

## African Art History in Canada: A Preliminary History

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(2017)

Art History pedagogy in Canada has been very conservative in nature, so it is little wonder that scant attention has been paid to the study of Africa's visual arts within its purview. If indeed these arts have been taught at all, they have been found in courses mounted in departments of Anthropology, History or Development Studies. As noted below, some teaching occurred at York University, beginning in the 1970s, but this contribution never materialized into a tenured position. To date, only two full-time, tenured or tenure-track positions exist in Canadian art departments: one at University of Toronto and one at University of British Columbia. It is worth noting that even at the University of Toronto, the Africanist position was initially marked for modern/contemporary/global. All other instruction in this area has occurred on a part-time, sessional basis.

Despite the remarkable rise in interest for Africa's arts within the global arena in the last 15 years, the study of Africa's arts within the Canadian academy today remains fragile, at best. Major international exhibitions of contemporary (and modern) African arts have been held at Documenta, in Venice, and at key institutions such as the TATE Modern and the Pompidou, and these same two institutions are actively collecting from the continent and private collections to deepen the global nature of the story they hope to tell about modernism.

Scholars of African art history often also teach the arts of the African Diaspora. But this area also has a limited history within art departments in Canadian universities. There are two full time positions in Diaspora art, held by Charmaine Nelson at McGill University and Andrea Fatona at OCAD (neither teach courses in African art). More recently Julie Crooks, at the Art Gallery of Ontario has taught both Diaspora and African arts on a sessional basis at University of Toronto, OCAD, and York University.

While one can only speculate as to precise reasons for this lacuna in the Canadian academy, a few historical notes may be helpful. Traditionally, within Canadian universities, Art History programs rested almost entirely on the work of scholars trained, with few exceptions, in England, France or the United States. Though one need not rehearse the German origins of traditional art historical training that dominated instruction in these locations, it is worth noting that alongside these established fields, the study of Africa's arts flourished in England, France, and the US, first in the material culture studies of cultural anthropologists who took as their remit the canonization of so-called 'primitive' arts and fed the interests of modernist primitivists. Second, modernist scholars 'studied' Africa's arts as fodder for European, and later America modernist genius. Third, with the face of post-war American internationalism, the establishment of the Peace Corps, and the rise of the Cold War, the US Federal government aggressively funded

a number of Folklore and Culture and Area Studies programs that led to the study of Africa's visual arts.

It is curious then that these interests did not seem to transfer to the Canadian sphere, despite the foreign training of its first art historians. Also, several significant collections of African arts have existed within Canadian university museums, most notably at Queens University, with the Lang Collection, in the Anthropology Museum at University of British Columbia, and at the Royal Ontario Museum, formally part of University of Toronto.

One could argue that the Canadian intellectual establishment, working within neither a former direct colonial power on the continent nor a nation publicly willing to acknowledge its own history of slavery, found little reason to attend to the continent or the history of its diasporas.

These lacunae have felt even more acute against a backdrop of sustained public discussion about the arts of Africa, and their connections to the significant and longstanding African diasporas in Canada. These discussions have focused on the taxonomic bind wrapped round the arts of Africa within the Canadian academy and in Canadian museums, where they traditionally held the place of ethnographic objects, rather than fine arts. Local challenges to these claims, by cultural critics, collectors, and activists mirror many of the profound shifts witnessed in the academy today, ushering in visual culture studies, critical race theory, re-writes of modernism and modernity, and approaches to globalism.

In particular, the catastrophic reception of the ROM's "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibition in 1989 deeply affected the relationship between the African Canadian community and that institution, and arguably all Canadian museums and cultural institutions. As a show purportedly aimed at exposing and critiquing the imperialist nature of colonial collecting by Canadian troops and missionaries in Africa, "Into the Heart of Africa," ultimately presented the arts and cultures of Africa in highly racist and offensive ways, leaving no room for the voices of the 'colonized' or space for sensitive interpretation of these broader histories of exploitation.

The full story can be found in the links below but suffice it to say that it took 27 years for the Museum to apologize publicly to the broader African Canadian community and admit to its insensitive and biased handling of the affair. In the meantime, a generation of African Canadians steered clear of the museum. While it is difficult to prove a direct link (though its curator was a visiting professor at University of Toronto Scarborough before resigning due to the stress of the situation), this controversy and its long aftermath of mistrust and accusation has continued to haunt the cultural institutions within the city of Toronto, and perhaps beyond. Even as the ROM prepared to mount a first permanent gallery for its African collections in the early 2000s, it turned to an anthropologist at the University of Toronto with no training in Art History to do so. Furthermore, the debacle led well-known collector Murray Frum to gift his traditional African arts collection to Art Gallery of Ontario specifically to ensure that his objects be presented and studied as art works, rather than ethnographic specimens.

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Dr. Bogumil Jewsiewicki Koss  
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Dr. Silvia Forni

# THE ART HISTORY

Curator, African Arts and Culture  
Royal Ontario Museum  
Status only appointment  
Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto

Trained at Indiana University and University of Turin  
<http://anthropology.utoronto.ca/people/status-only-appointments/>

## 1989-90

Jeanne Cannizzio  
Taught part-time, Scarborough Campus, University of Toronto  
before resigning due to mounting controversy over “Into the Heart of Africa, “ Royal Ontario  
Museum exhibition.

## 1973-91

Zdenka Volavkova (educated in Prague, Charles University), taught African Art from, York  
University

## Diaspora Arts:

Dr. Charmaine Nelson  
Professor  
Department of Art History and Communication Studies  
McGill University  
<https://www.mcgill.ca/ahcs/people-contacts/faculty/nelson>

Dr. Andrea Fatona  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Art  
OCAD University  
<https://www2.ocadu.ca/bio/andrea-fatona>

For more on “Into the Heart of Africa” see:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttjc4>

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/11/09/rom-apologizes-for-racist-1989-african-exhibit.html>

Murray Frum Collection:  
<http://www.ago.net/african-oceanic>