“Semper Novi Quid ex Africa”: Redrawing the Borders of Medieval African Art and Considering Its Implications for Medieval Studies

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Clues exist that the relationship between African American and African studies might be fruitfully negotiated through the medieval. Consider, for example, that Asa J. Davis, the founder of the historically significant Black Studies department at Amherst College, wrote a dissertation on a thirteenth-century Ethiopian manuscript.¹ We take that intersection as an invitation to consider the possibility of a collaboration between African American and medieval African art historical studies in the name of racial justice.

This essay stages such a collaboration: between a scholar of late antique art and archaeology (Andrea Myers Achi reading African art) and a literature scholar (Seeta Chaganti reading the

work of W.E.B. Du Bois). Together, we explore how emerging practices of curating art made in Africa from premodern historical periods might illuminate a specifically medievalist intervention into US-based discourses of race and racial justice. We contend, first, that curation offers important and necessary opportunities to broaden the meanings and definitions underlying African art. We ask: what specific national cultures on the African continent have and have not been considered African in scholarly perspectives? Our project, in other words, redefines what is considered African or medieval in predominantly US museum contexts. And second, we suggest that such broadening of definition can lead us toward curatorial practices, as well as responses to exhibitions, that further the critical examination of the very institutions that produce exhibitions. This means more than just introducing African objects into settings that visitors might expect to be Eurocentric. It means, as we shall ultimately argue, curating objects in such a way as to introduce a spectatorial practice of radical hesitation that intervenes into racialized epistemologies.

Our intervention requires a methodological and conceptual framework that acknowledges both the epistemology of hesitation and the facets of relation between the US-based racial politics, and the study of Africa. We find this critical framework in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose conception of “Sociology Hesitant” has provided a springboard for other work that links readings of culture with social justice. Furthermore, Du Bois’s interest in African countries and pan-Africanism also informed, throughout his writing and activist life, his thoughts about race in the US. In addition, Du Bois incorporated into his perspective on Africa a consciousness not only of its particular history—one preceding the Atlantic slave trade—but also of

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historical time more broadly, all crucial themes in the discussion of premodernity. Indeed, as Matthew X. Vernon has shown, Du Bois’s writing frequently gestures toward the medieval. Like Vernon, we are interested in how Du Bois construed the “sphere of cultural production” as an important site in which to examine race and foster racial justice. 3 But while Vernon invokes Du Bois through the latter’s explicit engagements with medieval European literature and history, we look to other aspects of Du Bois’s work and other reasons to invoke him. Perhaps most significantly, Du Bois’s writings explore how to shift in conceptual focus between the US and African countries, a mode of shifting that we bring to the US-sited exhibition of African art. Du Bois begins and ends his “Hands of Ethiopia” with the phrase “Semper novi quid ex Africa!” to designate the possibility of a meaningfully new, racially just, and anticolonial world. 4 He compels us to ask how focusing on the cultures of African countries might contribute to the creation of this world. As a medievalist using American critical race theory as a lens to read early Western literature and a medievalist who is an expert in Christian art of northeast Africa, we aim to triangulate the stakes of African art curation, its inflection in the realm of premodernity, and, finally, racial justice in the American settings that often provide the first public audiences for shows focusing on medieval Africa.

Ex Africa

The global turn in medieval studies coincides with a turn in the curation of American museum exhibitions of medieval art; in

this sense, we might say that many medievalists interested in the global Middle Ages find themselves confronted with a stereoscopic view: one pairing US race and African art. The turn in museum curation—initiated several years ago in the long process of exhibition planning—manifests itself in the present to foreground the contributions of the African continent to the worldwide development of art and artifacts across the Middle Ages. Two shows exemplifying this commitment are *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, which premiered at Northwestern University’s Block Museum (2019); and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Art and Peoples of the Kharga Oasis* (2017). In changing received narratives about medieval artistic traditions across Africa and Europe, such exhibitions raise, for us, a question about the extent to which a US-sited exhibition about medieval Africa is implicitly also an exhibition about race. For even though such shows often result from substantive collaboration with arts ministries and other representatives of African countries, we would suggest that their premiering, publicity, and viewing in the US necessitates understanding them through a filter of American racial politics.\(^5\) Indeed, the Getty Museum’s *Outcasts: Prejudice and Persecution in the Medieval World* (2018) at once brought up the topic of race as inflected by contemporary American political discourse and “inspired,” through responses to it, a subsequent Getty exhibition focused on Africa, entitled *Balthazar: A Black African King in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (2019).\(^6\)

5 *Caravans of Gold* has been produced in partnerships with museum officials in Nigeria, Mali, and Morocco.

