

Material Memory Season 3, Episode 2
There's Magic in Creating Something from Nothing

Transcript

[Music]

Narration: Hello and welcome to Material Memory. I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and I'll be your guide on this season's HBCU Library Alliance Tour. Today's stop on the tour is the Southern University at New Orleans, or SUNO, where I have the distinct pleasure of conversing with Professor Erika Witt. Specifically, we'll be spending time with Erika in SUNO's African Art Collection.

For many of us who are descendants of enslaved peoples, with the inability to trace our ancestry back 3-4 generations, archives, museums, and other collecting organizations become of paramount importance. In this episode we will be talking with Erika Witt about what those collections mean to her and the HBCU community, and how cultural connections have shaped her work as both a librarian and curator.

Erika Witt: My name is Erika Witt. I am currently employed by Southern University at New Orleans, one of the schools under the Southern system. I act in a few capacities here. At SUNO, I am interim circulation librarian for the [Leonard S. Washington Memorial Library](#). I am a caregiver or adjunct curator for the traditional African art collections on campus, and [an adjunct professor for principles of museology](#). I am also a full-time student at Louisiana State University for the doctor of design program in cultural preservation.

Narration: Erika's passion and love for the African Art collections at SUNO came out early in our conversation.

Sharon M. Burney: What are your favorite pieces in the collection?

Erika Witt: I love them all. I do have, I do have favorites.

So there is, for example, a honeypot from the [Mandinka people of Guinea](#) that still smells like honey. Let's see, there are two masks in particular that are my favorites. One is downstairs on display. It is the mask of [Ngaady aMwaash](#), who is something like the queen mother of the Kuba people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She is stunning. She has like these beautiful beads, beads and cowrie shells on her crown or for her hair. And then she has alternating patterns of black and white triangles and these wonderful black, white, and red stripes that are indicative of tears of motherhood and womanhood and things. She's beautiful.

And then there's another mask from the [Mende people of Sierra Leone](#). And I think there are a few in Liberia too, they're called [Sowe masks](#) and they are the only mask known throughout the entire continent of Africa that is solely masqueraded by women. They're stunning.

Narration: Erika wants other people to love them too and wants to illuminate the cultures they represent.

Erika Witt: I've always encountered the same situation of, "Oh, I never learned about that in school" or, "Oh, we didn't know anything about Africa. Only thing we know is that there, you know, the babies have bloated bellies and there's massive poverty and AIDS," and just all types of wild, just wild things from it. And, also, this lack of people wanting to respect ancestry in the sense of, "Oh, I don't want to hear about slavery. I'm tired of that being our origin" or, "I want to hear about something good. I don't want to feel sad." But this idea of wanting to know, or wanting to have some type of reclamation of, where they could be from and seeing Africa, and the various ethnic groups, and their spiritual systems in something else, especially here in New Orleans, because we have a lot of West African and central African traditions embedded here.

Narration: Erika strives to highlight those connections to the people visiting her collections.

Erika Witt: I try to find pieces here in the collection—which, I am in the collections space now—and I compare them with things that we see in day-to-day life. And it seems to work, and it brings me great joy when people finish visiting the collection, and they're just like, "I had no idea. This is great. I was never taught this. I want to bring this person and that person—I'm going to bring a school group. And I really feel connected with these pieces. And do you know if these pieces come from Western Africa? I heard that I had West African background."

We hold these things in perpetuity for, not only for our students but for the community at large. The purpose to me is to be able to, for example, show a drum from the [Kuba people](#) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to maybe a kid who's a drummer, here in New Orleans at one of the public schools, or for a woman who's maybe a hairstylist, show her the combs that we have from [the Yaka people](#) or from Ghana and have people really feel those types of connections. It's a really beautiful experience. Talking about it gives me goosebumps.

Narration: Erika understands what it is like to not see yourself represented in collections. Having an interest in Ancient Egypt since she was a child, she shares an experience visiting as a young adult while on a diplomatic fellowship, and what that meant for her as a Black woman from the US and as a curator.

