



WHERE ART AND CULTURE MEET

A Visitor Study of

“WHERE GODS AND MORTALS MEET:
CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL
IN URHOBO ART”

at the
National Museum of African Art

November 2005



Smithsonian Institution
Office of Policy and Analysis

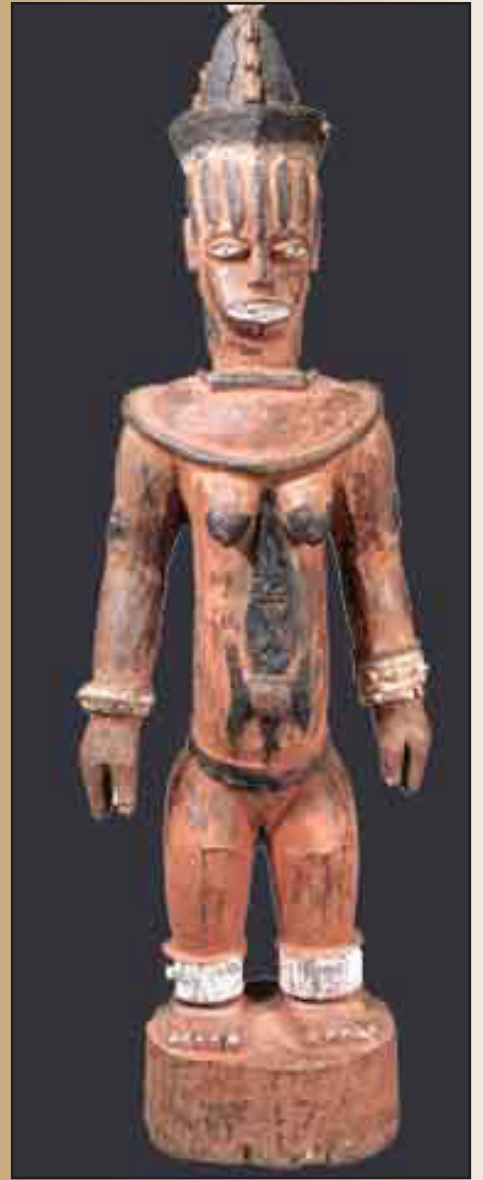


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Introduction	7
Methodology	9
Findings	11
Cultural Context	11
Supporting Elements	15
Sensitive Topics	19
Design and Aesthetics	20
Contemporary Art	23
Major Themes	24
Conclusions	27
Image Details	29

BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA
TWENTYFIVE YEARS OF CREATIVE SEARCH



EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS PAINTINGS & PRINTS
INSTITUTE OF AFRICAN STUDIES UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS FEBRUARY 27TH - 29TH 1964
LEOPARD IN CORNFIELDS

1964 BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA



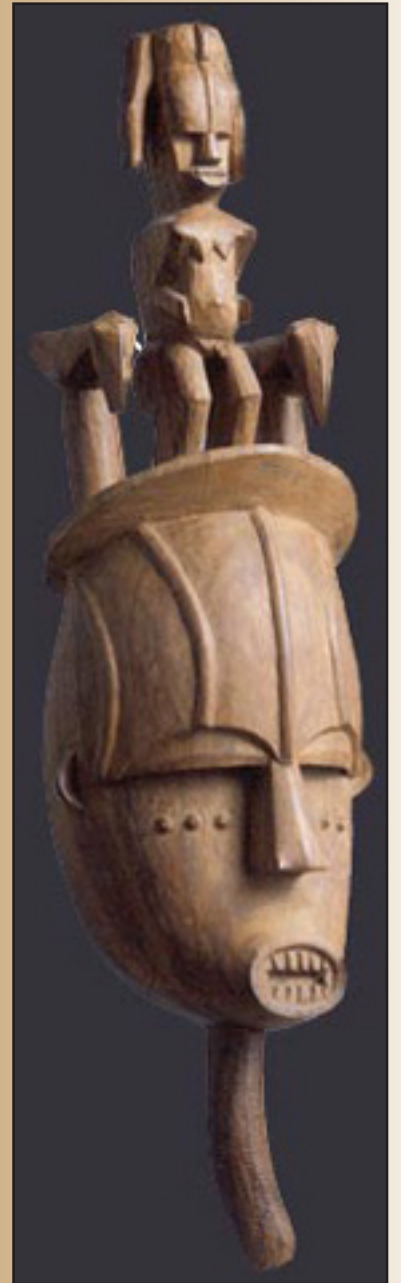
FOREWORD

When it comes to interviewing visitors, staff from the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) approach the task with a high degree of professionalism. For this report, OP&A interviewers elicited an interesting dialogue between art and culture. This report eloquently illustrates the co-dependence between the two constructs, especially with art that may be unfamiliar to Western visitors. Visitors were drawn to the objects in the exhibition under study both artistically and contextually. The report also draws out a relationship perceived by many visitors between the past and the present.

