

Staging and Displaying Colonialism

Art, Artifacts and Consumerism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Melanie Ulz

Abstract

The article examines the aesthetic staging and displaying of non-European art, particularly African art and culture, common at international world's fairs at the turn of the century. As examples serve the Brussels International Exposition of 1897 and the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931. The use of ornament, once of Art Nouveau and once of Art Deco, as a design feature, unite both exhibitions. This article examines two interrelated areas. One

is the relationship between the aesthetic staging and displaying of African art and the perception and appreciation of non-European art within the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement. The second is between this aesthetic staging and consumerism from 1900 onwards, which was increasingly marked by exoticism.

Introduction

[1] The accumulation of non-European artifacts at the early world's fairs in London, Paris or Vienna reflects European interest in non-European material culture. This interest is closely related to the taxonomic rise of 'foreign things' from spoils of war to colonial commodities, to objects scrutinized by ethnographers or art theorists, and finally to showcased works of art. Susanne Leeb has pointed out how the epistemological status awarded to non-European art at the turn of the twentieth century is marked by two reciprocal movements:

The paradigms of art and art theory are defined by referencing non-European art and culture, only to simultaneously relegate those to the margins of art, by assigning them a status of folk Arts and Crafts. In other words: although the arts of non-European societies and cultures only appear in the margins of a world art history at the turn of the century, they centrally serve to legitimise and justify a modern understanding of art.¹

In the early twentieth century, the cultural interest in non-European objects increasingly led to their categorization as ethnological artifacts, or as part of applied or autonomous art. This interest and these categorisations are not only visible in European art production and art theory, but also in the changing aesthetic staging of these objects.

[2] The ordering of non-European art through European systems of classification was initially based on photographic representations in magazines, catalogues or specialist literature. These representations greatly influenced the value judgments of institutionalized art history. The increasing visual representation of objects imported from the colonies influenced their commercial value and partly led to a rapid increase of their sales prices.² Additionally, the scenographic stagings of non-European arts in displays of Arts and Crafts as well as in ethnographic collections majorly influenced their perception. For example, the factual and reduced display of the "African Negro Art" exhibition, which took place from 18 March to 19 May 1935 at the MoMA in New York, showcased classical African sculpture (in the same way) as (Western) fine art for the first time.³

[3] At the same time, the turn of the century saw the development of an aesthetics of commodities and products which both fostered and served as a basis for a societal desire for the exotic. From the final third of the nineteenth century onwards, visual advertising became a new (mass) medium, which, in turn, created a visual world of consumption based on the 'seductive powers' of the exotic. This visual culture of advertising combined (colonial) goods and eroticized bodies, which together assisted in producing a desire for the (visual) discovery of 'foreign worlds'

¹ Susanne Leeb, *Die Kunst der Anderen. "Weltkunst" und die anthropologische Konfiguration der Moderne*, Berlin 2015, 10, my translation.

² Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, "Transcultural Interpretation and the Production of Alterity: Photography, Materiality, and Mediation in the Making of 'African Art'", in: *Art History & Fetishism Abroad. Global Shiftings in Media and Methods*, eds. Gabriele Genge and Angela Stercken, Bielefeld 2014, 113-128; Melanie Ulz, "Afrikanische Kunst in Europa. Kulturelle Aneignung und musealer Umgang am Beispiel der höfischen Kunst aus Benin", in: *"Global Art History". Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, eds. Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl, Bielefeld 2017, 199-220.

³ See the historical images of the exhibition, URL: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2937>.

and simultaneously visualised the alleged 'advantages' of the respective national colonial agendas.⁴ The colonial motifs of this world of consumption are mainly taken from the visual repertoire of eighteenth and nineteenth century European academy painting and were easy to decipher by consumers. The exotic advertising media promised a high quality of colonial goods and suggested their infinite availability.

[4] In the following, I will examine the aesthetic staging of non-European art and culture in relation to two areas of scrutiny.⁵ The first interaction to be explored concerns the relationship of this aesthetic staging and the perception and appreciation of non-European art within the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement. The second interaction is between this aesthetic staging and consumerism from 1900 onwards, which was increasingly marked by exoticism. I am interested, in other words, in the extent to which the appreciation of non-European artifacts in the context of the Arts and Crafts movement is related to the exoticist consumerism of the time. The international world's fairs, beginning with London's Great Exhibition of 1851, are significant for both developments in question. As an example, I will examine the consumption of African art and culture at the Brussels International Exposition of 1897 and the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931.

