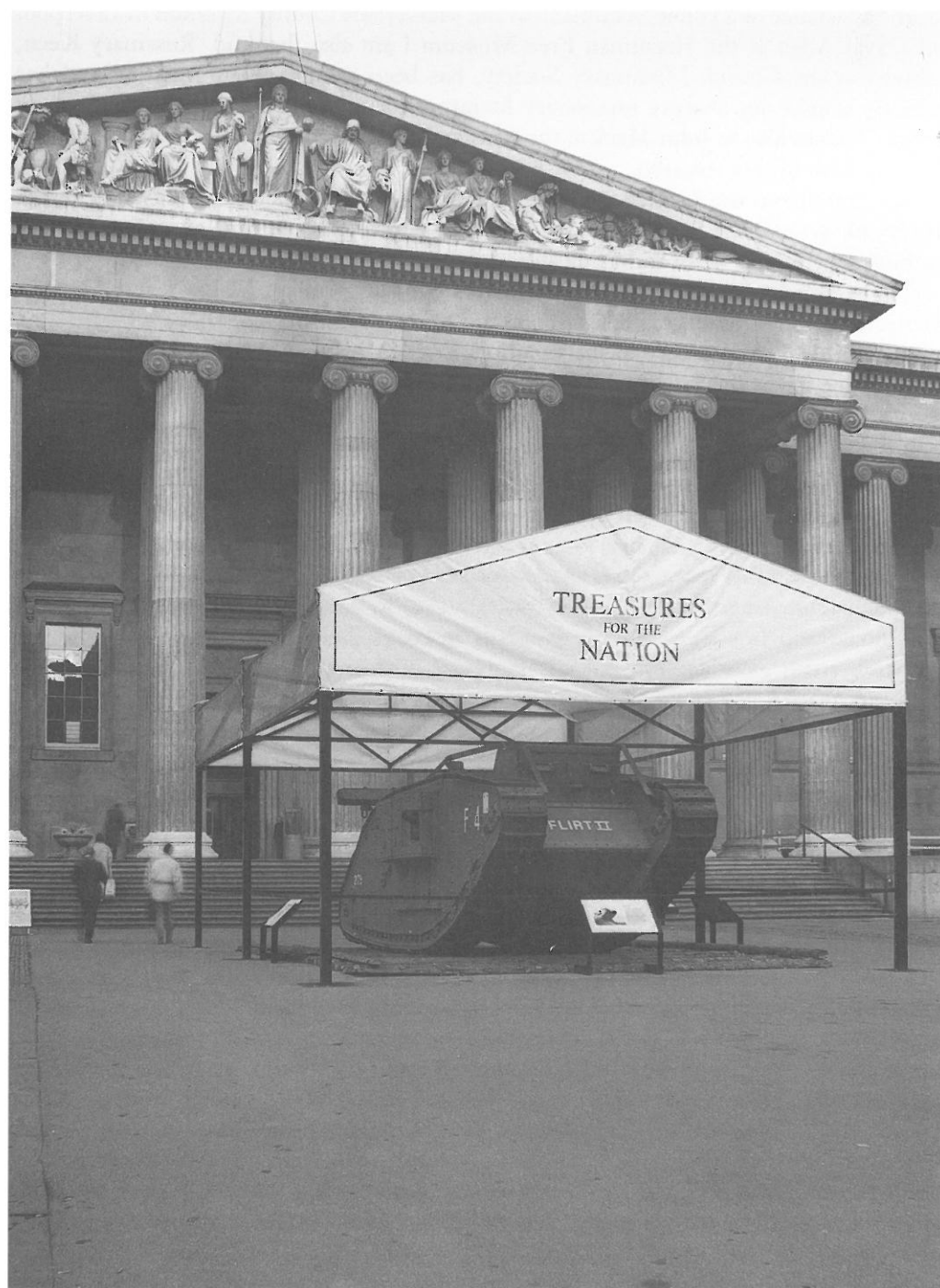




1. Photograph showing the main entrance of the British Museum, Bloomsbury, at the time of the 'Treasures for the Nation' exhibition in 1989. An armoured vehicle, 'Flirt II', can be seen positioned beneath the exhibition's canopy and in front of the museum's portico. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

