

**AfricaMuseum reopening
Tervuren, Belgium**

reviewed by Elaine Sullivan, Tristan Mertens,
Pierre Petit, and Kevin Conru

with artist interviews of Aimé Mpane and
Aimé Ntakiyica by Maxime de Formanoir,
translated by Allen F. Roberts

PRELIMINARY NOTE

The reopening in December 2018 of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA/MRAC), also now known as the AfricaMuseum, after five years of renovation (Fig. 1), has been a major event, not only in Belgium but way beyond its borders. Given the world wide celebrity of this interdisciplinary institution with its extraordinary collection of historical artifacts, I have considered it essential to solicit multiple voices and views. The commissioning of contributions for this multiauthor article has had its complications but was also quite revealing in its own right.

While criticism and much commentary circulated before and after the current coming-out of this prestigious museum, voices dispersed into the landscape. The RMCA remains a power house and treasure trove that continues to be in demand and, clearly, to command authority.

I am grateful to those who rose to the challenge and regret the reticence of the diaspora to share their thoughts. Interviews conducted in French with two contemporary artists who participated in the new installation are, however, included. No specific guidelines or suggestions were given to the participating authors, thus no one was aware of the content of the others' contributions. That is what, I believe, makes this article interesting.

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**CONTEMPORARY ART IN AND OUT
OF THE MUSEUM**

reviewed by Elaine Sullivan

The reopening of the Belgian Royal Museum for Central Africa (Fig. 1), was long awaited by almost all with an interest in African arts or ethnographic museums more broadly. Opening its doors just weeks after the release of the Sarr-Savoy report—which called on the French government to return objects of African cultural heritage to their countries of origin (Sarr and Savoy 2018)—was sure to bring even



greater attention to its collection and how it would communicate its history and current mission to the public.

As proof of its openness to new perspectives, the museum was eager to show audiences the contemporary arts by African artists on display in its halls. While Kinshasa-based artist Chéri Samba's painting *Réorganisation* (2002) (Fig. 2), depicting a tug-of-war over the museum's famed "Leopard Man" sculpture (now in the basement "Sidelined" gallery dedicated to sculptures the museum no longer deems appropriate; see Fig. 14) may be the symbol of the renovated museum, he has another work on display, in a dark corner of the "Afropea" gallery dedicated to the experiences of the African diaspora community

1 View of garden side of AfricaMuseum with new glass entrance to the left of the main 1910 neoclassical building.
Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

2 *Reorganisation* (2002) by Chéri Samba depicts a tug-of-war over the museum's "Leopard Man" statue as the current director, Guido Gryseels, looks on. Oil on canvas, 104 cm x 134 cm.
Photo: © Elaine Sullivan



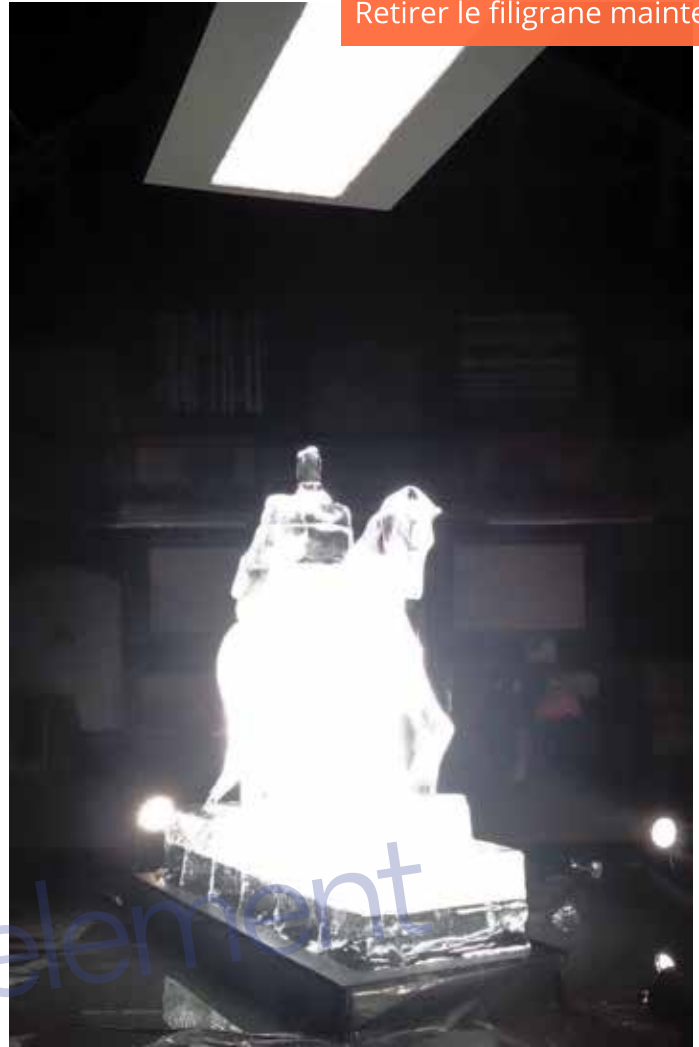


3 Chéri Samba's *Matonge-Ixelles, Porte de l'Amour* hangs on a building façade on the Chaussée d'Ixelles at the entrance of Brussels' Congolese Matonge neighborhood. Medium, 2002.

Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

4 *PeoPL* by Laura Nsengiyumva, ice sculpture, October 6, 2018.

