

A Consolidated Materiality for the New Harlem Renaissance?

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There has been talk of a New Harlem Renaissance. the speak is filled with hope – a new Harlem, a revived Harlem, Harlem's second-coming – and real-life happenings – businesses, arts, culinary attractions. I recently visited one site of this proclaimed re-birth: the [Museum of Art in Origins \(MoAAO\)](#) on 162nd Street.

Opened in November, 2005, the Museum is housed in Professor George Preston's brownstone in Jumel Terrace on Sugar Hill. As the most affluent part of Harlem, Sugar Hill has been known for its residents: well-known African-American artists and intellectuals like Duke Ellington and W.E.B. DuBois. This history is what has provides the neighborhood its grounding – and its cachet – for this second Renaissance.

The Museum is part of a network of cultural institutions and Harlem history sites. It opened at the same time as Kurt Thometz's rare and used-book store, Jumel Terrace Books, which is also housed in his brownstone. The bookstore specializes in African, African-American, and local history books. The two establishments are located just down the street from one another, and are also in close proximity to Marjorie Eliot's Parlour Entertainment where jazz concerts take place every Sunday afternoon in her home.

Cultural collaboration and a vivid arts scene are intended to animate and inspire the neighborhood and its surroundings. The literati that attend these events are part of a movement to foster greater appreciation and production of the arts. Underlying this mission is an interesting formulation of "origins" – both for "Harlem" as a place in peoples' minds, and for the people who actually inhabit this place.

Walking into the Museum, I was struck by the materiality of the place. There were objects everywhere, on walls in hallways, stairways, on tables, on windowsills. Some paintings were even filed together on the floor of the entrance hallway, with no proper place to be viewed. There were a handful of modern paintings by contemporary artists – many African-American – and some East Asian prints, but the majority of the pieces were wooden masks and sculptures from Africa. Dr. Preston gives every visitor a personalized tour. On arrival, my friends and I were greeted and then allowed to initially browse around. We made our way from the entrance hallway to the first room on the left. The room was almost entirely filled with African masks and sculpture, with a few other pieces placed amongst them (a vivid Romeare Bearden painting and a substantial sculpture by the Brazilian artist Emanuel Araújo.) None of the African pieces had labels or accompanying text, but all the other types of art did. Dr. Preston mentioned they were working on creating more labels. One particular table presented five masks on stands, placed against the wall. My companions and I were examining them when Dr. Preston came over to discuss the series.

He first stated that these objects are incomplete, noting that they were representations of what were once part of elaborate living outfits consisting of many components. The outfit, the dances and rhythms that they were made for, and the ceremonies that utilized the outfits all carried the same name. There was no separate name for the object we were seeing on the table. (Perhaps this was his disclaimer for the lack of wall text and labels?) These entire outfits were once collected, he continued, but upon arriving in Europe they began to be compared to European standards of artistic materials, and as much of these outfits were made of organic materials, everything but the wooden mask part was discarded/devalued. The five masks were described to us as "variations on a theme," and he noted the continuity of similar markings that signified cosmological and spiritual elements.

I was amazed. The professor was trying to give an adequate scholarly explanation of these objects that justified their decontextualized, aestheticized presentation. Yet, he never positioned himself in the anomaly of displaying the masks in such a way, and never told us why he chose these masks in particular or if he was even the one who acquired them.

Preston is well aware of the market forces and curatorial/dealer authorship that creates categories and value for "African Art." Not only is he a prolific collector, he has taught African Art History at City College for many years, up until his recent retirement. In addition to these credentials, he is also an initiated chieftain of the Akan tribe in Ghana. A New York Times article about the opening of these cultural institutions states, "He made his first trip to Africa in 1968, doing fieldwork in Ghana toward his Ph.D. in art history from Columbia University, and built his collection during numerous visits since. In 2001, the Akan tribe of Ghana made him a chieftain, in a ceremony that involved holding dried herbs in his mouth for four hours. 'That's because one of the first things for a chieftain to learn is how to keep his mouth shut,' he explained." (Strausbaugh 2005)

This ability to "keep his mouth shut" was demonstrated in a surprising manner when I inquired as to how these masks came to be in the museum. His response was a steady and well-rehearsed monologue that went something to the effect of:

Culture is fluid. It travels and moves like water. The impetus for its movement is economics: Money. Money is what makes these objects of culture travel. How did the Met and the Louvre get their collections? They had the economic power. \$100 for a mask like this buys the carver/seller enough cement to build a house, and he can then just make another mask in its place. Or sell you a fake! It may seem crude, but the seller thinks it is a good deal. [Pause.] That is one answer. But that is the best answer.

I could not believe it! To make this kind of statement was to make some specific declarations about the origins of his art. However, the vagueness and removed quality of his narrative continued to set himself apart from the actual collection process of his own Museum pieces. Ironically, the Museum's stated mission is:

MoAAO is dedicated to the preservation and exposition of art in relation to its origins. MoAAO addresses the question what generates art? and endeavors to exhibit art in dialogue with its origin: culture-historical, environmental, ideological, medium/process."

