

Cutting and covering up ethnographica:

The culture of curatorship



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Abstract: Anthropologists of ethnographic museums have neglected to study how the items in their collections have been altered. I here investigate one telling variant: the loinclothing or emasculation of male figures, by whom, when, where, why, to what consequence. The results of my survey indicate that especially curators had complex relationships with their objects. Yet they have tended to remain silent about these changes. I discuss internal reasons for the neglect of this topic and for this silence, which uncovers a broader, previously neglected side to museum studies yet to be illuminated.

Keywords: *Emasculation; curatorship; loinclothing; ethnographic museums; silence*

Introduction

About twenty years ago, I re-visited the Museum of Mankind, London. In its 'Introduction to the collections', I gawped at a large African male figure, its dark wood half-hidden under nails, mirrors, beads, other items. I read its label, which meticulously listed function, provenance, accession, all its various materials. I then realized there was a pale gash between the open legs of the figure. I checked its label: nothing. In other words, to my great surprise, someone had significantly altered the imposing figure, yet its painstaking label-writer made no mention of the fact, the lack of penis matched by a lack of words. Sex, it seemed, went with silence.

I found this deeply odd. I still do. It is the main reason I have written this paper. Though a few academics have looked at the alteration of items in museums (e.g. Gosden and Larson 2007; Larson 2007), no one (and this at a time of great concern over appropriate modes of ethnographic representation) has paid scholarly attention to Western tampering with ethnographica, whether emasculation or, an associated phenomenon, loinclothing. Here I wish to explore who did what to whom, when, where, how, why, and to what consequence. I then examine the reasons why curators have not discussed these behaviours, and why they might have kept silent about them. In the process, I hope to illuminate an otherwise ignored corner of our past and see what it says about us today.

I present my argument in the following sequence: briefly skimming the rise and concerns of critical ethnographic museums studies, I identify the scholarly examination of the alteration of items as a lacuna in this academic field. After detailing my research methods, I catalogue the alteration of objects, first at or near their place of origin, then in the West. Next, I list Westerners' loinclothing of previously undressed figures. This leads to a consideration of visual aversion, and its moral underpinnings, by curators, and then to a general discussion, which places the preceding in its broader contexts, about the historical status and treatment of items in ethnographic museums. I conclude with a call to enlighten this blind spot in the chronology of curatorship.

Critical museum studies, and curators

Today museums are ever more recognized as contested institutions of central importance: cultural, political, economic (Carbonell 2003; MacClancy 2007). Relevant factors in this change include the considerably increased possibilities of funding for museums, and the rise, in the mid-1980s, of 'the new museology' (Vergo 1989) which resulted in the establishment of a renovated, critical museum studies, as an interdisciplinary meeting-place of academic endeavour (e.g. Macdonald 2010; Marstine 2006). An equally important stimulus, for museums of anthropology, was the increasing demands of indigenous groups. Particularly since the 1970s, they have campaigned for the release of items held by museums and radically questioned conventional styles of mounting displays (e.g. McCarthy 2007; MacClancy 1997). In response to both these stimuli, staff in ethnographic museums, museologists, and anthropologists started to creatively re-examine curatorial procedures and to experiment with different ways to represent items in Western collections. Their anxieties, which dovetailed with the postmodernist querying of ethnographic authority, led to a substantial and sustained rethinking of how to exhibit anthropological material (e.g. Clarke 2003; Henderson and Kaepler 1999; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992; Price 1989).

Museum anthropologists have shown mounting concern over the controversial complexities of displaying ethnographica, and the status of the objects within them (e.g. Karp et al 2006; Knell et al 2007; Porto 2007; Price 2007). However, in the process, they have paid surprisingly little attention to the culture of curators themselves. Except in broad exhibitionary or classificatory terms, they have neglected to study curators' complex relationships with their objects, and the internally contested, evolving moralities of their workplace. Above all *no one*, to my knowledge, has paid sustained attention to the alteration of items in their care. Despite heightened sensitivities about the nature and exhibition of ethnographic objects, no one has thought to study why an indeterminate number of them have suffered re-dressing and excision, and what neglect of those practices might say about the institutions which house them. Furthermore, to place curatorial behaviour in its contexts, we will have to look at ethnographic emasculation more broadly.

In the late 1970s, Stephen Greenblatt confessed that he was 'fascinated by the signs of alteration, tampering, and even deliberate damage that many museums try simply to efface': he included in his list of changes the concealing of genitals, the evidence of cutting

or reshaping items, as well as 'the cracks, scorch marks, or broken-off'. He thought 'wounded artifacts. . .compelling not only as witnesses to the violence of history but as signs of use, marks of the human touch' (Greenblatt 1980:44). Yet, to my knowledge, the only sustained attention paid so far to the indigenous and Western conservation of damaged ethnographica was the *Objets blessés* exhibition at the Musée de Quai Branly in late 2007 (Speranza 2007). Despite that bright exception, genitals, and work on them, are still concealed. If tampered ethnographica are witnesses, they have yet to be called.

Method

Plausible survey work requires a broad sweep of the potential sources. I exploited to the full my network of contacts: anthropological, curatorial, mercantile. I emailed, phoned, and spoke to as many relevant people as possible. Since this topic has not been specifically studied before, there has been little written about it, except in informed, but passing comments; I have thus often had to rely more on emails than is usually the case in academic research. But I could not afford to visit all the colleagues which email enabled me to contact; my university would not have funded it. I contacted staff in almost all the major, and some of the minor, ethnographic collections in the UK, several major museums in continental Europe, as well as anthropologists and curators in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Africa: in all, 27 museums.¹ I posted open pleas for assistance on relevant e-

¹ In the UK: the British Museum; the Haddon Museum, Cambridge; the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the Horniman Museum, London; the World Museum, Liverpool; the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, University of East Anglia; the Marischal Museum, Aberdeen; Brighton Museum; Manchester Museum; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol; the National Maritime Museum, London; the Powell-Cotton Museum, Quex, Kent; Hull & East Riding Museum. In continental Europe: the Vatican Ethnological Museum, Vatican City; the Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Portugal; the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, the Missie Museum, Steyl, the Afrika Museum in Nijmegen, all in Holland; and the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. Beyond Europe: the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, Washington DC; the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver; Auckland Museum, New Zealand.

discussion groups, websites and newsletters;² and contacted the editor of *African Arts*. Suggestions from colleagues led to me contacting further anthropologists, curators, classicists and Indianists in the UK, the USA, and Denmark, and Maori specialists in New Zealand. Within the tribal art market, I got in touch with appraisers in ethnographica at major auctioneers in the UK, France, and the USA.³ I phoned or emailed several dealers, or former dealers, and their assistants in London and France. In the mid-1980s I conducted research on the UK market in tribal art, interviewing dealers, appraisers, and collectors (MacClancy 1988). For the sake of the present research I re-contacted some of those I had earlier interviewed, and have made use of my field-notes from that time.⁴ In each case, my aim was to learn if my interlocutors knew of examples of cut or loinclothed articles, and who had performed the act, for what reason.

A cautionary note

Various factors impede an accurate estimation of emasculation. First, for reasons made clear below, denial of or turning away from the topic means many curators today simply do not know whether male figures under their care have been cut, let alone how many. Ignorance, failing to take the practice into account or even to recognize it can further blind curators.

² These were: the Association for Social Anthropologists of Oceania, and the UK Museum Ethnographers Group.

³ These were Sotheby's, Christie's, and Bonham, in London; Christies, Paris; Live Auctioneers, in the USA.