Erika Witt: Going to Egypt was—and still is—a dream fulfilled. And shout out to Shafik Gabr, who offered 10 Egyptians and 10 Americans, myself included, to go to Egypt under the [Shafik Gabr, East-West Art of Dialogue initiative](#). I'm still the only African American female to go in the program. But wow. It was, it was intense. The fellowship really dealt with diplomacy and trying to repair the divide between Egypt and the U.S., especially after the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution that happened at the time. And again, I was a fish out of water. Ah, it was insane.

But one thing that I do know, especially after having spoken with some of my Egypt counterparts, they knew absolutely nothing about American enslavement. They didn't know anything about [Jim Crow laws](#), or this [act of keeping BIPOC away from knowing about history](#) and heritage of Africa in general, not only in the places that their ancestry could be traced to, but just throughout the continent in general, because, of course, people migrate. When I went to Aswan, a lot of the Nubian people were calling me sister, or saying that, you know, the pharaohs came from them. I said, you know, I said, why? And they will always, of course, cause there was a language barrier, but they will point to our skin tone. And I do feel like I was treated differently. I was treated more kindly with people there.

Narration: Erika's experience exemplifies the necessity of [Afrocentricity](#), an empowering approach to documenting the experience of Black people in the United States. It provides an understanding of our ancestry that has been systemically erased. Viewing the African art provided an opportunity for Erika to see herself in this history, in a way she never had in the US.

Erika Witt: And then just to be able to see artwork that, you know, if I put my hand toward the art, it's very similar. Instead of being told that, "Oh my God, Egypt isn't in Africa, no! Sub-Saharan Africans didn't do anything, you only had the Black pharaohs of Nubia and that's it and—" (*sighs*). Being able to go and see it myself, to be able to see these depictions on temple walls in museums, to see someone who looked like me, that wasn't a slave—that meant everything. I may not have been a direct descendant, but I can still look to them as ancestors. I can still pull from the achievements that they accomplished in their lifetimes, thousands of years' worth of lifetimes. That's available to anybody. I can see myself in that and if I can see myself in it, I can also make a case for students to see themselves in it.

Narration: Eventually, she had an opportunity to do just that.

Erika Witt: I had made the decision to enroll in Southern University of New Orleans—had no idea they had one of the largest collections of African art and got here. I found it and latched onto it and was able to bring about tours and things for other students to be able to see themselves in that art and to be able to hold it, cherish it, and kind of see it as I do, and to be able to incorporate that within library curriculum and other curriculum curriculums across campus, especially the museum studies.

Sharon M. Burney: I think about it in the role of [the griot](#) in our culture, and how it's important to carry on the historical legacy of what we have. So, I was thinking about that role of art in the museums, or artifacts, and how it is imperative to the storytelling of the diaspora. When I hear you talk about the artifacts in your collections, I see the energy transference in you. Can you expand about the energy that you receive from the pieces in their collection?

Erika Witt: Um, yes! So that's another reason why I decided to be in the gallery space where the art is, mainly the artifacts are located. You know, I think people are going to be like, "Oh my God, she's weird,"

but I can literally feel the energy in each piece and the intention that went into creating it and the love that someone put into it. There's this magic in, for example, a blacksmith creating something from nothing. So, yeah, I see the energy and the essence of all of it, and it's really, it's super powerful because it tells stories of like thousands of people that we have in this collection. We may not know their names, because typically an artist or a person who created these objects go[es] unnamed, but you still feel the intention of what they did. And I feel as if it's my duty to be able to push that forth to the people that I teach and the people that I interact with here on campus.

Sharon Burney: Sounds great. Okay. This is going to be a tough one now. You have 30 seconds to get out of the building. What are you grabbing to take out of the building before the whole building's going down?

Erika Witt: I can't choose. A part of me wants to say the Ngaady aMwaash masks downstairs, but yeah, I don't know. I would totally be that person to just like sacrifice myself with the pieces. I know that's terrible to say, but I love this stuff so much. And I don't know. It's just like having kids, like, which one would you save first, right? It's—Oh man. You just can't choose [laughter].

[Music]

Sharon Burney: Tell me about the first time you realized your love of art and museums.

