

African Art at the Museum of Primitive Art

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In the context of a larger project on the history of African art collections in the United States, which explores the cultural impact of decolonization beyond the confines of the African continent, I was interested in consulting the archives of the Museum of Primitive Art (MPA) at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC.) My research into the archives was driven by two major interests: I wanted to learn about the overall history of the MPA, but I was specifically interested in the museum's approaches to African art, as opposed to for example Latin-American, Native American or Asian art.¹ The following questions were central to my research:

- What was the MPA's role in the transformation of the African art market in the U.S.?
- To what extent was Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR) personally involved, and what drove him?
- How did NAR approach primitive art?
- What about the timing—why did the MPA project start in 1954 and why was it eventually folded into the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
- What does that tell us about the general appreciation of African art in the U.S.?

This report will attempt to address some of these questions, but my analysis of the material is ongoing, and will expand with the consultation of other archives.

The previous wave of popularity of African art peaked in the 1920's and 1930's, partly as a consequence of the interest in the "primitive" art of the new generation of European artists, and

of the pan-African activities of the era.² Since the 1920's, African objects were increasingly regarded as art objects instead of anthropological specimens, but it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that art museums were created exclusively in service of African, and other "primitive" arts. I believe this development is connected to the changing image of the African continent in the United States during and after the decolonization of the African continent.

The history of the founding and functioning of the Museum of Primitive Art, created in 1954 and opened in 1957 by NAR, is central to the argument I am constructing with regard to the changing image of Africa that existed in the era of decolonization, the impact this had on cultural politics, and the changing status of objects of "primitive" origin from anthropological specimens to art objects. In addition, NAR's background as a politician, diplomat, and art patron makes for an excellent comparison with the founder of the National Museum of African Art (part of the Smithsonian Museum today), Warren M. Robbins, who was also a diplomat and art collector.

Monica Black, an archivist at the RAC, quickly helped me determine which records could be of interest to me. Most of the papers that were useful to my project were in the Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection, Record Group 4 Personal, Series L. Projects, Boxes 161 to 168, and the Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 2, Office of the Messrs, Series E, Cultural Interests, Box 25, Folders 254 to 255 (also containing material on family contributions to the museum.) Additional material on the museum can be found in the Nelson Rockefeller Art Series, Speech Series and Vice Presidential Series, under confirmation hearings. I did a search in the card index as well, which is available at the RAC, under the following names:

Rene d'Harnoncourt, Robert Goldwater (both collaborators of the museum), Ernst Anspach, Henry Kamer, Clark Stillman, and Raymond Wielgus, which were all collectors or dealers of

primitive art. In addition to the archival material, I consulted one of the RAC's library books, Cary Reich's, *The Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller: Worlds to Conquer, 1908-1958*. New York: Doubleday, 1996, a biography on Nelson A. Rockefeller's life and career leading up to his election as Governor of New York.

The MPA was far from the first venture of the Rockefeller family into the museum world. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.) had been involved with the new Egyptian Museum and Research Institute in Cairo in the mid-nineteen twenties, and NAR himself was of course closely involved in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) before he ventured into the field of "primitive" art. It was in fact Rene d'Harnoncourt, director of MoMA, who was responsible for piquing NAR's interest in non-western art. The popularity of European "primitivist" artists, mostly expressionists like Picasso, was responsible for a general surge in interest in non-western art by western art collectors. Although this trend started in the 1920's, it was still reverberating by the 1940's, when d'Harnoncourt and NAR met. Aside from d'Harnoncourt, the other major influence on NAR and the MPA was of course Robert Goldwater, who became acting director of the MPA. Although NAR's early collection of non-western art was created with the advice of d'Harnoncourt, Goldwater sought out most of the acquisitions once the museum opened. Not only did both of these men work with the most renowned art dealers in New York, they also traveled to Europe in order to buy from European art dealers. After a European trip in 1957, Goldwater was of the opinion that "... these contacts will produce important objects for our consideration, and the knowledge that we will have them at materially lower cost of offerings in New York. We will of course, always need the New York dealers (and not only for New World objects), but knowledge of the European market is also basic."³

The selection of the objects occurred with a clear goal in mind—the creation of a collection and museum that could rival famous European collections. Consequently, making select acquisitions remained one of the priorities of the museum. Objects in other great collections often served as points of reference for the acquisition policy. The description of desired pieces betrays a particular vision of African objects in which they have been thoroughly removed from the world of ethnography and anthropology, and have entered the world of the art museum. “Exceptional beauty” and “one-of a-kind qualities,” were very often used in describing pieces bought for the museum’s collection.

The creation of a museum in which to display a collection was not solely the result of NAR’s impulse to share his personal collection, but also a wise business decision. It gave an already prestigious and valuable collection a boost in value, and elevated the general market for non-western art as well. NAR continued to buy and sell this type of art and involved several different collectors in the museum’s activities. These collectors included Ernst Anspach, Gustave Schindler, Eliot Elisofon (also involved with the African Art Museum in Washington D.C.), and the de Menil’s, who later founded the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas. Eventually, the MPA dealt directly with the art market, when it sold off part of its reserves in order to create space and funds for the acquisition of more top pieces.

