

exhibitions

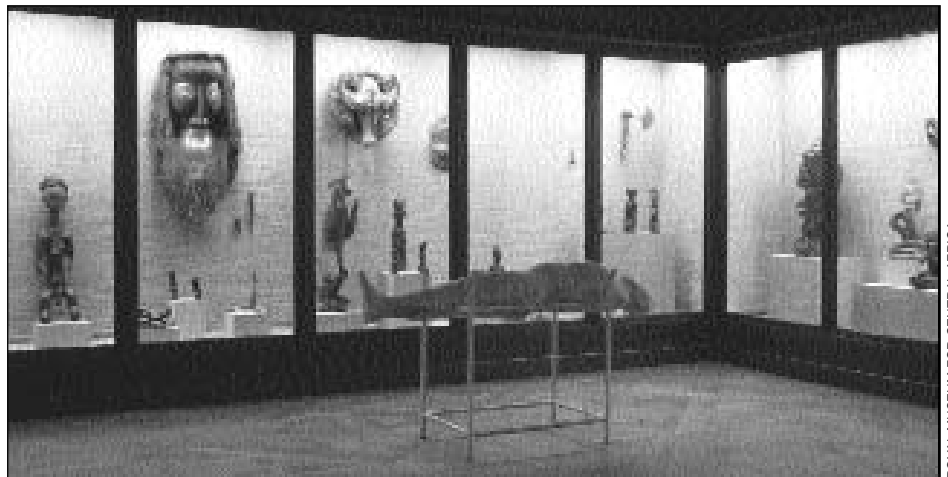
EXITCONGOMUSEUM: THE TRAVELS OF CONGOLESE ART

The exhibition *ExitCongoMuseum* will continue until 24 June 2001, and will very probably be extended into the autumn. There is an extensive website (<http://exitcongomuseum.africamuseum.be/>), and two catalogues with the same title (*Wastiau 2000a*; Muteba Luntumbue & Ponas 2001). The catalogue of the 1995 Treasures exhibition (Verswijver et al. 1995) is also still available.

After a three-year tour of museums in Europe, the United States and Canada, some 120 masterpieces of Congolese ritual art have now returned to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. In this former bastion of Belgian colonial scholarship, they now figure in a controversial exhibition with the telling title *ExitCongoMuseum: A century of art with/without papers*. This examination of conscience by young curators and artists itself represents a further element of the convoluted movements of Central African ethnographics in and between former colonial and North Atlantic societies during the late 19th and 20th centuries, when private and public collections and an international market for 'tribal art' came into being.

Huguette Van Geluwe, former curator of the museum, was one of the guests at the opening of the exhibition in December. She is a distinguished presence, an undisputed authority in the field of Congolese art/ethnographics, and for several decades was the *grande dame* – some say the 'iron lady' – of the Tervuren museum. When, inspecting the exhibition, she came upon the installation by the young Belgian-Congolese artist Toma Muteba Luntumbue, she flung up her hands in horror. In a display case Luntumbue has irreverently piled up a number of major items from the collection, in an untidy heap. Shortly afterwards Van Geluwe left the building, her eyes brimming with tears of rage. But before she did so, she made unmistakably plain what she thought of this treatment of the treasures she had nurtured for forty years: sheer effrontery.

When Luntumbue heard of the incident later in the evening, he could not restrain his mirth. 'Very good, that is precisely what it's meant to do: to prise the matter open once and for all. Our installations lay bare this colonial curiosity shop. The European monologue about Central Africa and its art is over and done with, but we intend to keep that memory alive.' The eloquent artist and art historian, who is also professor at a prestigious Belgian art college, insisted upon having a completely free hand as guest curator for contemporary art as well as contributing artist, refusing to



'Without title', cement and steel, by Philip Aguire y Otegui, 2000, in front of traditional showcases on the ground floor containing ritual statues and masks from the Congo.

ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA

accept, as he put it, 'the role of the token African on the committee'.

The exhibition

ExitCongoMuseum carries on where the exhibition *Hidden treasures from the Tervuren Museum* left off in 1995. The sober, aesthetically oriented presentation of that time – without much context, except in its catalogue (Verswijver et al. 1995) – has ceded place to a provocative investigation of the origins of the very same 'treasures', not presented as high art this time, but contextualized as contested objects-in-motion. The present exhibition's young curators have had to fight for their project every step of the way, in a setting which tends less to reflection. They focus on the social history and the biography of the objects, interwoven with the identity, prejudices, and political practices of their Congolese and, especially, Western owners, and in the process do not evade issues of art theft and restitution. In the foreword to the catalogue, the interim director of the museum tellingly distances himself from the culture-critical stance they adopt (Wastiau 2000a: 4-5).