Erika Witt: I have two ex—well, really three. I've always been an Egyptology enthusiast. And also, from a very young age, I loved going to museums with my mom or with my school in Roanoke, Virginia. We often visited the south [Western Virginia Science Museum](#) and [Planetarium](#), which were some of my favorite places, including their museum store. We'd get to buy the freeze-dried ice cream from NASA. And then my second experience was, I believe in ninth or tenth grade, Patrick Henry High School, for my African American culture class with Ms. Parker, God rest her soul, and, Mr. Nichols, we toured the [Great Blacks in Wax Museum](#) in Baltimore, Maryland. And coming away with that experience really pushed me forward toward wanting to take museums seriously. I always had wanted to become an Egyptologist, but I could do that while working in museums and still focusing more about the African American history and culture, but then it kind of warped in graduate school to traditional African art.

Narration: Erika's experience as a Black woman in museum studies was different than her White classmates.

Erika Witt: Having gone from predominantly white institutions, and then juxtaposing that experience with working at the [Harrison Museum for African Art](#) in Roanoke, Virginia, going through and seeing the museums in Egypt—all of those experiences engaged me in the sense of places where I felt welcome, places where I didn't feel welcome, places where I was able to connect and see myself as a human or see myself represented into other people, or maybe even the lack thereof. I wanted to use those

experiences to, I guess give another perspective to people like me who love museums maybe—or didn't know that they love museums until it was offered in another perspective.

Narration: Even in Black spaces, she found that she often had to contend with disparities in her graduate school experience.

Erika Witt: So, Harrison Museum—and this is what triggered me to get into African art—an internship at the Harrison Museum of African American History and Culture, Roanoke, Virginia. They were, I guess, rebuilding themselves from some previous hardships, and I worked as a curatorial intern at the time. They had a pretty decent African art collection, and I had no idea what the masks meant. I couldn't pronounce any of the ethnic groups that they may have come from, and I probably couldn't list a handful of the countries that they originated from. And I was ashamed. As well as not really having the wholesome museum experience that my peers had gathered in their respective museums—and again, at the time I was the only African American student in the museum studies program at Tusculum who chose to go to an African American culture museum—whereas my white counterparts were able to go to other museums that were predominantly white, have great experiences. But for mine, all the book smarts that I gathered in museum studies, it didn't seem to amount to being able to fix half the problems that the Harrison Museum at the time had.

Narration: And yet she remained steadfast, and in her current role as a curator, she is intentional in making museums more accessible to other visitors who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, or BIPOC.

Sharon M. Burney: How do you think we can possibly engage a younger audience more thoroughly to these experiences that the museums and galleries and libraries provide, to create a stronger self-love foundation in them, especially when sometimes access is not readily available in their communities?

Erika Witt: I think something that museums have an issue with—well, several issues in terms of connecting with their community. First issue, they don't typically meet people where they are, and sometimes they can come off as being super elitist institutions and subject people to poor treatment if they're not from a specific community, if they don't speak a certain way, if they don't look a certain way. I'll never forget going to New Orleans Museum of Art when I first got here. And again, I already had, at that point, I had already had a bachelor's degree in museum studies. So, it wasn't much that you could tell me that I didn't know about museums. And so, one thing that I do, I super analyze things.

So, I look at the frames. I look at, like if there are details in the frames, what kind of font did they use for the labels? Is the lighting correct? Like I'm not only just looking at the object, I'm looking at everything that's surrounding the object, but I got accosted by a security guard once and it didn't make me feel good and you know, maybe they perceive like I was wanting to touch the object, but I was at a fair enough distance to where I obviously wasn't going to touch it. And in the way that they approached me, it really made me feel unwelcome in being in that space.

Narration: Erika also pointed out the more subtle ways that GLAMS—or galleries, libraries, archives and especially museums—can make visitors feel unwelcome.

Erika Witt: Sometimes they'll use super complicated jargon in their labels. And I think, you know, they have a specific demographic that they're targeting, but they don't speak to the whole community. And it just makes other folks feel that they shouldn't be in those spaces because they are probably white, maybe predominantly affluent, predominantly graduate degree, you know, lettered persons, right? So, I would say first, an institution should have various levels of meeting people. There are certain ways to be able to write a label, like maybe at an eighth-grade level that maybe everybody can understand or have certain tours set up to where a younger audience can be able to understand it better.

