

## Viewpoint

*Hugo DeBlock*

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### Object Biographies and Museums:

**100 X Congo in Antwerp, Exhibition at the Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp, Belgium, 3 October 2020 – 12 September 2021**

### Abstract

The Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp, Belgium, opened the doors of its long-anticipated exhibition, *100 X Congo*, on 3 October 2020, highlighting the presence of a Congolese art collection that has been owned by the city for a hundred years (1920–2020). Tackling the often uneasy history of how these things ended up in museums in the colonial ‘motherland’, this exhibition signals a step forwards in museology in Belgium, away from mere aestheticism of Congolese and, by extension, African arts, towards, in contrast, a focus on provenance, context and cultural importance.

**Key words:** art, anthropology, museology, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Belgium

### Introduction

The title of the exhibition, *100 X Congo*,<sup>1</sup> at the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp, Belgium, refers to an anniversary: it marks the presence of a hundred years of Congolese art in/owned by the city of Antwerp. In the following contribution, I will explore the history of this collection.<sup>2</sup> It is far less known and much smaller than the renowned collection of Congolese materials that is kept at the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Brussels, but is nonetheless of importance in light of Belgo-Congolese history and the connections between Belgium’s former colony and the Flemish harbour city through which goods have been coming into the country for a long time. I will particularly focus on some object histories, which are of importance in current debates surrounding restitution and the decolonization of museums. While the exhibition does more than only consider pedigrees and provenance – it also provides rich histories and context for Congolese art and ritual – I will highlight, in particular, a number of objects that take centre stage as contested and contesting possessions, by focusing on their biographies.

The MAS, housed in a newly built museum, opened its doors in 2011. The relatively new museum houses, amongst others, notable collections of the arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas that were transferred from the former Ethnographic Museum of the city of Antwerp. 1920 was a pivotal year for the acquisition of a considerable collection of Congolese art objects by the city of Antwerp. It was the year when the city bought a collection of approximately 1600 Congolese objects from Antwerp-based African art dealer Henri Pareyn and, later in that same year, received a donation of about a hundred pieces by then Minister of Colonies, Louis Franck, who had just returned from an inspection tour through the then Belgian Congo and the mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi. It is these two instants that mark the beginnings of the Congolese art collection in the city of Antwerp, at the time housed in the Museum Vleeshuis (which, in turn, was housed in a sixteenth century, now listed building that was for centuries owned and used by the city’s Butcher’s Guild).

The story of the presence of Congolese art in Antwerp is much more complex, however, and does not just revolve around the year 1920. Since 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium had been running his own personal colony as Congo Free State, until 1908 when, under international pressure and due to the atrocities and crimes against humanity that were brought to light (amongst others in The Casement Report of 1904), he handed it over to the Belgian State. The huge area in Africa that Leopold had secured (at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885) became the Belgian Congo, until 1960, when it gained Independence and became the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (between 1971-1997, the Republic of Zaïre).

In the light of colonization, progress, and so-called superiority, Belgium and Antwerp have a history regarding the showcasing of power in the colony, highlighted by subsequent World Fairs that were held in Antwerp in 1885, 1894 and 1930. The World Fairs of 1885 and 1894 are particularly highlighted in the MAS exhibition, as they both showcased a 'zoo humain' ('human zoo') of Congolese people as well as a multitude of material culture and art objects from Congo. For the World Fair of 1885, a delegation of twelve Congolese people was brought to Antwerp, headed by the so-called 'King Masala' and presented and portrayed (and performed) as 'one tribe', under the heading 'Congolanders'. Masala, who was not a king but a *linguist* (derived from the Portuguese term 'lingua', which can be translated as 'translator', or 'interpreter'), had negotiated deals since 1879 between Henry Lewis Morton and local chiefs in Vivi, which was the first Belgian frontier post in Congo, east of Boma, which would soon become the capital city. It was also Henry Lewis Morton together with the Vivi chiefs who decided that Masala should represent Congo at the first World Fair taking place in Belgium, in Antwerp in 1885 (Etambala 2020: 36-7).