World's fairs and European Arts and Crafts movements

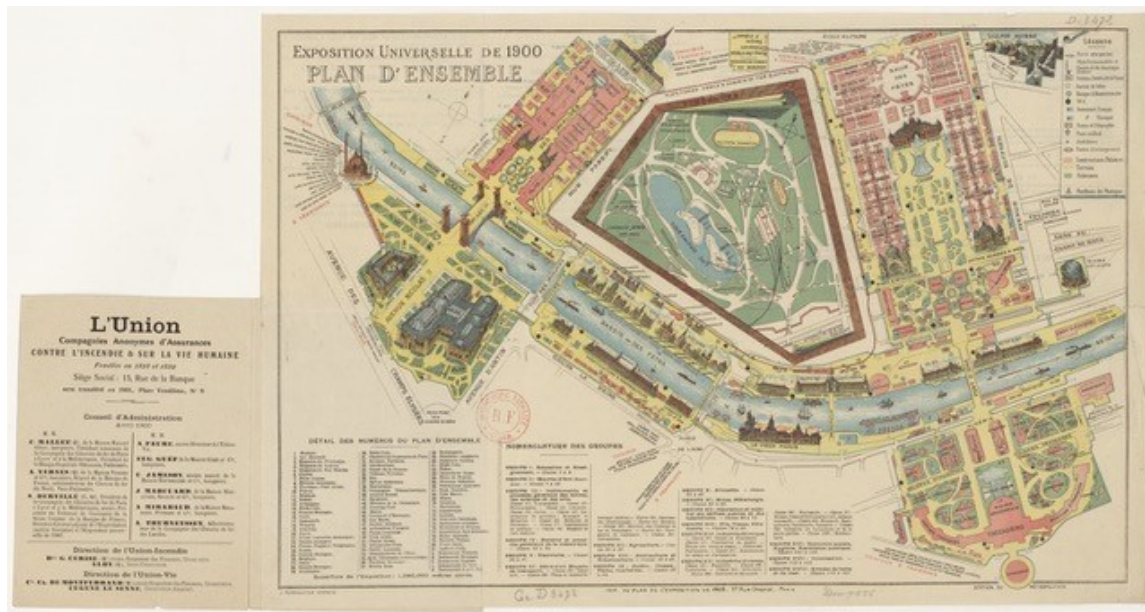
[5] The world's fairs paved the way for a reception of non-European art and culture within European popular culture. This was especially facilitated by scenographic stagings of 'foreign and exotic worlds' that were explicitly aimed at the taste and needs of a mass audience, which sought entertainment rather than education within the large exhibition spaces. The showcasing of colonial possessions, goods, products and humans continuously gained importance from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. The staging of the French Third Republic's forced colonial agenda already took up more room in the Paris world's fair of 1889, in a separated area on the *Esplanade des Invalides*.⁶ At the *Exposition universelle* of 1900, however, the participating countries competed with each other in an individual colonial exhibition section for

⁴ Miriam Oesterreich, *Bilder konsumieren. Inszenierungen 'exotischer' Körper in früher Bildreklame*, Paderborn 2018; cf. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London 1995, 207-231.

⁵ The notion 'staging' ('Inszenierung') refers to how objects are exhibited, showcased or presented. It includes questions regarding the lighting as well as the display furniture (cabinets, plinths, pedestals). These elements "can situate objects and cultures within a particular intellectual framework", as Petrov explains in her analysis on fashion museums: "The exhibitionary assemblage can be analyzed as a whole and as a sum of its parts – artifacts, labels, furniture, color, lighting, marketing material, scholarly catalogs, and wider cultural discourse." See Julia Petrov, *Fashion, History, Museums. Inventing the Display of Dress*, London 2019, 8.

