

# The Art Exhibition at the *Palais du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi* at the Expo 1958 in Brussels

## Searching for Perspectives

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### Abstract

It was mainly thanks to the efforts of the Belgian artist Laurent Moonens, who had founded an art academy in the then Belgian Congo, that a group of young art students from Lubumbashi were able to travel to the 1958 World Exhibition in Brussels. Today, their works are regarded as the first generation of modern art in the DR Congo. At the time, the issue of modern art in the Congo was incorporated into the national tasks of the Belgian colonial power; voices criticising

power relations or definitions are difficult to find in the sources. Nevertheless, the way in which these works were presented at the World Expo was not a matter of course at the time. This essay analyses the conditions of this very first exhibition, in which European and Congolese works were shown together. All those involved embraced an idea of "humanism", albeit their respective conceptions of it varied.

## Visible contrasts: the representation of colonial rhetoric in the Cold War era

[1] The first world exhibition after the Second World War took place from 17 April to 19 October 1958 at Heysel Park in Brussels. It reflected both the political upheavals and human suffering of the recent world war and the increasing confrontation between East and West, which also form the framework for the colonial history of this period.<sup>1</sup> Under the heading "Evaluation of the world for a more humane world", a large number of company pavilions were accommodated – a demonstration of a new phase of internationalisation determined by capitalism. While a nuclear military strike seemed imminent on the political stage of the Cold War, the Atomium in Brussels was meant to evoke the peaceful side of nuclear energy. Nuclear research in Belgium was made possible, among other factors, by uranium mining in the Katanga region by the Belgian Congo Nuclear Group.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the colonial presentation in the *Grand Palais du Congo Belge et Ruanda-Urundi* right next to the Atomium certainly does not seem out of place (Fig. 1). From 1897 onwards, the colonial exhibition format has developed a kind of Belgian tradition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, now adapted for a time when forms of emancipation challenged both politics and the arts.



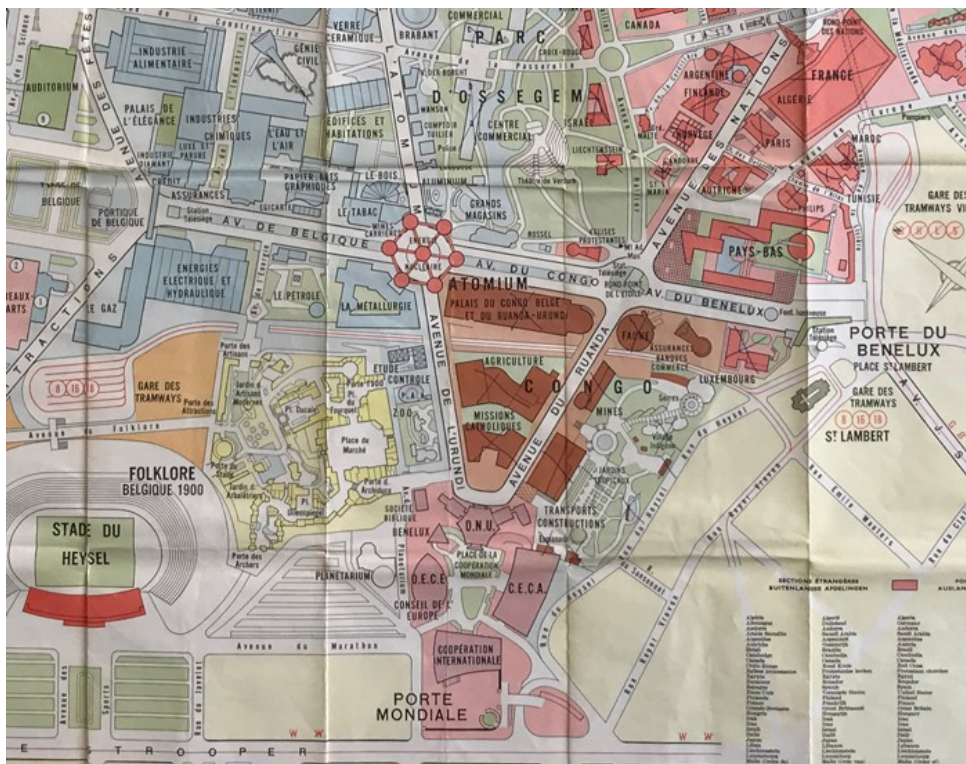
1 *Grand Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi. Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958*, photo: R. Stalin, Inforcongo. Collection Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale (since 2018: AfricaMuseum), Tervuren (reprod. from: *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial*, ed. Jean-Luc Vellut, exh. cat., Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Ghent 2005, 165)

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew G. Stanard, "'Bilan du monde pour un monde plus déshumanisé'. The Brussels World's Fair and Belgian Perceptions of the Congo", in: *European History Quarterly* 35 (2005), no. 2, 267-298; and Robert W. Rydell: "Brussels 1958. Exposition universelle et internationale de Bruxelles (Expo '58)", in: *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, ed. John E. Findling and Kimberly D. Pelle, New York 1990, 311-318.

<sup>2</sup> The science pavilion at the World Exhibition also presented nuclear research and uranium mining under the motto "For a more humane world"; cf. Rydell (1990), 316.

[2] The World Exhibition of 1958 was analysed in-depth from a historical-economical perspective by Guy Vanthemsche und Matthew Stanard, and both the architectural highlights and the presentation of the colonial empire have been the subject of research – while the pavilion with the art exhibition from the colony has not received much scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> The Colonial Department (*Ministère des colonies*) represented the 'civilising' work of the Belgians in the Congo and included a "native village", informative exhibitions on raw material extraction, transport, construction, banking and insurance, agriculture, and missionary work in seven large buildings on an area of almost two hectares south of the main axis marked by the Atomium (Figs. 1 and 2).



2 Map of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair (*Plan de l'Exposition de Bruxelles 1958*), Brussels: De Rouck, 1958, 58 × 81 cm, detail. Zentralbibliothek Zürich, 5 Db 48:1 (photo: ZB, Zurich)

<sup>3</sup> There are only brief notes on art in: Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1858–1980*, Cambridge, UK 2012, 65-66; Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo. A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*, Lincoln, NE 2011, 67-68; Stanard (2005), 272-273; Florence Hespel, "Bruxelles 1958 carrefour mondial de l'art", in: *Expo 58. L'art contemporain à l'exposition universelle*, eds. Florence Hespel, Jean-Philippe Theyskens and Francisca Vandepitte, exh. cat., Ghent 2008 (= *Les cahiers des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, 2), 13-59: 45-59 (limited to Belgian artists in the Congo); Sabine Cornelis, "Le colonisateur satisfait, ou le Congo représenté en Belgique (1897–1958)", in: *La mémoire du Congo, le temps colonial*, ed. Jean-Luc Vellut, Ghent/Tervuren 2005, 159-169; brief notes in: Sabine Cornelis, "Colonial and Postcolonial Exhibitions in Belgium (1885–2005)", in: *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires*, eds. Prem Poddar, Rajeev S. Patke and Lars Jensen, Edinburgh 2008, 21-23. The pavilion had already disappeared from sight in publications of the same year such as A. Cockx and J. Lemmens, *Les Expositions universelles et internationales en Belgique de 1885 à 1958*, Brussels 1958. Some pavilions of the exhibition are examined in relation to transcultural aspects in *Exhibitions Beyond Boundaries. Transnational Exchanges through Art, Architecture, and Design from 1945–1985*, eds. Harriet Atkinson, Verity Clarkson, and Sarah A. Lichtman, London etc. 2022.

