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Telling, Showing, Showing Off

Mieke Bal

1. Setting as Image, Nature as Sign

New York City, in many ways the heart and icon of American culture, enables the casual stroller to be struck by the semiotic charge of environment. Its very layout—its central axis centripetally drawing toward its green heart that reminds us of the nature it has replaced, its monumental avenues running along Central Park—demonstrates the importance of a balanced intercourse between background and figure, between overall plan and specific details, and between chaos and organization.

Moving up Manhattan from downtown one might indeed not even notice the neat symmetry in the middle of the city: Central Park, the domesticated preserve of nature-within-culture, is flanked by the two major museums, preserves respectively of culture and of nature. The symmetry is taken for granted, and so is the rationale that sustains it. On the right, the more elegant East Side, is the treasury of culture: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Met. The great art of the world is stored and exhibited here, Western European art as if to propose an aesthetic base

I am grateful to Michael Ann Holly for her very pertinent remarks on an earlier version of this paper. I dedicate this essay to Alexander Holly, who told me to go to the American Museum of Natural History to see the whale. This essay explains to him why I got stuck and never got to see his favorite.

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for the structures of domination that reign in this society. It makes the world around the park look almost normal.¹

The Met fits all the priorities of its own social environment: Western European art dominates, American art is represented as a good second cousin, evolving as Europe declines, while the parallel marginal treatment of "archaic" and "foreign" art, from Mesopotamian to Indian, contrasts with the importance accorded to "ancient" as predecessor: the Greeks and Romans. As "natural" as such priorities may seem—due to what is available, one might say; but why?—the difference with the British Museum in this respect tells us that these random facts are not so arbitrary. The overall impression is one of complete control, possession, storage: the Met has the art of the world within its walls, and its visitors have it in their pocket.

The West Side is less classy. On the left-hand side of the park is the American Museum of Natural History. Its status as well as its immediate surroundings being obviously less fancy than those of its spatial opposite, this museum works harder at its self-image. Around ten o'clock most mornings yellow dominates the surroundings as an endless stream of schoolbuses discharges noisy groups of children who come to the museum to learn about "life." A booklet for sale in the museum, published in 1984 and reissued in 1990, somewhat pompously entitled *Official Guide to the American Museum of Natural History*, makes sure the public does not underestimate the institution's importance in the cityscape. It begins as follows:

The American Museum of Natural History, a complex of large granite buildings topped by towers overlooking the west side of Central Park, has spread its marvels before an appreciative audience for over a century. Its stored treasures work their magic on millions of visitors every year and are studied by resident and visiting scientists and scholars from all over the world. A monument to humanity and

1. For an illuminating discussion of naturalization in literature, see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975). Philippe Hamon uses the term *motivation* for a similar phenomenon: rhetorical devices that make description pass off as "naturally" belonging in the narrative that in fact they interrupt. See Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du discours descriptif* (Paris, 1979). My use of the term *naturalization* here is meant to enhance the rhetorical nature of the experience of the cityscape.

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nature, the Museum instructs, it inspires, and it provides a solid basis for the understanding of our planet and its diverse inhabitants.²

The *Guide* is nothing like a guide; it does not provide floor maps or lists of exhibits, nor does it suggest an itinerary or feature a catalog; it is emphatically a self-presentation that represents the main thrust of the institution's ambition. The self-congratulatory tone of the introduction persists throughout the *Guide*. If taken as a symptom of the museum's sense of self, it is striking in its insistence.³ This grandiose image of the museum is clearly not taken for granted. The emphatic and repeated representation of the extent of the institution's ambition signals a certain unease about itself, a lack of self-evidence that harbors the conflicts out of which it emerged and within which it stands, an "unsettlement." There is nothing surprising about this anxiety: the museum is a product of colonialism in a *postcolonial* era. The unsettledness at the heart of this monument to settlement and the ways with which it is dealt is the subject of inquiry in this paper.

This monumental institution houses the "other" of the Met in three distinct but related senses, all paradoxical and fraught with ideological problems. First, it is devoted not to culture but to nature. But that nature is provided with a fundamental, defining feature of culture: namely, history. Second, this museum is largely devoted to biology, with attention also paid to geology and anthropology, and with, again, clear priorities: animals predominate, presented in their "natural" setting, the representation of which is crafted with great artistic care and accomplishment. Natural settings are the backdrop of the animal kingdom. But a few rooms are devoted to peoples: Asian, African, Oceanic, native American. These are precisely the peoples whose artistic accomplishments are represented only marginally in the Met: exotic peoples who produced artifacts that, unsure of our judgment, only reluctantly we classify as art. These works of art are exhibited here as artifacts, rigorously remaining on the other side in James Clifford's "art-culture system."⁴

The juxtaposition of these peoples' cultures with the animals consti-

2. Georg Zappler, *Official Guide to the American Museum of Natural History* (1984; New York, 1990), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *OG*.

3. The term *symptom* is meant in its specific, Peircean sense of an inadvertently emitted sign. Whether one wishes to think of the term with the medical or Freudian connotations of signifying disease or dis-ease is up to the reader.

4. Clifford presents an illuminating and witty version of A. J. Greimas's semiotic square as used by Fredric Jameson. Like Jameson, Clifford uses the semiotic analysis to map out the structures of ideology, not to suggest—as Greimas would—that meaning production must be limited in this way. See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 224; A. J. Greimas and François Rastier, "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints," *Yale French Studies*, no. 41 (1968): 86–105; and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981).

tutes the conflict at the core of this museum, distinguishing it from its unproblematically elitist partner across the park. By this very division of the city map, the universal concept of "humanity" is filled with specific meaning. The division of "culture" and "nature" between the east and west sides of Manhattan relegates the large majority of the world's population to static existence and assigns to only a small portion the higher status of producers of art in history. Natural history is not the same as the history of art; rather, as this cityscape suggests, it is its opposite. Where "nature," in the dioramas, is a static backdrop, "art," presented in the Met as an ineluctable evolution, is endowed with a story. But the American Museum presents a story, too: it is one of fixation, however, and of the denial of time.⁵

Yet in the representation of those foreign peoples, artistic production is an important part of the display. The artifacts function as indices of the cultures whose structures and ways of life have been elaborately crafted by the museum's staff. But their works of art are indices, not of the art of the peoples, but of the realism of their representation. They serve as an "effect of the real."⁶ They function invariably as evidence of the peoples' ways of life, of their "nature." But instead of artifacts processed into autonomous aesthetic objects as they would be on the east side of the park, they are indices interpreted as nature.⁷ The American Museum houses the Met's other in this third sense, too: it displays art *as* nature, for when nature turns out to be hard to isolate, art will assist, but as nature's handmaiden. While the Met displays art for art's sake, as the highest forms of human achievement, the American Museum displays art as an instrumental cognitive tool—anonymous, necessary, natural.

The Met's project has its own conflicts that are signalled in its leftover categories. To claim that art has universal value, and then to show that most of it follows a political itinerary coming from Europe, leads into a contradiction that can only be obscured by abstracting the artifacts from their social and historical environments—that is, from their allegiance to the west side of the park. In contrast, in the American Museum the environment takes over so insistently that the works are drowned in their own

5. See Johannes Fabian's classic critique of the evasion of time in ethnography in his *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983).

6. The term "effect of the real" (*l'effet de réel*) was introduced by Roland Barthes in his 1968 essay, "L'Effet de réel," *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris, 1984), pp. 167–74. The term is as problematic as it is attractive; see my critique in *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology* (Sonoma, Calif., 1991), pp. 109–45.

7. For the distinction between artifact and aesthetic object, see Roman Ingarden, *Das Literarische Kunstwerk* (Tübingen, 1931); the distinction was taken up again by Wolfgang Iser in his version of reception aesthetics in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978). The terms *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* are used in Peirce's sense; an accessible overview is published in Charles S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Robert E. Innis (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), pp. 1–23.

naturalness. As Roland Barthes would say, the connotative meaning of “this is reality” that supports the museum’s claim to realism appropriates the denotative function and vacates any sense in which the works could be individualized as “art.”

The American Museum of Natural History is monumental not only in its architecture and design but also in its size, scope, and content. This monumental quality suggests in and of itself the primary meaning of the museum inherited from *its* history: comprehensive collecting as a form of domination.⁸ In this respect museums belong to an era of scientific and colonial ambition, from the Renaissance through the early twentieth century, with its climactic moment in the second half of the nineteenth century. It belongs in the category of nineteenth-century endeavors such as experimental medicine (I’m thinking here of Claude Bernard), evolutionary biology (Charles Darwin), and the naturalistic novel (Émile Zola), all of which claimed to present a comprehensive social study. Such projects have been definitively compromised by postromantic critique, postcolonial protest, and postmodern disillusionment.⁹

But in spite of its appearance, that prefix *post-* doesn’t make things any easier. Any museum of this size and ambition is today saddled with a double status; it is necessarily also a museum of the museum, a preserve not for endangered species but for an endangered self, a “metamuseum”: the museal preservation of a project ruthlessly dated and belonging to an age long gone whose ideological goals have been subjected to extensive critique.¹⁰ Willy-nilly, such a museum solicits reflections on and of its own ideological position and history. It speaks to its own complicity with practices of domination while it continues to pursue an educational project that, having emerged out of those practices, has been adjusted to new conceptions and pedagogical needs. Indeed, the use of the museum in research and education is insisted on in its self-representations, including the *Guide*.

The critique of nineteenth-century collecting as being rooted in the colonialist conquest of foreignness has been sufficiently carried out. Moreover, it easily absorbs its own purpose if it fails to confront the

8. The relation between domination (in the field) and collecting (for the museum) has been sufficiently argued by Donna Haraway in her *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York, 1989). On collecting as domination, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, 1984); *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* ed. Phyllis Mauch Messenger (Albuquerque, 1989); and Michael M. Ames, *Museums, the Public, and Anthropology: A Study in the Anthropology of Anthropology* (Vancouver, B. C., 1986).

9. For an example of the postmodern critique, see Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Postmodern Arts of Memory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 194–233.

10. The metamuseal function of a museum like the American Museum is analyzed in Ames, *Museums, the Public, and Anthropology*.

remote past—the Victorian era as the late twentieth century's bad conscience—with the present, whose ties to what it critiques must be assessed as well. That is the trouble with *post-*: on the one hand, the prefix suggests a detachment, the severing of the umbilical cord that binds the present to the past; on the other hand, it reminds us of what it leaves behind, insisting that we settle accounts with the *post-* within ourselves.¹¹ For the purpose of this analysis, therefore, I will look at the metamuseal status of the displays in the American Museum. The focus here is on the marginalia of the museum's project, on those aspects of the museum that seem to pass unnoticed and uncriticized—those aspects that are “natural,” if you wish. I shall also examine not the nineteenth-century colonial project but the twentieth-century educational one. And while Donna Haraway has described and criticized the way in which the American Museum's collection was compiled, I will consider the rhetoric of the museum in passing off the legacy of or justifying that past ambition, that is, its forms of address.¹²

The most powerful form of address is narrative. Indeed, the space of a museum presupposes a walking tour, an order in which the exhibits and panels are to be viewed and read. Thus it addresses an implied “focalizer” whose tour is the story of the production of the knowledge taken in and taken home. I will focus on the display as a sign system working in the realm between the visual and the verbal, and between information and persuasion, as it produces the viewer's knowledge. My analysis will concentrate on a small portion of the second floor, the center piece of which, the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, has been extensively described by Haraway.¹³ I will contend that this microworld between West Eighty-First and Seventy-Seventh Streets derives its effectiveness from a striking signifying relationship with the culture of New York City in the 1990s by its unease about what it seeks to repress. This signifying relationship is iconic. The analogy in which this iconicity is grounded produces the naturalizing effect that turns the historically and socially specific stories of walking tours into an unproblematic and unquestioned reality.¹⁴

The obvious problem of the American Museum is the collocation in

11. Or with the “wild man within” that Raymond Corbey denies so vehemently to exist, as I demonstrate in “The Politics of Citation,” *Diacritics* 21 (Spring 1991). On the logic of the “ostentive self-definition by negation” at stake here, see Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea,” *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1982), pp. 150–82.

12. I wish to acknowledge my debt to Clifford's seminal essay, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” *The Predicament of Culture*, pp. 215–51.

13. Haraway's analysis hovers between a description of Carl Akeley's project and biography and a more fundamental critique of the ideological concatenation of race, class, and gender as it expresses itself therein. See Haraway, *Primate Visions*, pp. 26–58, esp. pp. 26–31.

14. See Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* and Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du discours descriptif*.

its visual discourse of animals and foreign peoples as the two others of dominant culture.¹⁵ It is possible to attribute this odd combination to the racism inherent in the colonialist origin of the museum, safely referred back to an age before today's alleged race and gender consciousness. In such a view the museum's status as metamuseum forbids its dismantling and prescribes its preservation for the sake of historical awareness. But preservation is not enough, not in the 1990s. That is precisely what the critique of the institution of the museum has taught us. The double function of the museum as display of its own status and history (its meta-function), as well as of its enduring cognitive educational vocation (its object-function), requires the absorption *in the display* of that critical consciousness. This requirement entails a specific exchange between verbal and visual discourse. One could expect that whereas the visual displays, the dioramas that form the bulk of the museum's "treasures," must be preserved as the objects of the museum's metafunction, the panels containing verbal explanation and information, as well as the *Official Guide*, being more easily adjustable and in fact clearly adjusted, present the displays critically. The sign system of the verbal panels constitutes precisely the museum's luck: it provides the latitude to change. Nothing is easier than to transform the interaction between visual and verbal representation so as to provide one with a commentary on the other. Only through such a change can the displays point at their own discourse as not natural, as a sign system. And whereas the verbal panels do demonstrate an awareness of the burning issues of today's society, it is the lack of the absorption of a more acute and explicit self-criticism, and the presence of an apologetic discourse in its stead, that I wish to criticize in this analysis. The museum has turned its luck into a lack.