INTRODUCTION

'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'¹

Walking past the imposing but familiar façade of the British Museum some time in 1989, I was stunned by an altogether unfamiliar sight. There, in the forecourt of the Museum, was an armoured vehicle from the First World War, virtually blocking the main entrance of the building (fig. 1). Nestling beneath a canopy marked 'Treasures of the Nation', the 'exhibit' mirrored the pediment of the huge façade in what might now be seen as a knowing postmodern pastiche. Closer inspection revealed that the armoured vehicle was incongruously 'feminised' by the words 'Flirt II' written across its front. The image has stayed with me, in turn disturbing, intriguing and often hilarious. My reason for recalling it now is because it seems to me to be an image which perfectly dramatises the contradictory emotions conjured up by the sign of the Museum.

Regardless of the intentions of the curators responsible for this piece of inspired absurdity, the conjuncture of femininity, military hardware, neo-classical façade, national museum and 'heritage' is a profoundly destabilising image. It enacts a challenge to those cultural values mythologised and therefore naturalised as part of a shared heritage, while at the same time threatening to expose the spuriousness of such a notion by dramatising the encounters between the state, militarism, colonialism and the secular temple, which stakes its claim to representativeness on the very basis of its institutional and academic autonomy from such essentially paternalistic entities.

Two years earlier, I had been similarly struck, not this time by a discomforting juxtaposition, but by the predictability and unsettling familiarity of the kind of conjuncture propounded by a feature in the science columns of a well-known liberal British newspaper. The extensive article, written by the medical correspondent, purported to be a scientific analysis of the incidence and conditions of the AIDS virus in Africa. Accompanied by a photograph of two smiling Kenyan women, the opening paragraph began, 'The best time to observe the Nairobi hooker is at dusk when the tropical sun dips beneath the Rift Valley and silhouettes the thorn trees against the African skyline. It is then that the hooker preens itself (*sic.*) and emerges to stalk its prey: the wazungu.'² The homophobic hysteria, that had characterised so much of the press reporting on AIDS and HIV, evidently now was being supplemented by the rabid attacks on another form of sexual transaction, whose deviance was confirmed by the racialisation and bestialisation of one of the parties involved, in this case, the Nairobi sex-worker.³ Apparently responsible for the contamination of 'innocent' white western males, these women were now being held accountable not only for the spread of the HIV virus but also, by implication, for the demise of

western culture. Some paragraphs later, this familiar anxiety resurfaces more explicitly: 'The port, with its spicy mixture of Africans, Arabs, Indians and Europeans, and the hint of dangerous excitement lurking in every dark corner, provides a temporary home for thousands of visiting merchant seamen and U.S. sailors.'⁴

On the face of it, these two anecdotes bear very little relation to one another, but I would like to suggest that their distance is deceptive and that the assumptions they dramatise, and the social relations they invoke, are intimately linked to each other. In addition, together they signal two of the underlying concerns of this book. On the one hand, my aim is to understand a little more about the museum as a repository for contradictory desires and identities, and the means by which different publics have been implicated by the narratives of belonging and exclusion produced within its walls.⁵ On the other hand, the book seeks to demystify the link (in the West) between those cultural values which could be said to reside in the museum and deep-seated attachments to a concept of racial purity, coupled with an equally tenacious anxiety about its contamination and degeneration by 'black' races cast in this scenario as the forces of evil. The context of my second anecdote – the science pages of the *Guardian* – makes it clear that any discussion of such an anxiety would also have to take account of the extraordinary licence given to those pronouncements made in the name of scientific inquiry or from the unapproachable distance of academic objectivity. I hope in this study to provide a better grasp of how such categories transform and produce knowledge beyond the bounds of their associated disciplinary remits.