⁴ In 2007, I was awarded a grant to supervise an undergraduate on a topic of my choice: emasculated ethnographica. For five weeks that summer, I advised the successful candidate, Katie Gutcher, on museums to visit and people to phone, and what leads to chase up. The resulting document she turned, the next year, into a 5,000-word essay (Gutcher 2008). Throughout this paper, I gratefully acknowledge the specific ways in which she assisted my pursuit of this research topic. But, for reasons which I make clear below, when I came to prepare this paper, I had to re-visit or re-phone most of the museums she had earlier contacted.

My original grant proposal was for two undergraduates. But the second, Adam Sharpe, had to withdraw within two weeks. Wherever in this paper I have relied on information gathered during that fortnight, I acknowledge it fully, with gratitude.

Second, the failure of some to take the phenomenon seriously has led them not to have the practice included in their records of each figure in their collection. Checking the online databases of museum collections is often fruitless: rarely is 'emasculatation' included in their descriptive categories; 'genital' or 'penis' are almost equally unenlightening. I was thus particularly reliant on a small number of experienced, open-minded, responsive curators and museum assistants who knew of emasculated pieces in the collections they maintained and were able to identify them.

Third, given the aesthetic styles of certain groups, it can be visually very difficult to confirm emasculatation. For instance, 'Much of Maori art involves careful looking, beyond just the glossy, and curious, and gleaming surface' (Te Awakotuku 2005:8). Jill Hasell, at the British Museum, wrote that, when judging whether emasculatation has occurred, 'Maori figures can be difficult - as some which are clearly meant to be male due to having male tattooing, were never carved as having genitalia' On re-examination for me of a piece she had previously thought altered (BM number Oc1903,1015), she concluded it was simply genital-less (J Hasell email 5 xi 2009).

Fourth, wood deteriorates. Over time, fragile extremities can easily be broken off, unintentionally or not. Genital damage does not indicate emasculatation per se (Keith email 10 ix 2009). Hasell re-examined for me: (a) a New Ireland chalk figure; she finally decided it had suffered accidental damage, not deliberate emasculatation (J Hasell email 5 xi 2009); (b) a Maori figure with a largish gash in the groin (Oc,+1997.a, PRN: EOC5509), but was unable to decide the cause (J Hasell email 15 x 2009).

Cuts at home, or nearby

Early examples of emasculatation appear to have been carried out by indigenous converts to Christianity, missionaries, dealers, and collectors. Their reasons for this practice were not all the same. I here list the cases I have learnt of, and the justifications provided.

The best-documented examples come from the South Pacific. The most famous is the A'a of Rurutu, Austral Islands (Fig. 1). In 1821 Rurutu converts gave this and divinity figures to Revd. John Williams, London Missionary Society. A few months later, Rarotongans, similarly eager to convert, presented Williams with fourteen immense staff-gods, some 'torn to pieces in front of our eyes', others reserved to decorate the rafters of a projected

chapel. Williams sent the remaining one, together with a local 'fisherman's god' and the A'a back to the UK (Williams 1838: 99).



Fig.1 A'a, Rurutu, Austral Islands (© British Museum).

It is not known if over-zealous locals or missionaries emasculated the A'a or the 'fisherman's god'. Many of the staff-gods were also cut: when, and by whom is unclear. Williams calls the large penis at the end of each staff 'an obscene figure' (Williams 1838:98). The anthropologist of Pacific art Terence Barrow comments, 'The phallic ends were removed because such sexual features were considered obscene and certainly not suitable to be viewed by Victorian ladies. The role of sexual organs in Polynesian art as symbols of chiefly vitality and the continuity of tribal life was quite beyond the narrow-minded missionaries' (Barrow 1979:88).⁵ Since Williams reported that sailors transporting the staff-god sent to the UK subjected it to rough treatment (Williams 1838:99), it is possible that the A'a and the 'fisherman's god' were emasculated while on their voyage to Britain. Of the seven surviving 'fishermen's gods' in Western collections, only four are genitally complete (Hooper 1997:18).

The items collected by the LMS were displayed in its London museum for patent purpose: to win over the indigenes, for the sake of their souls, and British visitors, for the sake of their cash; their discourse is one of combat, against devil-worship. One of Williams's biographers states his ship left Rarotonga 'decorated with the idol-trophies of their moral victory' there (Prout 1843:187). A contributor to an LMS journal classified the A'a as 'sufficiently ugly, and deserving the name of devil rather than a god' (*Missionary Sketches* No. XXIV, quoted in Hooper 2007:142). According to one anthropologist of Pacific art, the missionaries were consciously bent on desecrating the objects they collected: they would strip items of their wrappings, and write large identificatory letters across their faces or bodies (Hooper 2006:66). Excising their penises was another mode of disempowering these idols.

In Mangareva, Gambier Islands, pioneer missionaries insisted almost all local images of divinities were destroyed. By 1836, only about a dozen were left. One of them, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York is emasculated.⁶

⁵ Unfortunately, Barrow does not provide any evidence for this commentary

⁶ Accession number 1979.206.1466.
http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/arts_of_africa_oceania_and_the_am

In Rapa Nui, the earliest examples of 'ribbed figures' (*moai kavakava*) are clearly sexed male. From the 1880s on, island carvers either omitted or reduced the penis, for commercial ends, though it was much later resumed (Heyerdahl 1976:181).⁷ A 1940 commentator on the shift in carving style lamented, 'The penis is represented by a conical projection, a concession maybe to missionary prudery' (Hornell 1940:283). One emasculated ribbed figure is in the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (illustrated in Kjellgren et al. 2001:48, pl. 10); another is on display in the Pitt-Rivers Museum (Acc. No. 1935.36.142), whose catalogue entry states, 'The genitals have been broken off'.⁸ Some birdman figures (*tangata manu*) were similarly mutilated, e.g. the two figures illustrated in Kjellgren et al. 2001:46, pls. 4 & 5, which notes, 'As with many Rapa Nui wood carvings collected during the nineteenth century, the phalluses of both figures have been removed to satisfy Victorian notions of propriety' (Kjellgren et al. 2001:47).

Some, maybe many, Maori figures suffered emasculation. This is not surprising. It was standard for traditional Maori carvers to produce stylized human figures in which the head and genitals were accentuated (Phelps 1976:27). Excision appears to have been general (Aspin and Hutchings 2007:419; Te Awekotuku 2005).⁹ 'Missionaries. . .wielding mallet and chisel altered the sexual organs of god and ancestral images to avoid embarrassing congregations' (Barrow 1999). The most notorious documented case was the penile excisions, performed in 1905, on the carvings produced for the model Maori village in

ericas/male_figure/objectview.aspx?page=1&sort=3&sortdir=desc&keyword=1979.206.1466&fp=1&dd1=5&dd2=49&vw=1&collID=49&OID=50006317&vT=1.

I thank Eric Kjellgren for information about this piece.

⁷ In September 2009 Live Auctioneers sold a 'mid-19th century' ribbed figure, specified as '(penis removed)' for \$5,500 (<http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/6683491> Accessed 13 xi 2009).

⁸ The ribbed figure Fig.117 in Chauvet 1935 is also emasculated. I thank Kjellgren for information about the piece in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

⁹ I thank Adam Sharpe for directing me to the work of Aspin and Hutchings.