Photo: © Erica Falle



in Belgium. *Matonge-Ixelles, Porte de Namur! Porte de l'amour*, (2002) will be familiar to local viewers and frequent visitors to Brussels, as it is a smaller, oil-on-canvas version of the giant 12 by 15 meter artwork covering a building façade at Porte de Namur (installed in 2002), the entrance to the Matonge neighborhood of Brussels, which is the cultural heart of the Congolese community in Belgium (Fig. 3). The painting—and more broadly, the museum—reaches out beyond the walls of its colonial palace in Flanders, sharing not just masterpieces by Congolese artists of the past but also attempting to reflect the lives of Africans living today, both on the continent and abroad.

Such experiences are especially noticeable in the artworks by contemporary artists found in the museum, but are also found in the contemporary arts outside of the museum which comment on, subvert, and critique the museum and its broader role in Belgian colonization. Leading up to and during the opening days of the museum, contemporary art and moments of creativity inspired by the museum have pushed discussions of Belgium's colonial past and restitution of objects and human remains to the forefront.

On October 6, 2018, during Brussels'

annual Nuit Blanche art event, a multipurpose room of an elementary school in the Marolles neighborhood hosted the installation *PeoPL* by Laura Nsengiyumva. The artwork consisted of an ice sculpture replica of the statue of Leopold II currently next to the Royal Palace in Brussels placed under a copy of the monument's pedestal (Fig. 4). Over the course of the evening the sculpture slowly melted, fostering multiple interpretations. As the monument disappeared, the melting reflected the slow change of public discussion about Leopold II's legacy; one could wonder if memory of Leopold II's crimes in the Congo would also disappear as time passes. Under the light, the ice sculpture shone with a ghostly glow, giving physical presence to what Nsengiyumva described in the event program as Leopold II's "phantasmagorical presence in the Belgian consciousness." In Belgium he is still known as the "builder king" and was the founder of the AfricaMuseum. Nsengiyumva has been outspoken about her disapproval of the AfricaMuseum, for which she initially proposed this installation, and has described pushback from both museum spokespeople and former colonials accusing her work of being too controversial (Debrauwer 2018).

While Nsengiyumva's image of melting ice reflects the slow-moving discussion of Belgium's colonial history, in the film *Palimpsest of the AfricaMuseum* (2019), directed by Matthias de Groof in collaboration with Mona Mpenbele, the almost violent de-stuffing of a taxidermized giraffe acts as a recurring symbol for the necessary difficult work of addressing said history. The same day as the public opening of the AfricaMuseum, *Palimpsest* was screened at BOZAR in central Brussels.¹ Images of the first stages of the renovation, in which everything was removed from the building and dioramas were torn down, are juxtaposed with remarkably frank footage from planning meetings with the group of members of the African diaspora in Belgium broadly referred to simply by its acronym, COMRAF (Comité MRAC-Associations Africaines). The film pulls back layers of the museum's past, present, and future, and particularly what it has meant to some of those whose culture it claims to represent. But would the museum be able to remove its own aged stuffing to be born anew?

For many members of the public, the museum's renovation was not a success, and creative protests flourished beyond formally sanctioned art events. On Saturday, December



5 Installation by Collectif No Name across from entrance to the AfricaMuseum, 2018.
Photo: © Elaine Sullivan

6 New glass entrance connected by underground passage to 1910 building.
Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

8th, the day before the public opening, hundreds of special guests lined up outside to catch their first glimpse of the renovated museum. Waiting to enter the modernist glass-walled entrance pavilion, guests were greeted by a disparate group of protestors. Next to the doorway, a pair set up shop to sell

a self-published collection of fictional speeches the king of Belgium, Philippe, could have given had he decided to attend the opening. Others walked up and down the line selling *Kumbuka: a decolonial zine* and opposite the pavilion, a pair held a sign demanding restitution, and members of the Collectif No Name staged an “ARTivist performance” by planting dozens of cardboard-cutout hands in the lawn (Fig. 5).

Though the museum may have attempted to bring discourse into its halls through inclusion of contemporary arts and galleries on colonial history and diasporic experiences, it is outside of its walls that art pushed broader debates forward. While the renovation of the museum was a series of compromises bound to please no one, its reopening fanned the flames of anticolonial and decolonial discussions. In at least this manner it was a success, showing that



now more than ever. Retirer le filigrane maintenant

will be in continuous dialogue with the living communities and artists linked by history to the ethnographic collections of the past.

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Notes

1 *Palimpsest of the AfricaMuseum* had its official premiere at DOCLISBOA in October 2019.

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AFRICA IN MOTION: BRINGING HERITAGE TO LIFE?

reviewed by Tristan Mertens

When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture (Marker and Resnais 1953).

As we know, Tervuren's renovation was an attempt to break with its old-fashioned image, one which conveyed both a century-old museography and a propagandist architecture. In the characterization of museums as sacred places, the threshold space is a marker that sets the tone. In Tervuren's case the entrance is now a building of transparencies (Fig. 6) with a vast, white-washed underground space that leads to the old building and gives the



cultures. 7 Retirer le filigrane maintenant

to see objects shown elsewhere for their significant formal qualities in another network of experiences and to learn more about the societies from which they came to the Western world. Such a shift from the notion of masterpiece to that of mnemonic device, for example, is certainly a means for the museum to display its intention to involve the African diaspora, to take part in the process. With their many multimedia mediation tools and videos of women and men discussing a wide range of cultural patterns—sometimes a little simplified—these two rooms, nonetheless, constitute a platform for encounters.

