

**Yugoslavia's Window to Africa: The Establishment of the Museum of African Art Belgrade as a Product of the Cultural Politics of Nonalignment**  
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**Abstract**

*In recent decades, provenance research has become a very exciting research subject due to the reorganization of preexisting museums and the establishment of new „museums of world cultures“ in response to processes of globalization. However, Western-centric examinations of the history of museology often ignore the fact that the demand to decolonize museum theory and practice had already been raised in the second half of the 20th century, particularly within the context of the cultural politics of Nonalignment. This article analyzes the political and museological negotiations behind the establishment of the Museum of African Art in Belgrade in 1977, by asking if and how the notions and ideas behind the foundation of this museum relate to current efforts to „decolonize the museum“.*

In its very conception, the museum as an institution functions as a symbol and social lever for the consolidation of the Eurocentric idea of „universal knowledge“ production, while concurrently serving the purpose of „civilizing“ the „Other“. With the liberation of African countries from colonial grip following World War II, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, debates around decolonizing museums gained importance among the newly established international circles of museum professionals. During the Cold War the rivalry between East and West in the development of museology as an academic discipline gained precedence over all other topics regarding museum reform. Yet, it was only at the beginning of the 21st century, under the influence of poststructuralist and deconstructivist theoretical models which postcolonial studies are based upon as well as the wave of accelerated globalization and the process of European integration, that the „decolonial turn“ began. The main characteristics of this post-Cold War museal shift, which is concerned with the task of critically interpreting

collections and museums based on the colonial project, are: revealing the origins of museum objects, critically reflecting on the musealization of existing collections, and the reformulation of the terms used in the representation of heritage items from the colonial period. Such institutional approaches encourage the visitor to deconstruct the Eurocentric „image of the world“, showing that we live in a polycentric world in which monolithic narratives are no longer possible. However, their auto-reflection regarding the history of collecting and exhibiting mainly comes from „within“ the institution itself. Newly built museums which address colonialism and coloniality<sup>1</sup> hardly relate this to the historical struggle of the Third World to rid itself of Eurocentrism in both culture and science.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, it is of value to remind ourselves of the ways in which this has already been debated within the framework of Non-Aligned politics and in the context of the reform of the museum field.

In the 1970s and especially the 1980s, as one of the Non-Aligned Movement's founding states (hereinafter NAM), Yugoslavia shaped many exhibition initiatives and museological collections whose aim was to reconsider both „Western“ and „Eastern“ (Cold War) museum visions, as well as place emphasis on the importance of the struggle for decolonization within the cultural field. One of the symbols of Non-Aligned politics was *The Museum of African Art – The Veda*

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<sup>1</sup>Foundation and conceptualization of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin is the most recent and transparent example, which has provoked strong criticism from academics and activists precisely because of the lack of transparency in its work and the lack of broader contextualization of the process of decolonization of museum practice and theory that this state project should symbolize. See, C. Peitz, Streit ums Humboldt-Forum. Kunsthistorikerin Savoy: 'Da herrscht totale Sklerose', Tagesspiegel online 21.07. Available: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/streit-ums-humboldt-forum-kunsthistorikerin-savoy-da-herrscht-totale-sklerose/20092228.html> [Accessed 16 January 2021]; see also the website of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum: <https://ccwah.info/> [Accessed 16 January 2021].

<sup>2</sup>Some of the leading anti-colonial thinkers (and activists) from the Third World who were active in the second half of the 20th century include Frantz Fanon (psychiatrist and political philosopher from the French colony of Martinique), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghanaian politician), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenyan writer), Taban Lo Liyong (poet and writer from South Sudan), Abdellatif Laâbi (Moroccan poet) as well as many more.

and Dr. Zdravko Pečar Collection (hereinafter, the MAA). Veda and Zdravko Pečar were diplomats and art collectors who spent twenty years in West Africa. They created and donated collections of sculptures, textiles, as well as ritual and everyday objects, including movies and books, to the City of Belgrade in 1974; this formed the basis of the MAA. They spent years searching for an institution that would house their collection and finally the authorities of the City of Belgrade supported the founding of a museum dedicated to African art and culture.

