myths we used to believe in. We must work hard and carefully to produce for ourselves a history that more

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135 Jeffry Piker to Robert Swain, August 10, 1988, letter; Lang Files, Box 8, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.
honestly tells (and shows!) who we are, where we have come from, and where we are – and might be! – going.\textsuperscript{136}

In response to Piker’s letter, Swain wrote, “If it was shortsighted on our part not to include a black representative on the platform, it was not intentional.”\textsuperscript{137} The director went on to remark that the opening ceremony for the new African Gallery was meant mainly to thank both the Langs for the donation and those who helped fund the capital renovation to the Art Centre. He also explained that the opening ceremony coincided with opening of the “Heroic Figures” exhibition and the Canadian Association of African Studies Conference. As such, conference participants were invited to the opening ceremony event, many of whom attended. Swain also pointed out that there was Black participation in the writing of the exhibition catalogue for “Heroic Figures”:

Nkiru Nzegwu, a Nigerian scholar, was an author of one of two catalogue texts. She was introduced to the audience by myself from the podium and had been invited to join the other guests… but she declined… Black dancers and musicians were a major part of the celebration of the opening and performed three times during the Open House.\textsuperscript{138}

It is evident from the letters back and forth between Piker and Swain that there had been a misunderstanding, as the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony was under the impression that there had been no Black presence at the opening ceremony, when in actuality there was. However, there was no Black speaker for the evening, which is where

\textsuperscript{136} Piker to Swain, August 10, 1988, letter; Lang Files, Box 8, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.

\textsuperscript{137} Swain to Piker, October 5, 1988, letter; Lang Files, Box 8, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.

\textsuperscript{138} Swain to Piker, October 5, 1988, letter; Lang Files, Box 8, 1001.14, Queen’s University Archives.
the Committee may have been concerned. This discussion between the Art Centre and the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony echoed the earlier controversy, between the Art Centre and African scholars at Queen’s, over the inaugural exhibition of the African collection. These two incidents, therefore, point to the heightened climate surrounding issues of race and representation at the time. It is obvious that both groups wanted to be more involved with the collection. However, the controversies resulted in both groups distancing themselves from both the Art Centre and the Lang Collection, as neither showed interest in the collection thereafter.

The first three exhibitions of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre were, however, significant for many reasons. The exhibitions, including the corresponding events, which took place in conjunction with the exhibitions, attracted significant attention from scholars of African art and anthropology, including Susan Vogel, a leading specialist in the field who had originally evaluated the Lang collection prior to its donation to the Art Centre; Roslyn Walker, curator of the National Museum of African Art at Washington’s Smithsonian Institution; Ruth Phillips of Carleton University, Zdenka Volavka of York University, and Jean-Claude Muller from the University of Montreal. Combined, these exhibitions and excitement over the Lang Collection seemed to confirm Swain’s initial hope that the Art Centre and Queen’s University would ultimately become a new locus for the study of African art. Unfortunately, the excitement over the collection was short lived. The majority of exhibitions that followed the first three, all much smaller in scale and lacking separate exhibition catalogues, illustrate a significant falling-off in the level of attention placed on the Lang Collection at the Art Centre, a decline that is important to examine.
Other Exhibitions of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre

The first exhibition of the Lang Collection to be featured after “Heroic Figures” was “Earth Traditions: African Art and Agriculture.” The exhibition, which opened in January 1989, was co-curated by Fry and Farr, and marked Fry’s final curatorial project at the Art Centre (fig. 27).

Figure 27: Installation view of “Earth Traditions: African Art and Agriculture.” January 29 to June 18, 1989. African Gallery, Agnes Etherington Art Centre.


As part of the initial donation plan, the Langs had provided funding to hire Fry as a guest curator under a three-year contract. This contract allowed Fry to devote a great deal of time and energy to the production of the first three exhibitions—“Visions and Models,” “Visual Variations,” and “Heroic Figures.” It is evident that, through these first three
exhibitions, Fry played a central role in the shaping and reception of the Lang Collection as a whole. Her emphasis on aesthetics and a formalist approach to the collection also laid a foundation for understanding of the objects in the Lang Collection as works of fine art.

At the end of the three years, with Fry’s contract ending, it soon became apparent that the Art Centre would not be able to keep up with the task of producing such frequent and extensive exhibitions. Thus, Fry’s departure from the Art Centre marked the beginning of a new chapter in terms of the level of attention and energy devoted to the Lang Collection. While under contract with the Art Centre, Fry produced separate catalogues for the first three major exhibitions of the Lang Collection. With her contract ending, the in-house expertise necessary to the production of exhibition catalogues also disappeared; the Centre had neither the budget to hire a full time curator of African art nor the funding to produce catalogues devoted to the Collection. As a result, it was forced to come up with alternative means of disseminating information about the exhibitions it did mount. Beginning in 1988, the Art Centre began publishing an annual catalogue, titled *Exhibitions*, which highlighted all of the exhibitions on display each year. The publication was a lot less costly and required less work for the Art Centre, and became a suitable alternative to publications dedicated to exhibitions featuring the Lang Collection. Thus, beginning in 1989, exhibitions of the Lang Collection were featured in *Exhibitions*.

After 1989, Farr curated the majority of Lang Collection exhibitions at the Art Centre. Her role as chief curator of the Art Centre, responsible for all exhibitions, ultimately prevented her from devoting as much time to the Lang Collection as Fry had.
been able to during her term. As a direct result of this, the Lang Collection was exhibited less frequently than it had been initially.

While Farr’s approach to the Lang Collection was, for the most part, in keeping with the exhibition strategy Fry had established, which showcased the individual aesthetic and formal qualities of the African objects, Farr also chose to differentiate her approach by including more detail about the historical and cultural context of the objects in the African exhibition space itself.\(^{139}\) Farr’s approach, therefore, recalls the ways in which art and ethnographic museums in the late 1980s and early 1990s began blurring the boundaries between how objects were displayed.\(^{140}\) During this time, many museums (art and ethnographic) began to borrow similar approaches to displaying non-Western objects; art museums increasingly paired objects with contextualizing display panels, while ethnographic museums began to assemble objects thematically, instead of by geographical or cultural groupings (Farris 1988; Vogel 1988, 1991; Schildkrout 1991).

Initially, after Fry’s contract ended, the Art Centre was able to solicit outside expertise for specific exhibitions. For example, in 1989, Ruth Phillips of Carleton University curated the exhibition, “The Female Spirit: The Mende Masks of Sierra Leone.” Included in the exhibition were three Mende masks from Phillips’ private collection.

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\(^{139}\) Because separate catalogues were no longer being produced, the information on the display panels of the exhibitions allowed Farr to provide information that would otherwise have been included separately in the catalogues and absent in the exhibition space.

\(^{140}\) While in the 1960s, museums in New York and Paris began exhibiting similar types of non-Western and Aboriginal objects in both art and ethnographic museums, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s museums began to question their own role in classifying and displaying these objects as art or artifact. Prior to this period, art and ethnographic exhibitions were commonly understood as being mutually exclusive (Schildkrout 1991; Vogel 1991; Jonaitis 1988; Phillips 2011).
collection of African art. This marked the first time that outside works of African art had been included in exhibitions of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre. Later, in 1992, Farr invited Wendy Thomas from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to curate “Points of View: Art of the Western Sudan, A Selection from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art” (fig. 28).

Figure 28: Installation view of “Points of View: Art of the Western Sudan, A Selection from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art.” October 11, 2002 to June 20, 1993.


Thomas had been involved with the African collection in Montreal, and thus was able to bring her experience to the exhibition. Then, in 1996, Farr invited John Heward, a contemporary artist and collector of African art from Montreal, to co-curate the exhibition, “Artist’s Choice: West African Masks, A Selection from the Justin and
Elisabeth Lang Collection of African Art.” Later, Farr explained her decision to invite Heward:

It is important to vary the point of view and the “voice” to keep the engagement fresh for the viewing public. John Heward is a contemporary artist in Montreal who has assembled an excellent personal collection of African sculpture. I asked him to select pieces from the Lang Collection and to discuss the aesthetic reasons for his choices. (Farr 2009)

This exhibition was also significant because it was the first time that contemporary works were exhibited with the Lang Collection at the Art Centre. As Farr explains, “We hung one of his large canvases as part of the exhibition. So the exhibition was about the aesthetic of African art as perceived by a Canadian practitioner in visual arts and a collector of African art” (Farr 2009).

