CIVILISATIONS

FIRST CONTACT

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CULT OF PROGRESS

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CONTENTS

Preface | 11

FIRST CONTACT

Victorian Disbelief | 19
A Mariner Nation | 35
Invaders and Looting | 51
Justifying Conquest | 73
Keeping an Eye on Culture | 77
Embracing the New | 99
Acts of Empire | 123

CULT OF PROGRESS

The Lure of the Pharaohs | 149
Revolution in the Midlands | 167
The City and the Slum | 177
The American Wilderness | 187
The Course of Empire | 195
The Theft of Identity | 203
Portraits for Posterity | 211
The Advent of the Camera | 219
An Artistic Response to Progress | 229
An Exotic Escape | 237
Transformations | 253
The Plunge of Europe | 259

Afterword | 271
Notes | 277 Timeline | 286
Acknowledgments | 288
List of illustrations | 289
Index | 295

PREFACE

With the fall of Rome in the fifth century, Europe entered a new age of relative isolation. The mobility that had been a feature of Rome's vast and intercontinental empire fell away, and grasses grew between the stones of the roads that her legions had cut across Europe. Then, in the seventh century, the rise of Islam created a south-eastern border to Christendom. Later, as the Arab tribes crept along north Africa, conquering Egypt and then the Berber kingdoms to the west, they furthered the encirclement of northern Europe. The conquest of Morocco by the Safavid empire created the bridgehead for the later invasion of the Iberian peninsula in the early eighth century, and the formation of the Islamic kingdom of Al-Andalus.

The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, seven centuries later – a catastrophic blow to the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity – presaged the advance of Islam into the Balkans, on Europe's south-eastern flanks. It was around that moment, in the middle of the fifteenth century, that Christian Europe began to

break out of her near-millennium of isolation. A series of advances in maritime and navigational technology, fused with the residual spirit of the Crusades and a hunger for wealth and trade, inspired European explorers to break out of the confines of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. The fall of Constantinople re-ignited hostility between the Islamic and Christian worlds, but, rather than reinforce a sense of encirclement, it added further impetus to the European desire to seek sea routes to new markets and new peoples, who might be persuaded to become partners in profitable trade. Some, perhaps, might even enlist as allies in the struggles between Christendom and Dar al-Islam.

We often think about what became known as the 'Age of Discovery' solely from the European perspective. This, in one sense, is understandable. It was Europeans who took to ships and set sail across the globe, and often Europeans who left us the most comprehensive accounts. Yet the real civilisational story of the period between the late fifteenth century and the early years of the eighteenth is one of contact and interaction. It was an era in which civilisations from across the world encountered each other for the first time. When Europeans landed in the New World, societies that had not even been aware of one another's existence found themselves in sudden contact: contact which, in the case of the Mexican and Inca empires, proved nearly fatal. Yet, while the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

were unquestionably an era of conflict and plunder, and in southern and central America an age of calamity, in most cases and in most places Europeans were not in a position to conquer or colonise, no matter how much they might have wished to do so. The catastrophic conquests that took place in the Americas were the exception rather than the rule. The kingdoms and empires of Africa and Asia did not suffer the same fates as those which befell the peoples of Mexico.

The Age of Discovery was, above all else, an age of trade and broadened horizons. Part of what made those centuries so profoundly different from the era that had preceded them was the availability of new products and a deep and growing fascination in Europe with newly encountered cultures and societies from beyond its shores. The cultural exchanges that had taken place after 1300, when the spices of Asia had begun to flow into the Mediterranean, carried across Asia on the legendary spice road and on the ships of Italian merchants that plied the Mediterranean, had already sparked a profound change in European tastes. In the Age of Discovery new luxuries, even more exotic and desirable, arrived from lands even stranger and more distant, and became increasingly available to ever greater numbers of people.

The art of this age records how these new luxuries seeped into the lives of the wealthy and the aspirational, and how discoveries of new lands and contact with previously

unknown people fired their imaginations. These products, and the new wealth generated by their trade, added to the vibrancy and the variety of everyday life. They became the symbols of modernity, and eventually, as is often the case with new commodities, they went from being exquisite luxuries to being regarded as staples of middle-class life.