Narration: She has specific ideas for how to make collections, as Erika likes to say, “meet the people where they are,” by making them more accessible and providing a sense of empowerment and inclusivity.

Erika Witt: Museums are for everybody, you can find any type of subject in any of the pieces that I have in here, right? It just depends on how you frame it. I would say institutions, such as SUNO too, and other museums or galleries or collection spaces, should be able to have programs such as like traveling trunk exhibits that they can send out to schools, or have programs where certain schools can come to their museums for free. Being able to understand their community better, being able to train their security or other staff in being cognizant of themselves when handling the public. So, hopefully, it can be a museum or gallery such as SUNO, where we can be able to create a curriculum that can reach out to anybody. So, we can be able to connect with students who may not be able to travel, or to people abroad who are looking for a specific object that we have. It's just being able to advance ourselves to meet people where they are.

Sharon M. Burney: I think one of the major concerns right now is the younger people, BIPOC people, disappearing from jobs and careers in the GLAMs. And there are several factors that could be influencing that, you know—other than the obvious, institutionalized, systemic racism. But why did we start walking away from it? And at what point should we influence younger generations to understand that there are viable careers? I would think that your resume is almost a blueprint of how it could be done.

Erika Witt: Thank you. It's definitely a lot of volunteering. [laughter] You have to start from somewhere, but unfortunately there are people who may not have the financial means to wait that long, to volunteer. And that was one of my experiences too, but what fueled me was the love I had for it, versus the money that I could make for it, or positioning myself to be in places where I could kind of do both. So, for example, volunteering at Southern University at New Orleans after I graduated, with the collections and then that turning into a grant, which then turned into a job opportunity. You definitely have to start from the ground up.

Narration: But for many BIPOC people, the route Erika took might not feel like an option for them.

Erika Witt: I think if there are BIPOC people that may have encountered poverty, and then have parents that say, or relatives or friends that say, “Oh, well, why are you going to get into museums? There’s no money there. You need to go to X, Y, and Z job, or you need to go get a trade.” And so, I think a lot of people are turned away from coming into the arts, or into the humanities because it’s just a lack of money there. One thing that I find interesting, especially with being at an HBCU, is the idea of always giving back to your community, and always doing for self and for others to help build your communities. Here at SUNO, for example, as a graduate of the museum studies program, we were always encouraged to give back to our community, and to really do what you love, because you’ll feel like you’re never working a day in your life. And I can definitely say that’s true. So, to me, it’s about carving your own way or making your own lane, even if there isn’t one. And that’s something that I’m still doing every day.

Narration: The issue of BIPOC representation is often indicative of bigger problems in the profession.

Erika Witt: Museums really need to get it together and understand the people that you serve. And again, meet people where they are. If, for example, something that I see here too, people here speak differently. African American vernacular is different wherever you go. Right? So, you have people that come from different places on the continent of Africa that still kind of retain certain speech patterns. If you go to South Carolina with the [Gullah Geechee people](#), you can still very much hear those certain dialects, right? It’s the same thing here in New Orleans. But now you just have a combination of people who were speaking French, people who were speaking Spanish, then you have people who were speaking whatever native dialects off the continent of Africa, mashed in together. And so they speak differently. It’s not that it’s wrong. It’s just that it’s different. And if they’re not in spaces where they can adapt to speaking the King’s English or “proper English” or whatever, people tend to turn their nose at them. You don’t do that. We can communicate, I’m gonna meet you where you are, bring you to where I am too. I mean, there’s a certain elitism that’s still occurring that just has to go.

Sharon M. Burney: It’s fascinating because we are speaking about the continued work of diversity trainings in spaces that contain or showcase a plethora of culture. You know, so to be so hypocritical in a space that’s supposed to be celebrating of all these different cultures, and then again participate in oppression in the same space, is just ludicrous.

Erika Witt: It is. And I just had a very recent moment where that happened and I’m looking at folks and I’m just like, you know, this is the community that you’re a part of. How can you say that you serve these people and you speak about them so badly, or you don’t even take an opportunity to really understand where they are? That’s also a conversation that’s happening here in New Orleans, where you have people from other communities, different states trying to change the face of what attracted them to come here in the first place.

