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The museological representation of African art between tradition and decolonisation.
A critical analysis of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition at the AfricaMuseum, Tervuren

Giulia Casalini
Student Number: s2781778
Email: g.casalini@umail.leidenuniv.nl
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Supervisor: Dr. Wilfried J. L. M. van Damme
Second reader: Prof. Dr. Pieter ter Keurs

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Introduction

The topic of this thesis is the representation of African art in the semi-permanent exhibition *From the collection: Unrivalled Art*, presently on display at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (Belgium).[1] In 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa reopened with the new name of AfricaMuseum, after five years of refurbishing of the buildings and the reinstallation of its displays. The main purpose of this reinstallation was to decolonise the old-fashioned exhibitions and narratives of the Museum, as well as modernising the representation of past and contemporary Africa. Together with the re-arranged displays, the Museum has created a hall dedicated to semi-permanent exhibitions. The *Unrivalled Art* exhibition is the first show to be held in this space since the reopening, and is devoted to the arts from Congo and Central Africa. The analysis of this exhibition allows to assess the Museum's politics of representation of African art in the wake of the recent decolonisation process; moreover, it provides the opportunity to reflect on broader pivotal issues in the discourse on the museological representation of Africa, colonial and post-colonial epistemological frameworks, and intellectual constructions of African objects in museum contexts.

The reinstallation and decolonisation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa as a whole have already been discussed extensively by scholarship and are currently still the object of many studies. Most of the literature has highlighted the successes and pitfalls of the process. Scholars like Sarah Van Beurden, Dónal Hassett, Hugo DeBlock and Pierre Petit have criticised the uneven results of the attempts at decolonisation and the continued presence of colonial legacies in the building itself, as well as in the representation of African cultures.[2] However, few scholars have dealt with the *Unrivalled Art* exhibition in depth, offering at most brief and succinct comments within broader evaluations of the Museum's reinstallation. Scholars have deemed the exhibition for the most part traditional and old-fashioned, considering the choice to represent African objects as "artworks" problematic.[3] Vicky van Bockhaven and DeBlock, for example, have criticised the approach of the exhibition,

[1] From now on called "Unrivalled art."

[2] Sarah van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium. Belgian Federal Science Policy Office. Reopened December 2018," *American Historical Review* (December 2019), 1806-1809; Dónal Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"?: The Representation of Colonial Pasts and Presents in Belgium's AfricaMuseum," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2019), 1-20; Hugo DeBlock, "The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium: the reopening of 'the last colonial museum in the world'. Issues on decolonisation and repatriation," *Museums & society* 17, no. 2 (July 2019), 272-281; Pierre Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," *African arts* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 1-20.

[3] Van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium," 1807; DeBlock, "The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium," 275-276; Vicky Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age," *Antiquity* 93, no. 370 (2019), 1086.

highlighting the way in which the aestheticising display de-contextualises the objects showcased with regards to their original use, functions and meanings.[4] Similarly, Tristan Mertens has judged the exhibition's presentation of African art conservative and monolithic: the author has stressed how the absence of works by contemporary Congolese artists, or of videos on present-day contexts, situates entire sections of African art outside of contemporaneity and of the digital world.[5] Kevin Conru has offered some reflections on one of the main displays of the exhibition, featuring figurative sculptures; the author focuses mostly on the high quality of the pieces, and how the dense display diminishes their aesthetic appreciation.[6] Hassett has pointed out in particular the lack of information and awareness on the contested provenance of the works exhibited, with respect to the debates on repatriation.[7] These occasional and rather concise reviews aside, no detailed and in-depth studies of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition have yet been conducted.

This thesis aims at offering a comprehensive critical analysis of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition, with regards to its epistemological frameworks, the displays, the curatorial choices, and narratives; the final aim is to problematise how the exhibition constructs the representation of Central African objects, and how it creates and communicates knowledge about them. The thesis attempts to do so against the backdrop of current scholarship and museological debates on decolonisation and on paradigms of representation of African objects and cultures. This research is not only relevant with regards to the discussion on the AfricaMuseum's decolonisation, and the gap in the scholarship on the Museum it addresses; it is also useful to illuminate and evaluate Western museological practices and interpretative paradigms of African objects and African art at large.

Within this frame, this thesis critically analyses the ways in which the *Unrivalled art* exhibition represents Central African objects. The main research question this thesis will address is whether, and to what extent, the curatorial narratives and the display choices conceptually appropriate the objects within Eurocentric epistemological frameworks and art historical categories. To answer this main research question, the research focuses on three sub-questions: firstly, which are the critical and appropriative aspects of the art paradigm of display of African objects; secondly, how does the exhibition represent Congolese and Central African objects through the installation display, the curatorial narratives and the

[4] Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1082-1087; DeBlock, "The Africa Museum of Tervuren, Belgium, 275-276.
[5] Tristan Mertens, "Africa in motion: bringing heritage to life?" *African art* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 83-85.
[6] Kevin Conru, "A re-display, a re-launch, or a re-birth? What the RMCA has achieved," *African arts* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 90-92.
[7] Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"? 14.

explanatory texts and labels; finally, to what extent and in which ways does the re-conceptualization of the artefacts as "art masterpieces" within a Western framework impact the understanding of their original functions and meanings?

The theoretical foundations of this research consist of post-colonial museum studies and theories on museums' decolonisation, as formulated by scholars such as Annie Coombes, Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, Robert Aldrich, John Giblin, Imma Ramos and Nikki Grout among others.[8] In the first chapter, the meaning of museum decolonisation and what this process entails, as discussed in scholarship, will be presented. The main controversies of the material and intellectual legacies of colonialism, and the complexities faced by museums in overcoming them, will be outlined. In this framework, a summary of the foundation, history and reinstallation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa will follow, in order to highlight the Museum's place in Belgian colonialism, and the post-colonial challenges it has to face.

The second chapter will delve into issues of museographical representation and intellectual conceptualisation of African objects, with the purpose of setting the analysis of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition within the current scholarly and museological debates. To this end, through the study of relevant literature by scholars such as James Clifford, Francine Farr, Susan Vogel, Ruth Phillips, Christa Clarke and others, the ethnographic and aesthetic paradigm of representation of African objects in museums will be examined.[9] In light of its prominence in the *Unrivalled art* exhibition's displays and narratives, I will focus more extensively on the art paradigm, analysing its controversies with specific regards to the idea of conceptual appropriation. In the context of this thesis, conceptual appropriation is intended as the re-conceptualisation and re-interpretation of African objects within Western epistemological frameworks and Eurocentric systems of values, that superimpose new

[8] Annie E. Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities." *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 2 (1988), 57-68; Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, "Introduction," in *Colonialism and the object: empire, material culture, and the museum*, eds. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-8; Robert Aldrich, "Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2009), 137-156; John Giblin, Imma Ramos, Nikki Grout, "Dismantling the Master's House," *Third Text* 33 no. 4-5 (2019), 471-486.

[9] James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215-251; Francine Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," *African Arts 21, No. 4* (August 1988), 78-80; Susan M. Vogel, "Baule: African Art Western Eyes," *African Arts* 30, no. 4 (1997), 64-77; Susan M. Vogel, "Always true to the object, in our fashion," in *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp & Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 191-204; Ruth B. Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology: Twenty-First Century Imbroglios," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (September 2007), 8-18; Ruth B. Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism: Globalization, Pluralism, and the Persistent Paradigms of Art and Artifact," in *Museums After Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, eds. Griselda Pollock Joyce Zemans (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 80-103; Christa Clarke, "From theory to practice: exhibiting African art in the Twenty-first century," in *Art and its publics. Museum studies at the Millennium*, eds. Andrew McClellan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 165-182.

meanings, purposes and views on the indigenous ones.[10] With regards to the representation of the objects as art, I refer to the concept of "art by appropriation": objects not originally created for art museums displays, nor for disinterested aesthetic contemplation, made into "art" and "art museum masterpieces" through historical and cultural processes, by means of their inclusion in art museum collections and in the art historical study.[11] First formulated in 1949 by André Malraux, who coined the expression "art by metamorphosis," the concept was then introduced in anthropological and African studies by Jacques Maquet, who distinguished between "art by destination" and "art by metamorphosis."[12] Shelly Errington then redefined the term "metamorphosis" as "appropriation" with regards to the so-called "primitive art," in order to strongly emphasise the de-contextualisation and reinvention of the objects from their original contexts of use and performance, as a result of their reframing as "art."[13]

Following this, the second part of this chapter will provide an overview of the representation of Central African objects by the Royal Museum for Central Africa from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. This overview will show how Congolese objects have been differently displayed as ethnographic artefacts or artworks according to specific political and cultural agendas.

The third chapter presents the critical analysis of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition. This analysis will be conducted on two levels, examining both the display choices – such as the arrangement of artefacts, the lighting and the display labels – and the general narratives of the exhibition. The methodology employed includes the visual analysis of the objects' displays, the close examination of the cabinets' explanatory texts and the digital screens of the exhibition. These analyses and examinations are based on on-site research carried out during visits to the Museum in the summer of 2020. Moreover, I have scrutinised the exhibition booklet (available on the Museum's website), focusing both on how it describes and contextualises the individual pieces on show and how it illustrates the exhibition's narratives. In this analysis, I have specifically tried to evaluate the appropriative impact of the art paradigm, as well as of the presence of Eurocentric categorisations and narratives, in the objects' representation and understanding.

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[10] Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 78-79; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81.

[11] Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 78-79.

[12] André Malraux, *Museum without Walls*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Bollingen Series, 24 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949); Jacques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 18; Graeme Chalmers, "Review," review of The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts by Jacques Maquet, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 1990), 112.

[13] Shelly Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" Cultural Anthropology 9, no. 2 (May, 1994), 202-203, 223 note 1; Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 78-79.

1. Decolonising the museological representation of Africa: the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren

1.1. Decolonising museums: legacies of colonialism and post-colonial agendas

In recent years, ethnographic and ethnological museums in the Western world have faced an increasing pressure to decolonise their displays, narratives and identities. By "decolonising museums," we intend a process of questioning, critical reflection and dismantling of the museographical practices, epistemological frameworks, objects classifications, and ideologies of representation inherited from colonialism, which still perpetuate colonial power structures in museums today.[14] To decolonise Western ethnographic museums means to de-centre the Eurocentric views and assumptions on non-Western cultures and objects, and overcome the persistent legacies of old-fashioned, colonial narratives.[15] This process implies a critical self-reflection on the ways in which colonialism has shaped the understanding of the world, and on the role and responsibilities that Western museums had – and still have – in it.

Indeed, since the late 19th century, many ethnological and colonial museums were created to house colonial collections or promote colonial expansion.[16] A great number of ethnographic collections were formed through processes (directly or indirectly) connected to colonialism, such as collecting in the colonised territories, anthropological fieldwork, unbalanced or forced exchange of objects, or violent looting, at the hands of military officers, missionaries, anthropologists; objects were either directly collected by museums' scholars, bought, or obtained through donations by people who benefited from the colony.[17] As such, these collections are the product of colonial processes and still reflect deeply imbalanced power structures and relations. As scholars have pointed out, in countries engaged in

[14] Felicity Bodenstein and Camilla Pagani, "Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage (2000-2012)" in *The Postcolonial Museum. The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History*, eds. Iain Chambers & al., (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 47-48; Donata Miller, "'Everything passes, except the past': reviewing the renovated Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA)," Science Museum Group Journal 12, (Autumn 2019), n.p; Giblin, Ramos and Grout, "Dismantling the Master's House," 473; Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"?, 1; Shahid Vawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality," *Museum International* 71, no. 1-2 (2019), 74-78.

[15] Vawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice," 76, 78; Elisa Schoenberg, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum?" *MuseumNext*. September 18, 2020: https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/.

[16] Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities," 57, 61; Anthony Alan Shelton, "Museums and anthropologies: practices and narratives," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 64-66.

[17] Schoenberg, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum?"; Vawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice," 74. As Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy explain, the types of acquisitions included in the umbrella term "colonial collecting" comprise different ways of collecting, from acquisitions carried out in the framework of anthropological fieldwork to looting. Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, "Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationelle," (November 2018), available at http://restitutionreport2018.com/

colonialism, ethnological and ethnographic museums often functioned as a tool of propaganda for the superiority of Western nations and for the justification of the colonies.[18] In this framework, the display of objects, artefacts and resources from the colonies promoted the economic advantages of maintaining a colony and concurrently substantiated the need for colonisation as a "civilizing mission" of non-Western peoples. To this end, colonial ideologies of representation generally painted non-Western cultures as exotic, barbaric and uncivilised, stuck in a early phase of human evolution.[19] Evidently, constructing and exhibiting non-Western cultures as primordial and undeveloped was paramount to confirm the legitimacy of the political situation: Europe, as the acme of civilisation, had the right to rule over them and to introduce them to modernity.[20]

Nowadays, even after the end of colonial empires, ethnographic museums are still facing the persistent legacies of colonialism, which inform the identity, the nature of the collections, and the epistemological systems of many of these institutions. Post-colonial studies have been fervently debating on the most appropriate ways to attain decolonisation and to reframe ethnographic museums. The post-colonial agendas for decolonising museums focus in particular on critical self-awareness, representation, restitution of contested objects, and inclusion. Certainly, awareness, self-reflection and self-critique of museums and curators with regards to colonial responsibilities and biases is the first, fundamental step in acknowledging and overcoming these legacies.[21] In this respect, ethnographic museums need to develop new narratives that reject traditional and outdated ideologies and views on non-Western cultures.[22] To achieve this, museums need to focus on diversity, as well as prioritise the voices and perspectives of people from the ex-colonised territories and communities, as well as Diasporas. Additionally, scholars, politicians and the public opinion have increasingly

[18] Tim Barringer, "The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project," in Barringer and Flynn, *Colonialism and the object*, 5; Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," 219; Aldrich, "Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe," 138-139; Emily Duthie, "The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World." *Public History Review* (2011), 16; Giblin et al., "Dismantling the Master's House," 472. The same is true for the Expositions Universelles and the Colonial Expositions, which can be seen as concurrent actors in the political representation and ideological construction of non-Western cultures and objects. See Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa. Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwaridan England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), Chapter 6, 109-28 and Çelik Zeynep and Leila Kinney, "Ethnography and Exhibitionism at the Expositions Universelles," *Assemblage* 13 (December 1990), 35.
[19] Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (August 1993), 341.
[20] Coombes, "Reinventing Africa," 2; Hein Vanhee, "On Shared Heritage and Its (False) Promises," *African Arts* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2016), 7.
[21] Barringer, "The South Kensington Museum," 4.
[22] Schoenberg, "What does it mean to decolonize a museum?"

called for repatriation and restitution of cultural artefacts, as a way to repair colonial disruptions and wrongdoings.[23]

1.1.1. Museums, Africa and the making of knowledge. Decolonising epistemological frameworks

The challenges of museums' decolonisation include not only how museums should face their colonial past and their responsibilities; but also, how they represent non-Western cultures now. Hence, this comprises the ways in which the current museological representation of Africa is still embedded in the colonial conceptual understanding and structuring of the world, which have proved very hard to dismantle. Indeed, colonialism was a system in which values and ideologies were established, and ethnographic museums had a role in the creation and perpetuation of these epistemological, political and cultural frameworks. The museum proposed an understanding of the world and influenced (and still does) the very way in which knowledge on non-Western peoples was constructed. This system was embedded in power relationships and assumptions of Western superiority, as the Western museum retained the self-proclaimed authority of constructing and sharing knowledge on the world. The narratives constructed by 19th-century museums, by filtering the representation of African cultures through Eurocentric paradigms and categories, created a long-lasting, erroneous and biased image of Africa as exotic, primitive and savage, intellectually and culturally inferior to Europe.[24] African communities were portrayed as traditional and frozen in a pre-modern, a-historical time: the living embodiment of the prehistory of the West, which the West allegedly needed to civilise. Therefore, certainly, the issue of how ethnographic museums represented and represent African cultures is crucial in decolonisation processes: it shapes the way in which artefacts are interpreted and perceived, and thus how African cultures are communicated.[25] Despite claiming to be universal, scientific and neutral institution, museums

[23] The issue of repatriation and restitution is one of the most discussed with regards to museum decolonisation and post-colonial reparation. To delve into this topic, however, eludes the scope and space of this thesis. For an introduction to the subject see: Neil G.W. Curtis, "Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: The tangled stories of things." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006); Chip Colwell, "The Sacred and the Museum. Repatriation and the Trajectories of Inalienable Possessions." *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 2 (2014); Mariana Françozo, Amy Strecker, "Caribbean Collections in European Museums and the Question of Returns." *International Journal of Cultural Property* 24 (2017).

[24] Mary Jo Arnoldi, "From the Diorama to the Dialogic: A Century of Exhibiting Africa at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History," *Cahiers d'études Africaines* 39, no. 155-156 (1999), 706; Jean Muteba Rahier, "The Ghost of Leopold II: The Belgian Royal Museum of Central Africa and Its Dusty Colonialist Exhibition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 60, 67.

[25] Barringer and Flynn, "Introduction," 4; Phillips, "Re-placing objects," 104.

are nevertheless cultural – and political – formations themselves. [26] Taxonomical categorisations, museum labels, display strategies, objects classifications and nomenclatures are a product of Western culture and reflect Western structures of thinking and organising the world. The re-interpretation of non-Western (material) cultures and people within Western epistemology not only superimposes new values, but in doing so, often performs a conceptual appropriation of the objects within Eurocentric paradigms of values, symbols and practices.[27]

In the case of Africa, even if dioramas, evolutionary displays and reconstructed primitive villages have long disappeared from major Western museums, it could be argued that Eurocentric display categories and narratives are still actively present. As Seiderer and Phillips have pointed out, museological paradigms of representation of Africa are European creations, within which African heritage is reinterpreted according to ideal values.[28] Indeed, since their first arrival in Europe, African artefacts were invested with various meanings, according to Eurocentric narratives of evolution, exoticism, or aesthetic pleasure. In occasion of the 2000 *ExitCongo* exhibition at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, artist and curator Toma Mateba Luntumbue declared that "the European monologue about Central Africa and its art is over and done with."[29] But is it really so? Surely, the steadily increasing inclusion of African curators, artists, scholars and public in exhibitions and in the personnel of museums has positively impacted diversity and introduced new perspectives. However, as Phillips and Hassett have argued, the museological representation of Africa is still deeply embedded in colonial frameworks and narratives.[30] As Seiderer maintains, ethnographic museums should break away entirely from the system of knowledge production that has created the images of the cultures these museums studied and displayed.[31] Drawing from the works of Kopytoff and Appadurai on the biographies of objects, post-colonial studies have shown how the meanings of objects are altered, reinvented and reconstructed when they are displaced and displayed in different contexts.[32] Therefore, museums have the responsibility of choosing how to represent

[26] Barringer, "The South Kensington Museum," 12; Craig Clunas, "China in Britain: The imperial collections," in Barringer and Flynn, *Colonialism and the object*, 42.
[27] Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities," 61; Phillips, "Re-placing objects," 93, 101; Giblin et al., "Dismantling the Master's house," 475.
[28] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 13; Anna Seiderer, *Une critique postcoloniale en acte. Les musées d'ethnographie contemporains sous le prisme des études postcoloniales* (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, 2014), 39.
[29] Raymond Corbey, "ExitCongoMuseum: the travels of Congolese art," *Anthropology Today* 17, no. 3 (June 2001), 23.
[30] Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 80; Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence?" 1.
[31] Seiderer, *Une critique postcoloniale en acte*, 7.
[32] Barringer, "The South Kensington Museum," 12; Duthie, "The British Museum," 15; Aldrich, "Colonial museums in a postcolonial Europe," 153. See also Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge

colonial objects and which phases of their lives to narrate. Even more so, decolonising processes need to overhaul the whole system, which implies a critical self-reflection – and potentially, a complete reconfiguration, an "epistemological revolution"[33] – of Western museographical practices, ideologies and categorisations.[34]

1.2. Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa

1.2.1. Origins and foundation of the Museum

For its role in king Leopold II's colonial project, the Royal Museum for Central Africa is maybe the most blatant example of a truly colonial museum. Indeed, its origins, collections, and purposes were deeply interconnected with Belgium's colonialism.