Disparity of approach not only reminds us of the role of the AfricaMuseum in shaping our perception and interpretation of other cultures, but also that it remains an institution hosting different departments with specific agendas from which can emerge competing perspectives, as may be the case with the involvement of African communities. In this regard, the proposals more particularly relating to history and its transmission are areas of conflict. “Long History” is, significantly, the title of a very small, darkly lit room, which is intended to represent Africa before the Europeans’ arrival. Colonialism and memories of the African diasporas are tackled in different ways ranging from archives to contemporary art, with variable degrees of success.²

The transformation of the museum is in no way to be considered a completed process. It is only a possibility in progress, a place to contest, notably for the many teachers coming with their classes. This process has to draw attention continuously to heritage, not as a neutral, inert product but a strategic site where, in addition to identities, relations with the world need to be negotiated on the symbolic level as well as the most pragmatic and materialistic. In this respect, the pretensions of the two thematic

impression of crossing a border (Fig. 7). This temporal routing introduces one of the stakes of this renovation: a challenge to colonial history. In the new antechamber of the museum, panel information indicates that the collections to be presented are recognized as the heritage of humanity and are in the process of being digitized. These issues of memory, transmission, and new technologies deserve to be addressed.

One of the notable changes in mediation devices is the use of many screens, some of which are tactile. This introduction to the moving image, its sound equivalent, and a multimedia didactic approach brings an undeniable freshness (Fig. 8). Visitors, including the youngest, readily engage in touching at a distance, listening to music and to various testimonies, and even experiencing Kinshasa in 3D, while bound to their earphones and screens. These tools have at least the advantage of captivating a large number of spectators. But to what extent is it also a diversion from the expressive qualities of the objects and competition with their inherent power of attraction?

The temporary exhibition *Unrivaled Art*, especially staged for the museum’s opening, is a case study of the other well-known extreme, namely an overemphasis on aesthetics (Fig. 9). This room suggests that whole sections of African cultures are kept out of the digital world and have not yet entered contemporaneity. It

concerns the special category known as “art-works” or, according to an old and tenacious terminology, the museum’s treasures.¹ Here one can refer to text panels and a pamphlet that provide dates and provenances, uses, collection protocols of objects. But why is there no video of an act of masking or any other present-day context? Somehow, the most prized valuables have been submitted to the most conservative museography, and it is regrettable that living artists, regardless of their practice, are not entitled to occupy this space. The exhibit thus seems to be the preserve of collectors and their own regime of knowledge.

The room dedicated to music and languages and that on rituals and ceremonies propose an interesting alternative to this monolithic vision. Past and present merge, addressing changes as well as continuities, forms of appropriation and exchanges between complex



7 Underground passage to old building.
Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

8 Section on “Rituals and Ceremonies” dealing with education through initiations.
Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019



sections called “Landscapes and Biodiversity” and “The Resources Paradox,” intended as tools of instruction on sustainable development, are worrying and hypocritical. Both display the incomparable resources and wealth present in Africa in terms of ecosystems and raw materials. A video of a scientific mission interestingly shows uninhibited collecting of insects, while such practices regarding artifacts and even human beings largely remain visual taboos. But beyond some analogies, how can it be honest to name the display “The Resources Paradox” (i.e., poverty due to abundance) rather than “Massive Looting”?

Panels and videos draw the public’s attention to the energy opportunities of competitive engineering or the dynamism of the cultural sector in Africa. However, the project of a global citizenship education claimed by the museum should acknowledge that, although we may not be compliant, we still exist within a system of predatory economies.³ The consensus or even promotional nature of the proposed images could be tested by a more subtle gaze, such as Renzo Martens’ controversial perspective in his film *Enjoy Poverty*.⁴ If the answer is related to the institution’s duty of neutrality in order to implement a public culture free of friction, then the question is much more one of the paradoxes of its funding: Why is the inaugural exhibition

Unrivalled Art under the patronage of Philippe de Moerloose?⁵

Questioning blind spots and differentiating sensitive approaches could be tasks for artists of our time. No one seems to have been given the space or expressed the desire to confront that. With all my respect and sympathy for Chéri Samba, his overrepresentation in the permanent exhibition **does not really provide** access to some other recent pictorial perspectives on the continent. It should be asked whether the participating contemporary artists, besides being the museum’s regulars, are representatives less of Africa than of its diasporas in Belgium. It is regrettable not to see more of them using video or new media arts in a place looking to fashion a contemporary image of heritage. It still remains necessary to propose works challenging the current perennial consensus to meet the expectations of a newly expanded audience.

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Notes

1 One can find this in different past exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues but also in the positions defended by this museum regarding issues of restitution.

2 *Unrivalled Art*, temporary exhibition display. Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

2 The room dedicated to colonialism and independence is obviously one of the key points of the new presentation and dialogue that the museum seeks to have with the citizens of this history. This room deserves particular attention but does not enter the subject of this article.

3 Regarding the claim to a global citizenship education, see for instance <https://www.africanmuseum.be/en/learn/teachers>

4 Renzo Martens had been present at the museum a few months before the reopening for a talk on his work. His project, entitled *Institute for Human Activities*, questions the role and possible effects of museums in the global economy and is, again, fully relevant. <http://www.humanactivities.org/en>

5 The Belgian businessman Philippe de Moerloose is, for the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an emblematic, albeit discreet figure of a neoliberalism in which social inequalities worsen. Rather than talking about “The Resources Paradox,” which naturalizes the situation, attention should be drawn to how Africa is involved in globalization, as the anthropologist James Ferguson (2006), among others, has urged us to do for many years.