6 Kristen Collins and Bryan C. Keene, “Scholars Respond to an Exhibition about Medieval Prejudice,” *The Iris*, March 6, 2019, [https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/scholars-respond-to-an-exhibition-about-medieval-prejudice/](https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/scholars-respond-to-an-exhibition-about-medieval-prejudice/). In the development of *Outcasts*, the terms “diversity,” “inclusivity,” “tolerance,” and “out groups,” as well as the aim “to make connections between the Middle Ages and the contemporary world,” appeared. While this terminology itself is not limited to a US context, the curators also cite as foundational to their aims Holland Cotter’s *New York Times* manifesto, which refers to the urgency of connecting specifically American politics
In tandem with medievalists’ push to use anti-racist approaches in their work, an adjacent discipline of Medieval African Studies and Art History seems to be emerging; these newer approaches in combination with a longer history of display and taxonomic practice foreground the need to re-examine what we mean by “medieval African art.” Books such as François-Xavier Fauvelle’s *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages* and Michael Gomez’s *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* carefully examine primary sources from historical Africa and situate Africa within the global Middle Ages. These publications broaden public understanding of the interconnectedness of medieval worlds. Work on “medieval” Africa, for the most part, applies to traditional African studies and a chronological period that approximates late antiquity and the European Middle


Ages (300–1500). To complicate matters further, the borders of Northeast Africa have expanded and waned not only geographically, but also, more importantly, within the mental landscape of both medieval and modern writers. As the term “Medieval African Art” begins to appear in museums, it creates an urgent need for reflective discussion. This conversation requires careful approaches to undoing the implicitly colonial elements of museum spaces, highlighting original contexts, and sharing understudied narratives.

Critiques aiming to “decolonize” museums often focus on West African art, but where does Christian art from Northeast Africa fit within these conversations? The artist Kader Attia opened an exhibition directly confronting the display of African art in his “Museum of Emotion” at the Hayward Gallery in London. In describing the exhibition, Farah Nayeri remarks:

Through his installations, Mr. Attia (who won the Prix Marcel Duchamp, France’s most prestigious art award, in 2016) critiques Western museums’ approach to African heritage — their tendency to undervalue, misread and misrepresent its treasures, and to view it, still, through colonial eyes.  

Discussions of West African art exhibitions often entail such critiques. In considering the problems of African art displayed in museums, Suzzane Blier notes: “‘Traditional’ African arts are alternatively: a) too African (i.e., ‘Exotic’); b) not where they should be displayed (in Western museums rather than in ‘traditional’ African shrines).”  

Rarely, however, do these issues spill into a discourse concerning Northeast African art, particularly

Christian art from those regions. In *Art History in Africa*, Jan Vansina addresses this issue:

“**African art**” is the label usually given to the visual and plastic arts of the peoples south of the Sahara, especially those of western and central Africa. […] Thus defined “African art” is not the Art of Africa. […] We cannot amputate half of Africa then call a portion of what remains “African art.”

As a solution, Vansina labels North and Northeast African art as *Oikoumenical*, reflecting traditions centered on the Mediterranean. Already, many art historians and historians in late-antique, Byzantine and Medieval Studies accept the material culture of Christian Northeast Africa as integral to their fields. Consequently, Christian artworks from these regions are usually in museums’ medieval galleries, not African galleries. Christian Northeast African art is seen as created “in” Africa, but not “of” the continent. The colonial division of Africa is apparent in the separateness of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia in museums. Ethiopia, for example, an ancient Christian society, never colonized, is absorbed often into European galleries. While the presence of Ethiopian art in European galleries highlights the diversity of the medieval world, it also suggests a non-African character of Ethiopian art. When Ethiopian art is displayed in African sections in museums, it can seem equally out of place due to the art’s Christian themes.

**The Medieval *Oikoumenē* in Africa**

Recently, significant exhibitions of Byzantine art have incorporated arts of Christian communities from Africa in an attempt
to counteract a longstanding misperception and separation of these particular African arts within a broader context.\textsuperscript{13} The exhibitions allowed visitors to situate Christian artworks made in Africa within their real time and space. Still, the arts from Christian Egypt (Coptic), Nubia, and Ethiopia are perpetually understudied and misunderstood: understudied because they are not part of western art historical canons; misunderstood because they are often seen as low-quality iterations of Byzantine art and never as African art. While it is true that the medieval material cultures of Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia have meaningful links to the Mediterranean basin, the art cannot be claimed to be “non-African.”\textsuperscript{14} We can place the objects within “a broader African context without adhering to the concept of a unified African culture” and, by doing so, expand the collective mental geography of Africa.\textsuperscript{15}