I would like to thank James Smith, who led the interview team and wrote the report, and the other OP&A staff members who interviewed visitors and helped to shape, articulate, and clarify the report's findings: Lance Costello, Kathleen M. Ernst, and Amy L. Marino, who also designed the report.

Finally, I am grateful to Sharon Patton, the Director of the National Museum of African Art, who patiently explained, raised questions about, and highlighted the art of the Urhobo for me.

Carole M.P. Neves
Director,
Office of Policy and Analysis



INTRODUCTION

From June 23 through September 5, 2005, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) hosted the traveling exhibition, "Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art." Curated by Perkins Foss and organized by the Museum for African Art in New York City, this exhibition is the first comprehensive presentation of the arts of the Urhobo people of Nigeria, which have remained relatively obscure even among African art aficionados.

"Gods and Mortals" attempted to show how the art of the Urhobo people is integral to their traditional culture. The exhibition was arranged thematically into sections that addressed subjects such as male aggression, images of women at different stages of life, masquerade arts, and communal shrine art. Interspersed with the traditional arts were works by contemporary artist Bruce Onobrakpeya that provided a more modern perspective on Urhobo culture.

In addition to explanatory wall text, the exhibition featured colorful videos of Urhobo dances, rituals, and craftsmanship; striking photographs of the Urhobo people and their cultural world; and snippets of literary works, presented in conjunction with Onobrakpeya's prints. A computer terminal with links to relevant Internet resources was also installed in the last room of the exhibition for visitors interested in learning more.

Shortly after the exhibition opened at NMAfA, the museum's director asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct a visitor study of "Gods and Mortals." The director was interested in probing visitors' views on several aspects of the exhibition, such as

- » The approach of embedding art in a cultural context;
- » The inclusion of didactic and ambient elements such as photographs, music, maps, a computer terminal, and video displays;
- » The treatment of sensitive topics such as gender, nudity, and aggression;
- » The integration of contemporary art with traditional art;
- » The overall design of the installation;
- » Which artifacts or displays made the greatest impression; and, in general
- » What major ideas or themes visitors took away from the exhibition.



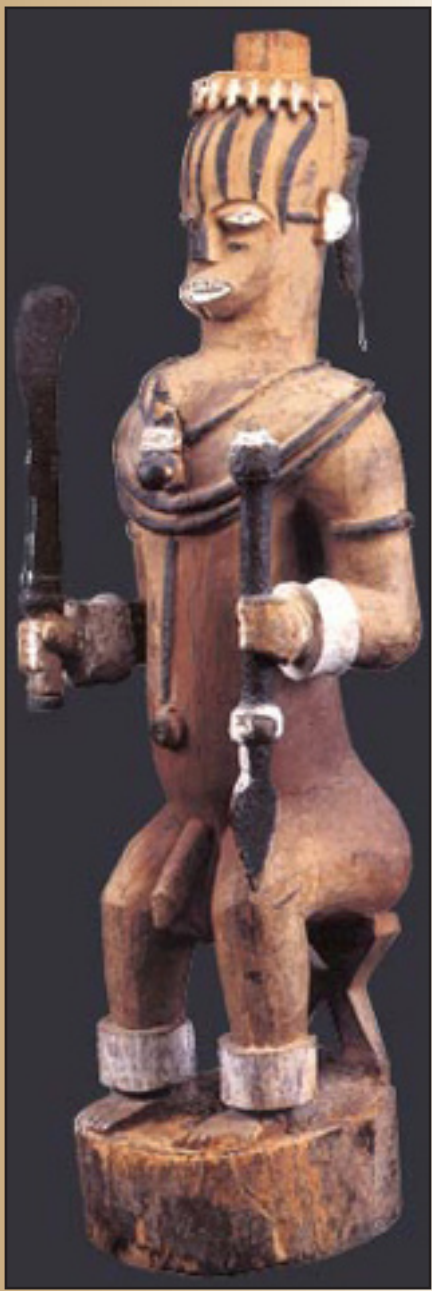
METHODOLOGY

Between August 15 and September 25, 2005, four OP&A staff members conducted qualitative interviews with visitors exiting the exhibition. Formal random sampling (to obtain a sample statistically representative of the population of exhibition visitors) was not attempted, but interviewers talked with a wide variety of visitors. A demographic profile of the interviewees is as follows:

- » A total of 79 individuals participated in 44 interviews.
- » Considerably more females than males took part—53 interviewees were female.
- » 30 interviewees were from the Washington, DC metropolitan area.
- » 37 interviewees were white American, 25 were African American, 3 were Asian American, 1 described herself as part native American, and 13 were foreign nationals (including 2 from Africa).
- » Ages ranged from under 10 to over 70 years.
- » Eight of the interviews were with persons participating in organized tours of the exhibition, such as school groups and adult education groups.