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OF COLONIAL PROPAGANDA AND BELGIAN INTIMACY

reviewed by Pierre Petit

The renovation of the AfricaMuseum's 1910 neoclassic building (Fig. 10)—of its huge mural paintings, its mahogany vitrines (Fig. 11), its marble surfaces—is breathtaking and deserves a visit in its own right. Apart from the new entrance building, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) has been restored with a clearly stated objective: to rehabilitate its original propaganda architecture. This aspect is a complete success and I will elaborate on this later on.

If one is to assess the new display, component by component, and compare it with the situation before the restoration, there are certainly improvements, like the large screens allowing Congolese to address the visitors on biographical topics or the inclusion of a room related to the diaspora, awkward in its display but certainly needed. Commentaries presently deal with racism and colonial violence (Fig. 11), including the atrocities of the “red rubber” trade—absent in the old museum display—and with the dubious or forceful way artworks were often acquired. The director Guido Gryseels declared that the twofold aim of the new exhibitions was “to provide a better picture of contemporary Africa” and “to adopt a more critical approach to the colonial past” (*Making of 2018*: 9). Indeed, there are advances in both directions, even though there are numerous criticisms of the renovation. Among some of the limitations that have been noted—and I will not enumerate all of these—it was debated whether the exploitative aspects of the colonization are explicit enough or if contemporary Africa is really mainstreamed in the display.

My problem is that, despite such advances, at the end of the visit one is left to speculate on what one has learned from the exhibitions as a whole. The ten display sections, ranging from “Rituals and Ceremonies” to “The Resource Paradox” via “The Crocodile Room,” are not organized as components of a whole. It is as if the teams had autonomously elaborated their respective thematic spaces. A connecting thread is missing. Whether one proceeds clockwise or counterclockwise (no recommendation is provided), the result is the same: the visit unfolds in staccato fashion, with no explicit transition between the rooms. The only conclusion one can draw from the visit is that, since the dark age of early colonialism, science has progressed and disentangled itself from its former prejudices against Africa. I can join this academic merriment, but as an achievement, it is limited and nonspecific.

The specificity of the RMCA is that it is a former colonial museum that maintained a colonial display until 2013, when the renovation started. At that time, the *anyota* man (a bronze statue showing the masked member of a secret society killing his victim with metal claws)



10 Chaussée de Louvain, Tervuren, main museum entrance. Early 20th century postcard

11 Excesses of colonial punishment. Photo by Alice Seeley Harris, 1900, and oil painting (40 cm x 60.5 cm) *La Civilisation au Congo* by Eduard Manduau, 1884. Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

was still in its original place (Fig. 12). The present RMCA is unquestionably rooted in the colonial museum: The bulk of the artifacts date to the colonial period and come from Belgian colonies. Colonial propaganda and entrepreneurial emulation were at the core of Leopold's museum project. The RMCA is, therefore, not an AfricaMuseum, as its current title proclaims. If the research in the institution is indeed devoted to Africa at large and to issues related to the present, the museum exhibitions are nonetheless centered on the Congo and comprise, even today, objects gathered during the colonial regime and presented within a propaganda architecture.

The museum has been visited by four generations of Belgians, who used to go on Sunday family day trips to the place. Of course, visitors were not passive recipients, and in the last decades, most of them were aware of the anachronism of the exhibitions reminiscent of *Tintin au Congo*. The place was a very clear example

of heterotopia and heterochronia (Foucault 1984): The museum created an enclave of the Congo under colonial rule in present-day Belgium. It was the basis of a sweet-and-sour insiders' pleasure, a kind of private joke in the country of Belgitude and surrealism, to which I belong. The Tervuren museum has long been a component of Belgian “cultural intimacy,” in the sense of a domain of self-acknowledgment of one's cultural identity that is embarrassing when unveiled to outsiders, but nevertheless





12 “Ethnogr Retirer le filigrane maintenant of the display

13 “The Sculpture Depot,” an underground reserve of banished colonial works including Aniota.

Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

produces a strong sense of commonality for insiders (Herzfeld 1997).

The RMCA probably tells us more about Belgium than about the Congo. It reveals the range of relations Belgians had with the African Other: exoticization, paternalism, racialization, proselytism, exploitation, and so on. Almost all European countries were directly or indirectly involved in colonialism. But in Belgium, a young European nation with no imperial tradition, there was much to do to “sell the Congo” to a population that was largely refractory to colonial schemes (Stanard 2011). This explains the museum’s unusual importance in Belgium. In my view, this dimension is more relevant as an exhibition thread than updating the achievements of science in ten Africanist sections. The focus should be on Belgian/Congo relations and colonial representations and practices at large. This would be in keeping with the spirit that animated the architectural renovation, as summarized by the master-architect Stephane Beel:

I wanted to display the museum as it had been in all its glory—even of the colonial sort. I don’t feel that history should be rewritten. Colonialism is part of our past. It did happen. That being the case, you simply make it more visible. But you have to pass comment on it too. That can be done subtly or in an indirect way, but there has to be comment. The worst thing would be to look the other way and pretend that colonialism had never existed. Our history won’t be made any rosier by removing these shocking sculptures of shackled slaves, nor would any fresh insights be gained (*Making of* 2018: 32).

