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Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective

Diasporas of Art: History, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, and the Politics of Memory in Belgium, 1885–2014*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Challenges abound as contemporary museums engage the politics and culture of memory, particularly colonial memory, and ways of approaching histories of violence. The South Africa Johannesburg Museum represents one end of a spectrum, with a stark, evocative new building obliging visitors to experience the spaces of apartheid. France, inimitably supple, vaporizes the vexing problem of its colonial past by aestheticization, creating in the Quai Branly a new museum devoted to the highest standards of art across the continents. Belgium's Royal Museum for Central Africa, however, presents a different and unusual case. In 2005, the museum attempted to confront for the very first time a brutal colonial history in the center of a singular institution of official national denial: King Leopold II's palatial Congo Museum, opened in 1910 and never renovated. This article examines the museum's evasive commemoration of 2005 as a springboard to look back, and forward: back to the context of the museum's founding, exploring the architectural structures and imperial mentalities that shaped it, and forward to some of the ensuing controversies and initiatives as the museum undergoes a multiyear closure and major remodeling project. The museum is due to reopen in stages beginning in 2017.

Until 2005, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), set in parkland on the king's estate in Tervuren, near Brussels, was little known except to specialists. Operating as a federal unit with limited budgets, the Tervuren museum is enmeshed

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in a tangle of institutional arrangements distinctive to the decentralized political system of Belgium and unfamiliar to modern historians accustomed to museum administrations directed from the top down. Nonetheless, the RMCA has become a touchstone for national and international debates concerning colonial legacies and ways to transmit knowledge about them. Groups inside the museum and in Belgium are wrestling in varied ways with the dilemmas of colonial amnesia, especially regarding the period of the Congo Free State (1885–1908). Further, the past two years has seen a new outflow of the Tervuren collections to global circulation, yielding a number of exhibitions in the United States. While these have forged new museum partnerships, they have also unwittingly brought into view transnational and transcontinental connections in the history of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, suggesting that patterns of collective forgetting are not unique to Belgium.

The article will proceed in eight parts. Part I provides an introduction. Part II situates the Royal Museum in the field of museum creation in 1880s Belgium as an entry into aspects of the new nation's understudied cultural and imperial history; one example is the activities of A.-J. Wauters as scholar of Flemish arts and Congo publicist. It goes on to examine the establishment of King Leopold's Royal Congo Museum from 1897 to 1910, highlighting challenges to representation posed by the Congo Free State as a nonsettler empire of extraction. Part III describes some of the permanent installations that endured for a century, as well as the beginnings of the revision of the legacies of colonial denial in the 2005 exhibition *La Mémoire du Congo*, which acted as a catalyst for public engagement with the colonial past. Part IV surveys important changes within the museum from 2005 to its closing in 2013 and its emphasis on "Africa today and in the future" as it prepares to reconceptualize collections and displays.

In Part V, I suggest possibilities for reassembling "diasporas of objects," both Congolese and Belgian, as the museum moves forward. I argue for the notion of a diaspora of objects, and the systematic study of provenance and producers, to be extended from the museum's African collections to the arts made in Belgium from Congo raw materials and inspired by Congo motifs. I highlight my research on modernist Belgian Art Nouveau as a distinctively Congo style, with particular emphasis on examples of fin-de-siècle chryselephantine ivories as expressive forms of imperial profusion and displaced violence. In Part VI, I explore three instances in 2012 Belgium where "Africa as Continent" and generalized cross-cultural thematics were celebrated, diluting the particular histories of Congo and context still in need of reappraisal.

A deepening dehistoricization characterizes a new global turn, as I call it, of the Royal Museum, which has been sending collections to international venues since the 2013 closing. In Part VII, I identify a new diaspora of objects in two exhibitions in the United States from 2012 to 2014—first, a show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art featuring twenty-seven works, *Shaping Power: Luba*

Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa, and second, an exhibition touring the Southeast, *Kongo Across the Waters*, in which 110 Tervuren objects were featured to tell the story of “5 centuries of Africa in Florida.” Part VIII is the conclusion.

II. FROM NATIONAL INJURY TO IMPERIAL BOUNTY: MUSEUMS IN BELGIUM, 1885–1910

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, elites across Belgium turned to what they considered the unfinished business of nation building by crafting a canon of the arts as a unifying patrimony. Assiduous writers, connoisseurs, and archivists joined key officials to institutionalize art collections. Publications dedicated to inventory attributions and tracking object provenance abounded; new catalogs appeared. Scholars, collectors, and curators discovered new homes in major museums, such as the Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts, opened in 1890, and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, with an impressive building completed in 1887. These, along with museums added at the Cinquenaire, were part of the ambitious handiwork of King Leopold II, the *roi bâtisseur*, who transformed Belgium and for whom cultural, architectural, and imperial expansionism were interdependent.¹

The foundational expert A.-J. Wauters (1845–1916) provided a first synthetic view of the arts in his 1885 *Flemish School of Painting*. A scholar and Brussels museum commissioner, Wauters, along with writers and curators such as Henri Hymans (1836–1912) and Louis Maeterlinck (1846–1926), invoked specific sources and sites in the Flemish past as building blocks for a new artistic heritage in the present, reclaimed Rubens as a Flemish printmaker and painter, and wrested Pieter Brueghel the Elder and his sons from the confines of Dutch realism and history.²

¹ Leen de Jong, ed., *The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp* (Oostkamp, 2008); on King Leopold's expansionism see Debora Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism,” pt. 1, *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 139–81, esp. 139–44; Liane Rainieri, “Léopold II, ses conceptions urbanistiques, ses constructions monumentales,” in Herman Balthazar and Jean Stengers, *La Dynastie belge et la culture* (Brussels, 1990), 173–92; and Piet Lombaerde, *Léopold II, Roi-Bâtisseur* (Ghent, 1995).

² A.-J. Wauters, *La peinture flamande* (Paris, 1885); *Tableaux anciens* (Brussels, 1900); *Le siècle de Rubens et l'Exposition d'Art Ancien* (Brussels, n.d.); Henri Hymans, *Histoire de la gravure dans l'école de Rubens* (Brussels, 1879); *Oeuvres de Henri Hymans*, vols. 1–4 (Brussels, 1921); Louis Maeterlinck, *Quelques peintures identifiées de l'époque de Rubens* (Brussels, 1905). While the discovery and public recognition of the “Flemish Primitives” is often associated with the acclaimed 1902 Bruges exhibition, scholars emphasize that the collecting and categorization of Flemish art in Belgium and

In their chronicling and cataloging of collections, Wauters and his cohort sounded a common theme: lamentation. The history of the arts in Belgium was a history laced with loss and injury, cast in part as a diaspora and suffering of objects that paralleled the broader history being written in the 1880s of a nation invaded and wounded by foreign conquerors. Paintings and their provenance, for example, were defined by a cycle of confiscation and restitution, most notably by the plundering and removal of treasures such as Rubens's St. Walburgis triptych and the Ghent *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by French troops after the French Revolution and their subsequent return, in Joyous Entry festivals, after the fall of Napoleon. Yet the return home always carried with it the wounds of exile and the marks of violation by external aggressors. The scarred objects, as noted in the catalogs of Belgium's new museums, could never resume their sites and conditions of origin.³

While Wauters and his colleagues were devising classifications and categories for the arts of a prenatal Flemish past, King Leopold II achieved an astonishing goal: he claimed a vast new realm of his own devising, a conjury on a map called L'État Indépendant du Congo, the Congo Free State (fig. A1; figs. A1–A6 available online). First an international congress and then the Belgian parliament authorized the king to become the sovereign of this distant African realm, and the parliament provided the loans to fund it as an arena of investment and extraction. Thus was born what historians have called an anomalous colony without a metropole, a fictional state owned by the king, ruled by decree, and run from Brussels from 1885 to 1908.⁴

the Netherlands were pursued vigorously, and with distinct national agendas, since the 1840s. An essential text is Bernhard Ridderos, Anne van Buren, and Henk van Veen, eds., *Early Netherlandish Paintings: Rediscovery, Reception, and Research* (Los Angeles, 2005).

³ Till-Holger Borchert, Dorine Cardyn-Oomen, and Bruno Fornari, eds., *Ensur à Bosch: Les prémices de la "laamsekunstcollectie"* (Brussels, 2005), 55–90; André de Vries, *Brussels: A Cultural and Literary History* (New York, 2003), 123–24; V. Mirguet, *Histoire des belges et de leur civilization* (Brussels, 1896), 2:701–12.

⁴ Only one deputy voted against permitting the king to become the absolute ruler of a foreign realm while remaining a limited constitutional monarch in Belgium under the ambiguous legal terms of a "personal union." The unusual character of this imperial structure—which studiously avoided the word "colony"—is discussed in the 1902 "Congo Free State" entry in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, reprinted in Paul B. Armstrong, ed., Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, 2006), 99–113; Jean Stengers, "King Leopold's Congo 1886–1908," in Roland Olivier and G. N. Sanderson, *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 6 (Cambridge, 1985), 315–58; E. H. Kossmann, *A History of the Low Countries, Belgium and the Netherlands* (Oxford, 1999), 361–97; A.-J. Wauters, *Histoire politique du Congo belge* (Brussels, 1911), 55–58; Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (London, 1963); and CoBelCo.org, "Histoire de la colonisation belge du Congo, 1876–1910," <http://www.cobelco.org/Histoire/histoireframeset.htm>, 1–5.

Wauters, an early and enthusiastic supporter of the new Congo state, combined his art-historical work with articles, lectures, investment activities, and wide-ranging promotion of this overseas expansion. He published numerous books on the Congo after 1882 and edited the two premier magazines of the imperial period, *Le Mouvement géographique* and *Le Congo illustré*. A laissez-faire idealist and exuberant freemason, Wauters celebrated the Congo as an arena of free-trade universalism and a new space where Belgium, constrained and vulnerable in Europe, could now be daring and free. As he was building the canon for an art history of Flemish primitives, Wauters was also mapping the Congo: while he, like most citizens of Belgium, never traveled to Africa, by 1891 he was credited with discovering the source of the Ubangi, a tributary of the Congo River, through research he painstakingly pursued in his office in central Brussels.⁵

By 1895, King Leopold's Congo state transformed the way history was being written in Belgium, and it also broke the mold of the newly consolidating royal arts museums. By 1898, the kernel of a museum of the Congo was housed in temporary galleries at the king's Tervuren estate. The initial contents encompassed many examples of the products of the African domain that had granted Belgium sudden and spectacular profits, especially ivory tusks and the disks, cakes, and cables of latex extracted from wild lianas, or rubber vines. But a profusion of cultural artifacts, decorative arts, and use objects also appeared, trickling in with early explorers of the 1880s but swelling to a flood by 1898. While its own artistic heritage was being assembled and screened through the lens of loss and suffering objects, Belgium was itself becoming the agent and initiator of plunder and seizure in a distant African empire; now its shores were the recipient and beneficiary of a vast outflow of cultural materials. The Congolese objects had not been subject to a targeted removal like the one carried out by Napoleon, who is described in museum histories as having selected masterpieces of Flemish arts for the Louvre as the consummate sign of political triumph and as war booty. The glut of Congo artifacts deposited at King Leopold's Tervuren—woven baskets, intricate fishnets, shields, carved statuettes, chiefs' headdresses, silver and metal knives, iron pots, hatchets, arrows, spears, carved wooden spoons, etched calabash water jugs—were instances of collateral cultural damage, by-products of the frenzy for rubber that had cut a swath of fire and blood through the villages of

⁵ Despite his extraordinary influence, studies of A.-J. Wauters are sparse. In addition to his Flemish arts scholarship and writings on Congo geography and administration, Wauters was a directing member of a number of Congo Free State commercial companies in the 1880s, in which capacity he was involved in the hiring of Joseph Conrad to pilot a steamer on the Congo River. For a selection of Wauters's works, see *Le Congo au point de vue économique* (Brussels, 1885) and *Bibliographie du Congo: Catalogue méthodique* (Brussels, 1895). For an examination of his social circles, writing on African architecture, freemasonry, and networks of association, see Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness," pt. 1, 163, 178–79.

the Congo Free State, which, by 1908, even the enthralled optimist Wauters called “a nightmare” and a “pays de l’enfer.”⁶

Violence was on view in other museums as well. After Belgian independence in 1830, Pieter Brueghel the Younger’s copy of his father’s *Massacre of the Innocents* formed a centerpiece of the Brussels Royal Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 1). Bequeathed to the nation, the painting provided the touchstone of a cultural patrimony coursing with the themes of martyrdom and violence endured. In the painting, a sword-bearing soldier yanks a small child up by the arm; a mother pleads for her son while another sits wailing over her dead baby; and a circle of armored knights stabs a pile of babies with long pikes. Maurice Maeterlinck and Eugène Demolder both wrote prose adaptations of the painting in 1886 and 1889, respectively, continuing the theme (from the time of the painting’s creation and its many copies thereafter) that the image evoked a Spanish Alba and Flemish innocents—an allegory of a country beset by foreign invasion, cruelty, and oppression.⁷

Another Pieter Brueghel the Elder resurfaced in 1897; it was purchased and displayed in the new Antwerp Musée van den Bergh in 1904. This was *Dulle Griet*, or *Margot l’Enragée*, Mad Meg (fig. 2). Those in art-historical circles, including Henri Hymans and Wauters, were thrilled by the reappearance of a major Brueghel, and on Flemish soil.⁸ Brueghel’s *Dulle Griet*, a large, lunging female figure, rampages through a countryside racked by fire, smoke, monsters, and pillagers; the mouth of hell is visible in the distance. She wears a disheveled partial armor, with helmet and breastplate, sword clutched and pointed forward in her lowered right hand. Her left side is crammed and bulging: arm crooked with a strongbox held tightly under the shoulder; left gloved hand clutching a sack filled to the limit, with silver chalice peeking out. Her left forearm extends like a pole where two handles—those of a large pot and a wicker basket—are shown suspended. Loot overflows from these hanging containers, scooped up indiscriminately along the path of a moving force. Dishes, chalices, coins, and jugs pile on; an iron skillet protrudes from the back of the basket, while a knife tied on by a rope is swinging in easy reach by her side.

