

TEACHING IN AFRICA WITH GAËL DE GUICHEN

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Abstract: because you have to have one.

History

Years ago, after many years lecturing at ICCROM, Gaël de Guichen asked me if I was interested in lecturing in Bamako, Mali, to conservators from many sub-Saharan museums, on topics related to the huge exhibition being organized, *Les vallées du Niger*. I jumped at the opportunity and we met at Fiumicino airport for the first leg of our trip to Bamako, via Algiers. At the check in, the queue was incredibly long: dozens of Algerians were boarding with an incredible amount of hand luggage, mostly large plastic bags, overflowing at all seams. Once embarked, I was near a very unusual fellow Algerian: thin face, slim arms, but a quite imposing body. Something was definitely amiss and after some minutes I started to chat, out of curiosity. So I learned that almost all passengers were shuttling between Algiers and Rome, actually Naples, to buy all types of jumpers, golf, trousers and so on. Of course, the more items brought back, the higher the profit. In addition to his plastic bags, my fellow passenger was ‘multilayered’, with some 12 (twelve) layers of shirts and trousers.

The flight was uneventful and Bamako was expecting us: the usual visa and luggage problems were easily overcome with the help of our local hosts. The next day all the conservators showed up in European dress: Gaël ‘kindly’ asked them all to come next day in local attire, by far more colourful. The lectures went on and I was in charge of theft prevention topics. A very attractive lady, in charge of a national museum, listened to my presentation with great attention and I felt obliged to ask for comments. She, very kindly, said that my suggestions were quite useful for the general people, but not for her museum. At my prompting, she explained:

I am a sensitive, and therefore I can detect something wrong at my museum, even at distance! Here is an example. Some weeks ago I was sleeping, but I woke up suddenly, feeling that something was very wrong at the museum, about one kilometre away. I woke my husband and told him to rush to the museum, where the protection was entrusted to military police. He took a pistol and rushed, only to find that all guards were asleep. I took at the phone and started phoning all numbers I had, related to the museum custody. Eventually, I woke at 3am the Minister of the Defence, and the next day all guards on duty were duly flogged publicly!

Next I showed a detailed sketch of the steel ring, that should be used to fasten a gate with a padlock, instead of a chain, that can be easily cut. The drawing was quite clear to me, but not to the participants. Acting on Gaël's advice, we went to the nearby valley of the blacksmiths, where hundreds of blacksmiths hammer all day long. Paying a small amount, I got on top of a huge hill of iron scraps and found a suitable piece. Then we went to a nearby blacksmith and we explained, step by step, how to make the hinged ring. A small boy pedalled furiously and the blower, fastened to the bike's wheel, reddened the metal. In half an hour the item was ready, exactly as I had it sketched. We went back to the lecture room and all the conservators understood perfectly my message. Many such hinged rings are now in use in Northern Africa museums.

One evening a lady teacher from Canada wanted to go to the *souk*, to buy some local artifacts; I gallantly escorted her. I am not really an able trader, but something touched my heart. We bought some 20 dollars-worth of local artifacts, after two hours of negotiation non-stop, with a number of glasses of *thcai* (tea) poured in. I was exhausted as well as the young lady, but the seller was so pleased with the way the trade went, that I still have a brass souvenir that he gave me, as token of appreciation for the enjoyable trading experience.

The session ended, and after some days we were due home. The plane to Algiers was quite late and we missed our connection to Rome. We stayed at a local hotel and visited the National Museum while waiting for a seat on the next plane. No way: all seats were booked solid for days to come. At the airport a young Italian couple were desperate: apparently they decided to take their honeymoon trip *before* marrying, and the marriage was already fixed for the next day in Italy! The only way out was via Paris, but the ticket must be paid in full and in advance: the young couple had no more cash. Gaël and I exchanged a glance, and he moved to a very restricted area, for men only. Here, money came out of a place where the sun never shines, and the couple were able to buy the ticket and take off to the church. (Later on, a full refund came, with profuse blessings).

Conclusion

Would I do all this again? With Gaël, of course!