I agree with his view, and regret that the current exhibition displays have not followed this transparency. That, in my opinion, is the only way to “decolonize” the museum, a

leitmotiv of the official museum publicity. This would imply restoring, and commenting on, the exhibition rooms and objects as they were presented to the Belgian public in the past, including the “busts of various indigenous types modeled from life” (see Wastiau 2000: 60); the ethnic maps; the scale model of a hill divided in two to show how the country was before and after colonization; the *anyota* man as it was displayed originally, surrounded by vitrines of ethnographic objects classified by “tribe”; and colonial watercolors with emanations of wavering nostalgia. Confronting the Belgian colonial past that way would be an act of intellectual courage. A notice that justifies the presence of colonial propaganda statues in

the Rotonde room argues that they are “classified as heritage and cannot be removed” (see Fig. 19). This lacks bravery. Similarly, other politically incorrect statues have been put in a preliminary room, like the rejects of a salon: a too-easy self-absolution (Fig. 13). They should be reintegrated in their original place, or at least be referenced, and discussed in relation to their original meanings and objectives. This would provide a new perspective in the present-day context. “Decolonizing” supposes restoring colonial mechanisms to understand their trappings, with subtlety, of course.

The exhibitions could proceed, more than they do presently, through contradictory evidence: historicization of the display,



juxtaposition with alternative displays, references to resistance, or contemporary artworks; comments on videos—not all the time, of course, for visitors can think for themselves. The exhibition circuit for natural sciences should either be separated from the humanities, or connected to it through interdisciplinary themes. The present transition, from masterpiece sculptures to the stuffed jungle zoo, is inappropriate.

The sculptures and other artifacts, which give this museum its reputation as the richest collection of Central African material in the world, would not suffer from such a presentation. On the contrary, the objects' biographies would be much more present (Wastiau 2000) and their original display would be very telling of the past reception of African art. But in my view, the main beneficiaries of this paradigmatic change would be the Belgian population, including the Afro-descendants, and the Congolese visitors, for it would open a venue for discussing the colony and the postcolony, *cartes sur table*.

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A RE-DISPLAY, A RE-LAUNCH, OR A RE-BIRTH?: WHAT THE RMCA HAS ACHIEVED

reviewed by Kevin Conru

The RMCA is a natural history institution similar in scope to related museums in New York, London, Chicago, and Sydney, in that the breadth of their focus encompasses numerous disciplines. In the nineteenth century it was common to have such museums, even in regional urban centers, as the general public was fascinated by the so-called Natural World, which included all manner of flora and fauna,



14 Restoration of walls and ceilings. Photo: © Dunja Hersak, 2018

15 Moseka Smart Traffic Robot from Kinshasa by Thérèse Izay Kirongozi. Acquired by RMCA in 2018. Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

minerals and fossils, as well as the material culture of non-European peoples. Many of these museums have now been either closed or subsumed and partitioned into more contemporary institutional types. Cases in point are the well-known Musée de L'Homme's ethnographic collection, which was relocated to the Musée Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac; various English





historical society museums that have been dissolved, with their collections dispersed, like the less-familiar nineteenth century Niagara Falls Museum in northern New York State, which contained early Polynesian and African material and the coffin of the Egyptian pharaoh Seti I. Tervuren is perhaps unique among the survivors in that it not only retains collections of biodiversity, geology, and human societies, but has collections based on a specific geographic region from its colonial past: the Central African countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi.

As such museums have so many disparate elements, it was undoubtedly a challenge to deal with the visual totality of their display and museology. While stuffed animal displays can always please the enthusiastic public, especially the younger generation, with large, exotic, and sadly endangered fauna, what of the

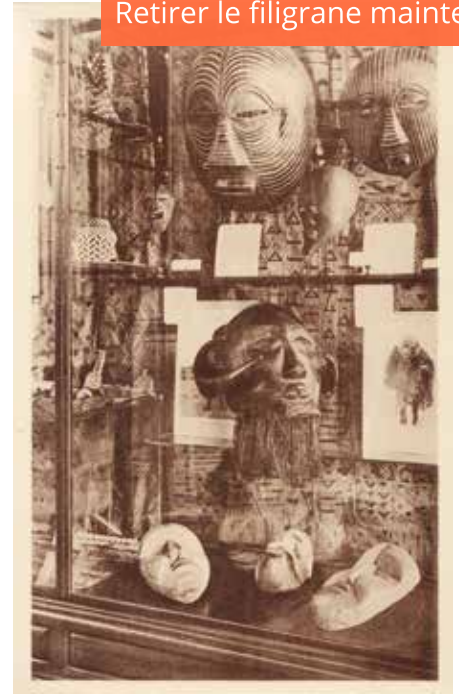
mineral and gem department, with seemingly repetitive row upon row of dried rocks or tropical wood samples? How does one explain such intangibles as music and language, which constitute much unique recorded material held by the museum? Tervuren has faced all these challenges as best as they were able to.

With the renovation, the first thing one notices in all the galleries is the condition of the building. The marble, paneling, walls, and ceilings have all been meticulously restored and the rooms kept to their original proportions (Fig. 14). This posed important challenges, in that the new displays, and their technologies, have to coexist with the neoclassical statements inherent in the original structure and not be coopted by the museum's "imperial" splendor (Fig. 15). The original features contrast with the numerous contemporary architectural additions deemed necessary in the refit. Some,

like the glass-enclosed staircase leading to the entrance and exit doorways and the glass wall in the old colonial history corridor, have brought an airiness to the structure that was lacking in the original building. Other contemporary additions are under construction, and some, such as the basement archway rooms and garden stairway, seem pointless in their stated emptiness.