The study team rejected the possibility of a formal written survey of exhibition visitors, for both practical and conceptual reasons. From a practical perspective, the level of visitorship to the exhibition was such that gathering a sufficient number of responses would have required many days of survey administration. This was judged to be an inefficient way to gauge visitors' perceptions. From a conceptual perspective, the team concluded that the issues in which the director was interested lent themselves at least as well to qualitative, discursive discussion as to responses based on rigid survey categories.

The study team also decided against using tracking and observational methodologies. This was because the physical layout of the exhibition was judged to be too small and intimate, and the density of visitors too sparse, for observation of visitor behavior to be conducted in an inconspicuous way.



FINDINGS

Overall, interviewed visitors were very satisfied with “Gods and Mortals.” Criticisms tended to be relatively minor, and most interviewees had a positive opinion of the exhibition—in some cases, very enthusiastically positive.

In part, this can be attributed to self-selection. Most of the interviewees with whom the study team spoke were visiting NMAfA because of some genuine personal interest in the subject matter—whether a general interest in art, a particular interest in (or curiosity about) African art or culture, or a personal connection to Africa through travel, friends, or heritage. Nevertheless, many of the interviewed visitors had specific reasons for their positive view of the exhibition that went beyond a general affinity for the art or the subject. In particular, two notable points emerged from the discussions:

- » Interviewees liked the integration of the art with its cultural background. Almost all interviewees were initially unfamiliar with the Urhobo people, and many had only sketchy knowledge of any African cultures. The contextual presentation allowed them to understand and appreciate the art in a deeper way than a purely aesthetic presentation would have done.
- » Interviewees generally enjoyed the videos, regarding them as both effective means for conveying information about the cultural role of the art, and colorful and fascinating displays in their own right.

These points are elaborated below, along with discussion of other issues.

Cultural Context

The Importance of Cultural Context

The verdict on the integration of art and culture in “Gods and Mortals” was uniformly positive among interviewees. No one objected to the infusion of culture; most appreciated it; and some insisted it was absolutely necessary, given the unfamiliarity of African artistic forms to most Western audiences. For example, a middle-aged female elementary school teacher from New Orleans commented:

I think only a collector or someone who knows the history and context of the art would appreciate it [without the cultural information]. Just looking at it in a glass case is not going to be appreciated, I think, by the majority of the people.

A young male visitor from California agreed, noting that in the absence of information on cultural background, his lack of familiarity with African art would have raised a considerable barrier to appreciating it:

I just don't have much to start with here in the African museum. I understand a little bit about the cultures of Africa, but I know nothing about the history of [this particular] culture. So it's kind of hard for me to get an understanding of what these things mean.

Even visitors who were familiar with African art acknowledged the need to place the pieces in their cultural context. In some cases, this was because Urhobo art was considered somewhat exotic even among connoisseurs. For example, a middle-aged French woman visiting with her husband noted:

I could relate to [Treasures] because I know Africa well and I could relate to most of the cultures. But I didn't know much about [the Urhobo] at all, and it was good to have the cultural aspect explained. I think there's a need for both the aesthetics and the more cultural aspects.

For another African art aficionado—a middle-aged male collector from Baltimore—the value of the cultural context was not in providing specific information about an unfamiliar culture *per se*, but rather in conveying a sense of how the Urhobo people (and other African peoples) approached their own art:

If you like African art, you can't get enough of it, so [any type of exhibition] works for me! But I think it is so important to see things in the context of the people who made them. For those people, it's a useful object—although I'm sure they appreciate the art of it as well. We Westerners tend to see it as a static thing that we stick on the wall or in a case; so seeing it in context is really important.

A visitor who described herself as “part native [American]” offered a similar view on the need to see art of this nature as embedded in, and drawing its meaning from, the culture that gives rise to it:

I think most art in the world is created traditionally in that kind of environment; it's not something you are supposed to see on a museum wall. Now, I'm a painter myself, and I'm always happy to have a show that's seen on the wall! But this is really coming from a tradition where [the pieces are] ordinary objects that you're using everyday, and the art is formed from that, or from a religious sense. ... So I think [presenting the art in its cultural context] keeps tighter to the idea that this art is an important part of life.

Art and Ethnography

At an art museum such as NMAfA, there is always some risk that in presenting cultural context, the aesthetic value of the art itself may be submerged. Yet it is worth noting that among the interviewees exiting “*Gods and Mortals*,” most were at least as interested in the culture that produced the art as they were in the objects themselves. For example, a local female in her forties—the teacher of an adult education class that was visiting the exhibition on a field trip—admitted:

When I come to see an exhibit like this, I’m more interested in learning about the culture than looking at the objects. I mean, I like to look at the objects, but I don’t look at one of those masks the way I would look at a Western painting or sculpture. It wouldn’t hold my attention quite so much just to look at it for its beauty. I’m interested in the cultural connections it has.

No interviewee, when explicitly asked, expressed a clear preference for a purely aesthetic presentation of the objects. However, a number did comment on the need to avoid setting up an unnecessary dichotomy between “art” and “culture”:

Interviewer: Which did you think was more important: The culture or the art?