2. *Asian Mammals: The Politics of Transition*

Turning left at the stairs near the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial on the Central Park West side, visitors enter the Vernay-Faunthrope Hall of South Asiatic Mammals (fig. 1). They are surrounded by dioramas of animals whose strangeness has long been effaced by that even more "natural" museum, the zoo. Against painted backdrops known from postcards and geography books, the dioramas are impressively realistic. The visual rhetoric of realism is helped here by the darkness in the hall. There is a tension here, perhaps a paradox, inherent in the museum as a whole, between common and strange. The displays hover between the attempt to

15. The terms *discourse* and *collocation* are meant quite literally here. The visual displays *speak* to the visitor in more than just informational terms, and it is on this surplus discourse that I would like to concentrate. Similarly, collocation is more than just visual juxtaposition; by speaking together about animals and foreign peoples, the displays communicate an ideology of distinction that has this conflation as its sign system.

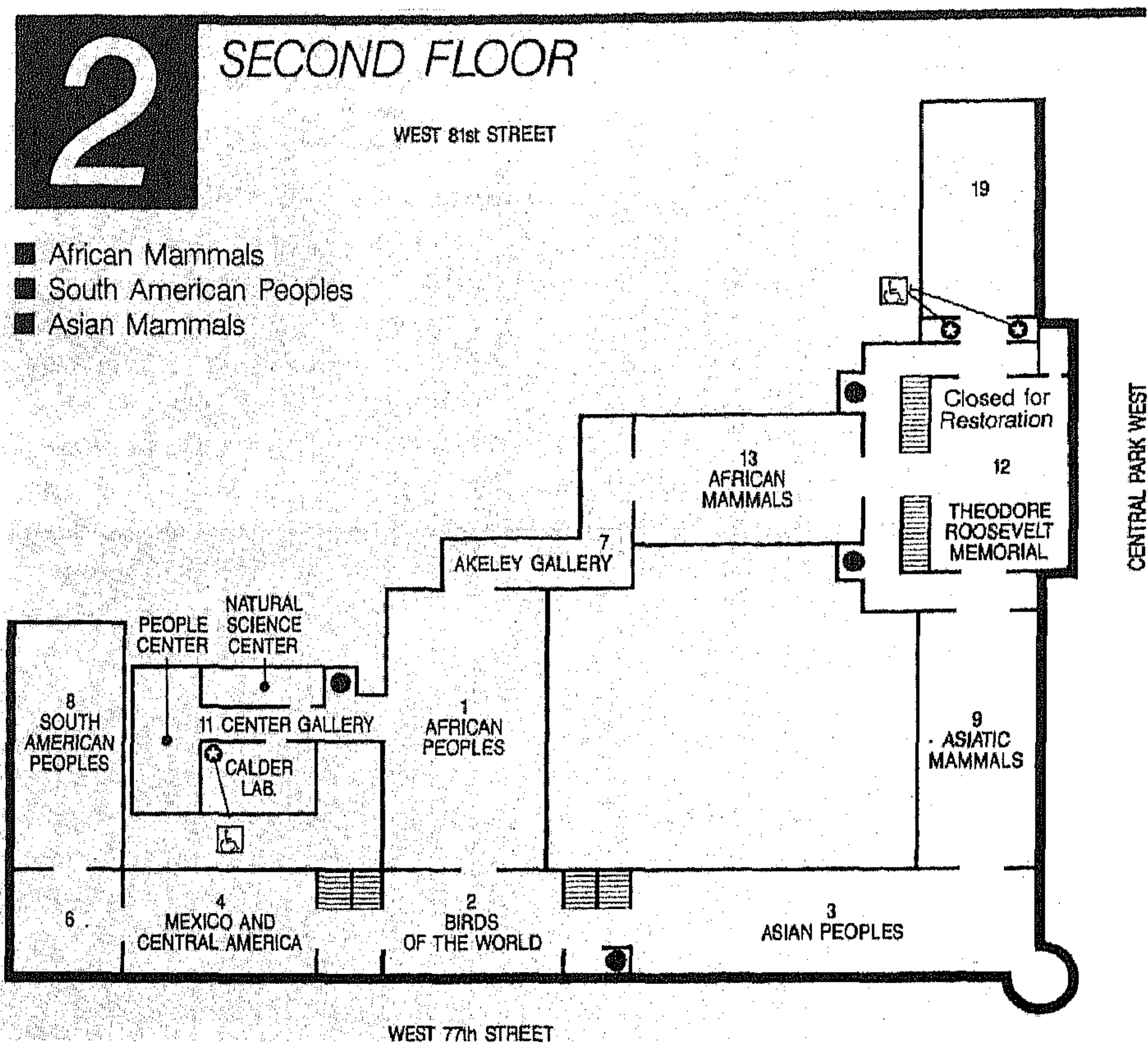


FIG. 1.—Floor plan, second floor, American Museum of Natural History.

represent reality as natural through an aesthetics of realism and the attempt to demonstrate the wonders of nature through an aesthetics of exoticism.¹⁶

As in the other halls, the double edge of the American Museum is acutely felt: the imitation of nature, striving for perfection, foregrounds itself by that very telos. The skillful but ruthlessly artificial painting, the protective glass, the neat separation of species, and the limited size of the settings compared to the animals, all contribute to make one constantly aware of the representational status of this "nature."

But the effect of the real works. This is one form of truth-speak, the discourse that claims the truth to which the viewer is asked to submit, endorsing the willing suspension of disbelief that rules the power of fiction. For the visitor entering through this hall, this is the equivalent of the

16. In other rooms of the museum a third representational strategy is deployed: the aesthetics of scientificity, which projects aesthetically pleasing and cognitively convincing three-dimensional diagrams. This strategy is more emphatically present in the halls of animals, at which I will not stop in this analysis.

“once upon a time” formula, the discourse of realism setting the terms of the contract between viewer or reader and museum or storyteller.

At the far end of this hall the door opens to the Gardner D. Stout Hall of Asian Peoples. Within the framework of the mimetic success of the realism in the Hall of Asiatic Mammals, the transition from this cultured “nature” to culture *as* nature—from mammals to peoples—is, of course, highly problematic. The most obvious problem is the juxtaposition of animals and foreign human cultures. But how to avoid the sense that the juxtaposition of animals and peoples somehow equates the two? The doorway between the two halls is semiotically charged as a threshold. Therefore the transition has to be particularly carefully organized. Here is a point where the difference between the colonial past and the postcolonial present can either be smoothly covered up so as to avoid the excessive foregrounding of the racial politics involved in the museum’s origin, or, on the contrary, emphatically thematized so as to increase an awareness of the museum’s contemporary educational endeavor.

In the case of these two Asian departments there is a sign of an awareness of the need for a transition; but it remains on the level of symptom, not signal. This transition is monitored by a small display, within the Hall of South Asiatic Mammals, at the far end to the right, between the Indian rhinoceros on the left and the water buffalo on the right. In contrast to the dioramas, this little window contains only one rather bare exhibit, black against an undecorated orange background: a nineteenth-century statue from Nepal. It bears the title *Queen Maya Giving Birth to the Buddha from Her Side* (fig. 2). It represents an elegantly shaped female surrounded by decorative ornaments. It is at odds with the other displays in this hall.

The panel beneath it contains several key phrases that elaborate the transitional status of this statue’s display:

Queen Maya giving birth to the Buddha from her side, Nepalese bronze, 19th century.

According to popular tradition, Gautama, the historical Buddha, was born to Queen Maya of Kapilavastu as the result of a visit by a white elephant with golden tusks who ran around her bed three times and then returned to the Heavenly Mountains. Buddhism, one of the principal religions of Asia, has many stories of the previous lives of the Buddha as a compassionate soul in the bodies of animals. As a consequence, many Buddhist sects are vegetarian.

How does this small display fulfill its function as a transitional object, and how does the verbal presentation help the visual one to work?



FIG. 2.—*Queen Maya Giving Birth to the Buddha from Her Side*, Nepalese, 19th century. Bronze. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

Keeping its purpose and status distinct from the museum of high art at the other side of the park, this display holds an artifact from a low moment in the history of Buddhist art, low because the moment of making coincides with the moment of acquisition: the nineteenth century. This temporal coincidence deprives the artifact of historical patina and scarcity, requirements for high artistic status. Typically, nothing is noted about its style. It is, moreover, thoughtfully presented as anchored in “popular tradition,” that nameless other of individual elite art. It thus goes from being art to anthropological evidence of a timeless culture.¹⁷

The verbal text accompanying the statue thoroughly frames it in its specific transitional function. The mention of the white elephant introduces the animal element that justifies the curious collocation of this artifact with “nature,” the animals in their settings, in the hall. Looking back, the visitor notices that the statue is facing the centerpiece of the hall, two life-size elephants, grey with white tusks. The historical information concerning Buddhist mythology, emphasizing the difference from Christianity in metempsychosis’s polytheistic tendency (“many stories”), serves the explanatory function that is so important in the museum’s scientific-educational vocation. Buddhism may be “one of the principal religions of Asia,” but the use of the word “sects” in the final sentence is pejorative, especially in its plural form, in a culture whose dominant ideology is monotheistic. In addition to the colorful story, this word “sects” further estranges Buddhist culture from the Western viewer. But the official *explanandum* of this statement is Buddhist vegetarianism, and one may well wonder what the relevance of that anthropological feature is in connection to the Hall of Asiatic Mammals.

As it turns out it is highly relevant, not for Asian mammals, but for American educators and the function of anthropology. Anthropology is pervasive in the American Museum as the unquestioned supplement to biology; take, for example, the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples.¹⁸

17. On the semiotic status of evidence, see *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, Ind., 1983). On “tribal art” as cultural evidence, see Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, pp. 187–252. I agree with most of Clifford’s reading of the museum, but I am not sure that his distinction, borrowed from Ames, between formalist and contextualist protocols accounts for the semiotic strategies used in the Met and the American Museum, respectively. Aesthetics is also a context, which is why formalism necessarily fails. In both cases the works are used as indices, specifically as synecdoches, but the whole for which they stand as parts is different for each. *Time* is the crucial factor, the ground whose absence (in the American Museum) or presence (in the Met) produces the meaning of the representative object.

18. I cannot resist pointing here to a “Note from New Guinea” written by Margaret Mead—dated 21 April 1932 in Aliatua, Wiwiak District, New Guinea—a letter that Clifford mentions but might have analyzed in more linguistic detail. Here is the note in its entirety:

We are just completing a culture of a mountain group here in the lower Torres Chelles. They have no name and we haven’t decided what to call them yet. They are a very

The discipline of anthropology has speculated extensively on the origins and meanings of alimentary taboos,¹⁹ and one explanation that has gained wide popularity is their educational value.²⁰ Taboos regarding food, along with sexual taboos, teach distinction. By forbidding certain connections and incorporations—in the context of this analysis one might also say collocations and metonymies—people learn to respect the difference between self and other. To taboo cannibalism, for example, is to teach “savages” that they are not animals but humans. To learn this is necessary for the survival of the species. In the hall of Asian mammals the reference to vegetarianism suggests a prior form of savagery. The taboo on the consumption of meat affirms the distinction, not between humans and other animals, but between all animals—including humans—and plants. In other words, the panel suggests that there is a greater difference for these Buddhist sects between people and plants, which can be eaten, than there is between people and other animals, with whom these people are too congenial to allow their use as food. The history of the Buddha as told in this panel is supposed to prove it. He was fathered by an elephant, and the elephants in the center of the hall suddenly stand as witnesses to their mythological brother.

The panel accompanying the display of the statue does not question and criticize as dated the collocation of human artifact with animals but, on the contrary, sustains it. Self-reflection is swept aside in favor of naturalization. The words read as an explanation of the relevance of human presence in the animal realm, but they do so by qualifying the humans in

*revealing people in spots, providing a final basic concept from which all the mother's brothers' curses and father's sisters' curses, etc. derive, and having articulate the attitude towards incest which Reo [Fortune] outlined as fundamental in his Encyclopedia article. They have taken the therapeutic measures which we recommended for Dobu and Manus—having a devil in addition to the neighbor sorcerer, and having got their dead out of the village and localized. But in other ways they are annoying: they have bits and snatches of all the rag tag and bob tail of magical and ghostly belief from the Pacific, they are somewhat like the Plains in their receptivity to strange ideas. A picture of a local native reading the Index to the Golden Bough just to see if they had missed anything, would be appropriate. They are very difficult to work, living all over the place with half a dozen garden houses, and never staying put for a week at a time. Of course this offered a new challenge in method which was interesting. The difficulties incident upon being two days over impossible mountains have been time consuming and we are going to do a coastal people next. [Margaret Mead, “Note from New Guinea,” *American Anthropologist* 34 (Oct.–Dec. 1932): 740; emphasis added]*

Fabian's subtitle, *How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, is ironically illustrated here.

19. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

20. See Jarich G. Oosten and David Moyer, “De mythische omkering: Een analyse van de sociale code van de scheppingsmythen van Genesis 2, 4b–11,” *Antropologische verkenningen* 1 (1982): 1–34.

question as being close to animals, closer than “we” are. This human presence is only emphasized as the object of representation; the obvious human performance in the dioramas of the hall, especially in the painted scenery, remains relegated to the unnoticeability of realism. Realism is the truth-speak that obliterates the human hand that wrote it, and the specifically Western human vision that informed it. In contrast, the statue represents humanity, even in some conception of its essence, birth that is, and it is an index of the humanity represented in the next room: foreign, exotic. The question arises as to what is the more specific meaning of the visual display that needs to be sustained so emphatically by words.

The statue represents a woman, “naturally” as close to animals as humans come, and it represents her in the most “natural” of poses, giving birth. But this is not an ordinary birth whose representation would strain the tolerance of educational prudishness; it is a mythical birth, from the woman’s side. There is an opportunity here to draw attention to cultural *similarity* by pointing out that in Genesis the first woman emerges out of the side of the first, androgynous creature, after having been fathered in an equally unorthodox way.²¹ But this opportunity is passed over. Instead, the strangeness of this nature-woman is emphasized. By selecting a representation of femininity that reaffirms woman’s closeness to nature through a thoroughly unnatural fiction presented as foreign, the designers of the hall have accomplished quite a semiotic feat: they have managed to mitigate in this local transition the major ideological oddity of the museum as a whole. The metaphorical equation of “woman” with “nature,” so familiar in the culture betokened by and surrounding this museum, mediates between mammals and foreign peoples, emphasizing the otherness that justifies the relegation of these peoples to this side of Central Park.

Gender politics is thus intricately enmeshed with ethnic stereotyping, for there is more to this visual ideologeme than meets the eye: the Buddha himself, in spite of his masculinity, is aligned with the archfemininity of giving birth. Associated with this double naturalness of birth-giving femininity and mythical remoteness, he is authenticated as the proper authority to prescribe vegetarianism as a feature of animality. And it is this surplus of ideological information that the panel with the verbal representation is conjured up to “explain.” Visitors are now prepared to accept the ambivalent display in the next hall showing peoples as nature. But before they enter that hall, they see over the door two sculpted wooden horses: animals fabricated by Asian Buddhists to underscore their animality through

21. For an analysis of Genesis 2 and 3 in these terms, see Oosten and Moyer, “De mythische omkering,” and Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), pp. 104–30. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (forthcoming), rightly criticizes the repression of Genesis 4 in critical accounts of the creation stories in the Hebrew Bible.

their own products. What extends before the learner is culture frozen in a clever double structure that, according to the panel at the entrance, can be read alternately as unfolded in space and developed in time.

3. *Evolutionism and Taxonomy*

After the transition effected by the Buddhist statue and further confirmed by the wooden horses, the visitor is ready to enter the Hall of Asian Peoples, which extends to the right. The entrance to that hall proposes a double representation, however, offering a choice. The disposition of the hall is cleverly designed to allow two different modes of interpretation: through time, by moving to the left to a corner diorama, and through space, by moving to the right into the hall itself. The spatial presentation divides Asia into regions, moving "from Japan westward to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea," as the hall's first panel reads. Taking the spatial route entails the likelihood of skipping the temporal one, which is tucked away in the corner to the left, while the temporal option inevitably leads into the spatial section at the end. Turning left, then, is the right thing to do. Is this a coincidence, or does it tie in with other symptomatic elements?

The subject that guides the route through time is phrased on the introductory panel and then again as the headline for all sections: "Man's Rise to Civilization." The leading question as well as the program it entails are posed clearly: "How did man achieve civilization? We have no final answers but we have *archeological traces* and *anthropological parallels* by which to create possible models" (emphasis added). The conflation of time and space is possible through the unstated notion of the primitive so dear to the forefathers of the museum. The bringing together of "trace" and "parallel" is the speculative tool that proposes answers to unanswerable questions whose very statement implies, literally, too much for words. "Man's rise to civilization": the universal concept of "man," the evolutionism of "rise," the transhistorical generic use of "civilization"; these are the three presuppositions that inform this museum's other, the Met. For the study of cultural difference that this hall could offer, the concepts insert the awareness that the double access to this hall is based on an untenable distinction. "Time" will become a question and "space" will be the metaphoric cover-up of its unanswerability.

Tucked in the corner that extends into a rotund space is the section devoted to "Man's Rise to Civilization in the Near East." Through the entrance and to the left are the Greeks, singled out with panels that sing their praises in unambiguous terms: panel 10 headlines "Troy and Western Civilization," while panel 11 bears the title "The Ionian Achievement." The archaic Greeks are represented by Homer and are selected to establish the connection to "our own" culture. This is not a surprising

choice and may be partially informed by the irresistible attraction of iconic thinking: we are looking at a culture where excellence was an ideological core.²² These Greeks are praised in panel 10 for their investigation of “nature to the limits of human intellect,” suggesting the happy outcome of an evolution that has just been traced before us. The panel on Ionian culture offers a neat example of the way time overtakes space in this section (fig. 3). Suddenly, as we approach our own culture, anonymity yields to great names, and the selected characteristic of the represented culture is the very definition of the scientific pursuit that this museum represents. The voyage ends with a conflation of the two moments between which stretches the period to which the “rise to civilization” has led.

The Greeks, then, are not simply an episode in a voyage through time but the emblem of the highest level of civilization. Representing the Greeks at the transition between the time-bound and geographically ordered exhibits of the Asian peoples is a gesture that qualifies the concept of “Asia,” giving meaning to the presentation “from Japan westward to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea”: from the utterly foreign to the uncannily familiar (fig. 4). But more importantly this placement qualifies the concept of the museum as a whole. It functions again as a transition, this time not between animals and foreign peoples but between the latter and “us.” It installs the taxonomy of “us” and “them” by proposing the Greeks as the mediators, just as the woman in the statue of Queen Maya functioned as a mediator. The Greeks, closer to Western culture

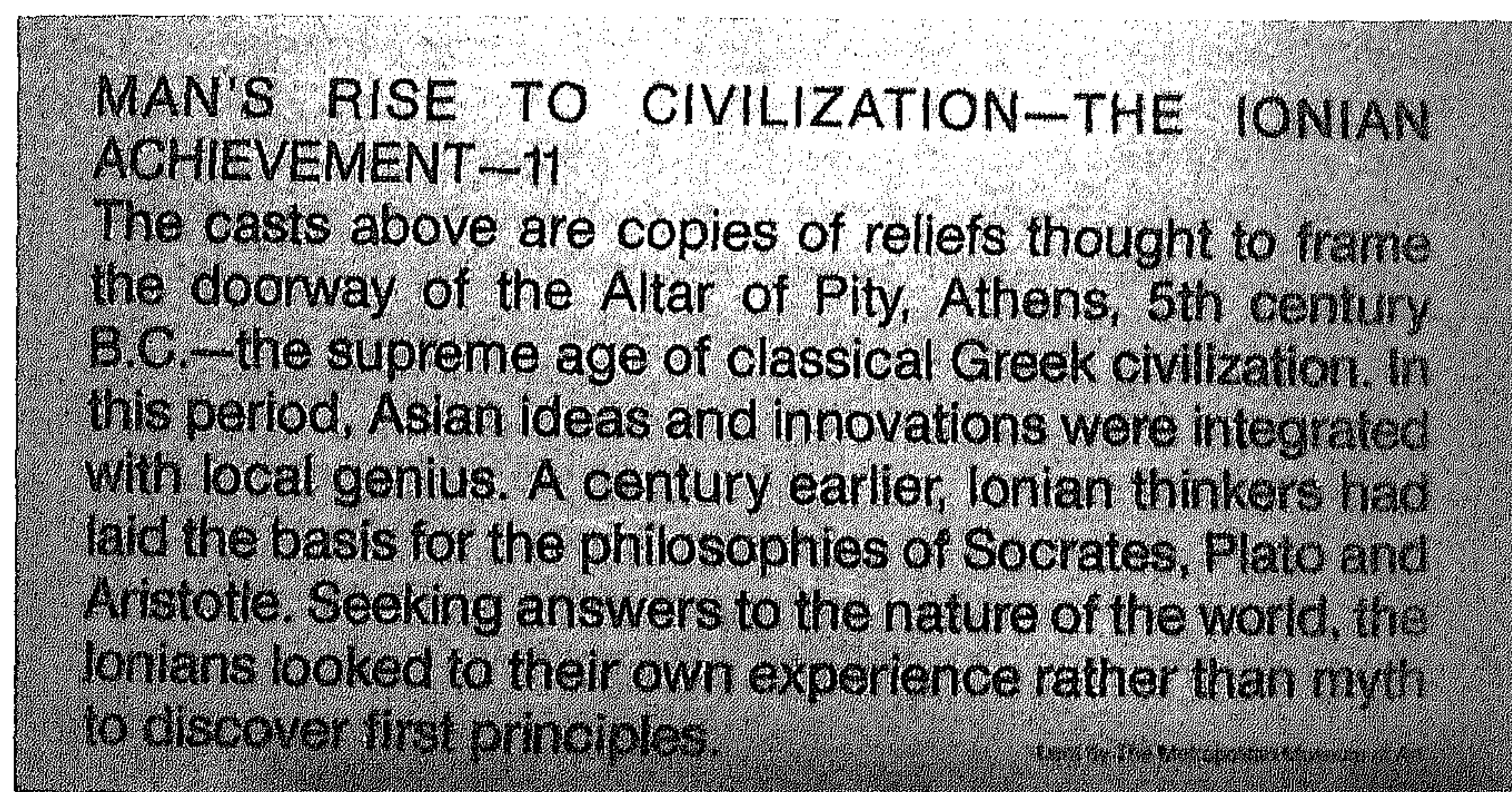


FIG. 3.—Explanatory panel. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

22. See Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1979).

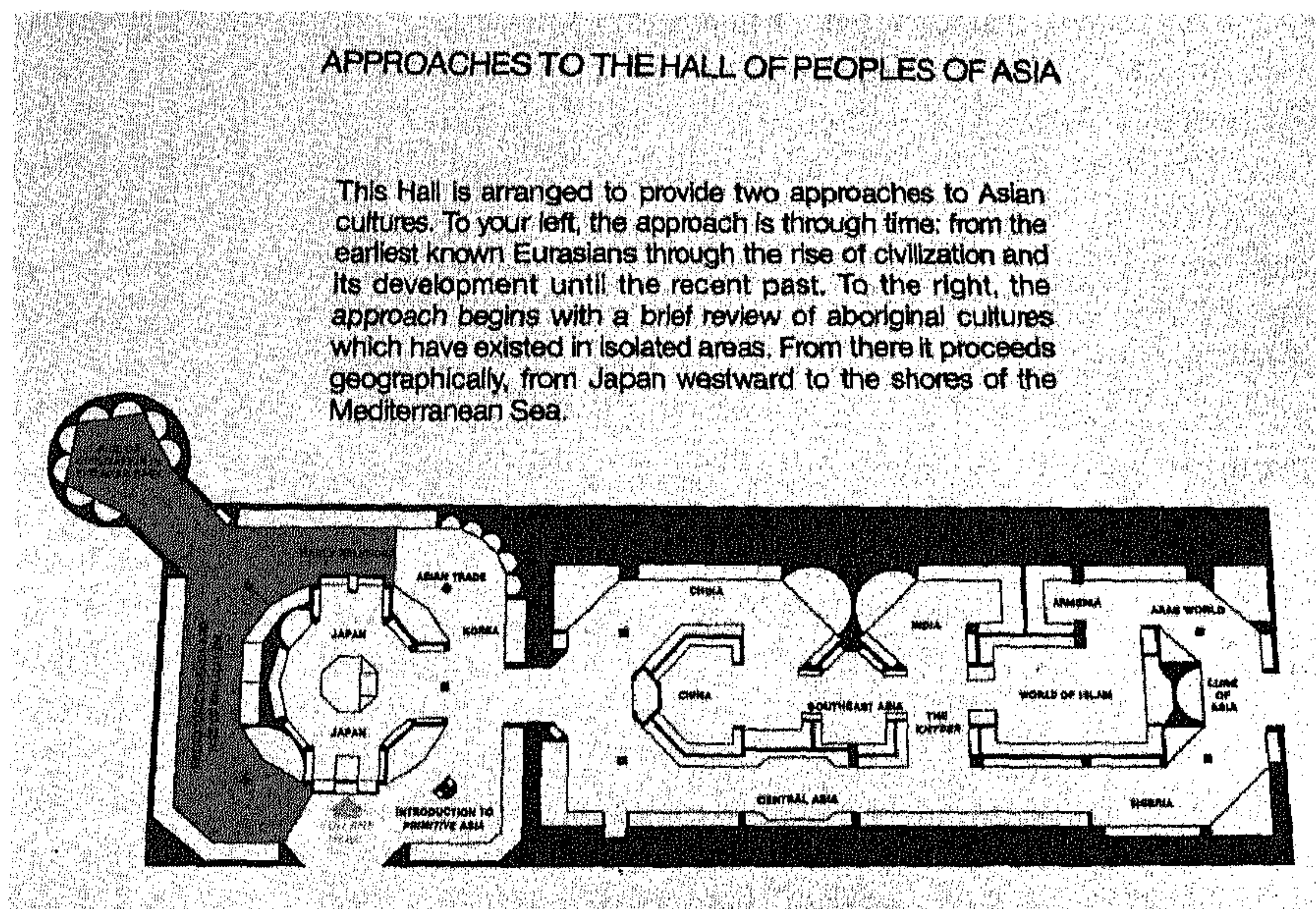


FIG. 4.—Explanatory panel. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

than any of the peoples represented in the museum, stand for the highest form of civilization, both the starting point of “our” culture and the end point of Asian cultures.