The main hall to the left of the new entrance is devoted to rituals and ceremonies and the central area of the room is broadly divided into sections on birth, education, marriage, well-being, and death and commemoration. While this explanatory approach is not novel, there is an attempt at clarity and concentration of ideas that eluded previous displays, which meandered over numerous rooms and interminable showcases. These sections are organized around central modules where relevant artifacts are juxtaposed with videos showing individuals explaining their life experiences. The outer walls have long expanses with more didactic displays, and they show subjects such as Chokwe initiations and the role and representations of ancestors. Throughout this room are object types ranging from the mundane and utilitarian to some of the most engaging sculptures in the museum. They are thoughtfully put together with a balanced spatial sense, and it is to be noted that the visual quality of each piece was well considered regarding the contextual information. What is also stimulating is that art made more recently, and which relates topically, is used to better explain the short, paragraph-length captions, especially regarding dress and fashion.

One of the more arresting galleries is devoted to the long history of Central Africa, which may be unfamiliar to many visitors (Fig. 16). The oldest carved wood piece in Tervuren's collection, dated from 700–900 CE, is that of the head of an animal, possibly an armadillo, found in the Liavela riverbed in Angola. This unique piece, with its attenuated facial features, reminds one visually of the ancient terracottas of West Africa and is exhibited in its own vitrine to better show off its mystery and importance. The room has a focus on ancient iron and copper artifacts and includes a section on prestige metalworked knives. These symbols of high rank and authority tie into two cabinets of Luba chiefly sceptres, stools, and neck rests. Again, it was decided



17 Temporary exhibition display with celebrated MRAC magical power figures from regions of Kongo and Songye peoples.
Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

18 Early display of Luba, Songye and other Congolese masks. Early 20th century postcard.

to illustrate the intellectual concepts with the very finest pieces, accentuating and emphasizing the visual narrative. Finally, several cases of Acheulean stone hand axes dating back 1,000,000 years are shown, highlighting the tools used at the very beginning of man's creativity.

The highlight of the museum regarding the sculptural arts of Central Africa, which are world-class treasures of universal renown, are the four large cases in the gallery called *Unrivaled Art* (Fig. 17). It is also noted to be a temporary exhibition, but why any institution would want to display its so-called masterpieces only temporarily is a question that must be asked. Perhaps there is a program for an enlarged installation. Here are most of Tervuren's famous artworks—those in the other galleries notwithstanding—and as many as possible are seen. The density of the display hearkens to presentations of an earlier era, with masterpiece after masterpiece standing cheek by jowl (Fig. 18). While to some the compactness does not allow sufficient space to contemplate calmly and without visual interruption each artwork, their visual identity and immense strength caged and diminished—this is especially the case with the three large power figures, two Kongo *nkisi* and a Songye community figure—but in another way, such density grants the viewer the opportunity to more readily compare, contrast, and relate the artworks to each other. It is a case of learning by looking. And so, fiber works, terracotta vessels, ivory carvings, masks, and figures

are grouped together in fecund classification. Nearby is a brief discussion of the notion of beauty from both an African and European perspective as well as discourses on artistic styles and identities.

A final main gallery room conveys the visual concepts and representations of sound—both in language and in music. This is artfully achieved with both musical instruments and audio listening sections, and with textual imagery on objects as varied as local beer bottles and printed fabrics.

While the museum has quite admirably achieved many of the goals it set out to accomplish and has attempted to address its colonial legacy, certain aspects of the reinstallation jar. Most directly is the interminably lengthy underground tunnel connecting the new entrance building to the museum proper. It not only reminds one of the arrival hallway at Brussels airport, but in the short few months since opening, its condition—with floor stains and a glaring white color no doubt chosen by committee—has deteriorated to a level reminiscent of the old JFK New York airport. As well, the first two lower-level rooms are so removed from the main halls, separated by imposing brick arches and stairways leading to nowhere, that they seem to belong to a whole other experience. And it was surprising, upon receiving the ticket at the entry kiosk, that the first image representing the “AfricaMuseum” is a North American Inuit parka. Inexplicable ... That said, there are no doubt plans for future corrections and arrangements.

In the end, perhaps the most exciting room in the entire museum is the stately rotunda, which was the former, historical entrance and which is part of the monument commission-listed interior. For over a hundred years it was a place of glorification of the monarchy and the colonial enterprise it spawned. Now, with the addition of one monumental contemporary sculpture created by the artist Aimé Mpane (Fig. 19), the entire dynamic of the museum has shifted, with the true focus now on the peoples and place of Central Africa.

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Conversation between Aimé Mpane and Maxime de Formanoir

August 19, 2019

Translation by Allen F. Roberts, UCLA

When asked about the new exhibitions at the AfricaMuseum, Aimé Mpane admits to not having “really grasped the sense of the distance covered nor what the message was supposed to be.” The artist has nonetheless been familiar with the museum since his arrival in Belgium in 1994. “The first thing I went to see was the Museum of Tervuren because at the time, I didn’t know our ‘traditional’ art well, and I was interested to see how it would be displayed. I was impressed by the sheer quantity of such things held by the museum. I was especially attracted to ‘tribal’ arts. For me, this first visit was a discovery, for I had never before seen ‘real’ things of the sort. In the Royal Museum, I was in the presence of ‘real’ Congolese patrimony. I had asked myself many questions about this art during the days that I

was pursuing my studies of art in the Congo. Mobutu had launched his politics of ‘a recourse to authenticity.’ As soon as he did, we were all curious about what happened prior to [Belgian] colonization. I wanted to understand, for we had never had classes on ‘*l’art nègre*.’ We had courses on Western art from Prehistory to Marcel Duchamp, but that was all!”

