

AFRICA IN BRITAIN, BRITAIN IN AFRICA AND BEYOND.

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This paper focuses on the evolving connections between Britain, my adopted country, and Africa, a continent I began to familiarise myself with rather late in life, after a visit to Morocco in the early 1980s. As no doubt some of the readers would know, one of the arguments often heard is that Morocco is not quite Africa, and that the real Africa only begins south of the Sahara, which makes one wonder: where does that leave our hosts, Ethiopia, and that great African civilisation in its immediate neighbourhood, Egypt? But I will not go into any of that beyond this observation, save perhaps to relate quickly in this context what one of my erudite Swedish acquaintances said to me over dinner in Stockholm a few years ago. “Oh those blacks in the South,” she said, referring of course to the French and the Spaniards of southern Europe, “they are *so* different from us over here. We hardly have anything in common at all”. So, there I would leave it, and without further ado I would move quickly on to the first half of the subject of my talk, Africa in Britain, but without going into any great detail about the history, because that is extensively documented.¹

More of African history is being made as we speak, and quite a lot of it is being added to the internet and embodied in publications on paper virtually each passing day. So, in sum, I am going to steer clear of any further discussion on definitions of real or not-so-real Africa or of African history.

Eleven years have elapsed since Africa appeared or rather loomed large on the British scene, thanks largely to the *africa95* “festival” of 1995. I use that word as a term of convenience, because *africa95* was a festival and a lot more, a constellation of exhibitions, performances, conferences and symposia and, above all, a political happening. The high point of *africa95*, mainly in terms of prestige and media attraction, was the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, which later travelled elsewhere. Royal Academician and artist Tom Phillips curated the exhibition. There were other important shows in London and outside London, even in the north of Britain, but *Africa: The Art of a Continent* was remarkable for its ambitious scale, the range of artefacts it offered on display, the passions it aroused amongst London’s art critics and the audiences it brought into the Royal Academy.

The exhibition offered, in a single venue, works ranging from the tools and rock art of early humankind to objects produced well into the twentieth century. Many of those who came to see the exhibition had never before been inside the building on Piccadilly, even though it tugs at the heart of Soho and straddles as rich and bewildering a cultural and ethnic mix as is likely to be seen in the British capital.

Now why was that? Because, quite simply, the Royal Academy was largely seen by Britain’s non-white ethnic communities as a preserve of the white British majority and widely perceived as a venue, again, of white art as opposed to all other art, whether British or foreign. The Royal Academy had organised other shows of non-western art earlier, but somehow those shows, however admirable or successful, had failed to dispel, in many minds, the notion of the Royal Academy as an elitist gallery space, a western elitist one at that. I say western elitist because, as we know only too well, elites are not the sole preserve of the West. Formatting error, not a reference but my own text.

Despite an element of surprise in the organising and sitting of the event and indeed some initial suspicion, though quickly dispelled, of the Royal Academy’s intentions, the staging of

¹ Both *africa95* and *Africa05* are well documented. A good starting point for *africa95* is http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search2?coll_id=5954&inst_id=19. For *Africa05*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcafrica/africa05/index.shtml> offers a good overview of all available resources.

Africa. The Art of a Continent appeared to please most of those non-white Britons who visited it and in the process became familiar with the Royal Academy as an institution that did not flinch from showcasing their art and culture.

This process did the Royal Academy a whole of lot of good and also went some way towards satisfying a long-felt need for a greater representation of non-white art and culture, whether British or borrowed, in a mainstream art gallery.

Although the Royal Academy has earned fame and notoriety (the question of which of the two depends on one's point of view) for organising, years later, shows such as *Sensation*, when it staged *Africa: The Art of a Continent* it was still widely regarded as a venue driven by aesthetics, western aesthetics at that and, of course, the economic need to remain solvent through large attendances.

In retrospect, a closer examination of what featured in *Africa: The Art of a Continent* reveals it as an exhibition driven largely by aesthetics. This was important for the Academy at the time, as its customer base, so to speak, or the regular audience — other than the audience it had yet to discover — would have expected nothing less from an exhibition on Africa.