*Illustration 1. Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), Neutelings-Riedijk Architects.*

Masala (a contraction of *Ma-Sala* in Kikongo, which can be translated as a 'commercial agent' for a Congolese chief) and his group departed for Antwerp, first from Matadi to Boma onboard *La Belgique* on the Congo river, and onwards from Boma to Rotterdam onboard *De Afrikaan*, and finally from Rotterdam to Antwerp onboard *De Telegraaf* (Etambala 2020: 38).



*Illustration 2. Portrait of Masala. The caption under the photograph reads: Antwerpen, Photographie Artistique, Anvers.*

Museum) was finished in 1910 and inaugurated by Leopold's successor, Albert I of Belgium. The World Fairs in Antwerp and Brussels of 1894 and 1897 also both showcased a 'human zoo', on a much grander and more industrial scale than that of 1885. For the World Fair of 1894, a total of 144 Congolese people were brought over via the Matadi-Antwerp line, to be exhibited during the Fair in Antwerp.

### Congo in Antwerp

The MAS exhibition explores, for the first time, the history of the Antwerp World Fair of 1894 and unveils, through new archival research conducted by the museum's Africa- and *100 X Congo* curator, Els De Palmenaer, that at least eight Congolese people died during their stay in Antwerp. The seven Congolese people who died during the World Fair of 1897 in Tervuren are buried there and have become part of a collective memory in Belgium, but this discovery by De Palmenaer of the Congolese people's deaths in Antwerp was erased from history, until now. The bodies of those deceased in Antwerp were first buried at Kiel Cemetery and later dispersed in a mass grave at Schoonselhof Cemetery in Wilrijk. Bitio, aged 20, died of dysentery on the doorsteps of the Stuijvenberg Hospital upon arrival in Antwerp. One day later,

The delegation of twelve (five men, three women, three young boys and one young girl) arrived in Antwerp on 12 May 1885 and was exhibited as a 'human zoo', as part of an 'Ethnographic Exhibition' in a 'Congolese Village', where they were to reenact their local customs and daily routines. Masala also had an audience with King Leopold II at the Royal Palace in Brussels on 8 July 1885, for which he wore a *veste à Brandebourgs* (see Illustration 2). On 29 August 1885, all twelve delegates from Congo safely returned to Vivi, after a noted presence of about four months in Antwerp. Among the objects that were exhibited during the Antwerp World Fair of 1885, one Kongo *nkisi* statue, to which I will return later, is important.

The other World Fair in Antwerp, of 1894, served in many ways as a blueprint for the World Fair in Brussels of 1897. For the World Fair in Brussels, a *Palais de Colonies* was built in Tervuren and, shortly afterwards, in the same park, the first stone was laid for the *Musée du Congo Belge*, which was to become a true temple for the glorification of Leopold's colonization of the Congo. The building of the *Musée du Congo Belge* in Tervuren (later known as the Royal Museum for Central Africa, now Africa



Sabo died, aged 24. In the coming weeks, many men and women fell ill and were admitted to hospital, at least six of whom died due to diseases such as bronchitis, pneumonia, and measles.

Among the objects that were exhibited at the 1894 World Fair and that returned to MAS, Antwerp, in 2020-2021, was an impressive slit drum that was later acquisitioned by the *Musée du Congo Belge* in Tervuren. One photograph, of a group of men posing with the slit drum in the Congolese Village of 1894, provides evidence that the drum was in fact exhibited in Antwerp before it came to be a part of the collections in Tervuren (see Illustration 3). None of the objects that were exhibited in either World Fair in Antwerp were kept there; they were sold off or donated to other museums. Felix Von Lushan visited the Fair of 1885 and was able to 'secure' a total of 75 Congolese pieces for the *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin, many of them being so-called 'doubles' of some of the 'masterpieces'. In 1894, it was the *Volkenkunde Museum* in Leiden that received a considerable collection of the Antwerp Fair's Congolese objects; over 200 items in total. Amongst them, one 'Oorlogsfetisj' ('war fetish', a *nkisi* statue) that shows remarkable similarities with the one exhibited in Antwerp in 1885 and likely also in 1894, was part of the donation to Leiden.

