

PRESENTS

A magical clockwork elephant? Emil Torday's Encounter with the people of the Kasai in 1909



Image: <https://www.greenstagegallery.co.uk/view/2004>

By

Dr. Rebekah Sheppard

Wednesday, January 20, 2021 | 1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Zoom Webinar

Abstract

This paper is an exploration of an expedition to the former Belgian Congo conducted by Emil Torday on behalf of the British Museum. The collections Torday made here constitute the first, and most extensive, collection of Central African artefacts in the UK (numbering over 3000). We are privileged to have access to a vast amount of supporting documentation, including fieldnotes, letters containing ethnographic insights, historical photographs and unpublished and published accounts. These allow us to explore the expedition contexts in greater detail, gaining a more in-depth insight into how objects functioned in a local context, as well as the context of encounter and early proto-anthropological fieldwork. This presentation will illuminate Emil Torday's encounter with the Lele people of the Kasai region of modern-day DRC and the former Belgian Congo, examining Torday's methods in field research. Torday's practices engaged his linguistic skills as well as his profound understanding of Central African metaphysical contexts that widely involved artefacts. Evidencing Torday's understanding was his use of a clockwork elephant from Hamley's Toy Shop in London, used to coerce local peoples into engaging with the expedition, and subsequently, for the first time, welcoming Europeans into the region. I will provide a deeper context for Torday's approaches, to examine whether, as Torday claimed, this artefact was received and accepted within a local ontological and material universe as an item capable of divinatory powers. Was the clockwork elephant rendered magical by Torday? Or was this merely trickery typical of manipulative European explorers?

About

Dr Sheppard conducted her doctoral research within the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in the Sainsbury Research Unit for World Art Studies within the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. She worked with African collections at the British Museum in London as well as various other museums in Europe, including the Royal Museum for Central African Arts in Belgium. Her doctoral research explored the Central African collections, historical photographs and expedition field notes relating to the little known Hungarian Explorer, Emil Torday. Dr Sheppard also carried out field research at the Pende festival of Dance and Masquerade in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her research primarily focuses on the interaction and encounters that took place during an early colonial setting between local people and European explorers, traders, photographers, artists and collectors. The broader objective is to reintegrate artefacts into historical discourses; as documents of local-interregional religious and socio-cultural practices and trade.

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This is part of the African Studies Brownbag Seminar Series