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ARTICLE

BRINGING AESTHETIC EMOTION INTO THE MUSEUM: REFLECTIONS ON AN EXAMPLE FROM OCEANIA

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Translated from French by Diana Cline

Abstract

On museum labels, ethnographic objects are most often defined by their meaning or symbolism within the societies that they originate from. The visitor, on the other hand, knows very little about how they are received in situ. Yet some of these objects are originally meaningful above all for the effects their physical presence are intended to create at the time of their use. In this article, masks made by the Sulka of New Britain (Papua New Guinea) will serve as a case-study. These masks appear in public during rituals in a performance that is aimed at producing a powerful emotional and sensorial impact. Even though they are meant to be burned at the end of the ceremonies, several specimens have been brought into museums, where they stand in absolute negation of the values behind their creation… So what cultural representivity can be ascribed to them? From a museographical standpoint, we must ask how to go about exhibiting them in a way that allows visitors to grasp what these objects were and what they did in their original context. But at the same time, we must question the legitimacy of such an undertaking as concerns societies where it is not the object so much as the performance that counts – societies in which cultural continuity is assured through the repetition of the ephemeral much more than by the conservation of the material.

Keywords: Sulka; ritual performance; beauty; conservation; destruction; museumization

In many European or North American museums of ethnography, information labels most often define the ritual objects on display through their symbolism or the use they had within the societies that they come from. Of a mask, for example, it is said that it represents a founding spirit, a tutelary deity or a totemic ancestor; that it is used in initiation, healing or warfare rites. Its use is held up to the imagination, but very little is said about how it is received in its own society nor about the event that its appearance constitutes in its original context. Yet through its ceremonial use, such an object is less important for what it is than for what it *does*, in other words, for the effects its presence is intended to create. I will use the masks made by the Sulka of New Britain (Papua New Guinea), and the problems arising from their museumization, to illustrate this.

Numbering around 4000, the Sulka are nominally Christian today. Incorporated in their worldview, Christian ideology is constantly adjusted to make it more assimilable, and coexists with ritual practices whose vitality shows no sign of weakening and that are at their most spectacular during initiation and

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wedding ceremonies. Their preparation begins several months in advance, with the cultivation of plots to produce the quantities of tubers needed for the exchange of goods during festivities. At the same time, the men begin making masks in huts built in the forest some distance from the village. Traditionally, these masks can take close to a year to fabricate. This is done without the knowledge of the uninitiated – women and small boys – who are supposed to believe that these masks are spirits that the men summoned up from the stones in the bush to ask them to come dance in the village.[1]

The day of the festivities, the masks make their appearance, carried by dancers and whose cloaks completely hide their bodies. There are two main types of masks: those called *sisiu*, whose upper part is cone-shaped, and those called *hemlout*, which are topped with a sort of parasol close to two metres in diameter (Figures 1-2). They perform separately during the ceremonies and follow two distinct choreographies : as a synchronized group for the first, individually one after another for the second. In any event, their performance in public is short, since after a dance lasting a few minutes, they withdraw from the village to return to the forest. There, they will be secretly burned weeks or months later by initiated men, once those taking part in the ceremony will have gathered the necessary goods (pigs, tubers, bags of rice, food supplies, shell money, bank notes, etc.) to exchange among themselves. Until exchange has taken place, the masks cannot be destroyed and remain where they were left hidden in the forest. Regardless of their state of deterioration due to the combined action of the weather, rodents and insects, they will be burned as soon as the protagonists will have gathered enough exchange goods.

Yet, at times, some of these masks escape their intended destruction and end up in museums, usually missing the long plant-fibre cloak that covered the dancer. What remains are dull, faded fragments – odourless, lifeless, dried out, decaying and silent – before which visitors can stand as long as they want, often under the dimmed lighting some museums prefer rather than under the harsh sun of the tropics. Looking at these objects in a showcase highlights that which the Sulka aesthetically abhor, because these improbable things represent an absolute negation of the values behind their creation. Just imagine a museum label reading : *This is no longer a Sulka mask…*

Figures 1-2. *Hemlout* (left) and *Sisiu* (right) masks. Photos taken by the author in 1994.

