



*Aethiopia: Peuples d'Ethiopie*. Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium,

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Originally opened in 1996, *Aethiopia* is an exhibition with a projected life-span of about four years. This is proof of the enormity of the exhibit, which includes three thousand objects collected in Ethiopia especially for the exhibition, and it is complemented by the scope of an accompanying book of the same title. When the exhibition is set against this book, the overall project to present a holistic resource about Ethiopia is clear. The book is a separate achievement and will be reviewed in a following article. It is more likely to be referred to after visiting the exhibition itself than as a guide, as it is a source of specialised essays that are of independent interest. Here, the exhibition as it stands on its own is outlined without reference to the book, and its objectives assessed. 

The organization of *Aethiopia*, the largest ever exhibition of Ethiopian material culture, is in response to the misrecognition of Ethiopia by the majority of Europeans whose contact with Ethiopia has been limited to its visual representation on television a decade ago. The media reports of famine that mobilized aid inscribed in collective memory a land of death and despair and a landscape parched beyond reclamation. The wish to reveal the wealth of Ethiopia is one widely felt to be worthwhile by those whose purview is more informed than average. As a showpiece of the nation, it embraces the supposedly unifying potential of difference under the umbrella of multiculturalism.

*Aethiopia* is not a national exhibition,

such as other expositions and world fairs; it is not an Ethiopian state initiative to redraw the international image of Ethiopia, and it is not curated by Ethiopians. Brainchild of an NGO worker, *Aethiopia* is redolent with worthy motives; but when I had occasion to view the exhibition, the project to improve the image of Ethiopia was hampered by the exhibition space. The rotunda of the Africa Museum, Tervuren is an icon of Belgian national identity. It is featured in advertisements for Stella Artois beer and is also a monument to the Belgium colonial exploitation of a century ago. The pedagogical pretensions of Leopold II, who personally owned the Congo, framed the display; the makeshift exhibition furniture lined the walls, but a palimpsest of murals of uncannily underpopulated, panoramic friezes of Zaire hovered uncomfortably behind. Unfortunately, *Aethiopia* is a neo-colonial collection and in the guise of a promotional exhibition recapitulates the imbalance of power anew. *Aethiopia* resonates with a sense of bold exploration; expropriation and booty reoccur in a new guise. One imagines the exhibition collectors on an exotic treasure hunt in Africa stalking "game," amassing the three thousand objects displayed, such as baskets, head gear, religious objects, and so on. 

Ostensibly this is not an anachronistic presentation of material culture. The exhibition looks jazzy and its design softens disconcerting elements of imbalance and paternalism. Embracing the vitality of an African coun-

try's cultural genius was made possible by gungho collecting, given free reign by the imbalance of neo-colonialism, which has assembled an eclectic celebration of Ethiopia with questionable content. Ethiopia's western vanguards include aid workers, who are so assured of their worth and whose acceptability is so overriding, it seems, that their motives are left uncriticized, and their activity unsupervised by professional curators au fait with museological concerns about representation. What has been superimposed is the cultural racism *<cite>de nos jours</cite>*. An insensitive presentation corresponds to this charge: "diversity" is the buzz word, but this multicultural perspective is naively misrecognised as an inherently uncontroversial remedy for racism. *<p>* Whether *<cite>Aethiopia</cite>*'s presentation of Ethiopia as an inclusive unit, in concert with the display of diversity, could be effective if handled differently is uncertain. When wandering through the galleries, the sum of the parts (environmental features and historical, ethnic and cultural particulars), does not hold together enough to enable one to imagine an alternative arrangement. In other words, could another *<cite>Aethiopia</cite>* achieve an image of Ethiopia as a self-evident, cultural unit? Moreover, is such a totalizing endeavour the right way to approach exhibiting cultures? Is any attempt to show the "mosaic of cultures" doomed to be merely an assortment of material objects, because Ethiopia is so heterogeneous? The exhibit tries to combat the confusion of the mosaic to an extent by emphasizing and lauding heterogeneity but encapsulates rather than investigates its subtleties, making the plurality of cultural styles within Ethiopia simply a vehicle by which to capture the attention of the visitor, who wanders through an extravaganza of diversity. Even well-informed visitors will struggle to make sense of this exhibition. Diversity is a device which could be understood as an expression of the contradictions that make up contemporary Ethiopia, but this sensitivity is absent. *<p>* The Ethiopian paradox of unity in diversity is not con-