Visitor: I don’t know how you would separate them. You needed both—that’s what made the exhibit very special.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy the element of culture that was part of the exhibition?

Visitor: You can’t get away from that. I mean, that’s part of the art.

The adult education teacher quoted above agreed that “art” and “culture” should not be considered antagonists, and noted that this applied not just to African art, but to any art. She used an example from her own experience to illustrate how setting art in its cultural context, far from reducing it to ethnographic artifact, can allow many viewers to gain a deeper appreciation for it:

I take people on tours to Italy, and I’ve had couples where the woman is really into art, and the husband is just going along to eat. I remember one of those couples in particular where she said to me, “My husband’s having such a great time; all he wants to do is talk about what we saw!” And I don’t think it’s because he suddenly became passionate about art—although I’m sure he did gain some

appreciation for it. Rather, I think it was interesting to him because [I discussed how] everything was related to history. So when I talk about a Raphael painting, I relate it to the history of the time. That's not inappropriate in an art museum.

Quantity and Quality of Cultural Information

Most interviewees were satisfied with the quantity and quality of background material on Urhobo culture, as presented through the videos, photographs, and wall text. Of those with suggestions for improvement, the most common comment concerned the need for more, or different types of, contextual information. A number of interviewees alluded to “unanswered questions” about Urhobo culture that occurred to them as they walked through the exhibition, although in some cases these questions had little direct reference to the art on display:

I felt that there wasn't enough explanation that went along with it. For example, there was a photograph taken in 1972, but I don't know if those customs are still practiced today, or the origin of the customs, or the meaning of the customs. For example, that oil [in the bride procession video]— what is the meaning of it?

An unusually articulate local teen visiting with her high school class that had been studying African culture added this:

This art in particular probably needs more cultural background than what was given. Because a lot of it isn't really made to be looked at with an aesthetic view. It's made to be looked at as part of a tradition. I didn't think there was a lot of information on the traditions themselves—not a lot of cultural background.

Specific unanswered questions mentioned by interviewees and directly relating to the art itself concerned the materials used in the sculptures, the religious significance of the artifacts, and the age of the artifacts, however approximate. Several interviewees also wanted to see more information on modern Nigeria and the current status of the Urhobo. One visitor was curious about whether the rituals depicted in the videos were a part of day-to-day Urhobo life, or were special events only rarely performed.

In addition to the quantity and type of information offered, several interviewees commented on how the cultural material was presented. A few complained that the wall text was too dense, and said they would have preferred a more

terse or bulleted style. One visitor suggested that simplicity is absolutely critical in presenting contextual information on art that is unfamiliar to Western audiences:

You have to go to the simplest level, so that when people leave, at least they'll leave with that, if not the specifics. The eye is just not trained for this kind of art.

Overall Summary

Overall, visitors looking for a learning experience seemed to be pleased with the cultural background provided by the exhibition. In terms of the intellectual dimension of informing visitors about Urhobo culture and the place of the displayed art within it, the study team's interviews suggest the exhibition was a success:

I didn't know much about Urhobo culture, and this exhibit was certainly enlightening in that sense. I learned more about an African culture and some of their arts, and that was interesting.

I didn't really know anything about [the Urhobo] before this. I knew about some other African peoples; I've been to Benin, I've been to Cote d'Ivoire, I've been to Senegal. I've learned first-hand about the cultures [in those regions]. But Africa's huge—it's hard to learn about every culture there.

I got a lot of information, and I don't think I would change anything about the exhibition—probably just more statues and more information!

Supporting Elements

Interviewees also had positive views of the didactic and ambient elements that complemented the art, including the photographs, music, maps, and particularly videos. Visitors mentioned finding these elements both useful as learning tools and interesting in creating an atmosphere that conjured up a sense of Urhobo life.

Videos as Learning Tools

Many interviewees talked about the value of the videos for conveying an understanding of the role of art in Urhobo culture that went beyond the purely

cognitive understanding conveyed by the wall text. Some visitors used the videos to augment what they learned from the wall text, and thus to provide a more complete picture:

I think you need both [text and videos] to tell the whole story. The text is saying that you have this ceremony, and then you actually get to see the ceremony on the video.

The artifacts themselves didn't say much underneath them, but when I coupled [the text that was there] with the videos, I guess I used my own mathematics to add up what it was used for and how it was used.

Others—particularly people who were under some time pressure, more casual visitors, or those who described themselves as visually oriented—read less and relied more heavily on the videos for putting the art in its cultural context:

I didn't really read too much in there, so I didn't benefit from [the wall text]. But the videos definitely helped. ... The videos caught my attention, because I wasn't focusing very hard, and the videos were an easy way to get something quickly.

Sometimes when you are going from room to room in a museum and there is a lot of written matter, you sort of get lazy after a while. You read some labels, and then you start skipping. That's the good thing about the videos. And I'm a visual person, so I just like them more.

The video works best for me, because I'm visual. If I can see it, it stays with me more, and I can say, "Okay, I understand that now." ... I mean, I'm an avid reader; but if it's something in a museum, I'd rather see it.

