

# Contested Heritage in Europe and Africa

Representation, Commemoration, and  
Memorialization of a Connected Past

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## **Style Congo: Heritage and Heresy**

Reappraising Art Nouveau in Brussels

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### 3 Style Congo: Heritage and Heresy

#### Reappraising Art Nouveau in Brussels

*Kathleen James-Chakraborty*

The murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States, triggered Black Lives Matter protests in many European countries. Of these, some of the largest and most consequential were held in Belgium, where they galvanized those who were already outraged by the way in which immigrants from Africa and their descendants were often treated. What is now the Democratic Republic of Congo was a Belgian colony from 1908 to 1960, and before that the Congo Free State was from 1885 until 1908 the private property of the Belgian King Leopold II. Belgium assumed control of the much smaller former German colonies that now comprise Burundi and Rwanda under a League of Nations mandate following World War I; they became independent in 1962. Over 10,000 marched in Brussels on 7 June, and smaller rallies were held across the course of the month in a number of other Belgian cities.<sup>1</sup> Statues of Leopold II, whose thirst for income from rubber and ivory triggered an international scandal in the first years of the twentieth century, were defaced and several were taken down by local authorities.<sup>2</sup> Belgians have for more than 20 years been slowly coming to terms with their colonial past, but these protests appear for some to have broken a dam, encouraging more widespread public recognition of the degree to which colonialism shaped their national culture in ways that they have too often chosen not to acknowledge. These discussions matter not only to Belgium but also to the European Union, for which Brussels serves as the de facto capital. The city is the seat of most of the EU's principal institutions. Their presence, as well as that of many migrants and descendants of migrants from Belgium's African colonies, contributes to the city's cosmopolitan character, and to its centrality to Europe's confrontation with its colonial heritage.

Widespread acknowledgement of the genocidal nature of the Congo Free State in Belgium as well as elsewhere dates above all to the publication in 1998 by the journalist Adam Hochschild of *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*.<sup>3</sup> Hochschild drew renewed attention to one of the ugliest chapters in the history of Europe's colonialization of Africa, or indeed any other corner of the world. The story, exposed most notably by George Washington Williams and William Henry Shepherd, who were both African American, as well as the Irish nationalist Roger Casement, had never been entirely forgotten by Blacks on either side of the Atlantic, while Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1899, also kept it alive, especially among students of

English literature.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent Belgian colonial regime was less murderous, but still deeply exploitive. The Belgian contribution to the violence that immediately followed Congo's independence in 1960 and resulted in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, its first prime minister, further tarnished the reputation of the former colonizer.<sup>5</sup>

There is a striking difference between the hesitancy of the national government to effect change and the forcefulness with which those attentive to the role of art, especially in public space, have advocated for it. By the end of June 2020, when King Philippe issued a letter of regret on the 60th anniversary of Congolese independence, it looked momentarily as if substantive, formal progress was about to be achieved.<sup>6</sup> A special parliamentary commission was established to examine the country's colonial past. Meanwhile, the government of Brussels and the capital region hired a team of 14 experts to write a report addressing how to decolonize its public spaces. Subsequent political progress, however, has stalled. The commission failed to reach a consensus. The comprehensive apology for which many had hoped was not issued, nor were any plans made for the reparations some had demanded.<sup>7</sup> It also remains unclear how many of the recommendations made to the city in February 2022 will be implemented. These included the establishment of a prominently situated national monument to the victims of Belgian colonization, the establishment of a documentation centre and a museum plus the creation of a dumping ground for those previous memorials not of high enough artistic quality to be relegated to museums, as well as the commissioning of new monuments and memorials. This committee was insistent, however, that such gestures alone would be insufficient. The report stated,

What is it worth to fill Brussels with Lumumba statues, so to speak, when Belgians of Sub-Saharan African descent are being set back in education, cannot find a job or are unable to find a job commensurate with their level of education, are discriminated against in the housing market, die in suspicious circumstances during police interventions, etc.?<sup>8</sup>