sidered. Ethiopia is presented not as a product of human agency and a nebulous cultural area, but as a physical entity, an outgrowth of its geological foundations. A causal environmental explanation for cultural diversity is suggested. The genesis of the rock formation which caused the dramatic contrast between the rift valley and the fortress-like plateaux is illustrated by panoramic satellite photography; a topographical model displays the environmental variation found in Ethiopia, which is shaded in as a distinct physical entity. A replica skull of the "first Ethiopian" is exhibited in an evolutionary schema to the right of the relief model of Ethiopia. The gallery is imbued with a foundational spirit. The originary moments are represented by monumental replicas and are complemented by the makeshift polystyrene Axumite architecture that clads the gallery. Axumite stelae and motifs symbolically augment the monumental importance of Ethiopia to human civilization. *<p>* A faux stone Axumite archway frames the entrance to *<cite>Aethiopia</cite>*, and the layering of peoples falls into the immemorial division between high culture, namely the Axumite Christian heritage, and the rest of Ethiopian culture. There are "ethnographic" displays for all the other cultures in Ethiopia, while a whole gallery is devoted to Axum and the Church. Highland Christian culture is included in the ethnographic walkway of diversity, which is supposed to straddle the divide. The multicultural theme supposedly takes precedence; however, at the exhibition's centre is a negatory feature, a huge reconstructed mak'das, an integral component of the interior of every Ethiopian orthodox church. This counteracts the multicultural ethos because the division is intact, and so the exhibition's general orientation does not gel. *<p>* As more or less ethnographic, the exhibition is about people and culture, but overall one is left with an uncomfortable sense slightly reminiscent of muted face-to-face encounters with dioramas of human physical types. Petrified trophies are housed in a pan-Ethiopian walkway with informational plaques giving brief outlines

of named peoples, and accompanying photographic stereotypes. House styles are associated with a particular people, and this arrangement of peekaboo and cross-sectioned houses from the four corners of Ethiopia encourages the viewer to evaluate each in comparison with the others. Life-size reconstructions of houses are filled with implements and ornaments, and clothed mannequins are displayed alongside. The visitor is enticed to imagine an accumulation of objects, to sift and sort through the cultural jumble; and belongings, assessed aesthetically and for their usefulness, can be compared avariciously. Nevertheless, the exhibition's focus is not coherent, and the visitor is overwhelmed by the diversity of style. <p> The objects themselves have been lovingly collected. Singular artifacts are included which typify a way of life, or mark difference, and this is remarkable, but they stand for the whole of the cultural genius and way of life of each group represented. This has been managed in a literal sense as the direct means of typification: wattle and daub abodes, fittingly ethnographic, typify the African subject. This means of exposing lifestyles overlooks the cumulative effect of the overload of objects displayed—as either voracious cultural consumption and touristic voyeurism, or as a museum salvage project to preserve primitive lifestyles and traditional practices threatened by evolutionary progress for posterity. The space given to non-Semitic peoples in a revision of the Ethiopian nation's image will go unrecognised by the public, who are probably proponents of the Benetton seal and the unguarded ideal of universal human worth. The inclusion of cultures under-represented or omitted in the past because they are not the northern Ethiopian dominant culture is essential for a more informed and balanced presentation. Unfortunately the point of these cultures' inclusion is misrepresented: the invidious sense of evolutionary taxonomy hangs in the air like a bad odour, and this subliminal representation of Africans subtly fuses with popular idealizations of the primitive. <p> It is rather redun-

dant to pass from gallery to gallery in the order presented trusting that there is a development and momentum of meaning. Amateurish curatorial strategy plays a part in presenting a less than consistent totality. For example, some objects are over-represented because they are collectibles; the most striking example of this is the devotion to head rests, which amount to more than five hundred of the objects collected. The importance of the means of acquisition of certain objects, or indeed the ethics of their inclusion, is omitted from captions. No visitor will ever know that the leather robe worn by the woman in the photograph on the plaque is the same one on the mannequin, or that the phallic kalasha diadem in the adjacent case belonged to the man featured in the exhibition's signature photograph and was bought by one of the curators through hard bargaining. Visitors can understand the value of this object only if captions are concerned to employ cultural description of beliefs and practices, but these concerns did not deter the curators from collecting sensitive objects. <p> Another instance where hidden truths about objects are integral cultural features of artifacts is the freshly painted mak'das by an Ethiopian priest which towers in splendidly lurid colours as the central piece of the exhibition. The unattributed work of the Ethiopian priest was made possible by having him flown in to paint it, yet narrative description of the biblical and hagiographic scenes depicted has been woefully neglected. The paintings can stand up to scrutiny as well-executed and vibrant, but without narrative these pictures are left unexplained, and the visitor is denied the interest of finding out who the depicted Ethiopian and biblical characters are, and what they mean to Ethiopians. Overall the captions fail to include Ethiopian meaning, and this can have ramifications: the impenetrable mak'das replicates a sense of high culture set apart from common understanding, although disorganization is the more likely reason for the lack of explanatory text. <p> It was not apparent that the Konso posts (waga) were in the first gallery