Some visitors mentioned specific instances where the videos helped them to identify the nature of objects that seemed initially puzzling. For example, one person mentioned the video of the iphri (male aggression figure) ritual, and several mentioned the "big animal" in the last room. Indeed, without the video of the latter, more than one visitor suggested they would not have known what the object was:

You know that animal thing that sort of looks like a hut? I saw it there, and I thought, "That's strange—what is it?" But when you see it on the video, it reminded me of the lion dances in Chinatown.

However, a few interviewees thought that the videos themselves could have used more explanation:

The only problem with the videos is that they really don't describe what's going on or what they're saying or what they're singing.

Videos as Ambient Elements

Some visitors commented on the value of the videos (and photographs) not only as learning tools, but as attractive elements of the exhibition's design in their own right that added color, life, and interest to what would otherwise be a static installation:

They break it up a little bit. As opposed to just standing and looking at an object and reading, there's some movement in the gallery.

I don't think the exhibit would be nearly as interesting without the videos and the photographs of the people.

Among those who talked about the videos as ambient elements rather than (or in addition to) didactic tools, the dancing videos were frequently mentioned as particularly engaging:

The dancing is very intense—very! People don't dance like that here; they dance more like they're dead!

I loved the dancing. ... Like, on one part from the first video, there's this one dance where they're paddling and it shows a journey or something with rough rapids, and how they overcame it in the end.

That was the first time I had seen a group dancing on stilts. Look at that! I don't know how he balances himself!

Music and Background Sound

Many people commented positively on the music and background sound as contributing to the ambience of the exhibition. However, a few interviewees also noted the contrast between the sometimes boisterous sounds in the exhibition and the calm atmosphere in the rest of the museum.¹ One couple

¹ One first-time visitor from Texas eloquently described the overall character of the museum in these words: I like the building, the spaciousness. There is a hushed quiet, like they are letting me in on a secret. ... There's a heart to it.

found this contrast jarring, and suggested that the videos should be separated from the rest of the exhibition, so as to avoid interfering with the contemplative experience offered by the art:

Having that noise, and not being able to get away from it, was distracting. It's a pity. ... I've seen exhibitions that have videos, but don't have the noise all the time. ... You could put them in another room where they don't affect people who just want to see the pieces.

However, in general, complaints about the background sound were rare—with one caveat. Among interviewees who toured the exhibition with a docent or curator, several mentioned that the videos tended to compete with their guide's discourse for their attention:

For me, it would have been better if the video had been shown someplace else, so we could have just gone through separate from that. Because I found that as [the tour guide] talked, it distracted me, and I wanted to see the video. I didn't know whether to stay and listen to her or to walk over and watch the video.

Other Elements

Interviewees did not comment on the photographs, maps, and computer terminal as frequently as they did on the videos. When the photographs were mentioned, they generally received positive comments similar to what visitors had to say about the videos. They too were noted for having value as both didactic and design elements.

Interestingly, a number of interviewees did not notice the orientation maps in the first room of the exhibition—including some who spontaneously commented that the exhibition could use maps! Among those who talked about the maps, faint praise was the typical response. The geographical location of Urhoboland appeared to be a matter of relative indifference to most of the interviewees, although it would be inadvisable to venture any generalizations about the value of maps from this convenience sample.

Finally, relatively few interviewees used the computer terminal in the final room. Those who did—or who mentioned it despite not using it—generally agreed that it was helpful to have access to further resources for those who were interested in following up on issues raised by the exhibition. However,

some of those who attempted to use the computer terminal were perplexed by what they found. The following exchange with two young women from the Netherlands brings this out:

Interviewer: How was the computer terminal?

Visitor #1: I found it a bit confusing. There were too many links and too much information. We were looking for a nice map; we did find one eventually.

Interviewer: So it took you a long time to find a map…?

Visitor #1: To find a nice one, yeah.

Visitor #2: There were a lot of different ones, like the pipelines and whatever. I didn't see the relevance of a pipeline map here in this exhibition. [Laughs.] Or major railroads…You should just focus a little more on the region. Maybe [a map of] the different tribes. The religious groups were kind of interesting, because that has some link to the exhibition. But pipelines…?

Visitor #1: Or gas fields! [Laughs]

Another interviewee who attempted to use the terminal to follow up on the exhibition had similar observations about the relevance of some of the links:

There were a lot of links, and I clicked on things I thought were going to give me more information. [But] it was more like how to enroll for courses at some university in Nigeria or something.

Sensitive Topics

Although the exhibition contained a number of displays—depictions of male aggression, nudity, and gender roles—with which some viewers might potentially be uncomfortable, the study team did not encounter any adult interviewees who reacted negatively. Even when explicitly asked, most considered this to be a non-issue:

I didn't think much about it at all. I don't think we should be judgmental about other peoples' cultures.

We're all fairly interested and educated in the art; that's why we're here. So something like this would be more informative than "shocking." We know these things exist!