Vanthemscche and Stanard agreed with Rydell's conclusion regarding the decision to represent the colonies in this way in the face of urgent colonial independence movements: "it masked more than it revealed".<sup>4</sup>

[3] The installation of thatched huts in the *village indigène* right next to the Atomium made for the greatest possible contrast; at the same time, however, the positioning of the *Grand Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi* on the exhibition site also indicated the importance that Belgium attributed to the colony in terms of its own modernisation. While everything was subjected to an economic perspective framed by a paternalistic gesture, this focus also helped to distance the host country from the violent past of Belgian interventions in the Congo, Stanard argues.<sup>5</sup> The symbolic order envisaged by the 1958 World Exhibition seems to have met certain expectations: in the *village indigène*, scenes unfolded in which visitors fed the villagers like zoo animals. The treatment by visitors and the colonial administration caused great resentment among the Congolese employees working there. The village had to be temporarily closed because the staff went on strike.<sup>6</sup> According to Stanard, 700 Congolese visitors – including "evolus" from a well-educated group of people of colour, students, soldiers, craftspeople, and professional exhibitors – attended the Brussels World Exhibition as individuals.<sup>7</sup> Among them were numerous journalists such as Mobutu Sese Seko and his political opponent Patrice Lumumba<sup>8</sup> as well as several young artists from the Congo, as we will see below. The official rhetoric of the colonial administration emphasised forms of equality for people of colour and educational opportunities

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<sup>4</sup> Rydell (1990), 315.

<sup>5</sup> Stanard (2005), 282 and 286, with reference to what Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Boston 1998, termed "The Great Forgetting".

<sup>6</sup> There were also protests from staff against being housed in a distant Brussels suburb, a decision taken to prevent them from visiting the World Expo themselves. A unique source for the Congolese perspective are testimonies based on oral history and collected by François Ryckmans, *Mémoires noires. Les Congolais racontent le Congo belge, 1940–1960*, Bruxelles 2010. François Ryckmans is the grand-son of the colonial official Pierre Ryckmans who had held the position of Governor-General of the Belgian Congo between 1934 and 1946 and also served as the High Commissioner for Nuclear Energy, an economic sector that developed in Belgium primarily due to the raw materials from the Congo.

<sup>7</sup> On the students cf. Guy Vanthemscche, *Belgium and the Congo*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012, 64; on the estimate of 700 people, cf. Stanard (2005), 275.

<sup>8</sup> The 1999 film *Mobutu, Roi de Zaïre* by Thierry Michel shows the later dictator Mobutu (1930–1997) in historical film footage as a young reporter conducting interviews at the World Exhibition. On the meeting of Lumumba and Mobutu in Brussels, see the visual memory story by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu created in cooperation with Johannes Fabian in the 1970s: Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present. Painting and Popular History in Zaire*, Berkeley 1996, and Zoe S. Strother, "African Works. Anxious Encounters in the Visual Arts", in: *Res: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 39 (2001), 5–23.

under a banner of international understanding, without mentioning conflicts.<sup>9</sup> In 1956, as part of an ongoing formation against Belgian rule, journalists and intellectuals in Léopoldville demanded black emancipation and independence in a "Manifesto" in the magazine *Conscience Africaine*, opposing the so-called Van Bilsen Report, which envisaged a transition period of 30 years. Local elections in 1957 prompted processes of legitimisation which led to the declaration of independence in 1960.<sup>10</sup> At the time of the universal exhibition in Brussels, political circles around Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Ileo und Joseph Kasavubu began to debate to what extent Belgians should continue to be involved in the Congo's future politics at all.

## The exhibition "L'art au Congo" in the colonial pavilion

[4] The colonial pavilion, the *Grand Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*, consisted of a basic rectangular concrete structure with a saddle roof, lit on the ground floor by a large number of small square windows and with several entrances to the main hall on two levels.<sup>11</sup> The pavilion was orientated along the *Avenue du Congo*, the main axis of the World Exhibition grounds with its cable car (Fig. 1). Over a length of 150 metres, the cantilevered concrete construction rising to a height of 20 metres and spanning 45 metres permitted the installation of exhibits on two floors. In front of the building, a stele with a pattern reminiscent of Bakuba raffia textiles had been prominently placed. At the main entrance to the colonial pavilion, visitors were greeted by a sculpture by Arthur Dupagne (1895–1961) at the top landing of the double staircase. In the spacious entrance hall, the scene was set by a large-scale mural by Floris Jaspers (1889–1965) entitled *La synthèse du Congo* (Fig. 3).

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<sup>9</sup> At a sociological conference in Brussels, directly after the World Exhibition, students pointed out numerous conflicts between whites and blacks, see *L'avenir politique du Congo belge*, colloque du 22 novembre 1958, Brussels 1959 (= *Bibliothèque de l'Institut belge de science politique*, series 1, no. 8). On colonial rhetoric, see the articles in *Congo Belge. Bulletin mensuel d'information*, a publication of the *Office de l'information et des relations publiques pour le Congo belge et le Ruanda-Urundi* in Brussels, from 1957 and 1958, on electoral eligibility, racial hatred and activist plans.

<sup>10</sup> On the political history of the emancipation movement and the permission to found political parties, which was granted in 1958, see Emizet François Kisangani and F. Scott Bobb, *Historical Dictionary of the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 3rd, illustrated ed., Lanham MD 2010, as well as Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State. Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, Durham, NC 2015.

<sup>11</sup> On Georges Ricquier cf. Johan Lagae, "Léopoldville, Bruxelles. Villes miroirs? L'architecture et l'urbanisme d'une capitale coloniale et métropole africaine", in: *Villes d'Afrique. Explorations en histoire urbaine*, ed. Jean-Luc Vellut, Paris 2007 (= *Cahiers Africains/Afrika Studies*, 73), 67-99.