BEAUTY AS A CREATIVE FORCE

To understand the challenge of displaying such pieces in a museum, we must first realize the vital importance that the Sulka accord to beauty – a quality that the polysemy of the vernacular word, *ayar*, associates with that which is "good", "proper", "sound", "right", "apt", "adequate", "exact" or "effective".[2] The beauty of the masks is a necessary condition for their use in ceremonies and anything that compromises this (a dull appearance or poor combination of colours) calls for their immediate and unquestioned rejection and disposal. For the men who work together making the masks, this concern for beauty is evidenced in the extreme attention they take in the arrangement of the designs painted on the surface and to the chromatic contrasts chosen to reinforce their visual impact. Beauty is found in light and lustre, and this search for radiance explains the Sulka's preference for acrylic paints bought in town – and prized for their more vibrant colours than those traditionally obtained from natural mineral or vegetable pigments.

The technical know-how needed in the art of ascribing objects the utmost beauty necessarily involves the use of magic. Repeated incantations solicit the assistance of ancestral spirits, since it is upon them that the success of any human undertaking ultimately depends : whether it be the fabrication of a mask, the cultivation of a garden or the construction of a canoe. The aim of magic, say the initiated, is to ensure that when the masks appear in public on the day of the festivities, they have the effect of a "flashpoint", that they "set fire" to the village and strike everyone who sees them with awe. To achieve this, their arrival in the village is orchestrated as a sudden revelation. As groups of women dance and sing or drums are beating, the sound of a conch shell heard in the distance announces the imminent arrival of the masked dancers. The dancers, first hidden by a screen of leafy branches carried by men coming out of the bush, are suddenly revealed when the screen is lowered to let them through. They then begin to move according to a particular angle of exposure to the sun. Their performance plays on the multisensory impact produced by the combination of the vibrant polychromic masks, the sounds made by their movements, the scents given off by their plant components, the powerful throbbing from the dancing and the swishing of air caused by the choreography, reinforced by the colours and scents of the grass skirts worn by the women. All of this – which we could speak of as brightly shimmering scents and sounds or of loud and strongly scented shimmering sights – makes the beauty of these masks an event that surpasses mere visual delectation to become an all-encompassing experience. The impact it has on the audience is experienced in many different ways : stunned shock, feelings of powerlessness, of affliction or exaltation. In every instance, it is felt as a powerful hold, as rapture of the highest order, and it is the exceptional sensorial and emotional intensity of these brief minutes that evokes the existence of the sacred. If the masks bring to life the ancestral spirits solicited through the magic of beauty, it is not so much that they (the spirits) are embodied in them (the masks) but rather that the spirits are present in the very sensation of beauty – a powerfully intrusive sensation, described as self-dispossession, as being suddenly caught up against one's will, a feeling incomparable with any ordinary experience and which can be fleetingly felt only during such ceremonies.

The concept of beauty was long considered problematic by some ethnologists and art historians, who suspected it to be a socio-centric category inapplicable to traditional non-Western cultures. According to art historian Robert Goldwater (1986:311), "Beauty is a measure developed by a culture external to primitive societies (and) to invoke it is an elementary ethnocentric error." In this, he echoes American postmodernist critic Thomas McEvilley (1999:42), who speaks of "the generally terrifying power of a mask or an icon", assuring that "in their original context, [ritual] objects were accorded respect and fear, not aesthetic value." But one of the theorists who most stigmatized the concept of beauty was anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998). Assimilating aesthetics to a type of theology of art found in the West, he held that, just as a sociologist of religions adopts methodological atheism in his research, the anthropologist should show complete indifference toward the aesthetic value of objects. In his view, art is just a component of technology, a means of action that serves intentions and social strategies. For

Gell, ritual objects are not designed to be beautiful, but to act on the thinking or the behaviour of others by fascinating and impressing them.[3] As if denying Melanesians the idea that there are some things that they find beautiful and others not, these authors have agreed to view the concept of beauty as an ethnocentric fantasy, yet have no difficulty accepting that an object can be ugly, disturbing or intended to be frightening – thereby reiterating the primitivist stereotype of Aborigines plunged into a state of sacred fear where aesthetic delight had no place.