⁶ Wauters, *Histoire politique du Congo belge*, 183–312, esp. 241–47.

⁷ Maurice Maeterlinck, “Le Massacre des innocents,” in *Les débris de la guerre* (Paris, 1916), 129–47 (originally published in May 1886 in the journal *La Pléiade*); Eugène Demolder, “Le Massacre des innocents,” in *Impressions d’art* (Brussels, 1889), 35–39. On the circulation and copies of the Brueghel painting as a template of Spanish oppression of the Low Countries, see David Kunzle, “Spanish Herod, Dutch Innocents: Bruegel’s *Massacres of the Innocents* in Their Sixteenth-Century Political Contexts,” *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 51–82.

⁸ Henri Hymans, “*Margot L’Enragée*,” *un tableau retrouvé par Pierre Breughel le Vieux* (Paris, 1897).



FIG. 1.—Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Massacre of the Innocents*, ca. 1565–67, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Massacre_of_the_Innocents_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Massacre_of_the_Innocents_-_WGA3479.jpg. A color version of this figure is available online.

Writers at the time invoked a proverb that may have been part of Brueghel’s mentality when creating the picture: Dulle Griet, the folk female marauder, was said to be “plundering at the mouth of hell and emerging unscathed.” Others suggested that Brueghel again alluded to the historical period he lived through, evoking in the destructive Dulle Griet the Spanish invasion of the Low Countries. But in 1904 Belgium was itself the object of a growing firestorm of criticism for unleashing atrocities and destruction in the Congo.⁹ The sweep and scoop of stuff yielded by Dulle Griet’s plundering—from household crockery, jugs, pots, and skillets to a pirate’s treasure chest—bore striking affinity to the bonanza of spoils, swooped up randomly by officers moving through the Congo interior, that shipped out and came to be displayed in the emerging Congo museum of King Leopold at Tervuren.

⁹ Belgian parliamentary leader Emile Vandervelde called the years of bitter debate over Congo abuses and reform “our Dreyfus Affair”; see his *Souvenirs d’un militant socialiste* (Paris, 1939), 68–93.



FIG. 2.—Peter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet* (Mad Meg), 1562, <http://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/dulle-griet-mad-meg-1564#supersized-artistPaintings-186745>. A color version of this figure is available online.

A. *The Royal Congo Museum, 1897–1910*

World's fairs held in Belgium initiated the inflow of objects that would become the core collections of a royal Congo museum. Congo Free State raw materials and even some natives themselves were exhibited in Antwerp fairs in 1885 and 1894. But as the market for latex and ivory expanded, officers in the Congo received urgent requests from the king and from Edmond van Eetvelde, the Brussels administrator, for any and all artifacts: the king wished to show the public the full range of treasures and potential of the Congo. In preparation for the 1897 world's fair, which would include a dedicated Congo pavilion to be housed at the king's estate, cargo ships sent not only animal skins, elephant tusks, and sacks of latex but also a myriad of native use objects, from "fetish" statuettes to headdresses to curved hatchets, baskets, patterned cloth, spears, and carved neck rests. These were stuffed higgledy-piggledy, as Alphonse de Haulleville tells us, into the haylofts of the king's stables.¹⁰ The 1897 exhibition showed some of

¹⁰ Alphonse De Haulleville, "Le Musée du Congo belge à Tervueren," *La Revue congolaise* 1 (1910): 206–25; Philippe Maréchal, "Le Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale,"

them. Products like ivory, hardwoods, and rubber filled a “Congo Imports” hall. The native objects were tacked to walls and set along the display tables and floors of an ethnographic section designed by Art Nouveau architect Paul Hankar and organized vaguely by region. Scores of fetish figurines lined the ledges along the top of the galleries.¹¹

The success of the 1897 exhibition led the king and Congo Free State officials to maintain the pavilion displays as the kernel of a colonial museum at Tervuren. By 1904 King Leopold had enlisted French architect Charles Girault to build a permanent palatial structure, and he worked with Girault to plan the building as a larger version of the Paris Petit Palais and the Versailles Trianon that inspired it. Unlimited budgets were lavished on the project, funded by the king’s Congo treasury. The new Congo museum was to be the centerpiece of an enormous complex of buildings designed by Girault on the grounds of the royal estate. The plans for the complex included a “World Colonial School,” a “Colonial Congress Hall” outfitted with a 3,000-seat auditorium, and a pair of structures set aside for future Belgian acquisitions in the Far East. Girault’s Congo palace was also the terminus of a sight line from the newly completed colossal Triumphal Arch in Brussels, also funded by the king’s Congo treasury; a swath of roadway for the just-emerging automobiles favored by the technophile king as well as an electric tramway linked the two locations.¹²

While the museum’s large-scale external walls were brought to completion with alacrity, Girault spent five years at a representational impasse on the massive interior spaces, discovering few options for symbolic expression there. Anomalies of the Belgian monarchy and Congo sovereignty contributed to this struggle. The Belgian institution of the monarchy, of short lineage and constrained politically and ceremonially by strict constitutional regulations, had few visual traditions for glorifying the king. Further, the extraconstitutional construction of the king as absolute ruler of an empire of extraction made it difficult to apply a visual program of public celebration in a monument heralding its founder. Finally, the character of the Congo as a personal fiefdom could not be openly acknowledged, nor could the overseas conquest be affirmed in the visual exaltation of a national

in *La Dynastie et la culture en Belgique*, ed. Herman Balthazar and Jean Stengers (Brussels, 1990), 331–40.

¹¹ M. Luwel and Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervuren 1897* (Tervuren, 1967); Maurits Wynants, *Des Ducs de Brabant aux villages congolais, Tervuren et l’exposition coloniale 1897* (Tervuren, 1997).

¹² Charles Girault, “L’Oeuvre architecturale de Léopold II,” *L’Émulation* 11 (1926): 137–47; Lombaerde, *Léopold II, Roi-Bâtitseur*, 88–91; Wynants, *Des Ducs de Brabant*; Pierre Pirenne, “Projets de Léopold II: Réalisations actuelles,” *Congo-Tervuren* 5 (1959): 50–56; M. Luwel, “Histoire du Musée royal du Congo belge à Tervuren,” *Congo-Tervuren* 6 (1960): 30–49.

mission.¹³ King Leopold never met anyone from his second kingdom, and not many Belgians worked there, further thinning out imaginative resources for representation. In Paris, the halls and ceilings of Girault's Petit Palais configured allegories and historical episodes in urban and national life, such as Alfred Roll's *Marianne*, the symbol of the Third Republic, flying across gallery skies. In Girault's Royal Museum in Tervuren, the vaulted ceilings would remain blank, and unbroken sheets of patterned marble would form the bulk of the cavernous corridors inside.

Inside the rooms, giant maps filled the walls with various aspects of the Congo—product locations, political districts, and explorers' routes of discovery and conquest (fig. A2). The wall maps gave permanent and monumental form to a Belgian imperial culture exhilarated by the fact that a small, new, neutral nation had “acquired” one-thirteenth of the African continent, outmaneuvering the Great Powers; it also sealed in the palace walls the thrill of successful mapmaking on a grand scale, a glorious reversal of Belgium's own national destiny as an artificial country cobbled together by European diplomats.¹⁴ With giant cartography installed as the permanent iconography on the walls, the classification schemes for the interiors dramatized the origins of the museum as, in part, a showcase for valuable products as well as jungle animals, which appeared, from giraffes to elephants to hippos, stuffed and lifelike in processional rows on open platforms or as mounted skeletons in cases.

King Leopold set the groundbreaking of the museum to coincide with the 1905 festivities celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Belgian independence and the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Congo Free State. The

¹³ In Belgium, it was said, “the king rules but does not govern.” Leopold II, like his father before him, wore no crown and bore no scepter; he requested the right to rule through the communal ceremonies of the *Joyeuse entrée*. For the distinctive interaction of legal decentralization, communal authority, and limited monarchy in the new nation-state of Belgium after 1830, see Debora Silverman, “*Modernité sans frontières*: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of the Avant-Garde in Belgium, 1885–1910,” *American Imago* 68, no. 4 (2011): 707–97, esp. 714–20.

¹⁴ The “trauma” of Belgium's “amputation” and “dismemberment” at birth (a language used in the nineteenth century, especially regarding the slicing off of Limburg and Luxembourg as a condition of independence), confined by the 1830–31 Conference of London to the borders set for it and required to disable its fighting force, shaped a collective enthusiasm for what one writer in 1890 called a *Belgique nouvelle* in the Congo, where redemptive nation building could be pursued anew. I identify in my book in progress this interaction of incomplete nation building at home and compensatory, uninhibited expansionism in Africa as a central aspect of this variant of imperialism. For the frustrations of a neutral army, beset masculinity, and militancy at home and in the Congo as they crystallized in a work by James Ensor, see Silverman, “Ensor's *Panache*: Army and Empire in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and in Belgium, 1887,” <https://publications.artic.edu/ensor/reader/temptationstanthony#section/285> (Art Institute of Chicago Publications, 2014).

ceremony was held at Tervuren; the king placed a foundation stone at the site and buried with it a strongbox filled with what were said to be Congo Free State coins and Belgian currency.¹⁵ The year 1905 indeed marked a high point of Belgium's soaring economy and technological prowess; two decades of contact with the Congo Free State had remade Belgium as a global hub. Observing the bustle and the bulk of priceless stuffs at the port of Antwerp, a writer that year noted that Belgium had become a "[real] *pays de Cocagne*." Now the state of profusion and plenty that Pieter Brueghel the Elder had imagined as a compensatory fantasy amid sixteenth-century peasant deprivation had materialized as a dazzling mercantile deluge.¹⁶

But 1905 also marked the debacle of the Leopoldian Congo regime. That year was the climax of a period filled with acrimonious parliamentary debates and a storm of criticism over atrocities in the Congo Free State. Published evidence had existed since 1895, but by 1905 an official report by the British envoy Roger Casement, along with a report undertaken by appointees of King Leopold himself, made it impossible to deny any longer the devastation wrought by "red rubber" in the Congo. Politicians and citizens in Belgium remained deeply divided over how to respond. Critics of the king were vilified as "calumniators" and collaborators with covetous "Liverpool merchants," while reformers, both within Belgium and abroad, compiled and repeated the gruesome specifics of cruelty and greed in the *pays de l'enfer*: forced labor, invasion terror, public floggings, hostage taking, burning of villages, depopulation, and hand-severing—this last the product of a vicious accounting system requiring that native troops, whose ammunition was carefully rationed, present Belgian post commanders with a severed hand for every villager killed, as proof that they had not wasted bullets.¹⁷ Socialist deputy

¹⁵ Wynants, *Des Ducs de Brabant*, 159–60. The box with the money was apparently stolen during the night just after the ceremony (160).

¹⁶ Edmond de Bruyn, "Anvers," in *Notre pays, 1905* (Brussels, 1909), 1:245–76, quote on 260. The Brueghel print was on display at the Brussels 1910 world's fair.

¹⁷ Newspapers in Belgium, pressed by the Liberal Deputy Georges Lorand, began to publish reports of atrocities in the Congo Free State as early as 1896, such as Lorand's "Mains coupées" in the September 22 issue of *La Réforme*. The "red rubber" regime was a term made famous by 1906 by Congo reformer and former shipping clerk E. D. Morel. It was also circulated by 1898 by an artist-traveler from Belgium who visited the Congo, Louis Moorels, according to Sabine Cornelis, "Croquis congolais de Buis à Vaucleroy: Quelques regards d'artistes belges sur le Congo (1898–1930)," in Pierre Halen and Janos Riesz, *Images de l'Afrique et du Congo/Zaire dans les lettres françaises de Belgique et alentour* (Brussels, 1993), 113–27. Essential texts on Congo Free State history, administration, and violence are in Jules Marchal, *L'État libre du Congo: Paradis Perdu*, 2 vols. (Borgloon, 1996); CoBelCo.org, "Histoire de la colonisation belge du Congo, 1876–1910"; Ascherson, *The King Incorporated*; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York, 1999); Mark Twain (1905), *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (New York, 1999);

Jules Destrée and a disillusioned A.-J. Wauters condemned the “odious brigandage” of “modern conquistadors” in the king’s Congo Free State, noting that the brazen hypocrisy of the modern conquistadors made them even more repellent than their predecessors Cortés and Pizarro. King Leopold and his officers shrouded their marauding with appeals to civilization and philanthropic benefit for Africa, a detestable mixture of what Mark Twain, another Congo reformer and outspoken critic of the king, considered “money lust irradiated by high principle.” By 1908, after eight years of acrimonious debate in the Belgian parliament, the nation was forced to annex King Leopold’s colony, finally acknowledging the devastation wrought by the “red rubber” regime.¹⁸

The more beleaguered King Leopold became politically, however, the greater his architectural grandiosity. The Royal Museum took shape as he relinquished the Congo, and it formed the centerpiece of his bombastic defiance. While some of his building projects were canceled, the Congo museum was completed exactly as the king wished it. The state added funding for it as well as a cash settlement to the king with “gratitude” and in recognition of his “great sacrifices on behalf of the Congo that he created.”¹⁹ The museum opened officially in 1910 during the celebrations for Belgium’s eightieth anniversary of independence, one year after King Leopold’s death. Tributes abounded, acclaiming the king as the “founder” of a new world, a civilizing force who brought progress to backward people and prosperity to Belgium while revitalizing dormant Burgundian legacies of initiative and daring.²⁰

Edmund D. Morel, *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa* (London, 1904), and *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906* (Honolulu, 2005); Félix Cattier, *Étude sur la situation de l’État indépendant du Congo* (Brussels, 1906); and Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Du sang sur les lianes: Léopold II et son Congo* (Brussels, 1986). On cultural sources and expressive forms of violence, dismemberment, and severed hands in mid-nineteenth-century Belgium and after, see Debora Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness,” pt. 3, *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 20, no. 2 (2013): 22–61, and Silverman, “Modernité sans frontières,” 781–97.