⁶ The promenade was intentionally flanked by the war ministry's exhibition as well as the so-called hygiene palace, cf. Beat Wyss, *Bilder von der Globalisierung. Die Weltausstellung von Paris 1889*, Berlin 2010, 74.

the first time.⁷ France took up half of the area in this competition.⁸ The area surrounding the Trocadéro palace, on the other side of the Seine, opposite the Eiffel tower, was intended for the (re)presentation of the colonies (Fig. 1). The effect of this topographical positioning was two-fold: the exhibition space was both close enough to the Champ de Mars – where the industrial nations traditionally competed in terms of technology and economy – and simultaneously far away enough to show a civilizational gap between colonial powers and colonial states through a spatial gap.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

1 *Exposition universelle de 1900. Plan d'ensemble*, 1900, 47 × 31 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, GED-3472 (photo: BnF, Paris)

[6] The industrial nations based their own image of progressive radiance on multimedia stagings of foreign cultures as timeless and backward-looking, and this through exoticizing or primitivizing architectural settings as well as artisans practicing their crafts and amateur actors embodying 'foreign' cultures. Keying into an evolutionist model of culture, these stagings helped 'naturalize' the non-simultaneous nature of colonized societies.

[7] Through their visibility on the world's fairs, non-European artifacts found their way into conceptions of art theory, especially as positive or negative projections of (anti-) classicist or modern views of the ornament. Gottfried Semper's anti-classicist view of art, which led to the debate over polychromy, the dispute whether ancient sculpture and architecture were painted or

⁷ In this section, the colonial powers of Great Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal were exhibited, yet "t he criterion for placement in this section of the colonial exhibition seems to have been the exotic nature of the land being represented rather than whether or not it was technically a colony. William Schneider, "Colonies at the 1900 World Fair", in: *History Today* 31 (1981), no. 5, 31-36: 33.

⁸ The buildings for Algeria and Madagascar – as the respectively oldest and youngest French colonies – were positioned prominently. Schneider (1981), 33.

not, was famously shaped by the world's fair of 1851. In London, Semper first saw artifacts which supposedly confirmed his theory of "man's intuitive grasp of color principles".⁹

[8] In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the success of mechanical production processes, many industrial nations re-oriented themselves artistically, and intellectually revalued Arts and Crafts techniques. In this context, reference was often made to the value of non-European objects, which was sometimes even used to criticize civilisation and argue against the discomfort caused by advancing industrialization.¹⁰ Justus Brinckmann, for example, head of the *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*, founded in 1869, retrospectively made the first world's fair the starting point of the Arts and Crafts movement: "[...] in London revealed the decline of European Arts and Crafts. At that time, the movement took off, which soon led to the founding of the South Kensington Museum in London and numerous other such institutions [...]"¹¹ On the occasion of the extensive purchases Brinckmann made at the 1900 world's fair in Paris, he also reflected on the influence of non-European arts on European decoration and design.

*The lessons of half a century of historical style research and style exploitation have borne good fruit, but there is a general conviction that this alone is not enough. [...] Extensions of this knowledge, which the world's fairs and the public collections have conveyed in the works of the art of the Orient, the peoples of Islam and India for surface decoration, the Japanese for the use of motifs of the plant and animal world and the landscape, have been fruitfully added.*¹²

[9] In addition to Brinckmann's interest in objects influenced by and from Asian countries, he was the first German museum director who acquired a bronze head from the African Kingdom of Benin for his museum collection. Felix von Luschan soon offered Brinckmann competition by establishing, at the Berlin *Völkerkundemuseum*, the world's largest collection of art from Benin.¹³ The courtly art production, most of which consisted of brass and bronze sculptures and ivory carvings, was taken out of the country in 1897 in the course of the British colonial war against the Kingdom of Benin. It was mainly auctioned off in Great Britain as spoils of war, some of it, however, was also shipped directly to Hamburg.¹⁴

⁹ Harry Francis Mallgrave, "Gottfried Semper and the Great Exhibition", in: *Die Weltausstellung von 1851 und ihre Folgen / The Great Exhibition and its Legacy*, eds. Franz Bosbach and John R. Davis, Munich 2002, 305-314: 311; cf. also Leeb (2015), 106-120.

¹⁰ E.g. in the context of the British *Arts and Crafts* movement encountering Indian artifacts, cf. Christian Kravagna, *Transmoderne. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Kontakts*, Berlin 2017, 62-64; Carol A. Breckenridge, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs", in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), no. 2, 195-216.

