

Evening Standard
London – A world city in 20 objects
4 October 2012
Neil MacGregor

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Director Neil MacGregor introduces our new weekly series in which he turns a spotlight on an artefact from the British Museum with origins in one of the capital's vibrant cultures



In 2005, at the Singapore presentation to convince the International Olympic Committee to award London the 2012 Games, our delegation made the point that thanks to London's unique diversity within the capital itself "there will be supporters from every Olympic nation. Every athlete will have a home crowd". This is what makes the capital unlike any other city in the world. And it's not just great athletes who find a home crowd here, it's great objects.

All great objects have a London community with which they have an affinity. And the links Londoners maintain with their countries of origin put the capital at the centre of a worldwide conversation with all humanity.

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So the British Museum was particularly pleased when the Evening Standard asked us to choose a list of 20 objects which would have a resonance with particular communities in the capital. The choice was a difficult one — there are hundreds of communities in London and nearly all of these will find objects from their countries of origin in the British Museum collection. What we have selected can only be a snapshot which provides an indication of London's diversity and global make-up.

Nigerian, Cypriot, Bangladeshi or French communities can find their own histories in the British Museum and can see how those histories connect with London and the rest of the world. There is no other place where you have one building with the whole world inside it and there is only one city with the whole world living in it. The British Museum collection is the property of every citizen, freely available to all visitors. Since its foundation in 1753, the British Museum has sought to be a place where anyone can experience the boundlessness of human culture and curiosity. Even in those early days it was designed to be a place where all people, both "native" and "foreign", could come to understand the expanding world.

As London expanded through global trade and power in the 19th century, so did the museum's collection, as we sought to ensure that all the world's cultures were represented under one roof and to provide the city's complex communities with a cohesive sense of local identity. Some groups have lived in London for centuries, for example the Chinese or French communities, and the list will reflect this. The death mask of Napoleon, which features in the list, is important because it shows what a key figure Napoleon has been in both French and British history. Both countries were changed by this one individual.

But of course over the past 50 years there has been a great explosion in London's diversity, with many new communities arriving in the city. So the process of acquiring representative material continues at the museum today.

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We also run a number of programmes to encourage new visitors from London to connect with the collection. These vary from celebratory days, such as Chinese New Year, often attended by tens of thousands of people, to small programmes aimed at people who don't normally visit museums. We work with diaspora communities through supplementary schools, community groups and English for speakers of other languages classes. Talking Objects is a programme that encourages young Londoners to debate the importance and relevance of objects from the museum's collection to their lives.

Contemporary art is one of the great triumphs of modern London. As you would expect in a world city, art is made in London by communities that span the globe. So we start our list with the sculpture of an Otobo Masquerade by London/Nigerian artist Sokari Douglas Camp. This is a piece of "London art" but one which reveals strong links to her Nigerian origins.

One of the many Olympic legacies was to show the world what a rare city London is, a place where different communities — old and new — live and thrive together. So the last object in the series will, for obvious reasons, be from Somalia. Double gold medallist Mo Farah was such an inspiration during the Games that it is appropriate to conclude with an object which celebrates both his country of origin and his status as a great Londoner.

Number 1: Otobo (hippopotamus) masquerade figure

Sokari Douglas Camp, 1995

(Steel, paint, wood and palm-stem brooms. H 180cm, W 120cm. Af1996,08.3)

This extraordinary painted steel sculpture was made in London by British/Nigerian artist Sokari Douglas Camp, CBE. It depicts a man of the Kalabari people of southern Nigeria in an Otobo or hippopotamus masquerade costume — masquerade is a composite phenomenon in which song, movement, music and the different elements of the dancer's costume are all integral parts of the performance.

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The Otobo masquerade has been danced by Kalabari men for at least 200 years, yet here is a version made by a woman working in metal, a traditionally male medium of expression in Africa. Masquerade in Africa is an art of transformation, harnessing the powers of the natural and spirit worlds for the benefit of humankind, so Sokari's innovative re-interpretation of a long-standing tradition would seem entirely appropriate.

Douglas Camp was born in 1958 in Buguma, Nigeria, the cultural capital of the Kalabari people who live on 23 islands in the Niger Delta. She moved to Britain as a child and now lives and works near Elephant and Castle in London. "My work is about what's going on in London," she says, though part of that is a celebration of her own Kalabari culture, a theme which occurs in different ways in her work. "I live the reality of being both Nigerian and British but feeling outside both cultures".

The UK's largest Nigerian population is found mainly south of the river in the capital — in Lambeth, Southwark, but also in particular Peckham. Douglas Camp's version of an Otobo masquerader is displayed in the African Galleries next to three examples of carved wooden Otobo masks, one of which (collected by Douglas Camp herself) was made in the late 20th century, more than a century after the other two, though stylistically they are almost identical.

However, avant-garde European artists of the early 20th century would almost certainly have assumed these masks to be examples of spontaneous creativity, unfettered by the artistic conventions of Western tradition, rather than representing slowly changing, highly conservative artistic traditions — the very things European artists were trying to escape.

The African Galleries — with the help of artists such as Douglas Camp — seek to overturn this approach, showing the strength and diversity of art from across the continent from the earliest times to the best of contemporary art from Africa.