Rotorua. A missionary and 'many other church people' petitioned the government against the erection of 'indecent carved figures':

We feel that these figures do not represent our Maori art to our pakeha visitors, nor do we desire that they should do so, in the interests therefore of ourselves and our children and of our pakeha visitors and of the purity and refinement of the community generally, we earnestly beg that you will have these objectionable figures removed as soon as possible. (5 v 1905; Tourist Dept File 04/288, quoted in Neich 2001:223)

Letter-writers and journalists commented in the local press about the 'rudeness' of some of the figures; MPs raised similar concerns in their chamber. The Government decreed the figures be altered, despite counter-protests from chiefs and Maoris in general (Donne 1927:166-167). Such incidents have not stopped. In the late 1990s, some white New Zealanders complained about the patent sexuality of carvings produced for the Aratiki Visitor Centre, erected at the Waitakere Regional Forest Park, to the west of Auckland. But resistance prevented these protests from having further effect.¹⁰

In my survey of museums with African material, the trustworthy examples I found were: one figure at the British Museum, two at the Horniman Museum, London, and eight at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, all acquired between 1960 and 1986.¹¹ How, or when, any of these eleven figures were emasculated is not known.¹²

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¹ Information about Aratiki comes from an email to Adam Sharpe from Roger Neich.

¹¹ At the British Museum: a north Fang figure, acquired 1962, from the collection of Jacob Epstein (Accession no. Af1962,20.2); at the Horniman Museum, London: an Ibibio Idiong figure, acquired c.1921, and a Lobi Batiba shrine figure, acquired in 1998 (Accession no. 1998.407); at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, all acquired between 1960 and 1986: a male Kike figure, Mambila, Cameroon (Accession no. 1972.4.24a), a power figure (Nkisi), Songye, Democratic Republic of Congo (1978.409), a figure, Guro, Côte d'Ivoire (1978.412.374), a seated figure, Dengese, Democratic Republic of Congo (1978.412.520), a crouching figure, tobacco mortar, Luluwa, Democratic Republic of Congo (1978.412.636), a figure, Koko, Cameroon (1979.206.232), and two figures, Baule, Côte d'Ivoire (1983.561, 1986.481.1). I thank Wayne Modest for the

Cutting away from home

So far, I have discussed cutting of figures, whether by locals or Westerners, in or very near their place of production. But emasculation and other forms of alteration could also occur later in objects' lives.

In a novel about the tribal art trade, by a veteran Africanist anthropologist, a West African dealer displays 'five majestically tall male ancestor figures from Congo' to a New York dealer. All but one of the pieces are emasculated. 'I think that's to excise their power before they're sold,' the American tells his accompanying business partner (Stoller 2005: 14). The anthropologist-author wrote to me, 'That explanation of the excision of the penises of those Congolese figures is fairly common among West African traders' (Stoller email 4 xi 06).

examples from the Horniman Museum, London; Yaelle Biro for the list from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

¹² Corbey (2000:63) notes similar practices by Dutch missionaries in the Dutch East Indies and New Guinea in the colonialist period.

The one American example I encountered has become the most widely-spread image of all discussed here: Kokopelli, now a symbol of the American Southwest and of its indigenous traditions, is an emasculated version of prehistoric petroglyphs in the area, and named after Hopi ithyphallic kachinas, whose dances were censored by missionaries and US Government imposition (Malotki 2000; Titiev 1939; Walker 1998).

In India, the relatively few known examples of emasculation by Europeans are usually attributed to early Portugese missionaries, e.g. the image of Shiva Andhakasura at the Elephanta caves, Mumbai (Mitter 1977:110, pl.54). Partha Mitter suspects 'other sculptures near Portuguese Goa such as Elephanta, Kanheri etc' also suffered mutilation (P. Mitter pers. comm. For a further example, Mitter 1977:91, pl. 46). Earlier emasculation of sculptury was the work of Muslims (Wagoner and Rice 2001).

Some zealous Christians of the late antique period also practised a genitally-focussed iconoclasm. See Hannestad 2001; Kristensen 2009:243-249; Smith 2008.

European dealers might also alter their wares. During at least the 1920s, it was 'standard practice' for dealers to strip African ethnographica of any soft or fibrous parts. That way the stark wooden or metal piece remaining appeared more Modernist, in the style Picasso and his colleagues were then establishing, and so more saleable, for a higher price (Errington 1998: 81). Some went further, and took the knife to their merchandise. For example: Joseph Brummer was one of the first dealers in African art in Paris, from 1909 onwards. He moved to New York in 1914, but continued to work with his brother Ernest, who remained in Paris. In a 1935 letter to Joseph, Ernest mentioned the art dealer Louis Carré, one of the lenders to the 'African Negro Art' exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Works from his collection were displayed in several US galleries that year: 'CARRE: he will leave with the CHAMPELAIN on the 6th of March. It seems that he had to cut the sex of each negro statue that he dispatched to AMERICA.'¹³ The commercial logic undergirding this practice was clear: e.g. the commentary made on the 1931 sale of the André Breton and Paul Eluard collection, 'As always in primitive art, many of the naked male statues are not sellable everywhere, the attributes of the male sex being truly too emphasized.'¹⁴

Collectors also doctored their possessions (Cazaumayou 2007:164). In 1889 Paul Gauguin bought two Congolese power figures, which he 'cleaned', before 'adding paint and other materials to suit his taste', then inscribing them 'P.Go.' (MacGaffey 1998: 223). Susan Vogel, the historian of African art, speaking about the early decades of the last century in France and New York, noted that 'objects were routinely "cleaned". . .by dealers and collectors who felt no compunction about "improving" them', where those 'improvements' included emasculation (Vogel 2001:3). During my 1985 research in London, the most precise example I was given of emasculation by a collector came from the then leading London dealer in tribal art, John Hewett. Some years before, he had gone

¹³ From The Ernest and Joseph Brummer Records, quoted in Biro 2010. I am grateful to Yaelle Biro for this reference, and the background information to it. The short film made by Susan Vogel about the Western life-history of a Fang sculpture includes an art dealer emasculating it. See *Fang. An epic journey*, 2001, New York: Prince Street Pictures, plus Vogel 2001, for a discussion of issues raised by the film.

¹⁴ From *Gazette de l'Hôtel Drouot*, 4 vi 1931, no. 78, quoted in Cazaumayou 2007:149; my translation.

to the house of a deceased collector to pick up the man's collection, which he had just bought. As the last items were put into his vehicle, the widow suddenly said, 'And did you take the pieces out of the bottom drawer upstairs?' Hewett found it contained all the missing penises from the figures in the collection. The collector had done the job himself.¹⁵

Some curators also took the knife to the items in their collections. In France, Gaetano Speranza, the Paris-based organizer of the *Objects Blessés* exhibition, wrote that curators as well as dealers and collectors mutilated their possessions so they could be more easily sold or exhibited (Speranza 2007:12). In New Zealand in the mid-1980s an American curator, charged with shipping Maori sculpture to a US exhibition, found that 'the main figure on one ridgepole had its penis broken off many years ago. The museum director at that time, I am told, threw the penis out (!) because he thought it was obscene' (O'Biso 1989:108). Similarly the mid-1920s chiselling away of the genitals from a depiction of an embracing couple on the storehouse in Auckland Museum is attributed to curatorial intervention (depicted in Neich 2001, Fig 17.20). Barrow noted that 'some Victorian museum curators' excised the genitalia on Maori figures to spare the blushes of 'museum visitors back home', but gives no further details (Barrow 1999). Roger Neich, a Maori art specialist, stated that during his employment at the National Museum in Wellington, he and colleagues found a broken-off penis in the storage, which they were able to reunite with the *tekoteko* figure it had come from.¹⁶ Who carried out the act was unknown.

