Figure 1: *Helmet mask, batcham / tsesah*, Master of the Bamileke region, Cameroon, Bamendjo, 19th c., Wood, 72 × 51 × 37 cm, diam. 19.5 cm, Museum Rietberg, RAF 721, Gift of Eduard von der Heydt. Provenance: Gustav Umlauff, Hamburg (before 1914); Sally Falk, Mannheim (1920); Karl Nierendorf, Berlin (ca. 1920–1924); Eduard von der Heydt Collection (1924–).

Rhea Blem

Becoming a Masterpiece? The *Batcham Mask* and its Display at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich

Abstract This chapter presents a critical discussion of the display of the so-called *Batcham mask* at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich in 2016, and links this to its reception and canonization in a Euro-American context. The mask's masterpiece status and its decontextualized presentation are found to obscure parts of its biography. Many open questions remain concerning the object's history before reaching Europe, its fabrication and intended purposes, but also the colonial circumstances surrounding its acquisition, its trading and subsequent entrance into the collection of Eduard von der Heydt, the founding donor of the museum. This chapter seeks to investigate these gaps in information and attempts to recontextualize the mask by redirecting the focus onto its 'original' context. Lastly, it explores possibilities for alternative approaches to discussing its history and contemporary display within a local environment.

Keywords Batcham / tsesah, Bamileke Mask, Masterpiece, Eduard von der Heydt, Provenance, Primitivism, Museum Display, Object Biography

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At the heart of the permanent display of African art at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich stands an object that has come to be referred to as the *Batcham mask*.[1] It is presented as one of the 'highlights' of the collection, suggesting that a significant amount of prestige is associated with its possession.

The wooden mask is of considerable size and was designed to fit on top of the wearer's head. A crest of accentuated eyebrows rises steeply upward from the forehead, forming two elongated arcs whose semi-circular shape is emphasized by parallel lines that converge centrally. Their calm, rhythmic quality is echoed by vertical lines reminiscent of baleen bristles, which form a mouth, and ears. The eyes are oblong and large and have small perforations in their surface. The cheeks correspond inversely to the bulbous nostrils, which are reduced to two demi-orbs on either side of the nose.

Positioned at a central point against a black partition wall, the *Batcham mask* is presented in an aestheticized manner and isolated from the rest of the collection. In a brief exhibition video featuring Lorenz Homberger, former curator of the Africa and Oceania Department, the mask is hailed as an "ingenious masterpiece of an African artist" (Museum Rietberg 2013a). Emphasis is given to its monumentality, fine workmanship, and provenance, thereby embedding it in a value system of commodified art (‣**Commodification**). By describing the interplay of convex and concave surfaces as "cubist" and "modern," this presentation participates in a rhetoric that reads a modernist primitivism (‣**Primitivism**) onto the *Batcham mask* (Museum Rietberg 2013a). While the piece is visually striking, its mode of display deprives it of any other sensory values, as it barely allows a 360-degree view of the mask. The official photograph of the mask functions as an extension of the exhibition space, reinforcing its emphasis on the visual. This ocularcentric focus, combined with sparse background information, is characteristic of European cultural conventions and is directly linked to the museum's institutional past.

The Rietberg's core collection consists of objects amassed by the banker and collector Eduard von der Heydt, which he donated to the city of Zurich in 1952; the *Batcham mask* was part of this founding gift. The collector showed limited interest in the original cultural contexts of the works (Von der Heydt 1947; Fehlemann 2002). His writings bear witness to a general imperialist attitude marked by an "interest in collecting with the aim of presenting a global overview rather than by a concern with social structures" (Kravagna, in Kazeem 2009, 136–137). This attitude still informs the approach evident in the exhibition video, when it admits that regrettably

1 These observations are based on an analysis of the state of display in 2016. I am aware of the simplifications implied in the term "African art", which presumes cultural homogeneity of vast areas, and of categorizing ascriptions such as *Batcham* or *Bamileke*, which are often remnants of colonial administrative shorthand. Here, the mask will nonetheless be referred to throughout as *Batcham*, as this is the name, which has established itself in the literature and the space of the Museum Rietberg.

little is known about the function of the *Batcham mask* yet fails to further discuss this lack of information (Museum Rietberg 2013a).[2]

Carl Einstein first published the mask in the 1921 edition of *Negerplastik* (Harter 1969, 411), thereby contributing to the object's reception in a primitivist context, as well as to its singularization (Kopytoff, in Appadurai 1986). This in turn paved the way for its inclusion in the seminal 1934–1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which pioneered the by now firmly established conventions of display (Sweeney 1935). The show marked a turning point in the life of the objects shown there, an irrevocable change in their meaning; it "transformed [them] from indexes of another way of life into masterpieces of world art" (Paudrat, in Rubin 1984, 164) (‣**Masterpiece**).[3] Views of the exhibit show the mask positioned on an unlabeled cylindrical pedestal in a white cube (MoMA Archives 2017). In placing the works in an artificial vacuum outside of time and space, this overtly aestheticizing presentation was formative for subsequent museological practice relating to African art. Today's minimalist display at the Rietberg, as well as the official photograph of the mask, reflects this pattern of decontextualization.

For all the attention given to prominent owners, dealers, collectors, and publications linked to the mask, its mode of display today reveals comparatively little about its life before leaving Cameroon. We have little specific information regarding the mask's original context, and also its function has been a subject of uncertainty in the literature. Nor has the exact age of the piece been established; it is dated very generally as "nineteenth century," a vagueness it shares with many contemporary pieces due to difficulties in dating wood and a lack or loss of records.