Another reason for introducing this historical study with two incidents from the more recent past is that while the book forms an analysis of a particular moment in the history of British imperialism, and a particular aspect of the colonial encounter, it is also framed as a contribution to a much broader project of contemporary relevance. How do we account for the apparently endless currency of certain received notions about racial difference, and how do we make sense of the resurgence, transformation and subsidence of these representations at different points in time?

The image of Africa, as it was presented to the British public in the last decade of Victoria's reign and the first decade of the twentieth century, has often been historically reconstructed as the product of a monolithic imperial propaganda.⁶ According to these accounts, Africa was uniformly reproduced through a series of tropes as a 'land of darkness', 'the white man's burden', peopled with savages of an inherently inferior order, both intellectually and morally, to the white coloniser. Consequently, the material culture that was brought out of Africa as a result of the 'civilising mission' of the white colonisers is usually understood in most historical accounts as being relegated solely to the demeaning category of 'trophy' or 'curiosity' over this period.

It would be absurd to claim that this was not the prevailing image, but I believe that rather than simply cataloguing the horrors of the British imperial/colonial psyche, it is only by coming to terms with the heterogeneity of responses to, and involvement in, Africa, that we can fully comprehend the insidious appeal of colonial ideology, even amongst those philanthropic and humanitarian liberals who were its most ardent critics.⁷ Africa, as a concept as much as a geographical designation, had diverse resonances for different sectors of the British public from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the First World War. The Africa that existed in the popular imagination was an ideological space, at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive,

inhabited by a population assigned a similarly disparate and ultimately contradictory range of racial traits. Representations of the African were, and are, evidently not 'fixed' but eminently recuperable and variable, depending on the political exigencies of any specific historical conjuncture.⁸ As such, they necessarily tell us more about the nexus of European interests in African affairs and about the coloniser, than they do about Africa and the African over this period.⁹

This book is not intended, however, to be a lexicon of representations of Africa in visual culture over the period 1890 to 1913. Rather it focuses on a series of case studies which have been selected in order to articulate the complex and often contradictory relationship between aspects of what could be broadly termed 'popular' and 'scientific' representations of Africa. The word 'popular' is used here as a way of differentiating that knowledge which was not produced through the emergent disciplines claiming to be 'scientific', in particular, anthropology, eugenics and biology. More precisely, my use of 'popular' is to describe cultural vehicles which were accessible to, and consumed by, an educated middle and lower middle-class public with a general interest in the colonies, or with professional stakes in the colonial administration, but who remained outside the academic establishment. It is not, as is so often the case with historical studies of popular culture, a shorthand term for working-class culture, although questions about the involvement of different class sectors in aspects of colonial ideology form an integral part of this analysis.¹⁰ In this sense, the use of 'popular' here comes closest to Tony Bennett's definition of an 'area of exchange' between classes.¹¹

There are two themes which structure this book: firstly, the analysis of the role of 'spectacle' in the constituting of racial difference, in relation to Africa, and secondly, the definition and scope of the public domain of anthropological knowledge of Africa from 1890 to 1913. In a period of burgeoning leisure opportunities for both the middle and working classes, two particular cultural arenas effectively disseminated knowledge of Africa and other colonies to a wide-ranging public.¹² The display and classification of material culture from Africa in ethnographic collections in local and national museums, and the use of this material culture together with the spectacle of Africans themselves in a variety of large-scale national and regional exhibitions, ensured that, as one commentator remarked in 1890, 'Africa in one or other of its phases [was] on everybody's mind and in everybody's mouth'.¹³ By focusing on these cultural institutions, each of which became associated in the public consciousness with 'scientific enquiry' or entertainment (and usually both), the analysis which follows explores the relationship between that knowledge of Africa and the African claiming to be 'objective truth', through the discourse on African culture and society produced within the emergent anthropological establishment, and that image of Africa sustained in the popular consciousness as 'received' knowledge. In other words, it examines the relationship between so-called scientific knowledge and popular imagination.