Within the art of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a visual record of the excitement and dynamism of what we might regard as the first 'age of globalisation'. Art frequently hints at how civilisations viewed one another and changed one another. Yet the imprint of globalism is often overlooked or rendered invisible. For when we imagine the art of the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century, or the masterpieces of Japanese art created during her long age of isolation from the 1640s until the 1850s, we naturally presume that such works are definitively Dutch or quintessentially Japanese. That, as well as being beautiful, what they primarily convey to the observer is the inner essence of those societies at that particular moment in time.

It's the same when we think of the art of India during the last years of the Mughal empire, before British 'company rule' spread beyond her trading factories on the east coast, and perhaps most of all when we think of the art of Africa, which we so often consider as being 'authentically' African: a distillation into form of the energy and inner spirit of the people of Africa. While much African art is, of course,

fundamentally an expression of the African societies that produced it, within the so-called Benin Bronzes and other works also lies the evidence of Africa's outward gaze and her centuries of contact and trade with the outside world. Something similar is true elsewhere, because, hidden within the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age, or the Japanese prints from the age of the Tokugawa emperors, or the so-called 'company paintings' of late Mughal India are strands of artistic and cultural DNA drawn from other cultures which we shall explore in Part One: First Contact.

During the latter decades of the eighteenth century this era of first contacts and artistic borrowings began to give way to a new age of empire. Fired by a new self-confidence born of the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Europeans came to regard their civilisation as exceptional. As a result of the Industrial Revolution a huge gulf opened up between European technologies and those available to Asians, Africans and others. The nineteenth century, the era of the European empires, thus became the age shaped by a cult of progress, one in which artists struggled to make sense of vast and transformative changes – the rise of the factory, rapid urbanisation and the subjugation of other peoples. We look more closely at artistic innovations and individual artist's responses to post-industrial modernisation in Part Two: The Cult of Progress.

1

FIRST CONTACT

VICTORIAN DISBELIEF

In September 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, hundreds of carved ivory statues and brass plaques were put on display at the British Museum. Alongside the statues and plaques were ceremonial heads and animal figures, all intricately cast in a copper-rich brass alloy. Together they were exhibited in a room normally reserved for public lectures. Although makeshift and temporary, the exhibition was hugely popular, in large part because it allowed the Victorian public an opportunity to encounter the greatest treasures of an ancient and once mighty civilisation that had recently been the focus of a huge amount of press attention. The faces depicted in the plaques and sculptures were those of its kings and queens, and around them were arrayed images of soldiers, traders and hunters, along with the symbols of a complex pagan faith.

1. One of the thousands of brass plaques looted from the royal palace of Benin in 1897. This plaque, now in the British Museum, shows the Oba (king) with four of his attendants.

To educated Europeans of the late nineteenth century, steeped in classical learning, antique sculptures and reliefs such as these, the artistic fruits of a highly sophisticated casting technique, were hallmarks of a true civilisation. However, what instantly troubled the public who came to view these treasures, and the reporters who were dispatched to the British Museum from both national and local newspapers, was that these stupendous works of art had been generated by an African civilisation, and in the late nineteenth century almost everyone in Europe believed that Africans lacked both the cultural sophistication to appreciate great art and the technical skills required to create it.

The Benin Bronzes, as they became known – despite being made from brass – arrived in London as the booty of war. Eight months earlier, a British military force, 1,200-strong, had invaded the ancient west African kingdom of Benin, home of the Edo people, and besieged then sacked their capital, Benin City. Ostensibly, the invasion had been launched to avenge the lives of British soldiers and officials who had been killed during an ambush of an earlier expedition. In reality this was merely the pretext. Underlying the decision to attack Benin were British ambitions to control the trade in palm oil and other commodities as London extended control over what was then the British Niger Coast Protectorate, part of modern-day Nigeria.