3 Floris Jaspers, *La synthèse du Congo*, detail, 1957–1958, 200 × 600 cm, oil on canvas mounted on panel. Private collection (photo: Flori Esser, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024)

[5] In different ways, Jaspers and Dupagne represent an artistic-biographical entanglement of Belgium with the Congo. Dupagne had worked in the resource-rich area of Kasai in 1927–1935 as an engineer and had turned to sculpture following a course at the Academy of Arts in Liège, later mainly inspired by Chokwe works. The body language of his figurative works developed from a form of naturalism familiar from the 1920s to large-scale heroic and even racist representations on a par with Arno Breker's sculptures. Conversely, Floris Jaspers had been an important protagonist of Belgian avant-garde circles of Dada, Futurism and Expressionism before the war. In the 1950s he moved to the Congo and focused on imagining African female figures until his death in 1965.<sup>12</sup> Both works made in the Congo therefore represent 'late' oeuvres. The artists' colonial experience and the framing by the *Gesamtkunstwerk* "Expo" turned their apolitical and primitivising subjects into a manifestation of a political position, appropriating a national Belgian "*imaginaire*": with its peaceful women at the market and the olive branch at the centre, Jaspers' *La synthèse du Congo* seems like a magical incantation to calm the political situation in the Congo.

[6] The "L'art au Congo" exhibition was installed on two levels in the *Palais du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*. The overall concept of this art exhibition encompassed both "traditional art" and contemporary art, and a section of decorative arts, music, literature and theatre, all under the heading "Les arts et leurs moyens d'expression".<sup>13</sup> Almost sixty contemporary artists contributed

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<sup>12</sup> Jaspers had already shown works in the Belgian sections at the world's fairs in Brussels 1935, Paris 1937, and New York 1939. On his colonial experience, see Stijn Vanwijnsberghe, ed., *Floris Jaspers Afrikanist. Kongo – Knokke*, exh.cat., Cultuurcentrum Knokke Heist 2015.

<sup>13</sup> See *L'art au Congo: Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958, Section du Congo Belge et du Ruanda Urundi*, exh. cat., Brussels 1958; as well as a leaflet with the exhibits of the contemporary art section of the "L'art au Congo" exhibition, with a more detailed list of the participating artists as well as information on the titles and exact dimensions of the individual works (only available to me in English language), entitled *Brussels Universal and International Exhibition 1958, Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section. Group 2/3: Art and its Means of Expression, Contemporary Art*, n.d., n.p., n. pag. (hereinafter: *Contemporary Art list [1958]*).

to the exhibition. It is especially noteworthy that, under the same roof of the Palais, works by Belgian contemporary artists having lived or living in the Belgian Congo were presented together with traditional artworks from various local communities and those of ten younger Congolese artists. In art historiography, African masks and traditional wood-carved figures have long formed the justificatory context for the development of European avant-garde movements. Against the backdrop of this modern art narrative, however, it is particularly remarkable that in Brussels, for the first time, the artworks of contemporary artists from an African country were shown together with works of European-trained Belgian artists and Congolese cultural traditions.<sup>14</sup> The list of artworks in the contemporary art section, which comprises 115 entries, includes 29 works by 16 Congolese artists. The exhibition has thus made history and as such requires a more detailed analysis of its circumstances.

## The place of contemporary art in the Congo and its position in the colonial discourse

[7] The exhibition "L'art au Congo" had initially been organised by the ethnographer Frans Olbrechts,<sup>15</sup> since 1947 director of the then Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren (since 2018: AfricaMuseum), but he died in March 1958. The writer Joseph-Marie Jadot, who, like Olbrechts, worked in the colonial administration, took over part of the organisation, while the artist Luc Peire assumed responsibility as artistic advisor for the overall exhibition concept.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the ethnographic museum in Tervuren at the time, where contemporary and modern art played no role, it became a key element here.<sup>17</sup> The presentation was massively influenced by the colonial setting, which also led to an appropriation of the Congolese contemporary artists – even linguistically – that can be analysed by way of examples from the catalogue.

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<sup>14</sup> First approaches could be found in the Antwerp 1930 "Exposition Internationale, Coloniale, Maritime et d'Art Flamand", which is referenced by Gaston-Denys Périer in his article "L'art des Noirs", in: *Congo-Tervuren. Revue trimestrielle publiée sous les auspices des Amis du Musée Royal du Congo belge* 1 (1955), no. 3, 81-83.

<sup>15</sup> The ethnologist Frans Maria Olbrechts (1899–1958), a student of Franz Boas, had organised the 1937 exhibition *Tentoonstelling van Kongo-Kunst*, exh. cat., Antwerpen 1937; his book *Plastiek van Kongo* (Antwerpen 1946) was the first comprehensive analysis of this subject.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph-Marie Jadot (1886–1967) was the president of the *Association des écrivains et artistes coloniaux*, and a member of the *Commission pour la protection des arts et métiers indigènes* (COPAMI). The artist Albert Dasnoy (1901–1992), who worked for the Ministry of Education, represented the interests of Belgian artists in the Congo and was head of the sculpture department at Expo 1958. On Dasnoy, see Sabine Cornelis, "Regards d'artistes belges sur les peuples du Congo (1880–1940)", in: *L'autre et nous: "scènes et types". Anthropologues et historiens devant les représentations des populations colonisées, des ethnies, des tribus [...]*, eds. Pascal Blancard, Gilles Boëtsch et al., Paris 1995, 191-196.

<sup>17</sup> Olbrechts' ethnological approach at the ethnological museum in Tervuren prepared the ground for the conversion of everyday objects into valuables – "art objects" – which also served to legitimise colonialism. However, in the "hall of art" in the Tervuren museum, no link was made to contemporary art. See Sarah Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture. Congolese Art and the Promotion of Belgian Colonialism (1945–1959)", in: *History and Anthropology* 24 (2013), no. 4, 472-492.

[8] There were a handful of figures in Belgian colonial history who supported contemporary art in the Belgian Congo in various ways. The administration had already sponsored travels by Belgian artists to the Congo in the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> In Brussels, the colonial official, historian, and literary critic Gaston-Denys Périer (1879–1962) was the co-founder and secretary of the *Commission pour la protection des arts et métiers indigènes* (COPAMI) founded in 1935, which had already been involved in the *Exposition universelle et internationale* in Brussels in 1935.<sup>19</sup> As early as 1929, Gaston-Denys Périer had organised exhibitions of works by artists from the Belgian colony in Brussels.<sup>20</sup> In addition, there were self-taught promoters of artist education on the ground, such as Father Marc-Stanislas Wallenda in today's Kinshasa (then Léopoldville) as well as Pierre Romain-Desfossés (1887–1954) and Laurent Moonens (1911–1991) in today's Lubumbashi (then Élisabethville). Périer's publications as an art critic had shaped the discourse about current art from the Congo through contributions entitled, for example, "L'art des noirs. Que doit-on penser et espérer de la peinture congolaise?" from 1955.<sup>21</sup>

[9] As a specialist in promoting young Congolese art on the Belgian exhibition scene, Périer wrote the text on painting for the catalogue of the 1958 World Exhibition.<sup>22</sup> This ambitiously designed publication, translated into three languages, offered a full list of the exhibits – including the traditional masks, statuettes and other objects – and provided a commentary on each section. It was richly illustrated, with colour illustrations also for works by the young artists from Élisabethville, and laid out in modern book design. In the appendix, each artist is presented with a

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<sup>18</sup> See Michaël de Plaen, *Mode Muntu. L'homme modeste*, Brussels 2015, 17.