¹⁸ Émile Vandervelde, *La Belgique et le Congo: Le passé, le présent, l’avenir* (Paris, 1911); Jules Destrée, “La Question coloniale” (Parliamentary sessions of July 1908), in *Oeuvres complètes* (Brussels, n.d.), 405–36, quote on 416–17; A. Conan Doyle, *The Crime of the Congo* (New York, 1909); Wauters, *Histoire politique du Congo belge*, 241–47.

¹⁹ CoBelCo.org, “Histoire de la colonisation belge du Congo, 1876–1910”; Wauters, *Histoire politique du Congo belge*, 344–401.

²⁰ M. Luwel, “Histoire du musée royale du Congo belge à Tervuren,” *Congo-Tervuren* 6 (1960): 33–37.

III. FROM THE ROYAL CONGO MUSEUM TO THE ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA, 1910–2010

The Royal Museum remained largely untouched for nearly a century, a virtual petrified forest of imperial triumphalism and the gargantuan container of the booty that resulted from its foundational policies of extraction. Classification systems and spatial organization retained the primary triad that had structured the walls and halls since the beginning: taxidermy, products, and giant maps.²¹ Despite the evidence amassed by generations of writers and critics both within and outside Belgium, the museum remained frozen in time and locked in silence, the most visible and provocative embodiment of what has been called “the great forgetting” in Belgian national culture and education.²² No consensus exists on the exact numbers, but ongoing debates have set the range: between 4 and 10 million Congolese died in the two and a half decades of the Congo Free State.

Until 2005, no mention of destroyed Congolese cultures and communities appeared in the Tervuren museum, though it did contain a “Hall of Memory” dedicated to 1,508 Belgian colonial pioneers. Visitors to the museum enter a grand marble rotunda ringed by elevated niche statues, large-scale gilded allegories including *Belgium Bringing Security to the Congo*, *Belgium Bringing Well-Being to the Congo*, and *Slavery*, the last representing the fearsome Arab slaver whom Belgian liberators were summoned to destroy. Positioned below the statues are the lowly recipients of Belgian benevolence, a series of seated and blackened bronze figures by Herbert Ward, including a hunched-up “chief” holding his spear in front with skulls arrayed on his back and an “artist” pushing his finger along the ground to sketch between splayed legs. Other instances of Congolese natives in Tervuren are Samba, the portly pygmy in colonial uniform who greets visitors at the café, and the ten-foot painted plaster figure who still draws most of the crowds in the central marble gallery—the hooded leopard-man, the Aniota, of 1913 (fig. 3). Part of a Congolese “secret society,” according to the appended text, the Aniota, equipped with lethal iron claws and spotted skin costume, uses the cover of animal disguise to commit murder. One Belgian fascinated by the Aniota display at

²¹ Some changes did occur, to be sure, and I examine a number of them below in Part IV. But I emphasize here the structures that remained uninflected—the architectural framework, murals and allegorical statues, product halls and myriad glass cases of large-scale stuffed African animals that startled many visitors. The history of the museum, while still not well known, has attracted some scholarly attention. Two examples are Maarten Couterenier, “No Documents, No History: The Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section of the Museum of the Belgian Congo Tervuren 1910–1948,” *Museum History Journal* 3, no. 2 (2010): 123–48; and Sarah Van Beurden, “The Value of Culture: Congolese Art and the Promotion of Belgian Colonialism, 1945–1959,” *History and Anthropology* 24 (2013): 472–92.

²² The term is from Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 292–306.



FIG. 3.—Paul Wissaert, *Leopard Man*, 1913. HO.0.1.371, collection RMCA Tervuren. A color version of this figure is available online.

Tervuren, Georges Rémi, known as Hergé, adapted the figure as a character in his 1931 *Tintin au Congo*. Like the artist Paul Wissaert and King Leopold II before him, Hergé had never set foot in the Congo. Thus, for almost a century, a wall of silence reigned regarding the millions of natives who died under Belgian rule, while millions of museum visitors beheld a dramatic embodiment of a Congo tribesman caught in the act of killing one of his own people.

In 2002, the museum's role as a carrier of "the great forgetting" began to give way. The Belgian government announced that year that the museum would be reorganized under a new director, Guido Gryseels. The plan was for the museum to remain open to the public during a long renovation process that was to be completed in 2010, coinciding with the one-hundredth anniversary of its original opening. The first phase of the museum's renewal unfolded in a major exhibition designed to take a comprehensive look at the colonial past, entitled *Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era*, which ran from April to September 2005.

According to reports, it was the combined impact of two books that had finally compelled the government to accommodate new realities in the Royal Museum. In 1999, the Belgian sociologist Ludo De Witte published a volume that documented official involvement in Patrice Lumumba's assassination, prompting a government apology.²³ Even more disturbing was the best-selling 1998 book (published in Belgium in 1999) by the American writer Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Hochschild marshaled extensive evidence to chronicle the unprecedented brutality of the Leopoldian regime, its national and international beneficiaries, and its formidable capacity to resist an army of powerful critics. Hochschild's riveting story uncovered some new sources while also highlighting published accounts, especially the multivolume works of the 1990s by former Belgian diplomat Jules Marchal. Marchal had spent years ferreting out previously inaccessible government archives in order to document the wretched history of Leopold's Congo Free State and the continuity of forced labor in the Belgian Congo from 1910 to 1945. While "virtually ignored" by professional historians and official circles, Marchal's work was read by many in Belgium, and Hochschild's narrative catapulted the Congo to the center of public debate.²⁴

King Leopold's Ghost met with a polarized reception in Belgium, divided between reverent admiration and "furious denunciation." A leading scholar of Congo history, Jean Stengers, whose works provided some of the evidentiary basis for Hochschild's book, suggested that Hochschild was motivated by sensationalism and the desire to attract the attention of the media and the public. The Royal Museum's new director admitted in interviews that he was "shocked" when he read Hochschild's book: it was full of "revelations" that were "pretty hard hitting." Gryseels, then aged fifty-two, confirmed the power of "the great forgetting" when he explained that he had never "heard a critical word about our colonial past" in his education in the 1960s and 1970s, that "no one really talked about it," and that "my generation was brought up with the view that Belgium brought civilization to

²³ Ludo De Witte, *De Moord op Lumumba* (Brussels, 1999); *The Assassination of Lumumba*, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Ferby (London, 2001).

²⁴ Marchal, *L'État libre du Congo, Paradis perdu*.

Congo, that we did nothing but good out there.” Gryseels went on to acknowledge the gaps in the museum, noting that visitors do not “find any information about the allegations made” in Hochschild’s or other books. In planning the first *Memory of the Congo* exhibition, Gryseels explained, the museum would begin the process of renewal by providing a broad, balanced, and inclusive view with multiple historians’ perspectives, thus affording the visitor the “scientific” materials to “make up his own mind.”²⁵

Memory of the Congo drew mixed reviews and great crowds to Tervuren in 2005. The show unfolded in broad thematic groupings of vague chronology and relied on a “multidisciplinary” and “multimedia” approach that emphasized multiple viewpoints. Omitting any mention of forced labor, equivocating on depopulation, and deflecting any discussion of colonial violence, the exhibition took shape overall as an exercise in tepid and reluctant revisionism.²⁶ Critics in and beyond Belgium emphasized the limits and selectivity of its approach, dramatized in one way by activists in Oostende and Diksmuide who organized to combat colonial amnesia and the long shadow of Leopoldian denial through what they called “artistic mutilations” of public statuary. In Oostende, the target was a large equestrian tribute sculpture to Leopold II placed along the beachfront in 1931. The left side of the statue showed a Congolese native, turning up toward the king to express the “gratitude of the Congolese people to Leopold II for liberating them from Arab slavery.” The Oostende activists considered the sculpture an affront to memory, a history too long unacknowledged. They spent a few hours one night sawing off the left hand of the African, noting that the severed hand on the sculpture “corresponds better to historical reality.” In another Flemish town, Diksmuide, activists placed a provocative honorary wreath at the foot of a statue of Baron Jules Jacques. While celebrated as a hero of World War I, Baron Jacques had also been a military officer in the Congo Free State, and local groups aimed to publicize his complicity in the Leopoldian regime. A week of action devoted to the “forgotten colonial past” was sponsored by the Diksmuide Communal Cultural Center in May 2005, kicking off with an evening gathering at the Jacques statue. Organizers placed a wreath at the base of the statue—not a wreath of flowers but

²⁵ Interview with Guido Gryseels, quoted in Alan Riding, “Belgium Confronts Its Heart of Darkness,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2002, A19.

²⁶ Silverman, “Art Nouveau,” pt. 3, 21–22; Adam Hochschild, “Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era Exhibition at the Royal Museum for Central Africa,” *New York Review of Books* 52, no. 15 (2005): 39; AHA Presidential Panel, “History, Museums, and the Politics of Memory: The Congo in Belgium after King Leopold’s Ghost,” New York, January 3–5, 2009; Jan-Bart Gewald, “More than Red Rubber and Figures Alone: A Critical Appraisal of the Memory of the Congo Exhibition at the Royal Museum for Central Africa,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39 (2006): 471–87.

one fashioned from a rubber tire. Four severed hands and a bloodstained placard confronted the public with arresting evidence of the history long denied.²⁷

These symbolic reenactments of colonial violence reveal the continuing conflicts within communities in Belgium, which remain unresolved, as does the fate of the many other statues and symbols glorifying King Leopold II and imperial heroes. The 2005 Tervuren show thus acted as a catalyst for a long-delayed public engagement with the colonial past while exposing the fault lines in the politics of memory, especially concerning the foundational period of Leopoldian rule in the Congo Free State.²⁸

New voices in Belgium have emerged since the exhibition from a number of varied sectors. These range from professional historians like Guy Vanthemsche to writer David Van Reybrouck to photographer Carl De Keyzer, all committed to integrating a fuller and unvarnished history into public discourse and national pedagogy, including at the museum.²⁹ A new generation of scholars is now at work; both Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU) and Université catholique de Louvain (UCL), for example, have emerged as hubs of research on colonial history, including the Leopoldian period.³⁰ Eklektik Productions, a collaborative

²⁷ Michael Meeuwis, "Het activisme van der verminking/L'activisme de la mutilation," in *Belgische Vereniging van Afrikanisten/Association Belge des Africanistes*, *Forum no. 25*, *Nieuwsbrief/Bulletin*, July 2005, 3–12, quotes on 9, 10.

²⁸ The left hand sawed off the Congolese figure on the Oostende statue was never recovered, and arts activists extended their provocation by staging the reappearance of the hand in various places around Belgium: between 2005 and 2010, the hand would pop up in a public square and then be snatched back. A caustically comic documentary short film by Pieter De Vos was made about the hand in 2010. Entitled *Sikitiko, the King's Hand*—Swahili for "I'm sorry"—the film presented a fanciful resolution of colonial denial with King Leopold apologizing to the Congolese people in their language, hailed by a native military band. The film toured internationally and won the 2013 prize for best political short film at the Buenos Aires venue. It can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/13652184>. My thanks to Aaron Hyman for the link.

²⁹ Guy Vanthemsche, "The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo," in *Europe and the World in European Historiography*, ed. Csaba Levai (Pisa, 2006), and *Nouvelle histoire de Belgique*, vol. 4, *La Belgique et le Congo—Empreintes d'une colonie, 1885–1980* (Brussels, 2006); Vincent Viaene, David Van Reybrouck, and Bambi Ceuppens, eds., *Congo in België: Koloniale Cultuur in de Metropool* (Leuven, 2009); David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: Een Geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 2010); Carl De Keyzer and Johan Lagae, *Congo belge en image* (Tielt, 2010); Carl De Keyzer, *Congo (Belge)* (Tielt, 2010).

³⁰ See, for example, the works by UCL faculty Vincent Dujardin, Valérie Rosoux, and Tanguy de Wilde d'Estmael, *Léopold II, Entre génie et gêne* (Brussels, 2009), and KU scholars Jo Tollebeek, ed., *Mayombe: Ritual Sculptures from the Congo* (Tielt, 2010), Jan Vandersmissen, *Koningen Van de Wereld: Leopold II en de aardrijkskundige beweging* (Leuven, 2009), and Vincent Viaene, "King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860–1905," *Journal of Modern History* 80 (2008): 741–90.

group of young documentary filmmakers, graphic artists, and historians, both Francophone and Flemish, recently released a three-part television series on the history of the Congo that incorporated archival film footage and photographs, including some never before made public, from the period of the rubber terror, which they assembled from the Tervuren museum collections. Close to a million viewers in Belgium watched the series.³¹ Celebrated contemporary artist and performer Jan Fabre began in 2008 to incorporate themes of rapacity, violence, and repressed memory of the Congo in his startling installations in European exhibitions. Yet resistance to these efforts remains tenacious, encompassing some ex-colonials, political officials, and members of the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry, which still closely monitors the Tervuren museum.³²

IV. TOWARD A NEW TERVUREN MUSEUM?

After the *Memory* show, some changes took the museum in a new direction; others did not. The palace still greeted visitors with the strange 1997 sculpture group by Tom Frantzen, *The Congo I Presume?* (fig. 4), showing an African elephant head and King Leopold's bust topped by three peg-leg natives. In 2006 Frantzen added another group and fountain at the roundabout entry to the park, *The Bandundu Water Jazz Band*. Here a festive band of jungle creatures—jaunty hippo, grinning crocodile, sporty pelican, and earnest tortoise among them—march with their spouting instruments as they lead the way to the museum, a dissonant riff on the stash of their thanatal counterparts awaiting the visitor in the galleries.