Several curators said to me they believed their predecessors were guilty of the practice. Almost all these statements were vague: names of curators and examples of their handiwork were not forthcoming. These comments, often given in a jokey tone, were usually related as though in an aside, downplaying their importance. They remained, frustratingly, at the level of 'museum anecdotes', 'storeroom gossip', or 'the oral history of our institution'. The story is transmitted face to face, nothing is written down and since, as far as I can judge, curators from different museums do not usually discuss the practice, these accounts tend to stay within the home of their production. Thus, just how widespread these stories are becomes very hard to estimate.

¹⁵ Despite much work, I still cannot identify this collector. A former colleague of his noted that Hewett did not share with his clients 'the histories of the objects he sold—indeed he often removed vital labels—but every one hoped he had kept records' (Waterfield and King 2006:163).

¹⁶ In email to Sharpe

Clothing concerns

The alteration of images did not begin and end with emasculation. Some curators, and others, chose to modify the items in their care in a less damaging manner. Some placed loin-skirts or cloths over the midriff of figures, whether or not they had been emasculated. A word of caution here: in certain African cultures, such as the Igbo, Urhobo and Baule, some figures were loinclothed in traditional contexts of use. In the following I am not talking about these figures, but about ones which, though dressed by Westerners, would not customarily have had their mid-sections covered up.

The earliest known practitioners are the LMS missionaries, who, for the sake of its public display, placed a loincloth around the A'a's middle. But the A'a was in fact a reliquary, facilitating productive communication between human and divine forces. Thus, ironically, these 'discreet coverings (possibly of barkcloth) supplied by the LMS to protect the sensitivities of a European audience would have been inadequate for Polynesian tastes. If and when the A'a was exhibited publicly in an indigenous context, its wood body would almost certainly have been hidden from direct gaze' (Hooper 2007:168).

Loinclothing figures was relatively common in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, e.g. a late nineteenth-century photograph (Fig. 2) of pieces from the Rapa Nui collection of a locally renowned Catholic bishop includes a loinclothed ribbed figure (Kjellgren et al. 2001:2). An alternative form of midriff dressing is the metal figleaf screwed onto a Nicobar Island figure in the National Maritime Museum, London (Accession no. AAA2828 (2)). It is likely it was collected and figleaved by sailors of the Royal Navy, perhaps in the late nineteenth century (Wintle 2013).¹⁷

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the only image held by the National Maritime Museum of this figure shows him without his figleaf. One could wonder what this says about the concept of authenticity upheld by the Museum.

It was not just figures that might be covered up. In the library of the missionary museum Missiemuseum Steyl, Holland, two plates, XI and XII, in one book (*Ethnographische Sammlungen des Ung.* Nationalmuseums, Budapest 1899) have the genital areas of the depicted figures covered with paperstrips (Jan Euwals email 7 ix 2012).

Loinclothing could prove controversial, as dressing a figure, unlike emasculation, is easily reversible. Neich, speaking of the National Museum, Wellington, states, 'There are oral accounts of museum education officers who used to attach small loincloths over the offending parts on prominent figures on display.'¹⁸ In the British Museum, the best Luba female figure, was, when acquired, adorned with a small beaded flap of South African origin. Once staff realized this, the flap was removed (Mack email 11 xi 2009).

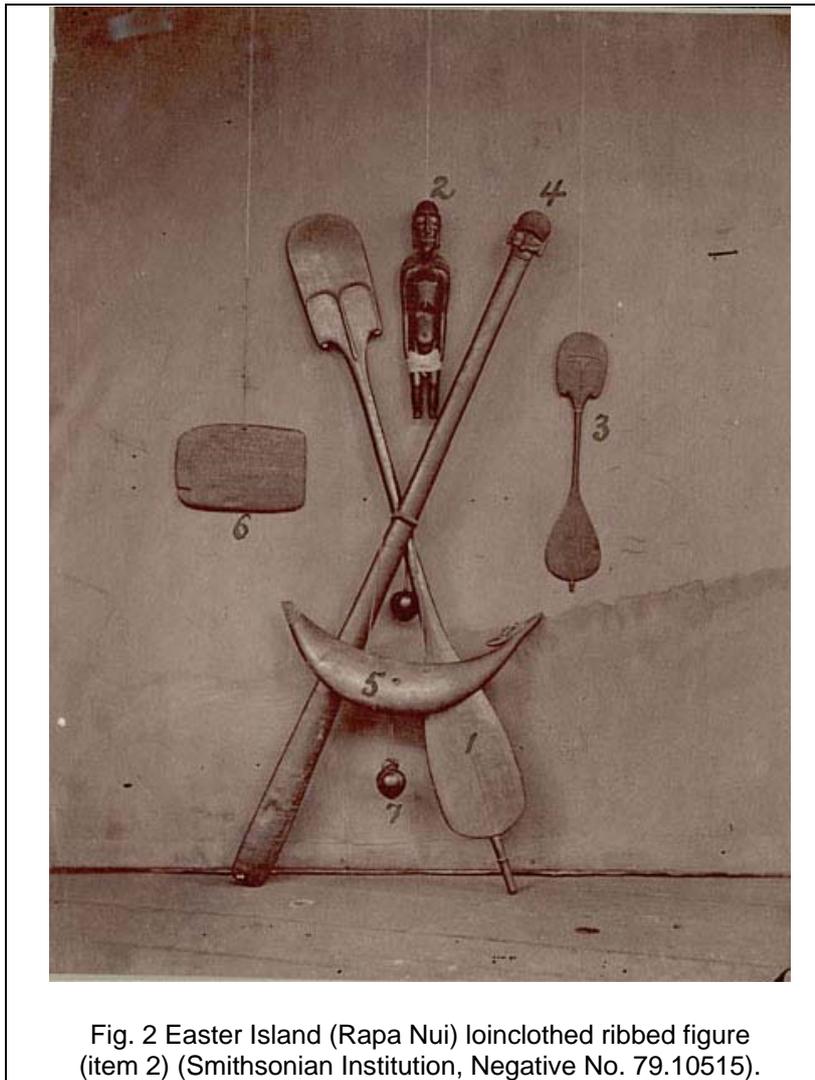


Fig. 2 Easter Island (Rapa Nui) loinclothed ribbed figure (item 2) (Smithsonian Institution, Negative No. 79.10515).

¹⁸ In email to Adam Sharpe. Hoogerbrugge 1977 includes photos of figures from Humboldt Bay, Irian Jaya, whose genital area is covered by barkcloth loincloths fixed by nails (my thanks to R.H.A. Corbey for this reference).

The best documented example of this practice, and the conflicts it could lead to, comes from the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. In the late twentieth-century museum staff worked to identify, then remove, all loin-cloths which had been added by missionaries, colonial administrators, or previous curators. This was the belated end to a much earlier contest. Though the Museum's first Director, the Baron Alphonse de Hauleville, was a scholar, he was not an anthropologist, and he hated displays of visible genitalia. From the Museum's opening in 1910 onwards, he had the exposed pudenda of many figures and power objects on show covered up with 'artificial loincloths, wisps of raffia fibre, a belt, a scrap of beaten bark'. These Western veils of modesty much irritated Jean Maes, Head of the Ethnography Section. In 1912, he judged them 'risible', 'ridiculous', 'illogical', and called for their removal. The baron, his superior, would have none of it: 'I very energetically rise up against the proposal of Monsieur Maes to expose in all their repugnant nudity certain fetishes and figures where the exaggeration of certain generic details constitutes a repugnant and obscene spectacle' (quoted in Cornelis 2000:75). He argued he was perfectly capable of distinguishing European and African representations of nudity: the first were 'art', the second obscenities. This distinction he thought important, as he wished to protect the sensibilities of children and other visitors; he wanted everyone to feel able to visit the Museum. Maes disagreed: 'natives' also had artistic feelings, just ones different from ours. He contended that the imposition of loincloths would give an incorrect, over-civilized image of the Belgian Congo. Taking them off would remind viewers of the civilizing mission his colonialist compatriots were carrying out (Bouttiaux 1999:602; Cornelis 2000; Couttenier 2005: 308-309). The immediate outcome of this dispute is unclear.