At the opening in 1977, Belgrade's mayor at the time Živorad Kovačević stated: „This museum, both as a collection and as projected activity, frees us from inherited Eurocentric and ethnocentric views and cultural prejudices and strides, inspiring a deeper and wider viewing of culture, history and man“.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Kovačević underlined the political importance of the MAA's opening: „unlike the many museums of African art worldwide that were most often the result of imperialist conquests, the MAA is a symbol of a time in which the Non-Alignment Movement created a new spirit in political relations between nations and a new relationship in valuing the artistic achievements of folk art“<sup>4</sup>. The political and museological creators of the MAA saw it as the basis for creating a new museum institution free from the colonial discourse. This was linked to the fact that Yugoslavia had no colonial past, which allowed it to claim that it „actively politically, economically and militarily helped the anti-colonial movements of African countries“<sup>5</sup> and that with „most African countries, Yugoslavia has friendly relations that stem from their shared commitment to the politics of Non-Alignment.“<sup>6</sup>

Architect Slobodan Ilić designed the ground floor of the museum

<sup>3</sup>M. Celar, Mesto ljubavi i prijateljstva, in: Politika ekspres, 25 April 1977, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Olga Manojlović-Pintar, Preface: Muzeji umiru takođe, in: Ana Sladojević (ed.) Muzej africke umetnosti. Konteksti i reprezentacije, Beograd 2014, I-X, here III.

<sup>6</sup>President Josip Broz Tito's speech to the Federal Assembly, held on 17 December 1971, is cited on page 2 of the first MAA catalogue from 1977.

using natural concrete. The initial building had a flat, grass-covered roof. In his foreword to the MAA's first catalogue, „art historian Kwasi Myles from Ghana stated that the architecture of the museum was authentic, almost completely African and that it matched the African philosophy of life: 'The flat roof is reminiscent of the roofs of our houses made of soil on which vegetables are grown, and as is the case here, there is a meadow on the roof. The light reaches into the Museum interior through the openings on the roof, just like in our houses'“.<sup>7</sup> The innovative design of the permanent display, the work of architects Slobodan and Saveta Mašić, consisted of blue and green plinths and the sparing use of glass cases. According to the architects, the colours were reminiscent of the African sky and savannah and the sculptures, freed from museum „armature“, intimated the generalised African understanding of art as *part* of life, not as an expensive *surplus* (implied by the glass vitrines in European art museums).

Even the museological concept of the MAA, conceived of by the anthropologist Jelena Arandžević Lazić, was led by the idea of creating an original museum display through which African culture and art would be presented not as the „other“, but rather as another equal part of the civilized world.<sup>8</sup> However, this ambitious approach was only partly successful. One of the key reasons was that the methodology of the Pečar's collecting practice was itself based on colonial discourse, which was then inevitably reflected in certain traits of the exhibition. As art theorist Ana Sladojević in her analyses of the MAA's permanent exhibition pertinently noted, precisely this was reflected in the following curatorial gestures: „ethnic attribution, generalised ethnographic labels, the petrification of meaning within an imagined primary social community, the collections' atemporality, anonymity of the author, the representation of a whole with its part (*one style, one tribe*) and ignoring urban forms of art expression – a static display“.<sup>9</sup> The same

<sup>7</sup>. , in: , 20 May 1977, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ana Sladojević (ed.), Muzej africke umetnosti. Konteksti i reprezentacije, Beograd 2014, p. 65.

author, however, also cites successful elements in the musealization of the anti-colonial narrative on which the MAA was conceptually based: „the introduction of contemporary artists, the attribution of works, offering other materials than those in wood, the animation of the display (film, music, dance – segments that introduce other aspects to observing the ‘African object’), lectures and conferences (the introduction of a theoretical discourse)“.<sup>10</sup>

