

CONNECTING AFRICAN ARTS

THE ACM'S LATEST SPECIAL EXHIBITION IS FOREIGN, YET FAMILIAR

By Connie Kirker

Mask, Kwele Congo, collection of the musée du quai Branly, Paris; photo by Sandrine Expilly

Imagine listening to the BBC. At the mention of Africa as the subject of the next report, you brace yourself for bad news. What you want to conjure up are images of exotic costumes, percussive drummers and beloved animals like elephants and giraffes; what you fear are even more vivid reports of famine, war, genocide, disease and corruption.

It is easy to feel removed from those images here in Singapore. Vital issues of food, healthcare, education, personal safety and housing have been sorted out by Singapore's earlier generations.

Perhaps in the same way you may feel removed from the tribulations of modern Africa, you may also wonder what the exhibition *Congo River: Arts of Central Africa*, on view at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) from 10 December, has to do with Singapore.

Like Singapore, Africa is made up of several cultural groups with various interpretations over history and beliefs. These relatively new nations, created not by choice but by circumstance, have traditions and art forms that may conflict with the pressures of modernity. (The same may be said of the small neighbourhood temples in Singapore that have been destroyed or relocated in recent years.)

Singaporeans will recognise a colonial past that exoticised artistic traditions and collected, even commissioned, 'objects of curiosity' for international exhibition. This is the case with some of the pieces on view in *Congo River: Arts of Central Africa*.

In this exhibition, the first major one of African art ever mounted in Singapore, the ACM will showcase over 100 major works from the musée du quai Branly in Paris, Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren and Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. These illustrate the artistic traditions of the Central African countries of Gabon, the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the ACM exhibition, curators have opted to highlight the influence of African art on modern art, and have provided a very rare opportunity in Singapore to have access to several original works by Picasso on loan from Musée national Picasso, Paris. Picasso and other modernists admired this art for what they saw as 'rule breaking', the moving away from the traditions of Western naturalism. Ironically, they regarded the exaggeration of human features in African art as personal artistic expression when, in fact, the African sculptor was actually tied to rules of iconography, bound by requirements of context and use. In this way, African artists were similar to Asian artists who were also tied to rules when creating an image of a Buddha or a Shiva. While African art is often both beautiful and powerful, it is also supremely 'functional'. It is art that heals, explains, educates, frightens or warns of danger. African art is art that has real consequences in the everyday world of its viewers.

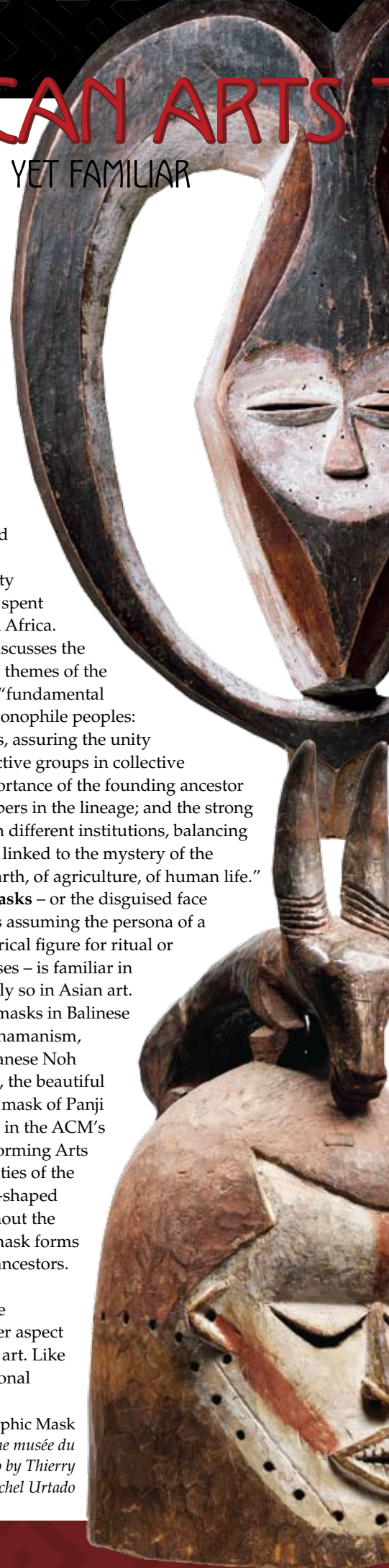
So what should visitors expect from this exhibition?

