[KOEN PEETERS]

The Africa Museum in Tervuren and Orhan Pamuk's White Gloves

Sunday morning, spring 2011. Black youths sat at a long, wide table in the coffee bar at Brussels-South station. They neither ate nor drank, but were doing something vague between talking and sleeping. There were TV screens in the station hall. Breaking news, the prime minister of Japan appeared in white overalls and talked about the nuclear threat. No one either heard or saw it. Or no, a Spanish poet did, looking for contact with passers-by and gesticulating broadly. The world might have come to an end in the meantime, but no one looked up or was concerned.

The train with the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk was twenty minutes late. I waited patiently. Circumstances had led to me being asked to accompany the Nobel Prize Winner for a visit to the Royal Museum for Central Africa, or Africa Museum, in Tervuren. Pamuk was coming from Düsseldorf and would travel on to Istanbul the same evening. I was his chauffeur for the day, his guide, his travelling companion.

Suddenly, there he was in front of me, impatient. I took his suitcase and his thick, light brown leather briefcase. We walked to my car and drove onto the inner ring, then into the rue de la Loi and through the tunnels under the Cinquantenaire. During the car ride Pamuk took photo after photo. He photographed buildings, city vistas, but no people. Then suddenly photographed himself, casually, with a flick of the wrist.

I admitted to him that I did that too; that I took careless, unfocussed photos, wildly, almost endlessly documenting and researching. He immediately wanted to know whether I saved the photos to a disc or whether I deleted them.

'Both,' I said.

Pamuk looked at me from behind his large glasses, laughed and ran his fingers through his thick grey hair. He had visited Tervuren years ago, he acknowledged. He remembered the tram ride out there, 'just a short, melancholy quarter of an hour'. Now he wanted to know how we dealt in the museum with political correctness and the burden of history. He said that he had acquired a sharper, deeper insight over the years.

Pamuk was still interested in museums, despite the fact that his extraordinary novel *The Museum of Innocence* had been published two years earlier.

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The novel, from 2009, is about an unhappy love affair. The main character is a sentimental collector who gathers objects in a museum.

While writing the novel Pamuk thought about actually opening a museum where he would keep all the objects that appeared in the book. He referred to these thoughts as a dream that brought him to a state of 'euphoria'. He would open his own museum the following year. He was busy working on it.

On the way to Tervuren, Pamuk asked me about the museum's operating budget, the size of the staff, the organogram, and what the museum had been called over the years. Pamuk wanted to know all about it. I was impressed by this writer, famous by now due to malevolent newspaper campaigns and the lawsuits filed against him in Turkey. In Istanbul he had to have a bodyguard to move around. Then he had fled abroad, but the death threats continued.

To change the subject we talked about relations between Congo and Belgium. Then Rwanda. 'You know the story of the genocide?' I asked him.

'Tell me briefly,' answered Pamuk.

From his nods and brief interjections I quickly understood that he knew all about this and other genocides.

We arrived at the museum, where we were met in the entrance hall by the director and two members of staff. We looked at the familiar racist statues, the slave driver, the leopard man, and 'Belgium bringing civilization to Congo'. Inside the museum, Pamuk took photos hungrily, without flash. He read every caption, took almost no notes but seemed to literally consume everything he saw and heard. He behaved earnestly, nervously, a little obsessed. Youthful

and restless he trotted along behind the female guides, taking photos of all the display cabinets and the objects inside them.

In particular, it seemed, he took photos of 'everyday' Africa, the ordinary people. Their spoons and knives, their axes, aprons and shoes, masks and musical instruments. Was this a way of finding himself as an ordinary person? Is that why he photographed himself almost mechanically? I took some unfocussed photos of him too now.

We ate in the museum cafeteria. He laughed tiredly and ate from his plate with one hand. He told us how he had received an honorary doctorate from Brussels University. How he was driven around the city with motorcycle escorts, sirens blaring. 'And I sat in the car like a madman, taking photos of the furore.' He was dressed in a ceremonial toga, and then photos were sent round the world with the strangest of interpretations.

'Can we carry on with our visit?' he asked, defensively.

Objects communicate with each other

In his book *The Innocence of Objects*, published the year after our visit to Tervuren, Pamuk says, 'In the spring and summer of 2011, I stopped being a writer'. Under considerable political pressure following some controversial comments about the Armenian question, he found himself the unwilling focus of international attention, while all he wanted was to have the peace and quiet to write novels and visit museums. (Don't we all?)

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It was during this difficult period that he set up his own museum, as he describes in the novel. 'Is it possible that by looking at objects we might see our memories as if they were a film?', he wonders.

'The power of things inheres in the memories they gather up inside them, and also in the vicissitudes of our imagination, and our memory', he adds a little further.