¹¹ Justus Brinckmann, *Die Ankäufe auf der Weltausstellung Paris 1900. Hamburgisches Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe*, Hamburg 1901, 3, my translation.

¹² Brinckmann (1901), 4-5, my translation.

¹³ For the history of the Berlin collection of so-called Benin bronzes, cf. Rebecca Habermas, "Benin Bronzen im Kaiserreich – oder warum koloniale Objekte so viel Ärger machen", in: *Historische Anthropologie* 25 (2018), no. 3, 327-352.

¹⁴ The *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg* has elaborated on the collection history of three objects from the Kingdom of Benin, acquired by Brinckmann, cf. Sabine Schulz and Silke Reuther, eds., *Raubkunst? Die Bronzen aus Benin im Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*, exh. cat., Hamburg 2018.

[10] The Benin bronzes were treated differently by the applied arts promoter Brinckmann and the ethnologist von Luschan. While von Luschan was interested in the objects primarily as historical documents of a 'vanishing culture', the bronze head acquired by Brinckmann served solely as a model for an extraordinarily high quality of metal processing in the museum's school of arts and crafts. This history of acquisition can be seen as evidence for the interest in African art among the representatives of the (German) Arts and Crafts movement, which at first sight seems to have been more open to 'foreign' art production than the heads of established art museums. With an anti-academic habitus, the representatives of the applied arts countered the traditional division of high and low cultures, which often marginalized non-European arts. The experience of visiting a world's fair, which made handicraft products from many parts of the world accessible to many for the first time, contributed significantly to a transcultural understanding of art.

[11] However, these examples do not refute the Janus-faced positioning of non-European art at the turn of the century, which I have already addressed. Only very rarely did debates take place on an equal footing that would have actually fostered an understanding of the art conceptions of the still so-called 'foreign' cultures. At the turn of the century, non-European art, 'folk art' as well as relics from prehistory and early history, were used by art theory as well as by artists primarily for consolidating their 'own' European positions.¹⁵

The displaying of the Belgian Congo at the Brussels International Exposition of 1897

[12] Belgian architect and designer Henry van de Velde, for example, claimed in a statement that he was not interested in political questions of colonialism, as Bärbel Küster has shown on the basis of the presentation of the Belgian Congo colony at the Brussels International Exposition of 1897.¹⁶ The design of the Brussels exhibition space in Tervuren, south-west of the city, gained international renown because of its design by representatives of the Belgian Art Nouveau.¹⁷ The scenographic staging of the Belgian Congo set stylistic and museological standards which not only strongly influenced following colonial and world exhibitions, but also displays of ethnographic collections in museums. The "Congo question" was not of interest as a political question to the Belgian Art Nouveau artists participating in the exhibition, but only, as Henry van de Velde called it, as an "idea in a country [Belgium] poor in ideas".¹⁸

¹⁵ Michel Foucault calls this the "anthropological configuration of modernity", cf. Leeb (2015).

¹⁶ For this issue and in the following cf. Bärbel Küster, "Zwischen Ästhetik, Politik und Ethnographie: Die Präsentation des belgischen Kongo auf der Weltausstellung Brüssel-Tervuren 1897", in: *Die Schau des Fremden. Ausstellungskonzepte zwischen Kunst, Kommerz und Wissenschaft*, ed. Cordula Grewe, Stuttgart 2006, 95-118.

¹⁷ Silverman identifies Belgian Art Nouveau as a "specifically Congo style and as 'imperial modernism'", see Debora L. Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I, Part II and Part III", in: *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18 (2011), no. 2, 139-181; 19 (2012), no. 2, 175-195; and 20 (2013), no. 1, 3-61.

¹⁸ Leopold II, King of the Belgians from 1865 to 1909, was the founder and sole owner of the so called Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908. His administration was characterized by tyranny, exploitation, and systematic

[13] The exhibition display established a homogenous structure, which inscribed the ethnographic objects into the world's fair's aesthetics of mass-produced goods. Their 'foreignness' was reduced; they were easily accessible and – figuratively – consumable as decorative ornaments (Fig. 2).¹⁹ The decorative, fan-shaped positioning of everyday culture from the Belgian Congo was borrowed from a neo-baroque design language and arranged according to formal similarity, as Küster has pointed out:

*The aesthetic form of the presentation, the lining up of similar objects on the wall, treated them like the products of an industrial society and not only echoed the representative 'neo-baroque' arrangement of the walls in the Hall of Honour [where the most important artists of Belgian Art Nouveau were represented – my note], but extended it to the entire exhibition.*²⁰



2 Musée du Congo, set up in 1897 as part of the Brussels International Exposition of 1897 at the exhibition grounds in Tervuren, interior view, photographer: Albert Édouard Drains (Alexandre), 1897, collotype, 21,9 × 22,7 cm. Wellcome Collection, London, 22893i

[14] Regardless of their original context of usage and meaning, the exhibits were commodified as colonial (mass) products. All of them were re-inscribed in terms of content: They now acted as a kind of souvenir from the colony. A souvenir is usually characterized by a high non-material value, which is ascribed to the object through a subsequent attribution of meaning. The souvenir acts as

brutality. The members of the Belgian Arts and Crafts movement, on the other hand, tended to belong to socialist circles. Van de Velde attempted to bring these contradictions together rhetorically. Henry van de Velde, "Die Kolonial-Ausstellung Tervueren", in: *Dekorative Kunst* 1 (1898), 38, quoted after Küster (2006), 106, my translation.

¹⁹ Architect and journalist Paul Hankar was responsible for the overall coordination and design of the *Hall of Honour* as well as the Ethnographic Hall. He also designed the mahogany wall panels that can be seen above the exhibits. Küster (2006), 101.

²⁰ Küster (2006), 113, my translation.

a proxy for things experienced and/or imagined. Correspondingly, visiting world and colonial exhibitions was often staged and advertised as a 'small trip around the world'. Additionally, for the visitors the souvenir character of the colonial exhibits at the Brussels world exhibition was dramaturgically reinforced by the ride on the state-of-the-art monorail from Brussels city centre to the exhibition ground at Tervuren.

The *Palais des Colonies* at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931

[15] The aesthetic staging of colonial culture in a kind of 'comprehensive synthesis', as it was first systematically done by the artists of the Belgian Art Nouveau, is once again revived in the twentieth century at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931 – now on the basis of the modern Art Deco ornament. The formal language is derived from the innovations of the highly successful 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris. The idea of an independent, international colonial exhibition in Paris, however, arose from the colonial sections of the previous world exhibitions of 1878, 1889 and 1900. The modern Art Deco ornament incorporates the exotic as a fashionable currency in its set of motifs. The modern ornament does not develop an own aesthetics, but follows – just as the contemporary visual advertising – eighteenth and nineteenth century motifs. The fantastic image of an intact colonial world was created, which was aimed at stabilizing and promoting colonialism, as well as highlighting its alleged advantages beyond any possible criticism.



3 *Palais des Colonies* at the *Exposition coloniale internationale*, Bois de Vincennes, Paris 1931, south façade at night, photographer: Jean Gilbert, photography, 17 × 23 cm. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, PP0133836

[16] The only permanent building constructed for the International Colonial Exhibition of 1931 was the *Palais des Colonies* (Fig. 3).²¹ The same artists already represented at the 1925 *Exposition* were commissioned to design the building. It should jointly represent the otherwise distinct spheres of the colonies and France on the exhibition grounds at the Bois de Vincennes. Both spheres were to be represented in one building, while avoiding any blurring between the two distinct cultures as well as any questioning of the *Grande Nation's* (alleged) civilizational superiority. The building, designed by Albert Laprade, architecturally transforms these provisions by emphasising the opposition between colonizers and the colonized: the building's straightness stands in opposition to the ornamental façade relief executed by Auguste Janniot.²² The façade decoration is subordinated to the classical formal aesthetics of architecture or added as a supplement, emphasizing that the ornament is constitutive for the building. The interplay between a seemingly classical structure and extensive ornaments creates an aesthetic tension that is very inviting from a distance. The reliefs, which present the colonized mainly engaged in manual and agricultural activities, and thus as backward and subaltern, can only be gradually deciphered at a closer look.²³ Against the backdrop of the formation and development of anti-colonial resistance movements in the 1930s,²⁴ this design was aimed at aestheticizing the colonial and racist visual agenda of the French *mission civilisatrice*, and at advertising an era of peaceful and prosperous unity.²⁵

