

Congolines

Inscribing Lines, Weaving Threads. Congolese Colonial Drawings and Paintings as Images and Objects

DURATION

1/09/2021 - 1/12/2025

BUDGET

1 103 906 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

This research project aims to reconstruct a long history of painting and drawing in DR Congo by analysing three types of collections in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) and the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR):

- abstract geometric and realistic scenes in rock arts, on traditional objects such as calabashes and ivory horns, murals and paintings (Northeast Congo, 1900-1960);
- paintings on sheets of paper by Albert and Antoinette Lubaki and Thsyela Ntendu (colonial province of Kasai, 1920s-30s);
- paintings with oil on paper and oil on canvas (Elisabethville and Leopoldville, 1940-50s).

These collections were composed by (male) Westerners who tried to influence and control Congolese painting and/or to cherish an "authentic" Congolese painting tradition. These paintings were traditionally labelled as 'colonial' because of the use of western materials and/or the depiction of colonial society, even though they show important similarities to earlier geometric and decorative art forms associated with oral culture.

The general objectives and underlying research questions are:

- to reinscribe these artworks in a longer history of drawing by studying them in conjunction with tradition-based art forms from which they were separated as a result of colonial bias;
- to study the context in which the works were made and used in the colonial contact zone, and served as mnemotechnic devices and performative objects for Congolese;
- to study the paintings from the point of view of Congolese artists and Congolese publics, rather than from the perspective of the white (mostly male) "discoverers" and patrons of the artists.
- to analyse the reception history of these art works in world art in connection to early 20th century western art and design;
- to pay particular attention to female painters and western women involved in patronage networks.

The methodologies consist of:

- collection research: creating a database of geometric and figurative motifs on the art works in question and other artefacts held in the RMCA's collections;
- fieldwork in the DRC to overcome the limits of archival research as sources in general, and the limits of (pre)colonial sources in particular;
- literature research on so-called precolonial, colonial and postcolonial collections, their reception history and the history of their influence on western artists;
- non-invasive art technological research.

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Potential impact of the research on

- **science:** rewriting the history of Congolese to question the false opposition between pre-colonial and colonial art;
- **society:** the collaboration with the Congolese Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo will allow digitally restituted arts contained in a digital repository to reach diverse museums and higher education institutions all over DR Congo
- **management, conservation and valorisation of Federal Scientific Institution's collections:** an art technological survey of a number of artworks will result in:
 - a *risk* analysis and assessment (light, acidity and handling),
 - a preservation plan,
 - a better knowledge of the materials in function of the research to establish the authenticity and provide further insight into the creation process, chronological dating, chronology/evolution, and meaning.

Expected final research results and valorisation perspectives at short and medium term

- At least 8 scientific articles;
- 1 edited volume;
- Diffusion or research results through
 - exhibitions in several museums and higher education institutions in Belgium and DRC,
 - a website and digital content,
 - conferences for specialized publics;
 - press messages, walk and talks for a non-specialised audience,
- a digital collection database for a number of Congolese institutions;
- training programmes in DRC to reach teachers and communities;
- teaching in art history and material culture and facilitation of MA theses at UGent and KASK.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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