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The museum of liberation

An excursion into the early history of reconquest

> "Nothing is more galvanizing than the sense of a cultural past. This at least the intelligent presentation of African Art will supply to us."
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> – Alain Locke, A Note on African Art, *Opportunity*, May 2, 1924

In his forward to the catalogue for the exhibition *Blondiau – Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art*, which was shown at the New Art Circle in New York in 1927, the philosopher Alain Locke writes, in connection with a general characterization of the exhibited artworks and their significance for European modernism: "[...] it is curious to note that the American descendants of these African craftsmen have a strange deficiency in the arts of their ancestors."[1] Like in previous essays of his, Locke postulates that African American visual arts lag behind achievements in music, dance and literature. While a synthesis of traditionally Black and eminently modern forms of expression has already succeeded in the latter genres, he writes, the fine arts have yet to see an interpretation of the art of their ancestors that corresponds to the modern Black experience. Locke understands the political significance of this engagement with African art to lie in the empowering affirmation "that the Negro is not a cultural foundling without his own inheritance."[2] In emphatic disagreement with the widespread notion that Black Americans lost their African culture through centuries of enslavement, Locke argues that the African art which made such a vital contribution to the early 20th century European avant-garde could be taken up all the more legitimately by artists of the African diaspora and translated into an aesthetic expression of the new self-confidence of the New Negro Movement. Here he speaks unequivocally of the need to recapture the "creative originality" of African art.

Such a reclamation of cultural heritage could not be limited solely to individual artistic acts such as, for example, certain paintings by Malvin Gray Johnson, in which concrete references to the African masks of the Blondiau collection are evident. Reconnecting African American contemporary art with a transatlantic Black cultural history also demanded the institutional reclaiming of African art for the cultural and educational ambitions of the African diaspora. Locke initially sent the young artists whom he supported (e.g. Aaron Douglas) to the Albert C. Barnes collection to study European modern art in combination with African art – Locke's 1925 *New Negro*anthology featured numerous illustrations of masks from the Barnes Foundation – and in 1927 became involved in purchasing the Blondiau collection for a planned Harlem Museum of African Art. Although this museum was never realized, the collection found its first home at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, which is now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and thereby became an important source for Black studies of the art and cultural history of Africa and the diaspora. Locke's private African collection was exhibited in 1928 at the new art gallery of Howard University in Washington as a source of inspiration for students at the Black university, where Locke taught philosophy for thirty years. After Locke's death, his collection was incorporated into the collection of the university's art gallery, where it can be seen to this day alongside the collection of African American art.

The case of this African American reappropriation of the collection of Belgian diplomat Raoul Blondiau – at a level of institutional policy by Locke, and at an artistic level by painters like Johnson – is of special interest because the objects in this collection originate from the context of the colonial regime of Leopold II in Congo, the extreme violence of which African diaspora actors had been speaking out about in many ways since the late nineteenth century. The example of the African collection of the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Virginia, demonstrates that anticolonial agitation, Black practices of collecting African art, and emancipatory educational programs in the context of Historically Black Colleges and

Universities (HBCU) in the American South were all inextricably interconnected from very early on. Visiting the museum in Hampton makes it strikingly clear that the collection, exhibition and study of African artworks, articles of daily use, and textiles was eminently significant for the development of African American modern art, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. The paintings and sculptures by former students such as John Biggers and Samella Lewis that are exhibited here show directly how motifs, symbols and formal elements from the objects in the African collection found their way into an aesthetic of liberation in the context of anti-racist movements. In contrast to the structures of western ethno-museums, in which collecting and collected cultures face one another along the colonial power axis of dominant and subjugated societies, and endless chains of production of difference continue to be formed to this day, the prevailing spirit in Hampton is one of reconnecting the separated histories and torn-apart communities of the African diaspora and the African continent.

Like Fisk University in Nashville, Atlanta University and Howard University, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, which was founded in 1868 on the grounds of a former plantation, arose right after the Civil War from the first educational programs for African Americans liberated from slavery. Booker T. Washington, who developed the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama into a leading institution of Black education from the 1880s onward according to the model of the Hampton Institute – which propagated education of the “hand, head and heart” – was one of the most influential among Hampton’s first generation of students. The University Museum was created at the same time as the school, and in the school’s early years, its founder General Armstrong, who had commanded Black troops against the Confederacy in the same place where the school was founded, began collecting art from Africa and Oceania and Native American art as well as works of contemporary African American art. (e.g. Henry Ossawa Tanner). As early as the 1870s, the collection was used in the curriculum of the African Studies program. In 1893, a Folklore and Ethnology department with a marked interest in “traditions of ancestry in Africa” was

established.[3]

