

PROMA

Provenance Research for Museum Audiences

DURATION

01/02/2023 – 01/05/2026

BUDGET

175 948 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Museums outside Africa with collections from Africa, like the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), are questioned for the colonial context of their collections and the poorly documented provenience and provenance of the collections. When the RMCA reopened in 2018, one criticism concerned precisely the lack of context and background of acquisition of the collections presented in the new exhibition. The aim of PROMA is to carry out provenance research on objects on display. Being directly visible to the public, they "immediately" invite to, and facilitate sharing of knowledge via specific labels, apps, websites, etc.

PROMA will link various objects on display throughout the museum space as well as those invisible to the public in storage rooms, offering complementary narratives to those of the permanent exhibition; the project will specifically look into the often-invisible female agency in the production, use, collection and purchase of ethnographic objects.

The size and volume of the RMCA collections and the long institutional history are exceptional resources and have been the object of historical investigation. However, the museum collections have hardly been explored through the angle of gender studies. A recent pilot study by Eline Sciot (2018) on the first female scientist at the RMCA, the ethnographer Olga Boone, forms an exception. The context and background of the formation of a part of the ethnographic RMCA collections are situated at the interplay of the Belgian colonial enterprise and the emergence and relatively late (mid-20th century) professionalization of the anthropological discipline in Belgium. The absence of a gender studies approach until recently in the history of anthropology in Belgium is in contrast with the Anglo-Saxon world or the French context where the role and place of women anthropologists has received more attention. The same disparity exists with Fine Arts institutions, for which gender has long been a focus of study.

Our project capitalizes on current provenance research conducted within the RMCA yet from the novel perspective of gender that has not (yet) received the appropriate recognition in this type of research.

The disruptive character of the research orientation necessitates an interdisciplinary methodology (history, art history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and mediation) in order to reflect the various issues and stakeholders. The members of this project (essentially female) are part of a collaborative process open to dialogue and encounter, aiming at the co-construction of knowledge. Narratives will be (re)constructed from archives inside and outside of the institute, in an inclusive approach that considers private archives as well as memories connected to this heritage among the diaspora and in the countries of origin.

The main objective of this project is to study the RMCA "as gendered space(s), particularly aspects of (in)visibility and materiality in collections and archives" (Sciot 2018). At the same time, it is also about modifying the visitor's experience, by pointing out and deconstructing the essentially "male" or "virile" nature of the colonization, in questioning the representativity and the representation of genders in the exhibited pieces by making a positive selection for women whose biography will be studied. Museography choices that influenced the (in)visibility of women in the permanent exhibition will also be assessed in the process.

The project PROMA addresses two socially relevant topics, that of gender and of (post) coloniality which are at the core of research in the humanities and social sciences for many decades. More recent events sustained and proclaimed in social media (e. g. MeToo, Black Lives Matter) have propagated these two topics rapidly into the international civil society debates in which museums need to participate. Combining these topics in a project that foremost centers on the audiences, ensures that recent academic achievements in gender and postcolonial studies enter the museum space, thereby responding to the expectations of the public.

PROMA

CONTACT INFORMATION

Coordinator

Agnès Lacaille

Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)

Cultural Anthropology & History

agnes.lacaille@africamuseum.be