Today such approaches are indeed a familiar element in many academic and museum circles, but in these premises, where King Leopold II and his pitiless exploitation of the Congo still hold sway, they had hardly penetrated until now. The sights of the old guard of the Tervuren museum's large, multidisciplinary research staff are generally focused exclusively on the societies, landscapes, and products of Africa rather than on their own practices and the political implications of these; however, in the light of the present post-colonial identity crisis of Belgian and other ethnographic museums this is difficult to maintain. An examination of conscience would seem to be inevitable in plotting a new course, and is precisely what the curators aimed for – to the irritation of some and the delight of many, as is clear from the exhibition's generally very favourable reception in the Belgian press, professional circles, and even ex-colo-

nial circles (Arnaut 2001).

The polysemic and layered project was conceived by curator and Africanist Boris Wastiau, who invited Luntumbue to curate its contemporary art section, while Joris Capenberghs, an independent museologist, helped to develop and stage the show in the same spirit. Beginning with its title, it plays with references to travel, alienation, eradication, theft, and the North-South divide. As a visitor, you depart for the Belgian Congo from the wharf in Antwerp on a gigantic, filmed ocean liner. The display cases, full of breathtakingly beautiful ritual objects from the Vili and the Lega, the Mangbetu and the Yaka, are set out precisely on the Belgium-Congo north-south axis, which symbolically runs transverse to the main axis of the building. The first object encountered is an anthropomorphic Ntomba coffin, suggesting a reference to the museum as a cenotaph – an empty ceremonial grave. Everything revolves around the peregrinations of the 'treasures', evoked by colonial photographs, film footage and maps and by the new crates in which certain artefacts are packed. The 120-odd objects are located in showcases in the first half or two-thirds of a long rectangular space on the first floor of the main building.

The travels of these colonial treasures are reflected and commented upon in different ways by a number of contemporary artists, in the other half of the first-floor space and on the ground floor of the museum. On the ground floor they are inserted into the museum's permanent exhibits which are in a more traditional style or in the process of being revised, and together with natural history exhibits fill the ground floor of the early 20th-century neoclassical building which still exudes a mysterious colonial atmosphere. The artistic interventions drastically disturb visitors' normal viewing routine. Most visitors are Belgians, many if not most of them have some personal or family connection to the former colony, and all foster images of it, mostly colonially tinted. At a certain point they are invited to contribute their often surprised and fresh,

sometimes cutting comments and reactions, which become part of the exhibition.

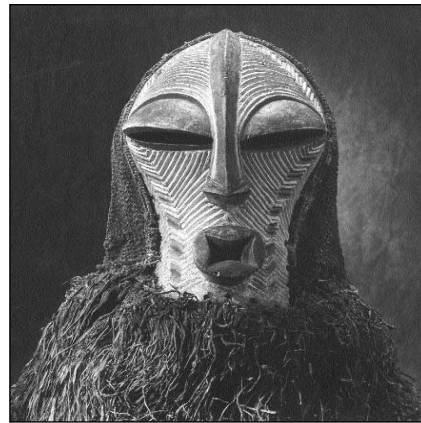
The contemporary artists were invited by Toma Luntumbue, who himself also contributed the first installation, described above. Barthélémy Togo from Cameroon, for example, has constructed a metaphor for tense North-South relations from banana boxes. In *Chacun son destin*, a large portrait of the Congolese artist Chéri Samba by film poster painters from Madras, commissioned by Johan Muyle from Liège, weeps floods of tears into buckets, harrowed by the desperate plight of his country. In his opening speech, Jos Gansemans, a senior member of the museum staff, spoke of 'traditional and contemporary art from Africa', once again betraying the dissent in the museum and incomprehension about what these installations mean. This time the artists themselves have the whip hand (see Muteba Luntumbue & Ponas 2001), whereas Gansemans would perhaps have preferred to have presented their output in the display cases himself. Artist Audry Liseron-Monfils from Guadeloupe addressed this attitude very directly during the opening, by literally placing himself within a display case. The contemporary art effectively complements and counterbalances the cultural critique in the first half of the show, using different and more ambiguous, but equally provocative and subversive means (cf. Arnaut 2001).

What had remained in the background in the *Hidden treasures* show in 1995 is now exposed to the full light of day: the role of soldiers, colonial civil servants, missionaries, planters, collectors, art dealers, and curators; the functions of these masks, statues, amulets, and shields in the colonial propaganda of the beginning of the last century; the way in which they began to be presented as art – *art nègre* – at Tervuren in the 1930s, under the influence of Modernism. 'They've now once again been deployed differently,' says Wastiau, 'this time in a dialogue between cultures and a long overdue self-critical historical investigation.' That investigation focuses on two hundred and fifty thousand ethnographic items from the former colonies which remain in the Africa Museum, one-fifth of which are classified as art.

