



Art or artefact?

*Some observations on dilemmas faced by curators
in their attempt to display African art objects in the West*

From the 16th century onwards there was a constant flow of indigenous objects from Africa to Europe. However, only towards the end of the 19th century did these objects begin to draw the attention of a wider audience beyond the circle of select anthropologists or individual collectors who presented these objects as part of their 'curiosity rooms'. Colonialism was at its apex and most of the ethnographic museums were also founded at that time. Inevitably, the display of these artefacts was tainted by the epoch's imperialistic outlook and its underlying assumptions about the superiority of the white race. African artefacts were not considered as art. The predominant definition of art excluded non-naturalistic representations. The cherished values of art in the West were invention and originality, and this set it apart from craftsmanship. By contrast, collections of African items generally veered towards utilitarian objects and displayed repetitions on traditional styles and motives. As a consequence, the first museums to display African objects were natural history museums, and they had a clear mission: to demonstrate the evolution of culture and to do so by highlighting the differences between modern, 'advanced' cultures and the so-called 'primitive'. A clear diametric opposition had to be drawn between 'us' and 'them', between the West and its colonies. African objects were seen as no more than mere 'fetishes', 'fertility figures', or 'ancestor figures' which was a token of their primordality.

European avant-garde artists first encountered African artefacts in these ethnographic museums. The most celebrated of these encounters was Pablo Picasso's visit in 1907 to the Musée Dapper, Paris's ethnographic museum. Looking at African masks and sculptures made Picasso think about the negatives of internal and external spaces. It seemed to shatter to bits the perceptible object and it led Picasso to think in 'cubist' terms and then paint *Les Femmes d'Alger* – considered by many as the harbinger of the modern era in the arts.

African art had an impact on artists working in Paris at the turn of the century and it played a central role in the development of major modern visual and literary movements. The European artists, at the time, felt dissatisfaction with the figurative tradition of the West. African art demonstrated how they might liberate themselves from their compulsion to correspond to the perceptible external world. It also enabled them to express their 'inner world' – their fantasy, dream and imagination.

With the advent of the post-colonial period, avant-garde artists gradually began to see objects from the African continent as products of an 'equal but different' culture. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1980s that African art actually made its way into the fine art museums. However, these museums still faced the age-old quandary: in the West, art is something that is there for its own sake and in the desire to make African art resemble and conform to



15 **Wooden Chair with metal inlay**
Chowkwe People (Angola, DR Congo, Zambia)

H: 130cm W: 52cm D: 56cm
The Tamar Golan Estate

During the 17th century many Chokwe chiefs were introduced to chairs imported by Portuguese officials and consequently adopted the foreign style for their own thrones. However, the Chokwe style and decoration practices were maintained and incorporated into the chair. The figures on the back, stretchers, and legs are typical of Chokwe carvings. Furthermore, as the Portuguese also introduced Christianity into these communities, its symbols were adopted and incorporated as well.