<sup>19</sup> The literary critic Joseph-Marie Jadot worked in the same commission; together with Périer he was responsible for the publication *L'art nègre du Congo belge*, published by the *Commission pour la protection des arts et métiers indigènes*, Ghent 1951, 42. On the 1935 exposition, see Johan Lagae, "Celebrating a Cinquantenaire. The Section of the Belgian Congo at the 1935 World's Fair in Brussels", in: *Fabrications. The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 17 (2007), no. 1, 82-113.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Joseph-Aurélien Cornet, "Les précurseurs de la peinture moderne au Zaïre", in: *60 ans de peinture au Zaïre*, eds. J.-A. Cornet et al., Brussels 1989, 9-58; as well as in the same volume René de Cnodder, "L'école de Lubumbashi. L'authenticité en tant qu'écologie picturale", 73-108; Sabine Cornelis and Jean-Luc Vellut, "First Movements in the Belgian Congo", in: *An Anthology of African Art. The Twentieth Century*, eds. N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin, New York/Paris 2002, 154-167; and André Magnin, ed., *Beauté Congo – 1926–2015 – Congo kiloko*, exh. cat., Paris 2015. For a history of the neighbouring schools in Kinshasa (then Brazzaville) in the context of French colonial history, see Jean-Luc Aka-Evy, "Les arts au creuset de la pensée congolaise contemporaine", in: *Cahiers d'études africaines* nos. 198-199-200 (2010), 1215-1240, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.16564>.

<sup>21</sup> Published in the colonial organ *Congo-Tervuren*, produced by the Friends of what was at the time the *Musée royal du Congo belge* (today MRAC): Gaston-Denys Périer, "L'art des noirs. Que doit-on penser et espérer de la peinture congolaise?", in: *Congo-Tervuren* 1 (1955), no. 3, 81-83. Further publications by Périer: "L'art vivant des noirs du Congo belge", in: *Artes africanæ* no. 3 (1936), 1-13; *Les arts populaires du Congo belge*, Brussels 1948; see in this context Pierre Halen, "À propos de Gaston-Denys Périer et de la notion d'art vivant", in: *Textyles. Revue des lettres belges de langue française* 20 (2001), 46-56, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/textyles.913> (accessed 28 April 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Gaston-Denys Périer, "La peinture", in: *L'art au Congo: Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958, Section du Congo Belge et du Ruanda Urundi*, exh. cat., Brussels 1958, n. pag.



short biography, including the young art students from the Congo: Bela Sara (1920–1968; the first student of Romain-Desfossés), Sylvestre Kaballa (\*1920), Jean-Bosco Kamba (1939–?), Pierre Mwanza (life data not found), Floribert Mwembia (1939–1989), Mwenze Kibwanga (1925–1999), Modeste Ngoye (b. 1940), Albert Nkusu (1914–?), PiliPili Mulungoy (1916–2007) and Edouard Tshilolo (1939–2015).<sup>23</sup> Here, as well as in Périer's introductory text "La peinture", they are presented in the language of Western art critique, which struggles with stylistic characteristics and comparatives. In the latest development of modern painting in the Congo, Périer saw a renewal of 'traditional art'. The ubiquitous opinion that this kind of easel painting had no tradition in African culture (and that only the decorative painting of houses was practised) was adopted by Périer. His argument concluded that while European painting was merely based on imitation (of reality), modern African painting was pure imagination. Certainly ignoring the latest developments in Western art since the Avant-Garde, the contradictions in Périer's bizarre text – he alternates between paternalism and Western art historical parameters in praising the "black Expressionists"<sup>24</sup> – reveal the challenges when it comes to recognising modern Congolese artists within a colonial regime, both in linguistic and scholarly terms.

[10] While the effort to establish a certain equivalence between the various exhibits of Belgian and Congolese origin is a strength of Périer's article, as well as of the entire exhibition "L'art au Congo", it is achieved at the price of a national paternalism. The concluding statement that the African experience has practically enriched the collective imagination of Belgian artists falls back into national colonial propaganda in which picturesque motifs enhanced a Belgian "imaginaire".<sup>25</sup> The attributions to Expressionism and Impressionism, the laboured comparisons with Francisco de Goya, and the derivations from Egyptian art and African prehistoric rock paintings were to have an impact in art historical research for a long time to come.<sup>26</sup> Sabine Cornelis and Jean-Luc Vellut therefore conclude that

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<sup>23</sup> The entry for PiliPili, who was already 42 years old in 1958, emphasises his established position in Lubumbashi (Élisabethville): "Né en 1916. Il était peintre en bâtiment à Elisabethville lorsque Romain-Desfossés le recruta pour son école. Possède un style nettement décoratif. Participe aux expositions du groupe don't il est le peintre le plus connu." See "Notices biographiques", in: *L'art au Congo* (1958), n. pag.

<sup>24</sup> "Ainsi s'accuse la différence entre l'art européen, basé sur la copie ou l'imitation du modèle, et l'art congolèse issu de l'imagination pure." Périer (1958), n. pag.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the works by Paul Daxhelet and Maurice van Essche in the English-language leaflet on the contemporary art section: *Contemporary Art* list (1958), no. 10 (Daxhelet) and nos. 73, 74 (van Essche); and, with different numbers, the illustrations in the (French-language) exhibition catalogue *L'art au Congo* (1958), no. 74 (Daxhelet) and no. 75 (van Essche).

<sup>26</sup> The contribution by the film director and official André Scohy to the above-mentioned publication *L'art nègre du Congo belge* (1951) describes the artist Albert Dombe as "Breughel africain"; André Scohy, "Peintures congolaises. Problème d'aujourd'hui (I: Naissance et faiblesse de la peinture congolaise sur chevalet)", in: *L'art nègre du Congo belge*, published by the *Commission pour la protection des arts et métiers indigènes*, Ghent 1951, 137-152.

