I have never been to Africa

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I have never been to Africa ...

... From 1976 to 1979 I studied Three Dimensional Design: Ceramics at Bristol Polytechnic (now the University of West of England) at the Bower Ashton campus. In 1977 my year group were on a study visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. It smelt like a charity shop.

My attention was taken by an object in a showcase on one of the mezzanine levels with the label turned away so I couldn’t read the legend. The object was palm size, gnarled and black, burnt or tarred, a shrivelled lump with carpentry nails pushed in and through and all bound with string. I took it to be at least sacrificial, to ward off spirits or hopefully to encourage some wild sexual ritual, and from what was then the Republic of Zaire (now DR Congo). I made countless drawings and took black and white photographs.

On my return I developed the remaining two years’ work at Bristol as responses to this object and it is arguable, using the ‘stuff happens’ theory that these creative decisions shaped a subsequent career in art life and higher education.

I went back to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 2002, 25 years later, as a lecturer with a student group so they could select an object for a critical analysis and subsequent presentation. Excitedly I went upstairs to see the piece. It smelt less like a charity shop.

On this occasion the label was turned towards me.

I read nervously ...

It was a lemon! ... Actually!

The story is that a grocer in Leamington had been having trouble with a competitor in the same street; he had to sell the business to him and so he left it on a shelf as a curse on his competitor’s future.

- Phil Sawdon