Yet for the Sulka, beauty embodies the supernatural (see Jeudy-Ballini 1999). It makes it possible to perceive and feel that which cannot be represented. It has no conceivable existence outside the relation between humans and spirits, and is given as a sign of their cooperation. The subjective experience that the ritual incites among the villagers is a cosmological, and even theophanic, event. Too sublime to attribute to a mere feat or to human creativity, beauty forbids or "suspends the disbelief" according to Thomas Maschio (1994:41).[4]

Note that the link between the emotional impact caused by the revelation of beauty and the perception of the supernatural is not confined to Melanesian cultures. The works of certain historians (Marin 1993, Schmitt 2002) have shown how, in the West, brilliancy revealed the presence of the divine in the medieval religious aesthetic. Louis Marin (1993:218, 224, 226) writes that the precious materials (gold or diamonds) that enter into the composition of liturgical ornaments or objects show "how light is embodied in matter", their lustre acting as a "signifier" of the divine, a transmutation of divine power. Before the Renaissance, observes Hans Belting (2004), images (and not only religious images) were perceived as a presence rather than as a representation – leading to the risk denounced by iconoclasts of confusing image and idol. And yet, what European museum of sacred art has ever succeeded in transmitting this idea? Similarly, we could ask whether a museum of ethnography could ever do justice to that which makes sense in the Sulka culture. And how could it? Beauty constitutes a fundamental dimension that is difficult to reproduce in a museum, if only because the conservation of the object already renders this approach intellectually and materially problematic.

MAKE, DESTROY, REMAKE

Sometimes, having returned to the bush after their performance, the masked dancers come back to the village for another brief performance. But this is now received with general indifference. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who spent a few months among the Sulka in the years 1927-1928 and witnessed such prolongations, summed them up in his field notebooks by remarking that spectators gave him the impression that they were "*half hearted and* de trop" (sic.). Beauty, which is never reduced to an intrinsic quality, is associated with the intensity of the impression that something produces. This arises in large measure from its novel or original nature, which produces the greatest impact on the affects and the senses. That which had an effect at its first appearance is not expected to do so in subsequent appearances.

Destruction of the masks forms an integral part of the ceremony, and the ephemeral nature of these ritual objects arises from an aesthetic-religious constraint. The act of making, destroying and remaking the masks that is undertaken in secret by the men inscribes the existence of these objects in an ever-renewed cycle of disappearances and reappearances, as if they constantly arose from their ashes: bright, intact, recognizable, timeless. This demonstrates that for the Sulka, nothing can be reused and that beauty can only be fleeting. The absence of a tangible trace due to the refusal to preserve anything material is exactly what makes it possible to live in reproduction and continuity.[5]

Among the Sulka, the only artefacts handed down from the past are shell money that, according to oral tradition, was brought back from expeditions to neighbouring islands decades ago. Other objects are not meant to last and villagers apply to those that they import the same "throwaway logic"[6] as to those that

they make. Cultural transmission is therefore only exceptionally a question of material conservation. Rather, continuity is assured in the form of performance, through the staged repetition of the ephemeral (stories, songs, dances, ritual ceremonies). Yet the event, because it cannot be repeated exactly the same way, is unique each time, regardless of the ideological value accorded to reproduction in the local culture. Under these conditions, as Jack Goody (2013:16) observed in essence concerning the writing down of oral traditions, serious problems arise from efforts at preservation, because they transform an evanescent reality into a lasting and visual object. For instance, what can a mask saved from its intended ritual destruction reveal of the vision of a society that views its destruction as a prerequisite to the cosmological renewal that is at the crux of these ceremonial activities? From a conceptual standpoint, the preservation of an object whose disappearance was prescribed constitutes an affront to the very ethnographic reality that we intend to present, and this is the difficult task that the museum must face.[7]

MUSEUMS IN QUESTION(S)