The time frame initiated, then, is not that of an innocent-looking voyage through time, but that of an evolutionism collaborating with taxonomy, dividing human cultures into higher and lower, the ones closest to “ours” being the highest. It would be feasible, although not easy, to walk backwards, to untell this Eurocentric story, but the museum has not provided panels that make such a return trip readable. After entering the hall via the Greeks, all peoples represented in it can only be less developed, more foreign. And, indeed, between the spatially developed presentation and this climax of time, the most marginal items mitigate the transition: “the approach begins with a brief review of aboriginal cultures which have existed in isolated areas,” in order to begin in earnest with Japan.

Semiotically speaking, this transition from time to space functions as a shifter. Émile Benveniste’s distinction between the personal language situation of “I-you” exchange and the impersonal representation of “him,” “her,” or “them” is relevant here.²³ The two are not symmetrical: whereas the “I-you” positions are reversible, the “third person” is powerless, excluded. In addition, the “I-you” presides over the “third person,” the “I” performing the representation in conjunction with a “you” who may be

23. See Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (1966; Coral Gables, Fla., 1971), pp. 195–204.

real, imaginary, anticipated. The peoples represented in the American Museum, as well as the animals, belong irreducibly to “them”: the other, constructed in representation by an “I,” the museum’s designers. The “you” for whose benefit the “third person,” here the Asian peoples, is represented, is constructed by implication. That construction is foregrounded in the opening chapter on the Greeks: by emphasizing the Greeks’ ascendancy in the culture in which the museum functions, the addressee is marked as belonging to the Western white hegemonic culture. The alterity of the represented other is thereby increased; it is made absolute and irreducible.

The degree to which that “I,” the subject of representation, is visible in the representation itself opens up the possibility of a critical dimension, for the self-representation of the subject implies a statement concerning the subjectivity of the representation as potentially fictional. This entrance into the Hall of Asian Peoples, however, does not function that way, for instead of stating the “I” it proposes identification with the Greeks, an apparent “third person” that appeals to ideological allegiance without exposing its subjectivity. The construction of such a radical division between self and other works to deny the conflict in contemporary society where cultural diversity is present, so much so that the construction of “them” is no longer possible.

Hence the need to obscure “I-you” through the metaphorization of the Greeks as “our” stand-ins. But the very act of foregrounding in the gesture of obscuring the “I-you” interaction—in other words, the construction of subjectivity within the representation—obscures itself in the ambiguous evocation of the people that stands between Asia and Europe, between archaic and modern, between “them” and “us.” Evolutionism serves to blur the boundaries built up by taxonomy.²⁴ What is really on display here, then, is the rhetorical strategy where words are used to provide images with meanings they would, and should, not have. Instead of the panels on which words give meaning to the order of things (allusion intended), large mirrors would have been a better idea. Strategically placed mirrors could not only allow the simultaneous viewing of the colonial museum and its postcolonial self-critique, but also embody self-reflection (in the double sense of the word), lead the visitor astray, and confuse and confound the walkers who would thereby lose their way through evolution and, perhaps panicking a bit, wander amid diversity to their educational benefit.

24. Clifford mentions an exhibition held in 1985 at the Musée d’Ethnographie in Neuchâtel that foregrounds the temporal paradox of the ethnographic museum. See Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 231 n. 6. The relevant texts that give a good idea of the “ideal” presentation can be found in Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, *Temps perdu, temps retrouvé: Voir les choses du passé au présent* (Neuchâtel, 1985) and “Temps perdu, temps retrouvé: Du côté de l’ethno . . .,” *Gradhiva* 1 (Autumn 1986): 33–37.

4. Circular Epistemology

The curators have made effective use of the possibilities of visual and verbal channels of information to convey very different ideological positions and to obscure ideological tensions. It is the latter, the effort to ease instead of to enhance tensions by shedding verbal light on visual objects, and to lend a particular, semiotically loaded order to what had best remain chaos, that matters here. Not only is such a use foregrounded in the double presentation of the Hall of Asian Peoples through time—storytelling as well as history writing—and through space—taxonomy as well as geography—but within each of these presentations the specific semiotic potentials of each medium are also reflected on. I will again limit the discussion to one case. In the presentation “through time,” there is a panel enigmatically and possibly ironically called “Prehistoric Storytelling” that presents a perfect example of the conflation of “archeological traces” and “anthropological parallels” to “create possible models” of “man’s rise to civilization.”

The phrase reveals a kind of narrative self-reflection: “prehistoric” qualifies “story-telling,” and we can expect a theory of storytelling specific to prehistory. That kind of storytelling could only be a visual kind (fig. 5). The explanation on the introductory panel demonstrates what kind of epistemological usage visual storytelling allows:

The panels displayed here, made by 19th-century Siberians, tell stories of daily life. Dominated by tales of hunting both sea and land mammals, they also include scenes of the settlement that show the kind of houses, sleds and other items commonly used by those people. The panels at upper left and upper right even depict the dog sacrifice shown in the Koryak exhibit to the right. For the Siberian viewer, each panel is a complete account and clearly reflects the well-known exigencies of daily life.

For thousands of years, peoples have told such stories both orally and graphically. The painting at the back shows a hunting scene from the site of Çatal Hüyük, in Turkey, about 6500 B.C.

First of all, the text foregrounds visuality as the crucial form of reception. It describes the ideal viewer as the model addressee. But surely there is no such person as a Siberian *viewer* of these panels, at least not if that denomination means a prehistoric Siberian and not an occasional visitor from the eastern Soviet Union. The nineteenth-century Siberian maker of these images cannot be asked, nor does he or she have any direct relation to the prehistoric peoples who represent this episode in the history of “man’s rise to civilization.” The panels this viewer is supposed to under-

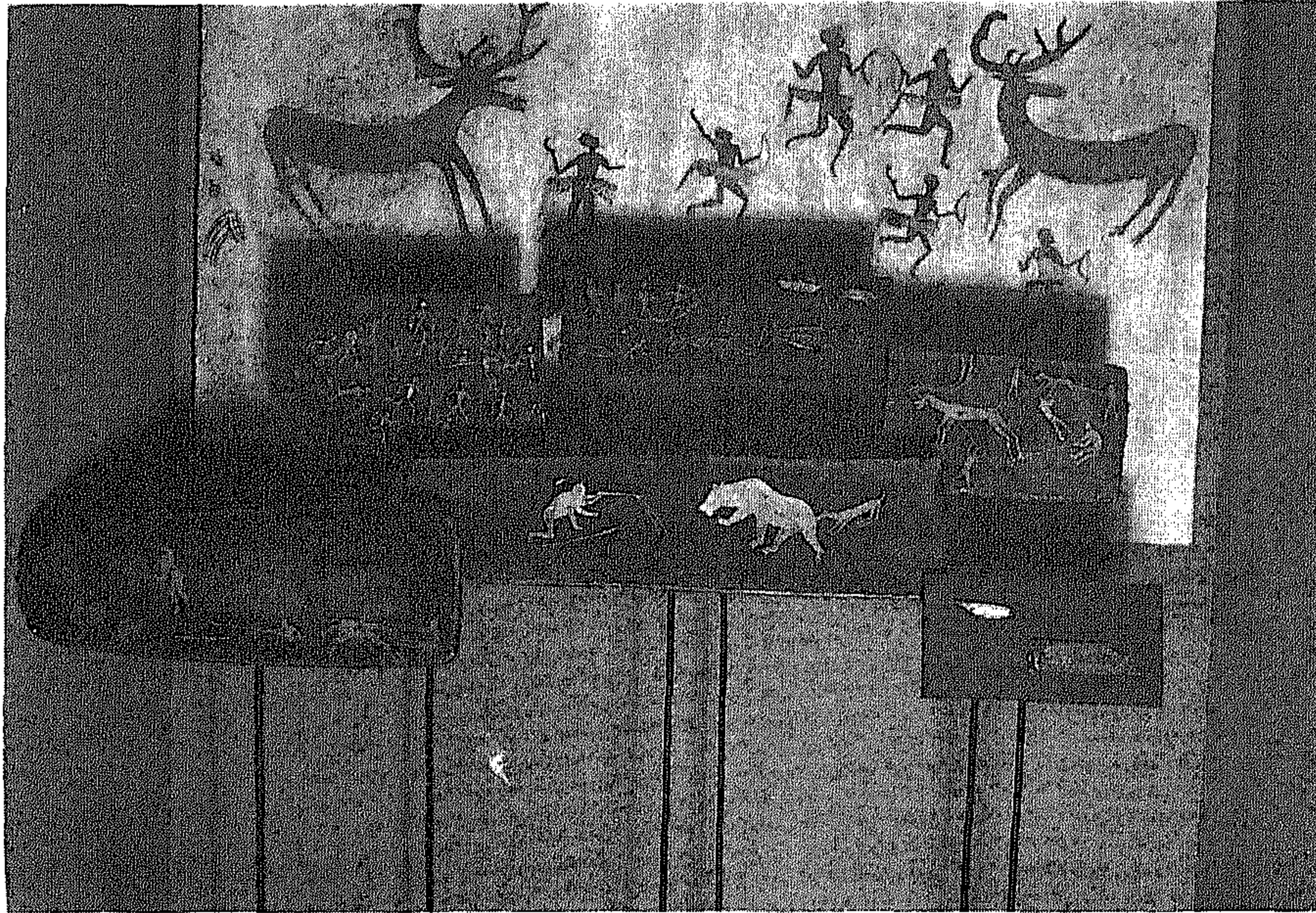


FIG. 5.—Siberian panels, 19th century (foreground); Turkish painting, approx. 6500 B.C. (background). American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Department of Library Services (Neg. no. 68137, fr. 30).

stand so readily are irreducibly of a different time and place, and as the very presence of the text panels suggests, displayed here they address a literate viewer, while prehistory is (problematically) defined by illiteracy.

But that may be precisely the point; the text proposes that this information be absorbed in the mode of prehistoric humans—that is, visually. Why is that so important? The second striking element of the panel suggests an answer to this question: this model addressee reads the panels as *complete* and as *accounts*. The combination of these two features describes the aesthetics at stake: realism, the description of the world so lifelike that omissions are unnoticed, elisions sustained, and repressions invisible. The direction given by this verbal rhetoric is to read the panels realistically in this double sense: as complete accounts for a contemporary member of the represented culture. This mode of reading is further strengthened by an incredible density of metarepresentational signs, all symptomatic of a desire to make representation coincide with its object: “clearly” leaves no room for doubt; “reflects” borrows the very terminology of realism; “well-known” disqualifies as ignorant the surprised viewer who hesitates to willingly suspend disbelief; “daily” emphasizes the ordinary, the anonymous, the opposite of individual excellence or notable events, again with an effect of the real. Who would dare to doubt the truth of the representation after such pedagogy?

Following this insistence on realism, the trace is wed to the parallel.

The second paragraph of the panel brings up the epistemology at stake. The nineteenth-century Siberian is conflated with thousands of years of the likes of him; the peoples in question do not have a history, no more than the "nature" depicted in the dioramas. They are prehistoric in this sense, and thereby qualify for exhibition in this museum of *natural* non-history. The background painting, although different in style and medium, is placed so as to form a literal-visual background to the modern panels. By representing hunting scenes they provide the idiom with which to read the panels in the foreground.

It is hard to disentangle oneself from this realistic rhetoric. But what if we applied this ideology to Western painting, the large majority of which has long deployed religious themes and meanings? How would a culture different from our own assess the difference between subject matters of a symbolic religious nature and those representing a "daily life" that includes religion? The issue is not addressed explicitly, but the conflict it betrays is present in the epistemology for which these panels are made to work. Within this utterly realistic display the images are said to be symbolic. For it is the use of symbols, as it is said in another panel, that characterizes civilization. This appeal to symbolism is already a problem in terms of the crystal-clear realism claimed in the introductory panel. The argument leading to this conclusion, however, is circular and deserves a close analysis.

Immediately *preceding* this exhibit on prehistoric storytelling there is a Koryak exhibit that contains, in addition to "the well-known exigencies of daily life," a rudimentary representation of the sacrifice of a dog—or so it seems (fig. 6). In imitation—that is, in realistic representation—of one small section of one of the nineteenth-century artifacts, the display represents a "real" dog sacrifice, showing little mannequins spearing a dog tied down with ropes (fig. 7). "What are they doing to that poor dog?" exclaimed one of the numerous children who walked by while I was there. "I don't know," said the monitor lamely. "It's mean!" replied the kid.

The epistemological connection between this exhibit and the Siberian panels is based on the trace-parallel conflation. Clearly the exhibit imitates the artifact, but the artifact has been interpreted realistically in the first place. The dog sacrifice, symbolically represented in the artifact, is taken to be "symbolic" of "real life" (hence the appropriateness of the child's exclamation, "It's mean!"). This visual argument is comparable to the idea of an anthropological representation of Western culture through the crucifixion of men with headdresses made of thorns and other varieties of martyrdom. "It's mean!" foreigners would cry out in those cases. Our—Western—children don't.