Learning of the project to integrate contemporary artists into exhibitions after the AfricaMuseum’s renovation, Aimé Mpane was at first cool to the idea but then changed his mind, and participating in the competition, he went on to win. “I wanted to make something that went farther than the polemics of the museum.” As he adds, “with my work [*New Breath or the Congo Bourgeoning*, Fig. 19], I wanted to create something hyper-positive that would lead to light, create something that would bud and then blossom, and so present Congolese people in all their dignity.” More or less satisfied with the institution’s beginning to shed its old skin and take first steps toward decolonization, the artist nonetheless calls for such processes to continue.

Aimé Mpane’s work is situated in the grandiloquent rotunda of the museum, under a cupola struck with the monograph of Léopold II, King of the Belgians, superimposed on his crown. At the center of the rotunda one finds

the five-pointed star (Fig. 19), also topped by the royal crown where there once stood a bust of the king sculpted in ivory (see Arnoldi 2005: 180, fig. 1; Wynants 2003: 148, fig. 1). Until the Royal Museum closed for renovation, imposing plaster statues by Herbert Ward [depicting alleged Congolese “savagery”] stood on the peripheries of the rotunda (Arnoldi 2005: 183, fig. 3), but they have now been removed to an underground chamber with other sculptures emblematic of colonial [dis]regard of Africa. Aimé Mpane suggests that an artist might intervene in this place of relegation to transform its accumulation into an archival installation telling it like it was—and is.

Niches of the same majestic rotunda are occupied by sculptures in bronze and gilded copper conceived by Arsène Matton, Frans Huygelen, Paul Du Bois, Godefroid Devreese, Ernest Wijnants, Oscar Jespeers, and Arthur Dupagne. All glorify Belgian colonization of the Congo (Arnoldi 2005: 180-184), and they have not been retired from their longstanding locations, much

19 *New Breath or the Burgeoning Congo* (2017), sculpture in the great rotunda by Aimé Mpane, wood and bronze.

Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019



to the regret of Aimé Mpane. “I proposed, in a bit hare-brained (*farfelu*) way, I admit, that all these should be melted down to recover the metal from which they were cast to use for a different work, or at the very least, might they not be turned toward the wall so that their backs face visitors? But technically, no such intervention was possible,” the artist was told.

Aimé Mpane was obliged to reduce his ambitions as his project began, due to opposition he encountered that he readily describes. “The location that interested me was the inlaid star where the ivory bust of Léopold II had once stood. I wanted to demonstrate a positive African presence at that very spot. I immediately planned something very large, but neither time nor budget sufficed ... When my maquette was shown to the architect, he was furious. He refused it completely ... He wanted the rotunda to be open from one side to the other. But I had thought of such a response, and so I perforated the piece and narrowed it into a small bas relief, a profile. When seen from the front, one only sees a thin line surmounted by a plant.” As a consequence, the work is not imposing—even as it most surely is meant to impose itself on visitors.

We can join Aimé Mpane in deploring that his work now has such reduced proportions, for it might have reversed the visual weight of the colonial statues in the rotunda’s niches. “If I had been able to make something very large, the effect would have been very different ... Your gaze would have been obliged to follow my installation upward, to be dazzled by light streaming into the rotunda. At the same time, you would have seen the colonial statues in their niches as something secondary, as an archiving without interest, a simple background.” The residual attraction of the colonial past through these effigies that, it is said, cannot be unbolted from where they stand, have inspired the artist to a more fundamental reflection on the necessity to enlarge the field of intervention by artists in the museum’s spaces. “For me,” Aimé Mpane holds, “it would be interesting for there to be more contemporary artists, and not only Africans ... Who created these works in the rotunda? They were Belgian artists. Problems of the collective unconscious [that still inform the museum] concern us all, not just Congolese people ... I think that in the rotunda, there should be the work of a Belgian, of several Belgians, so that one can find a sort of balance. This is my opinion as an African. Such work should be undertaken all together ... Artists who presented the ideas of King Léopold II, who participated in this propaganda, were Belgian, whether we’re speaking of Dupagne or Matton.” And, as the artist concludes, “the present installation is still as though we Congolese have been placed in a human zoo. We are walled

off, separated, and that drives me crazy ... Such stances must be abolished. It is still the Whites who make all decisions, even when they include Blacks in their committees ...”

AIMÉ MPANE was born in Kinshasa in 1968. He currently lives and works in both Kinshasa and Brussels after training at the Fine Arts Academy of Kinshasa and the National School of Visual Arts in Brussels, better known as La Cambre. He has participated in a number of exhibitions in Belgium such as Yambi in 2007 and Persona in 2009, and others overseas such as Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2013. The artist’s works feature in important public collections, such as those of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art. aimempane@me.com.