Inside the museum, numerous efforts unfolded to update the institution and make it more welcoming. A design firm was hired to create a new logo, yielding a double “AFRICA” and “Tervuren” medallion that deemphasizes the “Royal Museum” part of the title. New children's and family programs sprang up in the large-scale “products galleries” where Congolese music, crafts, and dance are showcased. New marketing initiatives offered sleepovers for kids called “Night in the Museum” (evoking the Ben Stiller movie), and the “colonial rotunda and marble halls” could now be rented for private parties. A 2012 exhibition, *Uncensored: Vivid Tales from Behind the Scenes*, allowed the public to visit the vast basement storerooms of the palace “for the first and last time” before the museum closed for renovation. This area included the “Trophy Cellar,” eerie, cavernous rooms filled with rows of mounted stuffed heads of giraffes, hippos, gazelles, and antelopes; nearby, another section, like a catacomb, showed scores of elephant

³¹ The Eklektik Productions group and film, organized by Samuel Tilman (b. 1975), included Daniel Cattier, a great-grandson of Félicien Cattier, the jurist who in 1892 helped provide the legal basis for King Leopold's exclusive domainal rights in the Congo Free State and by 1906 had become one of the king's most tenacious critics.

³² I discuss Fabre's developing encounter with colonial denial and colonial memory in Silverman, “Art Nouveau,” pt. 3, 34–38, 50.



FIG. 4.—Tom Frantzen, *The Congo I Presume?* Statue and sculpture group, 1997. Photograph by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

crania and tusks on shelves and on the floor, some arranged in a semicircle to frame a giant elephant skull and jaw with intact tusks mounted high on a post.³³

An annual Tervuren/Congo fashion show and festival began in 2007, part of an effort to bring a Congolese public into the museum. The fiftieth anniversary of Congo independence in June 2010 prompted a number of exhibitions celebrating Africa and African communities in Belgium, especially Brussels. Oral histories and film interviews were used very effectively as part of the museum's 2010 multi-disciplinary show *Independence! Congolese Tell Their Stories of 50 Years of Independence*, while the crossover and contrasts of the worlds of Congolese in Ixelles and Kinshasa emerged in a photography exhibit by Jean-Dominique Burton, *Kinshasa-Brussels: From Matonge to Matonge*.³⁴ Children from the Congo began to appear on the "Kids' Pages" of the museum website, inviting virtual visitors to "my country, the Congo," and providing a new African presence in the museum's

³³ "Uncensored: Histoire animées des coulisses/Uncensored: Kleurrijke verhalen achter de schermen." There was no catalog.

³⁴ Matonge, in the Brussels municipality of Ixelles, is home to a large African community, with a great proportion from the DRC.

public face. In 2008 and again in 2010, two young artists from Lubumbashi (Katanga Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC), the photographer Sammy Baloji and the writer and cultural activist Patrick Mudekerezwa, were invited to spend several weeks at Tervuren in a new “Artists in Residence” program.³⁵

Some important changes began to inform the collections and the history and research departments, where young curators and scholars were added to the staff, and the imprint of a new generation started to emerge. Exhibitions were now highlighting artifacts more critically, but they still had to squeeze awkwardly into existing structures. Parts of the ethnographic galleries were remodeled to feature more of the museum’s permanent collection of African masks, musical instruments, and *nkondi*—the magical power figures, usually with protruding nails, shards of glass, and bits of feathers, rope, or shells, that were once called “fetishes.” The elegant and informative installations of these objects, arts, and contexts helped in part to rebalance the experience of visitors inundated by the countless displays of mounted and stuffed dead creatures, from beetles and pythons to birds, crocodiles, and mammals.³⁶

Other changes came to the archives and library, housed in a separate structure near the museum.³⁷ In 2008 a new summer research program brought African graduate students from the DRC to train on site in the archives for the first time, and in 2010 the museum collaborated with Ghent University scholar Johan Lagae and photographer Carl De Keyzer to create an unprecedented exhibition of some of the early colonial images from the archives that had never before been seen by the public. Assembled in an exhibition in Antwerp, these photographs, taken in the Congo between 1885 and 1920, were reprinted by De Keyzer in large format. They included depictions not only of iron bridges and steamers but also of pith-helmeted agents testing out their Maxim machine guns; of natives working, chained together by the neck; and of Conradian bodies shown discarded and disintegrating in the bush. De Keyzer created an extraordinary complement to these early colonial images from Tervuren by juxtaposing them with his own set of photographs taken during months of travel and study in the DRC the year

³⁵ Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, *Sammy Baloji & Patrick Mudekerezwa en résidence au Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, Congo Far West, Arts, sciences et collections* (Milan, 2011).

³⁶ Chief curator Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, who recently left the museum, spearheaded innovative exhibitions: see, for example, *Persona: Masks of Africa, Identities Hidden and Revealed* (Tervuren, 2009), and *Fetish Modernity* (Tervuren, 2011).

³⁷ Dr. Sabine Cornelis, scholar and long-time head of the colonial history section, has facilitated the research of many scholars who have worked in the collections, as have Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, Maarten Couttenier, and Nancy Vanderkinderen.

before, and crowds flocked to Antwerp to see the exhibit.³⁸ A similar experiment exhibiting Congo photographs, past and present, resulted from a trip taken by museum historian and anthropologist Maarten Couttenier with the Lubumbashi artist Sammy Baloji. Together, in 2010, they retraced part of the 1898–1900 expedition to the Katanga region undertaken for King Leopold II by Belgian military officer Lieutenant Charles Lemaire, including in their trip a visit to the site of a rarely discussed 1899 massacre that took place under Lemaire’s authority. In a subsequent exhibition, Baloji’s Katanga photographs were paired with archival images and documents from the Tervuren collections of the Congo Free State regime.³⁹

These developments in the museum are now part of a more substantial plan for transformation. In 2005, as mentioned earlier, the museum publicized a refurbishing of the galleries—“A New Museum in 2010!”—that aimed to keep the building and exhibits open for visitors during the work and was to be completed in time for the centenary of the opening of King Leopold’s Tervuren palace. In the period after the *Memory* show and the debates and controversies it generated, long-term strategies for reconceptualizing the museum’s future expanded, and what was a small-scale adaptation became a full-scale renovation. Although the scope, structure, and contents of a new museum were not immediately clear, an ambitious architectural plan was commissioned and publicized. Guido Gryssels announced in 2013 that the museum would close for at least three years and reopen in 2016; a second phase of change was planned for completion in 2020.

In the past few years the emphasis of the director has clearly shifted in tone and ambition. The defensive stance of 2005 concerning “allegations” by Hochschild, the need to “contextualize” violence, and debates over the misplaced use of the term “genocide” in the Leopoldian colonial past has ceded to an enthusiastic embrace of the museum’s new direction. The outdated displays, Gryseels noted in an interview, will now give way to a focus on “Africa today and in the future . . . better late than never.”⁴⁰ New partnerships have sprung up, with the university in Kinshasa as well as with New York’s Museum for African Art, among others, and funding has been secured for scientific projects and exhibitions that promote “public awareness and knowledge about Africa.”

The “better late than never” formula has implications not only for the modernizing of the museum but also for the task of confronting the challenges of “the long forgetting” and the unacknowledged history of violence that distorted the

³⁸ Carl De Keyzer and Johan Lagae, *Congo belge en images* (Tielt, 2010); De Keyzer, *Congo (Belge)*.

³⁹ Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, *Sammy Baloji & Patrick Mudekereza en résidence au Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale*, esp. 34–109.

⁴⁰ Philip Blenkinsop, “Fifty Years On, Belgium Struggles with Ex-Colony Congo,” *Reuters*, June 28, 2010, 2.

museum from its inception. Gryseels's look forward raises questions of how the museum may deal with the past; the replacement of the past with the present will not be an adequate strategy for moving forward. In 2008, in the product room featuring the wonders of the Congo *lianes*, the *caoutchouc* latex and rubber-vine display cases that had been untouched for decades were shuttered, sealed in frosted glass, and marked with strips of tape. By 2012, a visitor to the museum would find that the rubber sections of the gallery had vanished altogether. But bracketing the past—covering it over and closing it off—is ineffective: it only creates a new way to deny a past that will continue to haunt. In the taped-over rubber display cases of 2008, viewers could still see the haunched segments of vines, their shadow and outline peeking through. Like the memory of the Leopoldian regime itself, they hovered, suspended, intruding on the space outside and demanding integration (fig. 5).

V. TOWARD THE FUTURE: DIASPORAS OF OBJECTS, CONGOLESE AND BELGIAN

One way in which the Tervuren museum will rethink past and present will likely refer to international debates and models regarding colonial collections in



FIG. 5.—Taped over rubber (*caoutchouc*) cases in RMCA product room gallery, 2008. Photograph by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

postcolonial museums outside Belgium, as well as those that have approached histories of violence.⁴¹ Before the discussion broadens to include international concerns, however, there are significant issues and topics within the museum's own history and materials that need to be addressed. I offer here some possibilities for rebuilding while balancing history, memory, and the future of the Congo in the new "Africa" Tervuren.

A. Archaeology of Objects/Diaspora of Objects: Congo

The timing, conditions, sites, and sources of the massive outflow of artifacts that ended up in Tervuren, especially during the first decades of the Congo Free State, are just beginning to be studied. Former curator Boris Wastiau's 2000 exhibition and catalog, *ExitCongoMuseum*, offered an important first intervention, which was followed by an African studies conference Wastiau organized at the museum in 2005 on colonial violence and collecting.⁴² Pillage, plunder, and market networks have been given occasional emphasis with displayed objects in Tervuren exhibitions, such as in the 2007 *Couvre-chefs* (Headdresses) installation. American anthropologist Allen Robert's 2012 book *A Dance of Assassins* examined the story and fate of a power statuette taken to Belgium from a beheaded Tabwa chief and rival of army officer Lieutenant Émile Storms in 1884. The wooden statuette has been exhibited for almost a century, without comment, alongside a number of other artifacts in a Tervuren gallery case.⁴³ Ultimately, provenance and producers may be irretrievably lost for many parts of the museum's holdings, as the loss of their histories accompanies the destruction of communities and peoples. Attempts to systematize information are underway in the museum, with a comprehensive digital project to create an inventory of all the items in the vast collections.

B. Archaeology of Objects/Diaspora of Objects: Belgium

1. *Art Nouveau's "coup de fouet" Congo.* A promising and little-discussed aspect of the archaeology and diaspora of objects in the Tervuren collections relates to those made by artists in Belgium from Congo raw materials and for Congo representations, especially in the foundational period of King Leopold's Free State. We know that Leopold and his Brussels-based secretary of state for the Congo, Edmond van Eetvelde, gave modern artists free (or very low-cost) ivory and Congo hardwoods for the 1897 exhibition to showcase products and the artistic possibilities of Congo resources. Art Nouveau artists—Henry van de Velde, Georges Hobé, Paul Hankar, and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, among others—

⁴¹ These could include the Johannesburg Museum of Apartheid, National Museum of the American Indian, and the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology.

⁴² These conference papers were never published.

⁴³ Allen F. Roberts, *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Colonial Hegemony in the Congo* (Bloomington, IN, 2012).

were hired to design the Congo section of the Tervuren fair: both its interior furnishings and the plinths for chryselephantine statues, which would form a nucleus of the Royal Museum a decade later. The term “Style Congo” emerged at the time from this close association between Belgian modernism and the king’s Congo; little-known archives at the Tervuren museum show that it was occasionally called “King Leopold Style,” and the 1959 Tervuren museum journal featured Art Nouveau and even referred to it as Leopold’s and as “Belgian Style” or “Tervuren Style.”⁴⁴

These core Art Nouveau interiors and fittings were disassembled and dispersed, and we do not know enough about when and where they circulated. Photographs and postcards through the 1930s show some of these signature Art Nouveau display cases and tables being used for ongoing functions in the Royal Congo Museum galleries: Georges Hobé’s tables in the Salle du Caoutchouc, for example, adjacent to the large-scale plaster sculpture of a pair of fictional Congo “rubber tappers” by a tree trunk; Gerard Van Tuyn’s cabinets and tabletops filled with specimens of giant fish and snakes from the Congo in sealed formaldehyde jars; and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy’s display cases packed with natives’ pots and statuettes (fig. 6). After 1967, some of these furnishings were transferred out to the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH). Van de Velde’s large armoire in Congo wood, in which pith helmets and officers’ uniforms were featured as part of his installation of the 1897 Tervuren exhibition’s “Export Room,” was sent there. Serrurier-Bovy’s cases, also sent to Brussels, are now in the RMAH attic storerooms; one of these cases was taken out of storage for a 2005 exhibition of Belgian art and design.⁴⁵

Reassembling the missing histories of such Belgian objects made from Congo raw materials will also help create a more comprehensive account of their making, meaning, and reception. Biographical facts, social circles, networks of association, patronage hubs, and aesthetic patterns with connections to the Congo have long remained unrecognized in the story of Art Nouveau; the 1897 exhibition has been viewed as a discrete episode of encounter with Africa. But Congo forms, figures, and fantasies had spurred artists’ creative consciousness for more than a decade before the Tervuren installations, and they were integral to the development of the distinctively Belgian variant of Art Nouveau. My research shows the

⁴⁴ A full discussion of the raw materials and official commissions for the 1897 exhibition, their Art Nouveau designers, and the evidence assembled on a “Style Congo” or “King Leopold Style” can be found in Silverman, “Art Nouveau,” pts. 1–3. The legacy of Belgian Style art nouveau as “Tervuren style” underlies the article by Jean van de Voort: “De ‘Belgische stijl’ te Tervuren,” *Congo-Tervuren* 5 (1959): 62–63.