In the context of colonial expansion of European country-states and reigns during the 19th century, the king of Belgium Leopold II (1835-1909) was convinced of the need for his country to create a colonial empire, which would not only increase Belgium's political power and status in the world stage, but also have profitable economical outcomes.[35] From 1875, the sovereign set out a plan of increasing political influence in Congo and Central Africa. Such influence grew steadily, also through diplomatic means, until 1885: during the conference of the European states infamously known as the "Scramble for Africa," Congo was officially recognised as a private possession of the king with the name of "Congo Free State."[36] The king ruled over Congo as his personal domain, exploiting the inhabitants for the collecting of red rubber and chasing people out of their lands to sell them to private companies; corporal punishments included the use of the *chicotte* (a whip made of hippopotamus hide) and the severing of hands. Millions of people died as a consequence of exploitation, malnutrition and diseases.[37]

University Press, 1986), 64-94, and Arjun Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 3-63.

[33] Seiderer, *Une critique postcoloniale en acte*, 13.

[34] Barringer and Flynn, "Introduction," 4; Giblin et al., "Dismantling the Master's House," 471-473; Vawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice," 76.

[35] Martin Ewans, "Belgium and the colonial experience," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003), 167-168.

[36] See Jan-Bart Gewald, "More than Red Rubber and Figures Alone: A Critical Appraisal of the Memory of the Congo Exhibition at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006), 471-486.

[37] The merciless and violent ways in which Leopold II exploited Congo for his own personal gains have recently been growingly exposed and investigated by scholars, in particular since the publications of the book "King Leopold's ghost. A story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa" by Adam Hochschild, which has brought to the attention of the general public the horrors of Belgium's colonial past. On the ways in which Belgium has dealt with the (lack of) memory of its colonial past, see Idesbald Goddeeris, "Postcolonial Belgium. The Memory of the Congo," *Interventions* 17, no. 3 (2015), 434-451.

At its origin, the Royal Museum for Central Africa was the direct, material and ideological product of king Leopold II's colonial expansion.[38] The Museum was officially created as a propagandistic affirmation and celebration of the Belgian "colonial adventure," and as a mean to promote its success in the eyes of the government and the public.[39] Indeed, the display of treasures and riches such as ethnographic objects, wealthy materials and potential economic resources from the Congo aimed at demonstrating the profits granted by the exploitation of the colony;[40] moreover, it was intended to propagandistically prove the need for the civilising mission of Belgium in Africa, and its accomplishments.

The origins of the Museum can be traced back to the *Expositions Universelles, Internationales et Coloniales* of Antwerp (1885, 1894) and to the Colonial Section of the Brussels World Fair in Brussels-Tervuren (1897). During these Expositions, the most diverse objects from Congo were exhibited, both as proof of wealth and justification for the amount of human and economical expenditures of the colony.[41] These Expositions coincided with a moment of massive collecting of Congolese objects, which would become some years later the core of the Museum's collection.[42] During the Brussels International Exhibition, held from 10 May to 8 November 1897, the king inaugurated an exposition on the Congo in Tervuren, where he had a Colonial Palace built for the occasion. The Brussels-Tervuren Exposition was an incredible success, with one million visitors.[43] It was on this very site that in 1898 the first permanent colonial museum was inaugurated by the king. In 1904, Leopold II appointed the architect of the Petit Palais in Paris, Charles Girault, to design a new, more majestic building, which was inaugurated in 1910 and still hosts the collections nowadays (fig. 1.1).[44]

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[38] Patrick Hoenig, "Visualizing trauma: the Belgian Museum for Central Africa and its discontents," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 4 (2014), 348; For a historical account of the Belgian colonial experience see Ewans, "Belgium and the colonial experience."

[39] Debora L. Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 19, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2012) 622; Hoenig, "Visualizing trauma," 348. Notably, the parliament and the public responded sceptically to the king's manoeuvres and resolutions. Ewans, "Belgium and the colonial experience," 169.

[40] Seiderer, *Une critique postcoloniale en acte*, 125.

[41] Rahier, "The Ghost of Leopold II," 81.

[42] Maarten Couttenier, "'One speaks softly, like in a sacred place': collecting, studying and exhibiting Congolese artefacts as African art in Belgium," *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (June 2015), 23-24.

[43] *Idem*, 31. In the park of the Palace, in Tervuren, a reconstruction of a Congolese village was also set up, comprising a "human zoo" of 267 Congolese people forced to live in the village during the period of the exposition. Pascal Blanchard and Maarten Couttenier, "Les Zoos humains." *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 32, no. 1 (2017); as of October 2020, the AfricaMuseum website presented an article on the Tervuren Exposition and the brutality of the Congolese "human zoo," which appeared on the homepage of the museum. AfricaMuseum, *The human zoo of Tervuren (1897)*, 2020. https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/history_articles/the_human_zoo_of_tervuren_1897

[44] Pascal Dayez-Burgeon, "Un musée subliminal: le Musée africain de Tervuren, " *Hermés* 61 (2011), 154.

1.2.2. Calls for the decolonisation of "the last colonial museum in the world"

The Royal Museum for Central Africa remained largely unmodified for almost a century.[45] Even after the Congolese independence (1960), and through the processes of Western museums' decolonisation initiated in the 1970s, during the "new museology" period, the RMCA lagged behind in adapting to the rapid, global changes of post-colonialism. Starting from the end of the 1990s, scholars and the public opinion began to draw more attention to the controversies of the colonial past and the (forgotten) colonial memory in Belgium. Parallel to this, increasing calls for a necessary and impending reinstallation of the RMCA rose, demanding the institution to take responsibility for its role in colonialism, and critically reassess the colonial legacies in its displays. As Planche demonstrated, the colonial past was still firmly rooted in Belgium's identity, and the RMCA continued to be an undeterred stronghold of colonial narratives well into the new millennium.[46] In what had been defined as "the last colonial museum in the world,"[47] the permanent displays were outdated and uncritical; they presented an image of Africa still exoticised and fossilised, giving the impression that decolonisation had never happened.[48] The paternalistic and uncritical representation of Belgian's colonial past still praised the country's civilising mission.[49]

Around 2002, some changes seemed to be set in motion, as the Belgian government announced the beginning of a renovation process with the appointment of the new director Guido Gryseels.[50] In 2005, the director communicated the mission of transforming the museum in a "modern and dynamic museum for Africa,"[51] primarily by changing its tendencies in research and overcoming the stagnation of its exhibitions. The new institution aimed at offering a comprehensive representation of contemporary Africa, as well as

[45] Debora L. Silverman, "Diasporas of Art: History, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, and the Politics of Memory in Belgium, 1885-2014," *The Journal of Modern History* 87 (September 2015), 627.
[46] Stéphanie Planche and Véronique Bragard, "Museum practices and the Belgian colonial past: questioning the memories of an ambivalent metropole," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2009), 181-182.
[47] Bambi Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens: The Royal Museum for Central Africa as Contact-Zone," in *Advancing Museum Practices*, ed. Francesca Lanz and Elena Montanari (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C., 2014), 84.
[48] Idem, 87.
[49] Hasian Wood and Marouf Rulon, "Critical Museology, (Post)Colonial Communication, and the Gradual Mastering of Traumatic Pasts at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA)," *Western Journal of Communication* 74 no. 2 (2010), 131.
[50] Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 629; Pierre-Yves Thienpont and Dominique Legrand, "Quête d'identité Guido Gryseels, nouveau directeur du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, veut inscrire son mastodonte dans la modernité Tervuren, vitrine de l'Afrique actuelle," *Lesoir*¸ 08 April 2002. https://www.lesoir.be/art/quete-d-identite-guido-gryseels-nouveau-directeur-du-mu_t-20020408-Z0LPEF.html
[51] Guido Gryseels, Gabrielle Landry and Koeki Claessens, "Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium," *European Review* 13, no. 4 (October 2005).

providing a critical view on the colonial past.[52] The goal was one of inclusion, respect and representation of diversity, through the introduction of voices from African communities and the Belgian Congolese Diaspora.[53] As Hoenig has pointed out, the Museum needed first and foremost to convert from a colonial legacy itself to a place of discussion, a "nodal point of reflection" on the colonial past and its effects in the present.[54] The beginnings of the Museum's critical engagement with its past started in 2005, with the exhibition "Memory of the Congo: the colonial era." The exhibition, indeed, was intended to specifically and comprehensively look at and confront the colonial past. The final result, however, though a great success of visitors, was tepidly received for its revisionist and polarised approach to the narration of colonialism.[55]

1.2.3. The AfricaMuseum: a renovation, a reinstallation, or a re-conceptualisation?

The Museum closed its doors in 2013, for a grand five-years project of renovation of the building and the displays.[56] The re-conceptualisation of the institution started with the new name of the museum itself, "AfricaMuseum," which suggests a vast – if maybe too generic – approach on the representation of Africa, and tries to obliterate the direct connections to its royal (and colonial) foundation of the previous denomination.[57]

A new pavilion, which functions as entrance for the visitors, and somehow as a modern, conceptual framing of the old museum, has been added to the Leopoldian building (fig. 1.2). An introductory exhibition looks at the past of the museum and its collections, the present and the future plans. The main exhibition on the ground floor has been rearranged and is now

[52] Bodenstein and Pagani, "Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe," 44-45; Pierre Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," *African arts* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 86.
[53] Gryseels et al., "Integrating the past," 643-644.
[54] Hoenig, "Vizualising trauma," 361
[55] Planche and Bragard, "Museum practices and the Belgian colonial past," 181; Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 629-630.
[56] For a timeline of the renovation process from 2003 to 2018 see the section on renovation on the official website of the museum: Africamuseum, *The renovation of the AfricaMuseum.* https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/renovation. The most accurate term to define the processes underwent to bring about the decolonisation of the RMCA could be debated: indeed, the word "renovation" has been the one more used in the literature and in the reviews of the new museum, and the museum itself defines it so in the official website. However, this term could be misleading, as it could suggest only a remodeling or refurbishing of the building itself, and of its architectural or structural features. The term "re-installation" could better convey the idea of re-making of the display and narratives, as well as the new organisation of the exhibition galleries, highlighting as well the discontinuity with the previous displays. "Re-conceptualisation," on the other hand, suggests the idea of a more radical transformation, a re-thinking and an intellectual re-framing of the institution itself, of its goals and its nature. For the purpose of this thesis, the term "reinstallation" will be used.
[57] Interestingly, though, the museum itself keeps using this denomination, for example in some of its publications. This is the case of the "Unrivalled Art" exhibition's catalogue, the subtitle of which reads "Spellbinding artefacts at the Royal Museum for Central Africa."

divided in five main themes: Languages and music, Landscapes and Biodiversity, The resource Paradox, Colonial History and Independence, and Rituals and Ceremonies. The exhibition *Unrivalled art*, which presents highlights from the museum's collection of "art masterpieces," is hosted in a specific section for semi-permanent exhibitions. The website of the museum has a dedicated page for the "Renovation process": [58] it recounts the main issues that have been faced, in particular the challenge to "present a contemporary and decolonised vision of Africa in a building which had been designed as a colonial museum."[59] "Before the renovation," it states, "the permanent exhibition was outdated and its presentation not very critical of the colonial image."[60] The priority of the museum was to offer a contemporary and decolonised vision of Africa, as well as re-conceptualising the institution as a forum for debate. It has been fervently discussed whether or not the reinstalled museum is still reminiscent of, or even inevitably imbued in the very colonial frameworks and ideologies that created it; if it is possible to effectively break away from these colonial roots; even, if it desirable to do so at all. Petit, for instance, maintains that for as much as the museum tries to represent contemporary Africa, it is still an institution mainly on Congo, situated in a colonial building, showcasing collections formed primarily during colonialism. In this sense, to really attain decolonisation, it should focus more on the relations between Belgium and Congo and colonial representation, keeping the old display while contextualising and criticising it.[61]

The uneven outcomes of the museum's decolonisation are still being evaluated and criticised by scholars all around the world. To assess in detail the failures and successes of the reinstallation eludes the purpose and the scope of this thesis; nonetheless, it is useful to provide a summary of the main achievements and downfalls as they've been analysed by the literature after the reopening. The reviews have been largely critic, and have highlighted many of the pitfalls of the decolonisation process. Van Beurden and Petit have stressed the inescapability of the colonial past of the museum, as the institution is inherently a colonial building, which is communicated by the architecture and the colonial statues.[62] However, Van Beurden has praised the addition of the introductory exhibition, which clarifies the history of the museum and its collections, as well as the reframing of the exhibition display, no longer organised in an evolutionary pathway.[63] Among the positive elements can be signalled the

[58] Africamuseum, *The renovation of the AfricaMuseum.*
[59] *Ibidem*.
[60] *Ibidem*.
[61] Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," 87-88.
[62] It is worth noting how the building and the statues are protected by the Belgian law on cultural heritage, so they couldn't be modified or removed. Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," 87; Van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium," 1806.
[63] Van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1808-1809.

new interactive digital screens and the presence of videos of contemporary people from Congo or the Diaspora.[64] This, together with the introduction of art by contemporary African artists, offers diverse perspectives on Congo and Africa, and promotes the ongoing dialogue with the living communities.[65] The actual decolonising impact of the presence of contemporary art, nevertheless, has been doubted by some scholars, as it has been judged a weak attempt to deal with the structural colonialism of the building and the museum as an institution.[66] In general, the critique on the failures of the museum in dealing with colonialism has been overwhelming. The approach to the colonial past has largely been deemed too neutral and not consistent enough.[67] Moreover, the museum has failed in engaging self-critically with its role in colonialism, and in the shaping of colonial structures of knowledge and display: the museum is still relying on Western epistemological, cultural and political frameworks which taint the realisation of a true decolonisation.[68] In this sense, scholars have also criticised the lack of transparency and communication, in the display, on the contested provenance of some objects in the collection, as well as on the debates on repatriation.[69] Finally, the lack of a master narrative and of unity in the museum's message as a whole doesn't give a clear picture on its mission, resulting in a missed opportunity for taking a stronger stance in the decolonising process.[70]

[64] Miller, "'Everything passes, except the past'," n.p.; Mertens, "Africa in motion: bringing heritage to life?" 83; Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," 86.
[65] Miller, "Everything passes, except the past" n.p.; Conru, "A re-display, a re-launch, or a re-birth? What the RMCA has achieved," 91; Elaine Sullivan, "Contemporary art in and out of the museum," *African arts 53, no. 2* (Summer 2020), 80-83.
[66] Van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1807 Forsdick, Charles. "Coming to terms with the colonial past? A visit to Tervuren." *University of Liverpool, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures* (blog), 11 March 2019. https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-cultures/blog/2019/colonialism-belgium/?fbclid=IwAR28DMODOL34vCwzpFduiKXL8Jf3nvwVcsYUGwO4qjd7ORFV_SMet7cLFCM;
Gillian Mathys, Margot Luyckfasseel, Sarah Van Beurden, Tracy Tansia, "Renovating the AfricaMuseum," Africaisacountry, 29 April 2019. https://africasacountry.com/2019/04/renovating-the-africamuseum?fbclid=IwAR1Kcx0LK1rC-DQlNununeXvz9NF8wGKRKErvY_d2LsuiWhGtGPDDg2T5dQ
[67] Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1805; Mathys et al., "Renovating the AfricaMuseum"; Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"? 18; Van Beurden, "Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1809; Forsdick, *Coming to terms with the colonial past?*; Sarah Arens, "Memory in Crisis: Commemoration, Visual Cultures and (Mis)representation in Postcolonial Belgium," *Modern Languages Open* 1, no. 32 (2020), 4; Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," 86.
[68] Hassett, "Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"? 1, 17; Miller, "Everything passes, except the past," n.p.; Matthew G. Stanard, "Decongolising Europe? African art and post-colony Belgium," In *Decolonising Europe?: Popular Responses to the End of Empire*, ed. Matthew G. Stanard and Berny Sèbe, (New York: Routledge, 2020), Chapter 12; Arens, "Memory in Crisis: Commemoration, Visual Cultures," 4.
[69] Mathys et al., "Renovating the AfricaMuseum."
[70] Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1082; Petit, "Of colonial propaganda and Belgian intimacy," 86.

2. From artefact to art. Changing paradigms in the display of African objects

2.1. The display of African objects between ethnography and aesthetic appreciation

The ethnographic and art paradigms are two of the display paradigms that have retained the most authority in the history of museographical representation of African objects in the West:[71] since the beginning of 1900, African objects collected by museums have been mainly categorised either as artefacts or artworks, and displayed accordingly.[72] Certainly, these two display typologies do not involve merely display techniques and arrangements of objects; they reflect and implement epistemological frameworks and systems of values that determine the conceptual interpretation of the objects.[73] Reflecting on the premises and the agendas behind these display paradigms is essential to understand current museological politics of representation of Africa and their potential futures.

The ethnographic paradigm of display was institutionalised in ethnographic museums from the end of the 19th century, to display non-Western cultures.[74] Within this paradigm, objects are perceived and presented as artefacts, understood mainly for their utilitarian purposes; the focus is placed on their functions and role in the originating culture.[75] Artefacts are generally grouped densely together and accompanied by relatively extensive contextual texts on their functions, their culture of origin, indigenous meanings and values. The criteria of the classification and arrangement of objects are mostly typological, functional or based on the geographical or cultural provenance. These groupings stand as a "metonym of a culture": objects are made to represent an entire culture, a ritual, or an institutional context, metaphorically re-constructing it in the controlled environment of the museum.[76] Until some

[71] The considerations that follow are general assessments of the main characteristics and agendas of the ethnographic and artistic display paradigms, as they've been described and criticised by the literature. By no means it is assumed nor implied that every ethnographic museum's display strictly abides to one of these two paradigms. Moreover, it is worth noting that the representation of "Africa" at large in museums includes more aspects than the specific issue of display of objects that might or not be perceived and represented as art; this is only a specific part of said representation.

[72] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 222.

[73] See Susan M. Vogel, "Introduction" in Arthur C. Danto, *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988), 11-17.

[74] Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities," 61; Shelton, "Museums and anthropologies" 65. Of course, ethnographic objects were also found in other institutions such as encyclopedic, natural history, colonial and missionary museums.

[75] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 12; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81; Sónia Silva, "Art and fetish in the anthropology museum," *Material Religion* 13, no. 1 (2017), 83.

[76] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 220, 227; See also Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78; Silva, "Art and fetish," 83.

decades ago, displays would be accompanied by dioramas, mannequins, reconstructions of the contexts of use, photographs or drawings.[77]

The art paradigm of display, on the other hand, interprets and presents African objects as singularised art pieces, and even now it still reflects its connections to Modernism and Formalism. In this framework, the aesthetic appreciation of the object is privileged, thus its immanent formal and visual values are the focus.[78] Objects are usually isolated and given enough space to be seen individually, carefully lit and placed on a neutral background; they are positioned in glass vitrines or pedestals, and can often be seen all-round. The ethnographic information is usually reduced to the minimum. The objects are presented and conceptualised as unique, irreplaceable and exceptional masterpieces.[79] The isolating display, and the reduced information on utilitarian aspects, further the idea of *art-pour-l'art*, encouraging the viewer's aesthetic experience of plastic and visual qualities. The underpinning theory is that the object can sustain itself, independently of contextualising explanations, through its visual characteristics.[80]

The debate over these paradigms is still attracting much scholarly attention. In fact, though these display paradigms have transformed in recent years, with museums implementing new narratives, and even if their boundaries have blurred and started to overlap – or as a consequence of this – the art/artefact dichotomy is still being discussed, as it still retains much of its influence.[81] Traces of this influence can be found both in the current displays of African objects in museums and in the discourses on museological representation of Africa (and its impact in the popular imagination). Undeniably, when dealing with how to represent African objects, curators and museums are still facing many controversies regarding the inclusion and representation of their context, their histories and biographies, their

[77] In the most recent re-installations of ethnographic collections, dioramas, mannequins and reconstructions have disappeared, while photographs appear now more frequently, mostly on digital screens, accompanied by a growing presence of videos.

[78] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 12; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81.

[79] Donald Preziosi, "Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible," in Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 53.

[80] Thomas McEvilley, ""Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984) n.p.; Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow," *African Arts* 25, no. 2 (April 1992), 47; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and Museums. Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization,"*Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 4 (1997), 126; Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81; Staffan Lundén, *Displaying Loot: The Benin Objects and the British Museum,* (Gothenburg: Reprocentralen, Humanities Faculty, Gothenburg University, 2016), 63.