The RAC contains some excellent material making a comparison between NAR and Warren Robbins of the African art museum in Washington D.C. Robbins wrote to NAR, drawing his attention to vision behind the museum in Washington:

by promoting public knowledge of the significance of African culture and of the creative contribution of the Negro as embodied in tribal sculpture, the museum fosters ‘equal regard’ as a foundation for ‘equal rights.’ We believe such knowledge helps to evoke in

the Negro American himself that ethnic pride and sense of connection with the past which are indispensable to his social development.”⁴

Both men clearly viewed their museums as potentially political spaces. An invitation to an opening or event was inevitably an opportunity to network. While Robbins was more interested in the diplomatic world of Washington D.C., NAR was more geared towards New York politics during the existence of the MPA. It is clear from the above quote however, that Robbins was more explicit about his creation of the African Art Museum in Washington D.C. as a form of social and political activism. In contrast, the MPA aimed to be “an international center of research into the primitive arts.”⁵ On the first anniversary of the MPA’s opening, the press release boasted the museum by stating that it was created “to supplement the achievement of the natural history museums from the esthetic point of view and to permanently establish primitive arts as an integral art of the arts of man.” In addition, the museum established a library and photo archive that became a central source of information for those interested in deepening their knowledge of non-western arts.⁶

The name “Museum of Primitive Art” did not go uncontested. Under pressure from Mexican contacts, the museum initially backed away from the word “primitive” because of the potentially denigrating meaning of the word. As a result, during the organizational phase, before the museum opened its doors, the museum was known as the “Museum of Indigenous Arts.” Soon, however, it became clear that the term “indigenous” had its own problems, such as it elicited the impression that the museum was one of contemporary crafts and Native American culture. By the time it opened its doors, the board of the MPA had decided on the name “Museum of Primitive Art.”⁷ The objections raised in 1954 by contemporary representatives of a

region represented in the collections against the term “primitive” reveal that the term was not unambiguously accepted as descriptive of non-western traditional art in the 1950’s.

The MPA was the essence of the transformation of the non-western object from artifact to art. Distancing the object from its background and original context and isolating it in the spotlight, the object was reinvented as a masterpiece, a deposit of value and wealth, and a symbol of cosmopolitan and tasteful modern New York life. This is demonstrated for example, in a letter from Monroe Wheeler, director of exhibitions and publications at the MoMA, in which Wheeler exalts NAR’s efforts, “you have done a tremendous thing for art in the twentieth century by opening your museum of Primitive Art. By presenting worthily in New York the great art in this field you have so discriminately assembled, you have pushed American cultural prestige one notch higher.”⁸

Some follow-up research in different archives will be needed to answer my questions. A visit to the Sotheby’s Archives in New York has given me an idea of the evolution of the prices of African art on the art market, although an investigation of a European African art dealer’s records would still be necessary to get a good idea of the international scene. In addition, I need to visit the archives at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Some of the MPA’s archives, in particular documentation related to the objects, moved with the collection to the Metropolitan Museum. Following a trail that I discovered at the RAC, I decided it might be worth consulting the Archives of the United States Information Agency. The MPA participated in exhibitions created by the USIA for circulation in the U.S. A further exploration of this trail might lead to a clearer picture of how the state envisioned the role of African art in the promotion of its foreign policies.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹A recent essay by Kate Ezra gives a good introduction to the history of the MPA from the perspective of African art studies. See Kate Ezra, "Collecting African Art at New York's Museum of Primitive Art." In Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke, editors, *Representing Africa in American Art Museums*, University of Washington Press, 2010, pp. 122-149.

²The term "primitive" art is now considered to be outdated and is no longer used by scholars to describe what is generally considered to be traditional non-western art. Because I use the term as a historical, and not a theoretical concept, it will appear in quotes.

³Letter from Robert Goldwater to Nelson A. Rockefeller (NAR), August 4, 1957, Folder 1651, Box 162, Record Group (RG) 2, Series E, Rockefeller Family Archives (RFA), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

⁴Letter from Warren Robbins to NAR, June 15, 1965, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Folder 1198, Box 122 Series 4 L, RFA, RAC.

⁵Letter from Robert Goldwater to William K. Simpson, December 5, 1957, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers, Folder 1642, Box 161, RG 2 L, RFA, RAC.

⁶1958 press release for the museum's first anniversary, Nelson A. Rockefeller Papers, Folder 1666, Box 164, RG 4 L, RFA, RAC.

⁷The name "Museum of Indigenous Arts" was used from December 17, 1954 until November 26, 1956.

⁸Letter from Monroe Wheeler to NAR, February 20, 1957, Nelson A Rockefeller Papers, Folder 1674, Box 165, RG 4 L, RFA, RAC.