⁴⁵ On the armoire, the Export Room, and Congo “steamer style,” see Silverman, “Art Nouveau,” pt. 3, 3–13, 46–47; the Serrurier-Bovy display case appeared in the 2005 Brussels exhibition galleries but not the catalog: Claire Leblanc, *Art Nouveau and Design, Les arts décoratifs de 1830 à l’Expo 58* (Brussels, 2005).



FIG. 6.—Gustave Serrurier-Bovy's display cases in Royal Museum. Postcard, n.d. Courtesy of Cathleen Chaffee.

emergence of a coherent and specifically Congo lexicon in this modernist design movement in 1890s imperial Belgium. The structural linearism or “line of force” sought by Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde after 1893, for example—known as the *coup de fouet* or “whiplash style”—provided visual equivalents of both the rugged and sinuating coils of the Congo’s wild rubber vines, hailed as “vegetable boas” with “veins of gold,” and the lacing drive of the imperial *chicotte*, the long flogging whip at the center of Leopold’s regime. And Van de Velde’s radical theory of modern ornament—defined as an integral union of shape and material—has one of its previously unknown roots in his fascination with Congolese body arts, known in Belgium after 1878 as *tatouage*, or scarification.⁴⁶ With these kinds of contexts in mind, reconstructing the history and dispersal of the Tervuren Museum’s Art Nouveau interiors may help illuminate some new aspects of the production and reception of these arts in their society over time, as well as raising some new questions about why not only the impact of Africa but even numerous, seemingly obvious facts—such as Van de Velde’s brother Willy being an explorer of the Congo along with Henry Morton Stanley in the early 1880s, and Horta’s early work on King Leopold II’s Congo greenhouse—have for so long been left out of the interpretive field for analyzing the careers and styles of these “pioneers of modern design.”⁴⁷

2. *Chryselephantines, violence breaking through.* Similar benefits may accrue from an accounting of the archaeology and diaspora of the quintessential objects created in Belgium from the raw materials of empire: the Tervuren museum’s collections of chryselephantine sculptures. This distinctive genre combining ivory and precious metals, adapted from classical precedents, was revitalized after 1890 with commissions from the king and Van Eetvelde for modern artists to showcase for the public the new aesthetic forms made possible from Congo resources. Eighty of these were created for the 1897 world’s fair Hall of Honor, and many more were added to the collections in the decades following.⁴⁸ A

⁴⁶ Silverman, “Art Nouveau,” pts. 1, 2. A decade before Picasso and Matisse discovered formal solutions to problems of painting in West African masks and sculptures, Van de Velde’s invention of modernist ornament celebrated what he saw as the abstract patterns of raised flesh cuts adorning Congolese bodies.

⁴⁷ The quoted reference is to Nikolaus Pevsner’s title for his seminal early history of architectural modernism, where he hailed Belgian Art Nouveau architects Horta and Van de Velde as “pioneers of modern design.” This trajectory and the terminology of pioneers, modernity, and design need to be resituated amid the specificities of the culture of 1880s and 1890s Belgium, where “pioneers” of Africa were celebrated as they explored and annexed the Congo interior.

⁴⁸ The full list of the 1897 chryselephantine sculptures is found in Lieutenant Th. Masui, *Guide de la section de l’État indépendant du Congo à l’Exposition de Bruxelles-Tervueren* (Brussels, 1897), 13–16; an inventory of the group from the 1897 fair and just after is in Jacqueline Guisset, ed., *Le Congo et l’art belge, 1880–1960* (Tournai, 2003), 152–55. The foundational study of the chryselephantines is Tom Flynn, “Taming the Tusk:

special challenge of the medium of ivory was that even small-scale figure carving required the appendage of multiple tusk pieces; with the technique of chryselephantine, the overlay of the metal wraps concealed the joins and cuts visible on body surfaces. In the most famous of the Tervuren group, an Athena-inspired large composition by Charles Van der Stappen called *Mysterious Sphinx* or *The Secret*, the female figure's imposing upper body was made from three separate elephant tusks while a chased silver casing of armor and helmet secured the component parts (fig. 7). Critics in 1897 applauded the sculptor's ingenuity in devising the fitted silver armor as a seal disguising the assemblage inside; the wraparound from head to bust united metal and ivory "without a join being seen in any part."⁴⁹

Like the Tervuren Art Nouveau interiors, the chryselephantines marked the museum galleries for decades. Over time they were subject to rotating display and dispersal, and we lack a systematic history of how, where, and why they were shown and what they may have meant to the public that saw them. Postcards and photos through the 1930s show a group of statuettes stationed in the museum's imposing entryway rotunda encircling a mounted ivory bust of King Leopold in the center. Van der Stappen's *Sphinx* sat just across from him, her hand gesturing to the secret. Also appearing in the museum photos is a long alley of ivory figurines set on stands along one of the giant wall maps of the Congo districts. The statuettes' diminutive aestheticizations provide a striking contrast with both the wall map and the ivory products rooms documented in nearby galleries, such as the one containing the *Trophée d'ivoire*, an open mounted splay of giant tusks sprouting upward in the center of the area (fig. 8), or a product room from another date showing encased displays of oversize tusks crammed together with innumerable smaller ivory pieces.

In 1967, many of the chryselephantines were transferred out of Tervuren and sent to the Brussels RMAH; after 2005, they were reassembled for permanent exhibition in an opulent setting there, the Van der Stappen *Sphinx* among them.⁵⁰

The Revival of Chryselephantine Sculpture in Belgium during the 1890s," in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum*, ed. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (New York, 1998), 188–204.

⁴⁹ Fernand Khnopff, "Studio-Talk," *The Studio* (June 1897): 202; Octave O. Maus, "La sculpture en ivoire à l'exposition de Bruxelles," *Art et décoration* (November 1897): 132. For an extensive discussion of violence and disguise in the contemporary critical discourse, as well as of violent handling and techniques in creating the Congo chryselephantines, see Silverman, "Art Nouveau," pt. 1, esp. 144–51, 174–76.

⁵⁰ Dr. Werner Adriaenssens, curator of modern decorative arts at RMAH, is responsible for the Art Nouveau ivories and chryselephantine gallery there and has worked to build the collection and provide it with an empirical history and provenance. Among his works are *Philippe Wolfers, L'Album congolais, un royal cadeau commémorant l'exposition coloniale de Tervuren en 1897* (Brussels, 2002); "Wit goud uit Congo, of de kortstondige opleving van de ivoorsculptuur in België rond 1900," *Science Connection*, December 9,



FIG. 7.—Charles Van der Stappen, *Mysterious Sphinx*, 1897. Ivory and alloy of copper and silver with onyx base, 56.5 × 46 × 31.3 cm. Collection of King Baudoin Foundation, Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Photograph copyright King Baudoin Foundation. A color version of this figure is available online.

2005, 4–7, with photographs unavailable elsewhere; Françoise Aubry and Werner Adriaenssens, *Philippe Wolfers, Civilisation et Barbarie* (Brussels, 2002); and Werner Adriaenssens and Raf Steel, *La dynastie Wolfers de l'Art Nouveau à l'Art Deco* (Antwerp, 2006).



FIG. 8.—*Le trophée d'ivoire* (Ivory trophy), Product Room, Tervueren Congo Museum. Postcard, n.d. Courtesy of Cathleen Chaffee.

Another institution, the Brussels Royal Museum of Beaux-Arts, acquired (but does not exhibit) a Philippe Wolfers ivory statuette from the period that sports a precious jewel. Significantly, some of the ivories were not sent out and remained in the collections of the Tervuren museum. They were for many decades kept in cabinets in the basement storerooms, among them the ivory figurine *L'Esclave* (The Slave) by Eugène de Bremaecker, a carved ivory plaque commemorating the transfer of the Congo to Belgium in 1908, and a large ivory portrait bust of King Leopold II.

Attention to the production, display, and dispersal of these Tervuren chryselephantine objects may offer possibilities for new historical understanding as well as for contemporary criticism and engagement with colonial memory. The objects show a range of subjects, with varying levels of imperial presence, which are rarely discussed.⁵¹ The full-size carved ivory tusk caught in the 1897 *Caress of the Swan* by Philippe Wolfers, now on view at the RMAH, for example, offers conspicuous Congo materials and a theme of voracity. The formidable bronze swan, its expansive wings enveloping, tenders less a caress than a tight grip around the tusk. The elongated neck of the creature coils around to show a distended beak, mouth wide open, supported by the ivory horn (fig. 9). Braced and still, the swan waits for an eel, poised at the top of the tusk, to drop down into its gullet, reminiscent of the open-mouthed figure in Brueghel's *Land of Cockagne* that was popular as a print in 1905 Belgium—the knight with his visor lifted under a pie-filled slanting roof, arms propped on a pillow, waiting for one of the pastries to tumble down the hatch (fig. 10).⁵²

Other chryselephantines now reunited in the Brussels galleries are smaller in scale, arranged in the glass cases recreating 1890s style, with more or less overt African motifs in the ivory medium. Wolfers's *Civilization and Barbarism* (fig. 11), hailed in 2005 as a treasure of national design, is composed of a delicate, lily-carved tusk nested in a silver wrap of two ferocious creatures that symbolized, according to the artist, the battle between barbarism—in the form of a snake-headed dragon—and civilization, represented by a militant swan, with mighty wings in full swell, and a lethal, open beak ready to snap and crack. The double set of metallic wings envelop “Africa,” embodied by the carved ivory. It is open

⁵¹ One exception was a small exhibition of 2008, the first of its kind, that focused on ivory and Belgian colonialism. Organized by ULB art historian Sébastien Clerbois, the show was held not in Belgium but at the Leeds Henry Moore Foundation; only a few of the objects from the Belgian collections could travel there. The exhibition, April 5–June 29, 2008, was called *Heart of Darkness: Ivory Carving and Belgian Colonialism*.

⁵² In a print version of the painting, Brueghel shows a roast chicken caught and stuffed in the mouth of the knight; the painting depicts the knight with open mouth, patiently waiting, like Van der Stappen's swan in the *Caress* as it braces on the tusk with jaws tightly extended, waiting for the eel to drop in.



FIG. 9.—Philippe Wolfers, *Caress of the Swan*, 1897. Ivory and bronze, h. 173 cm.
© Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. A color version of this figure is available
online.

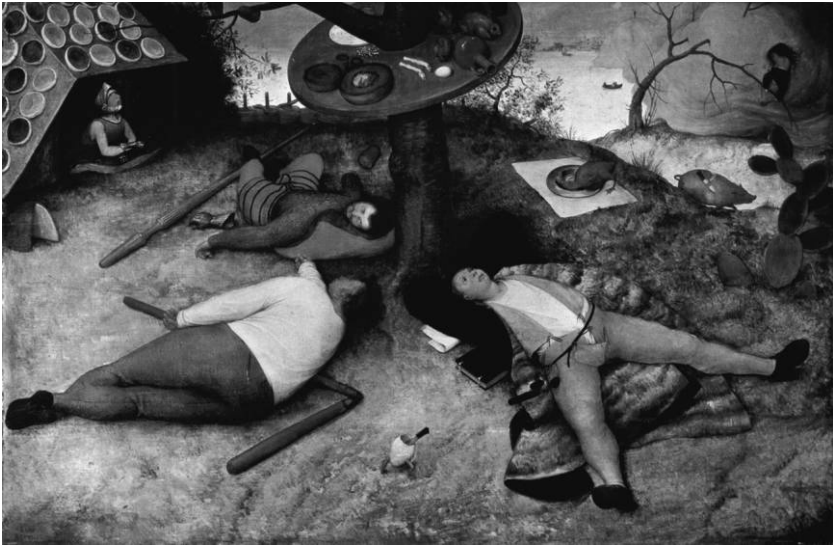


FIG. 10.—Peter Bruegel the Elder, *Land of Cokagne* (Luilekkerland), 1567. Wikimedia http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_d._Ä._037.jpg. A color version of this figure is available online.

at one end for a practical purpose: it was originally designed as a holder of a scroll bearing signatures of Belgian concession company officials honoring the Secretary of State of the Congo, Edmond van Eetvelde.⁵³ Commentators of 1897 praised the skillful interaction of the delicate ivory skin and the rigid silver wrapping in which it nestled. But a full view of the object, looking in, reveals that the ivory is secured by other means—it is punctured, clamped, and bolted in place (fig. A3). The violent handling of the artistic materials corresponded to the theme of combat depicted in the sculpture, as well as evoking some of the brutality of its origins.

All of the chryselephantines, with or without Congo themes and allusions, share the distinctive formal characteristics of the medium of ivory: the figures and objects appear with imperfections and injuries. The face and neck of the *Mysterious Sphinx* is riddled with cracks. In other statuettes, such as *Surprise* and *The Snake Charmer*, for example, limbs, like puzzle pieces, show exposed seams and gaps where they attach. De Bremaecker's 1900 *L'Esclave* is particularly resonant here: a seated Congo native, carved in Congo ivory, with arms

⁵³ On Van Eetvelde's career and Congo administration, the scroll, and the Wolfers gift of *Civilization and Barbarism*, see Silverman, "Art Nouveau," pt. 1, 144–52, 175–77.