Interestingly, the origins of many of the objects we saw – and were told about – were NOT exposed. Mentioning a country or ethnic group was the most specific he got. The museum, and the collection that furnishes it, present an intriguing combination of both euphemism and candor. Dr. Preston aims to have a museum that is different, one that speaks from his own experiences as collector, professor, initiated chieftan: "By having your own museum you

collect objects that in your opinion speak from a certain viewpoint about culture, about collecting” (Veljasevic 2006). Preston is cited as explaining the way museum professionals shaped the aesthetic classifications of these objects by favoring a shiny patina. They therefore polished the surfaces of their art, and claimed this was the aesthetic standard of African art. For Preston, the patina is an interesting example of the European hand in this art world. While it was used as evidence of quality and authenticity, it was in fact a European invention and imposition.

In the MoAAO, Preston exhibits his works with unpolished surfaces – some even exhibiting the remains of sacrifices made on their exteriors. This, he believes, preserves the aura of human contact and fosters the uniqueness of his museum’s experience: “When you experience the object in terms of its interaction with people, then you are in another context – of the art form itself,” he said. In his opinion the mixture of air, dirt, and oil from human hands and the idea that a certain object was held becomes part of the aesthetic experience.” He aims to exhibit the cultures connected to these objects, but only to the extent that they function as metonyms. Signifiers of an origin continued to the present.

In Susan Stewart’s book *On Longing*, she has a chapter on the souvenir and the collection, “On Desire,” which provides a useful framework for thinking about Dr. Preston’s mediating experiences of his Museum, as well as positioning the Museum in relation to its place in a “new Harlem.” The souvenir – as described by Stewart – is incomplete without its owner’s narrative that ascribes significance to the life of the object, which in turn signifies identification for the object’s possessor: “It will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins. ...What is this narrative of origins? It is a narrative of interiority and authenticity. It is not a narrative of the object; it is a narrative of the possessor.” (Stewart 136) In this sense, I believe the objects in Dr. Preston’s Museum functioned in a way like souvenirs. However, they were at the same time, of course, intimate parts of his collection.

“While the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting – stating again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie....The spatial whole of the collection supersedes the individual narratives that ‘lie behind it.” (Stewart 152, 153) The invention of culture, and the forgetting (or at least the guarding) of each individual object’s history, is the *modus operandi* of the MoAAD’s display of “African Art.” However, the aesthetic presentation and valorization of these forms are supposed to be a way of instilling pride in African roots, as well as of countering the Europeanized appropriation of these objects.

Nostalgia, desire, longing. These were all at play in the narrative Dr. Preston prescribed to his collection: “The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia....The souvenir generates a narrative which reaches only “behind,” spiraling in a continually inward movement rather than outward toward the future.” (Stewart 135). We had the privilege of viewing some video footage, shot this January, of an Akan funeral for one village’s priestess that died. The addition of this media could have potentially destabilized the overbearing conception of “Africa” that were imbued into the masks. This was not the case. If one had knowledge about contemporary Africa (which I and my colleagues did), we were unsurprised by the performances and musics we were seeing and hearing. However, one interesting comment that

Dr. Preston made during the initial minutes was, “Don’t you like those red plastic chairs there?” Women in African clothes sitting on patio furniture! It was as if these plastic lawn chairs were an aberration to his imagery of the African village aesthetic, in which ceremonies last days on end, dancers go into ecstasy communicating with their local spirits, and everyone dresses in traditional garb.

It seems that this second Renaissance – as far as the MoAaO is concerned – is reaching back to Africa just as the first did. Africa as ceremonial, as innately spiritual and creative, as authentic. There are no contemporary African artists, which is understandable considering the Museum’s title and mission. However, through Dr. Preston’s tour, he comments on how some of the masks have been made relatively recently. And the Akan funeral took place in January. So these origins exist in Africa today, but they connote origins for Harlem. The value-laden aestheticization of objects from Africa maintain a tenuous relationship to the notion of a new Harlem. Notice how the Museum’s name does not state “Africa” in its title, however, the presence of a continent made real by its removed materiality is the defining character of the Museum.

The Museum is an interesting and problematic place. There is much potential for it to become an educational resource and an uncovering of the accumulated meanings present within each of these objects. Dr. Preston certainly has the knowledge of how this world works in order to teach his community about it. He seems to be caught in his own politics of knowledge, where what he has been taught, what he has learned, and what he has experienced are entangled in economic, political, and ideological contradictions.

In a sense, these African objects were maintaining an element of relic. Stewart writes, “Because they are souvenirs of death, the relic, the hunting trophy, and the scalp are at the same the most intensely potential souvenirs and the most potent antisouvenirs. They mark the horrible transformation of meaning into materiality more than they mark, as other souvenirs do, the transformation of materiality into meaning.” (Stewart 140, emphasis hers) The African mask at the MoAAO, as described by Dr. Preston, did function as relic because their meanings have been subsumed by their material and aesthetic forms. The death of the mask’s life – as they are only fragments of what they had originally been, in context – turns into the life of the community museum, and the life of an imagined Africa for Harlem.

Works Cited:

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