It is thanks both to the objects and to ourselves that museum visits evoke such rich experiences. Pamuk also claims that objects in a museum can communicate with each other. He admits to being an ardent fan of flea markets and second-hand shops, but refers to collectors as 'ill-tempered, jealous, and despondent [hoarders]'. He is talking about himself. 'For the sake of the objects they could not give up, many [hoarders] had become alienated from their families; they spent most of their time alone in dusty rooms that, as they filled up, came to resemble storage lockers', he goes on to explain. Collectors want, above all, to show an era: it is 'up to new generations to reconstruct the lives and histories of these people of the past through the things that they [...] left behind.'

Later, when I read this, I understood Pamuk's perplexity during our visit to the museum. It was the curiosity of the exile, shame for the neglect of things that had been left behind and an intense compassion for old objects. He had observed himself in the museum.

Caressing with gloved hands

After lunch we continued our visit. A guard opened a small door to the right, behind which dark stairs wound downwards. We descended into large cellars with old furniture and art-nouveau exhibition cases. In a trophy room there were masses of crates full of stuffed animals, shot long ago by big game hunt-

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ers. The walls were covered with animal heads, most strikingly rhinoceroses without horns. Another room was full of elephant skulls, a cubbyhole full of elephant teeth, multitudes of stuffed birds, and – how sweet – stuffed okapis and an okapi foal.

We passed through a subterranean tunnel towards the Stanley Pavilion, the director pointing out secret passages on the way, and emerged in a small cellar where we climbed the stairs.

'Welcome to the Stanley archives,' said Mathilde, who was waiting for us there. She spoke polished English, and smiled broadly at Pamuk, who immediately pounced on her: 'Will you give me a thorough overview of your archives, with all the different sections?' It sounded like an order.

‘May I faint here and now?’ asked Mathilde affectedly, but she laughed again and quickly began pointing to objects. Boxes and trunks, books on shelves, the metal trunk on which Stanley’s widow herself had noted the contents. Half hidden behind a cupboard a large framed photo looked at us: Henri Morton Stanley, legendary explorer of Congo.

We went upstairs, where Mathilde had already prepared various items for her important visitor.

‘This is where I work,’ she said conspiratorially.

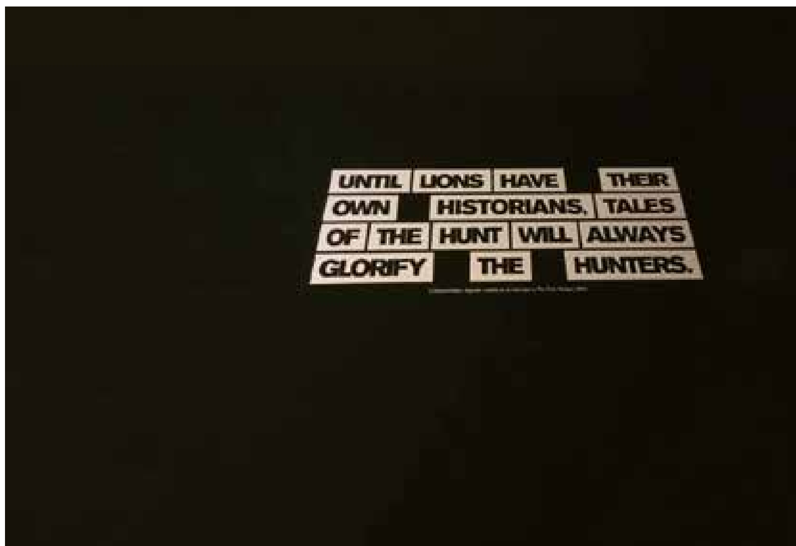
Here she did what historians basically do: carefully dusting off, opening out and analysing objects and documents. Studying them almost caressingly and preparing them for the narrative. In other words, picking up and listening to the stories that objects themselves can tell. An old-fashioned word for it is magic.

Solemnly Mathilde passed a pair of white gloves to Orhan Pamuk, which he donned like an experienced surgeon. Gently they leafed through an old photo album full of fragile portraits. Then Mathilde spread, unfolded and unrolled valuable old maps. She pointed to the imaginary mountains, riverbeds and lakes, named the incorrectly situated, foolish or just invented place names. As we leafed backwards through ever-older maps, we saw the interior of the African continent become more and more unknown, blacker or whiter. Finally she showed us the oldest map of Africa. Pamuk took a selfie of himself and Mathilde with the map.

Then she showed us the *pièce de résistance*, Stanley’s diaries. Pamuk bent lower and lower over the notebooks, hypnotised. Which version was the first, he asked. Show me a sentence, what was changed and by whom, how exactly had Stanley rewritten it?

Pamuk took more and more photos, asked for more and more details. He tried to spell the words out loud, asking Mathilde for help. They paid particular attention to the texts about Stanley’s visit to Turkey. The explorer’s breath was still fresh in the pencilled notes.