FIG. 11.—Philippe Wolfers, *Civilization and Barbarism*, 1897. Ivory and silver with onyx base, 46 × 67 × 26.5 cm. Collection of King Baudouin Foundation, Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Photograph copyright Hughes Dubois. A color version of this figure is available online.

raised and open in a stance of welcome and gratitude for liberation, a typical pose of the period (fig. 12).⁵⁴ The raised arms, made from a number of different tusks, reveal the gaps of the different pieces as a slice on each arm's surface. Tervuren museum postcards from the 1920s and 1930s show that this diminutive figure, in a mounted case, was displayed and positioned in front of the vast cases of ivory tusks and pieces in a product room. He is shown facing the array of ivory of all shapes and sizes, arms opening forward as if to reveal the yield of the transition from slavery to freedom (fig. 13). But this ivory slave, arms up and open to his benefactors and showing off the bounty of the jungle in the museum, also carries on the surface of his limbs the mutilation of the imperial interaction, a formal quality of the ivory medium that is uncannily fitting in this context of the suppressed history of violence. With so many of the Congo artifacts from the Free State period divested of a history and provenance, reexamining the arts from that period that were made in Belgium fills in other gaps and suggests other missing dimensions of colonial culture, past and present. The materiality of the ivories composes what I think of as a gallery of wounded objects, summoning new generations of viewers to see technical procedures and visual forms of violence, breaking, and breaking through.

VI. AFRICA TERVUREN, AFRICA BELGIUM 2012: COLONY, CONTEXT, CONTINENT?

The need to restore historical density to the inflow, display, and diaspora of objects in Tervuren collections clashes with a powerful and competing trend now visible both in Belgium and outside it: the emphasis on Africa as a continent, a geographic shape on a map rather than a series of countries with particular contexts and colonial legacies. The rebranding of the Royal Museum as "Africa Museum" and Director Gryseels's emphasis on "Africa today and in the future" corresponds to a number of developments that converge with a public, upbeat view of Africa as a composite and an abstraction, generalized and universalized, divested of the distinctiveness of time and place. At least three of these tendencies have recently emerged that press against the politics of memory and inhibit the depth of engagement with the Congo in Belgium and in the new Tervuren museum.

First, a new and compelling museum model focused on global, cross-cultural and cross-continental themes of a shared humanity across time may be hard to

⁵⁴ One conspicuous example of this genre of grateful natives delivered from slavery was a monumental embroidery panel, one of eight, created by artists Isodore and Hélène de Rudder for the 1897 Congo exposition and displayed in Tervuren until 1967. The panel, entitled *Liberté*, shows a native kneeling with open arms and looking up to her rescuer. The Congolese figure on the Oostende statue that was targeted by artist activists in 2005 also bears this pose of open arms and gratitude to liberators. De Bremaecker's *L'Esclave* is unusual, however, for its composition in the medium of ivory.



FIG. 12.—Eugène de Bramaecker, *L'Esclave* (The slave), 1910. Ivory, h. 24 cm. HO.0.1.293, collection RMCA Tervuren. A color version of this figure is available online.

resist. The Paris Quai Branly spawned an institution of spectacle, Disneyland reborn as *The Family of Man* with a postmodern twist. Objects from many areas of Africa, like those of all the continents, appear in a swirl of spotlit platforms or looming in dark cases. The Quai Branly vision of dramatic displays of all continents among equals also infuses the new Antwerp MAS Museum (Museum

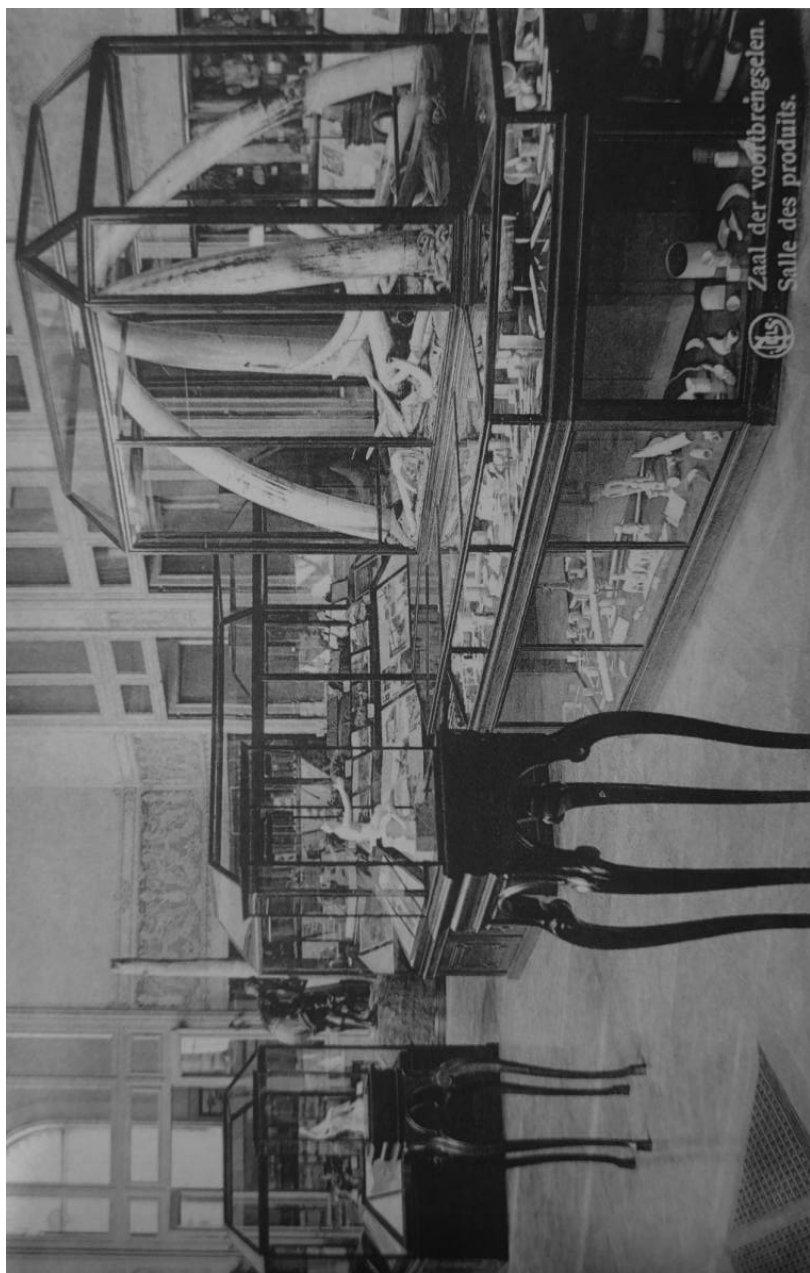


Fig. 13.—Eugène De Bremeacker's *L'Esclave* (The slave) facing cases of ivory tusks in Tervuren Royal museum products hall. Postcard, n.d. Courtesy of Cathleen Chaffee.

Aan de Stroom), opened in 2011. A splendid building, scaling up to multiple levels with stacked structures evoking containers at the port where it is set, houses thousands of objects from the combined former collections of the city's Vleeshuis, Folklore, and Ethnography museums. The objects on view are arrayed thematically on different levels, with varied African and, occasionally, Congo artifacts appearing alongside those of Asia and Oceania, for example, in broad ahistorical groupings such as "Life and Death" and "Display of Power." Cases with videos and accoutrements of contemporary "shamans of Antwerp" proceed to galleries that show those of Native Americans. Congolese masks, statues, amulets, and carved arrow stands fill luminescent "ancestors" cases that give way to a striking installation of a contemporary artist's rendering of a "Maori meeting house" where Polynesian "ancestors" would have been honored. At the MAS, an inclusive spirit dilutes particular histories and distinctive contexts in favor of a universalized "mankind," drawing Africa along with others into a buoyant continental drift: we are the world.⁵⁵

A second instance of Africa as continent and composite emerged in a public festive abstraction in the center of Brussels in 2012. The annual Flower Carpet, a vast tapestry of fresh begonias laid out in the city's Grand Place for five summer days and nights, was dedicated to the theme "Africa: The Continent" (fig. 14). In years past, this floral extravaganza in the medieval hub of the city had been devoted to such themes as "Brussels Coat of Arms and Guilds," "Belgium's 150th Anniversary," and "Art Nouveau." In 2012, visitors were invited, as brochures noted, to be "transported to the center of a mysterious continent: Africa!" The flower carpet formed not a map shape but a series of simple angled designs, mainly zigzags and diamond chains. The Congo was present, evoked by a set of markings along the border, spilling over into those that suggested many other countries, such as Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Botswana. The temporary popular marvel showed "old Europe and young Africa, permanent contrasts," according to the ads; the rich and diverse continent had "lessons of life to offer" (fig. A4). The celebration of Africa as totalized and ever young added to the cultural weight against Congo history, memory, and specificity. Flower Carpet Africa flattened Congo to a border, subsuming it as an icon of an ever-mysterious continent available for enchantment.⁵⁶

Africa without borders and freed from the limits of time appeared in a third event that year as well. This one drew in important artifacts from the Tervuren museum collections to take part, eerily and unselfconsciously, in a carnivalesque

⁵⁵ Leen Beyers, ed., *MAS Guide*, Antwerp, 2011; and <http://www.mas.be/MAS-EN/MASEN/Startpagina-MAS-EN-Hoofdnavigatie-News/Startpagina-MAS-EN-Hoofdnavigatie-News-Nieuws/The-MAS-A-must-see.html>.

⁵⁶ *Tapis de Fleurs/Bloementapijt/Flower Carpet*, Brussels, Grand-Place/Grote Markt, 8/15–19/2012, pp. 3–19.



FIG. 14.—Brussels Grand Place Flower Carpet, 2012: “Africa: The Continent.” Photograph by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

universalism in the heart of King Leopold’s Royal Palace. In August 2012 the once-a-year opening of the Brussels palace to the public included an inaugural temporary exhibition devoted to the theme “Face to Face.” Rather than the typical tour through the royal chambers and galleries, visitors moved along into the opulent throne room and were presented with a long, spotlit platform showing a series of “ethnic” ceremonial masks, in straw and wood, from Brazil—labeled “21st Century Mehinaku.” Nearby were installations of portrait paintings by Belgian artists; across from these was an array of masks, mounted on zigzagging wire poles, from New Guinea, Nigeria, ancient Mexico, Liberia, and the DRC, among other places. The architectural setting, lit by multiple, massive thickets of low-hanging cut crystal and gilded chandeliers, was the product of the 1902–8 renovation by King Leopold II, paid for with his Congo crown treasury, just as the Girault Tervuren museum palace of 1904–10 had been. Now the royal domain was occupied by global, tribal, and Belgian artifacts of playful misrule that spanned centuries, continents, and cultures (fig. 15).

The rationale of the “Face to Face” exhibition, mobilized by Queen Paola, appeared in placard wall texts explaining the show’s conception, invoking Claude Lévi-Strauss melded with a vague humanitarianism. Here was an interplay of masks in “the literal sense,” meaning those that would appear “in museum col-



FIG. 15.—Interior of Brussels Royal Palace with installations for 2012 “Face to Face” exhibition: Mehinaku masks, twenty-first century. Photograph by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

lections and display cases.” But the public was instructed to think also about masks in the “figurative sense,” described as the way in which “African, Asian, American and Oceanic diaspora members in the West” adopt masks as a way to cope: these groups were used to “‘putting on a good face’ in an environment where one is frequently subjected to ‘racial profiling.’”

With this earnest appeal to empathy for non-Western diasporic peoples, the exhibition proceeded from the vast mask-peppered room under canopies of chandeliers to a darker, narrower gallery. Here King Leopold’s Congo-imported malachite planks alternated with gilded columns to frame the space, equipped at one end with an oversize carved and mirrored fireplace. Two tall glass cases filled the room for this part of the exhibition, each displaying a number of masks. Most bore labels indicating that they were part of the Tervuren collections. The enclosed cases here, unlike the free-form positioning of masks in the main hall, suggested the objects’ value and fragility. These were “ritual” masks, a case text explained, each considered “an entity possessing a character, a way of moving and dancing,” so that “everyone can recognize when it is in action, with its costume, incarnated, and thus alive” (fig. 16). A “Kube or Kente” mask of 1908 and one from the Central Pende of 1912, both belonging to Tervuren, showed



FIG. 16.—Glass case with RMCA masks in Brussels Royal Palace “Face to Face” exhibition, 2012. Photograph by the author. A color version of this figure is available online.

uncannily expressive faces; with eyelids half closed and looking downward, these carved wooden masks did indeed suggest particular characters and people who wore them and moved or even danced (figs. A5, A6). The viewer encountered them through the glass, each shown posted atop an iron pole in the case. But rather than being “incarnate” and “thus alive,” the masks hovered, staked, hauntingly. The 1908 and 1912 masks, one noted as “a gift from R. P. Cambier,” an early explorer of King Leopold’s regime, belonged to the period of frenzied extraction in the Congo Free State and just after. Bodies moving and dancing may have been suggested, but bodies missing were also irresistibly present. The floating Tervuren masks in King Leopold’s palace in 2012 evoked the iconic heads posted as fences in Kurtz’s garden in the *Heart of Darkness*; lost ancestors materialized before King Leopold’s ghost. Before celebrating the strategies of all diasporic peoples who learn to “put on a face” of self-protection in the West, the diasporas, and destruction, of objects and peoples from a specific place and a specific time, the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, need to be acknowledged and worked through in Belgium and in the Royal Museum.