Stemming from the Arabic word Qibt and the Greek Aigupttios, the word Coptic has a provincial connotation in art historical discourse and has allowed room for racist perspectives in these discourses. The umbrella term “Coptic Art” designates an amalgamation of visual culture made by predominantly Christian communities in Egypt. To reflect the diversity of the art, specialists prefer inclusive phrasings such as Christian Egyptian, late antique Egyptian, Byzantine Egyptian, and medieval Egyptian.\textsuperscript{16} The art from these periods encompasses a plurality


\textsuperscript{15} Jenkins, “Egypt in Africa.”

\textsuperscript{16} Scholarship over the past twenty-five years has firmly placed Egypt as an important region for the Roman and Byzantine empires. See Roger S.
of cultural influences, which merged Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Persian, and later Arab visual strains. Despite the richness of Egyptian Christian art, early scholarship on the material was often racist and derogatory. For example, Charles Rufus Morey’s article “The Painted Covers of the Washington Manuscript of the Gospels” addressed the important book covers within the framework of early Christian art from Egypt that was either derivative of high-quality Greek art from cosmopolitan Alexandria or primitive, native Egyptian (i.e., Coptic) art from the rural regions along the Nile. Likewise, Klaus Wessel’s *Coptic Art* perpetuated the idea of an Alexandrian “sophisticated style” in contrast to a “crude style” created by ethnic Egyptians.

One cannot help but wonder if recent efforts to incorporate Christian Egyptian art into the canon of Byzantine Art have overshadowed other narratives of interaction between the arts of Egypt and the art of its southern and western African neighbors. While the boundaries and material culture of Christian Egypt are well defined, the regions and peoples south of Egypt sway from tangible to fantastical. Greeks, Romans, and early Christians called these people *Aethiopians*, a descriptive term referring to their dark skin color. As a geographic region, historic Nubia extended from the Nile’s First Cataract (in modern Egypt) to sites between the Fifth Cataract and the Sixth Cataract (in modern Sudan). Medieval Nubia was not monolithic; it incorporated the Kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa. The region converted to Christianity in 541 CE after the Byzantine


Figure 1. Bishop Marianos under the Protection of the Virgin and Child. Fresco, 1003-36, Great Cathedral, Faras Nubia. Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw.
emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora sent separate groups of missionaries to the area. In 652 CE, the Nubian kingdoms held off Arab invasions, and Christianity remained a defining feature of Nubian society until the 15th century. During this period, hundreds of churches and monasteries were built throughout the region. With its clear links to Byzantine visual culture, medieval Nubian art is challenging to define. It is of neither Byzantium nor Africa. The Nubians were of both worlds. Medieval Nubians spoke their indigenous language, but many were also fluent in Greek and Coptic, and later could correspond in Arabic. The “complexity” and “richness” of Nubian material culture has only recently been acknowledged in medieval studies. From large wall paintings in churches to the abundance of liturgical parchment manuscripts, Medieval Nubian art reflects direct contact with eastern Christian communities (fig. 1).

20 Kurt W. Weitzmann was one of the earliest and most prominent Byzantine art historians to publish on the connections between Byzantine and Nubian art. See Kurt W. Weitzmann, “Some Remarks on the Sources of the Fresco Paintings of the Cathedral of Faras,” in Studies in the Arts at Sinai (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 187–211.


museum contexts, to separate this art from the corpus of African art negates the diversity of the art made on the continent.

In many ways, Christianity defined the art and material culture of Ethiopian society, which maintained significant contacts with Western Europe, Byzantium, and then the Church of the East, and other African kingdoms through both trade and diplomacy. One of the first Christian nations, the Kingdom of Aksum (ancient Ethiopia), converted to Christianity early in the fourth century before Rome became a Christian state. As Getachew Haille notes, the influences of Christianity were “layered atop a stratum of traditional African life, particularly in the areas of social organization, family life, art, and architecture.”

Like the art of medieval Nubia, medieval Ethiopian art reflects close visual connections with orthodox Christian communities throughout the medieval world. Because of these links, the arts of Ethiopia, often seen as too different from sub-Saharan African art, have been explained within the context of “medieval European traditions.”