The sheer fact that European anthropological museums were founded in a spirit of colonialism at the same time that African collections were established as an instrument of liberation from colonial social systems and racist cultural concepts represents a remarkable counterpoint. Frequently, the same kinds of objects that were in the African collections also entered into "Western" collections at the height of the colonial era, where, however, opposing political meanings were ascribed to them. The specific history of the collection of Hampton University Museum, which depended on the dedication of African American missionaries, white abolitionists, and political activists in Central and West Africa, but also included gifts from African students, offers deeper insight into the temporally parallel nature of white and Black collections of African art and the history of political conflict between them. While it is not possible to go into much detail here, the influence of Hampton alumnus William H. Sheppard, to whom the University Museum owes the centerpiece of its African collection, is noteworthy.[4] In the early 1890s, Sheppard was an active member of the American Missionary Association in Leopold II's "Congo Free State," where he created an extensive collection of Kuba art for the Hampton Institute – from the outset, with the goal of embedding it in the curriculum of his alma mater. Although the university did not purchase the majority of this "first systematic collection of African art assembled by an African-American" until 1911, at which point the university newspaper, *The Southern Workman*, publicized the collection's "large mission in stimulating race pride," Sheppard himself had already begun to teach the students about the significance of the objects and their sociocultural context during visits home in the 1890s.[5] Like his colleague George Washington Williams, who is better known in this context and likewise created a collection of African art that he sold to African American universities, Sheppard was active in spreading counter-information to the Congo propaganda of the royal Belgian colonial regime and its Western allies.[6]His articles about the crimes of the royal regime and its concession societies, which he researched directly on site, had a major impact on Edmund

Morel's Congo Reform Association, and brought Sheppard both persecution at the hands of the Belgian colonial authorities and later the honor of "Man of the Month" (1915) in *The Crisis*, the journal published by W.E.B. Du Bois for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). African American collectors such as Williams and Sheppard positioned themselves against the colonial practice of accumulating and extracting artifacts for Belgian collections (Tervuren) by combining their criticism of colonialism with an emancipatory concept of collecting. Sheppard, for example, also used certain objects from his Congo collection to illustrate for Hampton students that the Belgian colonial regime's rubber economy was rooted in crimes against humanity.[7] In the late 1920s, 50 objects from the aforementioned Blondiau – Theatre Arts Collection were added to the African collection. Numerous photos are exhibited at the museum, showing the use of various pieces in the collections in handicraft instruction or music lessons. Other pictures show African students from Kenya, Sierra Leone and South Africa, who have not only brought their knowledge to the school, but also donated objects or entire collections to the school. One example of this African self-representation is the Kikuyu collection of 50 objects, which was donated in 1929 by Chief Koinange-wa-Mbiyu, the father of the first Kenyan Hampton student. "The collection is a rare example of objects selected by a cultural insider to represent his culture to a Western audience," the former director of the museum writes,[8] pointing out that the chief's son, Peter Mbiyu Koinange, gave the museum not only the objects, but also documentation and explanations of their significance and how these artifacts are used.

My own interest in Hampton arises less from the context of the museum debate than from the transcultural art history of the modern era.[9]As part of a work on Austrian-African-American relations in the interwar period, one of the topics I treat is the role of the Jewish psychologist and art educator Viktor Löwenfeld, who fled to the US from Vienna in 1938 and taught at the Hampton Institute from 1939 to 1946, in the development of African American art around the mid-twentieth century.[10] In

1943, Löwenfeld curated the first group exhibition of African American art at the MoMA in New York, where students from the Hampton Institute exhibited their art. At a Jim Crow-era Black educational institution in Virginia, Löwenfeld, a refugee from racist persecution in Europe, developed a form of art instruction that understood artistic expression as a means of liberation from a negative self-image and a way of empowering young African Americans. He also attached particular importance to the African collection. As Ira Dworkin writes, Löwenfeld was able to situate the Institute's African collection in the contexts of modern art in a new way on the basis of his European experience with the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.[11]