In keeping the aesthetic element paramount in its curatorial considerations, the Academy was up against a significant challenge and risked losing the art historical argument. Luckily for all concerned, the exhibition appeared to have delivered well on all fronts, with a careful choice of objects within geographical and historical contexts that gave the display academic and scholarly weight. The exhibition went to the Guggenheim Museum and received general international acclaim. The event on the whole was not without problems, two of the strongest objections being that it was paternalistic in tone, if not necessarily in intention and that it failed to put contemporary art and curatorial practices in Africa, or by Africans on the continent or in Diaspora, in their proper context. This sentiment was expressed widely, and most notably by Olabisi Silva, in her appraisal of *africa95*.²

“*africa95 should have been a cultural celebration and on some levels it was, but somehow a bitter aftertaste of cultural paternalism lingers. Africa is not one country but over 45 countries. Its size and diversity continue to challenge Europeans who find it impossible to focus on just one country. Festivals such as Japan, Brazil and Spain have highlighted and presented stimulating insights into individual countries, not whole continents. Even with the “curatorial correctness” of Seven Stories*³ —in which, significantly, the catalogue biographies of the artists in the exhibition are conspicuous by their absence—it is no coincidence that as we approach the millennium, Africa in its present economic, political and social quagmire is still at the mercy of European benefactors. As long as this is the case, we and other Third World countries will remain as Cuban critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera has stated, “the curated cultures.”⁴

I mention *africa95* at some length because, absent from the context at the time was what became omnipresent in 2005, when *Africa05* swept across Britain as the largest festival of African art and culture ever held in Britain, and was immediately embraced by the government as part of its wider foreign policy agenda in Africa. In 1995, Britain under the Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, was reeling under a series of post-Thatcherite economic and political traumas and was in the shadow of the Queen's description of 1992 as her *annus horribilis*, following a series of negative events affecting the Royal Family, most dramatic of all being the rift between Charles and Diana. John Major's government had no time for art and less so for African art.

² Silva, Olabisi, “*africa95: Cultural Colonialism or Cultural Celebration*”, in *Art Criticism and Africa*, ed. Katy Deepwell. London, Saffron, 1996.

³ *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*, at The Whitechapel Art Gallery, East London, featured works in mixed media by artists already known in the West from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda. The entire exhibition aimed to establish a historical context for modernistic art in Africa. One interesting portion of the exhibition was the special section dedicated to the murdered African leader, Steve Biko. See Clémentine Deliss, *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa*. ehibition catalogue., London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995.

⁴ Gerardo Mosquera, “Some Problems in Transcultural Curating” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher. London, Kala Press, in assoc. with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994, pp. 105-112.

In remarkable contrast, the Labour government, under Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2005, was keen to mix politics and art and ably demonstrated its flair for making use of art as a soft conduit for political objectives or projection of foreign policy, with the staging of the *Turks* exhibition,⁵ again at the Royal Academy, at a time when Britain was pushing for Turkey's entry into the European Union.

The Royal Academy was not available again for an Africa blockbuster, because another politically loaded exhibition, *China: The Three Emperors*, was just around the corner, but *Africa05* was an extremely timely and welcome occurrence, that coincided with the government's Africa initiatives on debt relief and poverty reduction programmes. This time around, not only the government and funding bodies, such as the Arts Council, but also the British Broadcasting Corporation participated with great gusto in the programming of Africa-related events throughout Britain. *Africa05* has met with resounding success and is now practically wound down, though some of its events and programmes are likely to continue through this year and beyond.