For several years, the capacity of ethnography museums to depict the world has come under debate among many curators and researchers.[8] They decry in particular the ahistorical or obsolete vision of non-Western societies, the socio-centred reduction of cultures to their materiality, the overrating of antiquity (associated with authenticity) and the concomitant rejection of signs of hybridisation and modernity. They blame the fact that museums cannot display objects without decontextualising them and dissociating them from the performed arts or from their intangible dimensions that are so seldom included in exhibitions. They frown on the importance given to the visual dimension and on the sensorial, emotional or procedural atrophy that characterise the representation of otherness in museums. Such criticism has helped challenge the construction the West has given to the image of otherness. They have revealed its subjectivity and the impossibility of neutrality. We have discussed elsewhere (Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2011:75-76) how museum exhibitions remain the product of individual choices : those of the heads of the institution who, at a given time, decide to acquire certain pieces, to keep others in reserve, to put some on display or to prefer a particular type of presentation. As we know, the rhetoric of an exhibition is always informed by the background, values and culture of those who have conceived it, even if they at times refuse to admit it.[9] By displaying artefacts in its museums, a country exposes itself above all, because it reveals its worldview and the place of its vision in constituting this conception. Yet, as Brigitte Derlon (1999:54) writes, "This issue is important for anthropology, because history has shown that while museums reflected theoretical ideas, they also actively contributed to their development" (*our translation*).

The problematic nature of museography is obviously due to the fact that none of the artefacts displayed in museums was made for this purpose or, as Nicholas Thomas (1991:4) notes, "objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become." Any object removed from the original context that conferred meaning upon it becomes something other than what it was initially: a museum object. Ethnographic artefacts, observes Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991:387-388), are above all artefacts created by ethnologists :

> Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached, and carried away by ethnographers. Such objects are ethnographic not because they were found in a Hungarian peasant household, Kwakiutl village, or Rajasthani market rather than in Buckingham Palace or Michelangelo's studio, but by virtue of the manner in which they have been detached [...]. The artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt. Where does the object begin and where does it end? [...]. Where do we make the cut? Perhaps we should speak not of the ethnographic object but of the ethnographic fragment. Like the ruin, the ethnographic fragment is informed by a poetics of detachment. Detachment refers not only to the physical act of producing fragments, but also to the detached attitude that makes that fragmentation and its appreciation possible.

Numerous proposals for reinventing the museum have been put forward (e.g., de Barry, Desvallées and Wasserman 1994; Desvallées 1992). In some instances, Indigenous representatives have been asked to collaborate in the design of museum displays, and "alternative" exhibitions have been set up in efforts to depart from a purely visual for a more immersive and interactive experience (MacLean 2011; Witcomb 2003). Such approaches have paved the way toward the introduction of multisensory devices intended to create suggestive atmospheres through the diffusion of odours and sounds, encouraging tactile and gustatory contacts, or making use of multimedia technologies. In spite of their experimental and creative value, such approaches can also raise scepticism as to their ability to raise awareness for the ethnographic complexity of a foreign society among the general public. Imagining that through the senses alone, members of a given culture could be brought to feel what it is like to be raised in another culture stems from an assumption on the universality of ways of feeling that the museum should incite visitors to question rather than reinforce.

"If I show the Mona Lisa to a Pawnee Indian, can I really bring him to see what he has before his eyes?" asks in essence novelist Thomas Edison, cited by Constance Classen and David Howes (2006:217). For these two authors, "The same might be said in reverse of Westerners. However much we are encouraged to handle indigenous artifacts, can we ever really understand what we are touching?" (Classen and Howes 2006:218). What goes for sight or touch is obviously true for the other senses. Indeed, unless reduced to a group of molecules, an odour, for example, is not dissociable from the specific environment made up at a given time by other smells, movement, the quality of light, a state of mind…

From a museographical standpoint, then, with regards to Sulka masks and so many other ritual artefacts, the question is how to convey a sense of what such objects did in their original context. Is this kind of contextualisation desirable? Can it be accomplished? Within a museum framework, the danger is that it could become a purely theoretical approach and that any attempts along this line would be reduced to a mode of essentialization which, in order to make objects understandable to us, would render them "unrecognizable or meaningless to the cultures they came from" (Vogel 1988:11). Attempts at recreating everything that is missing that the object has been removed from[10] are likely to be in vain, because despite what the information labels or the scenography say that it is telling us about the society it comes from, the object now only speaks the language of its adopted society. This is why museography should strive less for an impossible translation and offer interpretations (identified as such) of a specific reality instead, in other words, a clearly assumed expression that is culturally grounded in a process of creative reception.