The 'original' *nkisi nkondi* statue of 1885 (see Illustration 4), now in the collections of Tervuren, is a current topic of heated debate in Belgium surrounding ownership and cultural property. It serves as illustration for the collecting frenzies that were typical of the era and the competition and rivalries between museums and collectors and, particularly in Belgium, between the city of Antwerp and the museum of Tervuren. The *nkisi* statue, recently confirmed to be looted material (see Couttenier 2018, below), was, for the duration of the exhibition *100 X Congo* at MAS in 2020-2021, on loan from Tervuren to Antwerp, the city where it was first on view in 1885.



*Illustration 3. Photograph of a group of Congolese men inside the 'human zoo' at the World Fair of 1894, positioned around the slit drum that has since been kept and exhibited in the Africa Museum in Tervuren.*

The *nkisi nkondi* statue of the 1885 Antwerp World Fair (Illustration 4), was stolen in 1878 during a violent raid on the village of Kikuku, near Boma, led by Alexandre Delcommune, who would later become an officer in Leopold's armed *Force Publique*. The story surrounding the statue's history was brought to light by Maarten Couttenier, a historian and an anthropologist who works at the Tervuren museum, in a contribution entitled 'EO.0.0.7943' (the object's inventory number in the museum) (Couttenier 2018). The *kitumba* (statue) belonged to a



*Illustration 4. Kongo nkisi nkondi statue, stolen by Alexandre Delcommune in Kikuku in 1878 and since kept and exhibited in the Africa Museum in Tervuren (copyright 100 X Congo, Frederik Beyens).*

local chief, Ne Kuko, who, while fleeing Delcommune's armed forces, left it behind in the bush. Later in that same year, Ne Kuko asked for the *nkisi* statue to be returned to him, but Delcommune rejected this request. Instead, by 1883, when Delcommune returned to Belgium, he took the statue with him, where it was stored in the *Musée Royal d'Antiquités, d'Armetures, d'Artillerie et d'Ethnologie* (now *Porte De Hal* Museum, part of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels), until it was shown in Antwerp in 1885. Since 1912, it has been part of the collections of the *Musée du Congo Belge* in Tervuren.

Restitution requests for the EO.0.0.7943 *nkisi nkondi* include the initial plea by Ne Kuko for the return of his property, in the year that the statue was stolen, as well as a demand by President Mobutu Sese Seko in 1973. The latter formed an exemplar for Mobutu's *Recours à l'Authenticité* politics in which the return of objects of cultural heritage played a central role (see also Van Beurden 2015). Mobutu made the request after the *nkisi* was exhibited in a travelling exhibition, entitled *The Art of the Congo*, that toured the USA and Canada between 1967-1969. As a result of the attention that the statue received in those years, no major exhibitions were organized

in Tervuren between 1969-1975 and no exhibitions were mounted that focused on Congo between 1975-1995, in order to silence the debate (Couttenier 2020: 50). The EO.0.0.7943 restitution debate sparked up again only in 2016, when Baku Kapita Alphonse, a current chief in Kikuku, appealed once more for its return, as a result of Maarten Couttenier's patient and arduous archival and provenance research and additional fieldwork that was long needed for this contested and disputed object (see Couttenier 2018, 2020). It was Couttenier who traced Baku Kapita Alphonse during fieldwork in Kikuku, reconnecting the statue with living descendants in its original place.