It was recently ascribed to the western Bamileke kingdoms, Bamileke being a blanket term used for several diverse societies living in parts of the Cameroon grasslands (Museum Rietberg 2013a). Currently titled "Batcham Mask of a Bamendjo master,"[4] the consensus is that it was manufactured at the latter location but probably commissioned by a Batcham chiefdom (Illner et al. 2013, 150). The mask's obscure origin and

2 This primarily concerns the display in the year 2016. The presentation has, apart from some minor adjustments, such as the removal of the exhibition video, remained in this state until 2019. It seems safe to presume that plans for the rejuvenation of the permanent exhibition are underway.

3 A later edition of William S. Rubin's book on *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* reinstated the mask as part of the new canon of internationally renowned African art (1984, 138).

4 In 1993, Jean-Paul Notué proposed the alternative title 'tsesah' for a similar mask previously in the Welcome collection and later at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, the term 'Batcham' was by that time firmly established and has continued to prevail in connection with these and similar masks in the space of the museum until the 1990s (see Notué 1993; Biro 2018). Recently, the Museum Rietberg has adapted its description of the mask to include 'tsesah'. This move indicates an awareness for these problems and shows a concerted effort to use language that references the cultural context in which objects were made and used. Many thanks to Michaela Oberhofer for pointing me towards this term and for her valuable literature advice.

function is indicative of the complex dynamic of economic and artistic exchange occurring in the area, as both "these two chiefdoms, and Batcham in particular, were located at important cross-roads linking the four corners of the Bamileke region" (Harter 1969, 416). It is possible that the mask was manufactured in an entirely different part of the area but brought to either Batcham or Bamendjo as a result of such inter-regional transfers (Biro 2018, 127–130). Since courts routinely exchanged gifts, confusion regarding the birthplaces of objects could have arisen even before their removal from the African continent (von Lintig 1994, 110).

What is certain is that the *Batcham mask* was firmly embedded in a courtly environment (Illner et al. 2013). Bettina von Lintig further contextualizes the mask in comparison with a heterogeneous group of related pieces found across the Bamileke area (Illner et al. 2013, 108–109). She considers the fractal partitioning of the face as characteristic of "night masks" of the highland Bangwa in the western Bamileke region (Illner et al. 2013, 110). Together with similar examples, the mask is thought to have played a role in certain inaugurations and royal ceremonies (Illner et al. 2013, 144). Contrary to what its display might suggest, it was not conceived as 'pure sculpture' but would have been part of a complete multi-sensory performance embedded in a web of political and religious symbolism.

The mask's provenance is well documented and vaunted in both the literature and the exhibition video, but only from its time of arrival on European shores. Major gaps in the history of the mask confront the viewer with issues concerning colonial history and the migration of objects. Under what circumstances did its source communities part with it? With whom and with what other cargo did it travel and how did it eventually find its way into the possession of a German collector?

There seems to be a tension between the void of missing background information about the mask and the way it is staged as an "icon of world art" (Museum Rietberg 2013a). Against this backdrop, the *Batcham mask*'s presentation at the Museum Rietberg raises the question of how to move beyond its historical meaning as a trophy (‣**Decolonizing**)?

How, then, might such a recontextualization of this object be achieved? It seems crucial not to erase the inherited remnants of colonial discourse, but instead to become aware of and reveal them. Viewers could be directly confronted with the issues stemming from the circulation of non-European objects and aesthetics. Colonial appropriation practices should be made explicit in the display (‣**Appropriation**). In other words, the mask should be *discussed*, not simply *shown.* This would include sketching the paths of migration of the *Batcham mask*, recognizing its biography before its arrival on European shores and disclosing the circumstances under which the transfers took place. Furthermore, the information gap should be acknowledged and articulated. Uncertainties or missing sources, a common issue for objects collected across the African continent around the

turn of the century, should be discussed as well, as they are symptomatic of broader patterns. Once acknowledged, the 'absence' of sources could reveal a great deal about the way these objects were interacted with in the past.

On a conceptual level, this would involve an interactive exploration of colonial histories, representational strategies of the 'Other' (▸**Othering**), and an explicit questioning of past and present display practices. Even though the 'original' context of the mask is bound to have developed and changed, a dialogue could be initiated with the Bamileke source communities; this could, for instance, take the form of research collaborations with museums in Cameroon.[5] Lastly, the mask's status in its local context must be re-evaluated. No region of this earth escaped the effects of colonialism—Switzerland is not unconnected to imperialism and colonial history (see Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015). Perhaps a more direct discussion of Zurich as a center of trade and finance could be initiated, along with the acknowledgment of colonial legacies in Swiss industries.

The notion of museums as 'contact zones,' as "spaces of ongoing encounter between colonizer and colonized," implies a potential for transformation (Clifford qtd. in Edwards 2006, 253).[6] Clearly, such transformative processes are complex, long-term projects. Nonetheless, with regard to the Museum Rietberg's permanent exhibition and the *Batcham mask*, there is certainly room for a renegotiation of display practices and for initiating a conversation about not just the mask, but the collection as a whole. A departure from the masterpiece rhetoric could open up new avenues for discussing the conception, acquisition, and travel of objects such as the *Batcham mask*, so as to begin to explore the complexities of their biographies.

Figure

Fig. 1: Photo: Rainer Wolfsberger; © Museum Rietberg.

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5 Such cooperation projects are in fact in process with the Palace Museum of Foumban i.a. (Oberhofer in Laely et al. 2018).

6 More recent exhibitions, such as *Perlkunst aus Afrika: Die Sammlung Mottas* (June–Oct. 2018), begin to take into account such questions and have explored the entangled histories of the artefacts and objects displayed.

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