because of lack of space, but I was told this by a curator. Interestingly, locating them in the origin room had the unintended consequence of exhibiting them with Axum stelae models and photographs of megalithic art. A marvelous sense of Ethiopian cultural continuity, mysticism and unity was evoked. Inconsistency and insensitivity plague the exhibition. Contemporary art by cosmopolitan Ethiopians was housed in a small black room at the back of the exhibition; again, there was no accompanying narrative to speak of and the collection was positioned after the gallery of peoples. This juxtaposition is decontextualised, imbalanced and strange, and the impact of this was so strong that one might consider this to have been intentional, but it was not commented upon and it certainly detracted from rather than added to any understanding or appreciation. <p> Oddity is a repeated motif, and is one of a gamut of indexes of exoticism: a video of the process involved in Hamar hairdressing to make the distinctive clay bun had no presenter and no subtitles, hence the viewer could only gawk at the strangeness of the practice and the physical appearance of the Hamar, who were effectively mute and displayed as curios. The gallery seemingly devoted to modern history and popular culture includes a poster of Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida in <cite>Solomon and Sheba</cite> (1959), his bald head and her voluptuous figure making for a strange representation of the mythical couple. Incidental juxtapositions and contextual themes are present but this is not by virtue of any curatorial strategy. At this level of indiscriminate inclusion, it is wise to take a step back and observe that inclusion and unity are not one and the same. <p> Ethiopia's genesis is most strongly symbolised by the humanoid Lucy, or Dinkanesh, but even so this was not the beginnings of the display in the Africa Museum. Objects were relegated to inappropriate spots, and small cases of Nilotic objects, contemporary art and photo-portraiture spilled out of the confines of the exhibition so that the approach towards <cite>Aethiopia</cite> was

strewn with decontextualised objects. And this, in the context of the frightful colonial edifice, was not advisable. Dusty "ethnographic" trophies from the Congo lurked in adjacent cases, and the gallery's entrance was dominated by the most racist sculpture I have ever seen, commissioned for the national exhibition in 1897: a life-size black cast of an African man bearing down on a defenceless woman prostrate at his feet. On his hand is a claw-like, multi-pronged knife, and his head is covered with a leopard skin head-dress with two eye holes. The museum is Tarzan territory. As all exhibitions are shaped extensively by the space made available and the architectural limitations of a venue, it would not be fair to conclude that the mismanagement of the display will be perceptible on tour. The design features, however, set off a particular vision of Ethiopia and some of the display will be incorporated into other venues. <p> <cite>Aethiopia</cite> amounts to a totalizing melange of everything and anything Ethiopian. It is not so much what has been omitted, as has been the case in the past when only Christian art seemed to merit exhibition space, but more that what has been incorporated has been insensitively assembled. One omission worth mentioning is a gallery devoted to different types of cultivation. In the knowledge that this exhibition is a response to the horror of famine it seems out of kilter, but in step with the exoticism inherent in <cite>Aethiopia</cite>, that the livelihood of the majority of Ethiopians is not featured. Technology is aestheticised, and so fishing baskets and agricultural implements are arrayed with ethnic objects. Information plaques are decorated with pretty reproductions of botanical illustrations of teff, coffee, ensete and chat. Only consumable topics, or conversely, topics in consumable form, are displayed, and thus palliative forms fill the galleries. Ethiopia's position as one of the poorest countries in the world has been replaced by the idealisation of its cultural wealth. The apparent compulsion to acquire as much as possible for the collection is also discernible in the number

of trinkets and curios for sale at the museum shop. This reflects the volume of Ethiopian material culture leaving Ethiopia and bought by foreigners--a shame, for in the future Ethiopians will have a depleted storehouse of silver heirlooms.

<p> The exhibition is organized by Cultures and Communications and is currently on tour: Musee Arthur Rimbaud in the poet's natal town Charleville-Mezieres, France (until September 1998); Tropen Museum, Amsterdam (November-August 1999); Staatliches Museum fur Volkerkunde, Munich (September 1999-2000); Jerusalem (no fixed date); and finally to Denver, USA (no fixed date).

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