How can we reconcile past efforts to place northeast African arts within the framework of the Mediterranean world with the efforts we envision to undo museums’ replications of colonialist perspectives in their own configurations? How can the setting of the museum reflect, for example, Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s conception of medieval Ethiopia as “variable and multiple” in time and space? The answer, we propose, is that museums can display northeastern African arts near related objects from European and Byzantine traditions, but signpost the art as being


24 Deborah Ellen Horowitz et al., eds., Ethiopian Art: The Walters Art Museum (Lingfield: Third Millennium, 2001), 27.


made in Africa. This solution would address a persistent bind. On the one hand, one could argue that Egyptian, Nubian, and Ethiopian art in medieval galleries represents African heritage viewed through colonial eyes; those eyes render the objects exceptional due to their proximity to arts of Europe. On the other hand, it would misrepresent these objects to orphan them entirely from their original contexts within the Christian world of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. We should take care not to undervalue, misread, and oversimplify the art from these countries and its associations. We can speak about the art of the African continent in a way that discusses similarities between the Mediterranean basin cultures but also stresses differences. By doing this, we will shift the conceptual focus on northeast African art and incorporate it into the canons of both medieval and African art. We offer another approach to incorporating these artworks in medieval galleries: redrawing the boundaries of medieval African art. And what would it then mean for the fields of medieval art and African art if curators, collectively, put the word “Africa” on labels of objects that are made in Africa? In the next two sections, we will address this question first by outlining, through the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, a theoretical paradigm for such an experiment; and second, by offering an example of museum curation that engages in this experimental labeling in order to produce an experience of generative hesitation, both temporally and spatially.

**Always Old, Always New**

The previous section suggested changes to museum practices, which respond to the implicitly colonial impulses of the modern museum and in particular its treatment of African art. It is therefore worth briefly dwelling on the distinction between our goals in this essay and what is conventionally thought of as “decolonial” discourse, particularly because the latter has been subject to important critique specifically within medieval studies. Adam Miyashiro notes that “Until medievalists, and the wider academic world, can decolonize their fields, they will be (unwit-
tingly or not) part of the problem of white supremacy and settler colonialism.” His comment encapsulates a shift crucial for medieval studies to make, but his exhortation specifies settler colonialism as the structure to which decoloniality responds. That specificity acknowledges Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s critique of decolonization discourse as too easily absorbed into the field of metaphor and too easily conflated with other social justice initiatives. Because of its complexity in settler colonial contexts (which involve layers of different colonialist operations), decolonization is, according to them, readily transformed into a camouflage of figuration and analogy that conceals the real and material harms particular to the settler colonial structure. The relationship between, on the one hand, US museum history’s uses of medieval African objects; and, on the other hand, the settler colonial structure that decolonization should properly “unsettle,” per Tuck and Yang, is complicated. The differences between those two poles should not be elided. Decolonization as they understand it counteracts settler appropriation of indigenous identity as heritage, and the attendant convenient “desire to become without becoming,” by asserting an indigenous future that necessarily involves repatriation. It becomes important for us, correspondingly, not to employ the language of decolonization to metaphorize the changing function of the museum space but rather to formulate other ways to describe how our model’s counteraction of a colonial structure might interact with liberatory thought and action.

29 Ibid., 13–14, 21.
We shall therefore argue that the medieval focus of the African museum exhibition can give us some tools for sharpening our own impulses to detect, question, and attempt to dismantle the structures of dispossession around us. This dynamic exists not because of a nostalgic or romanticized vision of a recaptured precolonial time but rather because, as Du Bois's model will suggest, self-determination depends upon inhabiting several different temporal and spatial strata at once, and antiracist thought and action can emerge in the experiences of hesitation existing between those strata.

Scholars of Du Bois have traced the relationship that he builds between his interest in Africa (and pan-Africanism), on the one hand, and his examination of race in the US, on the other. His writings on Africa cover a broad spectrum of genres, including, for example, *The Negro*, a 1915 history of Africa that Du Bois necessarily characterizes as incomplete because of the racism that has delayed and stymied the development of scholarly interest in this field (later updated as *Black Folk Then and Now* [1939]); to the short piece that seems both meditation and manifesto “The Hands of Ethiopia” in the 1920 *Darkwater* (discussed below); to *The World and Africa* (1947), which further develops his historical and cultural project.\(^30\) James Quirin argues that over time Du Bois became “convinced that progress in African America would not be possible without progress in Africa and the African diaspora as a whole.”\(^31\) Du Bois’s sense of what the US had to teach Africa, and vice versa, shifted over time, but Daniel Walden suggests that throughout, Du Bois saw the “colonial system” as extending to the US and as something that needed to be dismantled in order to activate “racial progress in general.”\(^32\) Fikru Negash Gebrekidan elaborates on Du


Boisian thought about Ethiopia and Africa to argue that despite a history of controversy among Ethiopianists regarding Du Bois’s depictions of Ethiopia and Africa, Du Bois has ultimately played a shaping role in negotiating the relationship between US-based Black studies and Ethiopian studies though his “counter-hegemonic” thesis concerning Africa and its history. For these different reasons, the framework Du Bois provides—one that links African and African American studies—can further inform our response to museum curation as it re-examines art from Africa within a US setting.

