

Preparing for A105: Anthropology and aesthetics and the Pitt Rivers Museum

From Book 3, *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 2 The art of Benin: changing relations between Europe and Africa II, pp. 71-72.

2.2 The Benin bronzes and modern art

Anthropology and aesthetics

In earlier times, ethnographic museums tended to run together the display of what we now like to regard as art –such as paintings and carvings – with the display of functional items such as utensils, weapons and even boats. To some extent the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has retained this archaic mode of display deliberately: rows of glass cases stuffed with objects of every description, accompanied by explanatory labels which themselves betray the assumptions of the past about human social evolution. The British Museum used to display its Benin plaques as a sort of collective wall decoration, halfway up the main stairs, one more element in the eclectic mosaic of artefacts drawn from all over the world, the only cohering element of which was their container: the museum itself. This has now undergone substantial revision with the creation of the African Galleries.