A parallel incident occurred in the early 1970s in the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol, UK. Two young assistant curators noted 'funny little bits of rag, clearly not part of the original sculptures' on a few dozen items within the collection. The items were of both male and female figures; most from West Africa, the rest from Oceania, including Melanesia. The pair, after taking advice from other ethnographic curators in the UK, removed the midriff-drapes, which they took to be of Victorian or Edwardian origin, and which had since become 'rather dirty'. The removal coincided with the upcoming retirement of the museum's distinguished Curator, the folklorist Joan W. Lillico. She noted what had happened but made no comment (D.Dawson, pers. comm. xii 2009; S.Giles, pers. comm. x 2009) The accounts I was given of this all mention both the removal and the retirement, as though they were linked. It is difficult therefore not to think that the young men associated the de-robing of the figures and the disappearance of the 'lady ethnographer'.

They wanted an end to outdated attitudes and marked their superior's departure by carrying out an act which was described to me as 'an attempt perhaps at re-energizing the figures'.

On the borderlines, visual and moral

When I asked the director of a famous ethnographic museum whether there were any cut items in the collection under his charge, his immediate, confident reply was 'None'. Three minutes later, I spotted a clearly emasculated male figure, from Rapa Nui, in the first glass-case I peered into.

This curator had not realized, or chosen not to realize what his collection held. Some have simply looked aside. This optical aversion was a common strategy when faced with visually challenging ethnographica. A cultivated turning away of the eyes was a less intrusive reaction to sighting the open exhibition of the impolite. For instance, the first half of William Empson's poem 'Homage to the British Museum' is a detailed panegyric to the A'a. Even though this 'masterpiece' (Appleyard 2003) refers to the sculpture's 'organs of sense', Empson makes no mention whatsoever of its thick-bored penis, nor that most of it has been clearly excised. A similar strategy of visual denial appears to be at play in the over-cautious interpretations of some anthropologists: for example, a distinctively shaped item from the Northern Province of Papua New Guinea is variously termed a 'pestle, bird form' or 'pounder' (Gathercole et al. 1979:204; Newton 1999:168), though to many its phallic representation would be patent (e.g. Rawson 1973:186), especially given that pestles are handled by women. (Fig. 3 shows one of these pestles.) Much the same has occurred in the academic history of Indian art: over the last hundred years, scholars have consistently underemphasized or not mentioned at all the sexuality of male figures (Desai 1997:45-46).¹⁹

¹⁹ The one benefit to this aversive approach was that, within the oral history of Classical Studies, there are many stories about curators placing the museum number in the genital area, 'because no one looks there when it is on display' (E Cameron email 13 I 2007).

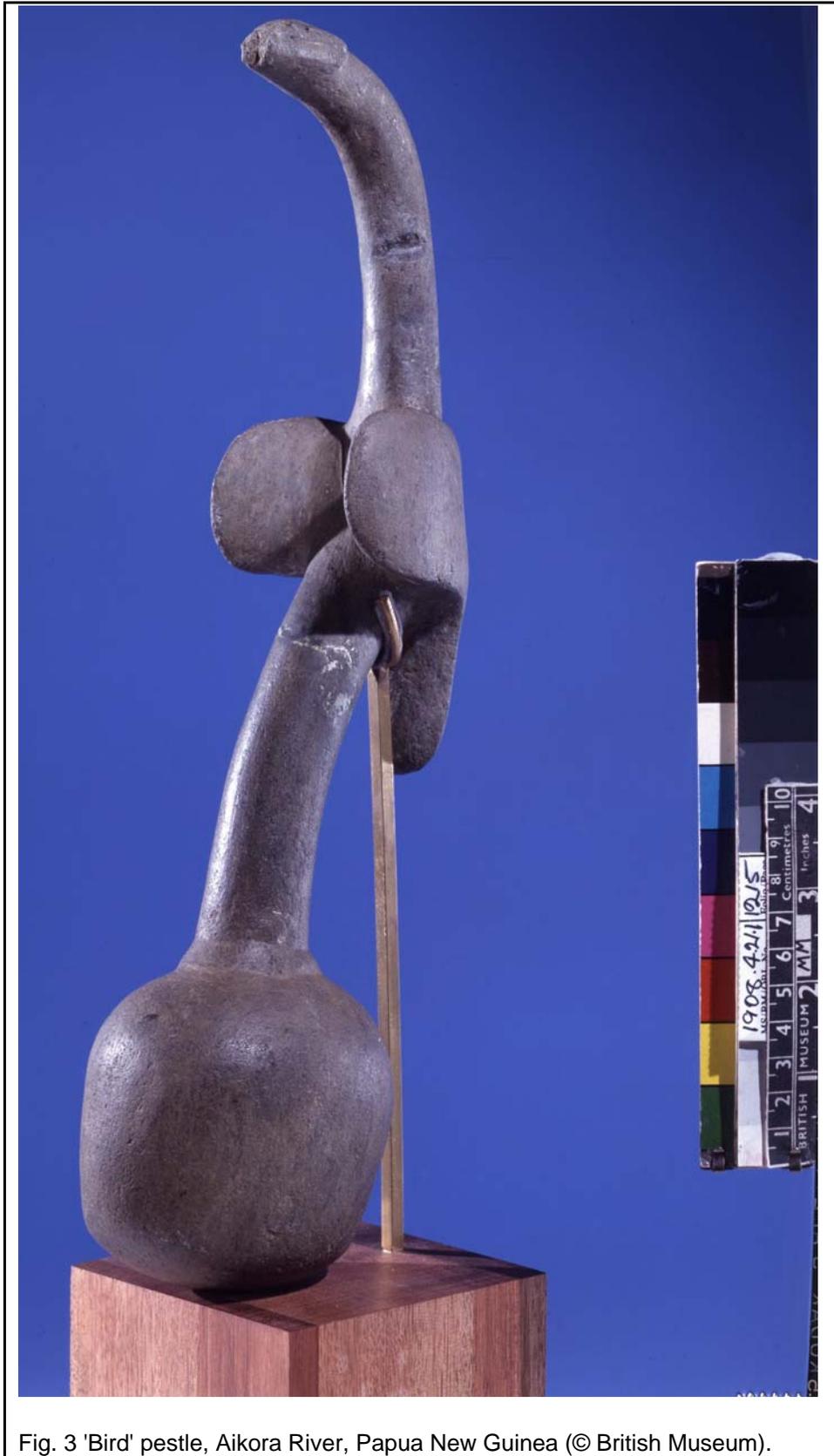


Fig. 3 'Bird' pestle, Aikora River, Papua New Guinea (© British Museum).

Perhaps 'denial' or 'embarrassment' are not the best terms for this visual aversion, rather an over-cautious approach by curators when having to deal with such a potentially powerful and controversial dimension of the objects in their care. Maybe what they are uneasy about is the potential reaction of museum visitors to the frankly erotic dimensions of these items, no matter whose eroticism it is. They do not, in other words, wish to run the risk of being labelled pornographers, unwitting or not.