We begin this juxtaposition of Du Bois’s work with our art historical archive by noting that medieval art from Africa can help elucidate in new ways certain aspects of Du Bois’s perspective. Du Bois sometimes seems to espouse distinctions and exceptions among certain African countries, but these are not always consistently characterized. For example, at the end of “The Hands of Ethiopia,” Du Bois notes that “it is clear that for the development of Central Africa, Egypt should be free and independent, there along the highway to a free and independent India; while Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli must become a part of Europe, with modern development and home rule.” Ethiopia itself, the subject of this section, also potentially offers itself as a site of exceptionalism owing to the tradition of its “special meaning,” encoded in Psalm 68:31, to African Americans.

33 See also Amy Kaplan, The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), on critiques of Du Bois as romanticizing and exoticizing African countries (197). To some degree Quirin demonstrates this critique of Du Bois. However, he also shows how Du Bois’s knowledge of Ethiopia in particular deepened over time.


the same time, however, in *The World and Africa*, Du Bois offers a different perspective on Egypt, critiquing the separation of not only Egypt but also Ethiopia from the rest of Africa, referring to those efforts as “contradictory” because of the illogic of the race science on which they might depend. He elaborates that the apparent exceptionality of both countries, as well as the appearance of fundamental dissociation between them, stems from the needs of modern slavery to perpetuate those narratives as self-rationalization.\(^{36}\) We are struck by the ways that the fluctuation around this exceptionalism maps onto what we observed earlier regarding the curation of African art. In other words, we wonder about the extent to which the complex structures Du Bois creates to accommodate relations among African nations might subtly reflect complexities inherent to their older histories, and particularly the relationships to Christian arts that make these ambiguities especially visible. Furthermore, the dynamic relation of Ethiopia and Egypt speaks to the ways Du Bois deploys ideas about Blackness and specifically American Blackness. As Keisha A. Brown argues, Du Bois’s representation of American Blackness shifted during his process of bringing his political ideas to an international arena, with Blackness becoming a “metonymic part of a huge…web of global struggles.”\(^{37}\) Questions about how Blackness might intersect with specific African countries—e.g., Egypt vs. Ethiopia—inevitably have multifarious answers in such a trajectory. Furthermore, the particular triangulation our study brings forth of American Blackness, African history, and Christian faith—along with the complexities this triangulation involves—also resonate with Du Bois’s work.


As Yolanda Pierce argues, the “souls” of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) refer not only to religious life but also, and more specifically, to the sorrow songs and other faith-based practices that, again, negotiate for Du Bois between a Black American present and an African past.38

In these ways we might consider Du Bois’s political writings to run parallel to the complexities of the art historical dynamic as we have explored them. On the one hand, he reveals moments when the Christian European categorization of certain African cultures—particularly, but not exclusively, those with a geographically Mediterranean orientation—have subtended his political thought about African identity more broadly. On the other hand, while discussing aspects of culture distinct from the art historical, he recognizes the constructed nature of this narrative (a construction often by racist principles and serving colonialist ends) and perceives a more multifarious set of interrelations among African countries and their intersections in shaping this continent’s historical past and consequently its cultural legacies.39

Indeed, looking at Du Bois’s work from a medievalist perspective, we notice that he suggests not only the possibility of a new vision of the world emerging from Africa but also the dependence of that new vision on what is old, an attunement to a deep historical consciousness of Africa. This attunement manifests itself in Du Bois’s impulses to write histories of the continent and to use those histories to trace a long narrative—one that extends beyond the Atlantic slave trade—of perceptions of Blackness. In *The Negro*, for instance, Du Bois notes: “The medieval European world, developing under the favorable physical

39 While Du Bois does not specifically discuss African art history here, this is not to suggest his lack of engagement with visual media more broadly; see, for instance, Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Russert, eds., *W.E.B. Du Bois’s Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America: The Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2018).
conditions of the north temperate zone, knew the Black man chiefly as a legend or occasional curiosity, but still as a fellow man.” An extended history of African nations—sometimes even marked by Du Bois as the time of the European Middle Ages—forms an important part of an origin story about African culture intended to push against the modern conceptions of Africa and Africans that the Atlantic slave trade reified.