*[...] the main actors of this contemporary art, the African creators themselves, were excluded from the initial debate. The European masters and thinkers chose the terms according to which the new Congolese art could be structured.*<sup>27</sup>

And Sarah Van Beurden states with a view to the education situation in the Congo:

*In short, the kind of modernity that was tolerated in art production combined Western stewardship with roots in African techniques, forms and content.*<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, issues of power and representation of the young Congolese artists (as well as ethical questions) can be further differentiated through a more detailed analysis of the genesis of this exhibition.<sup>29</sup>

[11] Based on archival material and a photograph of one of the exhibition rooms inside the *Grand Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi* taken by René Stalin for InforCongo (Fig. 4), individual works in the exhibition can be identified, and it is visible that the works were presented framed, as were those by their Belgian colleagues.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cornelis and Vellut (2002), 167.

<sup>28</sup> Van Beurden (2015), 71.

<sup>29</sup> Further archival research is required here; the current state of knowledge is essentially based on literature and on material from the archive of Laurent Moonens. Moonens's handwritten notes and documents are kept by his son Philippe Moonens, Grasse (hereinafter: Moonens archive, private papers); however, various records have been digitised and placed online on the website of the Fondation Moonens, Brussels, <https://moonens.com> (hereinafter: Moonens archive, online).

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Philippe Moonens for drawing my attention to this photograph and making it available to me. On the photo archive of InforCongo, see Sandrine Colard, "The Afterlife of a Colonial Photographic Archive: The Subjective Legacy of InforCongo", in: *Critical Interventions. Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 12 (2018), no. 2, 117-139, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19301944.2018.1492280> (accessed 12 January 2021).



4 Paintings by Congolese artists in the exhibition "L'art au Congo" in the Palais du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi at the 1958 Brussels world's fair, photographer: René Stalin – InforCongo. Archives SPF (Service public fédéral) Affaires étrangères, Brussels, Archives africaines, BE AE-AA (fonds information et presse). All three paintings on the left wall are by Mwenze Kibwanga: *Birds on its [sic] Nest*, on paper, 50 × 60 cm; *Flowers and Birds*, on paper, 35 × 50 cm (both then Cheval de Verre Gallery, Brussels); and *Hunting Scene*, on paper, 50 × 60 cm, MRAC, Tervuren. The paintings on the back wall are (upper row, from left to right): Mwambia, *The Market*, on paper, 45 × 75 cm; Kaballa, *The Mysterious 40*, on paper, 36 × 50 cm, Coll. of the Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo at Tervuren; and Kaballa, *Sharing the Spoils*, on paper, 50 × 60 cm. The lower row painting may be by Kamba, *In the Forest*, on paper, 33 × 46 cm. The white framed painting on the back wall cut at the right edge of the photo is Tshilolo's *Bird and Snake*, on paper, 50 × 60 cm. The sculptural works in the photo are presumably, from left to right: Placide-Mikope Mosikini, *Crops*, 29 × 45 cm, low-relief, wood; Mayola from Léopoldville, *Warrior with a Spear*, h. 35 cm, wood (A. S. Gérard collection, Brussels); Milambo, *Statuette*, h. 46 cm, painted wood; and R. F. Yumba from Kansenia, *Madonna*, 76 × 41 cm, low relief, in wood.

It is currently not possible to fully reconstruct the hanging of the works by the Congolese artists in the "L'art au Congo" exhibition. Based on the photograph by René Stalin, it can be assumed that the artists from Lubumbashi and Kinshasa and the Belgian artists were at least partially exhibited separately.<sup>31</sup> If the artworks of the young Congolese painters from the Moonens school were indeed hung on the lower level of the main hall, then they were spatially separated from the objects of Congolese traditional craftsmanship, which were presented on the upper level – together with the works by modern Belgian artists living in the Congo.

[12] The *Hunting Scene* by Mwenze Kibwanga which can be seen on the left wall (third painting from the left) was reproduced in colour in the catalogue.<sup>32</sup> Critics appreciated his works especially because of his unique style (Fig. 5). The landscape format depicts three hunters crossing their spears over a killed wildebeest while dancing. The figures, the white background and also the grass sketched in the foreground are painted in colour strokes of almost equal width in muted tones which, together with the hunters' movements, generate a sense of ornamental vibration across the entire picture surface.



5 Mwenze Kibwanga painting at Expo 1958 in Brussels, photographer: Laurent Moonens (© Moonens archive, [online](#))

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<sup>31</sup> Michaël de Plaen documented his conversations with Kabongo, Mwenze, Mbuya and Kabuya in Lubumbashi in filmed interviews in 2015, in which the memory of the 1958 world exhibition was a central theme, but nothing was said about the details of the hanging of the artworks. In their memories, aspects of racist behaviour towards them were emphasised less than the pride of being recognised and welcomed by the Belgian public and the joy of being part of this travelling group; see also De Plaen (2015). I am deeply indebted to Michaël de Plaen for sharing these unique and unpublished film testimonies with me. De Plaen is currently working on the collection of Belgian dealer Pierre Loos and the painters from the art schools in Lubumbashi, focusing on these memories. For more details and material from the Dierickx and Loos archives, see the exhibition catalogue *Colours of Congo. Patterns, Symbols and Narratives in 20th-Century Congolese Paintings*, eds. Florian Knothe and Estela Ibáñez-García, Hong Kong 2021, that also traces the history of the art schools in the Belgian Congo.

<sup>32</sup> See *L'art au Congo* (1958), fig. 44.

[13] Mwenze Kibwanga (1924–1999) had arrived in Élisabethville in 1942 and had first come into contact with Laurent Moonens in 1948. Having joined the workshop ("Le Hangar") of Pierre Romain-Desfossés in 1951, he developed a highly personal style of parallel strokes to create shapes and figures. His main subject were everyday scenes, men and animals in nature.<sup>33</sup> He was able to show his works in a solo exhibition in Élisabethville as early as 1954,<sup>34</sup> having previously exhibited together with other students of Romain-Desfossés in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949 and in Rome in 1951.<sup>35</sup> After several years of endeavour, Moonens finally succeeded in arranging for four of his students to take part in the Brussels world exhibition: an official commission for decorative paintings on some of the pavilions' and gardens' walls brought Mwenze Kibwanga, Joseph Kabongo, Célestin Kabuya and Floribert Mwambia to Brussels. Also, from Father Marc-Stanislas Wallenda's school in Kinshasa, Charles Kalema, Clément Mutombo and Ferdinand Mbambu arrived to work on further decorative commissions (Fig. 6).



6 Filmstill from a film document made privately at Expo 1958 in Brussels. Collection Museum of Daily Life, Het Huis van Alijn, Ghent (courtesy of Het Huis van Alijn)

[14] The presence of the Congolese students generated much response in the local press.<sup>36</sup> An article in the Brussels daily newspaper *Le Soir* of 14 March 1958 summarises a response by Moonens to the question of where contemporary art in the Congo was heading:

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<sup>33</sup> See Joseph-Aurélien Cornet et al., eds., *60 ans de peinture au Zaïre*, Brussels 1989.