[81] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 222; Ruth B. Phillips, "Review: Where Is "Africa"? Re-Viewing Art and Artifact in the Age of Globalization," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002) 951; Anthony Shelton, "Curating African Worlds," in Museums and Source Communities, ed. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 187; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 98.

receptions, and which perspectives and voices to privilege.[82] Decisions on how to portray and display an African object or collection in a post-colonial society are culturally charged, as exhibitions' narratives convey different messages on how we understand and portray African cultures and peoples at large.[83] Representations of Africa in museums have to deal with the continuous legacies of how past museum practices and display paradigms have shaped the Western idea of Africa in the present. Therefore, as the influence of the art and ethnography paradigms persists, their problematic aspects need to be highlighted, in order to deconstruct their system of appropriation and misrepresentation of Africa. Indeed, both are deeply Western constructions, fictive intellectual frameworks that, although in different ways, de-contextualise the objects in exhibition displays by overwriting indigenous systems with Western values.[84]

2.1.1. The ethnographic paradigm and the persistence of colonial frameworks

Post-colonial museological analysis have heavily criticised the ethnographic paradigm of display of African objects. Indeed, even though not all ethnographic museums were founded in the context of colonisation processes, nor necessarily promoted colonial propaganda, nevertheless the ethnographic museographical framework has now been almost irreversibly associated to colonial practices and ideologies.[85] In Europe, during the 19th century, objects perceived to be part of Western culture and history were usually displayed in archaeological, history or art museums, while objects of non-Western cultures were confined to ethnographic museums, which were specifically dedicated to the showcase of these cultures. Ethnographic museums thus proposed a constructed opposition between the civilised West and the exotic "Others."[86] In the framework of colonialism, ethnographic museums' representations of non-Western cultures and objects – subjected to the unidirectional Western gaze – reflected and represented power relations, colonial ideologies and assumptions on non-Western cultures

[82] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 229; Arthur C. Danto, "Art/Artifact," *The Nation* (March 5, 1988), 314-317; Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, "Objects and agendas: re-collecting the Congo," in *The* scramble *for art in Central Africa*, ed. Curtis A. Keim and Enid Schildkrout, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

[83] Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78; Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 34; Françoise Lionnet, "The Mirror and the Tomb: Africa, Museums, and Memory," *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), 51; Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 10; Vanhee, "On shared heritage and its false promises," 7.

[84] Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78; Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," 42; Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 11; Shelton, "Curating African Worlds," 187; Schildkrout and Keim, "Objects and agendas: re-collecting the Congo," 1-3.

[85] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 228; Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 10; Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens," 87.

[86] Sauvage, "To be or not to be colonial. Museums facing their exhibitions," 100.

and of Western superiority.[87] In particular, many elements of ethnographic displays concurred in creating and institutionalising the long-lasting idea of a perennial, primitive "uncivilised" status and immutability of African societies and cultural practices:[88] among these, the use of the ethnographic present in explanatory texts and labels; the presence of reconstructed "primitive" villages, where no sign of modern ways of living was included; life groups statues showing "savage" indigenous people intent in allegedly "barbaric," pre-civilisation activities like hunting or crafting rudimental artefacts.[89] In this sense, African cultures were framed within narratives based on racist and evolutionary paradigms:[90] portrayed as "primitive" people, they represented the living embodiment of an earlier stage of human evolution, while Europe, the civilised world, was at the top of this evolutionary scale.[91] The evolutionary blueprint often informed the arrangement of ethnographic artefacts: for instance, the typological, developmental sequences of objects were meant to illustrate the evolution of human productions (and as a consequence, of peoples) towards greater complexity;[92] materials from the colonies were displayed together with casts of faces or skulls of the natives, to demonstrate the connection between "races" and their place in evolution.[93] Moreover, critics have highlighted how ethnographic displays held a considerable role in the exoticising processes of African cultures: the a-historical focus on the authenticity of "pure" African cultures and their traditional practices, depicted in their almost secluded context and threatened by the intrusion of modernity, painted an enduring image of detachment of African cultures from the modern Western world. This fed an ill-placed nostalgia for an imagined, exotic *paradis perdu* of pre-colonialism.[94]

Lately, however, it appears that the ethnographic paradigm of display in its more traditional forms has been deemed highly problematic and patronising, and has been transforming significantly, at least in major museums. In recent years, a steady, if equally

[87] Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 5.
[88] James Clifford, "Introduction: The Pure Products Go Crazy," In *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard : Harvard University Press, 1988) 12; Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and Museums," 126; see also Rahier, "The Ghost of Leopold II," 67.
[89] On dioramas and life group sculptures and their use in museums see: Arnoldi, "From the diorama to the dialogic," 137-156.
[90] Clifford, "On collecting art and cultures," 228; Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 3 (August 1993), 341; Coombes, "Museums and the Formation of National and Cultural Identities," 60; Alexandra Sauvage, "To be or not to be colonial: Museums facing their exhibitions," C*ulturales* 6, no. 12 (July-December 2010), 106; Lundén, *Displaying Loot,* 81;
[91] Clifford, "Introduction: The pure products go crazy," 16; Phillips, "Review: Where Is "Africa"?," 944; Sauvage, "To be or not to be colonial. Museums facing their exhibitions," 106.
[92] Coombes, "Museums and the formation of national and cultural identities," 62-63.
[93] Idem, 61-62.
[94] Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78; Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 231; Clifford, "Introduction: The pure products go crazy," 16; Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens," 87-88; Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," 43.

contested, shift towards more aesthetic – modern(ist) – display arrangements of ethnographic collections seems to have taken place.[95] In the British Museum, for example, the curators of the new Sainsbury Galleries of Africa, opened in 2001 (after the closing of the old-fashioned ethnographic Museum of Mankind), opted purposefully for a "highly aesthetic [installation] – white walls, open displays, enormous but very light cases […] Benin plaques floating on slim poles."[96] This practice, however, has also been heavily disputed. This is the case, for example, of the Musée du Quai *Branly* in Paris, which has been criticised for its presentation of African, Asian and Oceanic objects as "aestheticised commodities."[97]

2.2. Displaying African objects as "art": the controversies of the aesthetic paradigm

2.2.1. The "discovery of African art" and the persistence of the "modernist myth"

The display of African objects as artworks in museums has been at the centre of innumerable scholarly debates, both regarding the origin of this practice and its controversies. Indeed, the representation of African material culture as "art" was – and still is – part of a historical process of construction and reinvention of Africa in Europe; arguably, this process relates more to the evolution of Western receptions and uses of African objects in European artistic and scientific milieus, than with Africa itself.[98]

It is now widely accepted that the beginning of the 20th century saw the "discovery of African art" by the agency of some modernist artists such as Matisse, Vlaminck and Picasso among others.[99] According to this "modernist myth,"[100] these artists would have been the first in Europe to recognise the aesthetic qualities of these works, which in turn would have had a fundamental role in the renovation of contemporary sculpture and painting.[101] This assumption is only partially valid, inasmuch favourable opinions on the aesthetic value of

[95] Shelton, "Museums and anthropologies," 74.
[96] Christopher Spring, Nigel Barley, Julie Hudson, "The Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum," *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2010), 37.
[97] Dana Strand, "Aesthetics, Ethnography, and Exhibition at the Quai Branly," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 67, no. 1 (2013), 42.
[98] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 13; Vogel, "Introduction," 11-17.
[99] Jean-Louis Paudrat, "L'Africa," in *Primitivismo nell'arte del XX secolo. Affinità fra il Tribale e il Moderno.* Vol I, ed. William Rubin (Verona: Mondadori, 1985), 125; Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 198, 229; Sarah Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art and the Promotion of Belgian Colonialism (1945–1959)," *History and Anthropology 24, no.4* (2013), 474; Silva, "Art and fetish," 78.
[100] McEvilley, ""Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," 54; Wilfried Van Damme, "Not What You Expect: The Nineteenth-Century European Reception of Australian Aboriginal Art," *Journal of Art History* 81, no. 3 (2012), 135.
[101] William Rubin, "Primitivismo modernista. Un'introduzione," in Rubin, *Primitivismo nell'arte del XX secolo,* 6-7; Silva, "Art and fetish," 78; Clarke, together with Couttenier and Van Damme, is critical on this point. Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Van Damme "Not What You Expect," 133-135; Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 1-3.

African objects can already be traced back to the end of the 19th century, both within accounts of explorers in Africa and in art historical literature.[102] However, the influential impact that the modernist perspective had on the construction of "African art" is undeniable, and it continues to inform our understanding of these objects. The modernist artists and theorists carried out a formalist reinterpretation of African works, according to their aesthetic values: focusing on their plastic and formal qualities (while completely disregarding their originating context) they started to collect some pieces as sculptures and to display them as art.[103] Interestingly, this process reads as a conceptual appropriation: African objects were included in the realm of art, but only because they demonstrated an alleged affinity of spirit with modernist artists, and displayed an artistic sensitivity which resonated with the European *avant-garde* researches.[104] Artists studied and were inspired by their plastic values, privileging in particular figurative sculpture; they praised their instinctive creativity, the complete plastic freedom, the so-called "primitive" forms and artistic ingenuity. What is more, objects were analysed, studied and re-interpreted in a modernist framework also in art historical studies, as can be seen in the influential *Primitive Negro Sculpture* by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro (1926). Works like this one focused largely on wooden sculpture, formal qualities and stylistic analysis, privileging pieces that reflected the modernist aesthetic researches and displayed so-called "primitive" visual forms.[105] The persistence of this myth well into the recent decades can be seen in the influential exhibition *Modernist Primitivism* at the Museum of Modern Art of New York (1984-85) curated by William Rubin, which in turn fuelled anew this narrative. The enduring legacies of Modernism can still be traced in the contemporary ways in which we showcase African "art."

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[102] John Mack, "Kuba art and the birth of ethnography," in Schildkrout, *The scamble for art in Central Africa*, 64. For example, Gobineau, though denying the idea of an African civilisation, recognised the aesthetic value of African artefacts. Similarly, explorers in Congo in 1870 were already pointing out the merits of African art, culture and industry; see Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 5, 10-13. Famously, the appearance of Benin objects in Europe prompted reflections on the production and presence of art in Africa, due to the undeniable beauty and refinement of the "Benin bronzes." The "discovery" of Benin art allegedly made Europeans change their mind on the perceived "barbarism" and "savagery" of Africa. See Chika Joseph Ananwa, "Internationalisation of Benin Art Works," *Journal of Humanity Print* 2, no. 1 (2014); Paudrat, "L'Africa," 133.

[103] Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita, "African Art: The Concept in European Literature," *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 2, special issue on *African Cultural Dimensions* (1977), 196; Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Christa Clarke, "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture and the Aesthetic Philosophy of Albert Barnes," *African Arts* 36, No. 1, *Memorial to Roy Sieber, Part 1* (Spring 2003), 40; Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture," 474.

[104] Clarke, "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture," 46. The idea of "affinity" was strongly emphasised in the MoMA exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held in 1984-85, curated by William Rubin. See the introduction to the exhibition catalogue: Rubin, "Primitivismo modernista. Un'introduzione," 1-84.

[105] Certainly, the selections of some pieces as "artworks" and the stylistic analysis made in these decades by art historians greatly influenced the conceptual construction of "traditional African art," and laid the foundations for the subsequent art historical interpretations of African art.

2.2.2. On the art paradigm as a conceptual appropriation of African objects

The museographical art paradigm of representation of African objects has been fervently criticised for its Eurocentric bias. In particular, its close connection to Modernism and Primitivism has been deemed problematic: indeed, this persistent correlation ties the appreciation of African art objects to their subordinate role in the development of European *avant-gardes,* and imprints on them the enduring notion of "primitive art."[106]

The construction, reception and display of African objects as "art" in Europe has often been described as a process of appropriation.[107] According to this view, defining and displaying African objects in terms of "artworks" is a forceful imposition of Western categories and descriptive classifications, a re-conceptualisation of non-Western material culture within the Eurocentric idea of "art" itself.[108] As Farr maintains, this re-conceptualisation operates a misinterpretation of the objects, which has the final outcome of legitimising them as art in the Western eyes, more than giving justice to the original intentions of African creators.[109] In this sense, the epistemological framework of art digests African objects, transforming them into something new: reconstructed as art, they are not only physically removed from their context (which happens for virtually every object in a museum) but also conceptually, as in the art museum their visual and aesthetic agency is privileged over their other meanings and functions. [110] According to this view, the de-contextualisation and subsequent re-contextualization in displays as art masterpieces would betray the objects' nature, inasmuch these works were not produced to be shown in museums for a primarily aesthetic appreciation.[111] Objects would thus be detached from their history and rendered symbolically

[106] Phillips, "Review: Where Is "Africa"?" 945.

[107] See James Clifford, ''Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,'' in *The Predicament of Culture*, 189-214; Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 78-84; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81; Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 1; Elizabeth Burns Coleman, "Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept," *The journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics* 15, no. 1 (2005), 58.

[108] McEvilley, ""Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," n.p.; Danto, "Art/Artifact," 315; Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78; Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," 40; Schildkrout and Keim, "Objects and agendas," 2-3; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 81; Shelton, "Curating African Worlds," 188; Coleman, "Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept," 58. Indeed, the problem arises as "art" as a concept is not neutral. Even though nowadays concepts and theories like "global art," "universal art," and "world art" have been gaining more and more favour in the field of art history and aesthetics, nevertheless it can't be overlooked the fact that the modern concept of art is historical and relative, and a relatively recent one as it is. Even in the Western world, the word "art" has not always held the same meaning. The modern concept of art is a deeply Western one, tied to Romanticism and European philosophies of aesthetics, specifically that of Kant.

[109] Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 79.

[110] The process of inclusion – or absorption – of African objects in the category of art digested the objects also physically: they were transformed, cut, cleaned, painted, or stripped of elements deemed superfluous. Schildkrout and Keim, "Objects and agendas," 3.

[111] Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'oeuvre. Le Musée royal de l'Afrique à Tervuren," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 39, no. 155-156 (1999), 613; Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 79 ; Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Ananwa, "Internationalization of Benin

meaningless to their originating communities.[112] With regards to the objects in the RMCA, for example, some elders of the Congolese community argue that these are not art pieces, thus they should not be displayed at all, but kept in their local contexts.[113] To quote here the much-cited film by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, on the Western reception of African art, *Les statues meurent aussi* (1952–53): "when statues die, they enter into art [...] at the same time it receives this title of glory, black art becomes a dead language."[114]

2.2.2.1. Some thoughts on the assumption that African cultures do not have a concept of art, and its implications

For many scholars and anthropologists, the strongest arguments against the art paradigm of display are based on the fundamental assumption that African cultures do not have "art" as it is intended in the West, and that the idea of art itself does not exist in Africa.[115] This theory is primarily based on the empirical notion that African languages do not have words that convey the exact same meaning as the Western concept of "art."[116] Parallel to this is the idea that aesthetic appreciation of the object *per se* is also an alien concept to African cultures.[117] Some anthropological theories propose that "art" and "aesthetics" are modern Western concepts, that have no equivalent in other cultures. Kasfir, for example, maintains that these objects were not considered art by their creators and users.[118] If this would be the case, then certainly to interpret these objects as artworks, and displaying them as such in art museums, would be a wrongful imposition, a re-invention and appropriation of these artefacts according to Western representational values and needs.

This argument is extremely complex, as it has many implications, and can be unfolded on many levels. Firstly, to say that one culture does not have art, nor a concept of it, depends

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Art Works," 43. On this idea see also McEvilley, ""Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," 54-61, and Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity,"40-53.

[112] Clifford, "Introduction: The Pure Products Go Crazy," 22; Clarke, "From theory to practice," 176; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 88; Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture," 486;

[113] Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens," 94. A counter-argument to this statement is that Medieval religious art, similarly, was not primarily created as "art" as we intend it now, thus should have no place in museums. Nonetheless, the debate on the legitimacy of the concept of "African art" is more complex, as contemporary Westerners arguably have no direct controversial and contested relationship of colonialism, exploitation and power dynamics with the European Medieval past, as they do with African countries.

[114] Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, *Les statues meurent aussi* (France, 1952–53) 30 min. Available at https://shadesofnoir.org.uk/les-statues-meurent-aussi-statues-also-die%EF%BB%BF/

[115] Harry Silver, "Ethnoart," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8, (1979), 285; Evelyn Payne Hatcher, *Art as Culture: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Art* (Lanham, New York: London, 1985), 8-9; McEvilley, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," n.p.; see also Vogel, "Baule: African Art Western Eyes," 64.

[116] For a criticism of this theories see Wilfried van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art? An Epistemological Prolegomenon to the Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art," in *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics*, ed. Eugenio Benitez, (Sidney: University of Sydney, 1997), 98.

[117] Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Ananwa, "Internationalization of Benin Art Works," 43.

[118] Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," 42, 47.

greatly on the definition that we ourselves give of art, which, as centuries of philosophical and aesthetics debate demonstrate, is not a permanent nor universal.[119] Additionally, considering that much of the information we possess on African concepts of art and aesthetics derives from anthropological fieldwork, we must be aware of the individual bias of the person collecting this information, who might have a specific, culturally charged definition of art that influences their interpretation of local concepts.[120] Furthermore, while the sentiment behind the caution in defining African material culture as "art" for fear of cultural appropriation is commendable, the risk is indeed to unwittingly further racist and evolutionary ideologies.[121] Certainly, such statements can easily be read as the expression of an outdated, patronising and condescending attitude of the alleged "superior" Westerners towards non-Western cultures.[122] Indeed, the belief that Africans were passive races without culture, creativity nor refined sensitivity, thus incapable of expressive genius and of producing art, was a common 18th-19th century racist assumption, still maintained during the 20th century, which produced incredibly distorted narratives on African cultures.[123] One of the most famous examples of this is probably Leo Frobenius' interpretation of the Nigerian Ife heads in 1912: convinced that the beauty, refinement and naturalistic proportions of these pieces could never have been produced by an African race, Frobenius went as far as postulating the presence of a noble – "unnegro"[124] – Mediterranean lost culture (possibly, Plato's Atlantis) responsible for this art.[125]

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[119] I am aware that the in-depth analysis of this issue would profit from a reflection on the concepts of art and aesthetics, the philosophical debates behind their meanings and use, the historical and cultural processes that resulted in the constructions of these concepts in the West, and their changes over time. However, the philosophical complexity of the question, and the extensive literature on the subject elude the scope of this study.

[120] Van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art?" 101.

[121] Coleman, "Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept," 58; Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 4; Lundén, *Displaying Loot.*, 49. McEvilley, in criticising the modernist framework, stresses vehemently the lack of "feelings [...] of aesthetic ennoblement" directed at the objects in the original African context; he highlights instead how these objects where connected with rituals, danger, blood, shamanism and rawness. This view excludes completely the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation and concurrently frames African artefacts within an idea of savagery and primitive danger. See McEvilley, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," n. p.

[122] Van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art?" 98.

[123] Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 42-43. Already in the 18th century philosophers such as Hume and Kant were advocating the superiority of the "white race." In 1753, Hume wrote in *Of National characters* that the "Negroes [are] [...] naturally inferior to the West"; he went on by stating that there were "no ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences." Kant, on the same note, wrote in *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1724) that black cultures "have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling." Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 42-43. Again, Sepulveda argued that Africans lacked manufactures, arts and sciences, and this was an evidence of their inferiority. Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 49. In the same way, Toynbee was writing in 1935: "the black races alone have not contributed positively to any civilization yet." Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1935), 54; see also Odita, "African Art: The Concept in European Literature," 191.

[124] Leo Frobenius, *Und Afrika Sprach 1. Aus den Trümmern des Klassischen Atlantis* (Berlin: Vita. Deutsches Verlagshaus, 1912), as cited in Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 219.

[125] William Petrie was also convinced of the impossibility of an indigenous production of the Ife heads, and attributed them to a Perso-Greek civilization. William Flinders Petrie, "The Voice of Africa by Leo Frobenius."

Moreover, thanks to recent studies, it is becoming more and more apparent that, for as much as concepts like beauty, art and aesthetic experiences are studied in the West as if they were intrinsically Western concepts, this assumption is false.[126] In fact, while the concepts of *art-pour-l'art* and of disinterested aesthetic appreciation may be specifically Western concepts, an idea of art as a combination of beauty, skill and meaning is not absent in non-Western countries and cultures.[127] African cultures, in truth, do have words for beauty and ugliness and do experience and assess their material culture in terms of aesthetic appreciation;[128] in fact, this aesthetic evaluation can be related both to the material and spiritual function of the object and to decorative purposes. In particular, aesthetic is deeply connected to ethics, both on an individual and social level.[129] Aesthetics and function are not disconnected nor mutually exclusive: in many African cultures such as the Lega, the Fang, the Chokwe and the Baule, aesthetic and visual qualities are crucial to the very social, moral, religious or spiritual functioning of the objects.[130] Just as in Europe, beauty and ugliness – both in people and in objects, on an individual and a social level – are conceptualised in Africa, according to an emic system of aesthetic and moral values that functions in its own socio-cultural context and respond to its specific needs.