At the same time, “The Hands of Ethiopia” accomplishes something more complex than an origin story in deploying Africa’s cultural past to counteract the harms of the present. The form of this text suggests a circuit between past and present as the crucial mechanism for generating African-centered concepts of the continent and rejecting Eurocentric ones. We have noted this piece’s refrain throughout, making it a refrain of our own as well: “Semper novi quid ex Africa.” By beginning and ending “The Hands of Ethiopia” with this phrase, Du Bois emphasizes the potential newness of oldness. When the second iteration echoes the first, that something new becomes an echo of the previous invocation; it is already deep in time, and its newness is not so much the unprecedented but rather what a now-old thing might reveal that is new. The form of this piece at once calls to mind a framing structure and at the same time challenges it. In this sense the piece illuminates what we want to see as the work of the American museum: at once signaling its awareness

42 Ex Africa semper aliquid novi and other versions of this expression have been attributed to several authors from the classical period to the Renaissance. See Harvey M. Feinberg and Jospeh B. Solodow, “Out of Africa,” The Journal of African History 43, no. 2 (2002): 255–61. While these authors mention Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen)’s use of the phrase in the 1930s, along with other modern instances, Du Bois appears nowhere in their analysis.
of the frames and labels within which it necessarily works and at the same time challenging itself and viewers to unsettle them. Other aspects of Du Bois’s text elaborate more specifically on the temporal dynamics of African history and American contemporaneity. Let’s look, for instance, at the sentence “Always Africa is giving us something new or some metempsychosis of a world-old thing.” The assertive shadow of America lies behind the similarly assertive assonance of “Always Africa”; the us is to some extent the “us” to which Du Bois refers. In addition, the final phrase “metempsychosis of a world-old thing” linguistically balances a classical Greek past with ancient Germanic monosyllables, and places both on a pivot across from “something new,” repeated from the Latin. These elements of the sentence suggest a view of time that is not simply a historical sweep from past to present but rather a more obsessively wrought and even disorienting doubling back and turning. The structure seems to imply that for us to understand what Africa is saying to us on its own terms, to allow that “new thing” to be “a great humanity of equal men,” will require that we dislocate and destabilize ourselves within, and challenge the boundaries of, temporal and historical structures.\(^{43}\)

Du Bois’s use of parallel construction emphasizes this point. He composes his coda to shift between scenes “twenty centuries before Christ” and “twenty centuries after Christ”:

Twenty centuries before Christ a great cloud swept over seas and settled on Africa, darkening and well-nigh blotting out the culture of the land of Egypt. For half a thousand years it rested there, until a black woman, Queen Nefertari, “the most venerated figure in Egyptian history,” rose to the throne of the Pharaohs and redeemed the world and her people. Twenty centuries after Christ, Black Africa,—prostrated, raped, and shamed, lies at the feet of the conquering Philistines of Europe. Beyond the awful sea a black woman is weeping and

waiting, with her sons on her breast. What shall the end be? The world-old and fearful things,—war and wealth, murder and luxury? Or shall it be a new thing,—a new peace and a new democracy of all races,—a great humanity of equal men? “Semper novi quid ex Africa!”

We teeter between one possibility and the other while the present of Africa continues to exist palimpsestically with the past. Again, to see the possibility of worldwide emancipation emerging from Africa requires acknowledging this state of temporal and spatial disorientation. It is important to specify here that this temporalized proposal does not consider Africa the “Unhistorical […] Spirit” of Hegel’s terms. To the contrary, we propose a deepened precision of historical complexity rendered through the intersection of Du Bois’s words with a material archive of objects.

In this way our point about the space of African countries above collaborates with Du Bois’s point about the time of Africa here. More specifically, these perspectives on space and time reinforce each other in the service of racial justice in our own time and the space of the US museum exhibition of medieval African art. We might, for instance, ask how to respond to these shows in ways that acknowledge and challenge the limits of institutional spaces and the category boundaries they impose. In saying this, we don’t simply mean considering museum spaces to be coded or configured as Western or non-Western in some general or visible sense; we refer to what strictures underlie the structures of cultural and intellectual institutions. In describing the possibilities and limits of working from within academic and other institutions, Jenn M. Jackson points out that systems such as university policing have ways of “expand[ing] them-