2. Oba Ovonramwen in chains on the deck of the British ship HMS Ivy. *He was never to return to his kingdom, dying in exile in 1914.*

After the fall of Benin City, the expeditionary force – which was largely made up of troops from the Royal Marines – looted the royal palace. Later, the palace, other public buildings and a great many private homes were destroyed by a fire that may or may not have been started accidentally. Also lost to the flames were sections of Benin City's once imposing defensive walls. Oba Ovonramwen, the king of Benin, whose predecessors are the central subjects of the Benin Bronzes, was deposed and arrested.

Photographed on the deck of a British warship, the Oba casts a steadfast gaze, his look of steely defiance sadly undermined by the chains and manacles that can be seen coiled around royal ankles. Oba Ovonramwen was held responsible for the deaths of the Britons killed in the earlier expedition and put on trial by the British colonial authorities. Although he was (rather inconveniently) found innocent, Ovonramwen was nonetheless sent into exile, like so many

African leaders who confronted European powers during the so-called 'Scramble for Africa'. Indeed, the deposing of Ovonramwen and the British raid on the kingdom of Benin were unexceptional events in the late nineteenth century. Numerous African city states whose leaders had rejected the overtures of encroaching European powers had also been subjected to similar attacks: 'punitive expeditions', in the terminology of the time. What was exceptional about the 1897 Benin expedition was not the level of violence used against the Edo people, or the wholesale destruction of their ancient capital, but the fact that quite by accident the expedition delivered some of west Africa's greatest cultural treasures into the hands of Europeans. This had never been an objective of the expedition, and yet it is the reason the Benin expedition, of all Britain's 'small wars' from the age of empire, is still remembered today.

The looting that followed was not wild or inchoate but systematic and deliberate. Over a number of days the treasures of the royal palace were removed. Ceremonial heads were taken from around thirty royal shrines, dedicated to Obas of the past, and thousands of brass plaques were ripped from the walls and roofs. In all there were around 4,000 'bronzes', as well as hundreds of ivory tusks and carvings, many of which was piled up in the courtyards of the now ruined royal palace. There, photographs were taken of British officers posing among the loot, which they

dismissed in their correspondence as 'Benin curios'.[1] Amid the booty, with crossed arms and fixed expressions, their gaze is every bit as defiant as that of Oba Ovonramwen.

The plaques, statues and ivories were then packed up and transported to the coast on the heads of the thousands of indigenous carriers hired by the British. At the port, the fruits of several centuries of cultural output by the craftsmen of the Edo people were loaded into holds and shipped to Britain. To defray the costs of the raid, the bronzes were to

3. Troops from the British Punitive Expedition posing in the grounds of the Oba's palace amidst the loot; piles of ivory, brass plaques and cast brass figures can be seen.

be auctioned off in London, sold to collectors and museums across Europe. It was in advance of this colonial fire sale that the temporary makeshift exhibition at the British Museum was organised. The objects presented to the public that autumn were thus not the property of the British Museum but merely on loan to the institution from the Admiralty, who had taken possession of the artefacts on their arrival. Other bronzes and ivories personally looted by the British officers who had taken part in the punitive expedition were

4. Today the vast majority of the art treasures of Benin are held by museums in Britain, Germany and the United States. The collection at London's British Museum is the largest in the world.

regarded as their share of the spoils and excluded from the auction.

When the exhibition at the British Museum opened, it was an immediate sensation. Memories of the first expedition against Benin earlier in the year were still fresh in the public mind. Then the newspapers had exhaustively reported on the supposed 'savagery' and 'barbarism' of the Edo people. The *Illustrated London News* had published a special supplement, and one writer had dubbed Benin the 'city of blood'. Nine months later, the same publications were equally keen to report on the art captured during the successful British expedition. It was at this juncture, however, that both the popular press and the more learned journals encountered a difficulty, as they struggled to reconcile the dazzling art on display with the image of Benin as the kingdom of 'horrors' and 'savagery' that they themselves had helped create. Charles Hercules Read, the curator who persuaded the Admiralty to loan the bronzes to the museum for the exhibition, spelt out the contradiction when he wrote:

> It need scarcely be said that at the first sight of these remarkable works of art we were at once astounded at such an unexpected find, and puzzled to account for so highly developed an art among a race so entirely barbarous.[2]