Referenc Retirer le filigrane maintenant

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**Conversation between Aimé Ntakiyica and Maxime de Formanoir
February 15, 2019
Translation by Allen F. Roberts, UCLA**

The Burundian artist Aimé Ntakiyica recalls his first visit to the Tervuren Museum when he was a child. For him, as for the generations of Belgian school children who have read *Tintin au Congo*, the museum’s caricature of central Africa was taken for granted. The artist arrived in Belgium when he was two years old and was



20 Aimé Ntakiyica’s *Histoire de la Famille, Arbre Généologique no. 1*. Glass jars, labels and wool, 2016.

Photo: © Philippe de Formanoir, 2019

only able to rid himself of such ideas much later, through contact with friends in the African diaspora. As a result, he has scarcely any nostalgia for his early museum meanderings, nor sympathy for the pilgrimage-like relationships that some visitors continue to have with this place, decades after decolonization. “Whether they grew up in the Congo or have never been there, their understandings have been fashioned by the Royal Museum. Belgian colonizers were never numerous, yet the impact of the colonial enterprise on Belgium was total.” It was not without reticence, then, that Aimé Ntakiyica accepted to participate in the opening of the AfricaMuseum to contemporary creation. “When my intervention was proposed through the exhibition *Persona* (2009), I was interested because the oeuvre that I presented, *Wir*, permitted me to confront this place. This work presents clothing associated with social identity [Tyrolean attire, a bullfighter’s outfit, a Scottish kilt] functioned all the better in a museum that is all about stereotypes.”

Aimé Ntakiyica’s discovery of objects from his own family in Burundi in one of the museum’s vitrines helped him to conquer the place. “Tervuren is something special to me. Between the days when I came as a pupil and the moment that I learned that things of my own family are found there, all of this began to take on completely different import for me. You may be Congolese, Burundian, or Rwandan and recognize objects from these countries. But when it is something that once belonged to your own family, it’s altogether different. And it is because of this that the idea to reveal my genealogical tree was sensible, and nothing else was needed.”

As an installation, *Histoire de famille. Arbre généalogique no. 1* (Fig. 20) is displayed near a photograph of one of Aimé Ntakiyica’s uncles, echoing an intimate relationship between the artist and the Museum that purchased his work for its reopening. “These are pots containing colored yarn. By no means did I want to intercede regarding their placement. In other words, museum staff found themselves with pots bearing the names of persons in my family and holding colored substances. They placed the pots as they chose. It was therefore a surprise for me, especially because the curators knew nothing of these names: They didn’t know whose they were, nor the relationships between one and another of them. It was up to them to play with the names or colors. I am very happy with the result. On the other hand, members of my family have asked me why they have not appeared in the genealogical tree or why they found themselves placed beside this person instead of another. I answered that I was not responsible, it was the Museum!”

The curators’ arbitrary and provisional display of the artist’s named pots reveals a subtle *mise en abyme*. Indeed, Aimé Ntakiyica delivers a remarkable illustration of the

irreducibility of objects to the classifications so often proposed and imposed in museum spaces, thus retaining said objects’ “capacity ... to resist us” (Bonnot 2014). Even though *Histoire de famille* was seen at the DakArt Biennale of 2016 and so was not commissioned by the Royal Museum, it encapsulates the purposes of the institution’s new Afropea gallery in which it appears, permitting persons of the African Diaspora to take possession of a corner of the museum where they may reflect upon their own trajectories in and on their own terms (see Gryseels 2018: 6). “The oeuvre that I present is a work in progress, because my family continues to grow ... What they appreciate here, in this museum, is that my project is not fixed in time: I am going to change the pots, I am going to add more of them. What is proposed in this gallery is that we artists may bring modifications, rectifications, additions of names and details” to the works we exhibit here. Such displays cannot be static.

AIMÉ NTAKIYICA, born in 1960 in Burundi, lives and works in Brussels. He trained in painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels and has broadened his media to include installation and performance arts. His work has been featured in the Africa Remix of 2004, and many times in Belgium and elsewhere. Recently, he has participated in the Biennale of Dakar (2016) and Afriques capitales in Lille (2017). ntakiyica@gmail.com.

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Notes

1 Translator’s note: Because the word *négre*—used deliberately by the artist—carries in French many of the same ambiguities and insults as “the N-word” in American English, the phrase *art nègre* may be used in positive ways similar to Léopold Senghor’s liberatory *Négritude* as the rally word for a movement of the 1950s that contributed to the Independence of African states. Yet the term *négre* more often demeans and demoralizes.

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The Romare Bearden Reader
 edited by Robert G. O’Meally
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reviewed by P.A. Mullins

This work is a valuable resource for scholars and anyone else interested in Romare Bearden, art history, art techniques, the Harlem Renaissance (which Bearden calls the Black Renaissance because not all participants were in Harlem), and black US history. Robert O’Meally presents a wide range of sources and historical scholarship including Bearden’s writing, art, and literary and musical scholarship. All the essays present work to give the readers a better understanding of the significances of Bearden’s work (art, essays, plays, and music), especially in the context of Western art history and black arts. There are several books already written about and written by Bearden concerning his life and work, many of which are exhibition catalogues with extensive large plate photographs, such as those found in Myron Schwartzman’s *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (1990) or Ruth Fine’s *The Art of Romare Bearden* (2003). O’Meally draws together the major themes of Bearden scholarship, providing a useful jumping-off point for insight into Bearden and his work.

The book is divided into three sections, beginning, in Part I, with an overview of Bearden’s life and the environments in which he lived and worked. Part II is a collection of significant essays written by Bearden that reflect on his creations and their relationship to the larger art world (including literature and music), giving special attention to the Harlem Renaissance and black African art. Part III presents essays by literary giants such as Toni Morrison, August Wilson, and Ralph Ellison, alongside prominent cultural critics such as Kobena Mercer, Sally Price, Richard Price, Richard J. Powell, and Albert Murray.

Each author works with different strands that influence Bearden and examines how they informed his work. How he used color,