[17] The position intellectually awarded to African culture and creativity in this context is illustrated by the painting *Souvenir du Musée des Colonies* (Fig. 4), which was commissioned by Laprade and executed by the painter Louis Bouquet. This painting shows the artists involved in the design of the building in the form of a group portrait.²⁶ Seated in the centre of a group of clothed

²¹ Since 2007, the building houses the French museum of the history of immigration, the *Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration*. For an elaboration of the building's history and its features, see Germain Viatte, ed., *Le Palais des Colonies. Histoire du Musée des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*, Paris 2002; Maureen Murphy, *Un palais pour une cité. Du Musée des colonies à la Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*, Paris 2007; Benoît de L'Estoile, *Le Goût des Autres. De l'Exposition coloniale aux Arts premiers*, Paris 2007; Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition*, Paris, Cambridge, Mass. / London 2000.

²² Patricia A. Morton, "National and Colonial: The Musée des Colonies at the Colonial Exposition, Paris 1931", in: *The Art Bulletin* 80 (1998), no. 2, 357-377; cf. Morton (2000), 272-312.

²³ Only one scene shows the arts, represented by sculpture. The figure is not assigned to the African but to the Asian area. This assignment follows the tradition of the hierarchy of the continental allegories.

²⁴ In 1931, the *Ligue universelle pour la défense de la race noire*, together with the *League against Imperialism* and surrealist artists, organised the anti-colonial exhibition "La Verité sur les colonies", which was shown in the former Soviet pavilion of the 1925 exhibition. Cf. Kravagna (2017), 47-48; cf. Jody Blake, "The Truth about the Colonies, 1931: Art indigène in Service of the Revolution", in: *Oxford Art Journal* 25 (2000), no. 1, 35-58.

²⁵ Cf. Melanie Ulz, "Koloniale Rahmungen: Die Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris", in: *kritische berichte* 43 (2015), no. 2, 74-84.

²⁶ The portrait includes Auguste Janniot and Louis Bouquet to the left of Alfred Laprade, as well as Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann and Laprade's assistant Léon Bazin to the right. Bouquet painted the fresco *Allegorie de l'Afrique* in the *Salon du Ministère* of the exhibition palace; Ruhlmann designed its interior. Cf. Morton (1998), 372-373.

white men is an anonymous black woman, whose facial features are reminiscent of the Black American and later French dancer Josephine Baker. She performed with the dance revue "La Revue Nègre" at the Exposition of 1925 as well as at the Paris Colonial Exhibition. Baker's expressive and permissive performances embodied the erotic and exotic attraction of Black culture to a predominantly white audience.²⁷



4 Louis Bouquet, *Souvenir du Musée des Colonies*, 1931–1933, detail. Private collection (reprod. from: Lynne Thornton, *Les Africanistes, peintres voyageurs: 1860–1960*, Paris 1990, 31)

[18] The woman is staged allegorically as both muse and model. Africanism is shown by skin colour, nudity and femininity, but no individual subject is represented. The painting depicts the limits of the intellectual and artistic relationship between the representatives of black and white culture. This unequal relationship is reinforced by the constellation of gazes: Laprade, seated in the center of the picture, is staged as an architectural visionary by simultaneously directing his gaze at a future outside the picture and pointing to his design. The woman's gaze, however, is directed at Laprade. She is positioned above and behind him and casually leans on her left arm. She is apparelled with a white cloth, which underscores her representation as a model: An objectified model of inspiration. In contrast, the men are characterized in an artistic-intellectual way through different appendages and gestures.

²⁷ K. Merinda Simmons and James A. Crank, *Race and New Modernisms*, London 2019.

Consuming the exotic

[19] Beat Wyss describes world's fairs as "laboratories of a gradual subversion of self-appointed high culture and primitiveness", which led to a "creolisation" of colonial states.²⁸ However, in my view, the gradual relationship between the two following processes is more significant: the process of a (controlled) cultural appropriation and processes of (uncontrollable) cultural entanglement. From the dominant culture's perspective, it was always important to avoid any gradations between the cultural and civilizational binary of colonizers and the colonized. Any uncertainty in this identity construction would have meant a loss of control and potentially the ideological failing of the national colonial agenda.