Because none of the objects from both World Fairs was in fact kept in Antwerp (but rather moved to Brussels, Leiden, and Berlin), the exhibition at MAS mainly focuses on 1920 and on the acquisition by the city of the valuable Pareyn pieces and those donated by Louis Franck. Tervuren had shown interest in buying the collection that Henri Pareyn had offered for sale in 1920, but it was the Antwerp City Council that ultimately acquired the collection. For over 30 years, Pareyn had been buying Congolese artefacts on the harbour docks in Antwerp, from returning colonial officials and missionaries. His vast network and clientele



that he built up included collectors such as André Breton and Tristan Tzara and dealers such as Paul Guillaume and Charles Ratton (De Palmenaer 2020: 74). After his death in 1928, the rest of Pareyn's impressive collection was first put up for sale and, later, auctioned at the Grand Hotel Weber in Antwerp. Local newspapers at the time referred to the items as being of invaluable worth (De Palmenaer 2020: 75). As a result of the auction, Pareyn's collection was dispersed all over the world. At the auction, the city of Antwerp was able to buy only 19 more objects of the Pareyn collection and Tervuren bought only one piece (De Palmenaer 2020: 75).

Some 20,000 pieces were bought at the auction by pharmaceutical entrepreneur Sir Henry Wellcome, later forming part of the collections at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library in London (De Palmenaer 2020: 76). In 1964, the Wellcome Trust donated a huge part of its Africa collection to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), many of which were former Pareyn pieces (De Palmenaer 2020: 76). Another Kongo *nkisi* statue, next to two other ones (E.O.0.0.7943 in the collection of Tervuren and another 'double' in Leiden), now forms part of the collections of the Fowler Museum at UCLA (former Pareyn and Wellcome collections). It resembles Tervuren's E.O.0.0.7943, the heavily disputed example of 'war booty' that was taken to Belgium by Delcommune and first shown in Belgium at the Antwerp World Fair of 1885, in the sense that we can easily describe it as an almost identical piece.



*Illustration 5: Drawing of Frans Olbrechts at work, holding a well-known sculpture that he attributed to the Master of Buli (the sculpture is kept and exhibited in Tervuren), and the poster for the Kongo-Kunst exhibition that he organized in Antwerp in 1937. Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*

A later agent that was instrumental in the expansion of the Africa collections in Antwerp was Frans Olbrechts, who is widely regarded as a founding father of the discipline of African art history. Olbrechts, who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia in 1926-27 and returned

to Columbia in 1929-30, was from 1936 onwards involved in the workings of the Museum Vleeshuis in Antwerp. During his time in the United States, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork, advised by Boas, first among the Eastern Cherokee in North Carolina and later among the Onondaga. By 1947, Olbrechts became Director of the *Musée du Congo Belge* in Tervuren. In Antwerp, in 1937, he organized the first exhibition solely dedicated to the arts of the Congo in Belgium, entitled *Kongo-Kunst* (in comparison, the first major African arts exhibition in the USA took place at MoMa, Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1935). The poster for the Congo exhibition of 1937 shows an image of a *Hemba* statue (former Pareyn and Bela Hein collections, bought in 1931 by the city of Antwerp for a considerable amount of money in order to complement its collection; see Illustration 5). In 1952, under the impulse of Olbrechts, the Ethnographic Museum of the city of Antwerp was established. It closed its doors in 2007 after which it reopened as MAS in 2011, in which the collections of the Maritime Museum, the Folk Art Museum, and parts of the collections of the Museum Vleeshuis fused together alongside the Ethnographic collections to form the MAS.

### A Trajectory of Stories



*Illustration 6: Edo-Portuguese ivory saltcellar, around 1520, Benin (former Olbrechts collection, now MAS Africa collections) (copyright Frederik Beyens).*

The exhibition at MAS centres around the 100 masterpieces from the rich Congo collections of the museum, added by two important loans from Tervuren: the *nkisi nkondi* EO.0.0.7943 and the colossal slit drum in the form of a horned animal (see above; see Illustrations 3 and 4). The 100 objects are physically situated in the middle of the exhibition hall. Upon entry, one also immediately sees two remarkable female Kongo statues that were part of the donation by Louis Franck of 1920. However, the most appealing route for visitors takes them along the museum's walls, where African and, specifically, Congolese history is contextualized. On view are a beautifully crafted Edo-Portuguese ivory saltcellar (see Illustration 6), two photo reproductions of famous drawings by Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (see Illustration 7), and a painting by Constantin Meunier, which is a reproduction of a painting by Pieter Paul Rubens (*A Study of the Head of a Black Man*; see Illustration 8). Another painting that attracts the attention of the visitor is by Jacob Jordaens, which shows Moses and his Ethiopian wife Zipporah, painted around 1650.