### **Exposing the Links Between Art Nouveau and the Congo**

Neither the national nor the municipal government has yet made substantive progress in decolonizing public spaces, much less eliminating the racism that too often continues to constrict the opportunities available to Black Belgian citizens and residents and subjects them to state violence. Nonetheless, progress is being made in the cultural sphere at least to alert those living in or visiting Belgium who are interested in its artistic patrimony to the degree to which one of the most celebrated chapters in its artistic history is imbricated in the exploitation of the Congo. It has become impossible for anyone with more than a cursory knowledge of the subject to ignore the links between Art Nouveau, the innovative art and architectural style that flourished in Brussels as well as elsewhere in the country in the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century, and the violence unleashed in the same years in the Congo Free State. This matters because the break Art Nouveau made with

academic traditions, its link to modern technology and its sensuous ornament, as well as its lavish use of fine materials, have become fundamental to Brussels's and Belgium's self-image and a cornerstone of its vibrant tourist industry. The sources of the second to last may have been African, as the final entry on this list indisputably was. In particular, the tropical hardwoods and ivory that flooded into Belgium by the 1890s, and that continued to contribute to its artistic culture for decades afterwards, were obtained by highly exploitative and even murderous means that attracted intense international criticism even at the time and even from those who otherwise supported empire-building in Europe and the United States.

Artists were at the forefront of confronting these connections. For instance, following a visit she made to Brussels in 1989, Judith Barry explored the ties between Art Nouveau and the Congo, and thus between African and modern European art, in an installation she entitled "Work of the Forest" (Figure 3.1). First exhibited in 1992, when it was shown at the Foundation for Architecture in Brussels, it consists of a nearly circular chamber, which can be entered from three directions. This was inspired, in part, by the writings of Marcel Proust and constructed out of wood in an Art Nouveau style intended to recall the setting in which products and artworks from the Congo were displayed at the Brussels International Exposition held in the suburb of Tervuren in 1897. A three-channel video, accompanied by sound, is projected onto curving screens that envelop the viewer; an additional display case holds an installation of art from the Congo. The combination is intended, in the artist's words, "to stage conflicting histories of African art, the Belgian Congo and Art Nouveau".<sup>9</sup> The visuals capture the lushness of Art Nouveau interiors,



*Figure 3.1* Judith Barry, *The Work of the Forest* (1992), presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

while showing them haunted by this deeply problematic past, while the early date of the work reminds one that artists had been ploughing this furrow even before Hochschild's book was published.

In this pioneering work, Barry, who is from the United States and is currently a professor in the Art, Culture, and Technology programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, established several of the themes addressed by the artists and scholars who have subsequently sought to enhance public awareness of these ties. These include a focus on the rooms in the 1897 exhibition designed and fitted out by Art Nouveau luminaries Paul Hankar, Henry van de Velde and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, at the direction of Edmond van Eetveld, the administrator of the Congo Free State, who also commissioned a luxurious mansion from the style's inventor, Victor Horta. Equally prescient was the attention Barry paid to the Royal Botanical Garden Leopold established in his palace at Leuken, whose palm houses sheltered plants imported from the Free State, and her awareness that art from the Congo had already an impact in Europe well before Pablo Picasso quoted African masks in his breakthrough painting "Demoiselles d'Avignon".<sup>10</sup>

More than a decade after Barry first exhibited "Work of the Forest", an exhibition entitled "The Memory of the Congo, the Colonial Times" held in 2005 at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren prompted another visitor from the United States, this time the historian Debora Silverman, to explore the links between Art Nouveau and the Congo Free State. It alerted Silverman to the many ways in which the Congo infused a second exhibition, celebrating the 175th anniversary of the Belgian state, that was on view in Brussels's Museum of Art and History. It included works commissioned by Leopold himself that showcased Congolese hardwoods and ivory.<sup>11</sup> In a series of articles published between 2011 and 2013, Silverman not only focused on the use of such materials by turn-of-the-century artists working in a variety of styles but also reminded her readers that Art Nouveau had repeatedly been termed Style Congo.<sup>12</sup> While this had already been pointed out by Tom Flynn and Werner Adriaenssens, Silverman made a series of new and more controversial claims.<sup>13</sup> These include that the style's characteristic whiplash curves were inseparable from the gruesome colonial exploitation of natural as well as human and animal resources. She paid particular attention to the tendrils of the rubber vines that were the source of much of the colony's original wealth, as well as the *chicotte* whips with which the local labour coerced to extract that wealth were beaten. Silverman's fascination with the role that ivory from the Congo played in Symbolist as well as Art Nouveau sculptures prompted her as well to see traces of elephants in the motifs designed by van de Velde, who in his writings abhorred representation and advocated instead for the importance of ornament infused with the energy of abstract lines.<sup>14</sup>