[20] As Patricia Morton has highlighted, the architectural and artistic example of the *Palais des Colonies* shows that "the desire to unify the colonies and France in the museum was countered by a correlative fear of mixing their separate representational norms".²⁹ Colonial discourse has to continuously assert the Other's inferiority in order to secure its own power. Stereotypes have to be continuously reproduced and reinforced for their naturalization to be accepted. This continuous reproduction both demonstrates the colonial powers' authority and simultaneously reveals their instability and ambivalence. It can also be read as an expression of fear of an imminent loss of power. The fear of failure is inherent in the discourses of domination. This corresponds to the fact that the realisation of colonial enterprises mostly advanced far less smoothly than the numerous representations of technological and civilizational superiority would have it. There were manifold potential dangers to fail in terms of conceptualising colonial culture. The resistance of colonized subjects, who were brought to (capital) cities for world's fairs, also contributed significantly to this.³⁰

[21] The production of images propagating a successful *mission civilisatrice* conceals and banishes this colonial fear of failure. This fear is counteracted visually with the assistance of aesthetic systems of order. This aesthetic staging controls the fear-inducing parts of the 'foreign' by decontextualizing and delocalizing them; it reduces foreignness to a bearable minimum and thus transforms the 'foreign' into something consumable and 'exotic'.

[22] The increasing cultural appropriation of the Other – fostered by economic relationships and colonialism – also meant changes in the Self. Postcolonial theory analyses these processes of negotiation and examines the different degrees of reciprocal cultural interpenetration. Homi K. Bhabha has shown how, despite their administrative and discursive subordination, colonial subjects had discursive agency, and has termed this phenomenon 'mimicry'.³¹ Mimicry is a fundamental cultural technique in colonial discourses of education and power. The Other should

²⁸ Using the example of the 1889 Paris exhibition, cf. Wyss (2010), 43, my translation.

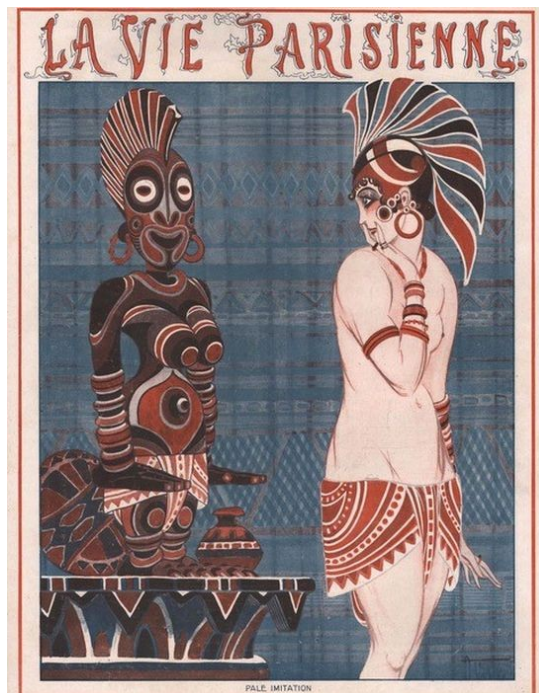
²⁹ Morton (1998), 375.

³⁰ Brigitta Kuster, "Sous les yeux vigilants / Under the watchful eyes. Zur internationalen Kolonialausstellung von 1931 in Paris", in: *Transversal Texts* 5 (2007), URL: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/kuster/de> (accessed February 15, 2020); Morton (2000), 96-129.

³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York 1994, 121-131. Cf. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, Berlin, 2nd ed. 2015, 222-247.

not be entirely different to the Self – but it was also not permitted to become 'completely equal'.³² Reciprocal cultural entanglement is accordingly not based on egalitarian notions of slow convergence, but on a discourse of power, in which colonial powers have to continuously claim their civilizational superiority.

[23] World's fairs and colonial exhibitions provided room for a controlled, secure, free-from-fear experience and appropriation of the 'foreign'. The virtual trips across time and space within the large exhibitions' high degree of order and structure staged a secure consumability of non-European cultures. At the same time, the culture of consumption of the early twentieth century sold this dosed experience of difference in the form of commodities and products designed for domestic use, and thus additionally fostered a cultural desire for difference. The title page of the *La Vie Parisienne* magazine (Fig. 5), for example, caricatures the Parisian Africa-fashion in a humorous way as "pale imitation".³³ At the same time, it turns the 'emulation' of French norms and values demanded by colonial discourses of education against French aesthetic taste. However, the supposed original in the picture is no less overdrawn.