Restitution and art dealers

Even since decolonization in 1960, the traditional art that remained in collections in Congo/Zaire has experienced a troubled history which constitutes one of the layers, a sub-text, of *Exit Congo Museum*, and the African flip-side of Belgian dealings with the ritual objects of well over two hundred Central African cultures.

While huge amounts of Congolese ritual art sat safely in public and private collections in Belgium and elsewhere in North Atlantic societies, or moved through flea-markets, missionary exhibitions, and auctions, there was soon very little left of the holdings of the nationalized Musée de la Vie Indigène in Kinshasa. When asked about his museum, President Mobutu Sese Seko did not have very much to show important visitors. Every single



Three 'treasures' from the Tervuren collections. From left to right: pfemba maternity figure, Yombe: wood, nails, glass, 31 cm, probably used in the context of a female fertility cult; kifwebe mask, Luba or Songye: wood, fibre, feathers, 21 cm; ofika figure representing a hanged man, Mbole: wood, 92 cm, kept by and figuring in rituals of the Lihwa society.

one of the major items in an exhibition on Congolese art in the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1967, for example, came from Tervuren; at the opening the Zairean ambassador to the United States described this as a scandal.

Mobutu asked the Belgian *frère* Joseph Cornet, in those days curator-in-chief of the Congolese museums, to compile a book about the most beautiful art of his country. 'But there was little of beauty left in Zaire', this elderly gentleman, another distinguished guest, said during the opening in Tervuren; 'I had to go to Belgium where I found what I wanted in the Vander Straete private collection.' His beautifully edited *Art of Africa: Treasures from the Congo*, sponsored by Mobutu, is extremely scholarly and is still regarded as the standard reference (Cornet 1971). The 180 pieces illustrated, almost all of them from the Vander Straete collection, are all as superb as what can now be seen in the temporary and permanent display cases at Tervuren.

Supported by resolutions from the United Nations, Mobutu repeatedly tried to have the cultural heritage of Zaire returned. Under a diplomatic agreement, between 1976 and 1982 a painful restitution of about 180 artefacts from Tervuren was set in motion (Wastiau 2000b). This initiative did not elicit undivided delight in the museum however, and much of what was given back was of very poor quality. In the 1970s a successful collecting campaign was launched in all parts of the Congo with Belgian support. But the newly accumulated collections, proudly displayed in the African-American Institute in New York in 1975 (Cornet 1975), were not too carefully looked after, and it was not long before pieces, including some returned objects, appeared on the Western art market. The bulk of the collections was housed in a storage space next to the presidential palace on Mont Ngaliema, where it was used to supply powerful fetishes and expensive presents, enhancing both Mobutu's royal and Zaire's national prestige. Mobutu's clan helped themselves too, and all sorts of items regularly disappeared.

Kinshasa, 29 March 1976. A famous ndop statue of King Mbop Kyeen of the Bushoong Kuba, Sankura-Kasai, is returned to Zaire. The current whereabouts of this object is uncertain.

During the political strife of the 1990s, the situation worsened. The country was ravaged by poverty and civil wars. Senior Congolese civil servants, army officers and politicians were involved in art theft, and probably still are. Soldiers of Laurent-Désiré Kabila plundered both the palace and the museum repeatedly, for example in May 1997. Pieces from the national collection, including a number which had been returned by Tervuren, found their way into Belgian and American private collections. The fate of the jewel among what was given back, a famous and extremely rare *ndop* king's statue from the Bushoong Kuba, is obscure. There are indications that it is currently in a private Belgian collection, and the same goes for several other high-quality and well-publicized pieces. A Brussels art dealer who was compiling a catalogue of objects from the Congolese national collections, including disappeared objects, repeatedly received serious threats. An official investigation into unlawful aspects of the movements of art objects – 'with/without papers' – and the possibilities for restitution is now being carried out by the Office of the Public Prosecutor in Brussels, and dealer-collectors and museum staff have established contacts to work out how to resolve these problems.

The matter has caused quite a commotion



among dealers and collectors, and in the Tervuren museum as well. More generally speaking, the restitution of cultural heritage is a topic of heated discussion worldwide. Frank Willett, a retired British museum director and authority on Nigerian art, has recently argued that the situation in Nigeria and many other African countries is so bad that it is better not to give things back now. Time and again in recent years, returned pieces have turned up again within months on the Western art market, due to corruption and theft.

Among the tribal art dealers of the Belgian capital there is as much, if not more, expertise on certain aspects of Congolese ritual objects as in Belgian museums (Corbey 1999). Under Van Geluwe, highly respected by friend and foe alike for her expertise, the Tervuren museum had fairly intensive contacts in this milieu, which were frowned upon by other curators. Material from the museum was sold off or exchanged, partly through a society of friends of the museum and the museum shop. Through the Brussels dealer Emile Deletaille, for example, much good material ended up in the new National Museum for African Art in Washington, DC.

