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ReThinking Collections



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FOREWORD

With *ReThinking Collections*, the AfricaMuseum introduces a new exhibition format in the cellars of the renovated museum building. The more human scale of this intimate space offers new possibilities and brings the visitor closer to the topic.

More and more Africans and Afro-descendants are taking an interest in their history and want to reconnect with the culture of their ancestors. This is no simple matter, as it relates not only to objects but also to their spiritual, cultural, and social significance. The past can never fully return, yet – as the AfricaMuseum espouses – 'everything passes, except the past'. When we know and understand our past better, we construct our own identities. Each of us should learn how objects, often acquired in violent or unjust circumstances, entered the museum. It is just as important to comprehend this crucial period in time: territorial conquest during the colonial era left deep wounds, and establishing the truth is part of every healing process.

The question of provenance research is thus a pressing issue. *ReThinking Collections* is a significant step in understanding and acknowledging the routes taken by the collection pieces. A scholarly work edited by Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola, and Agnès Lacaille served as the basis for this exhibition. I am greatly impressed by the compelling research that demonstrates how the 2022 Belgian law on restitution addresses an objective need for justice and reconciliation with our past.

I am similarly impressed by the record time in which the AfricaMuseum teams prepared and installed this exhibition of more than 60 objects, in a manner that provides new ways of seeing our history.

I wish you a rewarding visit, and I hope that it will bring fresh insights and greater empathy for the social debate around restitution.

Bart Ouvry, Director-General

ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

ReThinking Collections is a new temporary exhibition on provenance research. Most of the collections in the AfricaMuseum were acquired during the colonial era, in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Provenance research and the related theme of restitution are increasingly the subject of current social and political debate. But how can we trace the origins of collections? What new insights does this knowledge provide? And what should become of these collections, within and beyond museum walls?

The exhibition highlights the challenges of and varying approaches to provenance research. It presents a range of varied and occasionally unexpected collections. *ReThinking Collections* broaches relevant questions on contested heritage and explores new perspectives on the future of colonial collections.

ReThinking Collections was inspired by the recent AfricaMuseum publication *(RE)MAKING COLLECTIONS. Origins, Trajectories & Reconnections / LA FABRIQUE DES COLLECTIONS: Origines, trajectoires & reconnexions*, edited by Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola and Agnès Lacaille. This academic work, published in October 2023, focuses on two complementary perspectives: the field of (cultural) heritage in the general historical and contemporary Belgian-Congolese context, and more specifically, the collections in the AfricaMuseum.

Under the auspices of the Belgian Presidency of of the Council of the European Union.

THE BOOK BEHIND THE EXHIBITION: *(RE)MAKING COLLECTIONS: ORIGINS, TRAJECTORIES, & RECONNECTIONS*

The massive presence of non-western artefacts in Europe has drawn more and more attention from researchers in recent years. Instigated by the artefacts' native communities and their diasporas, this situation has become the subject of discussion in international social debates.

In Belgium, the collections of the AfricaMuseum and their colonial origins are under scrutiny. On its 2018 reopening, the museum was criticised for the patchy contextualisation of the manner in which the collections in the permanent exhibition were acquired. A 'provenance tour' introduced in 2021 gave visitors more information on the origins of various articles via a smartphone app and several website articles.

However, provenance research must dig deeper into the historical accounts of the collections as a whole, taking into account their development and transformation over time. To this end, the *(Re)Making Collections* publication project was launched in August 2021.



Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola & Agnès Lacaille (eds.), *(RE)MAKING COLLECTIONS. Origins, Trajectories & Reconnections / LA FABRIQUE DES COLLECTIONS: Origines, trajectoires & reconnexions.* Reeks/collection/series 'Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities', vol. 181. Tervuren: KMMA/MRAC/RMCA, 2023.

THE EXHIBITION

With the *ReThinking Collections* temporary exhibition, the museum aims to examine the challenges and approaches of provenance research and how they relate to the collections as a whole. The focus is not only on the ways in which the collection was acquired over the course of more than a century, but also on their future prospects.

In addition to cultural anthropology collections, the exhibition includes other types of collections, such as the natural sciences. While the former have been widely studied and covered by the media, the latter remain largely ignored by research and social debates – even if, from an institutional perspective, they form part of the same historical, ideological and political context. Photo collections and archives are also valuable; because of their documentary significance they are essential to research into the creation of collections.