A quick word here about *africa95*. Although there is insufficient recorded evidence from the mass media, largely because *africa95* was ignored or sidelined by influential art critics, as an event of little relevance to Britain, *africa95* made significant inroads into British society, especially the art and heritage sector and the universities. I was directly involved with two conferences, both held at the Courtauld Institute of Art. One, organised by *Eastern Art Report* and teasingly titled *Myths and Mothballs*, brought academics, art historians and artists together in an examination of what was meant by ancient and modern in relation to Africa.⁶ The other, titled *Art Criticism and Africa*, focused mainly on West Africa, Egypt and South Africa and Zimbabwe, resulted in the volume cited earlier, which remains to this day a definitive text on the manifestation and evolution of art critical practice on the African continent as well as international art criticism relevant to Africa.⁷ Other conferences at the University of London allowed prolonged examination of issues in African art education, art history, and cultural and social change both in Africa and in the West. *Africa95* spawned great interest in African art and led to increased interest in African studies at British universities and, by extension, in European institutions that were exposed to the British event.

Perhaps most remarkably *africa95* helped Britain's black – by that I mean largely African and Caribbean – communities repair some of the damage that is inevitably caused by displacement, migration or cultural alienation. *Africa95* was important in reinforcing these communities' self-identification as peoples with ancient histories and vibrant contemporary cultures, both on the African continent and in various diasporic communities in the West.

Africa95 changed audience perceptions and responses in different ways. For example, some of the strongest audience participation was apparent in events pertaining to performance arts and sculpture, though contemporary art shows such as the *Seven Stories* exhibition at Whitechapel received a lot of attention, as did visual arts or photography exhibitions where western definitions or perceptions of arts and crafts were challenged by examples of the contemporary practice of

⁵ See <http://www.turks.org.uk/index.php> for a comprehensive look at the exhibition. Also: Rizvi, Sajid 2005: "Turks at Europe's Gate? When diplomacy and geopolitics meet art." *Arab Banker*, Spring 2005

⁶ *Myths and Mothballs* examined curatorial issues on the African continent for instigators and organisers of both contemporary and traditional arts in Africa and debated tensions between the academic world and journalism, the latter by far the more responsible for whatever went by way of art criticism in the popular press. Although most 'reporting' (if not criticism) of new art, as well as exhibitions of traditional art was produced by journalists on African newspapers and, to a lesser degree, on the radio, most of such output did not meet with the approval of academics, who thought such writing as facile and worthless

⁷ AICA was actively involved with this conference and contributed towards the publication of the book, *Art Criticism and Africa*, edited by Katy Deepwell, for which major funding came from the Arts Council England. AICA's involvement was not widely publicised but, as Deepwell outlined in her introduction, it proved to be a precursor of later events. She wrote, "The conference had a twofold purpose. The first aim was to develop an initiative within AICA, a UNESCO non-governmental organisation, to facilitate the establishment of autonomous national sections of AICA in those African countries where English is recognised as an official language. The latter initiative has led to AICA sections in Nigeria and Zimbabwe being established in 1997 with discussions about a section continuing in South Africa. The second aim was to develop an ongoing dialogue with many of the visual arts participants who had come to the UK to take part in the *africa95* festival." The latter goal was pursued at different levels by different interests and certainly culminated in happenings during *Africa05*.

artists on the continent, as well as those fighting for recognition from mainstream galleries in London, Paris or New York.

Africa95 opened European doors for African and Caribbean artists and either helped them become international artists — in other words, artists with ever-bigger footprints in the African diasporas — or gave them vital support, that allowed them to continue with their artistic practice in their native lands.

But *africa95* on the whole was about the bigger picture, the broad sweep. In 1995, it was still possible for an artist or curator to lump things together, call it all African, and get away with it. Many of the events in *africa95* drew on themes that were advanced or broadly defined as “African” rather than, say, Ethiopian, Nigerian or South African. The fact that Africa, a huge continent, had logical possibilities such as diversity of local histories, arts and crafts, cultures and societies did not seem to figure much at the time. Perhaps it was just as well, given that *africa95* in many respects was a pioneering exercise, the key for unlocking doors that had long been shut and for opening up spaces that one did not know existed. Perhaps the organisers of individual shows knew, or at least felt, that a simpler message had a greater chance of accessing and reaching out to greater audiences. Perhaps some of the curatorial practice itself, at the time, had not been exposed to the complexity of the subject matter that it encountered and then proceeded to make accessible to audiences. In some respects, this is a fraught subject, beset by controversies, some recorded and others buried underneath layers of discreet silence. It may be expedient to give the various organisers of *africa95* events the benefit of the doubt.