44 Ibid.
selves into other community spaces,” with predictably harmful effects on those already marginalized.46 Thinking about “The Hands of Ethiopia” as overlaying and complicating the categories of different spaces over time, we might ask: how can viewers respond to these exhibitions of medieval Africa in ways that similarly resist the impacts of the very institutional spaces that have produced them? To answer this question is to move toward an exhibition space that sharpens viewers’ awareness of not only contemporary dispossession but also what is lashed to it across time. In other words, the aim might be to present objects in ways that allow viewers to engage them as what Jodi Melamed calls “race-radical” cultural artifacts. Such artifacts repudiate “liberal-multicultural affirmations” of capitalist policy, and state-sanctioned “liberal antiracism,” in favor of a truly emancipatory and communal agenda.47 We wonder if a “race-radical” potential in these newly-presented medieval objects, the aliquid novi that is also old, might assert itself through a different conception of the exhibition, one we posited in a general and theoretical way above but will specify further below. We envision museum presentation that dismantles precisely the oppressive epistemological structures that have hitherto dictated which objects occupy which spaces in the museum. We propose replacing the racist epistemologies that we discussed above in the reception of African cultural objects specifically with Du Bois’s way of seeing, one that integrates past and present in order to illuminate a more just political future. Museum curation, we suggest, could go out of its way to trouble, perhaps uncomfortably for many, the institutionally constructed borders of premodern African space precisely to engage in temporally productive work that brings past and present into a radical dialogue. Rather than

treating the museum space as one that articulates colonization and decolonization metaphorically, we suggest drawing upon its concrete potential to create palimpsests, to use the centering of medieval Africa in particular as a way to complicate the viewer’s experience of time as well as space and ultimately to create an immediate environment for thought and change.

We might elaborate on this possibility by extending the methodology that one exhibition, *Caravans of Gold*, articulates for itself. In the introduction to the exhibition’s accompanying volume, Kathleen Bickford Berzock explains how the fragmentary nature of the archives with which they worked moved the curators “from the concrete to the imaginable.” The archive engenders a methodology of “archaeological imagination” that affirms the validity of “informed supposition” in the absence of definitive evidence—an absence that characterizes so many premodern archives.48 This willingness to acknowledge the impossibility of total recovery, and to find productive alternatives, is thought-provoking and useful. But can it go even further? In his essay “Sociology Hesitant,” Du Bois points out a critical tendency to favor abstract structural arguments about social phenomena over reading the contingencies and complexities of more particular interactions.49 Mark C. Jerng argues that a method of hesitation—in which “being made not to act can be understood as richly as being made to act”—plays a crucial role in how Black studies and other ethnic and area studies analyze race and in particular the relationship of the narrative to the social.50 Thus, rather than following our impulses to fill in the gaps that fragments leave, what if we were instead more deliberately hesitant about what lies in those gaps? How would sitting with that particular confounding temporal and spatial inaccessibility further the connections we make between museum

objects—and their means of presentation—and the present realities surrounding the museum and us? We offer these questions to reconstitute the formal aspects of Du Bois’s discussion of Africa as a method of response and interpretation when faced with the objects of premodern African countries.

A Solution: Exhibiting Art Made “in Africa,” Not “of Africa”

In the following section, we propose a model for the placement of medieval objects within their broader African context, one that responds to the dynamics of hesitation outlined above by focusing on the complexities of interactions in Africa during the medieval period. In “Sociology Hesitant,” Du Bois remarks upon the significant lacunae in Comte’s study of “Society”:

So Comte and his followers noted the grouping of men, the changing of government, the agreement in thought, and then, instead of a minute study of men grouping, changing, and thinking, proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought, and call this new created Thing Society.51

Following Du Bois’s charge, exhibitions on medieval Africa should engage with the studies of the critical details of “men grouping, changing, and thinking.” Medieval Africa should not be an abstract idea, relevant to medieval studies based only on chronological similarities, but it should represent real connections across the space of the museum and across time both within and beyond what we consider the Middle Ages.

The exhibition Arts and Peoples of Kharga Oasis (2017–2020) was able to convey real links among societies in Africa, Byzantium, and Western Europe by foregrounding narratives about object uses, movements, origins, and temporal placements not ordinarily communicated to the general public. In this way, the exhibition encouraged viewers to hesitate over the assumptions

they might bring to the time and space of these objects, in Africa and in the museum, and thus in their own ways challenge the hegemonic paradigms that traditional museum culture might impose upon them. The exhibition presented a nuanced perspective on late antique Egyptian objects and worked against the tendency to see these objects as simply the “Thing.”

Both the introductory panel of *Arts and Peoples* and the individual labels offered different opportunities to present the art in the exhibition as being made “in Africa” and of the Mediterranean world. Providing an overview of the material was not difficult, nor controversial; the archaeological data is not disputed.