<sup>34</sup> See the catalogue of this solo exhibition in Élisabethville, 1954, entitled *Mwenze*, in the Moonens archive, private papers, *liasse* [bundle] "Expositions". The one-page introductory text by Laurent Moonens is entitled "Mwenze et l'évolution".

<sup>35</sup> Cf. information in N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin, eds., *An Anthology of African Art. The Twentieth Century*, New York/Paris 2001, 398.

<sup>36</sup> See the press clippings ("1958 – Expo-Chronique – Brussels") in: Moonens archive, [online](#), file "The Congo Years", 1958.

*Il est évident que l'orientation de l'art africain doit essentiellement subir l'impulsion des Noirs. Les Européens ne peuvent intervenir que pour faire connaître cet art, l'encourager et, précisément, éviter qu'il soit corrompu par des influences mercantiles. Il ne s'agit pas de tenir les Noirs dans l'ignorance des arts d'Occident, mais de leur faire comprendre que, seule, la tradition renourrit, sans fin, le génie de la race.<sup>37</sup>*

While in Moonens's outline of a strategy the concept of authenticity is still key, it is possible to read his use of the term "race" also in the sense of black consciousness. For him, his students' knowledge of Western art should encompass an ability to maintain a connection between contemporary art and tradition. Yet, this is a Western teacher's perspective after all.

## Laurent Moonens's students and issues of Modernism in the Congo

[15] Today, works by Congolese artists like Pilipili Mulungoy, Mwenze Kibwanga und Floribert Mwambia are representative of the beginnings of Modernisms in the Congo. Mwenze Kibwanga became an accepted artist, and after independence later taught at the Academy of Fine Arts of Élisabethville, today Lubumbashi.<sup>38</sup> The Brussels pavilion of the Belgian Congo and Rwanda-Urundi had actually given ten artists from the Congo the chance to exhibit, among a total of sixty participants. They were all included in the exhibition through the intervention of their art teacher Laurent Moonens. Apart from those who were self-taught (Mwansa, Nkusu), all were coming from his academy in Élisabethville. Four of them had been introduced to art by a discharged officer, Pierre Romain-Desfossés, who had opened his studio ("Le Hangar") in 1947. As a teacher Romain-Desfossés was known for not imposing much on his students and letting their imaginations free rein – he rather saw "Le Hangar" as a joint studio for decorative arts. The conservative painter Laurent Moonens, who had studied at the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and at the *Institut Supérieur des Arts décoratifs* in the *Abbaye de La Cambre* in Brussels and then taught at the art school in Molenbeek, came to the Congo in 1948. He opened his own art school in Élisabethville in 1951, and after the death of Romain-Desfossés in 1954, he welcomed the latter's students into his academy.<sup>39</sup> The students from Romain-Desfossés formed the "D[esfossés]"-Section, and in 1958, the artworks of Bela Sara, Sylvestre Kaballa, Mwenze Kibwanga and Pilipili

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<sup>37</sup> As note 36.

<sup>38</sup> Sabine Bompuku Eyenga-Cornelis refers to the desideratum of a monograph on Kibwanga; a tribute to the artist took place on the occasion of the opening of the department for contemporary art in the *Musée de Lubumbashi* in 2000; see Sabine Bompuku Eyenga-Cornelis, "Foreword", in: De Plaen (2015), 7-9: 8. For some of the long-term effects of the artistic activities of Moonens's students in the Congo, see also Célestin Badibanga ne Mwine, "Emergence of a New Congolese Art", in: *Afterall. A Journal of Art, Context, and Inquiry* nos. 55-56 (2023), 242-255.

<sup>39</sup> On the schools of Desfossés and Moonens, see De Plaen (2015), 15-33, including a note on the importance of art in the Luba culture (p. 18). At Moonens's private academy there were different sections: sculpture, painting, architecture, working in copper, and the advertising department ("Publicité"). The "Section "D[esfossés]" consisted mainly of painters, but from 1955 the sculptor Aroun Kabasia from the studio of the late Romain-Desfossés also joined. Cf. De Plaen (2015), 31. The "Section "D[esfossés]" differed from the painting courses of the Moonens academy, as there were no teaching sessions.

Mulungoy travelled to Brussels. Four of Moonens's own students contributed as well: Kamba, Mode Muntu, Floribert Mwembia and Edouardo Tshilolo.

[16] Moonens understood that the strongly segregated society in Élisabethville did not offer a favourable environment for artists to thrive in a barely existing art market. He saw training as a route to design textile prints, execute decorative work for commercial presentations, or obtain design commissions for public buildings (such as the theatre in Élisabethville), and thus wanted the students, who were sometimes very young (and some had received no schooling), to be able to earn a living.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Moonens always emphasised the artistic character of his institution and tried to organise exhibitions for his students, as his correspondence with the *Société auxiliaire des expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels shows. In 1954 he also approached the director's office at the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*. At the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp he found ready listeners – an exhibition of seventy works by his students took place there in the summer of 1955. In one of his letters, he mentions further venues of this exhibition in Brussels and Ostend as well as other plans for shows on the African continent.<sup>41</sup>

[17] After the Belgian King Baudouin (r. 1951–1993) had visited the Élisabethville art school in August 1955 while on a trip to the Congo, Moonens was not only able to negotiate the acquisition of 17 paintings by the king,<sup>42</sup> but also the eventual recognition as *Académie officielle des Beaux-Arts d'Élisabethville*.<sup>43</sup> For the inauguration of the academy in 1957, he was in contact with the authorities at COPAMI and the colonial ministry, which had at some point conferred the title of *directeur honoraire* to Gaston-Denys Périer.<sup>44</sup> While Moonens partly followed in Périer's footsteps with his activities and his efforts to position his students, his artistic views were far more

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<sup>40</sup> See the report (not dated) on Moonens's painting class, in: Moonens archive, online, [https://moonens.com/Files/Other/Fac-similes%20sur%20Academie/Education%20Populaire%20\(probablement%201955\).pdf](https://moonens.com/Files/Other/Fac-similes%20sur%20Academie/Education%20Populaire%20(probablement%201955).pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Moonens to the governor of the Katanga province, dated 8 November 1957, in: Archive Moonens, private papers, *liasse* [bundle] "Expositions". The letter was written on the occasion of an exhibition planned for the Capricorn Africa Society in Nairobi, for which a shipment of works was to be organised. Moonens reports on the exhibitions in Ostend and at the *Palais des Beaux-Art de Bruxelles* and on further exhibitions in Johannesburg, Salisbury, Cape Town, and the *Triennale* in Milan.