Scholarship like Silverman's is beginning to have an impact upon how Art Nouveau and older art referencing race are presented in Brussels.<sup>15</sup> Today, although visitors to the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium are still greeted in the bookshop by celebrations of the city's Art Nouveau architectural heritage, when they reach the galleries, they are reminded of the connections between the sensuous ivory carvings at which they are looking and the atrocities that were committed in

order to supply Belgian artisans with this luxurious material (the same museum has also mounted a thoughtful display of Rubens's sketch "Four Studies of a Moor's Head", previously known as "Negro heads").<sup>16</sup> At a time when cross-cultural displays are increasingly understood to provide a means of highlighting the extent of early modern cultural exchanges, African art, however, remains beyond the domain of this centrally located setting.<sup>17</sup> It is instead confined to the AfricaMuseum (formerly the Royal Museum for Central Africa) on the city's outskirts. This institution's displays, combining ethnography, natural history and the fine arts, remain controversial even following revisions in 2005 and 2018.<sup>18</sup>

When the city of Brussels declared the city the capital of Art Nouveau and 2023 the year of Art Nouveau, it was no longer possible to ignore the shadow that the Congo cast over a style whose local origins Silverman herself had once understood as an example of socially oriented artistic progress, although the colonial contribution was certainly glossed over in the original announcement of the program.<sup>19</sup> Ostensibly the impetus for the event was to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the completion of Horta's Hotel Tassel.<sup>20</sup> This building is generally seen as marking the invention of his characteristic fusing of structure and ornament and thus the commencement of the style that since the 1960s has been immensely popular for the way in which it signaled a modernist break with the historicist decoration characteristic of much of the nineteenth century, while preserving the emphasis on craftsmanship and materials that much later modernism would lack.<sup>21</sup> In actuality, the two designations were probably intended above all to attract tourists through a programme of events, as well as to enhance local appreciation of this celebrated chapter in the city's architectural history, one which was long appreciated for the contrast it provided to the bombastically monumental classicism Leopold II himself clearly favored.<sup>22</sup>

The programme included the usual mix of exhibitions, lectures and tours of buildings, only some of which are otherwise open to the public. Its signature exhibition, "Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau", was staged from 18 October 2023 to 14 January 2024 at Bozar, a building Horta designed much later in his career. Bozar is a multi-purpose centre for fine arts that includes cinema and concert as well as exhibition and conference spaces; its extensive programming, which encompasses dance and theatre as well as classical music, places it at the heart of the city's cultural life across many different aspects of the visual and performing arts. Although the exhibition's focus was more on the process through which Horta crafted his ornament and on how each of his major Art Nouveau dwellings suited the needs and interests of its client, "Victor Horta and the Grammar of Art Nouveau" addressed the issue of the Congo head on. Silverman featured thrice as one of the talking heads who provided an engaging way to present the latest scholarship to viewers who might never have bought the catalogue or lingered long over the drawings, photographs and plaster casts of which the display was otherwise largely composed. She also contributed an essay to the catalogue.<sup>23</sup>

The inclusion of these dissonant notes in what was otherwise a celebration of beautiful architecture erected in the service of Belgium's Labor Party, whose headquarters, demolished in 1965, Horta designed, as well as those who commissioned

houses that ranged from comfortable to ostentatious demonstrates the impact that the artists like Barry and art historians like Silverman have had in ensuring that even official commemorations cannot remain blind to the fact that the context out of which Art Nouveau emerged included the exploitation of the Congo's people, its flora and its fauna.

### **“Style Congo: Heritage & Heresy”**

Hardly surprisingly, the most probing artistic exposure of the ongoing impact of this exploitation was not listed in the “Capital of Art Nouveau Brussels 2023” press release. The exhibition “Style Congo: Heritage & Heresy” closed just over a month before the Horta exhibit opened. Its purpose was a far more explicit decolonization project than any city marketing effort could easily encompass. In the introduction to the catalogue, the curators, Sammy Baloji, Silvia Franceschini, Nikolaus Hirsch and Estelle Lecaille, stated:

By making visible the mutual dependencies and interrelations in the forms and spatial practices that migrated and mutated between Belgium and Congo from the late nineteenth-century until the mid-twentieth century, the projects here seek to make sense of the captivating power of design that gave eloquent physical form to fictive projections of the Congo, in situations where subaltern perspectives were, and continue to be, marginalized. The question is whether acknowledging, rereading, and analyzing the role played by these margins in modernity can help construct a new concept of heritage.<sup>24</sup>

This unabashedly decolonizing effort was situated neither in the city's centre, where Bozart and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts are located, nor on its outskirts, but in a residential neighbourhood no further from the city centre than the Museum of Art and History Silverman visited in 2005, but much further off the usual tourist track. “Style Congo” was hosted from 17 March to 3 September by CIVA, who organized it in collaboration with Twenty-Nine Studio & Production, based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and KANAL-Centre Pompidou, a ten-year partnership between CIVA and the eponymous museum in Paris. These are institutions with greater commitment to addressing contentious issues but less institutional authority and smaller visitor numbers than the city's major museums and exhibition spaces. Established in 2017 by Baloji and Rosa Spaliviero, Twenty-Nine Studio & Production describes itself as offering “consultancy, research, prospecting and production activities in the fields of artistic practice in its various forms, particularly in the visual and audiovisual arts”.<sup>25</sup> KANAL-Centre Pompidou was established with the ambition of creating “a centre of culture and exchange open to all, to put the creative scene of Brussels in the limelight, and to contribute to the capital's cultural appeal”.<sup>26</sup> Founded in 2016, CIVA is the Centre for Information, Documentation and Exhibitions of architecture, landscape and urbanism for the Brussels region. This is a venue where it is unlikely that minds were changed, but one that attracted those coming to deepen their awareness and enhance the

perspectives they brought with them of an issue with which they already had at least some familiarity.

In an interview published in the catalogue, Baloji, an artist, curator and photographer from the Republic of Congo's Katanga province, described being approached by KANAL to "bring visibility to the Congolese community [in Brussels] in relation to [its] colonial history".<sup>27</sup> He continued:

There were all these debates going on: should we leave these colonial monuments in the street, or should we remove them. I felt it was really important to dig into these questions, because it wasn't only one or two monuments that needed to be taken down, but the whole colonial system that needed dismantling. One of the things that system does is appropriate and transform object cultures, which colonial propaganda transforms into a modern landscape of progress. I wanted to look at how buildings materials, artifacts, etc. from Congo have been instrumental to this framework of "progress", but have largely remained invisible within its narrative".<sup>28</sup>

The curatorial team was drawn from two of the three contributing organizations. Franceschini, CIVA's curator for contemporary architecture, and Hirsch, its artistic director, collaborated with Baloji and Estelle Lecaille, an art historian who is a production and research manager with Twenty-Nine Studios.<sup>29</sup> Baloji and Twenty-Nine Studios have an impressive track record in mounting thought-provoking installations that challenge visitors to appreciate Congo's pre-colonial art and confront the impact of colonial exploitation upon its physical and cultural landscapes. These include an installation the previous year in Florence's Pitti Palace for which Baloji designed an 88-metre-long carpet inspired by works of Congolese ivory carvings that had been in Italy since the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Style Congo's curators turned to contemporary artists, including Judith Barry, Rossella Biscotti, ayoh kré Duchatelet, Chrystel Mukeba, Daniela Ortiz and Ruth Sacks as well as the Belgian architecture collective Traumnovelle and the architectural historians Paoletta Holst and Johan Lagae for the exhibition's content.

Entering CIVA's lobby, one was immediately confronted by "Monument", a sculpture by Peggy Buth that dominated the space (Figure 3.2). It dates to 2005, the same year that Buth published her photographic analysis as well as documentation of the installation in Tervuren that also inspired Silverman.<sup>31</sup> The empty black plinth is particularly evocative because of the way in which Buth has stacked the layers, suggestive of classical moldings, in ways that destabilize the expected symmetry. This announced the tone of what was to come in a way that required little or no verbal explanation for anyone aware of the many debates about the fate of controversial statues that this work so thoughtfully anticipated. "Monument" was created as part of "Desire of Representation", a two-volume artist's book that was also included in the exhibition.<sup>32</sup>

Visitors entered the galleries in which the rest of the exhibition was installed through a relatively narrow passageway where a book from 1903, in which the Belgian art historian and critic Hippolyte Fiermes-Gevaert described Art Nouveau as "Style Congo", was on view.<sup>33</sup> Equally critical was the visual evidence to affirm



*Figure 3.2* Peggy Buth, *Monument* (2005), presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

this claim. This consisted of photographs of the exhibition of artefacts from the Congo exhibited at the Brussels International Exhibition of 1897 in Tervuren. Whether or not one follows Silverman's argument that the aesthetic of the display was shaped by the Congolese artefacts installed here, there is no doubt regarding the support the participation of these prominent Art Nouveau architects indicated for the Free State regime.