It is also my contention that any analysis of how exhibitions and ethnographic museums defined and addressed their constituencies, and the question of their effectivity, has to be seen in relation to the rise of anthropology and its struggle for recognition in Britain, both as an academic discipline and in terms of its usefulness to the imperial state. Most histories of the development of anthropology have a tendency to characterise the emergent discipline either as the liberal conscience of the colonial administration or as a government lackey.¹⁴ It is clear from what follows that this is an unhelpful polarisation of

what is a necessarily ambiguous and shifting partnership with imperialism. In this respect, the professionalisation of anthropology in Britain provides a special case. In North America, France and Germany, the science's relationship to the state was less tentative and could rely on its direct patronage. This period sees the emergence of ethnographic curators and ethnography as a newly professionalised sector within the museums establishment. In Britain, however, despite developments in the stratified hierarchies of the museum bureaucracy and administration which today would signal a separate, if related, sphere of activity, ethnographic curators were drawn almost entirely from the membership of the Anthropological Institute. Indeed, many curators were also presidents of the Institute between these dates. Consequently, each sector had vested interests in the public recognition of both. What this meant, of course, was that precisely because of the lack of government recognition for anthropology as a serious academic subject (until the 1920s in Britain), and the lack of government funds for the development of ethnography, the domain of museums, curators sought to make their area of expertise indispensable in the broadest possible sphere. Their strategy was to propose anthropology as both 'popular' and 'scientific', appealing to and relevant for the general public, school-children and the serious academic who recognised anthropology and ethnography as a 'science' and a discipline with its own domain of study. This was primarily accomplished through the medium of the ethnographic collection.

The heated debates from within the membership of the Anthropological Institute clearly demonstrate shifts and complexities in the paradigms produced as an aid to understanding cultural production from different African societies. One of the contentions of this book, however, is that these complexities are rarely registered directly in what was arguably the public face of anthropology – the museum. While the history of anthropological theory within the discipline, and the shift from 'armchair' to fieldwork methods, has been thoroughly treated, little attention has been paid to the relation between anthropology's academic and public image over this period.¹⁵ It is this interface, and what I perceive to be a disjuncture between the anthropological theory promulgated in the public domain through museums and that produced for circulation within the aspiring academic community, that primarily concerns me here, rather than rehearsing the intricacies of anthropological theory from 1890 to 1913. This disjuncture mitigates against using the ethnographic collection as a barometer of the latest developments in anthropological thought. On the contrary, there is no easy correlation between the two. The ethnographic collection or museum instead represents the material intersection and negotiation of state, institutional and professional politics and policy over this period.

A central and related concern of this book is to elaborate the process whereby material culture functioned, metonymically, to stand in for various African societies. 1890 is the historical starting point, since this marks the period of concerted British imperial and colonial expansion in Africa, one of the consequences of which was the subsequent influx into Britain of material culture from different regions of the African continent. Since British expansionism tended to concentrate on territories in Sub-Saharan Africa, these are the communities which are most frequently subjected to the ethnographic and exhibitionary gaze. 1890 is also the moment which signals a renewed interest in ethnographic collecting generally, together with a shift towards a more expansive policy with regard to the hitherto neglected African sections in most national collections.

Art history has consistently dealt with the rise of European collections of material culture designated as 'ethnographic', in terms of the European avant-garde's projected spiritual or formal affinities with African, Oceanic or latterly Inuit material culture. In other words, research has focused on that development defined by the modernist catchphrase 'primitivism'.¹⁶ The best of this acknowledges anthropological discourse as a contributing factor in the widespread acceptance of certain criteria for establishing the cultural and aesthetic value of non-western culture in the West.¹⁷ With some notable exceptions, however, such empirical tracking serves primarily to indicate when and who amongst the European avant-garde 'discovered' the material culture of Africa and other colonies as an aesthetic category.¹⁸

This book works to expand the horizons of such scholarship, by indicating the extent to which discussions on the aesthetic and other values of material culture from the colonies were, in one way or another, familiar to a far broader middle-class public than is generally recognised. It also demonstrates that this public was directly implicated in the production of ethnographic 'meaning', and was sufficiently aware of the categories through which this was constructed, even while they may not have been aware of the more subtle nuances of meaning in the differentiation that they described, to recognise the ethnographic collection as something more than a mere jumble of 'curiosities'.