<sup>42</sup> According to Philippe Moonens these were four works from the "D"-section and 13 works by his father's own students, plus a painting by Tshilolo that was offered to the king as a gift. In return, the king donated 5,000 *francs* to buy presents for the students; oral communication from Philippe Moonens, 14 March 2019.

<sup>43</sup> A summary of the concept for his academy, written in 1956, is available at: Moonens archive, online, <https://moonens.com/Files/Other/Fac-similes%20sur%20Academie/Presentation%20Academie%20au%20Roi%20-%20fevrier%201956.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Mentioned in De Plaen (2015), 43. On the association *Les amis de l'art congolais*, which had already been active in Brussels from 1922, cf. Périer (1951), 168; on COPAMI cf. [https://archives.africamuseum.be/agents/corporate\\_entities/14](https://archives.africamuseum.be/agents/corporate_entities/14).

differentiated. Périer had focussed on the unadulterated imagination<sup>45</sup> and thus propagated an unreflected (and impossible) 'primitivism', even though these individuals lived under the conditions of colonialism. Moonens was also of the opinion that each individual's artistic approach to painting should be preserved, but in his letters, exhibition catalogues and interviews he formulated more nuanced views on the position and positioning of 'his' artists in the colonial discourse of Modernism and refrained from absurd stylistic classifications.

[18] In the first exhibition catalogue for Mwenze Kibwanga in 1954 he presented the artist as "*évolué*", as "someone with something to say". In his view, Mwenze visually interpreted the "communauté belgo-congolaise" and was exemplary for "l'évolution de l'homme noir en contact avec l'homme blanc".<sup>46</sup> On the one hand the wording is blatantly in line with colonial discourse, on the other, Moonens's words reveal contradictions as he also underlines the artist's freedom: "Ce sont des œuvres faites sans aucune influence étrangère, des œuvres d'un artiste libre."<sup>47</sup> His position should thus not be reduced to representing a colonial power apparatus; this falls short here, as Moonens underlines that in order to understand Mwenze Kibwanga, whom he had known well since 1948 and who was working independently in the "D[esfossés]"-section, and to value his work, it was more important to appreciate his personality and recognise how Kibwanga avoided the path of exoticism. In this case, too, authenticity is the solution: "Fini, espérons-le, l'exotisme à bon marché, pour faire place à un art d'expression authentique."<sup>48</sup> Here, too, Moonens followed the powerful verdict of authenticity derived from Western art, which he opposed to artistic exoticism.

[19] But his declared objective was to enable a number of his students to earn a living, so that their graphic design, as Moonens hoped, would in future also be in demand from a growing local clientele.<sup>49</sup> Apart from his reputation as director of the art school, it was Moonens's relationship with his students that motivated him to apply great personal dedication to organising exhibitions

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<sup>45</sup> Périer summarised the whole work of COPAMI in this way; see id., "Bilan historique de la Commission pour la Protection des Arts et Métiers indigènes (Secrétaire de la Commission)", in: *L'art nègre du Congo Belge*, published by COPAMI, Brussels 1951, 167-176. See also Halen (2001). 'Primitivism' in this view, as something outside of history and civilisation, was similarly seen as a creative impulse for *Art brut*, the art of the "insane", of children and of "indigenous people" – and served as a highly problematic model of thinking about modern art until the second half of the 20th century. See Bärbel Küster, *Matisse und Picasso als Kulturreisende. Primitivismus und Anthropologie*, Berlin 2003; Fred R. Myers, "Introduction. Around and About Modernity. Some Comments on Themes of Primitivism and Modernism", in: Lynda Jessup, ed., *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience. Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, Toronto 2001, 13-25, and the contributions in the issue "The European Scholarly Reception of 'Primitive Art' in the Decades around 1900", guest-edited by Wilfried Van Damme and Raymond Corbey in: *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 12 (2015).

<sup>46</sup> Moonens [1954], "Mwenze et l'évolution" (as n34).

<sup>47</sup> Moonens [1954], "Mwenze et l'évolution" (as n34).

<sup>48</sup> Moonens [1954], "Mwenze et l'évolution" (as n34).

<sup>49</sup> "[...] il peut être réalisé quelque chose par l'indigène et pour l'indigène"; see the interview in: Moonens archive, private papers, file "The Congo Years", "Art et Artistes au Congo. M. Moonens nous en parle avec compétence", undated (ca. 1951–1954), 10.



and sales and to applying for scholarships.<sup>50</sup> The idea to arrange for four of his students to stay and work in Brussels had been his personal initiative. While it was approved by the state, there was not much support. In personal letters, he lamented that neither the colonial administration nor the management of the Expo gave him any financial support or assisted with accommodation. In Brussels, Moonens looked after the students himself. Kibwanga, Kabongo, Kabuya and Mwemba were accommodated in a hotel, which he paid for himself; he also organised warm clothing. Later, they were able to join the other Congolese travelling staff at Expo 58 at the C.A.P.A. (*Centre d'Accueil pour le Personnel Africain*), and Moonens was able to claim some reimbursement of his expenses.<sup>51</sup>

## Perspectives: hopes and expectations at the end of the 1950s

[20] The above-mentioned paternalistic colonial setting that was identified by Vanthemsche and Stanard for the world exhibition in 1958, and by Van Beuren and Cornelis for the promotion of art in the Congo, can also be discerned in the setting of Expo 1958's art exhibition. However, individual perspectives within the colonial framework could certainly shift in focus, as becomes clear from Laurent Moonens's activities. Still missing in this discourse, however, are the voices of the artists themselves, a gap that this article is also unable to fill. In the art exhibition of the *Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*, the rhetoric of international understanding is paradigmatically intertwined with that of modernisation. Within the exhibition, art appears as a welcome means of depoliticising a field of acute conflict. In a privately made film documenting the world exhibition, the camera sweeps across the rear wall of the Agriculture Pavilion (adjoining the *Village indigène*), which is decorated with a larger-than-life representation of the cotton harvest by Mwenze Kibwanga, measuring almost twenty metres in width (see Fig. 6) – one of the decorative commissions. The subject of this picture, which has not been preserved, is perfectly in keeping with the colonial rhetoric: While the European eye perceives an apparently authentic indigenous rural scene, the implementation of industrial cotton production, which had taken hold in the Congo from the 1920s, symbolises – almost like no other agricultural product – the politically motivated restructuring of Congolese rural areas, massively changing traditional forms of living in the country in particular and undermining the self-sufficiency of the local population. By 1958, cotton farming for the Belgian textile industry had become increasingly mechanised.<sup>52</sup> Mwenze Kibwanga in contrast chose the traditional harvest as his subject.

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<sup>50</sup> See Moonens archive, private papers, file "The Congo Years". Moonens also tried to organise travel grants to the USA and other countries, but was unsuccessful.