The Kharga Oasis, located in the Western Desert of Egypt, was an important intersection connecting caravan roads from the Darfur province of Sudan (ancient Nubia) to the Nile Valley, a journey of 1,082 miles. As a result, objects and ideas from across Egypt, Nubia, and the eastern Mediterranean from the Pharaonic to early Byzantine periods made their way to Kharga. In late antiquity (fourth to seventh century), the region also bore witness to an expansive and vibrant Christian community, evidenced by new sacred spaces and the reuse of forts and temples as churches and monasteries. In 1908, The Metropolitan Museum of Art began excavations of late antique sites in Kharga. The Met’s archaeologists uncovered two-story houses, painted tombs, and a church. A selection of objects from these sites is on view in this gallery, revealing the multiple cultural and religious identities of people who lived in the region between the third and seventh centuries, a time of transition between the Roman and Byzantine periods. The finds represent a society that integrated Egyptian, Greek, and Roman culture and art. Presenting objects according to the archaeological context in which they were discovered, this exhibition explores these ancient identities and artifacts and demonstrates how archaeological documentation can aid in understanding an object’s original function.
The exhibition’s daily life objects — pottery, writing materials, and textiles — represented unique narratives curators do not often tell the general public. For example, the labels in the exhibition noted original archaeological contexts, which allowed the viewer to understand how, why, and when the original owners used the art.

Describing broader contexts for some individual artworks, however, did prove complicated. Some of the pottery found near a late antique church in Kharga have motifs known from Nubian pottery of the same period (fig. 2). Nubians either made the pots and exported them, or Egyptian potters produced them locally and emulated the Nubian ornament, or Nubian potters made them in Egypt. Are these pots late-antique, Christian, or Byzantine? Are they Egyptian or Nubian? Are they African? How would the Homeric inscriptions on some of them affect viewers’ perspectives on the time of literary genealogy (a timeline also of interest to Du Bois)? For the exhibition, in addition to the pots’ date and general description, their labels included their exact find-spots (in Egypt) and descriptions of the pots’ connection
to Nubia. Labels like these can dismantle assumptions about authority, categorization, generalization, and subjectivity in ways that further the conceptual and activist projects that Du Bois advocated, and the instrument of the label itself can crucially inform the spectator’s process in the real time and space of the museum experience. For while it is true that a visitor will look at an object before reading a label, visitor studies literature has shown that people do read and appreciate interpretative labels.⁵² Effective labels “create a symbolic dialogue between the label and the object” and “answer the visitor’s questions first, then try to tell them what you [the curator] think they should know.”⁵³ The labels for the Nubian pots, displayed in the medieval galleries, enter both the museumgoer and the curation project itself into a dynamic of hesitation rather than authority. Even when archaeological data temporally fix us in one sense, we might in another sense experience hesitation over perceived boundaries of civilizational period, opening still larger questions about periodization and these objects’ pasts in relation to our present. We might experience the spatial hesitation born from the complexities of attempting to categorize by nation.

Despite their importance, labels are not the only method that create spatial hesitation in galleries. An excellent example of innovative display strategies that push the limits of experimentation in museums is the Bode Museum’s *Beyond Compare* exhibition, which juxtaposed medieval European sculpture with traditional African Art. In this exhibition, viewers were forced to confront their own biases of beauty and art historical canons through formal pairings of sculptures, which differed in both time and space. Likewise, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Crossroads: Power and Piety* exhibition in the Medieval Sculpture Hall (2020–2021) will experiment with groupings that

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highlight overarching concepts core to understanding medieval works of art, and that also resonate for works of art from other regions and time-periods. We hope that museums will extend these experiments even further, using curation not only to unsettle audiences but also to move toward dismantling their own reified claims to knowledge and ownership.

We are aware that we write from within powerful and disposessing institutions ourselves: the predominantly white research university and museum. But we offer these thoughts with the hope that within such institutional spaces might exist ways for premodern artifacts to re-shape or even explode the spaces they occupy, generating new thought about race and racial justice by bringing needed change to our understanding of their histories. We hope museums will consider the idea that to create alternatives to Westernized perspectives on Africa requires an abyss of premodern time from which emerges not an inchoate, unexamined nostalgia but rather a time and space of strategic hesitation, an environment of perpetual interrogation and even disorientation. Perhaps this approach will encourage us to intervene more actively as medievalists into American political contexts when we occupy our sites — sites that themselves can intensify inequity — to re-examine art from Africa.
Bibliography