While the use of outside expertise in the development of these exhibitions was an important initiative taken by the Art Centre to broaden the scope of the exhibition themes, the institution was unable to sustain the frequency of the shows due to increased funding cuts. On the front page of the May/June 1996 issue of Currents, David McTavish, then Director of the Art Centre, discussed the effects of recent funding cuts to the Centre:

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre—like virtually every other public-sector institution in the province and most others in the rest of the country—is currently having to rethink how it does things. We are forced to focus sharply on how and why we operate as we do, for whom, and to what effect—not only in light of our impending capital expansion, but also as a consequence of the unprecedented cuts that all levels of government are making to the grants they award annually…. We will have to do things in different ways, but we do not propose relinquishing essential
commitments. Thus the permanent collection—its care and elucidation—and the public programming—including varied exhibitions, tours, lectures, studio programs, workshops and the like—remain our pre-eminent responsibilities. (McTavish 1996, 1)

What this meant for such permanent collections as the Langs’ was that it would be very difficult to maintain the original agreement with the donors—to display at least two exhibitions featuring the Collection a year. With increasingly restricted funding to the Art Centre, all resources were affected. It would be difficult to embark on outsourcing specialists in African art as guest curators, as was the case with the involvement of Fry, Phillips, Thomas and Heward. And, there would be limited funding to mount special events corresponding to exhibitions of the Collection. According to Farr,

The Lang Foundation provided some support annually for twenty years. However, the number of African exhibitions was reduced, in part, in response to general funding levels at the Art Centre. In addition, there was a decision made to do fewer exhibitions across all fields, so that each exhibition could receive more curatorial attention. (Farr 2009)

As a result, fewer African exhibitions were created, and those that were tended to remain on display for much longer periods of time. This situation has continued to the present, with most exhibitions remaining on display for upwards of a year. For example, “Metalwork of West Africa: A Selection from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection” was on display at the Art Centre for a total of twenty-one months (November 2003 to July 2005), followed by “The Dancer Transformed: Masks of West Africa” for twelve months (July 2005 to July 2006), “The Art of Mali” for twelve months (August 2006 to 2007), and most recently, “Ere Ibeji: Twin Figures of the Yoruba” for twenty-seven
months (December 2007 to February 2010). The length of time that “Ere Ibeji” was on display was predominantly a result of Dorothy Farr’s retirement in 2008.

Farr’s retirement has undoubtedly affected the fate of the Lang Collection, as she played a central role in the life of the Collection since its original donation to the Art Centre in 1984. Other than the first three exhibitions of the Collection and those curated by guest curators, Farr has curated every other exhibition of the Lang Collection at the Art Centre. Thus, Farr’s retirement has marked a period of uncertainty regarding its fate. The last director of the Art Centre, Janet Brooke, was well aware of the predicament of the Lang Collection. Brooke, together with Pat Sullivan, head of Public Programming at the Art Centre, recently decided to solicit contributions from scholars of African art by providing the opportunity to guest curate exhibitions of the Lang Collection. The most recent exhibition drawing on the Collection, “Collecting Visions” (September 2010 to August 2011), which was developed by Brooke and Sullivan in conjunction with Catherine Hale, a doctoral candidate from Harvard University specializing in African art, is an example of the new type of collaborative approach to the collection. As Brooke notes in relation to this collaboration, “In so doing, we inaugurate a new ongoing curatorial approach to the Lang Collection, in which we hope to enlist scholars in a variety of disciplines to engage critically with, and to bring new meanings to, this exceptionally rich collection” (AEAC “Collecting Vision” n.d.).

While this collaborative curatorial approach represents the beginning of a new era for the Lang Collection, the collection remains a largely untapped resource, especially since there has been minimal attention to the collection from African art specialists. As a result, relatively little is known about the sculptures it contains. The Lang Collection also
presents many complexities as a private collection. Unlike the ROM’s African collection, which represents over 100 years of collecting from a variety of private and public sources and can thus be seamlessly added to at any point, the Lang Collection cannot. Because it was donated as a whole from the collectors, and is based on their taste, history of activity, and selections, it is difficult to add to the collection without changing its essential character as a self-contained collection. In addition, since the Art Centre has not actively expanded its holdings to include other works of African origin, the collection remains cut off from the larger fabric of the Centre and its predominantly Western focus. The Lang Collection can therefore be seen as static and unchanging, thus making it difficult to incorporate other works into it or to present ongoing histories and contemporary parallels that extend beyond the African continent (Rogoff 2002a).141

It is evident that Swain’s original hope that the Art Centre and Queen’s University would become the centre for the study of African art in Canada was never realized. According to Farr, “What Robert envisioned would have required interest and co-operation from the higher levels of the University administration as well as from the Department of Art (Farr 2009).” At a time when budgets for hiring new curators and experts are increasingly restricted, this vision proved difficult to realize. Thus, the Lang Collection of African Art, like many African collections in Canadian cultural institutions, occupies a challenging position, lacking specialists to study and exhibit it in new and innovative ways.

141 For example, “The Spirit Sings” exhibition at the Glenbow Museum in 1988, used contemporary objects both from West African and African diasporic artists to draw parallels between Calgary and West Africa.
Chapter 6
The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Center’s African Collection, Amherstburg

While the history of museums demonstrates a gradual movement toward greater awareness of “the public” and concern with community issues, progress has been slow, and it is only recently that self-conscious reflection about the political implications of exhibitions—and what exhibitions imply about the cultures on display—has been seriously undertaken

—Christine Mullen Kreamer “Defining Communities Through Exhibiting and Collecting” 1992, 368.

In Canada, the controversies surrounding the display of non-Western visual and material culture at museums during the 1980s and 1990s have contributed to a major shift in how museums represent their diverse communities. While some have made significant changes to be more inclusive and experiment with new ways of classifying and displaying non-Western visual and material culture, many museums, such as the Royal Ontario Museum and Agnes Etherington Art Centre, still operate as largely separate from their constituencies. At the same time, there has been a parallel growth in different

142 Mainstream museums are at a crossroads in terms of representation and display. Many museums in Canada are struggling to redefine and reinvision themselves. According to Corinne A. Kratz and Ciraj Rassool, “the museum is being remapped in a number of ways: as site, as institution, as category, as a set of social processes, as a technology through which values are produced, and as a domain of interaction” (2006, 347).

143 Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Carl Grodach have argued, “As temples of high culture, mainstream museums have failed to present the ‘other’ voices in the city or have continued to exhibit them under categories of ‘primitive’ or ‘exotic’” (2004, 51). While
types of cultural institutions in Canada, such as cultural centres, which operate as not only a product of the Western museum system, but also in opposition to them. The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, Ontario provides an example of how a community-based cultural institution located in a small town with a substantial African Canadian population classifies and displays the African collection in its possession. I use the African collection, which can be classified as a cultural collection, as a way to explore how the Cultural Centre positions the collection as part of a larger narrative about African and African Canadian history and culture. In this chapter I argue that while few mainstream museums and curators have effectively been able to reposition the dominant narrative in order to make way for an alternative representation of history, several cultural centres and community, tribal or ethnic museums in Canada and the United States have been able to do so.

“Moving the Centre”

At the beginning of her essay, “Race for Sale: Narratives of Possession in Two ‘Ethnic’ Museums,” Patricia Penn Hilden cites Kenyan writer and political thinker Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who argues that, to change how history is interpreted and represented, intellectuals of previously colonized states must work hard to “move the center”

many scholars have argued that museums have made major and successful changes to adopt more sympathetic representations of non-Western cultures and histories, other have argued that museums still fail to adequately address the many populations who have been, and continue to be, marginalized in dominant narratives. See for example, Michael Ames (1991, 1992), James Clifford (1988; 1991), Dipti Desai (2002), Gloria Jean Frank (2002), Patricia Penn Hilden (2000), Anna Laura Jones (1993), Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (2002), Ivan Karp (1991), Joanne Nagel (1994), Christopher B. Steiner (1991), and George Yudice (2001, 1989).
The goal is to move the centre away from the West to the non-West, to the minority populations and the diasporic communities of the world who have been marginalized by dominant discourses of power (Thiong’o 1993; Hilden 2000; Rogoff 2002a; Enwezor 2001, 2002). This is not a simple process of substituting one centre for another, Hilden points out (2000, 11). Nor does this mean the recuperation of what has been marginalized or lost in Western representation. As Irit Rogoff argues, “we can no longer indulge in the multicultural management of inclusiveness—letting all the others in while remaining with an unchanging concept of ourselves” (2002a, 63, 72).

The legacies and “divisions of colonialism,” she goes on to argue, do not actually “map out the globe as people in the West believe” (68). The “colonizer’s vision of the world” is grounded in the idea that the West is responsible for mapping, interpreting, collecting, and writing world history (Blaut 1993, 28-29; Rogoff 2002a, 68). Thus, history is understood through notions of “conquest, oppression, and hegemonic persuasion” (Rogoff 2002a, 68). As Sidney Kasfir explains, “There are innumerable befores and afters in this history, and to select the eve of European colonialism as the unbridgeable chasm” would be to deny any alternative reading of history (1992, 43). While many scholars and museum curators have tried to disrupt this way of interpreting and representing history, relatively few have been able to move past the dominant narrative:

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144 Hilden employs Thiong’o’s ideas about moving the centre to examine Western museums.