The exhibition is based on an edited collection and reflects the various approaches of the authors of the *(Re)Making Collections* publication project, which include a number of researchers and institutional actors from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the diversity of the collections they study.

RESTITUTION: OVERDUE

This piece by the Congolese artist Steve Bandoma shows pieces piled up on a cart, which is drawn by one of the museum's iconic masks and a pair of human arms. It symbolises restitution, which the artist feels is long overdue. The choice of a cart is no coincidence: *'être charrette'* means that it is high time for action. The title of the drawing suggests that this is not only a long-term project but also one that keeps dragging on.



Steve Bandoma (Congolese, 1981, lives and works in Kinshasa). *Corvée* (Karwei / Chore). From the 'Lost Tribe series'. 2020. Ink on paper. 2022.5.1.© S. Bandoma for the artwork; photo © RMCA.

What was your inspiration for this piece?

As a contemporary artist for the past 20 years, I did not experience colonisation. Nonetheless, I feel duty-bound to look back at the past of my ancestors. I have always felt a need, a strong bond that forces me to look in the rear-view mirror in order to revitalise myself, to take ownership of Congo's past and allow new themes to emerge from within. That's my guiding principle.

What is the value of the 'colonial collections' for the Congolese?

Unfortunately, religion succeeded in its 'rescue mission', which curtailed the salvation of poor souls. Today, the invasion of churches and mosques is virtually unstoppable and the state struggles to maintain its authority over these religions. The settler has departed and rather than leaving his notorious overseers on the rubber plantations, he chose to leave the Church to guard the temple in his stead.

A paradigm shift. Alas, everything that comes from abroad seems better that anything we ever believed.

What future do you foresee for these collections?

We need real decolonisation in the truest sense of the word. Not just a hollow, misleading concept. Young Africans need:

- restitution of the historical truth;
- the transmission of values derived from the classical human sciences forged by their ancestors;
- the opportunity to regain ownership of their culture and spirituality;

Insistent voices seek the restitution of this heritage, which is of great significance to humanity. But only when these conditions are met can this heritage not only be appreciated by its recipients but also protected by them. The rest is noise!

RETRACING COLLECTIONS: HOW DO WE CARRY OUT PROVENANCE RESEARCH?

How were objects taken from their original environment: by whom, when and in which circumstances? The ways in which provenance research can attempt to answer these questions are looked at in the first part of the exhibition. Sources such as archives and oral testimonies offer information to varying degrees, complement each other, but also contradict each other at times. Every source contains biases, and that demands a critical eye. Provenance research does not follow a clearly defined route and is never finished.

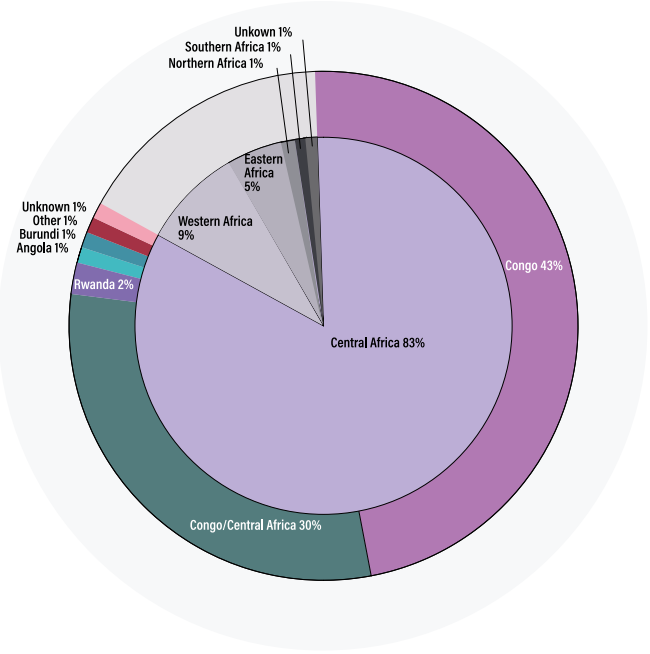
VIEWING COLLECTIONS THROUGH A WIDER LENS

Today, the AfricaMuseum houses 129,000 cultural objects, 95% of which come from African countries, Congo in particular. The museum acquired more than 40,000 pieces from Congo before the First World War - together they represent 60% of all the cultural objects from Congo that ended up here during the colonial era. Initial research into this early collection mapped out the various networks of the people who were involved, directly or indirectly, in their acquisition. The majority of these objects were obtained within a context of unequal power relations and/or violence, in which Congolese communities had very little freedom to act and react.