VII. GLOBAL INITIATIVES: TERVUREN COLLECTIONS AS INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS, 2013–14

After many delays, the Royal Museum for Central Africa closed for its multiyear renovation in December 2013, and proposals for exhibitions featuring the collections, which rarely traveled abroad, were welcomed. Two important shows resulted, both in the United States. While very different in scale and purpose, they gave the Tervuren museum new international visibility as an unmatched repository of Central African arts and artifacts even while neutralizing questions of the history and provenance of its holdings. A brief look at these two shows suggests some of the range, opportunities, and limits of this new global turn.

A. Tervuren Objects as Masterpieces: Luba Arts in Los Angeles, 2013–14

The 2013–14 *Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa* enlisted the Belgian collections to inaugurate a new gallery dedicated to the arts of Africa at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). Consulting curator Mary Nooter Roberts, a longtime scholar of Luba arts, selected what she called “the cream of the crop” from the rich stores of Tervuren. Twenty-seven carved wooden objects filled the rooms, each mounted on a plinth, encased in glass, and brightly lit. The objects encompassed caryatid stools that had served as portable thrones, royal bowls, statuettes, masks, and sculpted headrests from the Luba kingdom, a dynastic unit of southeastern Congo (now in the DRC) that had flourished from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. Labels were minimal; the focus was on the rediscovered

masterworks.⁵⁷ Each piece bore the inventory number required by the Royal Museum; most were marked with dates (“19th century,” “collected between 1891 and 1912,” “registered in 1911”).

In interviews and a video, Roberts emphasized the “highest aesthetic brilliance” of the objects on view, their symbolic meaning, and their active agency in the complex royal culture of the Luba kingdom.⁵⁸ Unaided by these commentaries, however, the spatial disposition and impact of the gallery, with its array of pedestaled items sealed off and set aglow, worked against ideas of embedded use and material practices. The Luba royal artifacts were elevated to the status of art of the highest quality.⁵⁹

To be sure, inapt singularity and disembeddedness pose challenges for all museums when ethnographic collections and former use objects are showcased for their aesthetic qualities. But the LACMA show, with its individual glass boxes, carried a second layer of distance and decontextualization specific to the lending institution. The gleaming, rarefied objects appeared in sharp contrast to the techniques of their amassing and display. The cultural objects that formed the core of King Leopold’s Congo museum were extracted like raw materials and stocked in quantity, arranged by type; individual artifacts as singular pieces were seldom conceptualized. Not long before the Luba show, the 2012 *Uncensored* exhibition at Tervuren allowed visitors to see the spectacle of existing storage for objects of the kind that would travel to Los Angeles. In the underground corridors adjacent to the “Trophy Cellar” were shelves packed with carved neck rests or wooden “pillows” from different Congo regions; these stood, six across and four deep, on open racks, like frozen still-lives. The royal neck rests at LACMA had been plucked as “masterworks” from the hordes of such objects in Tervuren. Old images of the existing profusion of wooden headrests in the museum might have given American audiences an opportunity to encounter the Luba pieces in more varied ways, to behold the brilliance of artistic quality while learning the history of the Tervuren collections, a tiny fraction of which had landed before them at LACMA.

The potential benefit of restoring historical layers is abundantly clear in the case of the “Baluba” helmet mask with horns and bird (fig. 17), displayed at

⁵⁷ There was no catalog for the exhibition.

⁵⁸ Mary Nooter Roberts video and interview, <http://www.lacma.org/video/shaping-power-luba-masterworks-royal-museum-central-africa>; see also Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, *Luba* (Milan, 2007).

⁵⁹ Reviewer David Pagel noted how the show allowed viewers to see the “stylistic consistencies” among the varied forms, testifying to a “visually sophisticated culture”: “LACMA’s ‘Shaping Power’ Reveals Central African Masterpieces,” *LA Times*, July 13, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jul/11/entertainment/la-et-cm-shaping-power-central-africa-lacma-20130711>.



FIG. 17.—“Baluba”/Luba mask with horns and bird, nineteenth century. Wood, h. 39 cm. EO.0.0.23470, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©. A color version of this figure is available online.

LACMA as having been “collected in 1896” by Oscar Michaux.⁶⁰ The provenance of the mask is incomplete, but its biography in Tervuren—omitted at LACMA—is long and complex. By 1923, the mask was considered a prized piece in the Royal Congo Museum and illustrated in its catalog and guidebooks. In 1958 it was raised to a *chef d’oeuvre* of Tervuren and celebrated in a special exhibit at the world’s fair, held that year in Belgium. In 2002–5, it underwent a careful repair that included X-rays, extensive research, and prosthetic mounts to repair the bird that had broken off at the back. The meticulous refurbishing nonetheless left the front of the mask with existing scratches, indents, and pockmarks, some the result of shrapnel wounds sustained in the 1944 bombing of the Tervuren palace. The inclusion of such facts would have created a richer story, offering viewers an object as *lieu de mémoire*.

The LACMA exhibition did mark the presence of history in one dramatic way. Off to the side, a room opened into an installation by the contemporary Congolese artist Aimé Mpane, called *Shadow of the Shadow* (2005). A life-sized figure assembled from thousands of matchsticks stood, arms folded, over a grave that read “Congo 1885 1960.” A large shadow cast by the figure loomed in front, facing the viewer.⁶¹ A wall text noted the changes and destruction wrought by colonialism, first in the form of the Congo Free State (1885–1908) and then the Belgian Congo (1909–60).

Powerful though it was, however, Mpane’s work functioned as an uneasy addition to the Luba show. Conceived as a “counterpoint” or “complement,” the room sequestered colonialism and its legacies to a discrete space and to a contemporary artist as its carrier. It was difficult for a visitor not to experience the exhibit as a “before” and “after”; the carved objects of the Luba kingdom, glowing in their cases and products of a resplendent past, followed by the grieving figure made of matchsticks with its shadow in the present. But the sequence elided the Luba masterworks’ own histories, for many of these objects from the Tervuren Royal Museum, with their vague “19th century” labels, fall squarely in the period of Leopoldian imperialism. The Luba arts and the Mpane installation were not sequential but synchronic; the shadow of the shadow permeated throughout.

B. Tervuren Objects as “Roots”: “Kongo Across the Waters,” 2013–15

The new American presence and visibility of the Tervuren collections deepened in a nineteen-month multicity tour of an exhibition originating in October 2013 at

⁶⁰ The memoir of Lieutenant Oscar Michaux, a brutalist Belgian army commander in the Congo Free State, is *Carnet de Campagne, épisodes et impressions, 1889–1897* (Namur, 1913); see also R. Ceysens, *Du Luulu à Tervuren: La collection Oscar Michaux au Musée royale de l’Afrique centrale* (Tervuren, 2011). Other parts of Michaux’s Congo collections, including chiefs’ regalia and booty seized during the “Arab Wars” of 1891–94, are displayed in the Brussels Royal Army Museum.

⁶¹ See the Mpane installation at <http://www.lacma.org/video/artist-aimé-mpane-visits-lacma>.

the University of Florida at Gainesville's Harn Museum of Art. The sprawling multimedia displays featured 111 pieces from the Royal Museum. The curatorial team assembled scores of Tervuren objects in varied materials for a dual purpose: to chronicle the history of the Kongo kingdom over five centuries, and to document its long-term influence and impact on African-American cultures in the southeastern United States and beyond, reclaiming long-lost but traceable deposits of diasporic identities.⁶²

Kongo Across the Waters highlighted Kongo with a "K," a vast area of western Central Africa south of the Congo River encompassing present-day Angola, the DRC, and parts of Gabon and Republic of Congo. Here a kingdom flourished from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century; its people spoke Kikongo.⁶³ From this broad swath of territory and large block of time, the exhibition focused mainly on the period before modern European imperialism redrew the map of the continent and constructed bounded entities as states. In the galleries and the show's voluminous catalog, the transatlantic slave trade forms the linchpin of the project. Historians suggest that one-fourth of all enslaved Africans, about 92,000 Kikongo people, were captured and sent on slave ships from ports along the Loango coast and the Congo River to the southern United States.⁶⁴ The exhibition team undertook to reimagine what they may have carried, what flowed out of Africa and took root in a distant place. With an ambitious vision of looking back and forward in time and back and forth across the waters, curators from the Harn Museum and the Royal Museum worked together to present an astonishing array of art and artifacts. The 111 objects that traveled were labeled with the generic dates of "19th century" or "early 20th century," clustering them in the period of the Congo Free State. How they got to Belgium, where they came from, and who "collected" them were not questions posed in the purview of the exhibition.

The Gainesville exhibition was designed to coincide with the "Viva Florida" celebrations commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish. It was inspired by and relied on a recent book called *Africa in Florida: Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State*.⁶⁵ The "hook" for the show, featured in publicity, the catalog, and the galleries, was the little-known fact that Ponce de Leon, whom most Floridians know as the founder of their state in 1513, was not alone: he arrived with two Spanish-named African explorers, likely from the Kongo kingdom. Thus both Europeans and Africans "came as

⁶² The exhibition traveled from Gainesville to Atlanta, Princeton, and New Orleans. The discussion that follows is based on the Florida exhibition and Atlanta venue as well as the richly illustrated exhibition catalog accompanying all sites: Susan Cooksey, Robin Poyner, and Hein Vanhee, eds., *Kongo Across the Waters* (Gainesville, FL, 2013).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁴ Jelmer Vos, "Kongo, North America and the Slave Trade," in *Kongo*, 40–49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 411; the book was coedited by one of the curators of the show, Robin Poyner. See Amanda Carlson and Robin Poyner, eds., *Africa in Florida: Five Hundred Years of African Presence in the Sunshine State* (Gainesville, FL, 2014).

conquistadors” to American shores.⁶⁶ With this historical record restored, the exhibition launched in three parts with a broad chronological hub.

Part 1, “Kongo in Africa,” followed the history of the ancient Kongo kingdom and Christianization; its early modern apogee in a network of exchange and diplomacy with Europe; its role in transatlantic slavery; and the interaction with European trade in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Part 2, “Kongo in the Americas,” turned to the transmission and transformation of Kongo cultural traditions by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the American South. The third part expanded the scope of connections to contemporary world art, suggesting Kongo-inspired forms and motifs in the works of artists from Cuba, Haiti, and the DRC, as well as African-American artists.

A broad theme of “cultural hybridity,” vitality, and dynamic creativity coursed through the show’s galleries and catalog, uniting the broad sweep of region and time encompassed by the show. Early contact with Christianity, for example, yielded the creation of iron swords and ivory trumpets that blended Kongo geometric designs with Christian imagery and motifs.⁶⁸ Kongo ceramic ware and wooden statuettes adapted nineteenth-century European fashion. African-American craftsmen and craftswomen reactivated Kongo visual cultures and patterns amid the ordeals of slavery and after, displayed in South Carolina sweet-grass baskets and carved wooden canes. A highlight of the exhibition juxtaposed the Carolina baskets and their much earlier Kongo counterparts; another case presented startling visual affinities between a carved wood “emancipation cane” of ca. 1890 with Kongo kingdom staffs and finials.⁶⁹

Fascinating pockets of information and stunning artifacts abounded amid the wealth of materials assembled for the Florida show. But one major area was off balance and overlooked basic historical contextualization vital to the objects on view and the way they were encountered: the sections on late nineteenth-century

⁶⁶ Susan Cooksey, quoted in Aida Mallard, “Kongo Artwork Comes to Harn,” *Guardian*, October 9, 2013, <http://www.gainesville.com/article/20131009/GUARDIAN/131009574?template=printpicart>; and *Kongo*, 1–2.

⁶⁷ The early modern period, ca. 1500–1800, had particularly strong displays, wall texts, and catalog essays and entries, such as those by Linda Heywood and John Thornton, “The Culture of Mbanza Kongo” and “The Kongo Kingdom and European Diplomacy,” as well as the work of Cécile Fromont, “By the Sword and the Cross: Power and Faith in the Arts of the Christian Kongo” (see *Kongo*, 17–33, 52–76). Two high points in the modern period were the essays by anthropologists John M. Janzen, “Renewal and Reinterpretation in Kongo Religion” (132–42), and Wyatt MacGaffey, “Meaning and Aesthetics in Kongo Art” (172–79).

⁶⁸ *Kongo*, 31, 62.

⁶⁹ These objects shared distinctive formats of carving relief narratives in “parallel registers” that read from base to summit. *Ibid.*, esp. 90–97.