145 Okuwi Enwezor has been instrumental in putting into practice this idea of moving the centre. For example, as lead curator for Documenta XI, he used, as his guiding principle for the exhibition, the question: “what happens to a culture when you think it from the place of another archive?” (Rogoff 2002a, 69). Similarly, in his 2001 exhibition, “A Short Century,” Enwezor repositioned the historical starting point for the exhibition about African art so as to privilege, not a colonial history, but instead, independence and liberation movements across Africa between 1945 and 1994.
Postcolonialist intellectuals of the “other” depend on a network of metropolitan thought that, regardless of how much importance is given to the “marginal” as the object of discourse, still exerts a centrist function for those of the margin who figure as the “other,” because they operate outside the hegemonic trace of the metropolitan culture. (Richard 1992, 58)

Therefore, in order to move the centre and make way for alternative readings of history, there needs to be a complete shift away from and decentralization of the metropoles, opening up new venues for critique, debate, and dialogue within the “art-culture system.” In such a move, the so-called “other” would no longer be fetishized and represented by the West, nor would the “other” continue to function solely on regulated margins or peripheries.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, many mainstream museums and cultural institutions have mobilized postmodern, pluralist dialogues in an effort to move the centre away from its current place in the dominant narrative, which privileges centre–periphery binaries. For example, the ROM’s recent exhibition, “Position as Desired/Exploring African Canadian Identity: Photographs from the Wedge Collection,” was literally positioned in the centre of the Wilson Canadian Heritage Room in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada, thus directly confronting the ways in which the dominant narrative of Canadian history is mediated and occupied by a white-Anglo presence. Similarly, the Art Gallery of Ontario recently reinstalled its permanent Canadian collection in the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art. Using a revisionist narrative, the installation challenges dominant narratives and provides viewers with multiple ways of interpreting history. However, while at face value many of these new pluralist approaches may seem effective, they are often nothing more than what Nelly
Richard describes as the gestures of “progressive intellectuals of the Centre pay[ing] their radical tribute to the ‘good consciousness’ of the Third World” (1992, 58). Hilden goes on to explain this paradox, stating that not much has changed:

Underneath the postcolonial, globalized skin breathes the same old Euro-centered body carrying the same old Euro-centered ethnicity through familiar Euro-designed spaces, where history is rewritten into scripts for the untroubled performance of the neoliberal (neocolonial?), multicultural project. (2000, 33)

**Cultural Centres as Alternative Sites for the Representation of Specific Ethnicities, Cultures and Histories**

While many institutions are trying to respond to the legacies of exclusion by mainstream museums by endeavoring to meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations, the establishment of distinct institutions, such as cultural centres, community museums and tribal or ethnic museums, is on the rise. Such institutions deal with not just visual and material culture but also community interests, contemporary struggles, heritage, culture, and traditions. As living history institutions they emphasize the relationships of artifacts and other cultural products to the continuing vitality of constituent communities. In many ways, these institutions have been designed to not only challenge perpetual marginalization of various groups by mainstream museums and other cultural institutions, but also to foster the representation and understanding of alternative histories by

146 It is important to note that, in Canada, mainstream or authoritative museums, cultural centres and artist-run centres receive some level of funding from federal, provincial or municipal sources. Thus, through funding initiatives to cultural centres and artist-run centres, the government is directly involved in preserving the vitality of such institutions, and as a result maintains a certain level of involvement in their oppositionality. In this sense, the state acts to contain dissent that might otherwise challenge it directly.
questioning the dominant narrative and the ways in which museums classify objects. James Clifford breaks down the four main characteristics of majority museums: “(1) the search for the “best” art or most “authentic” cultural forms; (2) the interest in exemplary or representative objects; (3) the sense of owning a collection that is a treasure for the city, for the national patrimony, and for humanity; and (4) the tendency to separate (fine) art from (ethnographic) culture” (1997, 121). Many of these characteristics can be seen in the approaches of both the ROM and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. By contrast, scholars have increasingly questioned the manner in which non-Western objects are classified and displayed in mainstream institutions: “who controls the means of representation, who controls cultural artifacts, and who controls the methods of displaying and exhibiting these artifacts in cultural institutions” (Desai 2002, 120; Clifford 1991, 226).

**Cultural Centre/Tribal Museum Movement**

The cultural centre/tribal museum movement began in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with increased questioning of the Western museum’s ability to adequately represent Native North American and non-Western groups. As Brenda Child notes, these decades also constituted a “crucial era when Indigenous leaders, activists and intellectuals demanded change in historical narratives and when the first departments of American Indian studies organized in American Universities” (2009, 252).

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147 As Clifford notes in relation to the term “tribal museum,” “tribal status is fortified by an aboriginal claim that ‘we were here first,’ before the existence of any multicultural nation, ‘mosaic,’ or ‘melting pot’ to contest or enrich” (Clifford 1991, 250).
In Canada, an increase in the number of cultural centres can be linked to the creation of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples and the desire of Aboriginal communities for more control over sacred cultural collections. The term “cultural centre” is most commonly applied to Aboriginal institutions in Canada that seek to restore and preserve the vitality of Native communities. So, there now exist the Woodlands Cultural Centre, U’Mista Cultural Centre, Squamish Lil’wat Culture Centre, and Lennox Island Mi’kmaq Cultural Centre. Many of these centres are also referred to as “Friendship Centres” and belong to the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC), which acts as a central unifying body in Canada “to promote and advocate the concerns of Aboriginal Peoples: and, represent the needs of local Friendship Centres across the country to the federal government and to the public in general” (NAFC website). There are Friendship Centres across Canada located in each province and territory; for example, the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Centre (BC), Nistawoyou Association Friendship Centre (AB), Buffalo Narrows Friendship Centre (SASK), Brandon Friendship Centre (MAN), Thunderbird Friendship Centre (ON), Native Friendship Centre of Montreal (QC), Fredericton Native Friendship Centre (NB), Micmac Native Friendship Centre (NS), St. John’s Native Friendship Centres (NL), Zhati Koe Friendship Centre (NWT). There are also other types of cultural centres that privilege different ethnic, racial or religious collectives. The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg (ON), Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia in Dartmouth (NS), Vedic Cultural Centre in Toronto (ON), Chinese Cultural Centre in Calgary (ALTA), Croatian Cultural Centre in Vancouver (BC), and Iranian Cultural Centre in Montreal (QC) are a few such examples.
In the United States, the movement flourished after 1990 with the passing of the Native American Graves and Protection Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The NAGPRA made it imperative that all museum collections held within federal institutions and universities in the United States review and provide detailed summaries of their Native American collections. Summaries had to be distributed to all Native American groups and communities so that they would be able to claim sacred artifacts, human remains, and other patrimonial objects from museum collections. As a result, since the creation of the NAGPRA, there has been a steep increase in the repatriation of artifacts from museum collections returned to Native American groups, thus resulting in the increased creation of Aboriginal-run institutions, often called “tribal museums,” to house the artifacts. “Tribal museums,” as Child argues, “while rooted in a Western institutional tradition, are furthering goals of decolonization and tribal sovereignty. They are museums, but they are also significant centers for community life” (2009, 253). These alternative sites—tribal museums and cultural centres—seek to not only preserve visual and material culture from the past, but also engage in the preservation and promotion of their immediate communities.\footnote{While cultural centres can offer new ways of interpreting visual and material culture, it is important to acknowledge that there are many ways of representing cultures and ethnicities, and while cultural centres can be seen as alternatives to mainstream museums, museums are also assuming responsibility for the revision of the dominant historical narratives that have privileged a white, Anglo, Western consciousness and marginalized non-Western ethnicities, cultures, religions and other social groups for centuries.} They can therefore be seen as “valuable model[s] for mainstream museums” (253).

It is important to note that in the United States, many scholars, such as Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Carl Grodach (2004), Phyllis Leffler (2004), Hilden (2000), and Child (2009), often refer to similar types of community-based cultural institutions as
“ethnic museums,” which they characterize as institutions that seek to represent a specific and distinguishable population or group within society based upon ethnicity, race, or religion. Each author, however, employs the term “ethnic museum” in relation to and separate from the mainstream or authoritative museum, often described as the “Western museum.” In other words, the “ethnic museum” is set in opposition to an unethnicized Western museum, as though the two types are mutually constitutive. Thus, defining certain museums as “ethnic” in contrast to authoritative “Western” museums suggests that the West is devoid of ethnicities, which is not the case. Rather, as Joanne Nagel notes, “the construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of both structure and agency—a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society” (1994, 152).