Pornography, after all, is not a timeless, neutral concept, but a shifting, much contested category, whose definition and content were dictated by the powerful and challenged by their critics. A moral barometer of its time, the idea of pornography has been a continuing cultural battleground over the permissible functions of erotic imagery (Svasek 2007: 176-180). One can choose one's metaphor: seeing pornography as a prism refracting the ethical quandaries at any one moment, or as a fluorescent tube illuminating the moral debates of its day. From the sixteenth century on, the hegemonic deployed the concept to combat political and religious subversion. In particular, Hunt argues, the idea of pornography was invented in response to the perceived menace of the democratization of culture: novels and prints of sexually confident women threatened hegemon's vision of domestic womanhood (Hunt 1991; 1993). Thus curators created 'secret museums', cordoned-off sections of their collections where patently erotic representations could be viewed only by elitist connoisseurs. Unlike these educated males, women and lower-class men were considered unable to control their unruly passions (Kendrick 1987).

If these refined European traditionalists sought to separate a cultivated knowledge from erotic pleasure, their expectations tended to remain within continental borders. Freud infamously argued that many Europeans had achieved civilization by imposing taboos which repressed primitive urges. By corollary, most non-Europeans were uncivilized because they did not bridle their sexual cravings or their capacity for violence. As such they became objects of both fear and desire. Thus many Victorians were simultaneously wary of and strongly tempted by the popular image of Africa, frequently referring to the supposedly promiscuous customs of the locals (Brantlinger 1986:213). Similarly, during the negrophiliac craze of 1920s Paris, racist divisions continued to link 'blackness' with sin, ignorance, sexual deviancy, virility and fecundity. Fashionable *parisiennes*, reacting against contemporary conventions, bought 'Africanized' objects in a bid to flirt or identify with a primeval past. The inherent references here were to 'the savage or barbaric persona, to sexual attractiveness and eroticism, to excitement and exoticism' (Archer-Straw 2000:25-26, 78). This primitivist perspective helped justify a wavering, highly

contextualized tolerance towards exhibition of the other (Lucie-Smith 2007). When European and non-European women were displayed in similar settings, the depiction of the local was less permissive. Whenever authorities strove to censor the circulation of photographs of naked local women, the edict would not apply to nude images of their non-European counterparts (Barkan 1995:91).

Generally, the exhibition of female sexuality might have been permissible, in certain contexts, but the Western display of male sexuality was much more controlled. In 1857, when Queen Victoria was gifted a full-scale cast of Michelangelo's six-metres tall David, it is said she was so taken aback that the London museum where it was exhibited commissioned a figleaf, to conceal the offending genitalia on any subsequent royal visits.²⁰ A modest size for male genitals became standard in the fifth century BCE, and was upheld until the end of the nineteenth century. Neither well-endowment nor sign of sexual arousal was wanted; the penis, if not figleaved or draped, was never thick-bored, and always limp (Mahon 2005:49). In these circumstances, the public exhibition of uncut black male figures, when it occurred, was more often a sign of racist exceptionalism or pro-primitivist lenience than of sexual tolerance. But even here the display of erect black penises was a taboo too far. Such figures remained in the stores.²¹

The display of nude tribal art may thus be regarded as having lain on the very borderline of the acceptable, the polite. Angela Heskett, former assistant to John Hewett, made the very interesting suggestion that some postwar British collectors, who were all male, may have emasculated pieces they had bought in order not to upset their wives (Heskett email 17 x 2009). At least three major collectors were known to have spouses who hated the figures with which they were forced to share domestic space. The Dutch anthropologist Raymond

²⁰ The David is still on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum; the figleaf is now housed in its own case on the back of the plinth of the figure (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/d/davids-fig-leaf/>).

²¹ A modern exemplar of these continuing concerns among certain sections of the public was the controversy from 1989 on, about public funding of exhibitions of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, whose subjects include nude Afro-American men, some of these photos focussing on their genitals.

Corbey cites one example of a compatriot collector who confessed he tampered with items in his collection because of his wife's objections (Corbey 2000: 197).²²

Of course, if emasculation and loinclothing refract a morality of their time, there will be other times and places when the opposite holds, when revelling in penile display is exploited by the commercially, artistically or subversively minded. In recent decades, carvers, dealers and auctioneers have learnt that strongly sexed male figures sell well.²³

If pornography is frequently as much concerned with the political as it is with the moral, then it is no surprise that loinclothing and emasculation can often be viewed simultaneously as a means to appease upset Westerners and as a mode of disempowering the locals. On this logic, taking a piece of cloth or the knife to the protuberant source of masculine reproductive and erotic power may be viewed, partially, as a style of colonialist containment; it was an act of censorship, violence or even punishment towards unenlightened pagans still living in the darkness of heathen beliefs and rampant promiscuity. In this sense, loinclothed and emasculated objects can be placed in the same contemporary context as the vast numbers of male weaponry (maces, clubs, spears, arrows, etc.) which were collected and prominently exhibited during the period (Coombes 1994). Arnoldi, for instance, in a paper on the fin-de-siecle sculptor and collector Herbert Ward, recognizes that trophy collecting motivated some Westerners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Collecting weaponry was 'logical and desirable. . . because they were such potent symbols of conquest and domination' (Arnoldi 1998: 195). In one of Ward's installations, each wall was covered with decoratively arranged spears; instead of a ceiling fan, the overhead light was surrounded by a fan-like spread of spears

²² Borderline acceptability becomes easy material for jokes, e.g. in *La Cage Aux Folles*, a well-endowed ethnographic figure loses its manhood in a memorable house-cleaning scene. I thank Chris Steiner for this example.

²³ Examples of strongly sexed male figures selling or being publicized well include e.g. contemporary tribal art dealers in Paris (Price 1989:47, 130, n.5), Papua New Guinea (Silverman 2009:16, email 29 ix 2009), or West Africa (Steiner 1994:145-146); Congolese sculptors (Schildkrout 1999); a Polynesian artist (Thomas 1999:266; Vivieare 2009:4); a Catholic missionary in the Arctic (Graburn 2000:23).

(Arnoldi fig. 8.5, 1998: 206). More generally, we may regard the removal of these ethnographic items from their contexts of origin as accompanied by varying sorts and degrees of violence: 'Beside the literal violence of theft, confiscation, and the like, we must include violence done to the object itself, which is often stripped of its accoutrements, varnished or even remodeled' (McGaffey 1998: 224). On these readings the various dimensions of violence, whether of original function, on transfer to Westerners, or while in Western hands, are integral to significant sections of ethnographic collections. Here emasculation and loinclothing of items may be seen as comparable modes of colonial disempowerment, and their exhibition as ways of advertising that fact.

The final cut

By definition, curators are meant to 'cure' and care for the objects within their collections. However, within that general definition, the job description of curators and the staff under them has not been static. Similarly, how their job has been viewed has evolved over time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, curators who engaged in restoration of pictures or sculpture were often seen as falsifiers, fabricators of truth. They were accused of 'making old things look beautiful and new, or of making new things look old and valuable according to taste' (Malkogeorgou 2006). In Victorian times, the influence of John Ruskin's views led to a different approach. He argued art should communicate truths of vision, religion, and the conduct of life. Speaking of gargoyles, he said their 'crude' and 'savage' aspects were but proof of their makers' laudable freedom of thought. He regarded conservation as essential and restoration as destruction, for the glory of, say, a building lay in its age, 'in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity' (Ruskin 1849:ch.6).