*Illustration 7: Katharina, alt 20 jar (Katharina, 20 years old), study portrait by Albrecht Dürer. The original is in the Uffizi Museum, Florence, Italy.*

But it is Katharina, drawn by Dürer during his visit to Antwerp in 1521, who draws the most attention. The young woman, Katharina, was about 20 years of age when Dürer drew her. She belonged to the household of João Brandão, who at the time was the representative of the Portuguese King in Antwerp. Katharina might have been a slave or a servant, or possibly Brandão's wife. In the drawing, we observe melancholy in her eyes. She does not confront the viewer and looks downwards. Yet, conversely, she wears a turban that appears expensive and that might be a sign of a certain status, crowned on her forehead by a large gemstone (Schreuder 2020: 30).

History continues on the walls, showing, amongst others, an art nouveau poster for the Antwerp World Fair of 1894, photographs of both World Fairs, and pages from the archives of the Stuivenberg Hospital showing the lists of the sick and deceased Congolese people in 1894. The visitor moves from this context on the walls to the 100 art pieces that are positioned at the centre of the exhibition space, passing by the arts of the Kongo Kingdom and of Yombe, Yaka, Suku, Chokwe, Kuba, Luba, Luluwa, Pende,

Songye, Hemba, Tabwa, and Lega. These artworks stand there somewhat isolated, with some contextual information in the form of written words by Congolese creative writer Patrick Mudekerezza. Some of his poetry is projected on the glass boxes that showcase these pieces. Other sounds that penetrate the room, and that (re)connect the historical context on the walls with the art pieces in the centre, are from two films that are projected in the exhibition space. One film, made by Matthias De Groof in 2020, is titled *Onder het Witte Masker* (*Under the White Mask*) and is a critical remake of Paul Hasaerts' film *Onder het Zwarte Masker* (*Under the Black Mask*) of 1958. De Groof's film reuses the artworks that were originally used in Hasaerts' film (some of which are on view in the exhibition). The images look and speak back at the audience, using excerpts from *Discourse sur le Colonialisme* (1950) by Aimé Césaire. For the film, the words were translated from French into Lingala (and subtitled in Dutch, French, and English). The other film, *In Vele Handen* (*In Many Hands*), by Belgian-Congolese *Collectif Faire Part* (*Faire Part Collective*), was also made in 2020, and specifically for the exhibition at MAS.

*In Many Hands* starts, in many different voices, with people talking to the camera lens about how they reconnect, one way or another, with the objects, or about how they feel a lack of connection because of loss of knowledge. They choose an object from the exhibition to talk about, and tell stories that relate to their own experiences as Afrodescendants in Antwerp or





*Illustration 8: Copy by Constantin Meunier, painted between 1890-1905, of a Rubens painting of 1613-1615. The original is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels. Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*

1992). These artfully-made objects of social, political, and religious life serve as remnants of the past, a past disrupted by the missions and colonialism. Testimonies projected onto the glass by contemporary people (see Illustrations 9 and 10) add to this sense of strangeness, rather than offering clarification, which leads the viewer to critically question what is actually on view. Questions of knowledge reproduction and epistemology are tackled in text and film. The poems by writer Patrick Mudekerezwa, featured throughout the exhibition, tie all of these feelings and sentiments together in the best possible, but also fragile and often uneasy and inconvenient ways.

