

In December 2020, the Fleming Museum staff decided to close the African and Ancient Egyptian Gallery, after determining that the space presented a harmful, stereotyped and inaccurate portrayal of Africa.

Despite holding a significant collection of African objects, the Fleming Museum has never made a priority out of highlighting them. I joined the Museum in July 2015, after the African Gallery had remained nearly unchanged for twenty years. It was easy for me, another white curator who lacked expertise in African art, to continue to uphold white supremacy through inaction—to leave a problematic gallery on view with vague plans to get to it “one day.”

This curatorial neglect showed in the physical gallery presentation. The space was dim, grim, gray and colorless, with objects of different cultures grouped together behind Plexiglas barriers, which had the overall effect of portraying the diverse continent of Africa as stuck in a generic, dark tribal past. Material culture objects such as staffs, weapons, and shields were given equal or greater weight than masks and figures with ritual and aesthetic significance. Maps and labels omitted countries or used the names of countries that no longer exist, and I did not make correcting these errors a priority, as I might have done for European or American artworks.

In my five years at the Fleming, I studied these flaws with mostly white UVM students and faculty, without truly understanding the feelings of BIPOC visitors to the gallery—because I never asked. Though the Fleming staff kept discussing a reinstallation of the space, we kept putting it off. We understood that it would be crucial to consult African and African diasporic people, to center their perspectives, and to present African culture as living and evolving by adding contemporary examples of African art, design, and performance. But my own uncertainty about how to make those exchanges equitable and not transactional prevented us from taking those first steps. What I didn't yet realize was that a much larger reckoning was due before that would be possible: a frank examination of how white supremacy had been guiding my work not just in the African gallery, but in every space in the Museum. Building trust by acknowledging those past failures, and making space for true collaboration with new voices, is the first building block to reimagined presentations of our African collection and a reimagined Fleming Museum.

-ANDREA ROSEN, Curator

Absence

Seeing and Unseeing the Fleming's Collection