Almost gasping from all that knowledge we left the archive.



The patient
dismantlement of a wall,
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'Now I'll show you my diaries,' he said, pulling off the white gloves. I passed him his briefcase. He took out a Moleskine notebook, scribbled full with his minute handwriting, interspersed with colourful sketches of statues and landscapes in India and Istanbul.

We stopped at the model of the future museum. It glittered in the sun, transparent in glass and silver. The director explained it. Then Pamuk signed the museum's golden book, lying ready beside a glass of tea. The woman from the staff newsletter asked him some questions. She had read all of Pamuk's books and wanted to know, 'What did you enjoy the most during this visit to the Africa Museum? Will this short visit make a lasting impression? Do you intend to come back?'

'I'm not going to answer that,' said Pamuk with slight irritation in his voice. 'But I'm really happy,' he said, mischievous again. 'I love so much dedicated people.'

When we left, he took another photo through the car window of the museum staff waving, and showed it to me proudly as we drove. We were both tired. In the car we talked about the pleasure of in-depth research for the writer, the lure of details, and how difficult it is to kill your darlings. I dropped him off in front of his hotel on Boulevard Adolphe Max for the obligatory meeting with journalists. But first he politely signed my four Pamuk books, complete with dedication.

That evening, in the overfull Henri Le Boeuf hall in Bozar, Pamuk read from *The Museum of Innocence* and was interviewed. They were the classic questions and answers. It was a pleasant evening, with the scent of apple hanging in the air, I remember. There were no political questions. That had been explicitly agreed beforehand. He received the applause awkwardly, lingered a moment on the stage, and then the interviewer announced that people should queue in an orderly fashion for his signature. No chatting please! No dedications or dates!

Like a picture from another era. In *The Innocence of Objects* Pamuk says he has the impression that things communicate 'with one another' in museums, that the solitary objects even 'have spirits' and that they tell, above all, the story of simple people.

Pamuk does not like the 'big state-sponsored museums' (see 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums', at the beginning of this book). He prefers the collections of extraordinary individuals like Stanley. He allowed himself to be shown

Orhan Pamuk
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around the Africa Museum, but stopped to look mainly at small personal objects. I saw how he zoomed in on the soft-pencilled notes in Stanley's diaries. It was not the height of the rooms, nor the width of the entrance doors that Pamuk liked, but the ordinariness of the hero.

I saw him looking through greedy, literary eyes: what were the precious words jotted down next to the objects? Whose hands had once handled these objects so carefully, and whose hands had put them down here, in this academic manner? How had all these things found their places? How had their little spirits grown towards each other?

I looked at the man looking at the museum. He was looking for the love, the little anxieties, and the sadness in these objects. He was taking photos, but at the same time he was writing a book, a story, making a painting of this museum. Just as every visitor does in his head.

So can objects look at us? Yes, of course, they are constantly looking back, large numbers of them, tense. What we look at in a museum is the ancient desire to capture the world, to create a world.

In my copies of Pamuk's books I underlined special words and passages in pencil, so as to be able to find them again quickly. Objects in museums function like that too. They are uneasy signs that point backwards and forwards to ourselves, to our own lives. Beauty has to do with memory, says Pamuk. However ordinary they may be, objects tell us that their lives are complicated, unknown and unfinished, like history. By looking at them you become part of those lives.

Museums invite us to look at objects from an aesthetic point of view, so that they can communicate their messages like gleaming reflections, an ancient

but ongoing process of oxidation. But it is a political viewpoint too. The story of these African objects is also that of the brutal, tainted colonial era, the story of Leopold II, and scientific conquest. This type of thing can only cause lasting controversy, as well as ongoing dialogue between the heirs on both sides.

Who were we? Who were they?

Two years after our visit the Africa Museum closed its doors for an extremely interesting, thorough renovation. It needed it. The old museum looked mainly at the broken Belgian heart of our own little Belgian nation, intimately and from the distorted, faded viewpoint of a View-Master. We looked there at an exotic world of animals, minerals and people. Who did we used to be? And, more to the point, who were they? Had it become the museum of guilt?

Later, in mid-2018, we will all visit the new museum together, happy and in celebratory mood. We shall see how everyday objects appear again: rough, incomprehensible, of sublime, unknown aesthetic. Once again it will be an invitation to look at unfailingly strange and colourful human behaviour, with a black, unknown side, both close to us and far away. ■

With thanks to the International House of Literature Passa Porta and Guido Gryseels, Sari Middernacht and Mathilde Leduc of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

FURTHER READING

Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, Faber & Faber, 2010.
Orhan Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects*, Abrams Books, 2012.

Candoia aspera: Jonathan Brecko
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Luba helmet mask, R. Asselberghs
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