Antropomorfe hoofdsteun / Appuie-tête anthropomorphe / Anthropomorphic headrest. Kasaï, RD Congo. [Luluwa]. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood (*Crossopterix febrifuga*), pigment. Acquired by CICM congregation. Gift. 1914. EO.0.0.18802, collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, CC-BY 4.0.

Scheut missionary Constant De Deken acquired this headrest between 1892 and 1894 in the Kasaï region for the Scheut missionary museum.



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ORAL SOURCES AND ARCHIVES

As well as individual recollections, oral sources and archives also include familial and collective memories, handed down from generation to generation through stories, songs and even paintings. They are an important source for provenance research. They complement written sources and archives, which often reflect the perspective of the coloniser, and place them in a new light.



Chef Yakaumbu Kamanda Lumpungu en zijn echtgenote Mfute Lushiya / Chef Yakaumbu Kamanda Lumpungu et son épouse Mfute Lushiya / Chief Yakaumbu Kamanda Lumpungu and his wife Mfute Lushiya. Léopold Gabriel. 1929. AP.0.2.9958. All rights reserved.

Through the museum archives and oral sources we can find out more about how the alleged necklace of Tippu Tip may have ended up in the collection of the Tervuren museum. They also shed light on the tragic and contested story of Chief Yakaumbu Kamanda Lumpungu (1890-1936). This Songye chief was said to have inherited the necklace from his father. Accused of murder, Chief Kamanda was executed on 1 September 1936 despite doubts surrounding the judicial investigation. His family and descendants still dispute the verdict and demand that his name be officially cleared. Chief Kamanda is a well-known figure in Congolese popular culture and his memory lives on in the collective memory. The museum has more than ten paintings depicting the chief and several significant events from his life.



Kaz. *La Mort du chef coutumier Lumpungu Kaumbu Ka Ngoie.* (De dood van tradionele chef Lumpungu Kaumbu Ka Ngoie / The death of traditional chief Lumpungu Kaumbu Ka Ngoie). RD Congo. 1989. Oil on canvas. Purchase from B. Jewsiewicki, 2013. HO.2013.57.125, collection RMCA. All rights reserved; photo © RMCA.

REVIEWING COLLECTIONS: PROVENANCE RESEARCH INTO CONTESTED HERITAGE

The second part of the exhibition displays three sets of objects whose presence in the museum has raised questions following recent investigation by AfricaMuseum researchers. These case studies are from both natural and human science collections, acquired during the colonial and post-colonial eras.

TROPHIES IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE

In 1898, the newly-founded Musée du Congo launched appeals for the collection of zoological, botanical and geological specimens. This led to an unprecedented collecting frenzy. At present, the debate on origin and restitution is strongly focused on cultural heritage; it is still early days for other collections.

As an agent of the Congo Free State from 1914, Sven Molin (1879-?) collected forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) skulls, hides and tusks – often at the request of and with the support of the museum of Tervuren. Large mammals, elephants in particular, were still absent from the museum's collections around 1900. Molin also bought or confiscated utensils, weapons and prestige objects from the Congolese under his authority.

The museum provided Molin with all the necessary items for taking photos. Under the pretext of science he created scenes with slaughtered animals, trophies or insignias of power.



Mise-en-scène met schedels van olifanten / Mise en scène avec installation de crânes d'éléphants / Mise-en-scène with skulls of elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*). Moma region, Équateur, RD Congo. s.d. Photographer S. Molin. Gift. 1935. Collection RMCA, AP.0.0.35868. All rights reserved.

LOOKING BACK ON FIELDWORK

Museums did not stop building collections following the independence of African countries. These transactions must also be scrutinized. While purchases were documented and, in the scope of long-term fieldwork, based as much as possible on voluntary and fair consent, it is hard to rule out unequal power relations entirely, and the acquisition can have detrimental effects on people and communities.

This *Gyela lu Zauli* mask was made by the sculptor Sabu bi Boti. Masks of this type represent elegant young girls and were worn during dances at funeral celebrations among the Guro in Côte d'Ivoire, but also appeared at events in the context of political propaganda or as entertainment at markets. Anthropologist Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, affiliated with the AfricaMuseum, bought this mask directly from the artist in 2002 before it could be used. It was her final purchase from the Guro. In the exhibition she reflects on her acquisitions and the paradoxes of collecting in a post-colonial era.