The painter John Biggers, who came to Hampton from North Carolina as a fifteen-year-old in order to train as a plumber, but soon attended Löwenfeld's art class and went on to become one of his most famous students alongside Samella Lewis, commented repeatedly on the mind-altering nature of his confrontation with African art under the conditions of emancipatory teaching. The educational system in general and the political climate in the racist South, he said, had made everything African seem lowly and ugly, even in the eyes of young Blacks. The African artifacts of the Hampton Museum thus initially appeared to the young Biggers, who according to his own statement entered the school with a "stereotyped concept" of Africa, to be "ugly, unlike anything I had seen before,"[12] but in the years that followed, through what was imparted by Löwenfeld, he came to recognize African motifs and design principles as an essential source for the development of his distinctive painting style. Löwenfeld's approach of considering artistic expression neither as a reproduction of external reality nor as a product of specific stylistic conventions, but rather as an expression of the experience of subjects in their specific social and political worlds, encouraged an artistic development that linked the formation of Black identity with awareness of the history and culture of the African diaspora. Samella Lewis, who later became one of the most influential historians of African American modern art, recalled Löwenfeld's pedagogy, which decidedly operated

across the color line: “It was a great cause for him, to work against segregation, prejudice… In a way he encouraged us to use art as an instrument or a tool to combat serious deprivation and prejudice, and the evils of discrimination. He forced us to take a position in relation to humanity and inhumane treatment of other peoples.”[13]

Today the works of Hampton artists can be seen both in the context of the museum’s African collections and in the broader context of the museum’s African American collection as well as in relation to documents on the history of Hampton University. The organic intertwining of the departments enables visitors to the museum and students at the university to gain a deep understanding of the interplay of collecting practices, teaching and artistic development within the emancipatory project of HBCUs under the political conditions of segregation. There are not many Western museums with African collections that are pervaded with such a positive spirit of liberation. Those who are painfully familiar with the tristesse of most ethnographic museums and the undignified defensive battles in the possessors’ discourse [14] in the recent metamorphoses of this type of museum can breathe a spirit of liberation here – a force that extended from the first educational projects after the end of slavery and the campaigns against colonial crimes in Africa to the acts of self-representation in the museum by African communities to an effective form of art instruction for African American modern art, through which a Jewish refugee from Nazi Austria/Germany was also able to lay the foundations of his successful career in the US. As a crossroads of minority histories and as a space of intelligent linkage of their politics of liberation, the museum produces a wealth of aesthetic experiences, which, in contrast to the promotion of exoticizing gaping at many anthropological museums, actually produces knowledge. Along with a clear political framing of relations between the parts of the collection, the reconnection of all narratives to the place of their narration and its history forms the second foundation of a museum experience in which enthusiasm for great artworks is not always immediately thwarted by the unease that the inequity of ethnographic collections usually

triggers.

Translation by Jane Yagar.

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[1] Alain Locke, "The Blondiau – Theatre Arts Collection," Blondiau – Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art, The New Art Circle, New York 1927, n. pag.

[2] Alain Locke, „The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts", ibid. (ed.), The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance, New York: Touchstone 1997, p. 256.

[3] Mary Lou Hultgren, "The African Collections: To Be a Great Soul's Inspiration," The International Review of African American Art, vol. 20, No. 1, 2005, p. 33.

[4] For more detail on the early history of the collection, cf. Ira Dworkin, Congo Love Song: African American Culture and the Crisis of the Colonial State, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2017.

[5] Hultgren, "The African Collections," p. 35-36.

[6] There is not space here to address the ambivalent motivations and multi-layered activities of African American actors in the Congo, which in some cases were also influenced by colonial mechanisms of action.

[7] Dworkin, Congo Love Song, p. 176-77.

[8] Hultgren, “The African Collections,” p. 38.

[9] On my approach to a postcolonial art history of contact, cf. Christian Kravagna, Transmoderne: Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts, Berlin: b_books 2017.

[10] The project receives support from the Dietrich W. Botstiber Foundation.

[11] Dworkin, Congo Love Song, p. 183.

[12] John Biggers 1988, in conversation with Alvia J. Wardlaw, cited in Wardlaw, “A Spiritual Libation: Promoting an African Heritage in Black Colleges,” Black Art – Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art, Dallas Museum of Art 1988, p. 57.

[13] “An interview with Samella Lewis / Interviewer: Harry Henderson,” Henderson Papers, Penn State University Archives, University Park, PA, cited in Ann Holt, “Lowenfeld at Hampton (1939-1946): Empowerment, Resistance, Activism, and Pedagogy,” Studies in Art Education, vol. 54, No. 1, 2012, p. 12.

[14] Belinda Kazeem, “Die Zukunft der Besitzenden. Oder fortwährende Verstrickungen in neokoloniale Argumentationsmuster,” Das Unbehagen im Museum: Postkoloniale Museologien, eds. Belinda Kazeem, Charlotte Martinz-Turek and Nora Sternfeld, Vienna: Turia + Kant 2009, p. 43-59.