On the other hand, while not always clearly articulated, some younger interviewees seemed to have more difficulty taking the “mature themes” of the show in stride. In some cases, mild nervousness or discomfort was suggested by loss of words or resort to humor when asked for their thoughts on these matters. For example, an otherwise articulate teenage local female visiting alone appeared to fumble for words in describing her response to the iphri figures:

The male aggression figures kind of freaked me out. I was like, “Okaaaaay…”
[Long pause.] You don’t usually see things like that. It sort of startled me.

Similarly, two college-age female visitors responded to questions about the iphri and depictions of female sexuality mainly with uncontrolled giggling. The following observations about the procession of brides video from two middle-school girls visiting on a class field trip are especially interesting—and amusing:

Some of the kids were thinking one of the videos was kind of gross, because it had half-naked ladies in it. And they were like, “Eew! Cover it up!” And they covered it up with papers, and they just thought it was really disgusting. Since there are no boys in our groups, we don’t know what the boys thought.

Well, I am a girl, and I am in middle school, so I didn’t really like the naked ladies. But I can look at that too. The boys can’t. They’re like [heavy panting]. Like a dog—“Woof! Woof! I want that!”

In another case, two grandparents visiting with their 8-year-old grandson noted the child was captivated by most of the exhibition, but turned off by the wild gyrations of the welcome dance video:

He didn’t care for the dancing. He thought the lady was losing her mind, so he was not too pleased with watching it. He thought that should be private.

Of course, it should not be surprising when younger audiences respond to depictions of unfamiliar cultures and mature themes with perplexity, nervousness, or sophomoric humor. Nevertheless, the fact that younger visitors do tend to have such reactions suggests some of the special challenges facing a museum such as NMAfA with family and school audiences.

Design and Aesthetics

Exhibition Design and Layout

Interviewees generally complimented the look and feel of the exhibition, noting that the art was presented and lighted beautifully. Several interviewees explicitly commented upon the spacing, noting that they liked the uncluttered character of the exhibition. A few interviewees suggested that the exhibition may have been a bit too dark, or the wall color too flat. One group of middle-school children agreed they would have liked a more immersive exhibition that evoked the feel of an African village, pointing to the grass-hut motif at the exhibition's entrance as something they particularly liked.

Several visitors also commented positively on the thematic arrangement of objects, suggesting that the placement of related objects together, often with an entire room devoted to a theme, helped them to better understand and appreciate the pieces.

Objects

In terms of the aesthetics of the objects themselves, most comments were positive but unspecific. Some interviewees appeared to get an emotional or aesthetic "rush" from seeing the art at first hand:

I came for that [gasping in awe!] experience. I just wanted to be in it and with it, and see it and feel it.

The sculpture was spectacular.

I like the statues ... they're sharp to look at.

[Our 8-year-old grandson] was impressed; his "oohs" and "ahhs" made me look at this, and look at that ... African art is precious.

I have tons of books on African art, but this is like... Wow!

Among the handful of interviewees who mentioned specific aesthetic qualities of the art, features that were singled out included the scale of the shrine art; the lines and shapes of the sculptures; the expressions on the figures' faces; the colors; and the variety of masks:

I was unaware of the enormity of some of their sculptures.

[I'm drawn to] the shape, the lines. Not necessarily the refinement, but the lines.

What will stay in my mind are the colors and the strength of the depiction of the faces and expressions.

I think one thing that attracts [my wife] to this art are the colors utilized by African peoples. She delights in the colors, and I like them too.

I like masks from all cultures. But I think the most beautiful masks are African masks. The diversity is greater than in any other culture—or I guess I should say any other that I am aware of.

The only criticism of the objects mentioned by more than one interviewee concerned the perceived lack of variety of the pieces on display. While perhaps acknowledging subtle differences that might be appreciated by more knowledgeable visitors, a few interviewees thought the pieces within certain groups of objects were too repetitious. This perception was reinforced by the grouping of like objects for thematic coherence:

[I would have liked] maybe a bit more variation. Not 20 aggressive men in a row. One or two or three is fine, but not that many. ... I'm not an expert, so they were all pretty much the same: aggressive men, aggressive men!

With the masks, it gets pretty repetitive, even though they are all slightly different. They're all about this tall or that size or whatever. It's just like all the male figures, and all the female figures too, are pretty much all the same.

It seemed to me when I was walking through here that it wasn't too varied. I didn't really pick up all the different aspects; it just seemed to just be a lot of wood sculptures.

Favorite Displays

So many different objects and displays were mentioned as favorites by visitors that no clear message emerged about what was most popular. Indeed, almost every display or (type of) object in the exhibition was named as a favorite by at least one interviewee, and nothing stood out in terms of frequency of mentions.

Some interviewees mentioned particular objects (the big animal; the large shrine sculptures; the ancestor column at the entrance of the exhibition); some mentioned types of objects (iphri; masks); some mentioned particular videos (the women dancing at the entrance of the exhibition; the craftsman carving the mask); and some mentioned broad themes that struck a chord with them, such as women in Urhobo culture or male aggression.