At the same time, larger authoritative museums in the United States, such as the Smithsonian complex, have created separate satellite museums focused on particular ethnic or cultural groups. Such satellite museums, for example, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, are completely separated from the larger museum complex. Separating and naming these institutions as ethnic museums raises questions; it suggests that the West is homogeneous, and that whiteness is the assumed or authoritative norm. This differs from the Canadian system, whereby mainstream or authoritative museums, under increased pressure from different ethnic, religious and cultural groups, have attempted to be more

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149 Patricia Penn Hilden (2000) refers to ethnic museums in her essay, “Race for Sale: Narratives of Possession in Two ‘Ethnic’ Museums,” although the term is not problematized, and instead is used in her discussion of museums in the United States that display African or Native American artifacts. Similarly, the term “museum” can be opened up to question, as many alternative cultural institutions seek to distinguish their practices and modes of representation from those identified with Western museums, which operate as largely separate from their constituents.
inclusive of different communities that have been marginalized by the dominant narrative.\footnote{For example, the AGO’s reinstallation of the permanent Canadian collection in the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art and the ROM’s recent exhibition “Position As Desired” in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada. While many museums have indeed become more inclusive of alternative histories, cultures, ethnicities and identities as a result of increased pressure from various cultural groups, both cultural centres and artist-run centres in Canada still occupy largely oppositional positions in relation authoritative museums.} By contextualizing the ways in which both Canada and the United States represent diversity in such binaries as mainstream/oppositional, Western/ethnic, we are able to see how museums locate themselves. This is, in many ways, reflective of the differing politics and legislation affecting multiculturalism in Canada and pluralism in the United States, and how people see diversity as a result.

For many of these alternative institutions in both large urban centres and small rural communities in Canada and the United States, the boundaries between community centre and art museum or gallery are continually negotiated and redefined to adequately capture “the complexity and multiplicity” of diverse populations by offering alternative vantage points for interpretation (Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach 2004, 50). Whereas traditional museums and other cultural institutions often view themselves as both “enhancers of knowledge” and “interpreters of art,” cultural centres more often view themselves as arenas for the promotion and celebration of particular cultural and ethnic groups, of living history, and of centres for social justice and community awareness (61). As Barry Gaither, director of the Museum of the National Center of African American Arts argues, they can actually initiate a new way of understanding North America and its relation to the world:

For example, the AGO’s reinstallation of the permanent Canadian collection in the J.S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art and the ROM’s recent exhibition “Position As Desired” in the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada. While many museums have indeed become more inclusive of alternative histories, cultures, ethnicities and identities as a result of increased pressure from various cultural groups, both cultural centres and artist-run centres in Canada still occupy largely oppositional positions in relation authoritative museums.
Culturally specific museums have a unique role to play in forging a new America. Grounded in historic heritages associated with particular communities, they provide intimate models for the partnership and dialogue which museums and their communities may develop. Responding to social, cultural, and educational needs, these museums participate simultaneously to affirm the worth and contributions of minority peoples. (54)

Thus, in many ways, cultural centres can challenge marginalization by offering cultural groups alternative methods for presenting history, while encouraging community growth.

**The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre: An Institutional History**

The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre is an example of an alternative to authoritative and mainstream institutions in Canada, as it is differently centered in order to address its immediate constituents. The Cultural Centre was conceived by a man named Melvin “Mac” Simpson who believed that “social, economic and educational issues would be better addressed by a society with greater knowledge and pride in its own history” (NABHM “Museum History” n.d.). Simpson wanted to increase awareness of Black history in Canada, but also to ensure that Black history would hold a prominent place within the larger narrative of Canadian history. In 1964, Simpson began collecting local historical material, which recorded information about ex-slaves and free Blacks who came to Amherstburg and surrounding areas during the late-18th and 19th centuries via the Underground Railroad. Then, in 1966, he began working with the pastor of the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in
Amherstburg who had a similar desire to preserve Black history in Canada and to find new ways to foster pride for future generations (fig. 29).

Figure 29: The Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church Plaque.


The Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church building, which is now part of the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre, is an important historical site originally built to serve the growing population of Blacks in Amherstburg.
and surrounding areas. Former slaves and free Blacks who had come to Canada to begin
new lives built the church in 1848, creating a safe haven for those escaping slavery in the
United States. The church was named the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church
after Bishop Willis Nazrey, its first Bishop (NABHM “African Canadian Community”
n.d.). During the mid- to late-19th century, the church became a place of refuge as part of
the larger Underground Railroad movement; it represented freedom for diasporic
populations. For many, the church became an initial refuge point, an interim resting place
until more permanent housing was found. The church also acted as a school for those
who were denied formal education as a result of state-sanctioned segregation policies,
which barred Blacks from access to education. In 1966, Simpson began working with
members of the church to raise the necessary government and private funds to build a hall
attached to the church. He envisioned a museum dedicated to preserving the complex

151 The history of state-sanctioned segregated schools in Canada is complex. In many
places across the country, particularly in Ontario and Nova Scotia, Blacks were barred
from entering the mainstream public school system (Howard and Smith 2011). As a
result, in addition to segregated schools, alternative schools for Blacks were set up by
community members, many of which were organized by and run in community churches,
as was the case with the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg. At
the same time that Blacks were segregated from many mainstream educational
institutions, Aboriginal children throughout the 19th and 20th centuries were forced to
enter church-run, government-funded residential schools across the country, which were
set up to abolish indigenous traditions.

The Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, was once the site of a
residential school. Established in 1834, the school, known as The Mohawk Institute, was
the oldest Anglican residential school in Canada. After it officially closed in 1970, the
building was reclaimed by and repurposed for the Aboriginal community members who
created the Woodland Cultural Centre in order to preserve, promote and support the
Eastern Woodland area communities. Although much of the original interior has been
remodeled to suit the needs of the Centre, the building itself remains as evidence for the
historical legacy of residential schools (Hill 2002). Like many individuals who visit the
Cultural Centre in Amherstburg to explore the site where their ancestors fled to escape
slavery in the United States, family members of and individuals who went to the
residential school come to the Brantford Cultural Centre revisit and confront this complex
and traumatic history.
history of this site, which would be attached to the church. However, in 1970 the government withdrew its financial support of the site; as the Nazrey Church was a functioning church, it could not use public funding. As a result, the museum building, which was attached to the church, was converted into a cultural centre, which was then eligible for government funding, secured through the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation.

In 1971 members of the Nazrey Church raised the additional funds necessary to purchase property next to the church to meet the growing needs of the Cultural Centre, which was playing an increasingly prominent role within the community. Then, in 1973, the Cultural Centre was extended to include a kitchen and washroom facilities and was named the Reverend L.O. Jenkins Memorial Hall, dedicated to the last pastor of the Nazrey Church. To support the building of a more permanent structure, funding was acquired from several private supporters, local businesses and government funding, including a Wintario Matching Grant of $325,000 (NABHM “Museum History” n.p.). On October 20, 1975, after completion of the main building, the North American Black Historical Museum was officially established and opened its doors to the public. And, on September 21, 1981, the Cultural Centre adjoining the museum was officially re-opened (figs. 30, 31).
Figure 30: Opening Ceremony of the North American Black Historical Museum in Amherstburg, c. 1981.

Source: “…and still I rise: A History of African Canadian Workers in Ontario 1900 to Present.” Works Arts and Heritage Centre. virtualmuseum.ca
http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Africanworkers/English/HTML/officialOpening.html
The Cultural Centre consists of a single hall and is located on the second floor of the main museum building. It is equipped with a television, DVD/VCR, projection screen, sound system and speakers, a kitchenette, and a supply of tables and chairs for events. The space is referred to as the Cultural Centre within the greater institution because of the ways in which is utilized by and for the community; it can be rented out for community events, such as cultural events, speaker series, seminars, retreats, live musical performances, parties, and weddings. By providing a space for the local community to hold such events, the Cultural Centre is embedded in community life. On
display in the Cultural Centre are ongoing temporary exhibits focusing on aspects of Black heritage in Canada.

Recently, the Taylor Log Cabin, which was built in 1812 and used as a residence by escaped slaves George Taylor and his family, was purchased and moved from the military site of Fort Malden in Amherstburg to the Cultural Centre property and joined to the main museum building and Cultural Centre (NABHM “Museum History” n.d.). The Taylor Log Cabin was restored and made to look as it would have at the time Taylor and his family lived there. Together, the Nazrey Church, main museum building, Cultural Centre, and Log Cabin make up the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre. In 1999, the compound was designated the first Black National Historic Site of Canada. In addition, the Nazrey Church was recognized as one of the oldest African Methodist Episcopal Churches in the country.

The Cultural Centre is ideally located to build pride in African and African Canadian heritage at transnational, national and local levels, as well as to disseminate this history to both African Canadian and non-African Canadian audiences. The town of Amherstburg is important to the Cultural Centre today, as it was to the people escaping slavery in the 19th century. Amherstburg borders the mouth of the Detroit River, which separates Canada from the United States, and was on the major northern route for thousands of Blacks escaping slavery in the United States via the Underground Railway. The settlement marked the narrowest entry point along the Detroit River and, as a result, was the point at which many chose to cross. Thus, the location of Cultural Centre in Amherstburg links it directly to the history of slavery in Canada and the United States.
The town, which is located in Essex County, is one of the oldest settlements in southwestern Ontario. Steeped in military history, it includes the King’s Navy Yard Park, where shipbuilding for the War of 1812 became the town’s major industry; Fort Malden National Historic Site, which played a major role in both the War of 1812 and the Rebellion of 1837; and Gordon House, which is one of the oldest structures of its kind in Ontario. Today, Amherstburg boasts several other historic sites and, as one of the oldest towns in the province of Ontario, has become a major tourist destination.