<sup>51</sup> See Moonens archive, private papers, file "The Congo Years", personal letters and "Procès-Verbal de la 51e Réunion du Bureau du Comité permanent de l'A.S.B.L., Section du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi", 7 January 1958. The C.A.P.A. was criticised for separating the staff from the exhibition and even preventing them from visiting it; see Ryckmans (2010), 149-161. As for the students from the Moonens academy, these visits were frequently possible.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Allan Isaacman and Richard Roberts, eds., *Cotton, Colonialism and Social History in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Portsmouth 1995, especially the article by Likaka Osumaka, "Forced Cotton Cultivation and Social Control in the Belgian Congo", 200-220. See also Likaka Osumaka, *Rural Society and Cotton in Colonial Zaire*, Madison 1997.

[21] With his efforts to place young African artists in a Western-style art world, Laurent Moonens actively transcended the boundaries between art and craft, applied art for decorative purposes and exhibition formats. The presence which he generated for Congolese artists at Expo 58 extended from decorative panels in the outside area to the pavilion's art exhibition.<sup>53</sup> The decorative works could have been imagined in the sense of producing a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Belgo-Congolese art, but were appropriated by the paternalistic colonial rhetoric in the 1958 catalogue; none of the works were read in the context of the radical process of change towards a modern life in the Congo – which applies equally to the works by Belgian artists who simply negate the same process. The tensions on the horizon of the global colonial conflict were not addressed in the catalogue, as the discourse here was focused on authenticity. Nonetheless, the very act of appropriating the technique of painting on the part of African artists can itself be regarded as an act of emancipation. The Ghanaian painter Kofi Antubam (1922–1964) put this succinctly in a lecture he gave a year after the Expo at the Second International Conference of Black Writers and Artists in Rome about "The Painters of Black Africa": The West had better realise that it did not have a monopoly on painting but was only the keeper of this human heritage to which anybody, regardless of race or skin colour, could contribute indiscriminately.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the decolonisation of art begins with defining one's own perspective.

[22] The formation of urban elites in the Congo was described from a scholarly position as early as 1959 as a phenomenon of a "maîtrise de la modernité", that is a conscious approach to modernity.<sup>55</sup> Not least for this reason does it seem appropriate to decolonise the dichotomising rhetoric, which persists even today, between 'modern' and 'traditional', and to comprehend modernising processes as different spheres for experience and action. The way in which art and art education were used rhetorically for new interpretations of 'Modernism' fuelled by colonialism appears as if under a brightly lit magnifying glass in the exhibition pavilion, where works by Belgian artists hung next to those by Congolese ones. In a foreword to the themed issue of *Présence Africaine* on "L'art nègre" in 1951, the Senegalese writer Alioune Diop stated that research on African art and the development of new artistic perspectives in Africa were urgently needed. In the issue of this highly relevant magazine, situated between the *Négritude* movement and the Harlem Renaissance, his contribution entitled "L'artiste n'est pas seul au monde" was the only one from Africa. In the 1950s, 'Art from Africa' was equated – not only in France but also in Germany – with objects, masks, and statuettes from 'traditional' contexts that had already been appropriated by the avant-garde for the Western art world shortly after 1900, and in a revised

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<sup>53</sup> From the records of the exhibition committee meetings in January 1958, it is understood that certain areas were defined by André Riquier to receive decorative painting: in the hall, in the cinema, in the corridors and in the archway of the café in the main exhibition pavilion; and in the areas of the pavilions dedicated to the exhibition on transport and energy and agriculture. See "Procès-Verbal de la reunion concernant les travaux à exécuter par les artistes congolais, tenue à Kilo-Moto, 31 Janvier, 1958", in: Archives SPF Affaires étrangères, Brussels, Affaires africaines; see the copy of the corresponding files in: Moonens archive, private files, with thanks to Philippe Moonens for the reference.

<sup>54</sup> Kofi Antubam, "La peinture en Afrique Noire", in: *Présence Africaine* no. 27/28 (1959), 275-285.

<sup>55</sup> See Benjamin Rubbers and Marc Poncelet, "Sociologie coloniale au Congo belge. Les études sur le Katanga industriel et urbain à la veille de l'Indépendance", in: *Genèses* no. 99 (2015), 93-112.

version after World War II. In view of contemporary tensions, Diop argued on the one hand in favour of necessary demarcations while criticising the colonial knowledge system and its blind spots: "l'artiste africain vous est inconnu, lecteur d'Europe. Les œuvres dont il est question dans ce volume ne vous étaient pas destinées".<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, he reflected on contemporary art and stated that new political and institutional circumstances in a colonised society also demanded new responsibilities on the part of artists. In their creativity as contemporaries, Diop saw potential to rearticulate experiences and needs that Europe had silenced in Asia and Africa.<sup>57</sup> For Diop, the goal of art was not individual expression, but the expression of humanity and the unification of humankind. How contemporary artists might react to this, however, was not addressed in the magazine issue, yet Diop's contrasting perspective is nonetheless hugely important.

[23] For Belgium's colonial rhetoric, contemporary art from the colony had vast ideological relevance in the context of the modern nation and with regard to a "more humane world". Nevertheless, unlike in British colonies, self-organised structures for art education in the Belgian colony remained dependent on the initiative of individuals, for which the 1958 exhibition "L'art au Congo" is a perfect example. From the perspective of today's postcolonial art history, the contradictions that became apparent in the exhibition in the colonial pavilion at the Brussels world exhibition in 1958 are part of the history of African Modernism(s). As Chika Okeke Agulu stated, this history also includes a requirement for African artists to be authentic and close to tradition, regardless of their Western training. This could be observed in Brussels, too, but the difference is made by the speaker's position: It marks a profound difference whether a colonial administration invokes humanity or if a Congolese painter does. The artists' movements that began to seek these traditions themselves in the 1960s in the emerging independent states must be regarded as a strictly separate perspective on content and politics. The overarching Western ideas of originality and authenticity are fundamentally contradictory to the fact of colonisation, as the quote by Alioune Diop makes perfectly clear.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Alioune Diop, "L'artiste n'est pas seul au monde", in: *Présence Africaine*, no. 10/11 (1951), 5-8: 6. He further emphasises the demarcation: "Il n'y a pas interpénétration entre la conscience de l'artiste et celle du public européen. L'objet seul les relie – accidentellement. Sans réciprocité ni nécessité."

<sup>57</sup> "L'Europe continue à mal poser les problèmes, tant que l'Asie et l'Afrique tairont leurs expériences, leurs besoins et ignoreront leur vertu salvatrice." Diop (1951), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Modern African Art", in: *The Short Century. Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, exh. cat., Munich 2001, 29-36.

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### Special Issue

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