Gyela lu Zauli. Masker / Masque / Mask. Tibeita, Côte d'Ivoire. [Guro]. Created by Sabu bi Boti. Wood, pigment, nylon. Field collected by A.-M. Bouttiaux. 2002. EO.2002.6.1, collection RMCA. Photo J.-M. Vandyck, CC-BY 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode).

REMAKING COLLECTIONS: FUTURE PERSPECTIVES?

By sharing questions around the origin of its collections with the public, the museum aims to contribute towards the debate around its history and its influence on society. What are the future perspectives on dealing with colonial collections? The exhibition sheds light on a number of paths.

ESPRIT DES ANCÊTRES: RECONNECTING WITH THE SPIRITUALITY OF ANCESTORS

By repairing the connection with cultural heritage, the Congolese artist Géraldine Tobe aims to breathe new life into ancestral spirituality. For the 'Esprit des Ancêtres' project, she researched pre-colonial African spiritual identity with the aid of Congolese cultural heritage pieces in European museums. Tobe translates the pieces' stories into works of art, in order to stimulate a new collective imagining that reconnects young Africans with their ancestors and their cultural history. This project is about reconciliation, restoration and reconnection, on both physical and spiritual levels.



Géraldine Tobe (Congolese, Kinshasa, 1992, lives and works in Kinshasa). *Le Cri de L'âme.* (De kreet van de ziel / The cry of the soul). From 'Kalunga' series. 2021. Smoke on canvas. © G. Tobe for the artwork, photo and © Jeanpy Kabongo

Géraldine Tobe studied at the Kinshasa Academy of Fine Arts. She came into contact with our collections in 2019 during an artist residency at the AfricaMuseum. She set up the 'Esprit des Ancêtres' project, for which she worked with 13 African artists on the recovery of ancestral spirituality.

THE CURATORS

AGNÈS LACAILLE

Agnès Lacaille is an art historian and museologist (MA). She has worked in the Heritage Studies service of the AfricaMuseum since 2020, where she carries out provenance research into pieces from the museum's collections, with a focus on objects in the permanent exhibition.

As a student, she researched the western colonial history of various collections of African artefacts. Her MA thesis (2003) led to an exhibition and a joint publication in 2007. She carried out preparatory doctoral research into the history of the trade and art market for Congolese artefacts in Belgium and the link between the art market and Belgian museums.

Thanks to this research, she has a great deal of experience in studying both institutional and private archives. In her most recent role, Agnès Lacaille has published ten articles on the origin of items in the collection on the museum website.

SARAH VAN BEURDEN

Dr. Sarah Van Beurden is an associate professor of History and African American and African Studies at Ohio State University and an editor of the journal *African Arts*. She graduated from KU Leuven (1999) and obtained a doctorate in history at the University of Pennsylvania (2009). Her interests lie in the ways in which culture is constructed, presented and used in political contexts.

She has written on the history of museums and African collections, the restitution of art, decolonisation, provenance research, the history of applied art, the politics of heritage and contemporary Congolese art. Her first book, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* ('New African Histories Series', Ohio University Press, 2015) examines the role of museum policy in the legitimation of the Belgian colonial regime and the postcolonial Mobutu regime in Congo/Zaïre.

DIDIER GONDOLA

Dr. Didier Gondola is a professor in African History and African Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He obtained a doctorate in African History from the Université de Paris in 1993. He is the author of around sixty articles and chapters on migration in Central Africa and on popular culture, particularly sape and Congolese rumba.

He spent the 2008-09 academic year in Kinshasa, where he carried out research and taught at the University in Kinshasa thanks to a Fulbright research grant from the US Department of State. He was also awarded a prestigious Eurias fellowship, which enabled him to spend the 2011-12 academic year as a fellow at the Institut des Études Avancées in Nantes, where he completed the book *Tropical Cowboys*.

PRACTICAL INFO

Ticket including temporary exhibition	**13 euros**
Under 18 years	**free**
Annual season ticket (incl. temporary exhibitions)	**50 euros**

All prices can be found at www.africamuseum.be

ACTIVITIES

GUIDED TOUR

Sunday 28/1, Sunday 25/2, Sunday 31/3, Sunday 28/4, Sunday 26/5, Sunday 30/6, Sunday 28/7, Sunday 25/8, Sunday 29/9

Every last Sunday of the month, the museum invites you for a tour on provenance research. The tour guides you through the exhibition in order to shed light on the various processes and difficulties involved in provenance research.

For groups: 190 €

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