Even today commentators will speak of conservation as the attempt to preserve the 'true nature' of an object (e.g. Eastop 2006: 517), which relies mainly upon its material constituents. For many, a true object is one composed of authentic material with a numinous quality. This concern with material authenticity may be so strong that, for example, a heavily restored object, so long as it is composed of the remaining fragments of the destroyed original, retains its numinosity for viewers. This belief in the power of the physical constituents of the object is thought a form of material fetishism (Muñoz-Viñas 2005:84-90). Whether this faith should be dubbed fetishistic or not, the materiality of this equation is above all a socially framed one. What makes an aged object authentic to

people is the connections it enables them to establish with the persons and places associated with it in its history. Here the materiality of objects is crucial as it 'embodies the past experiences and relationships that they have been part of, and facilitates some kind of ineffable contact with those experiences and relationships' (Jones 2010:190-191). Another way to put that is to state that the aura generated by an object's materiality is a product of its inalienable connections with past events and peoples (Macdonald 1997, 2002). In Ruskin's terms, it is the 'voicefulness, . . . sympathy. . . we feel (with) the passing waves of humanity'.

All of these curatorial considerations are undergirded by a strong sense of ethics. As Cesare Brandi, the pioneer Italian theorist of restoration, put it in the 1960s, the protection and restoration of objects is a moral obligation for curators and conservators. Respecting and preserving material integrity is the only way to protect the artistic value of figurative objects (Brandi 2005). Common codes of ethics provide these professionals with a moral ground on which to stand, together. As such, they also serve as a banner of occupational identity. But these moralities are at the same time inflected by the particular institutions within which curators work: a national museum, for instance, is funded to feed a version of national memory.

The consequences of all these points when directed to the work of curators of anthropological museums are manifold. In the 1940s the ethnologist Trevor Thomas characterized the curator as a 'chaperone' who, on obtaining a new item, introduces it to 'an unknown circle of acquaintance' (Thomas 1940:24). On the material collected in this paper, Thomas's gentlemanly ideal appears disingenuous. Missionaries might have desecrated objects in an over-zealous pursuit of souls, some dealers may have stripped or taken the knife to their merchandise in their desire for profit, several collectors appear to have behaved similarly for more domestic reasons. But none of these was duty-bound to conserve objects in the state they were originally obtained. Only curators are required to do that.

All the theorists and commentators on conservation discussed above, bar Thomas, are talking above all about objects, be they archaeological or art-historical, which come from Western heritage. These are items which were already highly valued and, especially in the case of paintings or sculpture, have long been so. Such is not the case with ethnographica. Until relatively recently, the great majority of items in anthropological museums were not viewed with awe by their curators or thought of as anything much more

than ethnographic indicators of non-Western ways of life. Throughout this period and up until the postwar years, museum curators in general valued highly the handling of objects as a key means of coming to appreciate the items in a collection (Candlin 2010). This hands-on approach was especially developed in anthropology museums. In the Pitt-Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, for instance, members of the academic staff taught students to handle, even use items in order to better understand their nature: taking objects from the collection, the anthropologists showed them, among other things, how to make fire from sticks, knap flints, and throw boomerangs (Gosden and Larson 2007: 143; Larson 2007: 109).

Perhaps the most striking indicator of this pragmatic approach to ethnographica is the fact that the person who for decades repaired and preserved items in the collection was a professionally untrained member of the Pitt-Rivers staff, personally employed by Henry Balfour, the Curator from 1891 to 1939, who enjoyed independent means. Equally revealing is the revelation that Balfour even sliced up several bows in the collection, in order to report on their internal composition (Larson 2007: 101). As a contemporary member of staff put it to me, in the Pitt-Rivers, objects were treated 'in a cavalier fashion' until well into the postwar period: for instance, the limbs of figurines could be replaced or added, though their curators or repairers might not know what the items were used for nor what they originally looked like (A. Petch, pers. comm. 4 v 2012).²⁴

This pragmatic or cavalier approach to individual items applied just as much to the collection as a whole. The Annual Reports of the Pitt-Rivers, which opened in 1883, give us some indication of the quality of conservation upheld by its curators over its first seven decades. Though the Museum was early recognized as a prestigious institution with 'a definite place in national life', the reports list loss and damage caused by, among other reasons: a leaking roof (1894, 1925, 1945, 1948), 'ruin caused by dust, the attacks of beetles and moths, and other causes, as well as the frequent handling by visitors' (1903), theft (1915, B.Cranstone pers. comm. 1985), burst water-pipes (1926), a plague of rats (1927), a severe gale stripping the roof and bringing ceilings down (1928), as well as

²⁴ It is indicative that in the mid-1950s the then Curator chose to emphasize that the repair of 'a splendid large model of a Burmese river boat' had been greatly assisted by the donation of 'a large photograph of the kind of boat from which our specimen was modelled' (Annual Report, Pitt-Rivers Museum, 1954).

disintegrating walls and collapsing ceilings because of dampness (1937) plus excessive heat, up to 110 degrees Fahrenheit (1940, 1949), and 'innumerable pests' (1959). Bronzes suffered malignant corrosion (1941), woodwork decayed or was riddled by worms (1944), ship-wrights' models fell apart (1941). In 1954 the Curator might have stated that 'In an ethnological collection the ephemeral becomes eternal' (1954); the Annual Reports suggest the opposite was often the case.²⁵

The case of the Pitt-Rivers was not unique. In 1904 Balfour complained generally about the state of many ethnographic collections, where fallen labels become attached to other objects, and 'apathy rules'. Management is 'handed over to the tender care of. . . moths and beetles, having full powers to dispose of the specimens as they think fit'. 'Neglect, atrophy, and decay' became the order of the day (Balfour 1904: 398). Specific examples are legion. For instance, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, the national museum of ethnography in France, the Trocadero, languished in ruinous decay and suffered frequent theft (Murphy 2009:27). Picasso, on his famous 1907 visit there, thought it dank, smelly, and seedy, with the objects poorly installed (Malraux 1974:17). Twelve years later, a *député* called it 'a true shaming of France' (quoted in Cuisenier 1987:146). Its successor, the Musée de l'Homme, did not have a good reputation for curatorship, as I observed in its basement in 1978; among other indications a magnificent Yangere wooden drum, from Central African Republic, later exhibited in the Louvre as a masterpiece of tribal art was used, in its time at the Musée, for holding umbrellas or as a rubbish bin. Similarly, until the exhibited items of the Musée national des Arts d'Afriques et d'Océanie were moved to the Musée du Quai Branly in the early 2000s, they were periodically wet by leaks from the aquarium on the floor above (G. Beaujean-Baltzar pers. comm. 30 v 2012. Also Corbey 2000:125).²⁶

Whether in the UK or on the Continent, this generalized ambience of neglect, partly caused by lack of funding, engendered a curatorial culture in ethnographic museums where some staff might show scant respect for the material integrity of the items. Moreover, if we take the point that objects are about the relations they enable, curators

²⁵ The librarian of the Pitt-Rivers Museum kindly made these Annual Reports available to me.

²⁶ Similar criticisms are made of the Leiden Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, the Dutch public institution.

who mishandled objects were able to reject the social connections proffered by these objects. Their mistreatment of pieces from other cultures can thus be seen as a material statement of social distance or cultural disparagement which, at best, borders on an unthinking racism.