2.2.2.2. Defining appropriation. African objects and the Eurocentric art-historical canon

As it is clear from these considerations, the crucial aspect in understanding any indigenous African aesthetic system is the need for contextualisation in its own socio-cultural background;[131] therefore, this emic perspective should be represented and communicated accordingly in museums. To go back to the issue of appropriation, it follows, then, that the

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Ancient Egypt 2 (1914), 84-86; see also Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 217-219. Similarly, for its great craftsmanship and beauty Benin art was believed to be the effect of European influence. C. H. Read, O. M. Dalton. "Works of Art from Benin City." *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 27 (1898), 371; Ling, Roth H, "Antiquities from Benin." *Nature* 60, no. 1549 (6 July 1899), 219; Annie E. Coombes, "Popular Culture, and Institutional Power: Narratives of Benin Culture in the British Museum, 1897–1992." *Studies in the History of Art 47, Symposium Papers XXVII: The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology* (1996), 145; Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, "Art and/or Ethnographica? The reception of Benin works from 1897-1935." *African Arts* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 24.

[126] Van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art?" 97.

[127] *Idem*, 98.

[128] On African words for "art," concepts of beauty, ugliness, and aesthetic experiences in Africa see Van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art?," 97-115.

[129] Wilfried Van Damme, *Beauty and ugliness in African art and thought* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2020), 26-28, 32.

[130] Van Damme, *Beauty and ugliness in African art and thought*, 10-12; Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-23.

[131] Vogel, "Baule: African Art Western Eyes," 64-65; Van Damme, "Do Non-Western Cultures have words for art?" 104; David Novitz, "Art by another name: the identification of art across cultures," in Benitez, *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim*, 74.

main controversy of the art paradigm lies in the practical ways in which, by assimilating African objects in the epistemological and museographical idea of "art," this paradigm projects Eurocentric values, concepts and definitions onto them.[132] In particular, the same concept of "traditional African art" is a fictive construction that developed according to Western art historical categories and museum practices.[133] From the beginnings of the display of "African art" in the 20th century, the selection of the objects was based on Eurocentric criteria, privileging what was more familiar and what could easily fit into the traditional category and ideals of Western high art, as well as what was more visually powerful.[134] Thus the artefacts that were preferred were particularly anthropomorphic pieces, and those with specific sculptural qualities. Statues, statuettes, masks, "fetishes," figurative objects (anthropomorphic and anthropo-zoomorphic), were deemed the most important expressions of African "fine" art.[135] This fictive construction, based primarily on aesthetic premises, had a huge impact on how we now understand African art and how we display it, and still retains much of its force today. Indeed, this categorisation imposed the idea of "high" art on some specific categories of African cultural and material productions, and created a canon that identifies sculptures and masks – indeed, figurative and sculptural – as the epitome of African art.[136] As a result, these types of objects were identified as "art masterpieces" and singularised as such in art museums, while other typologies of non-figurative objects were deemed as artefacts or "applied art."

Moreover, to determine the cultural value of the objects, Eurocentric criteria drawn from the art historical discipline (as traditionally defined by Western studies), were and are used.[137] Among these, we can point out antiquity, according to which the objects are deemed more or less valuable, precious and remarkable; another feature, typical of Western art historical analysis and evaluation, is that of authenticity: the authentic African artwork is "purely" African, made by Africans for Africans, and one which shows no influence of European contacts; not only this idea introduces a hierarchy of values that was not deemed relevant in the original culture, but it also creates a fictitious opposition between an

[132] Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, 1-5.
[133] For a critique on some of the assumptions connected to the idea of "traditional African art" see Isidore Okpewho, "Principles of Traditional African Art." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1977), 301-313.
[134] Pieterse in particular talks about an "assimilating process." See Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and Museums," 124. Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167. On the idea of the visually powerful, see Silva, "Art and fetish," 90.
[135] Clarke, "From theory to practice," 167; Clarke. "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture," 47. See also Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience*, 9-10.
[136] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 11; Coleman, "Aesthetics as a Cross Cultural Concept," 60.
[137] Clarke "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture," 46-47; Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture," 486; Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, 3-4.

"authentic," "pure" Africa, lost in "untouched" past prior to colonisation, and a "degenerated" present where artistic production has been tainted and ruined by the European influence.[138] Additionally objects are valued for their iconicity: the connotation of masterpiece singularises the object both out of time and context, in order to highlight the uniqueness and singularity of the object.[139] It is a specifically Western art historical preoccupation and assumption that to be a great masterpiece, an artwork should be unique and original; stand out for its inventiveness, creativity and in general, artistic greatness.

2.2.3. "African art" and the contemporary politics of representation

Some scholars have also pointed out the positive aspects of the art paradigm of display. Silverman maintains that the art paradigm purposefully distances the representation of Africa from the way in which it was exhibited in ethnographic displays, where the objects were "amassed and assembled" after having been "extracted" from their context.[140] Moreover, the inclusion in the realm of art history challenges the racist assumptions that Africans cannot produce art nor possess creativity.[141] In this sense, Phillips concedes that the art display allows visitors to appreciate the works in their visual and aesthetic qualities, and most importantly, it honours and celebrates the creativity of African artists.[142] Concurrently, if we accept that aesthetic appreciation is a cross-cultural category, and that Africans do entertain ideas of art and beauty, and a system of aesthetic values, aesthetic appreciation can be seen as not completely incompatible with the nature of these objects, and would not constitute a complete appropriation.[143] Clifford and Phillips have also pointed out how the category of art promotes equality of Africa to the West, as African objects obtained a virtual citizenship to be displayed in art museum just as classic Western masterpieces.[144]

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[138] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 221, 247; Clifford, "Introduction: The Pure Products Go Crazy," 4, 12; Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," 40; Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and Museums," 124.

[139] Clifford, "On collecting art and culture," 227; Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 13; Coleman, "Aesthetics as a Cross-Cultural Concept," 58; Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 656; Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 204-219. To these values, Errington adds as well portability and sculptural qualities.

[140] Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 656.

[141] Howard Morphy, "Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category," in *Key Debates in Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (London and New York: Routledge), 255-260; Coleman, "Becoming Art," 58; Silva, "Art and fetish," 80, 85. However, it is worth reminding that the fact that Africans have concepts of beauty and aesthetic does not constitute in itself a justification or legitimisation to display African objects as "art" in Western museums.

[142] Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 98; Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 16. As Torgovnick points out, it can also have the function of better educating the public. Marianna Torgovnick, "Making Primitive Art High Art," *Poetics Today* 10, no. 2 (1989), 304.

[143] Coleman, "Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories," 51.

[144] Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 98.Van Beurden does counteract this, though, by highlighting the paternalistic aspect of this argument, as if the extension of this equality was not much the outcome of a natural reflection but more a concession of Western benevolence. Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 486.

Another point is worth reflecting on, which is maybe the more important in light of the globalisation of art history and the notion of universal heritage. In recent years, the concepts of cultural heritage and art have started to be appropriated by African people themselves, both in the discourse over restitution and in museum practices. Indeed, the conceptual opposition of art and artefact, as well as art paradigms of display, have been expanded to and adopted by museums all over the world, by cultures that didn't originally contemplate this distinction.[145] Even more importantly, Africans of the new generations are claiming the importance of exhibiting their countries' long history and heritage, and are proud of the recognition of the beauty, refinement and civilisation attached to the display of their material cultures in art museums.[146] The concepts of heritage and art have also been re-claimed in the context of repatriation: recent calls for restitution of objects have not only focused on the need to restore them to their former contexts, but have increasingly been based on their importance as cultural heritage and art of African people, that need to be displayed in African museums.[147]

2.3. From "curiosity" to "art": African objects in Belgium from Colonial Expositions to the Royal Museum for Central Africa

The perception and representation of objects from Central Africa in Belgium changed tremendously from the first Colonial Expositions to the later displays in the RMCA. Indeed, Congolese objects were presented as exotic decor and tools of colonial propaganda during Universal Expositions; they were later considered anthropological specimens, evidences of ethnographic practices and – in turn – of the need for colonial civilising; they subsequently went from being "primitive art" in a modernist perspective, to acclaimed masterpieces of world art.[148] These changes reflect broader transformations in contemporary ideas and conceptualisations of African artefacts, culture, societies and "art" in Europe, and responded to the specific ideological purposes of their representational contexts.[149] What follows is a succinct account of how central African objects were differently interpreted and showcased from the end of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century, in exhibitions related to Belgian

[145] Phillips, "The Museum of Art-Thropology," 18.
[146] Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after Modernism," 98; Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens," 94.
[147] Sarah Van Beurden, "The art of (re)possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization," *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 1 (March 2015), 146.
[148] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 595; Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 473; Ceuppens, "From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens," 85-86.
[149] Surely, Congolese objects were not interpreted and presented in a single, monolithic way throughout all Europe; moreover, it is worth noting that the same types of objects were interpreted differently according to the context. As Farr notes, indeed, paradigms and contexts of displays always project something on and around the objects, defining their meanings. Farr, "Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections," 78.

colonialism and the Royal Museum for Central Africa. In particular, it will be shown how some of these artefacts came to be conceptualised as art. However brief, this account is crucial to historically contextualise the current *Unrivalled Art* semi-permanent exhibition at the AfricaMuseum.

2.3.1. "Exotic curiosity" and ethnography at the *Expositions Universelles*

The *Expositions Universelles* of Antwerp and Brussels-Tervuren were occasions for great quantities of Congolese objects to be displayed for large crowds of visitors. The display of African material culture in these Expositions was mainly underpinned by colonial propaganda: the three Expositions, indeed, were primarily focused on economic potential and development, and mostly dedicated to natural and economic resources.[150] In this frame, during the first Exposition in Antwerp (1885), Congolese objects were presented mostly as exotic curiosities:[151] the display of ethnographic objects evoked a general idea of the customs and peoples from Central Africa, but it was far from scientific or educational. The artefacts were not classified nor organized methodically, and explanatory labels were absent.[152] Notwithstanding the occasional admiration for some pieces – like for the sculptural qualities of some "fetishes" – disdain, and the belief that Africans could not understand beauty, accompanied the reception of these objects.[153] Similar considerations apply to the Exposition held in 1894. In the ethnographical section, objects were displayed in a picturesque and exotic way, with artefacts such as weapons, fishing and hunting gear, peddles, arranged together in twenty-three panoplies. Again, no labels with information on the objects' function or originating context was provided.[154]

In the context of the Brussels-Tervuren Exposition (1897) the first room of the *Salon d'Honneur* of the Colonial Palace, designed in refined *Art Nouveau* style, was presented as a section of "Art Congolais." Couttenier maintains that in the context of this exposition, Congolese objects were shown as "art," on the same level of European creations. However, as Jarrassé points out, the exhibition displayed almost exclusively European artworks, such as

[150] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 599; Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 619; Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 23; Dominique Jarrassé, "Art nouveau ou art congolais à Tervuren ? Le musée colonial comme synthèse des arts," *Gradhiva* 23 (2016), 131.
[151] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 595.
[152] Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 18. This, consequently, allowed for exotic and imaginary interpretations to be attached to the objects; the presence of a necklace made with human teeth, for example, fuelled in the visitors the idea that cannibalistic practices were in use in the Congo. Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 20.
[153] *Ibidem*.
[154] Interestingly, both in this case and for the previous Exposition, anthropologists had suggested to not use panoplies, and to display the objects with information labels. However, the organisers of the exhibition refused to listen to these suggestions. Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 24.

chryselephantine sculptures and luxury furniture, on elegant art nouveau pedestals and in glass cases (fig. 2.1).[155] The only indigenous Congolese objects were some draperies hung on the walls. In fact, the announced "art Congolais" was Belgian *art nouveau* – the "style Congo" – made using Congolese raw, natural materials: thus, the room symbolised the transformation of nature into art, the civilisation of the uncivilised – a metaphor for Belgian's action in the colony.[156] Conversely, Congolese objects were displayed in the "Ethnographic Room," presented as ethnographic "artefacts" and grouped together according to geographical provenance.[157] In this room, only two objects were shown in glass cases, while the others were arranged typologically and displayed in panoplies or crowded groupings, which impeded the aesthetic appreciation of the single pieces.[158] The overall display delivered an exotic impression, with the objects as testimonies of primitive populations, showcased together with models of Congolese huts and group statues representing indigenous people in various activities (figg. 2.2-2.3).

2.3.2. The *Musée du Congo Belge*

At its creation in 1898, the Colonial Museum of Congo was divided in four sections, with no specific section dedicated to art. From 1908, when the *Musée du Congo Belge* was acquired by the Belgian state, the sections became five, with the one on economy being the most important.[159] The ethnographic section was divided into twelve sectors according to hierarchies of need; in this arrangement, "arts and religion" occupied the last position. The display of the ethnographic section privileged compact and crowded arrangements of objects, grouped closely together in the vitrines (fig. 2.4). Bouttiaux stresses how the sculptures on display here were not yet considered art, but more as curiosities, artefacts produced by uncivilised tribes.[160] This state of things reflects the viewpoints of Alphonse de Haulleville, who was in charge of the Central Library of the Congo Free Sate, and later became the museum's director. De Haulleville doubted the existence of African art itself: according to

[155] Jarrassé, "Art nouveau ou art congolais à Tervuren ? " 125-128.
[156] *Idem*, 128, 133. The so-called "Style Congo" was a specific current of Belgian Modernism inspired by Congolese patterns, *tatouages* and materials, and used primarily Congolese raw materials (ivory *in primis*). It became quite famous and persisted well into the 1930s. Many pieces were displayed in the RMCA, following the idea of Belgian art domesticating wild resources. This is the case of sculptures in ivory made by Belgian artists displayed in front of elephant tusks in the "products hall" of the museum. On this see Tom Flynn, "Taming the tusk: The revival of chryselephantine sculpture in Belgium during the 1890s," In Barringer and Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object,* 188-204; Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 636-648 and Silverman, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II," 175-195.
[157] Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 26, 32; Silverman, "Diasporas of Art," 633.
[158] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 599.
[159] *Ibidem*.
[160] *Idem*, 602.

him, a true art form, defined as search for beauty without utilitarian purpose, couldn't be found in African material productions.[161] He even remarked how the statues and the "fetishes" were not art, but were instead even obscene and repugnant, mostly because of their nudity.[162]
A similar display was maintained during the following years, even with the creation of a room for "Indigenous art": in the *Salle d'art négre* in 1937 (fig. 2.5) panoplies still hung on the walls in decorative arrangements; various objects were cluttered in the vitrines, which were filled ground-up. However, the display of a Kuba royal statue (*ndop*) on a stool, isolated at the centre of the room, shows a shift towards the singularisation of some "art objects."[163]

2.3.3. The institutionalisation of "African art" in the Museum: from Frans M. Olbrechts to the 2000s

After the two World Wars, the display and narratives of the Belgian Congo Museum underwent some changes, as did the representation of the ethnographic objects. During the directorship of Frans M. Olbrechts (1947-1959), the museum started to increasingly present Congolese artefacts as art pieces: the "Congo Art room" was created.[164] The display and the narratives of the "Art Room" followed the scientifically-founded, art-historical methodology on the study of African art developed by Olbrechts, which was based on formalist analysis, stylistic classification and study of the objects in the originating society.[165] Though Olbrechts was opposed to the pure aesthetical approach to the study of African objects, during his directorship he initiated the conceptual *mise-en-valeur*, the "elevation" of some objects as "art masterpieces." The display of the Art Room (fig. 2.6) shows the prevalence of an aesthetic approach to African objects: a selection of a few pieces, made according to Olbrecht's stylistic categories, was showcased in a modernist setting; every object, placed against a white background, was granted enough space and lighting to be appreciated in its visual and formal qualities.[166] The labels supplied some ethnographical information, even if quite reduced, to direct the visitors towards their aesthetic appreciation.[167]

[161] Couttenier, "One speaks softly, like in a sacred place," 36.
[162] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 602. Haulleville even made the nudities of the sculptures to be covered with pieces of fabric.
[163] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 483-484.
[164] Hoenig, "Visualizing trauma," 349.
[165] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 480-483. For an introduction on Olbrechts' "Belgian Method" of study and analysis of African Sculpture see Daniel J. Crowley, "Stylistic Analysis of African Art: A Reassessment of Olbrechts' "Belgian Method"," *African Arts* 9, no. 2 (January 1976), 43-49, and Constantine Petridis, "Olbrechts and the Morphological approach to African Sculptural Art," in Frans M. Olbrechts: In Search of art in Africa, ed. Constantine Petridis (Antwerp: Etnografisch Museum, 2001), 119-140.
[166] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 482.
[167] *Idem*, 485-486.

Of course, this change in the objects' representation reflects the parallel broadening of the appreciation for African art in the whole of Europe; during the 1920s, in fact, African objects, in particular sculptures, were increasingly being collected and showcased as artworks.[168] In Belgium, the exhibitions on "Congolese art" had multiplied, in connection not only to commercial and colonial expositions, but also art fairs.[169] Indeed, concurrently with their increased aesthetic appreciation, Central African objects were also starting to acquire growing economic value in the art market. In light of this, Van Beurden argues that both the introduction of art historical narratives in the museum, and the institutionalisation of Congolese objects as art pieces in the "Art Room," functioned partly within a biased, late-colonial project of promotion of the colony and the empire.[170] This project brought together representational, economical and political aspects. Indeed, after the Wars it was becoming less appropriate to justify colonialism, and to use objects in the museum as an expression of the civilising mission of Belgium in the allegedly cultural inferior Africa.[171] The re-conceptualisation, operated by the museum, of the objects as art – thus as "culturally valuable" – also reinvented and reaffirmed them as "economically valuable resources," projecting economical and political values on them.[172] Though potentially positively equating African creative production with the European one, the Eurocentric label of "masterpiece" institutionalised them in the system of museums, collections and art market. Together with the cultural value, also the monetary value was elevated as a result, benefitting the status and reputation of the museum and the interests of collectors and the market. The elevation to "art," while distancing Congolese objects from the idea of being inferior primitive material production, was also paralleled by a commoditisation and reification, which arguably perpetuated – though transformed – their exploitation as colonial resources.[173]

The institutionalisation of Congolese objects as art treasures continued well into the 90s and the 2000s, in particular through temporary exhibitions. In 1995, the Museum held an important exhibition titled "Hidden Treasures of the Royal Museum for Central Africa." 250 objects, deemed the most important of the collections, were presented as art treasures in the largest temporary exhibition in the museum's history. The objects showcased were not only

[168] Raymond Corbey, "African Art in Brussels," *Anthropology Today* 15, no. 6 (December 1999) 11-12; Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 473.
[169] Corbey, "African Art in Brussels," 11-13. Moreover, scholarship on African art and other so-called "primitive art" was starting to flourish with scholars like Franz Boas and Melville Herskovitz. Olbrechts himself was a student of Boas at the time. See Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 475.
[170] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 472, 487.
[171] Hoenig, "Visualizing trauma," 349.
[172] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 472-473; Van Beurden, "The art of (re)possession: heritage and the cultural politics of Congo's decolonization," 145.
[173] Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 472-473.

pieces that had never been displayed in the museum, thus "hidden" from sight, but also famous pieces from the permanent collection. The museum explained the choice by stating that the pieces had metaphorically been hidden, because not well lit and "obscured" among the other ethnographic objects in the vitrines;[174] the exhibition thus gave them new light and allowed for their full aesthetic appreciation. The display was highly modernist, with cases – usually filled objects – hosting one or two pieces carefully lit with halogen lights.[175] Although the exhibition's curator stated that the museum did not want to be an art museum, the declared criterion for the selection of the pieces was primarily an aesthetic one (and admittedly, "according to Western notions"), together with rarity, old age or exceptional characteristics.[176] Aesthetics and beauty, antiquity, rarity and originality: in fact, some of the essential characteristics of an artwork by Western standards. The curator maintained that the exhibition fulfilled its original aim, namely "to bring the museum's most important ethnographic works to the attention of a wider audience";[177] but it did so by transforming them into "art masterpieces," for a Western audience. Likewise, in the 2000s objects from the RMCA travelled the world in itinerant exhibitions of "African art," in particular Luba art, displayed increasingly in highly formalist displays as fine art, or high art.[178]

Bouttiaux has acutely pointed out the controversy in this process. Certainly, "finalement," Congolese objects have been re-evaluated, and recognised the status of masterpieces over that of curiosity, *exotica*, specimens of primitive populations.[179] Nevertheless, the scholar wonders if this recognition has benefitted the creator communities: that is, if this aesthetic appreciation has been accompanied by a re-evaluation and a better popular knowledge of the cultures which made them; or if the extirpation and de-contextualisation of the objects through their "elevation to art" has been beneficial only for the art market and museums, and the Western viewers.[180]

[174] Some have argued that it could have well been for commercial reasons. Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 610.
[175] Gustaaf Verswijver, "Hidden Treasures of the Tervuren Museum," *African Arts* 28, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 31.
[176] *Idem*, 27-28.
[177] *Idem*, 28.
[178] Among these exhibitions we can remember in particular *Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa*, LACMA, Los Angeles, 2013-14.
[179] Bouttiaux, "Des mises en scène de curiosités aux chefs-d'œuvre," 611.
[180] *Idem*, 613.