The population of the Town of Amherstburg is just over 20,000. In 1998, however, the town was amalgamated with the neighbouring townships of Anderdon and Malden and established as a municipality. Together, the municipality covers over 186 square kilometers and includes a total population of 375,000. According to Census Canada’s last report in 2006, only just over 3% of Amherstburg’s population identified as a visible minority. However, 55% of that population identified as Black or of African descent (Statistics Canada “2006 Community Profiles, Amherstburg, Ontario” 2007). Despite the relatively small Black population (according to Census Canada), there has been a strong Black presence in Amherstburg stemming back centuries. Because of this, the Town of Amherstburg considers Black history to be of considerable importance within the larger framework of its history.

The Cultural Centre is one of the eighteen Black historical sites in Ontario that are partnered with the Ontario Heritage Trust, a government agency dedicated to the promotion of heritage conservation.\(^{152}\) It is currently affiliated with the Town of

\(^{152}\) This includes Bertie Hall (Fort Erie), Buxton National Historical Site and Museum (North Buxton), Central Ontario Network for Black History (St Catherines), Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society (Chatham), First Baptist Church Chatham (Chatham), Grey
Amherstburg, Amherstburg Chamber of Commerce, and Amherstburg Museums and Galleries. The Cultural Centre is also a National Historic Site and part of a larger network of Underground Railroad sites in Ontario. It functions as a major tourist site and destination for those interested in learning about the Underground Railroad and Black history in Canada. In a promotional publication, Amherstburg mayor Wayne Hurst, an African Canadian, writes,

While you’re here be sure to experience the past in all its glory by visiting our Historic sites including Fort Malden National Historic Site of Canada where you’ll learn about the war of 1812 and the Rebellion of 1837, the North American Black Historical Museum Complex and Nazrey A.M.E. Church National Historic Site where you’ll explore the role Amherstburg played in the Underground Railroad and our rich Black Heritage (Hurst 2009).

According to Kenn Stanton, curator of the Cultural Centre, “People can visit UGRR sites in the Unites States, but they come to Canada to find out what happened to the freedom seekers who made it” (Stanton 2008, 1). Thus, the Centre also receives many groups of African Americans who come to Amherstburg via organized tours, primarily from Detroit and neighbouring areas, to explore the history of the Underground Railroad and visit the places to which many of their ancestors fled. The Cultural Centre has become not only a

Roots Museum and Archives (Owen Sound), Griffin House National Historic Site (Ancaster), John Freeman Walls Underground Railroad Museum (Essex), Lundy’s Lane Historical Museum (Niagara Falls), Nathaniel Dett Memorial Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church (Niagara Falls), Oakville Museum at Erchless Estate (Oakville), Ontario Black History Society (Toronto), St. Catherines Museum at Lock 3 (St Catherines), Salem Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church (St Catherines), Sandwich First Baptist Church (Windsor), Stewart Memorial Church (Hamilton), and Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site (Dresden).
major tourist destination for those interested in learning the complex history of the area, but also a model for the promotion of local communities and histories.

While the location of Amherstburg is historically important, the naming of the Cultural Centre as the “North American” Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre points to the institution’s transnational significance. In addition, by identifying itself as “North American” instead of “Canadian,” the Cultural Centre positions itself against nationalist developmental histories, advancing instead a “transnational counterhistory” (Gilroy 1987; 1993). It functions as a major site within a larger narrative of the history of slavery and the African diaspora in both Canada and the United States. Mixing local, national and international histories, the Cultural Centre transcends its local and national boundaries.

The African Collection at the Cultural Centre

The African collection at the Cultural Centre includes a total of sixty-nine cultural objects. Although this collection is rather small, it is important because it showcases a different kind of African collection at an alternative or oppositional cultural institution in Canada. The cultural collection includes mostly carvings, musical instruments, jewelry, animal parts, paintings, clothing and books. Thus, like many objects or collections donated to museums, to borrow from Ruth Phillips analogy, the cultural collection is a “mixture rather than a compound” (2011, 98). Each of the objects has been donated to the Cultural Centre since the mid- to late-1980s. Prior to this, the Centre collected only historical records and artifacts pertaining to different aspects of African Canadian history. The majority of the African objects were collected by individuals from Amherstburg and surrounding areas who had traveled to different regions in Africa to explore their
ancestry, purchased souvenir or cultural objects there, and later decided to donate these pieces to the Centre. Thus, the cultural objects in the collection were not specifically purchased to be part of a larger institutional collection.

While the majority of the artifacts in the cultural collection can be classified as tourist or souvenir objects, at the same time, they represent something much more complex. They are not souvenirs collected by white explorers, traders and missionaries, as was the case with the majority of African artifacts donated to the ROM, nor are they works of art collected for the purpose of building a coherent connoisseur collection, as was the case with the Lang Collection at the Art Centre. The cultural objects are instead positioned within a larger narrative about the African diaspora and represent a network encompassing the trans-Atlantic movement of African peoples that was an essential part of what Paul Gilroy terms “The Black Atlantic.” As he points out, this transmigration across various regions and nations has resulted in complex relationships between cultural objects and historical context (Gilroy 1993; Walcott 2000, 40).

Because the objects at the Cultural Centre were not collected for the purpose of creating an institutional collection, there is little archival documentation attached to the collection as a whole. While this may be the case, it is evident that the majority of the objects are from west and south African nations (primarily Nigeria and South Africa); this can be discerned by their regional aesthetic characteristics. The lack of historical

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153 According to the African Collection Accession Cards in 1985, 7 artifacts were donated from the A. Binga Collection (location unknown). In 1986, Raymond and Leona St Louis from Windsor, Ontario donated 25 artifacts from Nigeria. Bob Buckie from Amherstburg donated 1 artifact (location unknown) in 1986. And, in 1989, W.M. Morton donated 18 artifacts from South African and Rhodesia. The remainder of the artifacts were donated from unknown sources and the original origin of the artifacts is also unknown (North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre Archives).
records is typical of many African collections in Canada, especially those at smaller institutions such as this Cultural Centre. For example, the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, located in Dartmouth, possesses a comparable type of African cultural collection to that of the Cultural Centre in Amherstburg. Many of the objects in the Dartmouth Cultural Centre’s collection were purchased by African descended Nova Scotians who traveled to parts of Africa (mainly Sierra Leone) to explore their ancestry, purchased souvenirs there, and later donated these objects to the Cultural Centre. Like the Amherstburg collection, the African objects in Dartmouth are testaments to the experiences of the African diaspora and to the transcultural migration of people and objects. Minimal documentation accompanies the cultural objects in both collections, as it was not the priority of the individuals who purchased them.

The origins of the objects and their historical contexts do not play a central role in understandings of the larger collection in any case. Conventional documentation is not required, as it is not perceived as important in establishing the authority of the objects in the same way that it is within the cognitive or aesthetic paradigms that operate within the ROM and Art Centre respectively. Instead, the authority of the pieces lies in the relationship between individual community members and the objects they chose to collect. The pieces serve as expressions of the larger community by signaling its history as its members understand and have traced it. In this, the African collections at both cultural centres differs from those of the ROM and Agnes Etherington Art Centre, where a great deal of emphasis is placed on documentation in order to support larger systems of meaning, value and authenticity.
In the case of the ROM, the African collection represents a composite collection made up of component parts from multiple donations, which are juxtaposed together to highlight social, economic, cultural, and political themes. The majority of artifacts in the museum’s African collection include some form of documentation. This documentation is mobilized to create wall texts and labels, which are laid out within the larger context of “World Cultures” at the museum. The ways in which the objects have been framed within this larger narrative of the evolution of world cultures, signals and references for the viewers the scientific/artifact paradigm within which the collection is embedded. Thus, the artifacts are used to establish the authority of the museum in relation to its overarching narrative.

This differs from the Lang Collection of African art at the Art Centre, which represents a coherent connoisseur collection, which cannot be easily added to without disrupting its raison d’etre as a grouping established by the collectors. In this case, each piece was purchased from a reputable art dealer in order to secure, through documentation, the history of ownership that is referred to by art historians as the provenance of the object. Thus, documentation is integral to the collection in order to trace the pedigree of the objects and establish their authority within an aesthetic paradigm.

Exhibiting Africa at the Cultural Centre

The Cultural Centre, which encompasses the main museum building, Taylor Log Cabin, and Nazrey Church, showcases several permanent exhibits. On display in the main museum building are a series of permanent displays that focus on the diverse aspects of African Canadian history, and are organized chronologically: African Peoples, The
Middle Passage, The Underground Railroad, Skills and Trades, Personal Accomplishments and Celebrations, Organizations, Music, Black Press, and Military.