Contemporary Art

Interviewees offered a range of views on the inclusion of the contemporary art of Bruce Onobrakpeya in the exhibition. No one thought it inappropriate to include these works, or that they in any way detracted from the exhibition. Some, however, failed to take particular note of the contemporary prints, or expressed indifference:

I guess I'm a typical collector: I like the old. The modern is just as important, and I can appreciate it; but in the limited amount of time I had, I really wanted to look at the artifacts as opposed to the modern.

I didn't have any objection to it. But it didn't do a whole lot for me. I'm more interested in the traditional stuff.

Interviewer: Did you notice there was contemporary art from a modern artist that was woven in with the tradition pieces?

Middle School Student #1: Not really.

Middle School Student #2: I didn't either.

Middle School Student #3: Were we supposed to...?

Even among those who appreciated the contemporary art, not everyone understood what it was doing in the exhibition, or grasped the theme of cultural continuity through time. One interviewee suggested that such continuity is difficult to illustrate, because of fundamental differences in the purposes of traditional and modern art:

I don't know if it's even possible to pick up that continuity. ... [With the modern,] the artist is expressing himself or herself. [The traditional art] is part of a religious tradition. ... It's the same as if you went into a church and saw a statue of a saint, and then went over to a museum and saw a Picasso. They're two very different things, even if they come from the same culture.

However, other interviewees did pick up on the theme of continuity, one of whom held opinions on the complementary nature of the two styles diametrically opposed to those quoted above:

It was integrated pretty well, I think. In the contemporary art, there are obvious roots in the traditional art. So you would have to try pretty hard to fail at integrating it!

Another visitor did not make the connection quite so effortlessly, but when she did, it enhanced her appreciation of the art:

At first I saw the one [contemporary print] here, then I saw one somewhere else, and I said, "Hey, wait a minute; this is a little disjointed." Yet it is part of the same character and cultural tradition. And it's nice; it's like the traditions get carried on, and they influence current artists.

Indeed, a common sentiment among those who picked up on the theme of continuity between the old and new was that the inclusion of the contemporary art made Urhobo culture seem more alive and relevant in the present. A woman visiting from Kenya offered these thoughts:

For me, it makes sense [to mix the traditional and contemporary art] because it shows that this community really exists. If you just put up things made many years ago, it would look like a lost culture. But when you bring in a modern man, it brings it to you and says, "This is real."

Another visitor also discussed the idea of using contemporary art to demonstrate that the culture in the exhibition is not dead and gone:

I think the contemporary art was integrated very well. That's important, because if there [isn't] a continuity of tradition, there's a danger that the traditional art is left in the museums—in the stuffy sense of the word. But something like this shows that it's still a living tradition. That's very important to hold onto.

Agreeing with this view, another visitor suggested that this kind of fusion of traditional and contemporary art was not only valuable, but increasingly necessary to draw in audiences today:

Since people today are so much living in the "now," if you don't bring the contemporary, they don't see how it applies. So I think that's the way the arts are going to have to go, whether you like it or not.

Major Themes

Finally, the study team probed interviewees to get a sense of what message or images they would carry away with them from their experience in "Gods and Mortals." The responses were once again quite varied. However, the most common themes mentioned seemed to be variants of the idea that "Gods and

Mortals” succeeded by using art as a medium through which visitors could connect—sometimes in a visceral or emotional way— with one traditional African culture and its people.

Of course, different visitors experienced this connection in different ways. Several visitors discussed their admiration or concern for peoples like the Urhobo, who are struggling to preserve traditional ways in the face of the onslaught of modernity:

For me, [it’s impressive] that they’re still holding on to their original traditions. [I admire] the way they’ve kept it going on generation after generation, regardless of what’s going on in the world around them.

It’s very nice that you can live in a modern time and still preserve some of the old culture. That was really nice.

I like the way it’s all tied together at the end, and how it empathizes with the lost culture. To me, you see that everywhere. Every culture is experiencing a loss of tradition—American culture, every culture.

What I learned is that Urhobo culture is still there, it still exists. It’s not an exhibit that is biased in terms of “Let’s save them!” But I thought it was interesting insofar as it was saying, “Here it is—these are people who share the world with you.” I guess I’m over-reading, but that’s the feeling I have.

Other visitors talked about an underlying sense of human unity that they felt upon seeing reflections of concepts and aesthetic forms that transcend particular peoples:

My first impression was that it seemed like we are all very closely connected. Because I have been to Alaska and I’ve seen the totem poles, and [the ancestor columns are] similar. And some of the prints reminded me of an Egyptian exhibition that we saw at the National Gallery of Art. And so, it just seems like we’re really connected. The expressions are different, the dances are different, maybe the masks are a little different, but the whole thing repeats.