The original curator and author of the extensive catalogue, Father François Neyt, Benedictine monk and emeritus professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, spent more than 20 years in Africa. In the catalogue he discusses the three complementary themes of the exhibition which are "fundamental in the lives of these iconophile peoples: the presence of masks, assuring the unity and identity of respective groups in collective celebrations; the importance of the founding ancestor and of eminent members in the lineage; and the strong presence of women in different institutions, balancing the authority of men, linked to the mystery of the regeneration of the earth, of agriculture, of human life."

The presence of **masks** – or the disguised face of a performer who is assuming the persona of a supernatural or historical figure for ritual or entertainment purposes – is familiar in African art and equally so in Asian art. (Consider the use of masks in Balinese dances, Himalayan Shamanism, Chinese opera or Japanese Noh theatre.) For example, the beautiful white *Wayang Topeng* mask of Panji from Java, on display in the ACM's Southeast Asian Performing Arts Gallery, mirrors qualities of the white-coloured heart-shaped masks found throughout the Congo region. Both mask forms represent links with ancestors.

Ancestor figures, particularly figurative sculptures, are another aspect of traditional African art. Like some forms of traditional

Anthropo – Zoomorphic Mask Helmet, collection of the musée du quai Branly, Paris; photo by Thierry Ollivier and Michel Urtado





Chinese sculpture, they are generally frontal, symmetrical, and lacking in emotional expression and movement.

As an example, compare the Qing dynasty boxwood ancestor figure from the ACM China gallery with a Fang example in the African exhibit.

The following paragraph from the exhibition catalogue by Father Neyt describes powerful ancestral figures common to all the areas of the Congo River. But the comments could as easily have been written about Taoist and Confucian beliefs and folk traditions still practised today in Singapore during the Hungry Ghost Festival:

"The souls of ancestors or evil spirits were honored. They define the dangerous ancestors and the persons who suffered violent deaths as formidable. The priest-diviner (nganga) has the role of protecting the families and groups from dangers that result from the energies of these known or forgotten deaths.

The sorcerer (ndoki), in contrast, makes use of occult forces to establish his authority, bewitch the living, and cast spells. The same rituals can have an offensive or defensive function, protecting or threatening another person. Other signs are there to strengthen the force of the group and make use of the energy linked to a reputed

enemy or other powers: certain relics are associated with sacrifices, divination, magic or sorcery."

The third theme – the strong presence of **women balancing the authority of men** – can be readily understood in terms of the Taoist principles of *yin* and *yang* and the duality of male/female in Hindu iconography. The ACM South Asia and Southeast Asia collections abound in examples of female deities that exaggerate and emphasise female fertility.

For example, the beautiful sandstone relief fragment of Three Matrika serves a similar role to the female ancestor figure from the Bembe tribe in the exhibit. Both depict full breasts and a youthful appearance.

This exhibit makes the case that we have more in common with Africa than it might first appear.

Editor's note: The comparisons between African and Asian artefacts are the author's own opinions drawn from her knowledge of African art and do not necessarily reflect interpretations presented in the exhibition.

Connie Kirker writes regularly for *PASSAGE*. A professor of Art History on leave from Pennsylvania State University, she returned to Singapore last year after an absence of nearly 30 years.

CONGO RIVER: ARTS OF CENTRAL AFRICA is on view at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 10 December 2010 – 10 April 2011.

SO ALIKE, SO DIFFERENT...

ASIA



Relief fragment of Three Matrika (Mother Goddess) 11th century, Pratihara, Uttar Pradesh, collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore



Topeng Mask, early 20th century, Java, collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

VS.

AFRICA



Female ancestor figure, Bembe, Democratic Republic of Congo, collection of the musée du quai Branly, Paris



Female Mask, Punu, Gabon, collection of the musée du quai Branly, Paris