



The arts past and present: the Benin Bronzes

Exhibiting the Benin Bronzes

Narrator:

The Benin sculptures are fascinating enough in isolation. But when you put them together in a museum, you add a whole new layer of meaning.

The French know better than most what a difference a display can make. In the late twentieth century, their museums were split by a fierce debate. It would question the very nature of non-Western objects like these. As the new millennium dawned, Paris awaited the arrival of a new museum. It was located in a prime position in central Paris. It was designed by one of France's top architects, Jean Nouvel. And the project certainly had friends in high places.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

Jacques Chirac the former President of France happens to be an amateur or what used to be called in un-regenerate times primitive art. And he's actually very knowledgeable about certain domains.

Narrator:

At the time, non-Western objects were housed in museums like this. They were the territory of anthropologists and ethnographers. They were seen as scientific evidence, which provided an insight into the culture that made them. But by the time this collection was filmed, anthropological museums were already in trouble.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

It so happens that the French museums with large ethnographic collections, essentially the Museum de l'Homme and the Musee des Arts Oceaneans et Africains, were somewhat deserted by the public. Nobody really knew much what to do with these collections any more.

Narrator:

Jacques Chirac wanted to bring all of France's collections of works from other civilisations together. The idea was to create a brand new cultural institution.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

The main aim is to exhibit and interest people in cultural diversity. Now the way the museum does this is by using visually spectacular objects to try and capture people's attention and draw them into the complexities raised by issues of diversity.

Narrator:

Jacques Chirac had high aspirations: to combat Western ethnocentrism. To hold collections in trust for all mankind. And to contribute to positive dialogue between cultures and civilisations. But first they had to grapple with the issue of display. Gone were the crowded glass cabinets of the ethnographers and anthropologists. These unashamedly visual displays owed more to the traditions of art historians.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

It's true that the amalgamation of the anthropological collections under a single roof, did create considerable controversy at the time. Particularly with the anthropological community. The anthropologists in France were worried by the idea that, their cherished objects were being captured by art historians, and that all these objects would simply be shown as art, rather than as exemplars or testimonies of cultural diversity.

Narrator:

This sculpture is the head of a Benin king. To an art historian, it's a piece of historical evidence. It is also an aesthetic object, to be appreciated in and of itself. But to an anthropologist, it's an artefact which is valuable because it sheds light on another culture and a different way of life.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

What troubled them, probably, was also the idea that they no longer held a monopoly of discourse over these objects. And obviously for understandable reasons, I felt this myself at a time as an anthropologist. It's a bit painful to be deprived of the right to have the final word on all these objects.

Narrator:

The museum, Quai Branly, opened in 2006. Its bold architecture was calculated to attract attention. But it was what lay inside the building that was under the closest scrutiny.

Anne-Christine Taylor:

This option of exhibition does to a certain extent lay the museum open to accusations of aestheticising and othering cultures. But it's a risk we are willing to assume in a sense. Because objects that we tend to categorise as art, are a good way of drawing people into other ways of conceiving the world.

In 2007, a major Benin exhibition came to Quai Branly. The exhibition had first been shown in Vienna, where it was designed and displayed in an anthropological museum.

Yves le Fur:

Lorsque nous avons conçu l'exposition à Paris, nous l'avons reprise de l'exposition de Vienne avec la structure qu'avaient fait les commissaires à Vienne, en Autriche. Donc entendez que nous reprenions cette exposition, nous reprenions le concept de cette exposition, on ne l'a pas changé.

(When we planned the exhibition in Paris, we kept the original spirit and maintained the structure designed by the curators in Vienna. We took on their underlying concept, we didn't change it.)

Narrator:

But these visitors in Paris are seeing a different display from their counterparts in Vienna. And the way the exhibition was adapted gives a good idea of Quai Branly's approach to display.

Yves le Fur:

Moi, j'ai désiré en tant que commissaire à Paris, j'ai désiré mettre particulièrement en valeur une des productions tout à fait étonnantes de l'art du royaume de Bénin, qui sont ces plaques.

(As the curator in Paris, I wanted to highlight something absolutely stunning in Benin art: these plaques).

Narrator:

Running down the left hand side of the exhibition is a collection of bronze plaques.

Yves le Fur:

Ces plaques en bronze elles sont tout à fait étonnantes à différents niveaux parce que d'abord, ce sont des formes d'oeuvres qui sont tout à fait uniques en Afrique, où on ne pratique pas ce genre de bas relief. (The bronze plaques are stunning on different levels. First, they are a form of sculpture that is otherwise unknown in African art, called bas relief).

Narrator:

That's an artistic point. But the plaques also contain anthropological information.