Visitors enter the main museum space where they are guided by a linear historical narrative. In this sequence of displays, the African collection is presented as the geographical and chronological starting point for the larger transnational history of the diaspora. In the installation of “African Peoples,” objects are assembled in such a way that they can be read in relation to one another, outlining an important historical backdrop to the larger African diaspora. This historical approach differs from that of the ROM, whereby artifacts are organized thematically to emphasize their cultural significance in relation to the museum’s overarching narrative of world cultures. It also contrasts to the Art Centre, where African pieces are displayed individually to showcase the aesthetic qualities of the works as fine art.

In addition, by positioning the “African Peoples” display before other exhibits focusing on African Canadian history, the Centre also creates a historical timeline evidential of a strong Black presence in Canada that stems back centuries (fig. 32).
This historical evidence counters what Rinaldo Walcott describes as a recent trend in scholarship that positions Blacks as new to the nation and privileges recent migrations from the Caribbean and continental Africa to larger urban centres. Walcott explains,

> The founding narratives of Canada leave little, if any room for imagining Blackness as constitutive of Canadianness. While Black people date their presence in Canada from as early as the 1600s, Blackness is still considered a recent phenomenon within the nation. This problem of thinking Blackness as recent means that long-standing Black communities across the nation continually have their presence absented in the founding narrative of the nation. (Walcott 2000, 7)
The story of the founding of Canada occludes the long-standing histories of Black populations in rural communities such as Amherstburg. What is particularly difficult in terms of locating a Black history in Canada is its seemingly discontinuous nature, which often makes it appear hard to define. Walcott argues that Canada’s Black populations are very heterogeneous:

The history of ex-slaves in what is now called Canada—black loyalists both enslaved and free; fugitive slaves from the U.S.; pre- and post-emancipation Caribbean migrants; late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century migrants—constitutes a discontinuous history of black migration to Canada… A continuous migration is characterized by post-World War II migration from the Caribbean, and more recent but dwindling migrations from the African continent and other black spaces. (Walcott 2003: 150; Mensah 2002: 3)

The continual denial of a historical presence of Blacks, combined with the assumption that all Blacks are new immigrants to Canada from continental Africa and the Caribbean, has had a lasting and detrimental effect on the understanding of Black Canadian history. As Walcott suggests, “Black people need to figure out how to reproduce the tensions and possibilities of these two migratory moments in a way that recognizes a long and enduring presence in Canada” (Walcott 2003: 14). The permanent displays in the main museum building of the Cultural Centre are examples of the continual negotiations that are needed in order to produce a historical timeline for Black history within the larger discourse of not only Canadian history, but the larger transnational identity of the African diaspora. This historical timeline is also perpetuated in the Taylor Log Cabin and Nazrey Church, both of which act as “living” monuments or heritage sites for Black Canadian history.
The Taylor Log Cabin, which is joined to the main building’s structure, includes a permanent exhibit that suggests how the house would have looked in the 1880s, when the Taylor Family lived there after escaping slavery in the United States (fig. 33).

**Figure 33: Interior view of the Taylor Log Cabin, North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre.**


The exhibit includes some of the original furniture and personal items from the Taylor Family, as well as replicas. The display, like those in other living history museums, invites viewers to comprehend and experience “what it felt like to live back then” (Handler and Saxton 1988, 245). According to Richard Handler and William Saxton, this exhibition strategy, common at heritage museums and sites, involves the selecting and arranging of historic objects to construct a sense of “narrative coherence” and a historically accurate representation for visitors to experience (243-244). The objects in
the exhibit space (those authentic to the period and those used to stand in for what is absent) act as props for an overall display. Importance is not placed upon the individual objects, for which there is little documentation or corresponding information, but rather upon their collective ability to create an overall sensation of the exhibition as a living monument.

Transitioning from the main level of the Taylor Log Cabin, the second floor (which was not part of the original structure, but was more recently added) is used to display current issues in African countries, particularly classification systems for refugees defined by the United Nations. This section of the display illustrates the various causes by which people become refugees, including famine, armed conflict, ethnic clashes, and wars. There is also a section dedicated to showing how African refugees differ from those displaced via the slave trade. The juxtaposition of the main level (historic plight of the Taylor Family escaping slavery) and the upper level (current plight of refugees in continental Africa) showcases both the legacies and the ongoing struggles of African peoples. Representations of these legacies and of current struggles underscore the perceived importance of the Cultural Centre and its role in the preservation and interpretation of African and African diasporic identity.

The Nazrey Church also acts as a permanent exhibit, as viewers are invited to examine the interior and exterior architecture of the building, which was built by former slaves to serve the growing Black community (fig. 34).
Much like the Taylor Log Cabin, the church, which is still in use today, acts as a living monument or living history museum, whereby visitors can visit the original building structure, which has not changed much over time, but also take part in the ongoing services and events that take place there (1988, 245).

Together, the Taylor Log Cabin and the Nazrey Church function not just as important living monuments within the larger Cultural Centre, but also as evidence of a particular period in Canadian history—a period that, for the most part, is absent from the Canadian historical narrative in mainstream or authoritative museums. The Cultural Centre not only positions itself as resistant to dominant historical narratives that privilege white-Anglo consciousness, but it is also inextricably bound to the ongoing vitality of its local and surrounding communities because it was created by and for the community. The
Cultural Centre, therefore, aims to build pride in African and African Canadian heritage, modeling possibilities at three levels: transnational, as an outward looking institution focusing on larger global concerns such as those stemming from immigration policies and displaced refugees, etc.; national, by creating a place for Black history within the larger narrative of Canadian history; and local, through community promotion and awareness. This differs from majority institutions such as the ROM and Art Centre, whereby the institution operates as largely separate from constituent communities even as it becomes more self-consciously inclusive. Unlike the ROM and Art Centre, where there is need for greater awareness of and consultation with constituent communities, the Cultural Centre exists as an extension of the community from which it grows. It speaks directly to the community because it was created both by the community and for the community. Thus, the Cultural Centre can be seen as a “community-driven” institution (to use Steven Lavine’s term), rather than “institution-driven,” as in the case of the ROM or “curator-driven,” as in the case of the Art Centre (1992, 149).
Chapter 7
Conclusion By Way of Reflections

One of the central issues for Canadian museums that discussion of the ROM’s and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre’s collections reveals concerns the ability or inability of such institutions to interpret and represent African visual and material culture. In the case of both the ROM and Art Centre, constituents questioned the institution’s ability in this regard. Several groups picketed and protested the ROM during the run of “Into the Heart of Africa,” claiming that the exhibition tarnished the image of Africa and African peoples through the use of stereotypical and emotionally-charged images. In the case of the Art Centre, the institution’s ability to adequately represent the Lang Collection of African Art was challenged by academic and local groups on two separate occasions. At both museums, it was evident that the institution favoured academic expertise over community consultation and collaboration, which revealed unequal power dynamics and led to debates and often bitter disputes.

When an institution maintains and perpetuates a hierarchical structure whereby it retains the authority to interpret and exhibit an African collection, the result is challenging for its constituents. As the ROM discovered in the wake of “Into the Heart of Africa,” maintenance of the longstanding relationship between museums and their audiences is no longer viable. James Clifford argues that many majority or authoritative institutions are becoming more and more limited in their ability to represent diverse histories:
Majority museums, cosmopolitan institutions for telling inclusive stories about art and culture, begin to appear as more limited national institutions, rooted in specific metropolitan centers. These ‘centers’ are themselves the products of powerful cultures and histories, now contested and decentered by other cultures and histories (1997, 144).

In the case of the ROM, the institution is located in a major metropolitan centre with diverse constituent communities, including the largest African Canadian communities in the country, many of which not only put pressure on the museum to be more inclusive, but also are becoming increasingly involved with the museum and its collection. The ROM’s constituents are challenging its authority. Combined with the level of controversy sparked by “Into the Heart of Africa,” these challenges have resulted in the “decentering” of the ROM in relation to its African collection. The museum has been forced to confront its own position of power and to question its ability as an institution to represent contested material from existing cultures. It has responded by creating more collaborative opportunities for local and contemporary African and African Canadian populations in Toronto and surrounding areas. Furthermore, it has effectively shifted its focus away from the African collection to address major criticisms at the heart of the controversies—the lack of respect for contemporary and local African Canadian populations. Since “Into the Heart of Africa,” the ROM has embarked upon several successful working relationships with groups and individuals who, prior to these engagements, felt alienated by both the museum and “Into the Heart of Africa.” The decentering of the ROM and its shift in focus to address African Canadian art, culture and history, and more recently, contemporary African art and visual culture, demonstrates that the museum can no longer view and treat its constituencies as a passive audience.
Instead, the ROM and other authoritative institutions across the country have begun to view their audiences as active participants in larger cross-cultural negotiations involving museums and communities.