For these reasons, the concept of the MAA was much closer to that of a cultural centre. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the MAA hosted numerous diplomatic meetings aimed at developing cultural ties between Yugoslavia and African countries that were NAM members.<sup>11</sup> Therefore the social function of the MAA, established by the City Assembly as initiator and investor, surpassed the interpretative capacities of the collection. It could be argued that the idea to create the „first anticolonial museum in Europe“ was not drawn from the Pečar’s collection itself, but rather inscribed into it. In this way, the museum became an emancipatory meeting place, a forum where Western and Eastern art hegemony could be questioned, even though, in a museological context the methodology for collecting, exhibiting and communicating a „non-aligned world“ was never actually achieved.

The strongest support for this museum mission came during the 1970s and 1980s from UNESCO. General director Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow visited the MAA following its opening in 1977.<sup>12</sup> In the following year, Dragoljub Najman, UNESCO Assistant Director-General, donated a collection of 30 objects from Zaire and Congo to the museum<sup>13</sup> and in 1979 the exhibition „On the Edge of the Sahara“ was displayed in the MAA as a gift from UNESCO’s International Fund for the Development of Culture. Another significant partner of the MAA in the first years of its conception was the African Institute for Cultural

Research in Dakar, which was composed of 19 African countries. The collaboration commenced in 1978 with the visit of Basil Kossou, the director of the Institute, who advocated for a so-called „horizontal cooperation“ between countries of the NAM in the field of culture.<sup>14</sup> The film and literature event „Days of Information on African Culture“ in Belgrade in 1980 was a direct result of this form of collaboration.<sup>15</sup> During his lecture at the event, Kossou emphasized that „non-aligned countries represent neither a cultural nor a geographical whole“, but that „they constitute, above all, a political force that opposes every form of domination“<sup>16</sup>.

As seen in the examples above, the need to define „African art“ for the Yugoslav eye with the help of experts from Africa was an authentic, emancipatory cultural project, although it was rather short-lived. With the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the political platform for further development of the MAA as a „non-aligned museum“ disappeared. During the following decades, traces of the Yugoslav cultural policy of Nonalignment in museum collections and exhibitions faded and disappeared, while in the European Union demands rose to develop (self-)awareness of Europe’s colonial heritage and thus also to reform museum institutions.

Unlike NAM policies and practices of cultural decolonialisation which had a bilateral and multilateral character and, in most cases, involved former colonies (Yugoslavia was in this way an exception), in post-Cold War Europe it was rather individual states or institutions, which had themselves been imperial colonial powers, that initiated this approach. The question arises: how does the call for decolonization in the cultural field, as a basic idea of NAM cultural policy, differ from current calls for decolonization of art/museum history in the European context?

NAM launched a call for the restitution of works of art to the countries from which they have been expropriated at the 5th NAM

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup>See Marija Ličina, Programme development at the MAA, in: Emilia Epštajn / Ana Sladojević (eds.), *Nyimpa kor Ndzidzi*, Exhibition catalogue, 2017, 52–61, here 53–57.

<sup>12</sup>See ‘ ’, 10 October 1977, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

<sup>13</sup> ‘ ’, 11 December 1978, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

<sup>14</sup> ‘ ’, 13 March 1978, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

<sup>15</sup>See Ličina, 56.

<sup>16</sup> ‘ ’, 27 March 1980, Newspaper archive of the MAA.

Summit in Colombo (Sri Lanka) in 1976. At that time, it was stressed that resistance to colonialism must be a global project, because only then could all former colonies regain their plundered cultural heritage. However, due to opposing political aspirations between the museum reform policies as advocated by NAM members during the Cold War (the idea of self-determination in light of anti-colonial politics) and those held by leading Western European countries in the era of global capitalism (the idea of Western supremacy in generating the terms and conditions in which museological knowledge is constructed on an international level), NAM's advocacy for the repatriation of cultural heritage went unnoticed in European and Anglo-Saxon literature, and thus is not mentioned in public debates and legal acts of restitution of African heritage in Europe today.