5 "Pale Imitation", cover illustration of the magazine *La Vie Parisienne*, 25 October 1919. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, FOL-LC13-81 (photo: BnF, Paris)

[24] In order to complicate the question of (reciprocal) cultural transmission somewhat further, I would finally like to address the phenomenon of the so-called 'self-ethnicization' of European nations, which develops in the wake of the world's fairs. The concomitant staging of an 'own' backwardness or primitiveness which has already been overcome is a trope that already appears

³² Cf. Kravagna (2017), 59-84.

³³ Tobias Wendl and Bettina Lintig, eds., *Black Paris. Kunst und Geschichte einer schwarzen Diaspora*, exh. cat., Wuppertal 2006, 53.

in the early modern period. It was used to varying degrees by industrial nations at world's fairs.³⁴ What is the epistemological connection between the peasantization (*Verbäuerlichung*) of French culture and the exoticization of foreign cultures, i.e. the often-quoted juxtaposition of national costume groups and colonized subjects in 1900 Paris?³⁵ The increasing interest in an allegedly rustic and rural way of life coincides with the demise of these communities in the course of industrialization. This phenomenon is comparable to the increase in ethnological interest in non-European culture, which also coincides with the colonial destruction of these cultures. Paul Gauguin famously first travelled to Brittany and then to the South Seas, where he did not discover the paradise he had possibly hoped for and which he devised in his paintings. However, in contrast to the staging of colonial subjects in so-called *Völkerschauen*, the self-ethnicization of the own culture through stagings of rustic and rural life was incorporated into the construction of a national identity. These displays were thus a contribution to the nation's conception of itself – in competing with other nations.

Conclusion

[25] World's fairs were not only exhibition spaces where a wide audience discovered, encountered or admired artifacts, products or goods from many parts of the world for the first time, but also "venues that reduced (through selective representation) cultures to their objects".³⁶ The accessibility to hitherto little known aesthetics or shapes enabled a broader European perception and reception of material culture, which was also reflected in a change in contemporary taste. Beyond that, however, there was virtually little examination of non-European arts that would have contributed to an actual understanding of 'foreign' artistic creations. The non-simultaneousness, backwardness or 'primitiveness' of colonized cultures is instead constantly asserted and performatively staged in various media formats; in the exhibition displays as well as in their framing architecture. Thus, for both the Art Nouveau artists in Tervuren and the Art Deco artists in Paris, African creativity remains only a vague source of inspiration; a muse and model as depicted in Bouquet's painting. The Belgian Art Nouveau as well as the French Art Deco ornament reduced 'foreignness' to a comfortable amount of exoticism and thus made it easily accessible and (virtually) consumable.

³⁴ Martin Wörner, *Vergnügung und Belehrung. Volkskultur auf den Weltausstellungen 1851–1900*, Münster 1999.

³⁵ Wörner (1999), 172; cf. Wyss (2010), 205-222.

³⁶ Breckenridge (1989), 202.

About the Author

Melanie Ulz is an art historian with a focus on transcultural art history from the 18th to the 21st century. She is currently a substitute professor for historical image studies at the University of Regensburg. From 2010 to 2016 she was a junior professor at the University of Osnabrück. She earned her PhD in 2005 from the University of Trier with a thesis on the depiction of the Egyptian campaign in French history painting (*Auf dem Schlachtfeld des Empire. Männlichkeitskonzepte in der Bildproduktion zu Napoleons Ägyptenfeldzug*, Weimar 2008). Since 2014 she has been a member of the research network "Art Production and Art Theory in the Age of Global Migration". Her research ranges from battle painting, the visual history of slavery, or the museumization of classical African art to the visualization of migration.

Translation

Moritz Kiermeier

Special Issue

Buket Altinoba, Alexandra Karentzos and Miriam Oesterreich, eds., *'Gesamtkunstwerk' World's Fair. Revisioning International Exhibitions*, in: *RIHA Journal* 0300-0312 (31 May 2024), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/riha.2024.2>.

License

The text of this article is provided under the terms of the Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0.