While the ROM has in many ways been decentered as an ethnographic authority in relation to its African collection, the same cannot be said for the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University. The reason may lie partially in the fact that the Art Centre is a smaller institution with comparatively limited resources to support a position for a full-time specialist in African art to research and develop the collection. Whereas the ROM is located in Canada’s largest metropolitan city, with significant populations of African and African Canadians, many of whom have become involved with the collection, the Art Centre’s location in Kingston, Ontario, a medium-sized city with a predominantly Caucasian population, does not foster the same level of community collaboration with African Canadian constituents. Despite the controversies sparked by a group of Africanists at Queen’s over the donation of the Lang Collection of African Art and the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony in connection with the opening of the African Gallery, the African collection has not received much negative attention. However, unlike the ROM, which invited individuals who voiced concerns about “Into the Heart of Africa” to become involved with the planning and construction of subsequent exhibitions involving the African Collection, the Art Centre did not seize a similar opportunity when it presented itself. For example, the Art Centre could have collaborated with the group of Africanists on campus who had expressed interest in the collection or invited members from the Kingston Committee for Racial Harmony to subsequent exhibition openings. Instead, under the direction of Robert Swain, it viewed
both groups’ involvement with the Lang Collection as unnecessary. Only more recently has the Art Centre taken steps to invite outside experts to act as guest curators of new exhibitions. Recognizing the lack of local African and African Canadian populations in the city of Kingston and surrounding areas able to offer expertise or express interest in the collection, the Art Centre took the initiative and, with it, this more active collaborative approach to interpret the collections in new ways.

The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, Ontario can be seen as an alternative to the ROM and the Art Centre, in that it is differently located as an extension of its community. The African cultural collection is not only inextricably bound to the community from which it grew; it is also tied to larger cross-cultural and transnational narratives, which inform the African diaspora. Thus, the African collection at the Cultural Centre extends beyond the African continent as part of a complex network of exchanges with links to African American and African Canadian history.

Reflections

By juxtaposing three very different types of Canadian cultural institutions and their respective African collections in a critical examination of the ways in which each institution interprets, represents and displays the collection, we can see that the African collections occupy unique and crucial sites for contemporary cross-cultural negotiations and ethnic awareness in both African Canadian and non-African Canadian communities. My research has shown that, while mainstream and authoritative institutions such as the ROM in Toronto and the Art Centre in Kingston, have begun to be more inclusive of alternative narratives and voices, these changes have been slow. More changes are
necessary and inevitable. Thus, my findings confirm Steven Lavine’s observations that “the most promising innovations in museums’ relationships with communities are coming not from the largest, oldest, and best-funded institutions but rather from institutions once viewed as marginal” (1992, 130). If mainstream museums and other cultural institutions are to become more inclusive of and accessible to increasingly diverse communities, they must do more than simply draw upon specific focus groups for special exhibitions and displays relating to cultural collections. Instead, there is a need for a complete and fundamental restructuring of the ways in which museums are organized—of the ways that privilege certain groups over others. Perhaps there is a greater need for larger established museums, many of which are a product of the colonial era, to look to smaller alternative institutions, such as cultural centres to learn new ways of approaching collections from existing cultures. As classification systems for non-Western art and artifacts are eroding, maybe the institutions themselves should respond by changing how they are, as institutions, classified. As Chikadibia argues, “It is important that museums—art, ethnology or hybrid—strive to be as dynamic and flexible as possible, offering artists the possibility of showing their work in a variety of discursive spaces” (Chikadibia 2011). Saloni Mathur asks, “How, for example, should we acknowledge the dominance of western museums, while also subverting—or at least not reproducing—their history of universalizing and totalizing claims? What kinds of critical practices will this require? What kinds of exhibitions should we be seeking? In short, what kinds of narratives should we imagine or tell?” (2005, 706). The interdisciplinary nature of critical museum studies offers an important lens through which these questions and ideas can be examined. Finding a balance between maintaining scholarly expertise and increasing
accessibility to constituents is often difficult. However, such a balance can be accomplished when institutions and communities work together to foster ongoing cross-cultural negotiations through active collaboration, conversation and dialogue.
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Appendix 1

Coalition for the Truth about Africa Pamphlet

The Truth About Africa

This pamphlet is not designed to sell you on any new product or idea, neither is it to turn you against the Royal Ontario Museum. This pamphlet is to inform you of a great injustice being brought against humanity.

The ROM is currently presenting an exhibit entitled “Into the Heart of Africa.” An exhibit, which according to the ROM, is a portrayal of African history. Yet the exhibit represents a clear and concise attempt to mislead the public and to further tarnish the image of Africa and African people.

The entire world, museums, curators, et al. have become aware of the immense contributions made by Africa, and by people of African heritage to humanity. These gifts have been made from the dawn of time in every area of creativity – in the mart of action and in the sphere of thought. These contributions have continued even under situations of the gravest duress which Africa, and people of African descent have experienced in the last five hundred years.

Without a doubt, the ROM must be aware of these experiences and contributions of Africa, and Africans. How then, can the ROM carry such trite and condescending texts as found within this exhibit?

For example, there is a scene with four African women and one European woman. The depiction states that this is a scene of a white woman supervising the washing of four black women. Did Africans not know how to wash before the arrival of Europeans? There are also implicit and explicit, subliminal and obvious statements and suggestions of Europeans civilizing and developing Africa.

Terms like “Savage” and “Dark Continent” are buzz words of this sad and disgraceful presentation.

What should have been made clear was that the role of the missionaries, like that of the soldiers, was to be agents of the Crown. The Crown was acting on behalf of the colonial industry. In short, the Holy Trinity in Africa, no disrespect intended, was made up, not of the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” but instead, “The Missionary, Mercenary, and Merchant.” It is folly to state of suggest that invaders such as Dr. Livingstone were heroes of the African People.

To further illustrate to you the unfortunate miseducation which institutions such as the ROM have induced on ourselves and our children we would like to present a short listing of some of the gifts that the African civilization has endowed upon humanity. It is our
hope that you may be enlightened by this information and help us in urging the ROM and such institutions in discontinuing to exhibit African history in such a deceitful manner.

Creators of Medicine

During the millennia, Blacks in ancient Egypt made numerous contributions to medicine and were acknowledged as the inventors of the art of medicine. They produced the earliest physicians, medical knowledge, and medical literature. They contributed to the development of medicine in ancient Greece. Ancient writers affirm this.

-- Frederick Newsome M.D., Journal of African Contributions

Creators of Art

The first artist was black. The oldest sculpture in the world, the ‘Bas-Relief of White Rhinoceros with Ticks’ was found in South Africa.

-- J.A. Rogers, Sex and Race Vol. 1

Creators of Science

Socrates (a black African), in the Phaidros, called the Egyptian god Thoth, the inventor of writing, astronomy, and geometry. Herodotus had a similarly high opinion of Egyptian science, stating that Greeks learned geometry from the Egyptians.

-- Dr. John Papperdemos, Professor of Physics, University of Illinois

Creators of Astronomy

The complex knowledge of the Dogon of Mail about the Sinue star system is sending shock waves around the science world. The West African people have not only plotted the orbits of the stars circling Sinus, but have revealed the extraordinary nature of one of the densest and tiniest stars in our galaxy. What is most astonishing about their revelations is that Sinus B is invisible to the unaided eye.

-- Hunter Adams III, African Observers of the Universe

As early as 300 B.C., Africans build an astronomical site at Namoratunga in Northwestern Kenya and an accurate and complex pre-historic calendar, based on its astronomical alignments was developed in East Africa.
Architecture

It seems that the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy among the ancient Egyptians was considered more extensive and exact than we had been led to suspect. The height of the Great Pyramid is one-billionth of the distance from Earth to the Sun, a unit of measurement not accurately established until 1974.

-- John Jackson, Introduction to African Civilization

- The pyramid is truly square, the sides being of equal and angles being right angles.
- The four sockets on which four stones of the corners rested are on the same level.
- The directions of the sides are accurately to the four cardinal points.
- The vertical height of the pyramid bears the same proportion to its circumference at the base as the radius of a circle does to its circumference.

The helical rising of Sinus was so important to the ancient Egyptians that gigantic temples were constructed with their main aisles oriented precisely towards the spot on the horizon where Sinus would appear on the expected morning. The light from Sinus would be channeled along the corridor (due to precise orientation) to flood the altar in the inner sanctums as if a pin-pointed spotlight has been switched on.

Mathematics

The Rhind Papyrus shows that the Egyptians did invent arithmetic and geometric progressions.

The Egyptians invented algebra.

-- Dr. Diop, The Nile Valley Civilization

Papyrus means paper, another African invention.

Euclid of Alexandria, one of the greatest mathematicians of his era, lived (was born) and died in Africa. There is noting to suggest that he ever left Africa.