How can this be accomplished without deception? Perhaps, in fact, by acknowledging this deceit as such, by refusing to display an object as a genuine sample of otherness, a piece of something from another place that the visitor could understand in the same manner as the members of the reference culture. It is important not to further the misunderstanding and to claim the process of cultural appropriation – material as well as intellectual – that the principle of the object's presence in the museum represents. One way to accomplish this could be, for example, to explain that the mask in the display case is definitely something other than a ritual instrument and is an object that has already been reinterpreted through Western eyes. Because it has been removed from the entirety constituted by the ceremonial performance and is displayed as no audience would see it in New Britain, its residual, and by the same token transgressive, existence necessarily takes on a different, novel or in any case profoundly inexplicable and disturbing meaning for the Sulka who I told, at the time of my research, of the presence of some of their masks in European and American museums (see Jeudy-Ballini 2004).

It would thus be advisable to abandon literality or efforts at imitative and objective restitution. In this case, the idea that "this is not (or not only or no longer) a Sulka mask", making it understood that this is a Sulka mask that is yet no longer one, would be an interesting way to turn the conventional expectations of museum visitors upside down.[11]

Continuing with another reference drawn from the surrealist movement, mention in closing how stunned André Breton was by the sight of the large Sulka mask exhibited at the Field Museum of Chicago, "Unless you are in the presence of this object, you cannot know the full extent of the poetry of the *sublime*." (1953:180-181, *emphasis his*) The surrealists glorified the impression this object made on them in lyrical terms : "triumph of the volatile" (Breton 1960:183), "undreamed-of splendour", "sublime harmony", "the disturbance of splendour glimpsed", "an astonishing tenderness" (Bounoure 1968:16, 31, *our translation*). The mask in question, this "monstrance of the sublime", represented a praying mantis, the poetic emblem of wild romance for the surrealists – this devouring love of the West that cannibalises the other and tends to aesthetise and consume cultural difference (Root 1998), as the postcolonialist writers could ironically remark.

The sight of this object left André Breton profoundly shaken. It gripped him with the moving sentiment of being in the presence of something that went beyond ordinary experience. The object, in fact, gripped him in the same way that the Sulka mask makers attempted to affect the original spectators. The emotive power associated with the beauty of the mask and that is felt by the Sulka as the embodiment of the sacred, Breton saw as the essence of what he called "magical art". Of these Oceanic creations, he wrote, "From the outset, the surrealist approach is inseparable from the seduction, from the fascination that they exert on us" (Breton 1953:180, *our translation*). Breton's aesthetic turmoil contributed significantly to the birth of the surrealist movement, such that we can say that the Sulka – albeit unknowingly – have played a role in the evolution of the history of Western art.

Today, the old praying mantis mask that continues to dry out in the Chicago museum is just a faded remnant of the flamboyant, lively, rustling, odoriferous and ephemeral figure that once danced in New Britain. And yet, if it still retains some semblance of its former self, it is in its enduring ability to (sometimes) astonish a visitor.

The surrealists were profoundly mistaken in taking "primitive art" for the expression of an unbridled upwelling of individual inventiveness, whereas *in situ* it was above all a striving for conformity. They would have doubtless found it distasteful to learn to what extent the Sulka affirmed the importance of the norm and of respect for tradition.[12] It is thus remarkable that, based on false premises and lacking an informed reference for the ethnographic signification of this object, the surrealists paid it one of the truest tributes that it deserved.