3. The *Unrivalled Art* semi-permanent exhibition: a critical analysis

The exhibition *From the collection: Unrivalled Art* opened in 2018, in conjunction with the reopening of the museum. Though it is defined as a temporary exhibition, it has now been continuously on view for two years.[181] It presents a selection of Central African objects from the ethnographic collections of the museum, mostly from the 19th and 20th century. The exhibition aims at offering an overview of the "artistic wealth" of Central African cultures and at highlighting the "unique artistic expression" of the museum's collection;[182] it also addresses relevant topics of the history of African art. As the director Guido Gryseels states in the foreword of the exhibition's catalogue, this selection of objects, defined as "masterpieces"[183] and "artistically among the best in the world," was made largely on aesthetic grounds.[184]

This chapter will present a critical analysis of the displays, the curatorial choices and the narratives of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition. It will focus in particular on critical aspects of the representation of "African art," examining the ways in which this representation re-conceptualises and potentially appropriates the objects within Eurocentric frameworks.[185]

3.1. The art paradigm of representation as conceptual appropriation in the exhibition

3.1.1. The title, the narratives and the display

The display and the narratives of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition rely mostly on the Western art paradigm, both visually and epistemologically. The very title of the exhibition, "Unrivalled art," frames the objects within the art paradigm and the framework of art history: even before seeing them, these works are proposed to the visitor as artistic masterpieces. The title also ties the African pieces in the exhibition to the modernist narrative and appreciative lens: as the

[181] As the director Guido Gryseels has explained, the exhibition is organised as a rotating display, with different selections of objects regularly alternating. For this reason, the exhibition will here be defined as semi-permanent. Guido Gryseels, "Foreword," in *Unrivalled Art. Spellbinding artefacts at the Royal Museum for Central Africa*, ed. Julien Volper (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2018), 7. However, in the times I've visited the exhibition since 2018, the displays and the objects showcased have not changed.

[182] As is stated by the museum's director in the exhibition's catalogue. Gryseels, "Foreword," 7.

[183] Thus they are defined in the text panel "Fine art in Central Africa," which is encountered on the first display cabinet at the beginning of the exhibition.

[184] Gryseels, "Foreword," 7.

[185] This appropriation within a Eurocentric perspective reconstructs the objects in a way that arguably makes them more significant for a Western audience than for the original ones. In the case of this exhibition, I will be looking both at the theoretical frameworks of the art paradigm as found in the narratives, and at the display choices. On the concept of "art by appropriation" see Malraux, *Museum without Walls*; Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience*; Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 202-203, 223 note 1;Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 78-79.

text panel at the entrance of the gallery explains (fig. 3.1), the exhibition's title comes from the book "Black Art" (1919), by Vladimir Markov (1877-1914), a Latvian modernist artist and theorist.[186] His quote is proposed on the panel:

> "The unusual physiognomy of black art is, generally speaking, surprising. Nevertheless, there is little other art that can rival it in terms of the abundance of materials. With an astonishing creative freedom, a wealth and plurality of combinations of shapes and lines (…) this art is unrivalled in the world."[187]

This quote, which focuses on visual and formal qualities, sets the framework in which to read the works in the exhibition: that of formal analysis and aesthetic appreciation of the objects as "art." The choice of a quote from a modernist also connects the representation of African artworks to the old-fashioned narrative of the "discovery of African art" at the beginning of the 20th century, when the status of "art" – and thus the worthiness of Western aesthetic appreciation – was accorded to some African objects.[188] In so doing, it tacitly ties such appreciation to the Western perspective.[189] On the text panel, nothing is mentioned of the original functions, significance, meanings of the artefacts included in the exhibition, while the accent is put on their status as masterpieces. The process of re-construction as art masterpieces not only detaches these objects from their original African contexts and meanings; by doing so, it appropriates them in a Western perspective, which offers only a partial understanding of the pieces and their culture.

The exhibition's narratives are also built within the categories of the art paradigm. The main, central cabinets display the "classics" of traditional African art: masks, statues, ivories and applied arts.[190] The cabinets' explanatory text panel attached to these displays, titled "Fine art in Central Africa," focuses on the creativity and the artistic wealth of Congo,

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[186] Markov was interested in African art and in "primitive" artistic cultures. Jeremy Howard, Irena Bužinska, Z.S. Strother, *Vladimir Markov and Russian Primitivism: A Charter for the Avant-Garde* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015) 15-16.

[187] Vladimir Markov, *Iskusstvo negrov* ("Black art"), 1919; as cited in the text panel "Unrivalled Art. A selection from the collection" in the exhibition.

[188] It is worth reminding how this perspective is strongly Eurocentric, as the modernists were not interested in the pieces' contexts, functions, and meanings, but only as pure sculptural objects, and inasmuch they held relevance to their own researches. Kasfir, "African art and authenticity: a text with a shadow," 47; Clarke, "From theory to practice: exhibiting African art," 167; Phillips, "Exhibiting Africa after modernism," 97.

[189] In this way, indeed, many art museums and exhibitions ended up validating African art primarily in relation to Modernism (such as the infamous "Primitivism and 20th century art" at the MoMA, 1984). Clarke, "From theory to practice: exhibiting African art," 167. See also Farr, "Art/Artifact: African art in anthropology collections," 79.

[190] Clarke, "From theory to practice: exhibiting African art," 167; Clarke, "Defining African Art: Primitive Negro Sculpture," 47.

defining the objects "masterpieces of world art." This introductory text is strongly traditional in its presentation of fine art and of the objects as masterpieces. It could also be argued that the very idea of "fine art" is a Western concept, a categorization of the arts developed in the 18th century, which defines art in relation to its pure aesthetic nature, set apart from the mundane world.[191] Thus, the definition of "fine art" in this case proves problematic, as it is anachronistically applied to these African objects. The other cabinets focus on specific issues of African art history, such as the identity of the artists, stylistic analysis, the notion of beauty in Africa and European views on African artworks.

In the same fashion, the display is typical of a traditional art museum exhibition:[192] showcased in large, modern black cases with glass vitrines, objects emerge quite impressively from the solid black background thanks to the careful lighting (figg. 3.2-3.3); some are placed on plinths, while others are held up by thin black poles, almost floating in the space of the cabinet. The arrangement of the objects and the lighting evoke an aura of "aestheticised sacredness," representing the objects as unique, decontextualised masterpieces that can self-sustain themselves by virtue of their visual potency. This is further emphasized by the fact that the labeling offers only brief, succinct information that include no ethnographical contextualisation. The labels identify the objects and list the dating, the cultural group and geographical provenance of the works.[193] When the artist is known (or is identified as an anonymous master to which a corpus of works has been attributed, as in the case of the "Master of Buli") their name is also included. Indeed, ethnographic information on the pieces, as well as explanations of the exhibition's narratives are found only in the exhibition booklet.[194] Without it, it is very difficult to understand the meanings of the objects, their functions and significance and even many of the themes of the exhibition: the primary message that comes across is the strong aestheticising interpretation of African art.[195] The

[191] According to this categorisation, the fine arts included painting, sculpture, architecture, music and dancing, with painting and sculpture in particular being considered as the epitome of art, at least in art museums culture. Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 83; David Clowney, "Definitions of Art and Fine Art's Historical Origins," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Summer 2011), 309-311. Surely this doesn't intend to imply that before the 18th century art didn't exist, nor that definitions or concepts of art were not conceived prior to this century. Nevertheless, the specific categorisation of "fine art" is a historically and geographically specific one.

[192] DeBlock, "The AfricaMuseum of Tervuren, Belgium," 275.

[193] Additionally, it records the objects' acquisition and the name of the collector, donor or seller.

[194] Julien Volper and Viviane Baeke, *Unrivalled Art.* Exhibition booklet (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2018). The booklet is available to download from the website of the museum at this link: https://www.africamuseum.be/en/visit/temporary_exhibition/unrivalled_art

[195] The first time I visited the museum, in 2018, the booklet of the exhibition was physically available at the entrance of the room, so it was quite easy to have access to it and its information. However, since the museum's reopening after Covid-19, the booklet is – understandably – not available in the room, in order to limit the spread of the virus. Though obviously laudable, of course this measure limits the understanding of the exhibition.

booklet is quite informative (if sometimes unevenly so) and offers a sufficient ethnographic support to the exhibition display. However, to read such a long booklet (it comprises 107 pages) is, arguably, not always feasible in the time span of an exhibition visit; and while it can be argued that the responsibility of educating oneself is left to the visitor's good will, the exhibition then fails in being informative and educational for all audiences, while mainly relying on the theatre effect of the aestheticising display.[196] Although it may seem a trivial or practical aspect, I believe that this is an important element, as the major and more immediate impact in the understanding of the pieces in the exhibition comes from the display and the general conceptual framework, which is decisively and selectively pending towards their representation as "art" over their other indigenous cultural meanings.

3.1.2. Masks and statues: the canon of traditional African art

The central sections, which occupy the largest display surface, are those of "Masks" and "Sculpture." These two typologies of objects are presented as the most important pieces of the exhibition, as the highest, classical examples of "African art." These objects are grouped typologically into two separate main displays, regardless of provenance, function or context of use. Indeed, the works in these cabinets belonged to different cultures and social groups and appeared, with multiple diverse purposes, in different ritual and social contexts and events.[197] The single pieces also had different and specific symbolic, spiritual and/or social meanings. The two displays, however, end up flattening these diversities by grouping the objects all together in the broad artistic categories of "sculptures" and "masks." This curatorial choice reflects the academic and museographical category of "traditional African art," according to which anthropomorphic sculptures, mostly in the forms of wooden masks and statues, are the canonical and best specimens of African artistic production.[198] This category is a fictive and historical construction, and on the whole very Eurocentric. Indeed, masks and statues were the first African objects to be widely accorded an art status in Europe, and institutionalised as such in art museums and art exhibitions, as their sculptural and visual qualities, their resonance with European modernist and primitivist researches and their

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Surely, the booklet can be downloaded easily from the museum's website (also thanks to the free wifi network of the museum) but one is left to wonder just how many people actually do that.

[196] Some ethnographical and contextual information can also be found in the digital screens; however, these are also difficult to read in full when visiting the exhibition, and they are not very informative nor extensive.

[197] Among these we can list funerary rites, marriages, initiation rituals (and the events connected to these such as processions or performances before, during and after the initiations), rites for the protection and prosperity of the community, rites or performances to ensure social control, ritual processions and displays of statues to dispel misfortune on the community, and many others.

[198] Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art,* 97; Clarke, "Defining African Art," 47; Clarke, "From theory to practice: exhibiting African art," 167, 170; Lundén, *Displaying Loot*, 369.

assimilability to the European artistic conventions allowed them more easily in the category of fine art.[199] The museum's representational choice follows this tradition. As a result, this narrative leads to a selective representation of African artistry based the idea of "African art" constructed in the West.

3.1.2.1. Masks

Masks are arguably one of the most famous categories of African art. Indeed, in the exhibition they are the first pieces that are presented, as a visitor would expect. The typological display showcases twenty-two masks from Congo, belonging to different cultures such as Songye-Kalebwe, Ngbandi, Tshokwe, Kuba, Biombo, Luba and others (figg. 3.4-3.5). The internal arrangement of the objects does not abide to a specific narrative, nor to sub-categorisations by geographical region or similar ritualistic functions. The impression that prevails is thus that of a general visual abundance of many heterogeneous masks and head pieces, representing as a whole the artistic category of "African masks." I say artistic category, and not ethnographical, because the exhibition strongly frames them in the art paradigm and representation. The very name of the section, "masks," reflects partial and biased Western artistic categorisations: indeed, the "masks" displayed are only face-covering pieces that were part of a more complex masquerade apparatus, which included also headdresses, raffia or other types of clothing for the body. In the African context, the face/head pieces appeared in performances and rites always in association with the costume, as they functioned and made sense only together: the "mask" was the whole ensemble.[200] In the West, the face-pieces were made to be individual, independent sculptural artworks through a selective process of collecting, conceptual translation and appropriation that singled them out among the available material.[201] This appropriation led to the creation of the artistic category of "African mask," conceptually recreating them as new, different objects.

The exhibition's representation of the masks follows this practice. Surely, the booklet addresses the problem of de-contextualisation of the masks, pointing out that these "faces" were only part of the original ensemble, and stating that "isolated from costume and context, these faces on display have lost a large part of their identity."[202] However, the display perpetuates this very practice through the representation of the masks as singularised art

[199] Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen Roberts, "Memory: Luba Arts and the making of history," *African Arts* 29, no. 1 (1996), 30; Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art,* 85.
[200] Dennis Duerden, "The "Discovery" of the African Mask," *Research in African Literatures* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 29. The masks, moreover, were to be experienced in movement and in association with the music. Van Damme, *Beauty and ugliness in African art and thought*, 25.
[201] Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience*, 22; Duerden, "The "Discovery" of the African Mask," 37.
[202] Volper and Baeke, *Unrivalled Art*, 1.

pieces, and in doing so it gives a biased perspective on both the physical objects and their symbolical meanings. In the display, the masks are all mixed together to create an impactful visual effect.[203] Held up by thin black poles, almost floating in the black glossy space of the cabinet, they invite a visual contemplation (fig. 3.6). Due to the lack of any explanatory text panel on the cabinet regarding the functions and the socio-cultural meanings of the pieces, the viewer is only told that they are to be understood as "fine art" masterpieces, according to the opening text panel on fine art. Some ethnographical contextualisation is provided by the exhibition booklet, which informs on the meanings of the specific objects and the rituals in which they were used. Regrettably, the information found in the booklet, and the awareness of current issues of representation that emerge from it, don't really inform the display: the narrative and representation remain traditional and anchored to the classical idea of masks as sculptural heights of African art. Probably the clearer example of this is the Luba helmet-mask, one of the most famous pieces of the masks collection (fig. 3.7).[204] The object, defined as "*the* [sic.] masterpiece of the collection,"[205] is given its own plinth, thus further singularised with respect to the others. Although the function of the mask is not yet clear, studies have associated it respectively with mythical figures, hunting rituals or, most probably, to the *bumbudye* brotherhood; this type of masks would have been used during initiations of new members.[206] In the museum display, its social role and spiritual meanings are lost, as the objects is re-contextualised primarily as an sculptural art masterpiece.

The digital screen for this section presents a good selection of historical pictures representing the masks in use (figg. 3.8-3.9): this is very laudable, as it offers a visual contextualisation of the masks presented in the display, thus giving an idea of how the masks were used, understood and aesthetically experienced in the Congolese context. However, the digital screen could have been employed to give more insights and background information on the masks, the cultures, the people or the use of the objects. No information of the sort is to be found there, apart from the name of the society or brotherhood that used them, the name of the culture, and the picture's author and date.[207] Moreover, it is puzzling that the screens do not show any video, even contemporary ones, of the dances and the performances where the

[203] Pieces from the same culture, for instance two Chokwe masks, are displayed far away from each other, in a way that does not allow an understanding – even just from a visual point of view – of the masquerade culture of that people.
[204] The mask is also pictured on the cover of the catalogue of the exhibition.
[205] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition Booklet*, 6.
[206] Julien Volper, "Helmet-mask," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 135.
[207] Only in one case, that of a Yaka *Kambula* mask, the screen accompanies the ethnographic historical picture with a relatively extensive explanation on the mask's use and context.

masks move and dance, which would have added up significantly to the understanding of their aesthetics at large.

It is interesting, in light of politics of representation, to see how the exhibition differently frames the masks in two different instances. In fact, the exhibition does address issues of collecting, representation and appropriation in relation to these objects in a specific section; however, it does this separately from the dedicated "Masks" display. The section "A disembodied face," indeed, is placed on the opposite side of the room from the main masks section. It displays three different *Tshihongo* pieces (fig. 3.10): an almost-whole costume (fig. 3.11), comprising the face piece, the headdress, and the upper body part;[208] a mask with the headdress still attached to it; and a wooden face piece, detached from all the other elements. As is pointed out in the exhibition booklet, the display problematises the issue of European transformations of African masks, which, mostly at the beginning of 20th century, were modified or collected selectively by removing the costumes and the raffia, judged accessorial to the pure sculptural parts.[209] All considered, anyway, the exhibition remains ambiguous in this regard, taking an ambivalent stance. On the one hand, it addresses the problematic aspects and the appropriative nature of historical collecting of masks, and their museum representation as art pieces, but it does so in a parallel, almost secondary section; on the other hand, the main section on the masks – arguably the most extensive and thus impactful representation – privileges the canonical aestheticised and de-contextualised approach, displaying only pieces without costumes, and many without raffia attachments or headdresses.

3.1.2.2. Sculpture

The section on "Sculpture" displays numerous anthropomorphic (and some anthropo-zoomorphic) wooden statuettes from Congo, belonging to many different cultures. Most of the pieces date to the 19th-20th century.

Some considerations on the epistemological framework of art, the idea of traditional African art, and its appropriative aspects can be made also in relation to this section. The very title and theme of the cabinet is not neutral, as it refers to the traditional categories of Western art history, where sculpture ranks among the highest expressions of fine art; statues also represent

[208] Significantly, probably due to practical reasons of space available in the cabinet, the *Tshihongo* mask is not displayed with its whole costume. Only the face piece, the headdress and the upper part of the costume with the waist elements are present in the cabinet, while the part covering the legs is not shown. This is a pity – mostly so in a display which aims at portraying the integrity of a masquerade costume – even more so considering that the museum does possess the lower part of said costume, as can be seen in the exhibition catalogue. See Lambert Kandala, "Tshihongo mask," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 132-133.

[209] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 70-71. Indeed, according to the taste of the first three decades of the 20th century, the costumes made the pieces look more like exotic, ethnographic artefacts, and rendered them very much alien from the Western idea of art of the period. Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*, 85.

one of the epitomes of Western art museum pieces.[210] This fictive classification rewrites these African objects as pure sculptural art pieces according to the Eurocentric art historical canon: despite their various different uses, ritual purposes, spiritual meanings, and powerful agencies, which make the objects conceptually different from one another (and from the Western artistic concept of statue) they are all named "statues" – both in the exhibition labels and in the booklet – and grouped together as "sculpture" in light of their similar visual aspect. The selection of objects by the curators is a partial one as well, privileging anthropomorphic wooden figures; again, the objects that are showcased are those that fit easily in the canonical category of "statue," abiding to the institutionalised idioms of traditional African sculpture. The exhibition booklet informs that animal sculptures were also made, but these are not shown;[211] similarly, it is said that also other materials, apart from wood, were used, but they are are not present in the exhibition.

The representation of these objects as art is delivered in the exhibition also through the display choices. Placed on a black background and occasionally on black pedestals, isolated in the clean and neat cabinet space, but at same time associated together in one continuous display (figg. 3.12-3.13), they lose their individual significance, appearing like a generic visual feast of sculptural wealth. The display gives a overarching image of the richness of sculptural creation in Africa, though it fails in representing cultural specificity and in delivering the original meanings and values of the sculptures, apart from highlighting the formal ones that assign them to the general category of "statues." As the exhibition booklet explains, these objects had different specific functions and roles. Some works represented ancestors, like the Statue 'of Manda' from the Tabwa, or the Hemba *Lusingiti* statue (fig. 3.14), which was also invested with the ancestor's spirit; others had a funerary role, either in memorial ceremonies like Ndengese statues (fig. 3.15) as a grave marker like the Lori Statue from South Sudan, or temporarily hosting the soul of the deceased as in the case of the *Kakungu* statue from the Metoko (fig. 3.16). Others had a decorative function. Most of these objects were believed to posses great powers deriving from the deceased, nature spirits or ancestors that could protect, heal, harm and even kill people.[212] Some Congo cultures had

[210] One only has to think about the place that Greek and Roman sculpture holds in the art historical canon, and how many museums on Western art have impressive, majestic statues galleries (not only of Classical Greek art) as part of the main permanent displays, like the Louvre, the Uffizi, the Vatican Museums, The Hermitage Museum among others.