Curators are duty-bound to serve the general public by displaying the collections under their care (Bolton 1904:254). But, if an ethical code is meant to undergird curatorial practice, then loinclothing ethnographic figures becomes yet another example of how curators are forced to negotiate a morally complex cross-cultural arena where key ethical decisions about display, which have to be made, may well be fraught, contingent and subject to revision. Curators who engaged in covering up were enacting a very particular morality for the sake of not giving offence. Their censorious acts serve, by reflection, to underline the passion-stirring power of the genitally endowed figures (Freedberg 1989; Peffer 2005). Generally, these self-proclaimed 'stewards of things' (Terrell 1979:16) who loinclothed objects in fact gave greater weight to the delicate sensibility of their non-academic visitors than to the physical integrity of the items in their care. The propriety of the public, and perhaps of themselves, came first. Unlike most iconoclasts who rebel against figures of authority, these curators were exploiting the authority which came with their position, to perpetrate a cover-up. Here is the place to remember that one of Brandi's main concerns was not just the conservation in the present day of objects in a collection, but their preservation for the future as well. In stark contrast, the curators discussed in this paper were thinking predominantly of the present, or that their ethical code was so absolute and universal it transcended time and place.

Perhaps that is too crude an interpretation, for the question remains: why did the curators keep quiet about the mistreatment of objects? Maybe the theorist of conservation Muñoz-Viñas gives us the clue. He tabulates the varieties of change an object may undergo:

	Non-deliberate	Deliberate
	Change	Change
Increasing		
Value	Patina	Restoration
Decreasing	Decay	
Value	Disaster	Vandalism

Muñoz-Viñas states that he only adds vandalism to his list for the explicit ‘sake of completeness’ (Muñoz-Viñas 2005:102). I.e. since curators by definition look after the objects in a collection, the very idea some might tamper with items is not to be considered seriously, or openly. On this logic, curators of ethnographica might have been cavalier yet still have minded their reputation in the eyes of more liberal colleagues. Tampering with objects was a behaviour enacted, not enunciated.

This withholding of words appears to have been the convention. In the past, except for the internal correspondence between Maes and de Hauleville at Tervuren, the practice of loinclothing by curators appears to have gone undocumented. Similarly, if some curators did in fact emasculate objects, they did not broadcast the fact, nor did colleagues aware of their practice transmit this knowledge beyond the museum walls. In my fieldwork for this paper, I found many of their modern-day counterparts were just as tight-lipped. Similarly Katie Gutcher, who surveyed excisory practice in British museums in 2007, found that ‘to some individuals the subject is still taboo, while others have merely failed to notice this phenomenon’; there was a ‘highly evident silence in relation to emasculation and the practice of cutting’ (Gutcher 2008:5, 9). Thus, information about curatorial tampering remains stubbornly within the closed space of ‘in-house gossip’, as part of the unrecorded life of an institution. If it is admitted to a persistent and intrusive outsider (such as myself), it is with a self-distancing laugh or presented as an embarrassing joke.

This apparent self-gagging within the guild would serve clear purpose. Social scientists have emphasized the power of muting (Berman 1998; Jaworski 1993). On their logic, silence can act as an unobtrusive form of concealment, selectively employed by those in authority to regulate utterance. Withholding words thus becomes integral to the veiling of power. Above all, for our purposes, it is key to the construction of professional identity, with local hegemony imposing the limits of the said (Achino-Loeb 2006:3, 12). Chances are this interdiction was itself unspoken, and learning its presence part of the socialization of fledgling curators.²⁷

This silencing goes hand-in-hand with the visual denial or trained blindness mentioned above. These behaviours, taken together, have also affected museum cataloguing systems for analysing and categorizing ethnographica, for there is usually no reference to emasculation and none to its perpetrators. This is a further reminder that these systems are but artefacts of their time and place, permeated by contemporaneous moralities. When I showed a curator at a major museum a de-sexed figure, of which he had been unaware, he responded, 'Gosh! There it is! Maybe we really should include "emasculation" in our database records'.

The qualified ignorance generated by the actions of emasculators, whether they were dealers, collectors or curators, is permanent. If collections are maintained partly for scholastic purposes, disfiguring objects denies scholars a more complete understanding of the items they wish to examine. There will now always be a lack of information about the size, bore, and position of these missing penises. The meanings the emasculated objects were meant to bear and embody have been diminished. This is not just a loss to anthropologists and museum visitors but above all to living members of the areas from which these items come. They have been permanently deprived of comprehending at least one dimension of their forebears' intentions, attitudes, artistry and vision. As Rowland Abiodun, Nigerian artist and professor of African art, put it, 'Sawing off and maiming those

²⁷ This silencing about sex is not exclusive to anthropologist-curators; anthropologists practised the same for several decades. For example, in the interwar years, discussion of sex was reconceptualised as 'marriage, family, and social structure' (Lyons and Lyons 2004:10. See also Herdt 1994: xi; 1997:xi; Lewin and Leap 2002:5).

works' has left us 'with no chance of discerning anything like the aesthetics that actually informed their creators' (in Vogel 2001:21).

* * *

If we regard objects as, like people, having social lives (Appadurai 1986), then the removal or covering of penises documented here becomes a badly neglected chapter in their transnational biographies. Nicholas Thomas, building on Arjun Appadurai, looked at the varieties of exchanges between colonizers and colonized: here, objects do not lose associations on transport, but gain more, in a dynamic series (Thomas 1991). To employ his term, modelled penises are 'entangled' within the multiple encounters in which they are forced to play a part. Some chopped them; others covered them. Whichever way they are exhibited, these mistreated objects can help reveal the specific yet ever-shifting nature of mutually regarding cross-cultural encounters, in sexual, economic, religious, academic, domestic, and artistic spheres.

If, as conscientious ethnographers, we wish the life-histories of curated objects to be as fulsome as possible, surely it is incumbent on us to investigate, in however fragmentary a manner, the previously unexamined or skirted around? The silence, or apparent ignorance of some curators should not be seen as an intellectual obstacle, but a methodological challenge. The ethnographic fact that this topic is difficult, and in many ways unsatisfactory to study (because so much is sparingly documented), should not be a reason for avoiding the subject: indeed the very opposite. At this rate, loinclothed or emasculated ethnographica are but a further example of the ways supposed marginalia can tell us much about central issues.

Furthermore this lack of scholarly attention to the ways these objects have been tampered with indicates that though a modern museum studies has revealed and questioned much about curatorial behaviour, there is still a lot more to unveil. Today, museums are all too often concerned, above all for reasons of funding, with projecting the right image, and that concern can act as a powerful disincentive to uncovering the less flattering aspects of an institution's past. Perhaps the tampering with objects discussed here is but one example of

the alteration of objects by those paid to care for them. Even seemingly enlightened museums can have their dark side.

We might also consider those objects which have not been collected, for reasons of supposed propriety, because they were difficult to display at the time (Burland 1973). For instance, it is remarkable that many European public collections of ethnographica do not include examples of Legba: outsize erect penises, which play a very important role in the social, religious and spatial organization of the Fon, Benin (Beaujean email 16 xii 2009). So far, we can only wonder how many other, similar objects there are whose collection was not countenanced.

In 1979 the American curator John Terrell defined his colleagues as stewards keeping 'a watchful eye over how collections are stored, handled. . . they are responsible for the survival of the collections under their care' (Terrell 1979:17). This role of guardianship applies whether the ultimate aim of the museum is pedagogic (e.g. the Pitt-Rivers) or nationalistic (e.g. the British Museum). The evidence of this paper suggests this model has not been consistently upheld, and a misleading image of curatorship perpetuated, for whatever reason, conflating rhetoric with practice, intentions with actions. Time for a change.

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