Yves le Fur:

Ces plaques font l'apologie de l'Oba mais aussi de ces dignitaires, d'un certain nombre de rituels, d'un certain nombre d'actions, qui sont véritablement une archive historique qui vient

se superposer, s'additionner à l'archive orale puisqu'il n'y a pas d'écriture. (These plaques are a eulogy to the Oba and his chiefs. They provide an unusual historical record of their rituals and actions. It complements the oral record, as there isn't any written record).

Narrator:

In Paris, the plaques are given a special status by the design of the exhibition itself.

Yves le Fur:

J'ai voulu qu'elles se succèdent et qu'elles créent une sorte de colonne vertébrale dans l'exposition qui soit en relation avec les thèmes qui avaient été choisis par Vienne. (I wanted them to follow one after another and create a sort of spinal column right through the exhibition, which would link the themes that were chosen by Vienna).

Narrator:

Facing the line of plaques are the themed collections of other exhibits. These items complement what you can see in the plaques themselves. This plaque shows three African traders. They're holding manilas, the currency that was used for trade with Europe. The next plaque along shows their Portuguese trading partners. And they're not short of a manila or two. But look to the right hand side of the exhibition, and you'll see real manilas. This cross-referencing bridges the gap between art and anthropology.

Yves le Fur:

On n'a pas choisi une exposition qui soit anthropologique, ou esthétique ou artistique, parce que je crois que, et ça c'est aussi une des grandes politiques du musée du quai Branly, c'est de pouvoir avoir des approches complémentaires. (We didn't adopt either a purely anthropological or a purely aesthetic route. This fits with one of Quai Branly's core policies, which is to harness both sets of disciplines in a complementary way).

Narrator:

But some observers believe the art historians have the upper hand. This salt cellar is presented as an object to be admired, not just explained. It's been given an aesthetic value that reaches beyond its historical context. This Queen Mother's head is displayed as a sculpture. The lighting is from two different angles, to enhance the three-dimensional effect. The display sends out strong messages about the artistic quality of the piece.

Yves le Fur:

On peut faire semblant d'être ennuyeux et rebarbatif et on peut aussi essayer de donner du plaisir parce que les couleurs sont agréables, les éclairages sont agréables, on essaye de donner un confort maximum. Ça peut vous donner l'impression d'une galerie d'arts, l'important c'est que l'information scientifique elle soit aussi présente. (We can fall into the trap of being pompous and intellectual, or we can try to give pleasure because the colours and lighting are attractive. We aim for comfort: that might give the impression of being an art gallery, but the important thing is that the scientific information is also there).

Narrator:

So this could be one legacy of the anthropologists' approach. Information about the Benin culture is used to structure the exhibition. But to some critics, even that doesn't go far enough. This leopard can be seen as a piece of art. But originally it was used for carrying water. Seeing it purely as a sculpture could strip it of its meaning within the culture where it was created.

Yves le Fur:

Or vous voyez par exemple qu'à chaque objet vous avez quand même un ensemble de 6 à 7 lignes qui donnent des informations précises sur chacun des, chacun des objets, et que cette information soit pas en très gros mais soit disponible et laisse au regard le plaisir de pouvoir regarder des formes et de pouvoir les admirer, je pense qu'il y a un équilibre possible entre les deux. (You see for example that for each object, you have six or seven lines, which give precise information about each object. But we don't bludgeon you round the head with this information, it is available but allows you to look, admire and enjoy the forms as well. That way, I think it's possible to have a balance between the two).

Narrator:

Quai Branly believe that their deliberately spectacular approach is beating off the critics. That they are bringing in large audiences, stimulating debate, and challenging the public to question their assumptions about their own culture.

Anne Christine Taylor:

People are not used to seeing their cultural patrimony exhibited in ways in which it's valued, made sort of made to appear as really valuable works of art and so on. Which they are.

Yves le Fur:

On a quand même une culture Africaine et cette culture Africaine elle se met au même niveau, elle est au même niveau, que certains arts de certaines cours Européennes XVIe, XVIIe, et la même puissance et c'est là où je veux dire qu'on peut tout à fait relativiser ce qui s'est passé en Europe. (You're looking at an African culture, and it's on a par with some of the art forms in some European courts of the 16th and 17th century. It has the same strength, and this should help to put into perspective what was happening in Europe).

Anne Christine Taylor:

Many French still assume that, they have this vision of African cultures as essentially tribal, relatively unhierarchical, relatively without centralised power and so on, showing Benin is a good way of rectifying or correcting this skewed view of African cultures in the French public.

But beyond France, a wider debate was raging. It was playing out in countries all over Europe, including Britain. This debate swings the emphasis back towards cultural context. And questions whether objects like these should be in Western hands at all.