Certainly it is abundantly clear that attributing aesthetic value to material culture from the colonies was not something confined to, or initiated by, modernist artists working in Britain, France or Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century. Rather than charting, once again, the European avant-garde's appropriation of African and Oceanic culture as a more or less opportunistic adventure in self-renewal (which none the less always puts the European in the privileged position of seer and visionary), it seems to me that more can be gained from exploring the ways in which such discussions around aesthetic criteria and the artistic categories of art and design from the colonies contributed both to definitions of 'race' and to the ideology of a national culture within Britain itself. My interest, then, lies in exploring the ideals of social effectivity and the narratives of identity produced through public ethnographic displays. In this respect, I am concerned to elaborate the symbolic status of collections as a form of social transaction which tells us more about the colonial process and the subject positions occupied by the main players in the colonial drama.

What follows is conceived as a contribution to the work of excavating the imperial and colonial consciousness, through an archaeology of certain institutions of colonialism. As such, I am primarily concerned with British perceptions of Africa and African culture. However, to analyse any aspect of the colonial encounter is to recognise it as just that, as an encounter. It is to recognise that the colonial community was not just the community of the coloniser, but was also made up of those communities subjugated under imperial rule. It is to realise, as Terence Ranger and others have so adeptly demonstrated, that any encounter, while not necessarily one between equal partners, is nevertheless a dynamic meeting.¹⁹ Consequently, while my primary preoccupation lies with unravelling the intricacies of the imperial state and the ways in which class and gender, together with the vagaries of party and institutional politics, mediated the available representations of Africa in Britain, I am also concerned to indicate some of the more ambiguous and strategic exchanges in the dialogue between coloniser and colonised. In recent years important work, much of it in the domain of literary studies, has theorised various aspects

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of the colonial encounter.²⁰ It is my hope that the reader of this account will recognise, in the materialist history which follows, the traces left by these insights. I have deliberately avoided expository passages laying out theoretical premises which are then 'illustrated' by empirical data. The book has rather made use of critical and political theory to underpin such material and to lend it meaning.

Some aspects of Michel Foucault's analysis of the dynamics of power and Antonio Gramsci's political writings on the concept of hegemony have been helpful in providing a theoretical framework for exploring the possibility of an interactive and mutually transformative relationship between these communities, both of which were necessarily heterogeneous rather than easily unified and straightforwardly oppositional entities. I have tried to signal some of the ways in which different African communities and individuals were able, sometimes of necessity and sometimes by choice, to make creative and strategic use of the colonial encounter. Since the focus of this book is on the impact of that encounter in Britain rather than on the African continent, I have chosen examples which dramatise the contradictions between expectations and lived experience on this front and between Europeans and Africans from the continent, rather than the African diaspora in Britain over this period.

Foucault's concept of discursive formation has also enabled me to think through the possible relations between different scientific and popular rhetorics and debates concerning race and culture, and the way in which they can be said to have produced Africa for different sectors of the British public through their own regimes of truth.²¹ Nevertheless, any dialogue said to occur between coloniser and colonised is already circumscribed by the all too tangible violence of imperialism. Consequently, I have found the materialist account of Antonio Gramsci indispensable as a corrective to the sometimes slippery relation between representation and lived experience, and the subsequent lack of opportunity for the recognition of dissent or resistance, which could be said to characterise Foucault's analysis.²² In particular, Gramsci's concept of hegemony as maintained through constant bargaining and negotiation between different social groups, rather than imposed forcibly from above, is a model which not only allows for a more dynamic and differentiated relationship between classes and between subaltern and dominant groups, it also enables a more productive rethinking of the power and suggestibility of cultural activity.²³ The dialectical relation suggested by Gramsci's thesis helps to explain the ambivalence of anthropology's position in the early twentieth century in Britain, and the reasons why public exhibitions of material culture from the colonies were such a potent means of maintaining the myth of Britain as a powerful and unified colonial force in the popular consciousness of those early years, and why they can still generate controversial discussions about the nature of belonging and history today.