This fertile misunderstanding gives pause. It shows that, though frankly subjective, the feelings of a Western artist had the merit of recognizing the importance of emotion in the perception of an ethnographic objet – which was not necessarily the prevailing or received view among his contemporaries (Blachère 1996:146). Perhaps, in fact, this could lead visitors to ask themselves whether the creators of the object could also have accorded this same importance to emotion…

In the performance of *Ghost Dance and Four Rituals* that he produced in Paris in 2012, anthropologist and dancer Hédi Zammouri proposed a corporeal representation of his personal vision of Sulka masks through an approach that he characterized as "cobbled together, poaching, hijacking".[13] Learning of Hédi Zammouri's fascinating and inspired performance or of the surrealists' writings about them, the Sulka would doubtless be disturbed by the effect their creations produce on the other side of the world. Should it become known, their reception of this reception would certainly constitute extremely interesting ethnographic data.

Agree that objectivity or scientific neutrality is illusory; renounce contextualisation in the form of imitation or restitution, in other words, the illusion of authenticity; identify what is exhibited as the representation of an exogenous reality and not this reality itself; recognize the modes of intellectual appropriation by rendering them explicit; lay claim to the plurality and subjectivity of views, and their contradictions; make the museum this forum, this place of confrontation, experimentation and debate

that Duncan Cameron (1992) called for: heuristically, this bias seems to be more stimulating. The fact that public collections inevitably represent cultural appropriation paves the way for reinterpretations. It is because the original intentions of its makers do not exhaust the meaning of this object that the process of intellectual appropriation (Thomas 1991) – or what Marilyn Strathern (1994) prefers to qualify as *empowerment*[14] – corresponds to a form of universally encountered creative reception. The museum must not serve as a sanctuary for an object saved from a ritually programmed death, but rather allow it to continue to live, and it is the world of multiple possible receptions of this object that can truly make this happen.

NOTES

1 Custom requires the initiated to keep this secret and for the uninitiated to refrain from questioning them about it. Violation of this law of silence was formerly punishable by death; it now results in financial penalties determined by village courts.

2 This article is based on 24 months of ethnographic research that I conducted among the Sulka between 1980 and 1994.

3 For a critical discussion of Gell's position, see Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini (2010).

4 Anthony Forge relates the sensation of perfection induced by certain works as "a sense of fitness, even of perfection, that [...] may manifest itself as a sense of the presence of the supranormal, of more power than humans alone can achieve" (Forge 1979:284). Note that the powerful emotional distress caused by the spectacle of beauty is so great that there is a ritual procedure of compensation for anyone who explicitly reports this to the head of the ceremony (see Jeudy-Ballini 1999).

5 The impossibility of physically comparing objects dating from different periods allows us to postulate this continuity. When I showed villagers photographs of Sulka masks made 70 years ago and held in German museums, none of them was able to certify that these masks were of Sulka origin and *a fortiori* to identify the designs on their surface.

6 The expression is taken from Christine Jourdan (1994:129) in reference to Solomon Islanders.

7 Let us note in passing that the problem of material or physical preservation is not reserved to museums of ethnography alone, as the same observation applies to productions of nature in natural history museums and other preservation institutions, such as zoos.

8 See Ames 1993; de Barry et al. 1994; Howes and Classen 2006:200; Jolly 2011; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991, 1998; Price 2007; *Le Débat* 2007; Vogel 1988.

9 Exhibitions like that curated by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art (now The Africa Center) in New York (*ART/Artifact. African Art in Anthropology Collections*, 1988) have at least attempted to acknowledge this.

10 "Whether the representation essentializes (one is seeing the quintessence of [a culture]) or totalizes (one is seeing the whole through the part), the ethnographic fragment returns with all the problems of capturing, inferring, constituting, and presenting the whole through parts" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:416).

11 Note that we could just as easily say: "This is no longer a mask either." Indeed, the term "mask" employed throughout this text for the sake of convenience is inadequate to designate the object in its entirety, including the plant fibres that cover the body of the dancer as he holds the upper part over his head.

12 We must emphasize that this is an endogenous point of view and not an established fact. While creative innovation never ceases to provide evidence of its existence, the Sulka do not value it as such, preferring to remain loyal to that which was, in other words, to the relation to lost ancestors who thereby survive through the actions of their descendants.

13 Hédi Zammouri, *personal correspondence* (January 7, 2012 email).

14 Criticising the use of appropriation by Thomas, which she deems ill-adapted to Melanesian societies, she recommends the term *empowerment*, which could be understood in this context as investment.

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