[211] Some of these animal sculptures of the museum's collection are featured in the exhibition catalogue. This is the case, for instance, of the Nande "zoomorphic aerophone sculpture," belonging to the *Isumba* brotherhood, or the "zoomorphic *emumu."* See Julien Volper, *"*Zoomorphic aerophone sculpture," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 46-47; and Julien Volper, *"*Zoomorphic *emumu* sculpture," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 54-55.

[212] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 42-51.

specific names to define sculptures that possessed these powers.[213] The Kongo *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*), for example, were powerful charms, which were endowed with the presence of a spirit through the addition of charged, magical substances;[214] their principal functions were those of healing and life-giving, as well as death-dealing and affliction, usually in retribution for wrongdoings;[215] the Yaka *nkosi/khosi*, for instance, were statuettes that possessed an animated will of their own; they were believed to have destructive powers – like causing misfortune, illnesses or even death – or to protect against thieves and sorcerers;[216] *bwanga* was the generic term for "power objects" among the Luluwa; the *bwanga bwa cibola* were powerful statues used in the Cibola cult, where they served to ensure the success of pregnancies and births, and mostly the reincarnation of an ancestor in the newborns.[217] Many power objects were activated through consecration rites by a diviner, often with the endowment of a special powerful substance or medicine. These rites and substances made them no longer mere objects, but presentifications of the spirits, with their own agency. However, the display and the art narrative in the exhibition represents them primarily as sculptural art pieces: this is not the only thing that the objects ever were, but what we, in the West, have made them signify. The anthropomorphic Yansi *mpwuu* statue (fig. 3.17), for example, was a highly powerful and feared object, which was not meant for display, but kept in a dedicated ritual box and offered libations, cared for and protected by the chief.[218] Its powers intervened in case of misfortunes or defended against external attackers. The object usually belonged and functioned together with one or two other figures, representing the wife, the child or the servant of the *mpwuu*, and a bracelet made of copper rings. Though the museum possesses these objects, they are not displayed in the exhibition, probably in order to maintain the clean visual aspect of the individual statue (fig. 3.18). In this way, however, the display offers only a partial illustration of the meanings of the object and of how it might've appeared in its initial context.[219]

An interesting case of representation is that of the *minkisi*, which are displayed both in the broad "Sculpture" section and in a dedicated sub-section, named "The importance of the

[213] *Idem*, 41. These terms identified specifically objects that had been consecrated and activated, and were thus different from those who had not.
[214] On the *nkisi*, see Wyatt MacGaffey, "Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 2, *Special Issue on Culture and Consciousness in Southern Africa* (January 1988), 188-203.
[215] Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo "Minkisi"" *Etnofoor* 3, no. 1 (1990), 50.
[216] Julien Volper, "Anthropomorphic *nkosi* statue," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 17.
[217] Constantine Petridis, "Bwanga bwa Cibola antrhopomorphic statue," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 33.
[218] Julien Volper, "Anthropomorphic *mpwuu* statue," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 23.
[219] *Idem*, 23-25.

container" (fig. 3.19). This display shows two *minkisi*: a statue and an amulet statuette (figg. 3.20-3.21). *Minkisi*, once mostly defined as "fetishes," are powerful objects, believed to have supernatural powers and agency. They comprise two main parts: a container, often anthropomorphic, and a charged substance made of natural ingredients, named *bilongo*, placed inside of the object by a *nganga*, a "priest" or diviner.[220] The consecration of the object by the *nganga* activated it and empowered it with the presence of a spirit.[221] In general, a *nkisi* offered protection and could be petitioned by individual or communities. The *nkisi nkondi* (plural *minkondi*) (fig. 3.20), is a particular type of *nkisi* which has the power to intimidate enemies and even harm them; nails were ritually driven in the object when requests were made to the *nkondi* or agreements made which were overseen by it.[222] What is interesting is that the fundamental part of a *nkisi* is the *bilongo*, the charged substance: the role of the container is to receive and keep the activating substance.[223] As the exhibition booklet rightly mentions, even a shell, a pouch, a box or a clay pot could function as a container, and retain the same power as an anthropomorphic statue.[224] However, the exhibition does not show any instances of this case, selecting instead only anthropomorphic containers. Even the cabinet title is misleading: although for its functioning the most important part of the object was the charged substance, the narrative gives the idea that the most important was, indeed, the container. Moreover, the display and even the booklet don't offer a comprehensive understanding of the functioning and the meanings of the *nkisi*, but focus instead primarily on the visual and aesthetic aspects of the pieces, seen as product of "the desire to embellish the ritually valuable by crafting a magnificent container."[225] Of the *nkisi nkondi* on display, the booklet discloses nothing on the purpose of the nails or the raised arm, remaining vague also on how the object acted: it only highlights the fact that it was restored "for aesthetic [...] reasons" when broken.[226] In this narrative where the object is looked at primarily for its aesthetic aspect, and communicated primarily as an art piece, a fundamental part of its biography is lost.

[220] MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo "Minkisi"," 49-50.
[221] *Idem*, 51.
[222] MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo "Minkisi," 50-51; Thomas B. Cole, "Nkisi Nkondi (Nail Figure) Congolese, Republic of the Congo," *JAMA* 315, no. 4 (January 2016), 330.
[223] Susan M. Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works: Fieldwork and Art History," *African Arts* 32, no.1 (Spring 1999), 48-49; MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo "Minkisi"," 51, 57.
[224] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 15; MacGaffey, "The Personhood of Ritual Objects: Kongo "Minkisi"," 55.
[225] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 15.
[226] *Idem*, 16. For example, the booklet does not explain the presence of the nails and their significance, nor the role of the mirrors, the necessity of the activation of the object by an expert priest or diviner, nor the reasons for which the *nkisi* could be petitioned. Moreover, it does not mention the difference between the *nkisi* and the *nkisi nkondi*.

3.1.3. Applied art

The "Applied art" section displays a great variety of objects such as shields, ceremonial swords and weapons (fig. 3.22), and an array of "everyday" pieces like pipes, spoons, belts, vases and pots (fig. 3.23), from diverse cultures. Most of these objects were owned by élite groups; sometimes they were used in rituals, and more frequently they functioned as symbols of their owners' social status. The main unifying criterion of display, of these otherwise largely different pieces, is their categorization as "applied art": objects which are considered mainly as functional.[227] The exhibition booklet states that these types of objects, typically downgraded as artisanal craft in Europe, actually show great technical skill and artistry.[228] Furthermore, the booklet highlights how the art of the cultures who created these objects has seldom been shown in art museums, as they didn't produce works which were regarded and selected by art museums as "typical African art," like masks or sculptures.[229] However, while implicitly criticizing this traditional narratives, which kept these cultures and objects outside of the realm of "fine art," the exhibition simultaneously maintains them within the display itself. [230] This section relies, indeed, on Eurocentric categorisations rooted in the epistemological, museographical and art historical tradition: the very conceptual separation of "fine" and "applied" art is the result of historically-specific social, economic, and intellectual processes which happened in Europe, that didn't occur in African cultures before the colonial period.[231] The very categorisation of "applied arts" is thus an anachronistic epistemological imposition on African objects, because it implies a hierarchical division of material culture, based on specific European values and art theories, which was not relevant in the African context. Moreover, this fictive division, based on the (recent) Western definition of artworks as objects created solely for aesthetic purpose, implies a constructed hierarchical scale were applied arts rank lower, as disinterested aesthetic appreciation is perceived as a higher purpose of art than functional use. Presenting them as "applied art," in the eyes of the public the exhibition immediately suggests an inferior artistic level, if not in beauty, then in importance. The curator's criteria of selection of these pieces is also very traditional, as it is based on the bias which places anthropomorphic and figurative objects at, again, a higher rank in the art scale, and demotes non-figurative pieces as applied or mere decorative arts.

[227] On the webpage dedicated to the exhibition on the website of the museum, this section is defined as "utilitarian art." See AfricaMuseum, *Unrivalled Art. Temporary Exhibition*, accessible at https://www.africamuseum.be/en/visit/temporary_exhibition/unrivalled_art
[228] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 88.
[229] *Ibidem*.
[230] It is also puzzling that the exhibition booklet offers virtually no information on the individual pieces' uses or context, nor on their stylistic aspects, or decorations.
[231] Lundén, *Displaying loot*, 200. This perpetuates the idea, already old-fashioned with regards to the European milieu, that there are different levels and values in art creation.

3.2. Artists, styles and signatures: the epistemological idioms of art history

One of the cabinets addressing specific themes in African art is dedicated to the main narrative "The style, the artist, the signature."[232] This cabinet (fig. 3.24) explores artistic styles and influences, artists' authorship, names and signatures, in different sub-sections. The cabinet's text panel (fig. 3.25) focuses on the ideas of individual style, the identity and biography of the artist, and explains how the study of styles is fundamental in understanding the origins of objects and cultural interactions. Focusing on individual artists' biographies and styles, the exhibition aims at "putting the individual at the heart of the creative process once again,"[233] moving away from the outdated notion of "community art" and lack of originality in African artists. However, even if starting from positive premises, this narrative proves to be problematic with respect to the way it's developed. Indeed, the framework in which the objects are presented refers completely to Eurocentric idioms and categories of the Western art historical discipline. The discourse on biographies and names of individual masters, and identifications of styles, are mostly relevant and significant within the Western art historical perspective, for the very way in which the discipline of art history, its methods and focus have been constructed in the West.[234] These researches don't necessarily reflect the significant aspects of the objects for the originating society, nor the parameters according to which they were perceived.[235]

3.2.1. Objects and artists in the framework of European connoisseurship

The section titled "The man behind the art – a question of style" focuses on stylistic analysis and attribution. The display includes pieces that have been attributed to specific artists or anonymous "masters": the Luba cup bearer, two statues and a Caryatid stool from the Master of Buli;[236] a mother-and-child, two masks and a funerary sculpture by the Master of Kasadi; some caryatid stools; a mask by the artist Gabama a Gingungu (figg. 3.26-3.27). Of the function of these pieces, nothing is said in the physical display nor in the booklet.[237] Explanations on the significance of the Luba caryatid stools in the expression of royal status,

[232] This is the title of the cabinet's text panel.
[233] From the text panel "The style, the artist, the signature" displayed on the exhibition's cabinet.
[234] These refer in particular to: the method of connoisseurship and attribution, the biography-oriented construction of art history based on some main "masters," and stylistic and formal analysis employed to create classifications of main styles. Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience*, 2.
[235] Moreover, this narrative is also underpinned by the self-referential exaltation of the role of "pioneer" Belgian scholars in the history of art of Africa. For a criticism of this aspect see Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1086.
[236] Some scholars prefer to refer to this artist as "Master of Kateba." Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 18.
[237] The exhibition booklet, surprisingly, does not provide any contextualisation or ethnographical information on these objects, focusing only briefly on the style, the history of acquisition and attribution studies, and some succinct information on the artists. See Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 17-21.

or the ritualistic use of the cup bearers, as well as the symbolic meaning of the Phemba mother-and-child group are completely discarded in favour of the discourse on style and on connoisseurship. Although the exhibition highlights the importance of the study of style in understanding the objects themselves, the visitor is told nothing on their specific meanings. It also noteworthy that, while preaching the importance of stylistic analysis, nonetheless the main stylistic characteristics of the pieces, for which the hand of the masters would be identifiable, are also not explained. The pieces are thus framed within the discourse on traditional Eurocentric art historical methodologies of connoisseurship and serve mostly to illustrate their results in identifying the hands of "masters." Additionally, the narrative is quite self-referential: it strongly highlights the vital role of Belgian Africanists in the acknowledgment of African objects as art, and their work on styles and attribution, even more than focusing on the African artists.[238] In the digital screen, the contrast is stark: the picture of Albert Maesen (fig. 3.28), researcher for the RMCA, is accompanied by an extended text on his work, researches, methodology; the picture of the sculptor Mazela (fig. 3.29), on the contrary, has a very brief caption. Overall, the objects are framed in the narrative of the Western canon of art history, and this fact is not problematised. This section turns the question of the discovery of African artist in a matter of compilation of individual *ouvres*, and presents it from the perspective of European scholars and connoisseurs performing attributions.

Finally, the very title of this section, "the *man* behind the art" (cursive mine), is problematic, as – gendered as it is – it's not inclusive, and reinforces the established image of a male-dominated art history. This could have easily been avoided, even more so because the cabinet includes a sub-section dedicated to "Female creation" showing clay objects created specifically by Kuba women.

3.2.2. Names of artists and signatures: on objects, artists and authorship

The issue of the identity of the artists, their names and signatures is dealt with in the section "The signature." In this context, the exhibition interprets the signature both as unconscious and conscious, respectively as the style and the physical marks or inscriptions on the objects; both reveal the individuality of the person creating the objects.[239] Artists in Congo started

[238] Van Bockhaven, "Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa," 1086. The digital screen features also images of the publications of these scholars, photographs they took during their fieldworks, and their pictures with African objects. Such is the case of the image of Olbrechts with the *Luba cup bearer*, by the Master of Buli. This is the first photograph seen in the "Man behind the art" digital screen section: ironically, Olbrechts appears more as the "man behind the art" than the creator of the work themselves.

[239] Volper and Baeke, *Unrivalled art*, 38.

signing their names on objects after the arrival of writing with European colonisation, as can be seen in two pieces on display by artist Songo, a bowl and an anthropomorphic container inscribed with "SONGO ASSALI" ("Songo made this"). This two pieces are given quite a bit of relevance in the display's space and narrative (fig. 3.30), as it supposedly reflects the similarities of artists' signatures in Congo and in Europe. However, this type of signatures was not the most common in Central Africa:[240] on some pieces, as the *Nobarra/Negamba* stools in the exhibition (fig. 3.30), the creators applied geometric motifs, which were characteristic of an artist or a workshop.[241] Pieces such as these, while not demonstrating the pre-eminence of the signature practice in Congo, nevertheless helps overcoming the outdated notion of the anonymity of African artists.

The exhibition modernises the idea of African artists, no longer presented only as anonymous perpetuators of art forms defined by the community and tradition. Nevertheless, the perspective in which the exhibition represents "individual creators" and artistic authorship is patently Eurocentric, both in its approach to the names of artists and to the relationship between these individualities and the objects. Western art history has long been – and arguably still is – preoccupied with individual artists as unique, original personalities, "geniuses" defining and changing the course of styles and of art history.[242] Traditional art history in the West worked mostly on a name-based method, identifying and worshipping individual masters and assembling their *ouvre*.[243] Thus, in connection to an artwork, the most important name is deemed to be the one of the artist – the authorship. In many African cultures this is not the case, and this is one of the reasons why (among historical processes and collecting practices) not many names of African artists are known in the West.[244] Indeed, this doesn't depend on the fact that names of artists were not remembered or deemed unimportant in the African context, but on the specific ideologies and cosmologies of art creation in African cultures, and the role of individual artists in the processes of making the

[240] It also needs to be considered that these works by Songo were created in the first decade of 1900. Thus, this signature practice can't with any certainty be projected back in time at a previous period of Central African history.
[241] The exhibition places a strong emphasis on signatures, dedicating a section to it. However, the pieces displaying a signature are only four, and two of them are from the same artist. One is left to wonder if the practice of signing objects by the creators was really that widespread and common in the area during this period.
[242] Clarke, "From theory to practice," 176.
[243] Alisa Lagamma, "Authorship in African art," *African Arts* 31, no. 4 (Autumn 1998), 20; Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works: Fieldwork and Art History," 40. This is also confirmed by the fact that attributing an artwork to a specific artist – mostly if it's a renowned one – can sensibly change the perception of the piece and its value, not only economical, but also scientific and artistic.
[244] This is also due to the fact that for a long time European collectors, ethnographers or anthropologists were not interested in the creator's names, and thus they did not record them.

objects.[245] In African contexts, authorship *per se* was rarely an important attribute of the object.[246] In many cases, objects were in fact not mere objects, but were connected with the world of spirits, had an agency and supernatural powers: these were not activated by the artists, but by diviners or priests, and only after this activation the artefacts were complete and functioning. Thus, objects were perceived to have multiple makers, the artist being only one of them.[247] In Luba culture, for example, the name of the artist was not the most significant, nor the only one connected to the object: there were the names of the patrons, the diviner that consecrated the object and the spirit inhabiting it, and the Luba archetypical artist.[248] Similarly, in other African cultures, the names of the spirit served by the object, the personal name of the sculpture, the name of ritual in which it functioned, the priest who activated it, were more widely remembered than the artist's.[249] In Yoruba societies, artists were recognised for their ability, but not in connection to specific pieces.[250] For the Kongo's *nkisi*, the sculptor's work was not even deemed necessary, as the power of the *nkisi* resided in the medicine. All these complexities are not addressed and problematised in the exhibition. While commendable, the exhibition's specific accent on attribution, artists' names and signatures responds to a very specifically Western preoccupation; by imposing concepts of authorship and highlighting the prevalent relevance of artists – by focusing largely on their (mostly) stylistic signatures – in a Western perspective, the narrative privileges only one aspect of the matter; in turn, it fails to provide relevant information regarding the African system of artists, patrons and society, and to shed light on the complex relationships between objects and their different "creators" and "activators" in the African context.

3.3. The concept of beauty in Africa: an emic perspective in the exhibition?

One of the overarching narratives of the exhibition focuses on "the notion of beauty in Africa." This narrative means to shed light on the indigenous concepts, perceptions and interpretations of beauty in Central African cultures. As such, it aims to offer an emic

[245] Mary Nooter Roberts, "The Naming Game: Ideologies of Luba Artistic Identity," *African Arts* 31, no. 4. *Special issue: Authorship in African Art,* Part 1 (Autumn 1998), 57.
[246] Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works," 41.
[247] Mary Nooter Roberts, "Does an object have a life?," in Mary Nooter Roberts and Susan Vogel, *Exhibition-ism*: *Museums and African art* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1994), 39.
[132] Roberts, "The Naming Game: Ideologies of Luba Artistic Identity," 65-66.
[249] Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works," 42. In Baule culture, for example, if people were asked to evaluate an object, they would ask if it functioned; the name of the maker would never come up, as it held no interest for the people in relation to the objects.
[250] Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works," 49; see also Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, 21-22.

perspective on aesthetic appreciation.[251] The narrative unfolds in three main different sections: "Artistic emulation," "Beauty is a force," and "Don't you find it beautiful?". These sections are meant to demonstrate different aspects of the concept of beauty in Central Africa, respectively: the connection of beauty and inventiveness, the relationship between beauty and function, and the idea of beauty without further symbolical meanings. The narrative is positively refreshing, as African emic perspectives on beauty are often overlooked in African art exhibitions, mostly silenced due to the idea of the absence of the concept of art in Africa or overwritten by Eurocentric evaluations of style and formal analysis.

The main text panel referring to this narrative, titled "How is beauty experienced in Africa?" is found twice in the exhibition (fig. 3.31). The text informs the viewer that African aesthetic notions and systems are little known in Europe, as they have seldom been researched thoroughly. Additionally, it points out how African art has been traditionally treated as group art lacking creativity, with the function of the objects as "its only measure of value" over the aesthetic aspects.[252] However, this statement oversimplifies the matter and is only partially true as, for instance, since Modernism "African art" had been appreciated for aesthetics and formal aspects, with no interest for their meanings, functions, symbolism.[253] Indeed, the text in general remains very vague and uninformative: the last sentence points to the collections of the museum highlighting "issues surrounding the notion of beauty in Africa," but no additional explanation is given, no specific examples nor information on African ideas and perceptions of beauty. The question asked by the panel is not answered in the slight in the panel itself, leaving the visitors as unaware as they (presumably) were at the beginning.[254] Probably the main regret connected to this narrative it's the way it has been constructed: indeed, being spread over three different cabinets far from each other, linked only by the quite uninformative text panel, the narrative is not as efficacious and comprehensible as it could have been. The main thread is easily lost among the other cabinets and thus the overarching message is not delivered clearly. It is a pity, as these sections are potentially innovative and informative.

[251] The term "emic," as defined by Marvin Harris, indicates the operation of elevating the native informant to the status of ultimate judge of the observer's descriptions and analyses. An emic analysis produces statements that a native would accept as appropriate, true and significant. Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 32. See also Thomas McEvilley, "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art"," n.p.

[252] From the exhibtion text panel "How is beauty experienced in Africa?".

[253] Odita, "African art: the concept in European literature," 196. Moreover, it seems that the text panel equates aesthetics with beauty: this simplifies the issue of aesthetic experience in Africa, mostly because no further or specific explanations are offered.

[254] The answers to the question are to be found in the single cabinets dealing with the topics, but once again this is not very clear, and can only be inferred by reading closely the exhibition booklet.