The connection between the nineteenth-century artifact and the twentieth-century exhibit is based on metonymy, a powerful rhetorical device. The later exhibit comes first, the older Siberian panel follows. This sequence allows for a reversal of model and copy, of two different



FIG. 6.—Detail of exhibit on Koryak culture. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

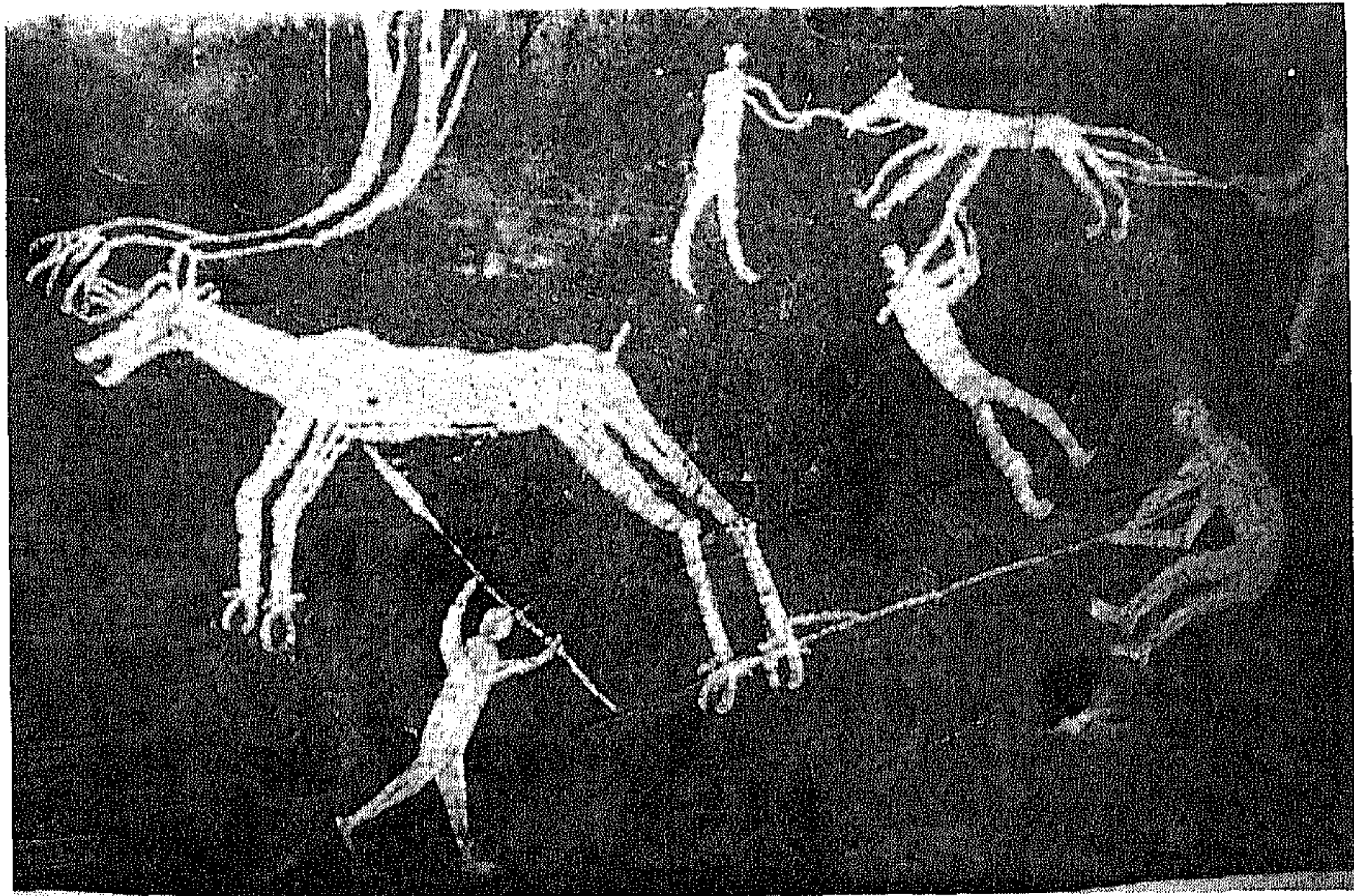


FIG. 7.—Detail of 19th-century Siberian panels. Photo: Mieke Bal.

levels of (representations of) the real.²⁵ Visually, it seems as if the Koryak exhibit shows the truth of the Siberian panel. The reference to the copy of a “really old” painting, a Turkish find from about 6500 B.C., provides the authentication of this conflation of time into space. But the trouble is, this painting, representing hunting scenes, does not have a trace of a dog sacrifice.²⁶

As usual, the verbal panel mediating this epistemology of juxtaposition makes the slippage—from space to time, from present to past—explicit:

The Koryak *live* in northeastern Siberia, a place of extreme cold. . . .
Our knowledge of shelter and clothing during the Ice Age is limited, but we can be *certain* that prehistoric man adapted to the climate much as have the Koryak. . . . As *shown* at the left, the people ritually sacrificed dogs as offerings to the spirits of the hunt and the settlement itself. [emphasis added]

The move from a contemporary but geographically remote culture to the prehistoric past is presented as a “certain” connection, and the dog sacrifice represented in the twentieth-century exhibit “shows” how the people in the past actually did things. The realistic representation of a fictional leftover from a foregone culture is taken as the source for an older artifact that will now have to be read realistically through this rhetoric.

The possibility that the Siberian artifact itself represents the dog sacrifice symbolically is not hinted at. In that case, the realistic representation of the culture in the display would have to show craftspeople, or artists, busy making a representation of a dog sacrifice, rather than busy with the actual killing of the animal. This circular argument would never pass unnoticed in a verbal historical analysis. The point I wish to make here is that the visual panels get away with it, but only because the verbal direction, the rhetorical setup of the addressee’s semiotic attitude, sustains the circle. This specific collaboration between visual and verbal sign systems partakes of an epistemology that is very much in place in present-day culture. All that effort is invested in stating the realism of this particular section in order to establish and sustain that circular epistemology. “Pre-historic story-telling” thus gains an unintended connotation: this is a pre-scientific, mythical way of telling the story of cultures we cannot know, a prehistoric historiography.

25. This reversal is precisely the reason that it is so important, for the point of view of critical semiotics, to insist on the ambiguity in Aristotle’s use of the term *mimesis*. See the analysis of the concept in my *On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics* (forthcoming).

26. Due to the disposition of these panels it was not possible to take a snapshot of the Turkish panel.

5. *In the Beginning Was the Word*

After the Hall of Asian Peoples, our journey through the semiotics of museum display takes us through the Birds of the World to a hall on the right, the Hall of Man in Africa. The panels here demonstrate a serious attempt to cope with the contradictions of a contemporary race-conscious society. They are evidently quite recent and could provide the critical edge that I propose as a requirement for a museum such as this one to be acceptable in the 1990s. In spite of an obvious attempt to represent African cultures within the historical context of domination, colonization, and slavery, however, they don't quite succeed in avoiding the traps that come with the repression of self-reflection.

The entrance panel on the left wall states the contemporary educational ambition of the hall (fig. 8). This panel is mounted outside of the

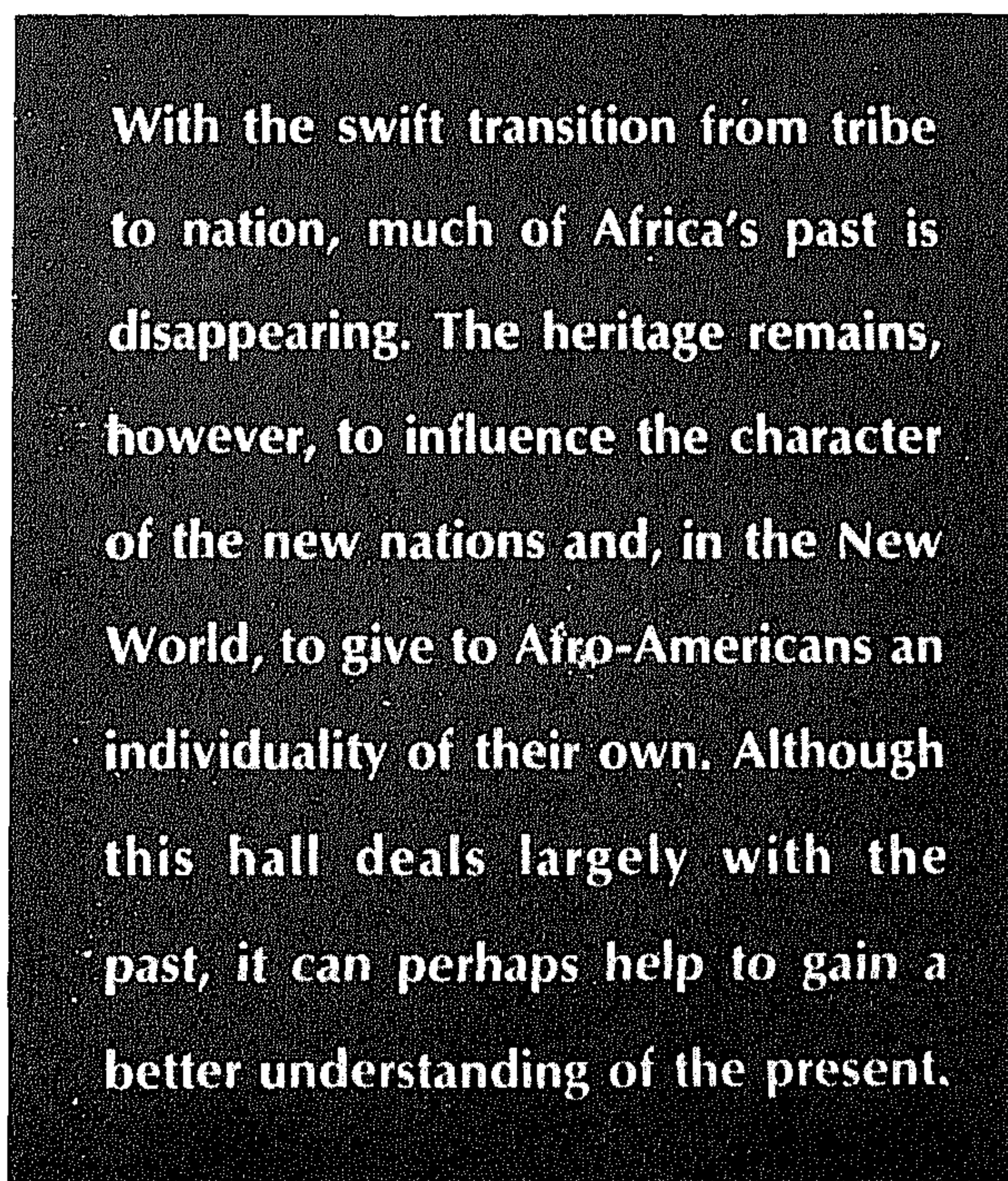


FIG. 8.—Explanatory panel. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

hall proper, and its position spatially signifies the distance separating the museum's curators today from the conception of the hall some fifty years ago. The panel suggests a self-critical project: to explain the problems of contemporary multiracial society by its roots in colonialism. This could

work if it were sustained throughout the exhibits. But if this self-critique is not pursued inside the hall, it remains a preface whose spatial position outside the hall reflects its ideological position of framing what happens inside with an apology. Again, the metamuseal function must be foregrounded, but it isn't.

The entrance is further framed by two bright window cases (figs. 9 and 10) whose visual rhetoric adopts the second form of truth-speak that the museum uses: scientific discourse. From where we stand we can catch a glimpse, in the dark distance of the hall, of one of the displays in the realistic mode, and the contrast is striking (fig. 11). The introductory exhibits at the entrance—"family" on the left, "society" on the right—present three-dimensional graphic models of that essence of Africa which only scientific analysis is able to provide. The connotation is scientificity, with reliability as its primary feature, thus visually proposing that what we are about to see is the "truth" of Africa—not the historically produced mixture of science and fiction out of which contemporary vision emerged—the critical analysis of which was promised by the introductory panel. Thus the critical project announced by the panel as the outer frame is overwritten by the scientific one of the second-level frame.²⁷

After this double, conflicting introduction, the first displays within the main body of the hall are devoted to "foreign influences" on the left and "Africa today" on the right. In agreement with the introductory panel, both are more about what colonialism has done to Africa than about its "natural history." But the latter will nevertheless be the object of the subsequent displays. Hence these two displays function as a third level of introductory framing, within the critical and the scientific ones, presenting the double voice of the museum's contemporary vision of Africa through Africa itself. The "Foreign Influences" section is divided into economic, political, and religious influences. The political situation is represented as follows:

The imposition of foreign rule created political entities much wider than existed before, *and this might have been advantageous*, but the same powers that set up these unities failed, usually, to consolidate them. They existed largely on paper alone; the common sentiment that must underlie any truly unified nation was lacking, and with the removal of foreign military force the imposed unity tended to crumble.
[emphasis added]

27. The snapshot of one case is here juxtaposed with the one that, in the museum, is just visible within the dark hall, between two other cases.

This sounds critical enough: foreign rule—colonialism—imposed an order that it failed to maintain. Indeed, the repeated use of the concept of imposition demonstrates the critical intent, as do words like “failed.” But by its lack of self-reflective attention to discursive practice, the self-critique fails to sustain itself. On the contrary, it hardly conceals attempts to reconfirm the values that produced the colonial situation in the first place. Thus the idea that wider political unities would be better than the small scale organization remains unargued, as does the legitimacy of any kind of imposition whatsoever. The desirability of large-scale nationhood is a “common sentiment” that Africans failed to muster. Its indispensable nature is stated in generalizing phrases like “any *truly* unified nation.” Finally, the sorry consequence of the removal of military force demon-

strates the conflicting message: critical in the way “imposed” qualifies “unity,” but uncritical in the connotation of “tended to crumble,” that the inherent weakness of the Africans made them unable to sustain the goods. Hence there remains room for the suggestion that colonialism was bad for Africa because it was not radical and lasting enough: if only the foreign rule had managed to impose its alien system more durably, all would be well today. Not a word on the social systems dislodged by the imposition of large-scale nations.