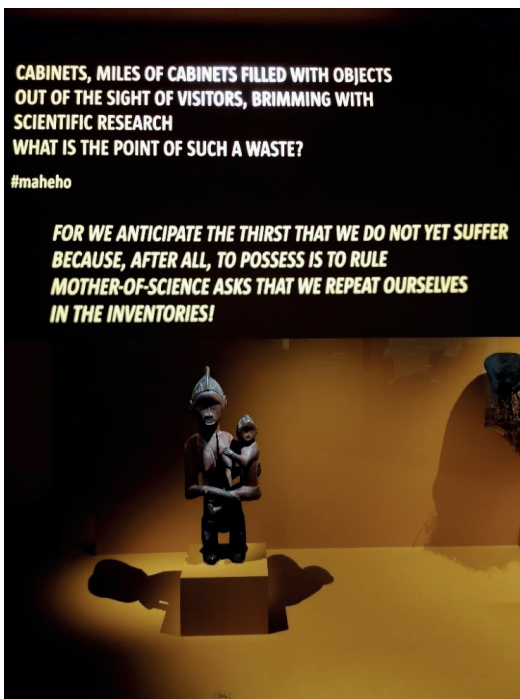
Upon leaving the exhibition space, the arts and crafts that were produced in mission schools are on view. One section is devoted to the introduction of needle lace to Congolese girls by congregations of Belgian nuns, alongside weaving, and wood- and ivory-carving to Congolese boys by Belgian friars. The lace style and technique originated in Tenerife, which was the waystation for Belgian missionaries on their way to Congo: the so-called *dentelle de Tenerife* (or *Ténériffe*), indigenized by the use of raffia and turned into what became known as Congolese lace (Van Beurden 2020: 95-9). The boys, in different mission stations and schools, were educated in carving and ivory inlay work that served as handicraft and was sold in order to support missionization and conversion in the Congo (Van Beurden 2020: 99-105).

Congolese people in Kinshasa. A powerful moment is when a man says, to the camera, that, 'Yes, these things have been studied, but how have they been studied, and by whom?' He repeats, in an imperative voice, that what we are looking at is stolen colonial art. Everyone in the film talks on their own terms, describing what these objects, and their histories, signify to them, ascribing meaning and value mostly from a personal, emotional point of view. In Kinshasa, we see and hear customary artists talking, one of whom is in the process of making a wooden copy of an ivory sculpture in the form of a raised fist that is on view at MAS. Other intimate moments in the film include a seller of crafts and handiworks at a tourist market who reflects on the meaning of objects, a university professor who talks about the new museum in Kinshasa, and an elderly shoemaker, filmed in the streets of the city, who reminisces about the missions and colonial days.

The 'whole' story of history and art coming together as a concept never really does come together: the art pieces in the centre remain largely silent, inside their glass boxes (cf. Ames



*Illustration 9: 'I want history, I want history, [...] but history can break your heart': projection on a case showing, amongst others, a pwoom itok and a ngaady a mwaash- and bwoom mask, royal masks of the Bushoong Kuba (Pareyn acquisition of 1920). Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*



*Illustration 10: 'Cabinets, miles of cabinets' projection. Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*



*Illustration 11: Film Still from In Many Hands (copyright Collectif Faire Part, 2020).*



*Illustration 12. Suku mask with canoe and bearers carrying a white man (Loan Marc Felix) and car with driver and passenger (Loan Africamuseum Tervuren). Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*



## Congolese Voices

I want history, I want history!  
 Not the rites I cannot perform anymore,  
 Nor the prices I cannot afford  
 I want to relive the journey from the origins,  
 From hand to hand to the reserves  
 I want to be part again of that history!

#kasau

But history can break your heart

#Patrick Mudekereza

(Full quote, see Illustration 9, translated from Dutch)

The exhibition at MAS attempts, on different levels, to engage with Afrodescendant and Congolese voices, in Belgium as well as in DRC, by highlighting the EO.0.0.7943 story, by working together with Congolese artists such as Patrick Mudekereza, and by amplifying these voices through block-lettering on the glass boxes and in sound, in *In Many Hands*. Furthermore, the museum hired Nadia Nsai Madjedjo, a Belgo-Congolese Curator *Beeldvorming* (which can be translated as 'Representation') particularly for the exhibition, who has been highly



visible in Belgian media and on television. The museum also offers guided tours in Lingala and Swahili, the two main languages of DRC, in order to attract and be accessible for Belgo-Congolese communities. For the exhibition and the catalogue, a range of Congolese writers and academics were involved, one of whom, Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu of the University of Lubumbashi, conducted additional provenance research on one object, a Songye *nkishi* of Chief Nkolomonyi (see Illustrations 13 and 14). As Dibwe dia Mwembu's recent research reveals, this statue, too, is an object that was acquired in violent colonial circumstances, sometime in the early twentieth century.