3.3.1. Beauty as inventiveness and originality

The section "Artistic emulation" deals with the issue of African aesthetic evaluation of objects and their beauty in relation to artistic inventiveness and originality. It does so by focusing on the masks used in the *Mukanda* initiation ritual of the Yaka peoples; the cabinet displays five *Mukanda* masks, all comprising the raffia around the face piece (fig. 3.32). The *Mukanda* masks, as the booklet explains, were made during the initiation ritual of young boys, and shown after in the surrounding villages in a public procession.[255] As the masks appeared all together and could thus be compared easily, the makers were always trying to surprise the public with original interpretations (in the colours, themes and shapes, and the different dolls on top of the masks) of the mask prototype. Indeed, the mask had a higher or lower reputation according to how inventive and beautiful it was. Moreover, they had a more or less important role in the procession according to the sculptural quality of the face, which was decided by the maker.[256] This section helps in dissipating the traditional assumption of lack of creativity and originality in African cultures with a concrete case: the explanation of the individual masks points out well the elements of originality that characterise every object. However, for what concerns the experience of beauty and the aesthetic evaluation of the masks among the Yaka, the display and the booklet remain largely vague and generic. The specific connections between inventiveness and beauty, and most importantly the Yaka criteria according to which the objects were deemed beautiful, are not made completely clear.

3.3.2. Beauty and function

The cabinet "Beauty is a force" offers an interesting reflection on the relationship between beauty, aesthetic qualities of the objects, and their function in African societies.[257] Six wooden Luluwa statuettes are displayed in the cabinet (fig. 3.33). These objects were used in two rituals, the *bwanga bwa Bwimpe/Bulenga* and the *bwanga bwa Cibola.* As the booklet explains, these rites were primarily meant to ensure successful pregnancies, the fertility of women and the children's health.[258] *Bwimpe* was also meant to encourage the reincarnation of an ancestor in the newborn. In particular, the statuettes exemplify the idea that in many African cultures, beauty and specific aesthetic qualities are necessary for the very functioning of the object. Indeed, the booklet explains how for the Luluwa, the idea of physical beauty is

[255] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 12.
[256] *Ibidem*.
[257] As I have pointed out other times in this thesis, it is a pity that the information included in the exhibition booklet were not somehow integrated better, at least in some parts in the exhibition's display. Indeed, without the booklet, this section of the exhibition appears only as a aestheticised presentation of wooden sculptures.
[258] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 27.

associated to moral goodness: thus the aesthetic perfection of the statue lured the ancestors to the new child, and concurrently protected them against negative supernatural attacks.[259] The concept of a close relationship between the aesthetic and the ethic is shared by many African cultures: what is physically beautiful is also generally believed to be morally good, and what is ugly to be morally repulsive.[260] Consequently, sculptures are believed to be beautiful when they embody moral socio-cultural values. The very function of these sculptures is enhanced by their beauty: in fact, their beautiful appearance pleases the spirits and the ancestors, attracting them to seek a connection with the living.[261] This exhibition's section effectively points out how in Africa beauty and function are not mutually exclusive, and offers an interesting view on indigenous perspectives and concepts of beauty within their own system of values, beliefs and social norms. Moreover, the booklet explains some of the beauty criteria of the Luluwa: round powerful calves, long necks, bulging foreheads are considered typical standards of beauty; scarifications, hairstyles and adornments are signs of laborious beauty, believed to show civilisation. Thus the exhibition offers here some concrete information on African standards and criteria of beauty – which do not necessarily equate European criteria, opening up to new different perspectives. I maintain that what is here only touched upon could have been explored and extended way more into the exhibition, in order to give more space to African voices. Moreover, it would've been interesting to see some reflection or information on how Luluwa displayed and kept these objects, and how they looked at them in context, to show how aesthetic appreciation does not necessarily only happen within an aestheticised museum display or when objects are translated into art pieces.

3.4. European views on "African art" and their physical impact on African objects

Another narrative of the exhibition focuses on the relationships between Central Africa and Europe, mostly in the 19th and 20th century. This narrative addresses two main aspects: the European views and perceptions of African objects, and the impact of the European presence in Africa on the artistic production. The first one will be analysed here, as it relates directly to perception, representation and the impact of material and conceptual appropriation on African objects in Europe. The theme of European views on African artworks is explored through the display of objects that were modified as a result of Western collecting practices. The cabinet's text panel "European transformations" (fig. 3.34) explains how African artworks were often

[259] *Idem*, 67; Constantine Petridis, "Bwanga bwa Cibola antrhopomorphic statue," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 35.
[260] Van Damme, *Beauty and ugliness in African art and thought*, 10.
[261] Volper and Baeke, *Exhibition booklet*, 67; see also Van Damme, *Beauty and ugliness in African art and thought*, 26.

cleaned, sawn, painted or had parts removed by Europeans collectors; these modifications were based on Western assumptions of what "beautiful African objects" should look like.[262] The text thus mentions both the physical modifications of objects and the perceptions on which these transformations were based. Hence the narrative sets interesting premises for a discussion and reflection on both physical and conceptual appropriation, but remains somewhat superficial: the displays are mostly focused on showing the material, historical modifications, and while the text mentions the impact of the "aesthetic considerations [...] on the study and the presentation of African artefacts in museums"[263] it doesn't elaborate on this issue, and mostly doesn't problematise how museums (even the exhibition itself) still enforce this through their representation.

These "aesthetic interventions"[264] modifying the aspect, and thus the nature of the objects, were carried out on many pieces and in different ways, even already at the moment of collecting. The three cabinets dealing with this topic showcase Tshokwe *chihongo* masks, Kongo *minkisi* and Luba prestige staffs. Selection of specific parts, that created a fictive image of a whole category of objects, is for instance the case of the "masks," as the cabinet "A disembodied face" shows and as has been disclosed earlier in this chapter. The section "Cleaned works" (fig. 3.35) displays eight Congolese *minkisi* in different state of conservation and stages of their lives, from pieces partially or completely cleaned of nails, mirrors and charged substances, to works that were never consecrated, to objects almost untouched. The exhibition booklet explains how the different aspects of the *nkisi* depend on the changing taste of Western collectors and the different collecting practices, which went from the removal of everything that was considered a hideous and dirty addition (everything that did not comply with the classical, clean aspect of a polished statue) to the preservation of the object as "authentic" as possible;[265] this even resulted in the addition of fake magical substances to some pieces, to make them seem more authentic. Of course, these modifications were not only highly detrimental for the scientific study of the objects, as the booklet explains, but also for the perception and representation of African "art," which was distorted for long time.[266]
Similar transformations invested Luba staffs, displayed in the section "Mutilated works." These objects functioned as prestige symbols for chiefs and dignitaries: they preserved and recounted the history of the chiefdom, their iconography referring to ancestral stories or mythological chiefs. In the West, many of them were sawn to remove the unsculpted shaft

[262] From the exhibition's text panel "European transformation."
[263] *Ibidem*.
[264] Volper and Baeke, *Unrivalled art*, 85.
[265] *Idem*, 81.
[266] *Ibidem*; Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, "Cane-sceptre top," in Volper, *Unrivalled art. Spellbinding artefacts*, 63.

and keep only the upper part, which was sculpted with figurative or anthropomorphic images.[267] These practices turned the staffs into pure sculptures, through a physical modification based on Western aesthetic principles. This Western practice of intervention proved harmful for the study of the objects and for their material and symbolical integrity, as it transformed the objects into something else, physically and conceptually, from what they were.

These sections are interesting from a post-colonial point of view, in the way in which they look at how African objects have been interpreted – their different lives and stages of life – and how this had an outcome on the objects themselves and their subsequent understanding.[268] However, the narrative could've taken a step further in the discussion of appropriation. Some reviews have pointed out that the exhibition remains very traditional, keeping the representation of African art outside of contemporaneity;[269] indeed, this section of the exhibition could have been an interesting possibility to reflect on contemporary museological representational dilemmas and debates surrounding these objects.

[267] Volper and Baeke, *Unrivalled art*, 85.
[268] This is reminiscent of the last part of Susan Vogel's fictional documentary on Fang sculpture, reflecting on the impact that the transformation in the perception of the object had on the physical object itself. See Susan Vogel, Fang: an Epic Journey (Prince Street Pictures Inc: New York, 2002).
[269] DeBlock, "The AfricaMuseum of Tervuren, Belgium," 275; Mertens, "Africa in motion: bringing heritage to life," 83.

Conclusion

This thesis focused on the challenges and critical aspects of the Western museological representation of African objects and art in the context of post-colonialism. It especially considered the relationships between epistemological frameworks, display paradigms and appropriation, focusing on the case study of the semi-permanent exhibition *Unrivalled art*, at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. The core research question concerned how the exhibition's narratives, the curatorial strategies, and the displays represented and interpreted African "art," and to what extent they reconceptualised the objects according to Eurocentric categories and values.

The theoretical framework of this thesis includes post-colonial studies on museum decolonisation, focusing in particular on the decolonisation of the representation of Africa and African art in museums. In this context, this research is situated within scholarly and museological debates on the Western paradigms of representation and display of African objects, and their appropriative aspects. As for methodology, the survey of the literature on the *Unrivalled art* exhibition has proved fruitful as a first step to identify the main critical issues, as well as the overlooked aspects, in the scholarly study of the exhibition. Following this, the visual analysis of the exhibition's displays, conducted both through on-site visits and through analysis of photographs of the exhibition, allowed a first-hand and detailed study of the curatorial choices and display strategies. Moreover, through the in-depth examination of the exhibition booklet, it was possible to evaluate the specific narratives of the exhibition, and how the objects were individually explained, framed and represented within these narratives. This procedure was accompanied by the parallel study of the exhibition catalogue, which served as support for the understanding of the objects displayed, and was employed to compare the information provided in the exhibition booklet with that present in the catalogue.

The analysis of the exhibition has shown how the art paradigm, which represents the objects as beautiful art masterpieces through an aestheticised and formalist display, scrupulous lighting, and reduced ethnographic information, is decisively predominant. This paradigm underpins also the epistemological framework of the narratives, which focus on the ideas of fine art, of artistic styles and influences, of beauty and the reception of African art in Europe. This placement of the objects in the realm of "fine art" proposes a partial and biased understanding of the pieces, which is only partly and unevenly counterbalanced by the exhibition booklet's ethnographical information. Being physically and intellectually decontextualised from their original meanings and purposes, the objects are also conceptually reinterpreted and appropriated according to Western art historical categorisations, such as

"fine" and "applied arts" or "sculpture," and re-evaluated within Eurocentric aesthetic and cultural systems of values. Indeed, the traditional presentation of African masks and sculptures abides to the Western conventions of conceiving and displaying "traditional African art," following a fictitious, Eurocentric and modernist categorisation of African material culture. The narratives dealing with style, artists and artists' signatures, though seemingly allowing for a discussion on artistic practices, artists' working methods, and socio-cultural systems of art production, end up focusing rather confusingly on connoisseurship, Belgian scholars' stylistic categorisations and sparse representations of stylistic influences between Congolese cultures. In this representation, Eurocentric art historical evaluations and Western art history's preoccupations with stylistic analysis and categorisation, connoisseurship, attribution and authorship, are privileged over the objects' indigenous meanings and functions. The analysis of some specific cabinet's narratives, especially those on the African concepts of beauty, has highlighted the presence of some innovative and stimulating perspectives. However, the dispersive arrangement of this narrative in the exhibition's space, and the lack of precise information on indigenous concepts of beauty and aesthetic evaluation, produces and uneven and quite disappointing outcome. Based on these results, I have argued that the most controversial and appropriative aspect of the exhibition is not merely the objects' presentation as "art," but the predominance of specifically Western ideas of art and aesthetics, which overwrite the originating culture's values and impede a clear understanding of emic aesthetic and socio-cultural systems. In light of its recent decolonisation efforts, the Museum could have strove to attain a more innovative, inclusive and less Eurocentric representation.

This thesis contributes to the scholarship on the renewed AfricaMuseum, adding some reflections to the ongoing discourse on the Museum's decolonisation, especially on its past and present responsibilities in the communication and representation of African cultures – both ancient and contemporary. Moreover, the issues and questions raised by this research will prove fruitful in the debate on the current strategies of display and knowledge formation on African objects in museums. In this regard, this work has consisted mostly on critical analysis and theoretical deconstruction. Surely, the deconstruction of current museographical paradigms is the first step to acknowledge and overcome the continuous presence of biased systems of values and colonial legacies in Western museums. Further research on this topic could surely try to propose new solutions to represent African art in the AfricaMuseum, mostly by researching and including indigenous ways of appreciating and conceptualising Congolese art. Moreover, future research could consider the reception of the exhibition, both

within Belgian or Western international audiences and members of the Congolese Diaspora in Belgium.

Illustrations

Fig. 1.1: View of the main building of the Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Fig. 1.2: The main building of the Museum as seen from the new entrance pavilion. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 2.1: Room of "Art congolais" at the Brussels-Tervuren Exposition, 1897.

Fig. 2.2: View of the "Ethnographic room" at the Brussels-Tervuren Exposition, 1897.

Fig. 2.3: View of the “Ethnographic room” at the Brussels-Tervuren Exposition, 1897.

Fig. 2.4: View of some cabinets displaying ethnographic objects and statuettes, according to Haulleville’s organisation. Musée du Congo Belge, ca. 1910.

Fig. 2.5: “Indigenous art room” in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, ca. 1937.

Fig. 2.6: “Congo art room” in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, 1963.

Fig. 3.1: Opening panel at the entrance of the *Unrivalled art* exhibition. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.2: View of a cabinet with African sculptures. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.3: View of a cabinet with African masks. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.4: View of the “Masks” display. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.5: View of the “Masks” display.

Fig. 3.6: View of the “Masks” display.

Fig. 3.7: Anthropo-zoomorfic Luba helmet-mask, 2nd quarter of the 19th century. EO.0.0.23470. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

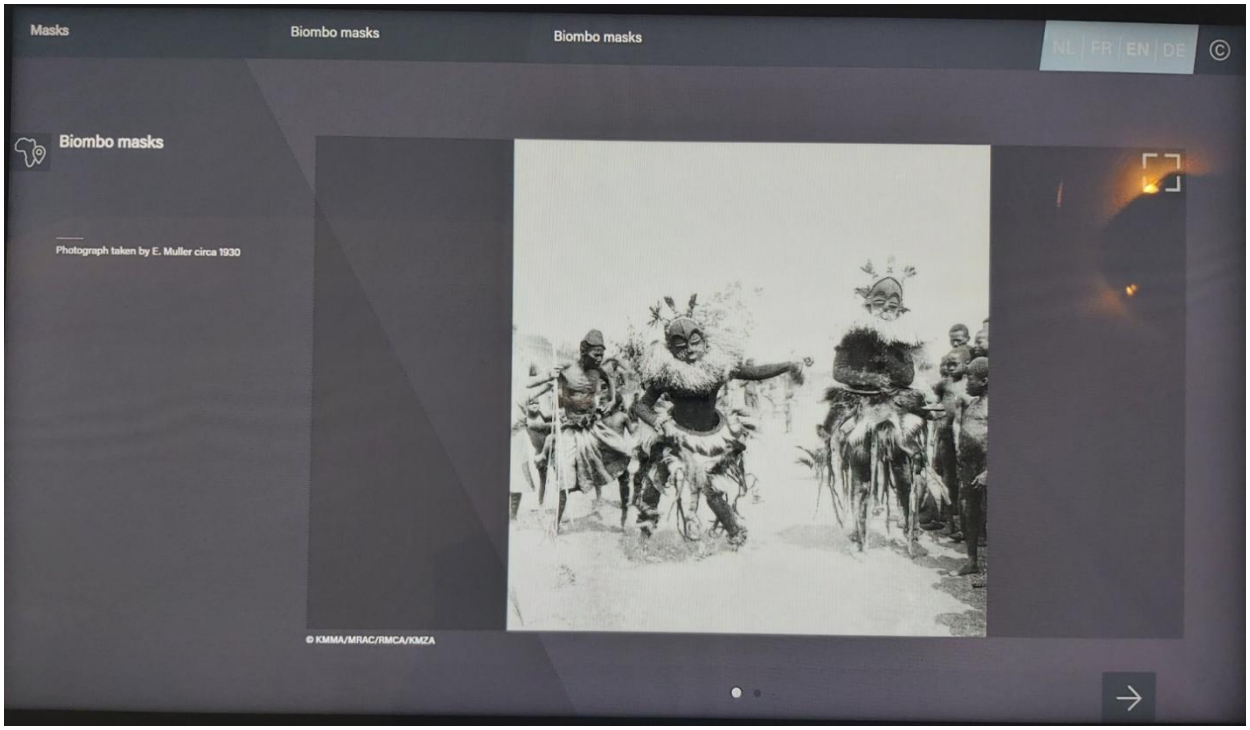

Fig. 3.8: Digital screen in the exhibition, showing a photograph of Biombo masks in context.

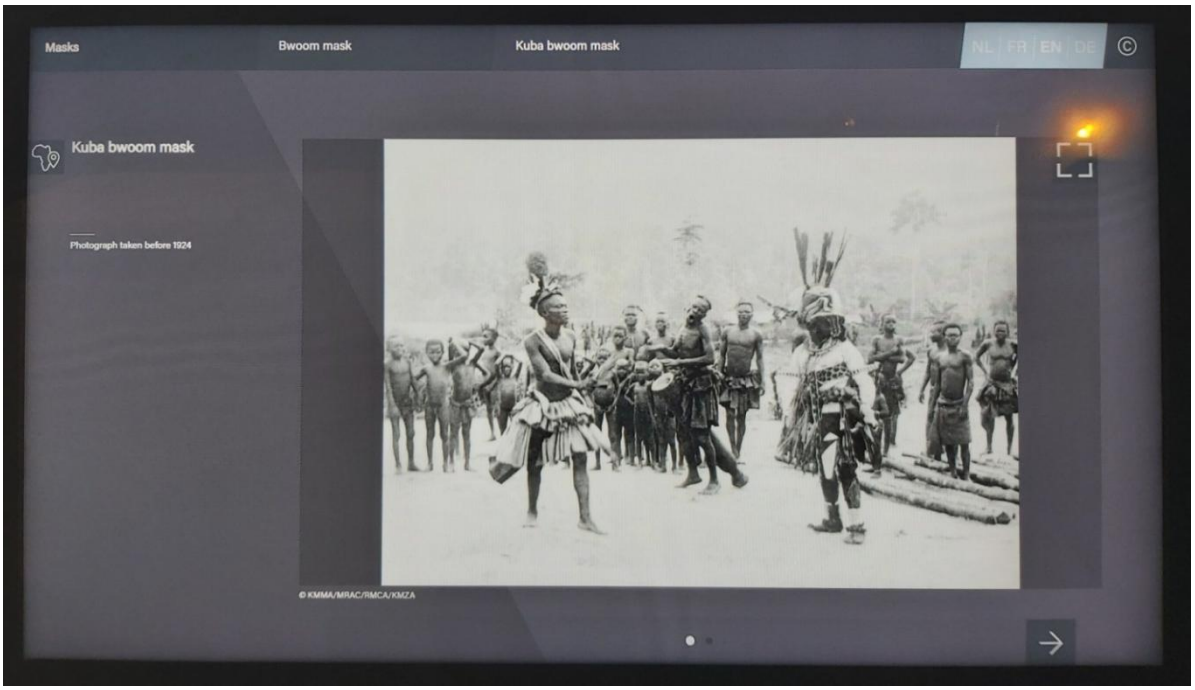

Fig. 3.9: Digital screen in the exhibition, showing a photograph of Kuba *bwoom* masks in context.

Fig. 3.10: Section “A disembodied face” showing *Cihongo*/*tshihongo* masks (Tshokwe).