Central Africa, especially those on “trade and chiefs” and “Kongo in the age of empire.” The upbeat celebration of an adaptive ingenuity suggested by commercial products on display from Tervuren collections of this period obscured essential facts about the character and distortions of market “exchange” as the Kongo “K” kingdom was twisted into the Congo “C”—the misnamed “Free State” of King Leopold II. Curators drew attention, for example, to an influx of European goods and their incorporation into native markets and manufacture. Here we learn of the Kongo “craze for Tobey jugs”—“little English drinking men” pottery vessels—and a fashion for European tableware. A 1910 photograph from Thysville shows these items being used as tomb adornments for chiefs’ graves. A catalog essay with the photo suggests that Kongo interest in such curios might express a late nineteenth-century Central African taste for “aesthetic exoticism” that could be called *Europannerie*, akin to the *Chinoiseries* of Europe.⁷⁰

A number of gallery displays of painted wooden grave figures from “early 20th century, Lower Congo” extended the emphasis on native ingenuity and adaptation of European motifs. Included here are two figures used to decorate Mayombe chiefs’ tombs. Both figures wear colonial medals, symbols of “a chief’s alliance with the colonial state” after 1891, the texts explain. The standing figure, wearing “fancy articles of late nineteenth century trade”—specifically a “European style jacket and military helmet”—holds a glass and bottle, “probably liquor offered by European merchants in exchange for African products”; the seated figure holds out an open hand with coins, indicative of “tax collecting.”⁷¹

A glowing review of the exhibition stressed this precise theme: how the display of objects like these demonstrated the vitality and canniness of Kongo responses to new kinds of commercial exchange. The later nineteenth century continued what the reviewer called “a long process of political and cultural conversation”; despite “King Leopold’s well-known economic exploitation of the Congo Free State,” Kongo chiefs showed a “spirit of creative re-invention” when they “may have cheerfully accepted European badges of honor” as “marks of their power.”⁷²

Ingenuity notwithstanding, power and conversation are rarely mentioned as elements of the indigenous experience in the period of King Leopold’s Congo. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the materials and themes selected with the particular historical world that the objects inhabited. Boma, Thysville, and

⁷⁰ Julien Volper, “A Touch of Exoticism: ‘European Fashion’ in Kongo,” in *ibid.*, 182–91. The author is curator at the RMCA’s Division of Ethnography.

⁷¹ *Kongo*, 180–81, 208–9.

⁷² This review is of the Atlanta installation. Jerry Kullum, “Review: ‘Excellent ‘Kongo Across the Waters,’ as Transporting as It Is Illuminating, at Carter Center,” <http://www.artsatl.com/2014/05/kongo-across-the-waters/>, quote on p. 2.

Mayombe in the Lower Congo were the sites of the photographs of chiefs and tombs and the painted grave figures exhibited. These objects open out to very different stories from the ones presented in the show, where they were inflected with a puzzling lightness and normalizing vocabulary of tax collecting, novelty fashion, and decorative “Europanerie.” The Lower Congo in this period was an epicenter of the brutal regime’s rampant violence. Historians and contemporary writers have amply documented how trade was destroyed as chiefs scrambled to react to, resist, or comply with commands for labor, provisions, and product. Mayombe had suffered a wretched depopulation by 1890. As for Thysville, it is best known for the Sisyphean and murderous project of the 233-mile railway between Matadi and Stanley Pool undertaken by Captain Albert Thys from 1890 to 1898.⁷³

The Kongo exhibition’s “age of empire” section, by contrast, skewed its presentation away from the heart of darkness, lifting to view the “craze for Tobey jugs” rather than the frenzy for ivory and rubber. The occasional tomb decoration with European crockery floated in the show without connection to the everyday mass death known to occur all around it. As early as 1890, George Washington Williams, a black American Baptist minister and former Ohio state legislator, traveled to the Lower Congo and decried in his published report the “crimes against humanity” he witnessed there, including chain-gang laborers and porters dropping dead of starvation and overwork.⁷⁴ The Kongo show’s stress on canniness and hybridity injected a tone of whimsy out of balance with the devastation of the Congo Free State’s empire of extraction, giving the public an impression deeply incongruent with what is, and was, well known about the Lower Congo from 1880 to 1910 and after.

By screening out colonialism and the Congo “C,” Gainesville’s *Kongo Across the Waters* also missed an opportunity to teach Americans about a well-documented but little-known chapter of American, southeastern, and Floridian history, of fateful consequence for both the United States and Central Africa after 1866. If few citizens are aware that Ponce de Leon was accompanied by African conquistadors when he discovered the Sunshine State, how many know that the

⁷³ E. D. Morel devoted a whole chapter to the Lower Congo in his searing 1904 book, *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa*. See Kajsa Ekholm Friedman, *Catastrophe and Creation: The Transformation of an African Culture* (New York, 1991, repr. 2013), esp. 71–83. Both Marchal and Hochschild discuss the appalling working conditions and mass deaths besetting Thys’s hubristic project of the Congo railway—“the means *par excellence* of allowing civilization to penetrate rapidly and surely into the unknown depths of Africa,” as Thys put it (quoted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, with introduction by Cedric Watts [New York, 2002], 206).

⁷⁴ Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 101–14; John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Durham, NC, 1998), 180–221.

founder of Sanford, Florida, was the decisive player and creator of King Leopold's Congo Free State? Henry Shelton Sanford (1823–91), an ambassador to Belgium and close associate of the king, won crucial early approval for King Leopold's claim to the Congo basin from the U.S. president, senate, and congress in 1884, setting in motion the international recognition required to establish a Congo Free State in 1885. Sanford mobilized American enthusiasm for free trade and a new Liberia in Africa, especially among southern senators, as his plan pivoted on facilitating “a Negro exodus”—the emigration of freed blacks to the Congo.⁷⁵ A grateful King Leopold granted Sanford the very first trade concession to send “the first commercial steamer on the waters of the Congo,” called the *S.S. Florida*, and Sanford created an investment company that underwrote it—the Sanford Exploring Expedition.⁷⁶ Joseph Conrad secured a post in 1889 with the company that absorbed the Sanford enterprises; in 1890 he was dispatched to take command of the *S.S. Florida*, with decisive significance for his life and career as a writer.⁷⁷ The story of Henry Shelton Sanford and King Leopold thus had direct relevance for some of the central topics covered in the exhibition, from the legacies of slavery and race relations in the South to the traces of artistic modernism. By not including that story, the *Kongo* show, with its highly skewed picture of “Kongo in the Age of Empire,” lost a chance to engage visitors with vital aspects of the ongoing interconnections among American, African-American, and African history.

⁷⁵ Guide, “The Henry Shelton Sanford Papers,” <http://sanfordhistory.tripod.com/the-henry-shelton-sanford-papers.html>; Lysle E. Meyer, “Henry S. Sanford and the Congo: A Reassessment,” *African Historical Studies* 4, no. 1 (1971): 19–39, esp. 27–28, http://webafriqa.net/colonial/pdf/sanford_congo_216266.pdf; Ascherson, *The King Incorporated*, 106–35; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 57–100; G. Moulart, “Henry Shelton Sanford,” *Biographie coloniale belge* (Brussels, 1952), 3:778–83; Franklin, *George Washington Williams*, 182–85; Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Belgian Congo and the Berlin Act* (New York, 1919), 31–83; Henry S. Sanford, “American Interests in Africa,” *Forum* 9 (New York, 1889): 409–29, esp. 424–29.

⁷⁶ Sanford, “American Interests in Africa,” 424–25; Meyer, “Sanford and the Congo,” 32; Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann, *The United States and Africa: A History* (New York, 1984), 136. By 1888, another ship was added, the *S.S. General Sanford*.

⁷⁷ A skilled merchant seaman, Conrad was hired through the influence of his aunt in Brussels, Marguerite Poradowska. She was a good friend of A.-J. Wauters, the Belgian art historian and Congo enthusiast we encountered in Part II; consequential for Conrad was that Wauters was the secretary general of the Société anonyme belge pour le commerce du Haut-Congo (SAB), which took over Sanford's operations. Wauters's title and position in the SAB are listed in Lt. Charles Lemaire, *Congo et Belgique* (Brussels, 1894), 253. Norman Sherry considers Wauters as “Conrad's patron,” in *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge, 1980), 104. I examine the formative role of Sanford's ship and company in Conrad's life, the role of Wauters, and the way the *S.S. Florida* and the Sanford company shaped the narrative and form of *Heart of Darkness* in my forthcoming book.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In 2005, Tony Judd contributed to a book entitled *How Can One Not Be Interested in Belgian History?*⁷⁸ The book explored understudied structures of Belgium since 1830 of vital importance to Modern Europeanists: federalism and the state; linguistic and regional divisions; nationalism and war. The question of that book title can be applied to other underexamined areas of Belgian history considered here: imperialism, the Royal Museum's origins and Congo collections, and the politics of memory and forgetting. Created during the Leopoldian regime, the RMCA sustained in its architectural frame and classification scheme the distinctive character of a product museum that issued from an anomalous colony of extraction that was built on and as a royal domainal property. In 2005, as we have seen, the museum began to edge away from a century of denial and to acknowledge, reluctantly, the legacies of violence and the contours of a painful past in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo. From that year to its closing for renovation in 2013, changes have been made, and Director Gryseels has shifted from a defensive stance to a more affirmative position: "to remain silent is not an option."⁷⁹ But the institution's work of history and memory is only beginning. The next five years, as new gallery installations take shape, will reveal how Tervuren is addressing the balance between reckoning and renewal, the responsibility to integrate the past with the imperative to tell new stories.

With the official closing, the RMCA has gone global, leapfrogging over historical gaps waiting to be filled as it seeks international visibility and partnerships. A new diaspora of objects has been flowing out from Tervuren. Curatorial cooperation has yielded recent exhibitions poised in two directions, recapitulating the broader history of the display of African arts as their status shifted from primitivity to the postcolonial in modern Western museums: toward aestheticization, the artworks elevated as "masterpieces," as in the LACMA Luba show; and toward materialization, the works presented as embodiments of social, cultural, and ritual practices, as in the Gainesville *Kongo Across the Waters*. But in both cases the exhibitions in American sites eluded thick description and historical contextualization. As we saw, the spotlight Baluba helmet mask sent to Los Angeles lost an opportunity, with its minimal labeling, to inform new viewers of an exemplary *lieu de mémoire*: the marks accrued on the mask's surface that told a story spanning the history of Belgium and the Congo. And if remaining silent was no longer an option, silence nonetheless blanketed the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sections of *Kongo Across the Waters*, with installations of objects of "trade," "medals," and "grave decorations," for example, that studiously avoided

⁷⁸ Benno Barnard et al., *How Can One Not Be Interested in Belgian History? War, Language and Consensus in Belgium since 1830* (Ghent, 2005).

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Kongo*, xviii.

discussion of the historical ground of the Congo Free State regime that enveloped them.

Silence again reigned in the very last gallery of the Gainesville show, where an oversized watercolor entitled *Lost Treasure* by the contemporary Congolese artist Steve Bandoma was displayed (fig. 18). Bandoma's 2011 work depicts a large-scale *nkisi* power figure with legs shattered and toppling off its base; the nails pounded into the body of the traditional *nkisi* are shown flying off, while an array of cutout hands protrude across the figure. Behind it the statue of Saint Michael killing the dragon, a traditional symbol of Brussels, appears in the distance. The text for the show informs visitors that Bandoma here composes a humorous allusion to consumerism and fashion.⁸⁰ But his engagement with the conspicuous themes and striking forms of dismemberment and severed hands, overt referents to the Belgian imperial regime, are utterly disregarded.

The silences and deflections of 2013 suggest the enduring power of "the great forgetting" that beset the Royal Museum in Belgium and the world of official culture and education beyond its walls. But other registers of global forgetting operate in global realms of knowledge; these neglect the thoroughly entangled national, international, and transcontinental histories of Belgium in the Congo. The circulation of Tervuren objects in the United States ripples out to overlooked and quintessentially American parts of the story of the Congo Free State origins and its aftermath, from the investments of the Floridian Henry Shelton Sanford in King Leopold's Congo to the Katanga mining concessions that ultimately yielded the uranium for Hiroshima.⁸¹ Just a few objects and labels in the nineteenth-century sections of the *Kongo Across the Waters* exhibition would have shown Floridians and citizens across the South that American ships and American plans to export free blacks and amass "white gold" (ivory) shaped the early years of Leopoldian incursions to the Congo, bringing no less than Joseph Conrad along in its train.

I have explored here how the particular history of the Tervuren museum inflects its ongoing attempts to reorganize the diaspora of Congolese arts, artifacts, and products amassed in its collections. I have also suggested that the notion of a diaspora of objects be extended to rethinking and reassembling the modernist Art Nouveau arts of Belgium that took shape as a distinctively Congo Style,

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 406–7.

⁸¹ At the height of the international criticism of Belgium and the king in 1906 by the Congo Reform Association, which was mobilizing forces in the US Congress and Senate to protest Free State policies, King Leopold provided influential American business magnates—J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Daniel Guggenheim among them—with access to Congo investment. They responded in kind by keeping the atrocities out of the newspapers under their control as well as by suppressing publication of Mark Twain's searing indictment of the Congo regime, the 1905 pamphlet *King Leopold's Soliloquy*. See Stefan Heym, Introduction, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (New York, 1994), 13, 23–26.



FIG. 18.—Steve Bandoma, *Trésor oublié* (from the Lost Tribes series), 2011. Watercolor/mixed media on paper, 100 × 140 cm. Collection of the Samuel P. Ham Museum of Art. A color version of this figure is available online.

composed from Congo raw materials and inspired by Congo motifs, from the “whiplash” and rubber-vine style of Horta and Van de Velde to the fin-de-siècle chryselephantine ivories as material forms of imperial profusion and displaced violence.

Like the diaspora of objects in Belgium, the new flow of African collections out of Tervuren carries with it provocations and obligations for global historical reclamation. By following the objects—where they came from, how they got here, what they carried, who made them, and how they lived in collections—scholars of modern history may find a number of possibilities for historical discovery, from lifting to view facts, artifacts, and meanings hiding in plain sight to the more labor-intensive detective work attendant on rebraiding connections from the ground up. In both cases, the new presence of Tervuren’s Congo arts in global circuits returns them to the distinctive force field that originally brought them to Belgium: a force field of an anomalous empire of extraction propelled by a new, small, and neutral country and its king, restricted in power at home and determined to master a world stage; and a force field of interlocking entrepreneurial ventures, a hub and concentration of international acquisitiveness and “armored cosmopolitanism.”⁸²

⁸² The term of Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia: The Wellek Lectures* (New York, 2005), 60, 47–83.