-- Professor Lumpkin, The Nile Valley Civilizations
Alexandria was an Egyptian city, founded in 332 B.C.

**Religion**

The earliest deities were wooly haired negroes. The pepper corn hair was a sign of divinity.

-- J.A. Rogers, 100 Amazing Facts about the Negro

All religions originated in Africa.

-- Count C.F. Volney, Ruins of Empire

The Greeks and Romans believed that their religion came from Egyptian religion up until about 100 A.D. Furthermore, Egyptian religion survives in Christianity itself. It is more accurate to view Christianity as a Judaeo-Greek religion, though the New Testament was written in Greek and was influenced by Greek culture.

-- Lawrence E. Carter, The Nile Valley Civilizations

The first gods (deities) of antiquity, from Greece to Mexico, were black Africans. The Ancients viewed the sacred image of divine as Black and the holy race of gods as Africans.

Black (African) gods
Zeus of Greece
Apollo of Greece
Ostris of Egypt
Isis of Rome
Fuhl of China
Buddha of India
Horus of Rome
Zaha of Japan
Quezalcoatl of Mexico
Krishna of India
Historically, religious figures such as Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammad are also commonly depicted as Black Africans.

**African Steel Making**

Researchers demonstrate evidence of a pre-historic, iron smelting technology that produced steel 1500 to 2000 years before Europe.

The temperature achieved in the blast furnace of the African steel making machine was higher than any achieved in a European machine until modern times. It was roughly 1,800 degrees Celsius, some 200 to 400 degrees Celsius higher than the highest reached in European blast bloomeries.

-- Edited by Ivan Van Sertima, Blacks in Science

**And The List Goes On…**

There are hundreds of documents and articles to draw from which prove that the African gift to humanity has been one of intellect, compassion and enlightenment and not of ignorance.

It is plain to see that the ROM has somehow neglected Africa’s contribution to humanity within this exhibit and has instead opted to emphasize the demise of Africa and African people. They also have purposefully left out Africa’s mouth piece, Egypt. We cannot blame the ROM alone though, such lies and misrepresentations have been told for hundreds of years. Do you remember Tarzan?

Our difficulty with the ROM is not with their carrying an African exhibit, but with the remarks accompanying these paintings, carvings, photos, etc. This exhibit thus reminds us too vividly of a past that is still not past.

Members of the African community contacted the curator, and director of the ROM indicating our willingness to assist with the exhibit. We have artists, art historians, anthropologists, and people with a variety of skills who could assist if the ROM wanted to be more sensitive and objective in its presentation and representations. We requested that:

(a) They exhibit the objects, but change the theme, or  
(b) They close the show.

So far, their response, in writing has been insulting, and ineffectual. We therefore, request of the public the following:

(a) That you avoid the exhibit, or if you go, visit on Thursdays and note discrepancies, and draw them to the attention of the ROM.  
(b) You contact a library or bookstore and get more material that could enhance your knowledge about Africa.

Among some of the publications we recommend are:

Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*  
George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy*
There are several other books for all ages, as well as libraries and bookstores where these are available, like The World Bookstore. The ROM receives the support of our people. We respect institutions that attempt to humanize and to educate the public, especially the children. It is our responsibility to ensure that our past is well represented for the sake of generations to come. All children, of every race, may only benefit from the truth being told. But no child can truly benefit from lies or deceit.

This pamphlet is brought to you by The Coalition for the Truth About Africa which consists of the following supporting and endorsing organizations: African & Caribbean Student Association (ACSA), African & Caribbean Student Collective (of Toronto), Black Heritage Association, Black Meres, Caribbean Student Association (York University), Daughters of Africa, Kenya Human Rights Organization (Canada), Negus Educational Foundation, Rally Against Apartheid, Riddim (Radio CIUT), Sister Vision Press, The African Caribbean Club (Humber College), the African Resource Centre, The Black Woman’s Collective of U of T, O.I.S.E., UJAMAA, United Coalition Against Racism, Unity Force, Woman’s Coalition Against Racism and Police Violence, and support is growing. For more information Phone 787-8442, 778-8360, 978-6636.

Please show your support for an impartial education system by filling out this form and dropping it into the suggestion box at the Royal Ontario Museum.

I agree that the ROM should not display historical events in a partial, racist, or discriminatory manner.

No, from what is presented in this pamphlet, I do not believe that the ROM’s exhibition truly depicts African history.

Such an exhibit should be totally redone to represent a true and impartial view of historical events.

Name_____________________ City_________________________
Appendix 2


Norman Biron (NB): How did you become interested in art?

Elisabeth Lang (EL): Being born in Vienna, one already has some art in him. I had an uncle in the art trade who taught me a lot. Instead of spending time on academic studies, I often went to a salesroom where I initiated myself to the art market. In a rash manner I acquired, one day, six engravings from the 18th century and that was my first step towards a collection of baroque objects (furniture, sculptures…) that I didn’t really like. Leaving Austria in 1938, I went to Holland, a country already open to modern art, while Austria had stopped at baroque. One day I went to a modest Dutch secondhand dealer where in a big bin of copper I found a sculpture that enthralled me… The dealer sensed this emotion to the point that he encouraged me to take the object, confident that I would pay off the cost of this treasure despite my small earnings. This was my first piece of African art, At the same time, I was visiting museums that helped me get to know more and more African, Indonesian and pre-Columbian art… In short, primitive art, so to speak, became a passion.
NB: Why did you leave Austria?

EL: After spending ten days in a prison in Havana, an old man, having read the list of prisoners discovered that I was the daughter off someone that he had admired very much and he helped me to get out of the prison. In this way I was able to leave by sugar cane boat heading to Canada where I arrived in winter… And, adventure became a lifestyle. At this time, African art was practically non-existent in Montreal. In 1943 old Gagnon who later gave his collection of African art to the “Musee des Beaux-Arts” in Montreal exhibited this art, taught it and he quickly became for me a master and a good friend… like the specialist in African art, Jacqueline Delange Fry.

NB: Have you ever gone to Black Africa?

EL: With my husband who built this collection with me, we made several trips particularly to the villages. These trips were very enriching in terms of art and of knowledge of life. I have never separated art from living. Utility objects that were becoming not only sociological testimonies but also lessons in life, for example the bonds in an African family touched us very much. Even though the head of a Muslim family can have two or three wives he would remain responsible for living harmoniously. Whoever has the material possibilities always helps the big family, comprising of the immediate family and others.

NB: And which countries…?

EL: First of all, we did some research on the Ivory Coast and the border of Liberia… Technically, it was very difficulty to bring back objects and now in a system totally
justified, authentic pieces rarely leave their country of origin. I believe at the same time that if there hadn’t been collectors and museums, such as the Museum of Man in Paris that had preserved these pieces, they would have disappeared. If these people wished today to create important museums, they would surely have the right to recover these objects.

We also went to the magnificent country of Nigeria as well as Mali in the villages of Bandiagara where it is always the big festival of artists, dancers… Mail is perhaps one of the most enriched countries as far as humanity is concerned: a magical place where every daily event becomes an opportunity for rejoicing.

NB: How did you acquire your pieces?

EL: Having collected for a long time, people were often presented to us and we exchanged with other art amateurs interested in different traditions, regions and civilizations, as least in the way they express their myths and culture.

We brought back from African many small pieces, we mostly went there to study the customs, the traditions and to discover their big festivals… We no longer go to African to collect as there are fewer and fewer authentic objects… The population has become mostly Muslim or Christian, which has led to the abandonment or to the destruction of pieces, even the forgetting of the origins that permitted certain works.

NB: What does the word “art” signify to you?
EL: Many things. Even the seasons can be brought in. In the summer, nature outside brings me what I don’t directly receive from art. In the winter, I feel reassured, being surrounded by pieces of art.

Art? I often ask myself if it is something that is given, inherited… Through African art and the people that made it, I find immense inspiration, a magic… One cannot forget this moment when one starts to hear the tom-toms… You will perhaps remember this sentence of the Gabon writer Ake Loba in Kocoumbo, the black student: “(The song of the tam-tams) expresses the poetry of African a poetry in which the elements are anguish, the source of fright ad superstition and a frivolous gaiety which causes forgetting.” If one doesn’t have a faith, a religion, art embodies many things.

NB: What do you think about the patronage of the arts?

EL: Extremely important and in this spirit I founded the “Gallery of Five Continents” with the hopes that this space may become a place for learning, for knowledge –to better understand the significance of art in the life of a human being, I am sensitive to the fact that more and more young people come to discuss, ask questions about certain pieces. This interaction is very enriching for them and for myself.

NB: What kind of exhibits do you present in your gallery?

EL: I believe that my gallery reflects my character. I lose myself in things with less significant appearances, but that please me because I connect them to something that interests me at the time. I believe that limiting oneself uniquely to Canadian art would result in a too narrow vision of art. I would wish that the public continue to open
themselves up to what is happening in the arts and artisan work on the five continents.

What counts after all is the quality of a creation…

END.