Last year’s *Africa05* programme, in contrast, has thrived on difference and diversity. There has also been in evidence a maturer, more confident approach, partly in response to an audience whose experience of Africa has ranged from television viewing of distressful scenes of hunger or war to an informed appreciation of art in various forms, from visual arts to music and dance to cinema. Publishers have capitalised on a growing interest in African fiction writing and writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri and numerous others now — rightfully — enjoy celebrity status.

An important change over the years since the staging of *africa95* has been the embracing of African art and culture as an integral part of their heritage by Britain’s own native African and Caribbean communities. This is in no small part a response to years of underrepresentation in the cultural mainstream. While Asian cultural icons have become a part of the British scene, Africa clearly lags behind. More crucially, a wider sense of underrepresentation has led to widespread campaigning, not only for greater representation of both Asian and African communities and their cultures in the British mainstream but also for radical changes in the curriculum, in the education sector, at large, in the heritage sector, which includes libraries and museums, and in the employment sector. All this has profound implications not only for British society but also for the location of African (and indeed Asian) culture and the manner in which it is defined and represented, within a British context.

I was on a Commission appointed by London’s Mayor, Ken Livingstone, to identify areas with a marked lack of representation of African and Asian communities in the capital’s heritage sector. This Commission on African and Asian Heritage, or MCAAH, published its report last year,⁸ having looked in great detail at how British heritage currently is managed, how those involved with running museums, public galleries, archives and libraries are trained, and to what extent the educational curriculum is inclusive of the historical contributions of African, Asian and Caribbean citizens to British life. The Commission also looked into how community-based heritage organisations can be made stronger and how major institutions, including the British Museum, can better make use of people drawn from African, Asian and Caribbean communities. If implemented, the recommendations of the Mayor’s Commission will transform British society in more ways that either *africa95* or *Africa05* hoped for. Nor is the future implementation of reforms that give African and Asians a greater voice in society dependent upon Labour retaining power during the coming years. Rather it is these communities’ substantial voting power that may influence governmental decision-making on the question of jobs in the heritage sector and the impact that is bound to have on art, art education, art history, to mention a few areas of

⁸ See delivering shared heritage, http://www.almlondon.org.uk/uploads/documents/delivering_shared_heritage.pdf

immediate concern. One direct result will be more alternative, challenging writing on all aspects of British history and society, including art history and art criticism, and there will certainly be more art.

British history is already being revamped in small measures, though changes in curriculum are still quite small. For example, the 200th anniversary in October last year of the British naval victory over the French and Spanish off Cape Trafalgar highlighted the contribution of non-white soldiers fighting for the Empire. It was the first time such recognition had been granted so publicly. Apparently, one in ten of the ordinary seamen at Trafalgar was non-white, a fact that British African historians now want incorporated fully into curriculum texts, along with many other aspects of African and Asian presence in the country. *Africa05* featured several events, including exhibitions that revisited known elements of history and society.

In one of the unexpected outcomes of the last G8 Summit, the British government announced its intention to pump £17m (\$30m) into an initiative to encourage British business links with Africa and help improve the continent's image. Whether this objective can be achieved with British donations alone, or whether more is required on several fronts, will have to be seen. But it is clear that the two Africa-related art events in Britain, *africa95* and *Africa05*, have coincided with developments elsewhere on the British scene that are worth watching and certainly ensure that Britain will remain a major player on the African art and culture scene, at least outside Africa, if not directly in African countries. And it is also becoming apparent that more Britons of African descent will be playing proactive roles in the process. It is an opportunity for both Britain and Africa, for these Britons to reclaim elements of their heritage that may have been lost in the mists of time, and for their future African partners to benefit from their experience and resources.