

Good example of how
is it displayed in the
rockefeller wing of the
metropolitan m...

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According to Clifford, how is tribal art displayed in the Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History?

Clifford is very enthusiastic about the manner in which exhibits are displayed at this museum. He has positive words to say about the installation since it brings out the original and highly intriguing characteristics from a world which is sadly no more. Largely the work of the indefatigable Margaret Mead who died in 1978, the installation reveals a large number of exhibits which have been saved from what Clifford aptly describes as a 'destructive history'. The artefacts vary from medical implements and other customs which have vanished with time but they are fabulously brought to life here in more ways than one.

Clifford is more critical of the display at the MOMA for various reasons. Firstly this does not seem to be an exhibition about the art of tribal discourse; rather it is a display of those Western artists who used tribal inspiration for their own works. He complains that this type of art lacks authenticity since it is simply seen from a Western standpoint and this does not make it original either. Although he does have words of praise on how the exhibition pans out he remains critical of the understanding that it may want to convey. He is particularly critical of the 'mix and match' methods which are used in the MOMA exhibition which may seem to be confusing and without much basis for understanding.

How does art discourse compare with anthropological discourse?

An excellent example of art and anthropology mixing together is the ' Seated Couple' sculpture from mid 19th century Africa. This sculpture which is one of the most original in African works of the time. It is dated from 1800 to 1850 and comes from a period of intriguing self-discovery for the African continent. The common theme that the figures explore is the familial one where the man is carrying a quiver on his back while the woman is carrying a child on hers. In a sense these are the roles which have to be followed in African society where the man carries out his work as a hunter which provides for the family while the woman is left to raise the children according to traditional roles.

The sculpture consists of two elongated figures which are sitting down and linked by the man who is putting his arm in a protective stance over the woman. The way the human body is portrayed in its elongated form is typical of African sculptures at the time which showed a propensity for this type of appearance. Again the amulets and charms which adorn the figures lend a certain air of superstition to it all also inveighing a certain amount of deity influence which is also another characteristic feature of African sculpture. The facial expressions are also very much in keeping with what is the norm here with large mouths and slit eyes although one has to compensate for the difficulty of carving in wood. The man and woman sit proudly and almost haughtily in this respect and they also portray an air of serene reflection in proceedings which is captured by their assured and relaxed poise.

Clifford discusses several exhibitions of tribal art that differ from those of

MoMA, the American Museum of Natural History and the Met: “ African Masterpieces” at the Center for African Art; “ Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos” at the Center for African Art; “ Te Maori” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Northwest Coast show at the IBM Gallery. What aspects of these exhibitions does he find useful?

Most of the exhibitions which Clifford discusses are wide ranging in their nature but at least they do tend to explore authentic facets of the culture of tribalism. The ‘ African Masterpieces’ exhibition is particularly intriguing since it includes several rare artworks and artefacts which have been saved from destruction and which also shed a new spotlight on certain tribal customs and practices. The ‘ Igbo Art’ is also daring and different from the MOMA exhibition since it exposes folkloristic aspects of tribalism which are completely absent from the Metropolitan exhibition. ‘ Te Maori’ is a contrast with what was achieved at the Pacific exhibition since here the emphasis is on visual interpretations of Maori customs.

What alternatives does he call for in terms of museum practices? What are your thoughts on his suggestions?

Primarily Clifford is calling for exhibitions that question and create a stimulus. It is difficult to bring this out especially when faced with Westernized versions of African and Pacific art. He hopes for a more stylized representation of tribal life while also calling for better interpretative panels on certain artefacts. While obviously all excellent suggestions, these are slightly far-fetched at least in my opinion.

Works Cited:

James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," Chapter 9 in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, 1985, print