The verbal message here is conflicting and carries dubious views of what happened to Africa. The visual exhibits illustrating this dubious view are all critical of what became of Africa’s political organization. But instead of representing the violence done to Africa, the exhibits are mostly caricatures.

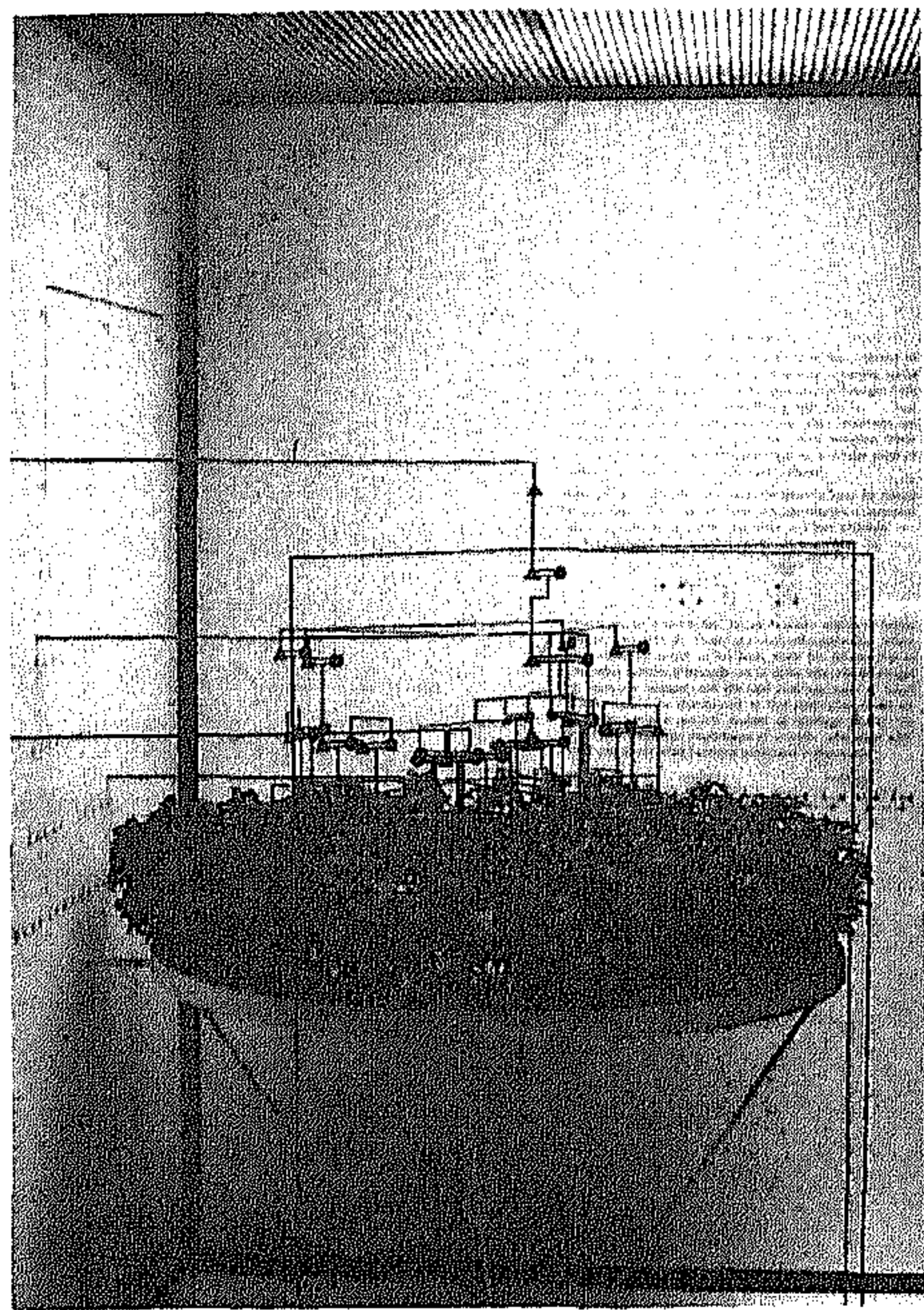


FIG. 9.—The Family. Display case at the left of the entrance to the Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

The displays illustrate the view expressed verbally, and the image of Africa has been replaced by the image of its protests against alienation. But these protests are not directed against the foreign colonizers; they are ambiguously presented as self-criticism. The combination of words and images turns the tables on the critical project: Africa is ridiculous and it

says so itself. Colonialism is blamed only for not upholding its lasting benefits (fig. 12).

In demonstrating the devastating effect of framing the museum of the past, the representation of religion deserves special attention. The relation here between verbal and visual messages becomes one of blatant contradiction. The verbal text states that Islam was far more successful in its attempt to impose itself on Africans than was Christianity because the latter, being

far less unified and much more in conflict with traditional African values, had a largely disruptive influence, socially and politically. The African countered by making of these new religions something of his own, and this genius for selective adaptation is now bringing forth distinctive, new and vital beliefs in Africa.

Again, the text is critical of colonialism, denouncing Christianity's destructive influence and projecting a positive image of Africans. Visually, however, these words are contradicted: with, oddly enough, a rosary as the token item referring to Islam, almost all of this exhibit is Christian (fig. 13). The display is unified by a statue of the Virgin Mary in the center, accompanied by a wise man holding a ritual bowl that is topped by an African symbol of a bird. The secondary figure stands slightly behind the Virgin and is placed so as to suggest a submissive offering. The combination's message is clearly the submission to Christianity rather than the genius of appropriation. The madonna is central and the ensemble is the largest display in this window. Moreover, it is the only one that is immediately recognizable. The message is, no doubt, Christian domination.

The *sequence* of the displays is as important for their semiotic effect as is their individual content and the *tension* between words and images it demonstrates. In the most negative reading, the visitor is set up to identify

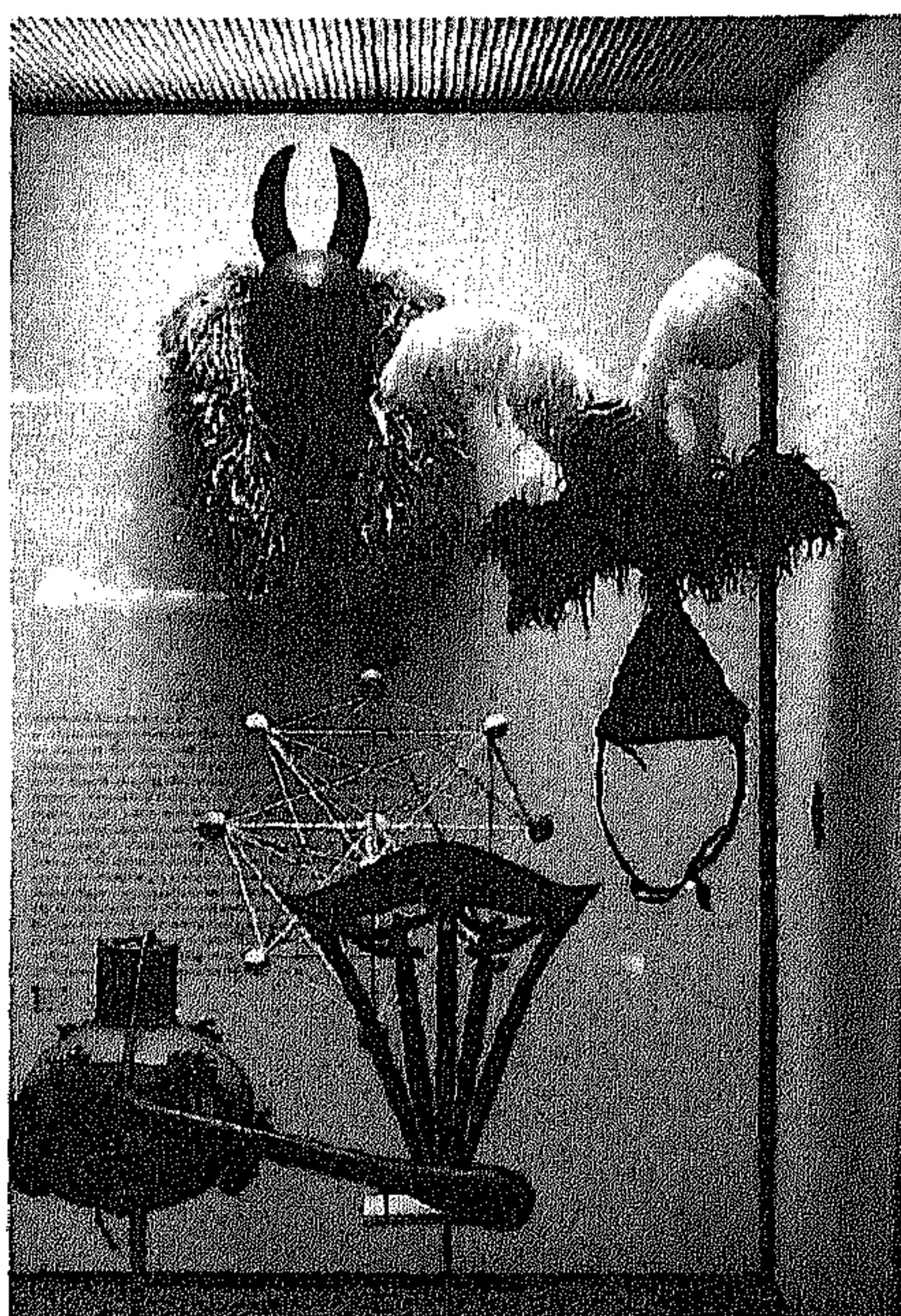


FIG. 10.—The Society. Display case at the right of the entrance to the Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

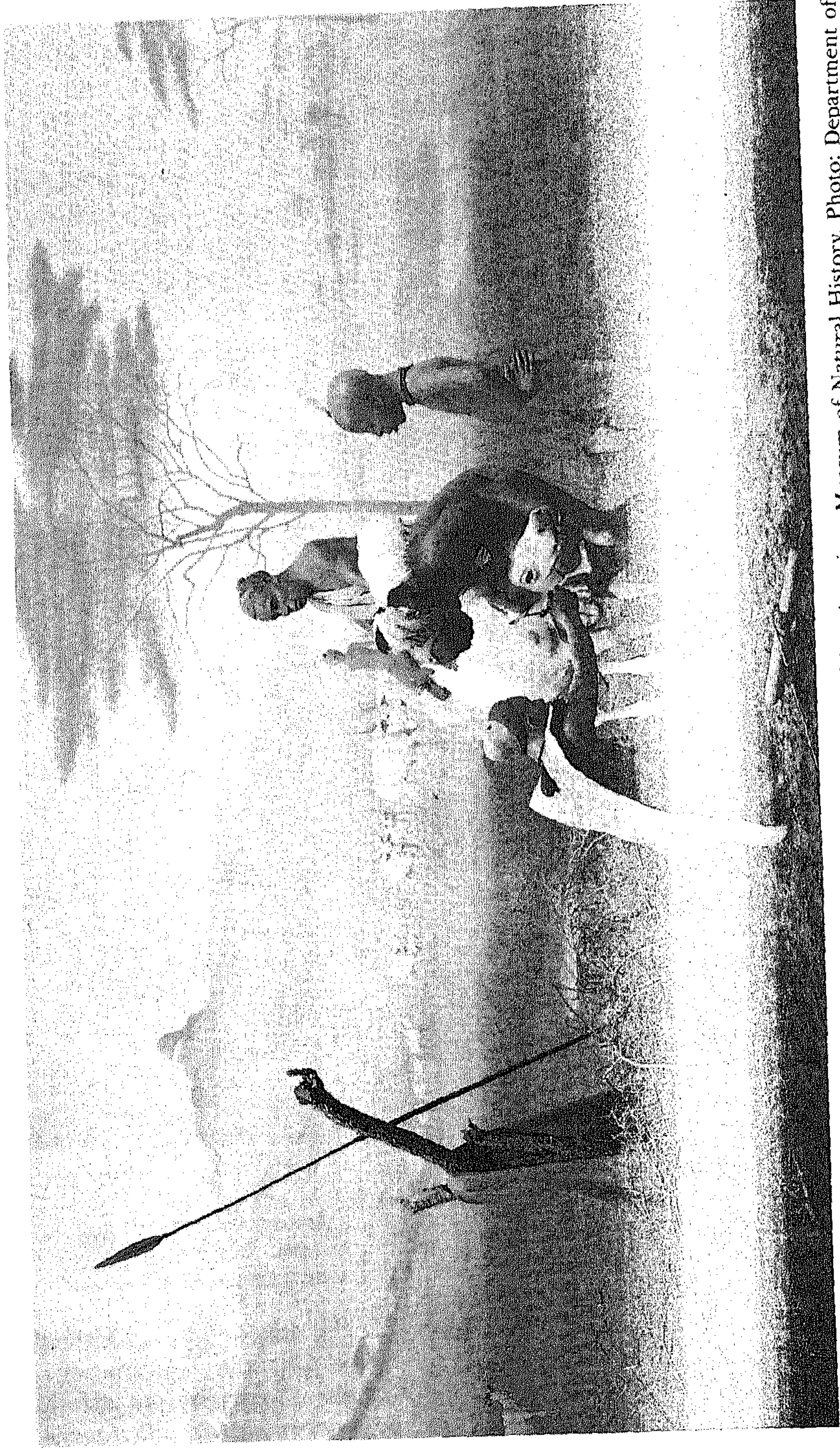


FIG. 11.—Plains Group. Farmers of the Grasslands. Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Department of Library Services (Neg. no. 333562, fr. 6b middle).

with the moral rightness and righteousness expressed in the outer framing panel, only to become caught in a narcissistic reflection on Africa as "we" have made it—on Western expansion more than on that which was sacrificed by it. This triple introduction frames the main part of the hall, where the various peoples are represented in the traditional manner of early anthropology. The combination of authentic artifacts presented as realistic details, and life-size puppets representing otherness in a frozen posture, obviously belongs to what the museum, in its metamuseal function, must preserve. The panels here, honestly and matter-of-factly, add no different dimension, no criticism, no self-awareness. The visitor's semiotic attitude thus remains in suspense. Reassured and self-centered by the opening, the viewer is prepared to take in visual and verbal information in wonder at otherness. The frame fails to provide the visitor with the lasting mirror needed in order to see the African peoples within history.