I see that happen at HBCUs too, where you have people from other institutions turning their nose up to what we have or the people that we serve. And it's just not right. You know, the oppressed being the oppressor, sometimes that's the situation, but I think we'll be better. We're going to, we're going to be better. It just takes people needing to take a step forward and being more understanding and showing a little bit more compassion and each museum, library, whatever, we need those type of people to be compassionate to the people that we serve, because we have no idea what someone's going through.

[Music]

Narration: During our conversation Erika and I realized we were both born in Virginia.

Sharon M. Burney: I was born in Richmond. So, you know...

Erika Witt: Richmond, Virginia? What?!

Sharon M. Burney: My family, my parents are both from Richmond. Like, Richmond is my people.

Erika Witt: Oh my gosh. That makes me so happy. Yay. So that means, like I say this, anytime that I meet anybody from Virginia here—

Sharon M. Burney: Cousins.

Erika Witt: That's right! We're related. We're cousins now. Just know, next interview I'm calling you cousin. Just know we're related.

Sharon M. Burney: That's fine, we are.

Erika Witt: I love it. I love it.

Sharon M. Burney: And they're from big families in Richmond. So, we probably are cousins, actually.

Erika Witt: I believe it! The families in Southwestern Virginia are huge.

Narration: Regardless of whether we're actually related, there is a kinship. By working at a museum in an HBCU library, Erika is able to help visitors embrace and understand this kinship and how it relates to their own identities.

Sharon M. Burney: To be able to do what you're passionate about and you love, and you bring that into everything and that's evident.

Erika Witt: And I can do it in a library setting. I had no idea that that was even a way to be able to integrate that, but it totally is, and it's a way to be able to not only connect with various library programs and library tours, but it's a way to be able to encourage students to have self-pride, pride in people who look like them, pride in the human experience, but also pride in being, or in attending, an HBCU. It's a wonderful link to have.

Narration: And the HBCU where Erika works has a lot to be proud of.

Erika Witt: Southern University of New Orleans is a beautiful place. We are by far one of the most resilient campuses and have a resilient student body and administration and faculty that's withstood tons of things, whether it was [to merge with a predominantly White institution](#), whether it was to emerge from the muck of [Katrina waters](#), rising from [the possibility of losing accreditation](#), like we've been victorious on anything that's been thrown at us. The African art collections at SUNO are indicative of that.

Narration: Erika was in her office when I spoke with her, surrounded by the beautiful objects of these African art collections, objects that told the story of the history Erika shared.

Erika Witt: I believe we lost over 450 pieces to the [devastation of Katrina](#). So, I believe it added more story to the pieces that survived. And I'm looking at this one drum in particular, it's a slit drum from the Congo, but you can see where it sat in the water and where the water bleached it. So it still looks, it kind of looks like a growth that's on it, but it's not, it's just discolored wood.

But it just adds to the story. It comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo only to find itself here and to now have a deeper story. It just speaks to the resiliency of the community, of Southern University at New Orleans, of the African art collection, and specifically, it speaks to the resiliency of a people who can withstand any devastation and make something beautiful out of it. And that's the beauty of being here at Southern University at New Orleans. We are a staff, a community who came from the very worst of a situation and it may have taken a couple of years, but we are at a point where we're just beautiful, resilient. And so, coming into the collection and seeing these artworks still here—a little battered, but still here—is a statement of that.

Narration: It is this dedication, beauty, and resiliency that is the summation of the bond of the people of the African diaspora reflected in the collections surrounding Erika and her commitment to her role in the preservation of cultural heritage. This is reminiscent of the late [Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune](#), who stated, "I plunged into the job of creating something from nothing, Though I hadn't a penny left, I considered

cash money as the smallest part of my resources, I had faith in a living God, faith in myself, and a desire to serve.”

And the drum continues to beat on the pulse of history.

[Music]

Sharon M. Burney: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about the collections at the Southern University at New Orleans, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we'll be talking with Ida Jones, university archivist at Morgan State University.

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I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.