I think everybody is interested in knowing how much other people are like us, and how different other people are from us. Some of the things about them seem different and exotic until we realize we have our own rituals that may be similar. So I think the more we can learn about other cultures, the more we can understand about ourselves.

One of the study team interviewers was particularly struck by a teenage female sitting alone in the final room of the exhibition, looking through the books with a somber expression. A long discussion revealed that she was heartbroken at the prospect that the living culture she had seen in the exhibition might disappear as the Urhobo are drawn into the vortex of globalization. Part of this exchange is worth quoting at length:

Interviewer: How did you like this exhibition?

Visitor: It makes me feel... sad.

Interviewer: Why sad?

Visitor: Well, not sad for Africa. We think it's so bad over there. But maybe they have it better over there...

Interviewer: In what way?

Visitor: Well, I think they have more community. Even though that's kind of being disrupted right now.

Interviewer: Is that something you have thought about before you came here...?

Visitor: Not really... Well, I know a lot of people from Africa, and just thinking about [what they tell me] makes me think, "This is the way people are supposed to live."

Interviewer: How do you know Africans...?

Visitor: My brother dates a girl from Sierra Leone, and just talking to her and her family. And then meeting people at school, going to community college, meeting people there. They just seem very ... happy. ... My brother was telling me how his girlfriend says there used to be a real sense of people wanting to help each other and be a community. But now, they are starting to act more like we Americans.

While this visitor may have been romanticizing the realities of life in a poor rural traditional culture, this exchange was remarkable for illustrating the emotional and imaginative power that "Gods and Mortals" was capable of exerting over visitors who gave it their attention. The study team can attest to other examples of visitors visibly moved by the exhibition in one way or another: joy at the life, color, and beauty on display; fascination among African-Americans in seeing the creativity that is part of their own distant heritage; quiet reflection on the beauty of the objects themselves or the meaning they conveyed; and of course, concern for the future of peoples like the Urhobo and their traditional arts.

CONCLUSIONS

The interviews conducted by the study team suggested that “Gods and Mortals” succeeded with its audiences on a number of levels: aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional. It moved and excited visitors with beauty, color, and pageantry. It educated them about an African culture to which few had previous exposure. And it stimulated many to think about pressing issues concerning the fate of traditional cultures in the modern world, sometimes in a very deep and personal way.

The key to the exhibition’s multi-level success appeared to be the placement of the art in its cultural context—an approach that was made more effective through the use of didactic and atmospheric elements such as music, photography, maps, and most of all videos of Urhobo ritual and craftsmanship. The incorporation of contemporary art containing echoes of traditional forms and values helped some visitors to grasp the idea that the culture embodied in traditional Urhobo art continues to live on in the modern artistic imagination, although the connection between the two types of art was not grasped by all interviewees.

The challenge for a museum such as NMAfA is to mount exhibitions that demonstrate how the art on display reflects and is integrated with African culture, without falling into the trap of presenting it as mere ethnographic artifact. While this can be a delicate balancing act, the interviews conducted for this study seem to suggest that “Gods and Mortals” struck that balance, and could be a useful model for future shows.



IMAGE DETAILS

All images courtesy of the National Museum of African Art

Cover:

Mask (wood, pigment, rattan)
Collection of Guillaume de Verges (cat. 70)

Page 2:

Left

Ancestor column (eshe) (wood, pigment)
Collection of David and Clifford Gelbard (cat. 17)

Center

Mask (wood, pigment)
Private collection (cat. 6)

Right

Female figure (wood, pigment)
Walt Disney-Tishman Collection of African Art (cat. 58)

Page 4:

Left

Leopard in Cornfield (color lithograph)
Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932, Nigeria)
Private collection (cat. 60)

Right

Udju Mara (Family Going to Farm), 1972 (plastograph print, watercolors)
Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932, Nigeria)
Courtesy the artist (Cat. 7)

Page 6:

Left

Mask (wood, pigment)
Collection of Henricus and Nina Simonis (cat. 68)

Center

Mask (wood, pigment)
Private collection (cat. 66)

Right

Mask (wood)
Private collection (cat. 69)

Page 8:

Left

Bell (copper alloy), Lower Niger, Nigeria
Private collection (cat. 20)

Center

Currency (copper alloy), Lower Niger, Nigeria
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht (cat. 29)

Right

Bell (copper alloy), Lower Niger, Nigeria
Private collection (cat. 18)

Page 10:

Left

Statue for male aggression (iphri) (wood, pigment)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Rogoff (cat. 36)

Center:

Statue for male aggression (iphri) (wood, pigment)
Collection of Henricus and Nina Simonis
(frontispiece)

Right:

Male figure (wood, pigment)
Private collection (cat. 34)

Page 28:

Left

Statue for male aggression (iphri) (wood)
Collection of A.C. Lebas (cat. 37)

Right:

Maternity figure (wood, pigment)
Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht (cat. 48)



Smithsonian Institution

Office of Policy and Analysis

Washington, DC 20560-0405

www.si.edu/opanda