Unlike literature, visual representation allows the reader more freedom of entrance. In the museum this freedom is limited by the physical and material setup of the galleries. As I have argued, the freedom of choice at the entrance to the Hall of Asian Peoples was strongly limited, both by the layout of the hall and by the constant shifting from time to space. In the Hall of Man in Africa, however, there are two entrances; one can come in either by way of the Birds of the World (the south entrance) or from the Akeley Hall of African Mammals (the north entrance). The choice of the latter presents problems like those with the Asian halls. The negotiation of transition described in the case of the south entrance is confirmed by even a casual look at the north entrance to this hall. But while the south entrance's introductory panel thematizes the relation between the representation of the past and the understanding of the present, one is firmly positioned at the north entrance for a search for beginnings. From this side the hall bears the title "Man in Africa," proposing a universalism that cancels out the specificity of African peoples to which the hall is devoted. History is effaced in favor of prehistory, of the archaeology of human society of which "African Man" is the primary index. First we see a circular sign carrying the repeated words: "One is born, one dies, the land increases . . . Galla." Next there is a panel on the left called "Early Humans in Africa," and an exhibit on the right called "The Beginnings of Society." The display on the left shows a photograph of supposedly the earliest human footsteps, those indices par excellence of real human existence and location (fig. 14). The exhibit on the right shows the earliest economic activities of herding, cultivation, hunting and gathering, and toolmaking.

This approach is very different from the other one. It honors the continent as the cradle of humanity, indeed, of civilization—although it calls it "society"—and could thus work to provide a history for peoples that traditional anthropology has so firmly classified as ahistorical. But in a different way from the first entrance, this approach can also deprive African peoples of their specificity. Whereas at the other side the influence of "us"

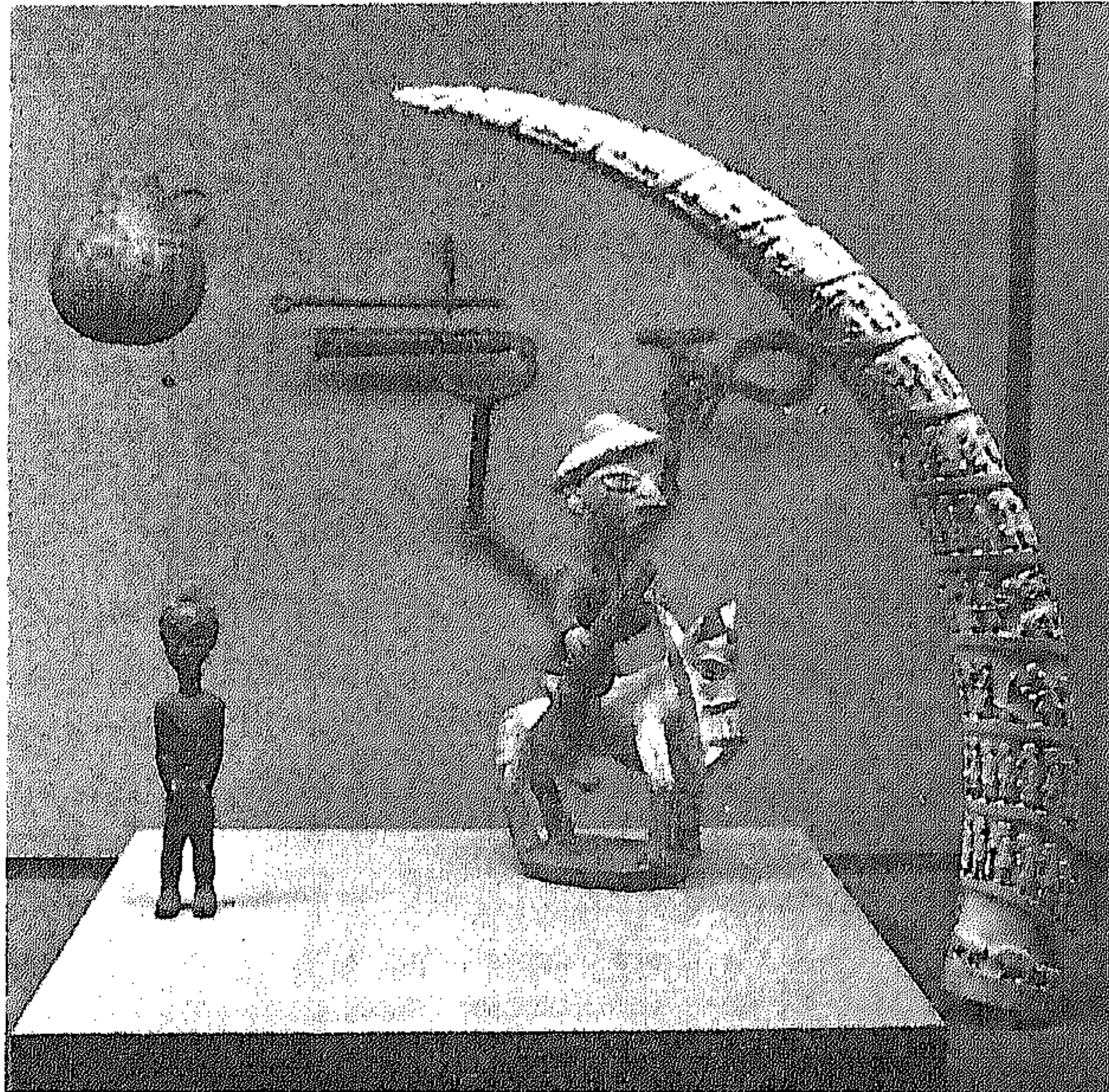


FIG. 12.—Political Influences display, Foreign Influences section. Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Department of Library Services (Neg. no. 63549, fr. 36).

on “them” framed the information on Africa, here “African Man” becomes man in general. The representation is about the origin of the human species, the earliest forms of social life, and therefore about the very definition of what it means to be human. If the oldest traces of human life have indeed been found in Africa, such knowledge can be framed in various representational projects. It might be used to provide Africa with a history—the longest history of all the continents, in fact, a forerunner to the same extent as the Greeks. Thus it might be used to challenge the standard conception of history as bound up with writing, the state, and the military. But such is not the semiosis activated here. Instead the very longevity of African societies is used to blur their historical position. “The Beginnings of Society” speaks of a universal humanity whose primitive stage is associated with Africa. Rather, the scientific fact of Africa’s long history is put to use for the signification of a primitivism that stands outside of history, and of which the displays inside present the frozen images.

Again, the frame is more elaborate than that. Approaching the main body of the hall from the north, the visitor goes through a narrow doorway into “Africa” proper, with Ethiopia singled out before the continent is divided into landforms: river valley, grasslands, desert, forest. The reason Ethiopia occupies this exceptional position is readable in the exhibits. It might be because it is in Ethiopia that the oldest signs of human life have



FIG. 13.—Religious Influences display, Foreign Influences section. Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

been found. But there is another reason, at least on the connotative level. The first two exhibits are devoted to “Christianity” (on the right) and “Warfare” (on the left). “Christianity” begins with the fourth century B.C.E. and the Solomonic dynasty of the third century B.C.E., with claims to Solomon and Sheba. The word “Christianity” in the display’s title centers the entire presentation, so as to make us view the oldest exhibit as a prehistory of later Christianity.²⁸ The notion of Jewish culture does not appear although Solomon is hardly a Christian character. The major exhibits in this window are a visual narration of the story of Solomon and Sheba painted on canvas, and a written one with a small illustration (fig. 15).

28. This construction of chronology as an ideological tool is a well-known problem in scholarship. I have discussed it at some length in *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, 1988). David Carrier reminds us of the double structure of chronology in E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, N. J., 1960). Carrier distinguishes between an annal (a simple listing of events in order of their occurrence) and a narrative. I find Carrier’s analysis naive in that it assumes that a list like Gombrich’s—Egyptian prenatalism, Greek naturalism, Byzantine antinaturalism, the Renaissance revival of naturalism, the development of naturalism, the end of naturalism in the nineteenth century—is a “simple listing of events” and not a (focalized) narrative. See David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst, Mass., 1987), pp. 16–17. Gombrich’s insistence on naturalism as the ordering principle for the history of art is as offensive as the American Museum’s insistence on Christianity as the “beginning” of the Hall of African Peoples. The most incisive critique of Gombrich’s naturalism to date is Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, Conn., 1983).

EARLY HUMANS IN AFRICA

Almost 4 million years ago, one of our earliest ancestors left a trail of footsteps in soft ground which soon hardened into an impression in stone. These ancient footprints, found at Laetoli, in Tanzania, remind us that our earliest ancestors evolved in Africa. Numerous skeletal remains from all periods trace human evolution in Africa from these early times to modern humans.



FIG. 14.—Introductory panel on the left side of the entrance to the Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

Whichever entrance one chooses, then, the Hall of African Peoples can be approached only through Christianity. This could be imagined to be a proper way of introducing Africa's history, but it is precisely *not* an appropriate introduction to "Africa" as the self-identical frozen continent—as traditional ethnography would have it—that the hall makes it out to be. The entrances by way of Christianity function as rites of passage: through a reversal of priorities and the suspension of logic (the conflicting messages), the visitor is set up to view the African peoples through the lens of Western Christianity. The various, impressively detailed exhibits presenting Africa in all its variety and internal difference are thus neutralized and naturalized by the a priori identification of the visitor as belonging to the culture that produced this museum. Clothed in their Christian identities, visitors face an Africa that is already a fiction: a story focalized in a particular way, where bias skews knowledge and metaphoric translation neutralizes foreignness. The visitor faces an Africa that is a Western vision.

The primary goal of such exhibits remains to provide information, allegedly to promote the understanding of the diversity of today's world. The effect of this information is, of course, contingent on the visitor's intellectual and ideological attitudes, and thereby cannot be entirely predicted. The children who pour into the museum in such great numbers

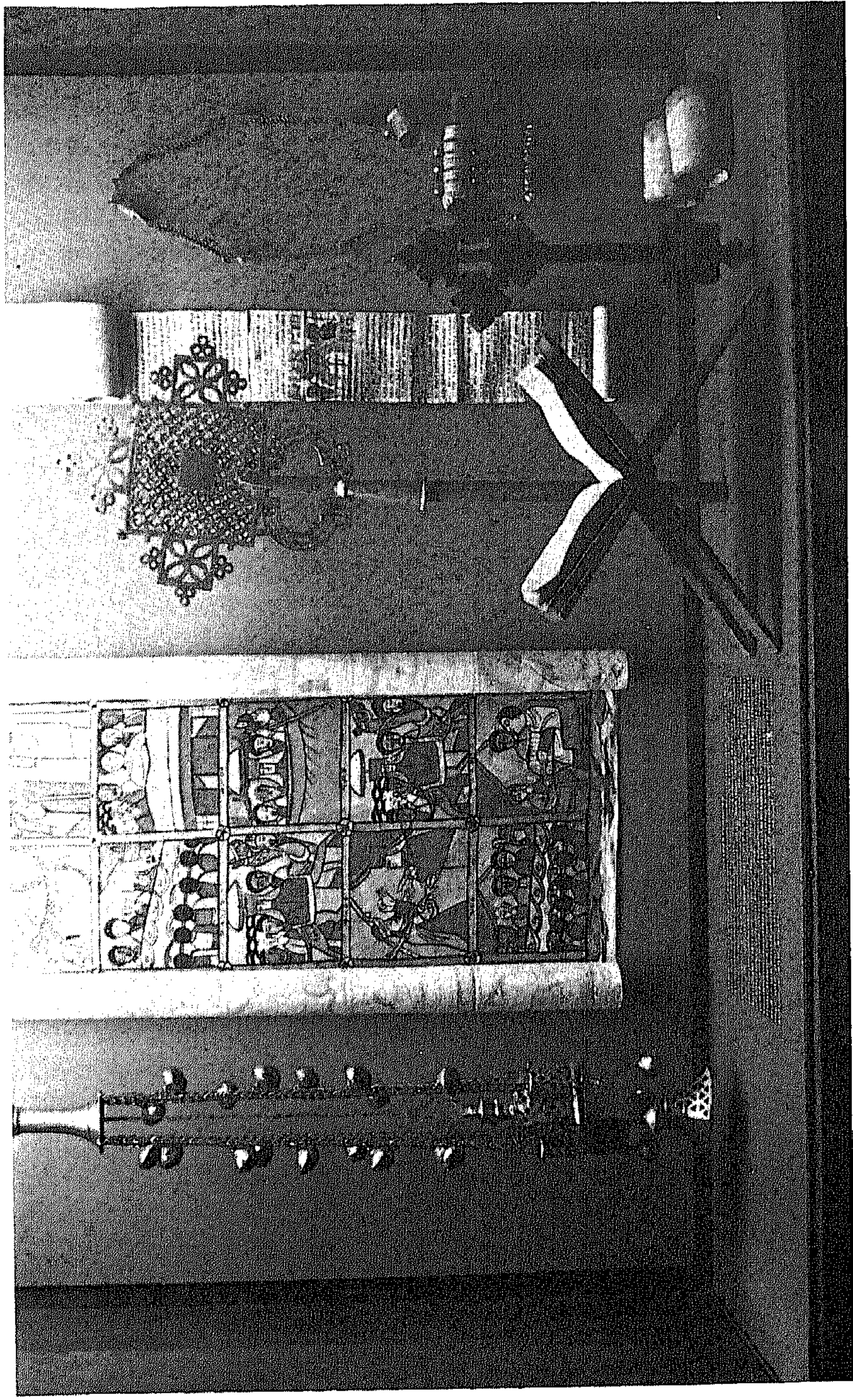


FIG. 15.—Christianity. Display case in the Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Department of Library Services (Neg. no. 63552, fr. 15a).

are not the Rousseauistic innocent beings romanticism made them; they come with their own backgrounds, and their visit is part of their school experience. Their visit is a field trip, thus entangling these young students within the contradictions of anthropology. Also, by definition the display of alterity is both educational and disturbingly voyeuristic: an awareness of difference may enhance respect as well as increase the fear that produces prejudice. My point is that because of the conflicting information and the priorities it proposes, no critical reflection on these issues is encouraged. The overall concept of these anthropological halls freezes cultures in static representations based on the notion of typicality; to represent human bodies as samples of ethnic unity; and to show cultures outside of history.