Since then, contacts with dealers and collectors have deteriorated to the level common to ethnographic museums – but not to institutions which think of themselves as tribal art museums. Internationally, many if not most curators are very happy to disparage dealers and collectors, certainly now that the ethics of acquisition and cultural property are being given a heavy emphasis. They tend to forget how essential the gifts, expertise, and sales of dealers and collectors have been over the years for their own collections (Corbey 2000). The

exhibition *ExItCongoMuseum*, itself a recent and significant chapter in the momentous history of Congolese ritual art, and one of the two catalogues which accompany it (Wastiau 2000a) leaves no possible doubt about the crucial role of private collectors and dealers in the constitution of the Tervuren and other museum holdings.

Museum in crisis

The museum in Tervuren, where some 250 people are employed, is in a fairly parlous position. The exhibits are out-of-date, and date from different periods. Internal relationships between various parties have long been under a cloud. Geologists and forestry specialists have to reach an understanding with ethnologists and historians who tend to take different views; young curators have the same problem with the old guard. A characteristic incident was the recent removal of four ‘treasures’ from the ‘irreverent’ art installation Huguette Van Geluwe complained about, ‘for reasons of security’, violating the integrity of the artwork by Toma Muteba Luntumbue they were part of. The position of director was still vacant when the exhibition opened, and the process of recruitment bristled with conflicts. Appointments to senior positions have been fairly politically tinted, and especially in federal institutions politics is complicated in Belgium, a federal state. The intercultural dialogue with the troubled former colony, multicultural itself, and with the equally troubled museums there, also leaves a great deal to be desired.

First and foremost the Royal Museum for Central Africa is wrestling with a crisis of identity, bound up with an undigested colonial past, and posing a major challenge.

ExItCongoMuseum: A century of art with/without papers, including its contemporary art, is a courageous effort to cope with that challenge, an exciting experiment which is certainly, in one way or other, contributing to the painful charting of a new, post-colonial course. ●

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comment

SPECULATIONS ON ISLAMIC FINANCIAL ALTERNATIVES

A response to Bill Maurer, A.T. 17(1).

Islamic banking is a very recent creation. Classical Islamic civilization featured no banks in the modern sense, let alone ‘Islamic banks’. Although classical Islamic jurisprudence produced elaborate rules to regulate financial transactions between individuals, these did not give rise to a system involving organizations able to pool thousands of people’s deposits, administer them collectively, and then survive the death of their managers. The earliest banks of the Islamic world, all foreign-owned, were established in the nineteenth century. Muslim-founded banks came into existence in the early twentieth century, and the very first ‘Islamic bank’ in 1975.

The ostensible purpose of creating self-consciously Islamic banks was to carry out interest-free banking in order to abide by Islam’s presumed prohibition of all interest. In fact, the view that the Qur’an categorically bans every form of interest, regardless of context, was a source of controversy even among

the earliest Muslims. Even at times and in places where efforts were made to enforce the ban, buyers and lenders routinely managed to engage in interest-based transactions by means of stratagems that received stamps of legitimacy from leading jurists. And in some regions there have been centuries-long periods when the Islamic courts enforced interest-based loan contracts, objecting on religious grounds only when the selected rate exceeded a certain upper limit.

To those who believe that God has banned all interest, these realities of Muslim financial history are beside the point. ‘Evidence that our ancestors have sinned,’ they say, ‘hardly requires us to repeat their mistakes.’ Those who consider the ban in the Qur’an to apply only to the form of interest explicitly mentioned – the pre-Islamic *riba*, responsible for the enslavement of innumerable individuals – retort that the Qur’an could not have banned practices that allow the weak, the infirm, the aged, and the poor to shift financial risks onto the shoulders of wealthy financiers. Every loan contract assigns both returns and risks, they

point out. And people of limited financial means often prefer the security of an interest-bearing, fixed-return savings account to the variable – potentially high but possibly negative – returns available through, say, the type of ‘profit and loss sharing’ account championed by the promoters of Islamic banking.

This brief history may help to put Bill Maurer’s argument in perspective. The ongoing controversy over Islamic derivatives is merely one of several contemporary manifestations of a struggle that dates back to the birth of Islam fourteen centuries ago. Since Islam has not homogenized the risk preferences of its adherents, there continue to exist Muslims willing to take financial gambles, along with other Muslims willing to pay them for doing so. The resulting coincidence of interests means that campaigns to do away with derivatives or other risk re-allocation instruments are doomed to failure. However loudly the opponents of interest condemn them as sinful, there will be people prepared to articulate reasons why they are beneficial to Muslims, consistent with the spirit of Islam,