Fig. 3.11: *Cihongo*/*tshihongo* mask (Tshokwe). EO.0.0.33780. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.12: View of a section of the "Sculpture" cabinet with African statues. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.13: View of a section of the "Sculpture" cabinet with African statues in the exhibition. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.14: Hemba *Lusingiti* statue, 2nd quarter of the 19th century, EO.1972.1.1. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.15: Ndengese statue, Late 3rd quarter of the 19th century, EO.0.0.3699. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

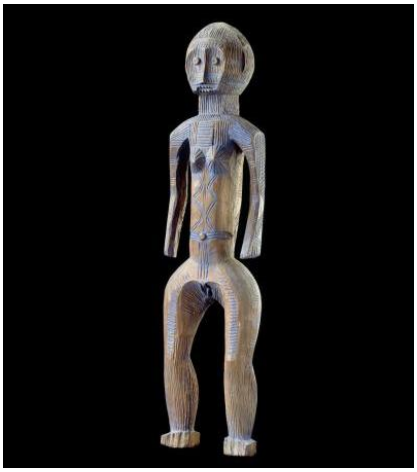

Fig. 3.16: *Kakungu* statue (Metoko), ca. 1920-1930, EO.0.0.32672. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.17: Anthropomorphic *Mpwuu* statue (Yansi), 4th quarter of the 19th century, RD Congo, EO.0.0.26509. Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

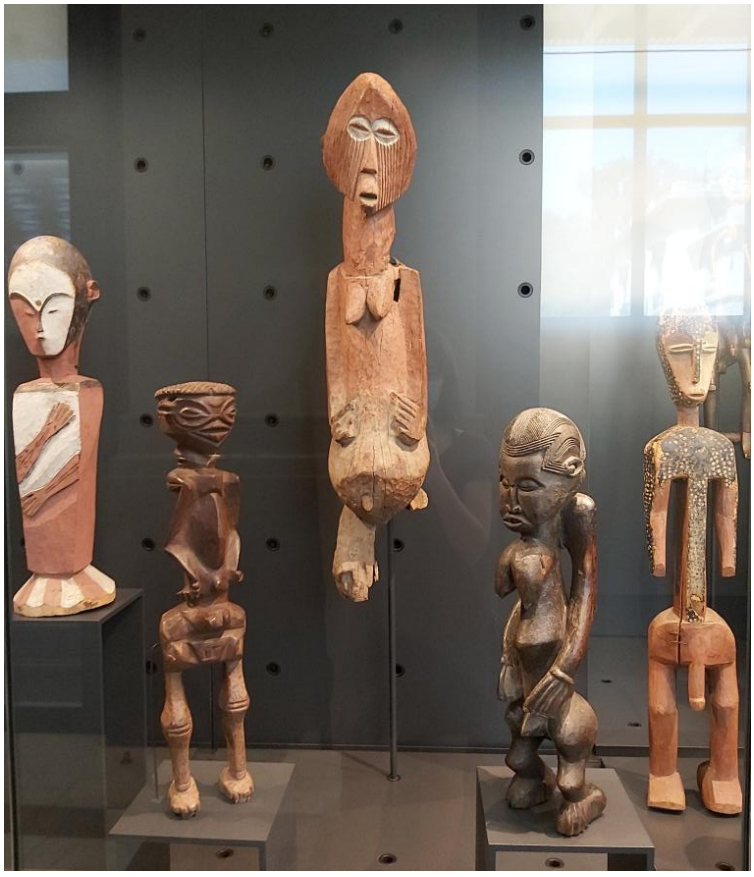

Fig. 3.18: Anthropomorphic *Mpwuu* statue (in the middle) in the "Sculpture" section.

Fig. 3.19: View of “The importance of the container” section, with a *nkisi* statuette (Kotshi), and *nkisi nkonde mungundu* statue (Yombe).

Fig. 3.20: View of the *Nkisi nkonde mungundu* statue (Yombe), 3rd quarter of the 19th century. EO.0.0.22436.

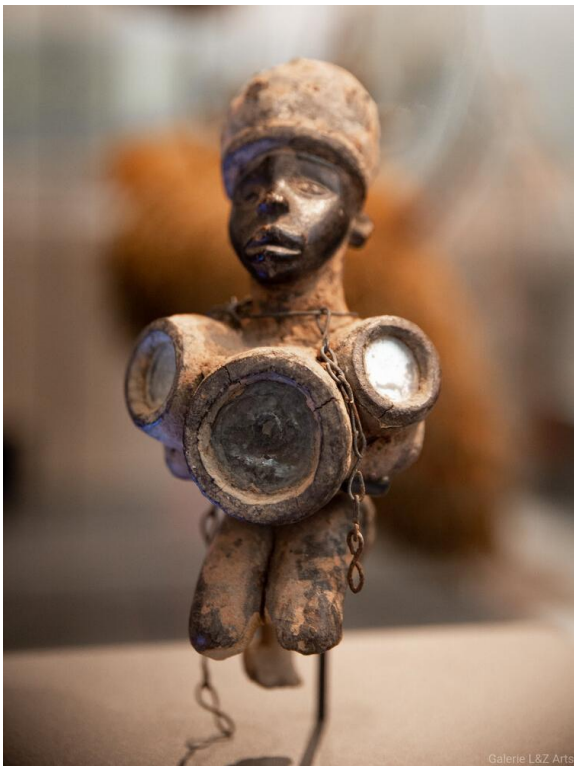

Fig. 3.21: *Nkisi* statuette (Kotshi). 3rd quarter of the 19th century, Angola. EO.1967.63.225.

Fig. 3.22: Section of the “Applied arts” display showing shields and weapons.

Fig. 3.23: Section of the “Applied arts” display showing jars, vases and various objects.

3.24: View of the cabinet dedicated to stylistic analysis, signatures and artists.

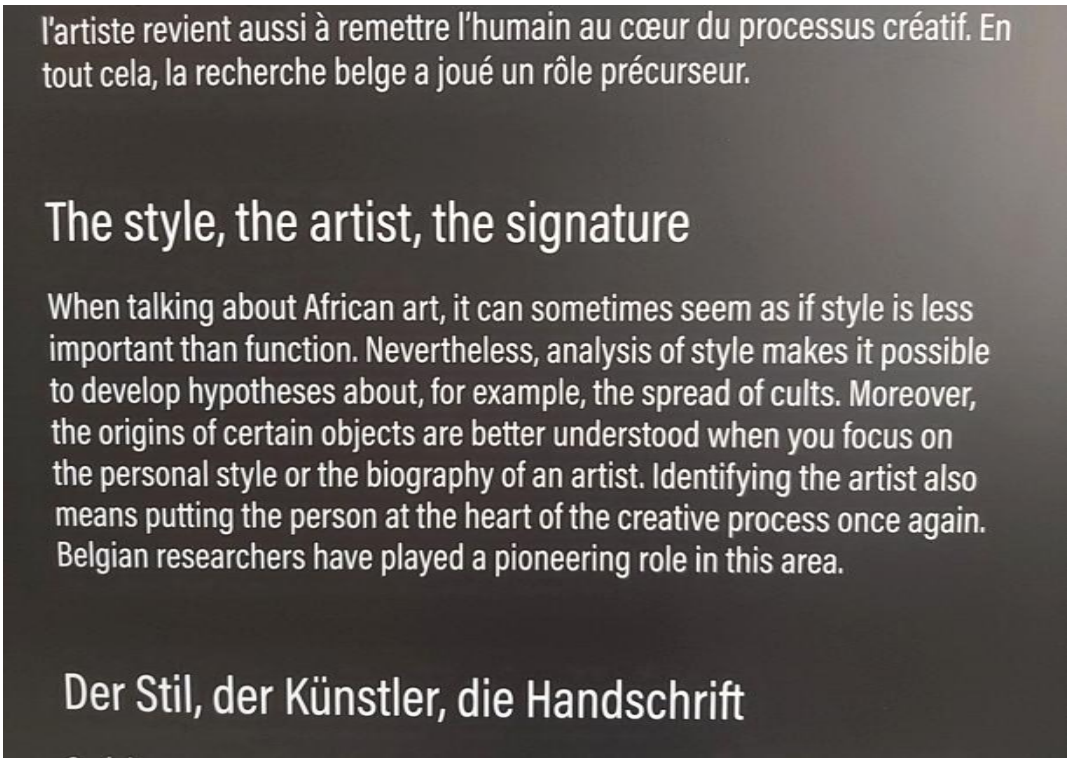

Fig. 3.25: Cabinet text panel on "The style, the artist, the signature." *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.26: View of the display cabinet "The man behind the art – a question of style."

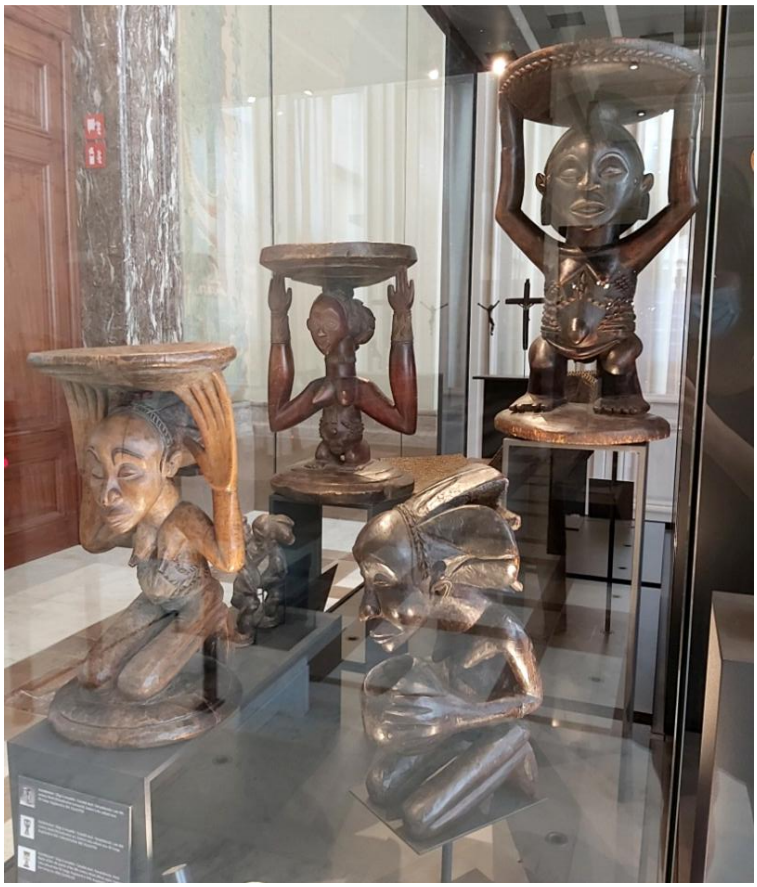

Fig.3.27 : View of the Luba caryatid stools and cup bearer.

Fig. 3.28: Digital screen on Albert Maesen and his methodology of study.

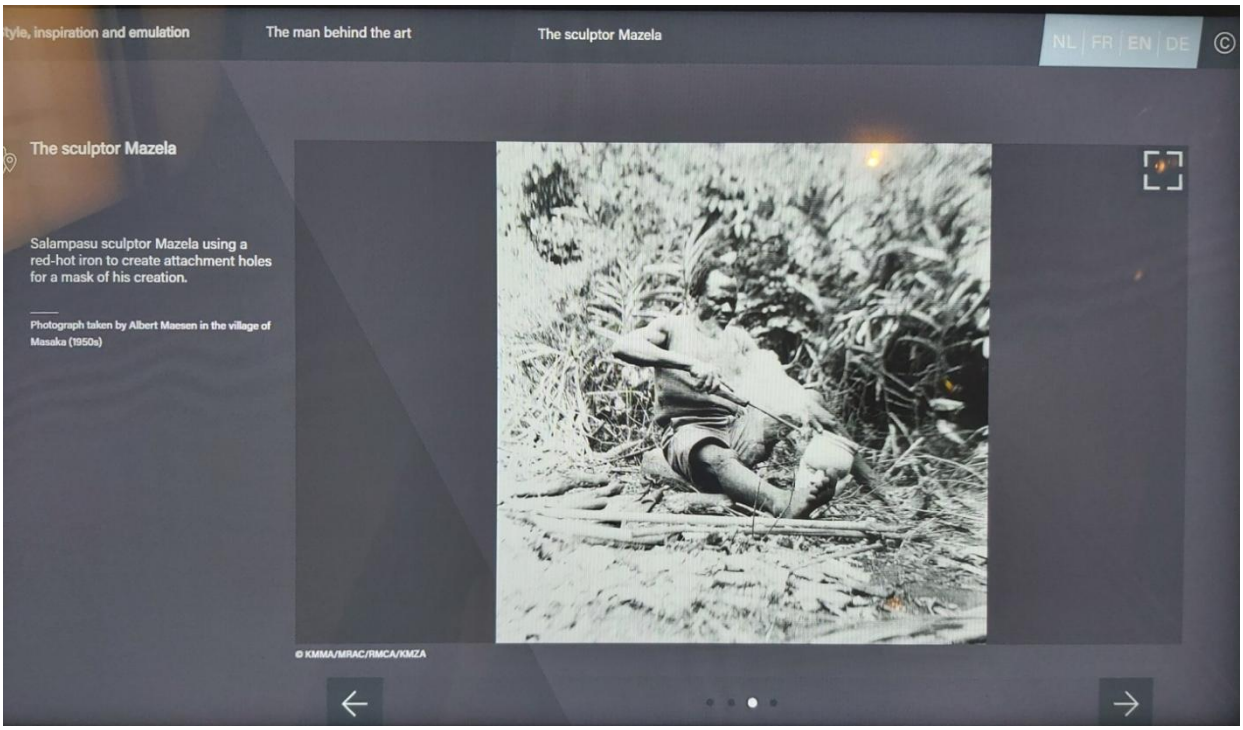

Fig. 3.29: Digital screen showing the sculptor Mazela at work.

Fig. 3.30: Objects displayed in the "Signature" section: two pieces made by the artist Songo and two *nobarra/negbamba* stools.

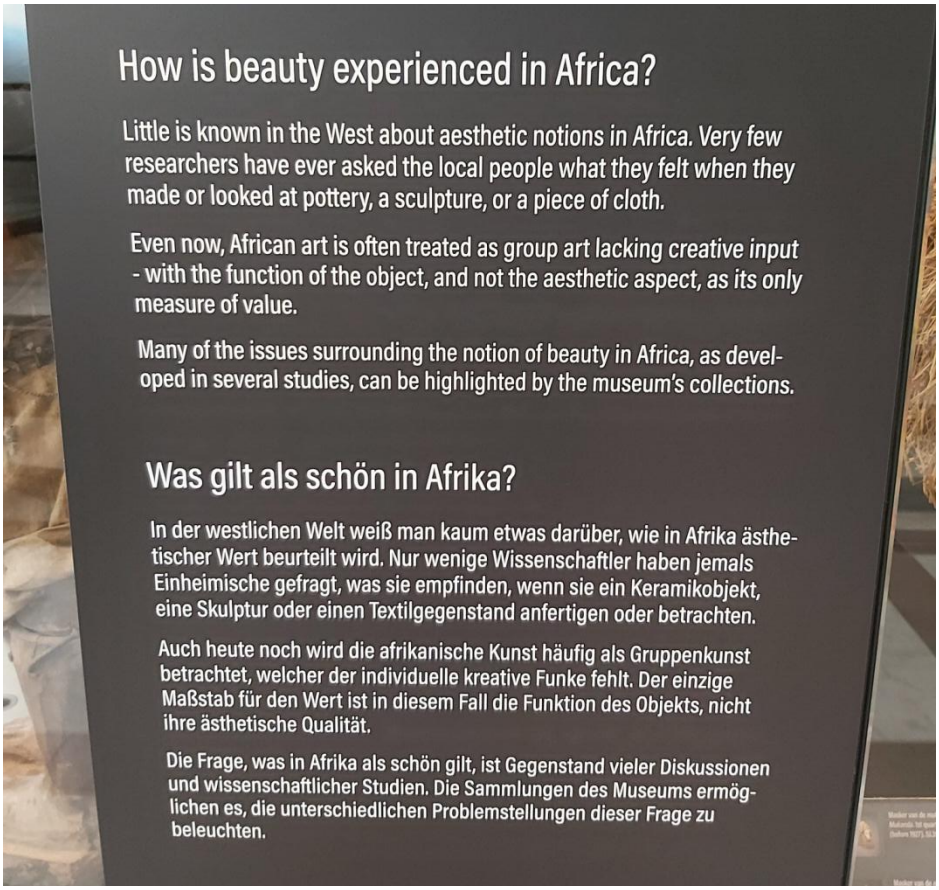

Fig. 3.31: Text panel on experiences of beauty in Africa. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.32: View of the display of Yaka masks in the “Artistic emulation” section. Note on the left the text panel “How is beauty experienced in Africa?”.

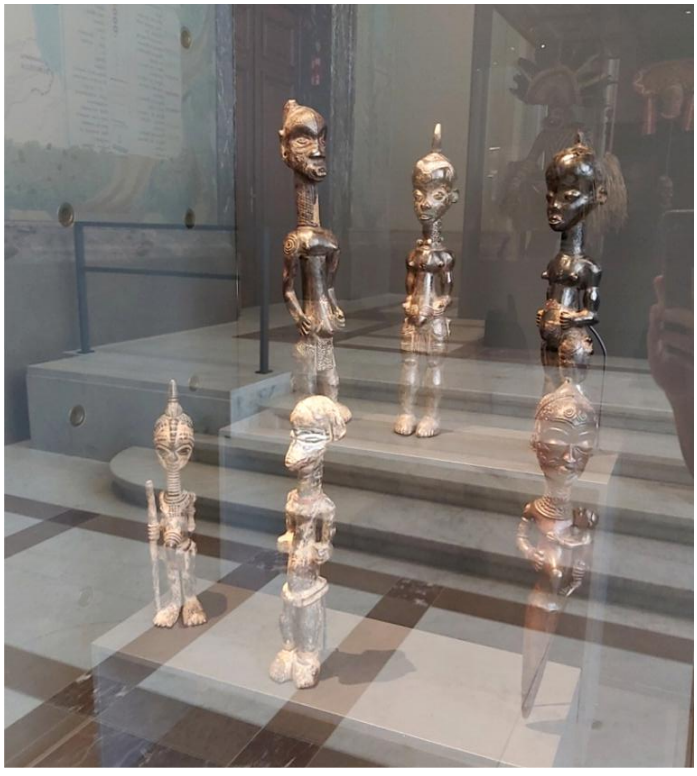

Fig. 3.33: Display of *Luluwa* statuettes in the “Beauty is a force” section.

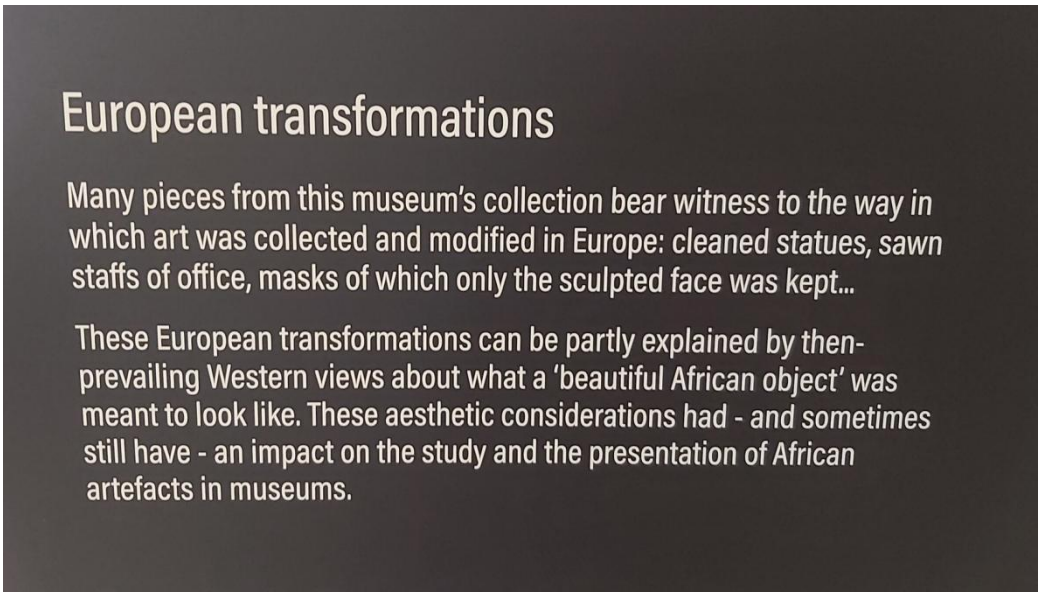

Fig. 3.34: Text panel on "European transformations" of African objects. *Unrivalled art* exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.

Fig. 3.35: View of the section "Cleaned works," showing *nkisi* in different states of integrity.

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Fig. 2.1: Couttenier, "'One speaks softly, like in a sacred place'," 27, fig. 8.
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Fig. 2.3: Jarrassé, "Art nouveau ou art congolais à Tervuren?," 135, fig. 5.
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Fig. 2.5: Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 484, fig. 2.
Fig. 2.6: Van Beurden, "The Value of Culture: Congolese Art," 484, fig. 3.
Fig. 3.1: Photograph of the author.
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Fig. 3.35: Photograph of the author.

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