In Western cultural history, images have been assigned the function of showing and words have been given the task of telling, and these two strategies of representation are in competition even within each medium.²⁹ Plato and Aristotle, exceptionally figured as individual heroes of "Man's Rise to Civilization" for their appeal to experience rather than myth in seeking to understand the nature of the world, long ago set the tone for the discussion of the semiotic merits of telling versus showing in literature. A parallel discussion on the representational capacities of visual art insistently sheds doubt on the ontological possibility of visual telling.³⁰ The Hall of African Peoples provides a glimpse into the ideological motivations for such a hierarchization of the arts and its intimate connection to the scientific appeal to "their own" experience. To deny the image's capacity to tell stories is one way of claiming narrative innocence for visual display—an innocence that is as untenable as it is necessary. The repressed story is the story of the representational practice exercised in this museum, the story of the changing but still vital complicity between domination and knowledge, possession and display, stereotyping and realism, and between exhibition and the repression of history.

Representing the peoples of Africa as visually graspable actively deprives them of their history in a manner complicit with the colonial imposition of "foreign influences." The representation outside of history goes hand in hand with the representation of typicality. And typicality ignores the very individuality that is the basis of the concept of high art on which the Met is grounded. There, artifacts have a name attached to them, and a date, but no context. Here, in the very attempt to *show* foreign cultures, the displays do tell a story. But it is not the story of the peoples represented, nor of nature, but of knowledge, power, and coloni-

29. See my *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, 1991), esp. the introduction.

30. For an incisive critique of major attempts to theorize essential differences between the visual and the verbal, see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986).

zation. If only that act of storytelling were foregrounded more, the museum would satisfy the expectations of a postmodern critique. It is ironic that natural history excludes history, and thereby excludes nature itself.

The story the exhibits tell is that of their own construction. The technical perfection of the realist aesthetics constantly foregrounds its own status as a backdrop for the artifacts whose cultural sophistication keeps suggesting they should be on the other side of Central Park. The artifacts are confined to speak the truth of the scientific subordination of individuality, history, and artistic function to the writing of natural history.

6. *The Official Guide*

The predicament of the American Museum is most obvious in its "official" self-reflective product, the condensation of its efforts at self-representation: the *Official Guide*, which, without the excuse of the children toward whose immediate education the halls can claim to work, tells its own story. The recent date of publication of the *Official Guide* makes the reader expect that at least some of the problems connected to institutions such as the American Museum should be addressed. For example, it is quite normal today, and even bon ton, to present a critical view of the invasion of European conquistadores into the native American world. Even primary and secondary school textbooks have endorsed this "politically correct" habit today. The 1990 edition of the *Guide* would have been in a good position to correct the museum in this. The museum floor plan consistently names the halls devoted to human cultures after the "peoples," except for one, which symptomatically signifies the uneasiness of such categories: the Hall of Eastern Woodland Indians and the Hall of Plains Indians. Why not call this room the Hall of North American Peoples and eventually add to the collection a number of realistic representations of the settlers as another other? The *Guide* makes it worse: the relevant chapter bears the odd title "Indians of North America and the Eskimo," lumping together in plural and singular generic forms the native peoples of the continent as one category of otherness.

The text of this chapter carries the marks of the conflict and bad faith toward the past that characterizes postcolonial American society and that is displayed in the conflicting environment around Central Park. The obvious notion of colonization is inevitably present in postcoloniality, but its presence is carefully managed. The first sentence of the chapter uses it, but it seems strangely out of place: "Although *Homo sapiens* appeared in Eurasia about 30,000 years ago, the species did not *colonize* North America until some 10,000 years later" (*OG*, p. 38; emphasis added). The effect here is twofold. It generalizes the concept of colonization so widely that it

loses its specific historical sense of guilt and destruction. Alternatively, it blames the native American peoples for colonizing the continent so that the later colonization will seem no worse than this “original sin.” In addition, this short first paragraph ends by noting the “discovery” of the New World, carefully using this innocent word that associates the disaster of colonization and destruction with knowledge and progress—the very kind of knowledge on which the American Museum prides itself.

The chapter continues to use neutral, innocent words and phrases that add to the effect of reassuring self-justification. The European invasion is referred to as an “encounter” (*OG*, p. 40). Syntax conveys meaning, and this inevitable semantic surplus is well exploited when the following sentence, for example, defensively presents the negative part in a concessive subordinate clause with the positive view in the main clause:

Although European contact ultimately led to disease, decimation, and the partial destruction of native American societies, it was a European introduction, the horse, that brought the Plains way of life to a peak in the middle of the nineteenth century. [OG, p. 40; emphasis added]

Elsewhere, the negative developments are presented as natural processes, such as the near extinction of the buffalo: “Their basic resource, the buffalo, and with it their way of life, almost totally vanished from the prairies in the 1880s” (*OG*, p. 41). Thus the virtual disappearance of these peoples seems to be the consequence of a natural process of decadence.

The emphasis in the *Guide* on evolutionism makes the juxtaposition of animals and foreign peoples even more remarkable. It is as if a natural evolution inexorably brought forth the present-day culture of New York City. The title of this booklet, *Official Guide*, whose remarkable pomposity is highlighted by its small format, may be read as self-defeating: aiming to present the museum’s grandiosity, it guides the reader around the efforts at self-criticism in the current displays in spite of their contradictions and conflicts.

7. Conclusion

This critique of some painful conflicts in the American Museum of Natural History demonstrates an inherent tension in such educational institutions. I have foregrounded certain problems, leaving it to standard presentations such as the *Official Guide* to propose a more positive view. The two forms of truth-speak—realism and scientific discourse, that is, displays in natural settings and diagrams—each deploy a different dynamic between visual and verbal signs. They seem divergent in their manners while convergent in their results. This convergence suggests that

visual realism, where the hand of the maker obscures itself and the words informing the visual image make themselves invisible, is as strongly discursive as the scientific diagrams, figures, and explanations, where discursivity is foregrounded.

The museum's staff has clearly put considerable effort into adding a critical edge to its old treasures. They attempt to alert the visitor to ideological problems in three different ways. First, they explicitly and repeatedly compare the cultures on display with Western culture, although the absence of "our" culture *in* the displays remains an oddity. One example of this effort is the presentation of African masks. The display bears the title "Masks and Social Control," and the verbal panel accompanying it explains their function. The person wearing the mask does not speak as an individual but in the name of society. The panel compares the masks with the wigs and robes that judges in the West wear to indicate that they speak as their society. That the visual display remains a collection of exotic items instead of incorporating a judge's wig makes this panel less effective than it could have been, but what makes this case noteworthy is the fact that the text does show the critical intent in its very offering of understanding.

Another well-represented strategy for critical presentation is the insistence on continuity of tradition. This is particularly emphatic in a minor, third entrance to the Hall of Man in Africa, coming from the Center Gallery, which is devoted to African tradition in African-American culture. Slaves preserved the African traditions by way of selective adaptation. Here the critical project is endangered by the excessive visual display of racist images whose cognitive goal is to show how "bad" slavery was, but whose proliferation can be argued to allow some measure of revelling.³¹ But the notion that African-American culture is as African as it is American is an important one that still needs to be driven home to the American public, and thus this entrance display is true to the intention expressed on the outer frame panel at the entrance from the Birds exhibit discussed at the beginning of section 5. It is a pity but, I fear, not a coincidence that the most successfully critical entrance is also the least used one, while the most problematic entrance is the most obvious one to use.

The third strategy is explicit self-reflection. Many possibly useful devices have remained unused. Nowhere are the panels and the exhibits ironic—ironic toward the museum and its own background, that is. An astute use of mirrors might have helped to encourage a reversal of the visitor's trajectory through the Hall of Asian Peoples and might have inserted the viewer at crucial moments in the foreign world represented. The representation of colonial violence at key moments such as the entrance to the Hall of Man in Africa is, I think, indispensable. Visual and

31. In agreement with many other critiques of this use of illustrative material, I have conducted an extensive critique of my own in "The Politics of Citation." See also Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Wit over Zwart* (Amsterdam, 1990).



FIG. 16.—*Working on the Pygmy Group*—George Peterson. Hall of Man in Africa. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Department of Library Services (Neg. no. 61465, fr. 7).

verbal detypifying measures could have helped us get away from holistic representation, from the synecdochic trope that underlies these halls.³²

Some displays are more successful than those discussed above in suggesting a different approach to the metamuseum, that is, one that integrates the conveyance of knowledge of the object with an understanding of the construction of it by subjects. There are, indeed, displays where the verbal panels do not contradict the visual exhibits. There are also exhibits that are so strong in their visual persuasiveness that no panel can counter their rhetoric. And there are displays where the exhibits do benefit from the critical edge brought in by the verbal accompaniments.

One example of the last case may serve as a starting point for integrating nonconflicting representations with the kind of self-critique that the museum should develop. At the same time, this final example constitutes

32. See Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Postmodern Arts of Memory."



FIG. 17.—Young New Yorker at the Indian Rhinoceros exhibit. American Museum of Natural History. Photo: Mieke Bal.

an instance of the third strategy that draws attention to ideological problems that the museum uses: the emphasis on issues that are burning problems in the West, so as to avoid the exoticist setting-off of the other as absolutely different. I offer this example because in its ambivalence it contains both the liabilities and the assets of a museum such as the American Museum.

Somewhere in the middle of the Hall of Man in Africa there is a small display related to Pokot women and how their lives change when they marry outside their local groups. The accompanying text reads as follows:

Competition takes a new form. Women who formerly were rivals begin to find a new unity and gossip incessantly about their husbands. This is not done out of spite but because gossip, and the men's fear of ridicule, is the woman's major means of protection against abuse. When women work at their chores in company, or drink beer together, they also formulate a body of opinion that by its very unity influences the behavior of men. Women have no formal authority in Pokot life but can exercise considerable power.

This text, like the others, leaves a lot unstated. The implications include that the division of labor in Pokot society is gender based; that women have the opportunity, the means, and the desire to spend time together; that they discuss matters concerning their lives during those periods. All this is obvious enough. What is not obvious is the text's conclusion that the shape of social life produces a discourse that is unified enough to make an impact: it influences the men. Here lies the power of women even if they don't have it any other way.

But just like the other texts this one has a metadiscursive implication. It also says that discourse produces social reality. This particular discourse derives its shaping effect from its unity, but that is not a feature of Pokot women's discourse in particular. Any discourse that is socially unified will be stronger in its reality-shaping effect than one that is not, a fact that holds for the particularly powerful educational discourse of the museum as well. If the visual and verbal interaction between exhibits and panels corroborates the repression of the conflicts in the museum's endeavor, then it will convey a sense of unity that contributes to the shaping of social reality. That is in fact the stated ambition of such educational institutions.

The fractures within this mixed discourse of images, words, and spatial distribution that I have attempted to show are representative of similar fractures within the social reality of New York City itself, the center of a world still struggling to cope with its colonialist legacy. But similarity is tricky. It may naturalize what should in fact be enhanced as historically specific and therefore changeable. The peoples inhabiting New York City, for example, are members of a world that cannot too easily endorse the *post-* of postcoloniality. As such, the conflicts in the museum point at the problems and breaks in the unity of an overall discourse of domination. But, as I have also tried to demonstrate, one particular element, the convergence toward an already very powerful tendency, prevails: the tendency to believe in the truth of the knowledge represented through fiction. "Showing" natural history employs a rhetoric of persuasion that almost inevitably convinces the visitor of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, largely Christian culture that is supposedly at the top of the evolutionary ladder, but is absent from the museum's displays. Showing, if it refrains from telling its own story, is showing off.

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