*Illustration 13: Songye nkishi in the exhibition and MAS collection, acquired 1940 (donation Osterrieth family, collected by Paul Louis Osterrieth in Lusambo in 1923). Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).*



*Illustration 14. CT-scan of the Songye statue, showing a network of connected channels through which substances were added to feed the sculpture and reinforce its power. Performed by the Radiology Section of UZA Wilrijk, and Arches and Axes Research Groups (copyright MAS Antwerp).*

The Songye *nkishi* was acquired by the city of Antwerp in 1940, as part of a donation by the Osterrieth family. It had been acquired in 1923 by Paul Louis Osterrieth, an Antwerp-based entrepreneur of German descent and a trader in colonial goods, in Lusambo, the capital of today's Sankuru Province, DRC. It was only after his death, in 1939, that a major part of his private collection was donated by his family to what was then the Museum Vleeshuis. The statue's label in the museum describes it as a 'fétiche' (a 'fetish') that belonged to 'Chief Kolemoina', who was a 'féticheur' and a 'chef de la tribu des Bassongo Meno', who were described as a 'race cannibale de la rive gauche de Sankuru' (Dibwe dia Mwemba 2020: 85). The label also identifies that this chief was sentenced to death by Belgian authorities after he had been found guilty of poisoning seventeen people (Dibwe dia Mwemba 2020: 85). Dibwe dia Mwemba carried out additional fieldwork in Lubumbashi and Kabinda alongside archival research, with Els De Palmenae, in Brussels, which uncovered that the name Kolomoina was in fact derived from Nkolomonyi, who was a Songye chief from Eyimono village, near Lubefu in today's Lomani Province (Dibwe dia Mwemba 2020: 85). Dibwe's respondents provided different versions and interpretations of the origins and reputation of Chief Nkolomonyi, but most seem to agree that



Illustration 15: *Hommage aux Anciens Createurs* (*Hommage to the Old Masters*), painting by Congolese artist Chéri Samba, 1994 (Loan Bernard de Grunne). Photo taken at 100 X Congo (copyright Hugo DeBlock).

he was a cruel ruler who strongly opposed Belgian authority and who used the power of images to reinforce and consolidate his power in the region.

African objects of religious, ritual life remain cultural items estranged from people of different places in a bygone era. In that sense, these objects are still – whatever the attempt to recontextualize them might be – alienated and contested property. It appears that many people want to reconnect to these artefacts that still form an integral part of cultural pride and heritage, even if this heritage is removed in time and space for many who claim allegiance. Since such objects were first regarded as curiosities and then transformed into examples of (scientific) specimens and into the even more problematic category (infused by market prices) of 'masterpieces of tribal art', they did not 'need' much provenance. They were meant to serve as grotesque, dramatic, or expressionistic examples of 'otherworldly beauty', for bourgeois consumption only. By aligning with current debates on the decolonization of museums and collections and restitution, the exhibition at MAS does not

avoid difficult questions or uneasy situations; rather, it confronts them. This is perhaps best illustrated by the first object one sees upon entry in the exhibition, the Chéri Samba painting 'Hommage aux Anciens Createurs' of 1994, in combination with the last object, upon leaving: a Kongo *ntadi* funerary statue in the form of a thinking, contemplating person (*fumani*). The last text panel, accompanying the statue of the Congolese thinker, asks: 'what did you think when you entered this exhibition, and what do you think now?' (*author's translation from Dutch*). This invites the visitor, upon leaving, to continue thinking about issues of colonialism and violence and power, and about disrupted and fragmented histories and Congolese art.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *100 X Congo* recently won the International Exhibition of the Year at the Museum and Heritage Awards in the UK: <https://awards.museumsandheritage.com/winners-2021/>.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I will use the name of the nation appropriate to the time period being discussed.



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