The German anthropologist Felix von Luschan, assistant to the director of the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, lavished similar praise upon the bronzes and effusively compared the metal-casters of Benin to one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance. Writing in 1901, he suggested that

> These works from Benin are equal to the very finest examples of European casting technique. Benvenuto Cellini could not have cast them better, nor anyone else before or after him, even up to the present day. Technically, these bronzes represent the very highest possible achievement.[3]

Yet in the late Victorian imagination the people of the so-called 'Dark Continent' were thought to be incapable of creating true works of art or of incubating that thing called 'civilisation'. According to the prevailing theories, Africa was one of those regions of the world unconnected to the 'golden thread' of western civilisation, which stretched, supposedly unbroken, from classical antiquity through the early Church, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, linking the cultures and societies of contemporary Europe to ancient Greece and Rome. Adrift, outside of that tradition, Africans were, in the minds of many, not only an uncivilised race but a people without a history. In Africa, it was said, time had passed, but, as progress had

not been made, there had been no true history to record. Yet in 1897 the thousands of plaques and statues gathered together in the centre of London were not only evidence of a sophisticated civilisation but were in themselves a form of historical record. The brass plaques from the palace walls had been cast in order to memorialise the reigns and great military victories of the past. They recorded the rituals that punctuated each year and the festivals in which the power and grandeur of the Obas was put on public and ceremonial display. The Obas were depicted at the physical centres of many plaques and were central to the concept of Edo cultural life. Larger than those around them, they were surrounded by their retinues, the symbols of their gods and the symbolism of their own god-like powers. Similar historical narratives had been carved in the ivory tusks that were also captured.

The art of Benin was so challenging, so sophisticated and complex that many people, in both academic circles and the popular press, were unable to accept that the treasures could have been produced by Africans. They confected theories to explain how it was that highly ornate, intricately cast brass plaques in high relief and perfectly proportioned sculptures of the human form could have been found in a forest empire of west Africa.[4] One suggestion was that the Portuguese, the first Europeans to have traded with the Edo people starting in the late fifteenth century, must have either taught local

craftsmen how to produce this art or had themselves cast the bronzes for the Obas of Benin. Another theory suggested that some unknown white civilisation could have produced the bronzes that had later been merely inherited by the people of Benin – this, despite the fact the faces depicted were clearly those of west Africans. Others suggested that this art form must have been transmitted to Benin from ancient Egypt.[5] A later theory had it that somewhere in west Africa or off her coast was the site of the lost Greek city of Atlantis, and that a band of wandering Greek artists had created the art. But there were experts, including Augustus Pitt Rivers, one of the fathers of archaeology, who rejected all such conjecture and snobbery, and concluded that the Benin bronzes were indigenous masterpieces of African origin. But that position was far from universal.

What was largely overlooked in the newspaper reports of 1897, although not in the scholarly debates, was that the people of late Victorian London and the men who had attacked and destroyed Benin City were not the first Europeans or even the first Britons to lay eyes on Benin's artistic treasures.

In the early decades of the European Age of Discovery, adventurers from Portugal and Tudor England had seen the same plaques, in situ, on the walls of the Oba's palace. The first of those English expeditions, led by the merchant Thomas Wyndham in 1553, had included among its crew

the young Martin Frobisher, who would later lead his fellow countrymen into battle against the Spanish Armada alongside Francis Drake. Wyndham and his crewmen had travelled inland and been highly impressed by the architecture of Benin City. They were further astonished to discover that the Oba 'could speake the Portugall tongue, which he had learned of a child'. Other accounts by European traders who visited Benin were similarly awed by this west African super-state – highly organised, centralised and militarised, a kingdom confident of its own power and determined to trade with Europeans as an equal partner. In 1668, a century after Wyndham's expedition, the Dutch writer Olfert Dapper penned a description of Benin City and the palace in his compendium travel narrative *Naukeurige beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Eylanden* (*Accurate Descriptions of the African Regions*):

> The king's palace or court is a square and is as large as the town of Haarlem and entirely surrounded by a special wall, like that which encircles the town. It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the Exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles.[6]