Since the 1990s, the portrayal of the Global South, especially as it was colonized by European powers (and less often the United States and Japan), at world's fairs has proven a particular popular window into understanding how imperialism was marketed at home and abroad, as well as offering evidence of the economic exploitation that inevitably motivated it.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, "Style Congo" largely filled CIVA's central gallery with an installation of material mounted on metal grids that illustrated the way in which the Congo was exhibited between 1885 and 1958 in both international and colonial exhibitions (Figure 3.3). The arrangement by the collective Traumnovelle allowed one to glimpse a layered history in a way that was more rewarding visually than it was intellectually, as very little analysis was provided of the rich documentation, amassed largely from CIVA's extensive collections of material relating to twentieth-century Belgian architecture. A dazzling array of beautiful renderings depicted buildings in a range of European styles that were usually quite modern for their time, as well as examples that attempted to evoke what were understood by colonial officials to be the Congo's vernacular traditions. To learn why any of this mattered, however, the viewer might have to



Figure 3.3 *Traumnovelle*, Installation devoted to archive documents from international and colonial expositions in Belgium held between 1885 and 1985, representing Congo. Presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

be familiar with the scholarship on such exhibitions, such as Lagae's article on the subject, which originally appeared in 2000 and was republished in the catalogue. This, however, covers only the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> The exhibition theme was developed further in Italian artist Rossella Biscotti's juxtaposition of photographs of the Congo and Brussels pavilions at the 1935 exhibition in Brussels.

Unfortunately absent, because it rather unusually combined the display of Belgium and the Congo in a single structure, was the pavilion Léon Stynen and Victor Bourgeois designed under the direction of Henry van de Velde for the World's Fair held in New York in 1939 and again in 1940 (Figure 3.4). It was later re-erected as the Belgian Friendship Building on the campus of Virginia Union University, a historically Black institution in Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the breakaway Confederate States of America, which had been established to uphold slavery. The pavilion's reconstruction in Richmond was accomplished with the support of the Rockefeller family funded General Education Board and was intended to curry African American support for Belgium, which retained nominal control of the Congo during World War II, in advance of the United States' entry into the conflict in December 1941. Remarkably, at the ground-breaking in Richmond, an African American speaker, I. W. Taylor, equated Belgian suffering under the German occupation with what African Americans endured under Jim Crow.<sup>36</sup> The Belgian Friendship Building later provided the venue for repeated



*Figure 3.4* Belgian Pavilion, Léon Stynen, Victor Bourgeois and Henry van de Velde, New York, 1939.

visits to Richmond by Martin Luther King, Jr., who in 1957 noted in a sermon delivered there “the rumblings of discontent in Africa and Asia” as “the revolt against imperialism and colonialism perpetuated by the Western Civilization for so many years”.<sup>37</sup> From Richmond he would travel to Ghana, to witness that country’s independence, before journeying to India. That the same structure could house over a span of less than two decades such prominent celebrations and critiques of colonialism suggests a complexity not readily offered by Traumnovelle and Biscotti’s contributions.

It was, however, present in much of the work that ringed the walls of the central space and was also tucked into two stories of smaller galleries located off it. In most of this work, the focus was clearly on Belgium, rather than the Congo, and much less on the United States. One of the two exceptions was the video entitled “Objects that are dear to him”. By Lagae and Holst, it was based on documentation assembled in the early twentieth century by a Belgian colonial official, Edmond Leplae, who understood that “To colonize the Congo, it is necessary to make it inhabitable” in terms understood by Europeans. Demonstrating the degree to which Belgians borrowed aspects of their colonial architecture from other European imperial powers, as well as the degree to which they conceived of the landscape as empty before they began to extract its natural resources, this visually engaging presentation succeeded in reconstructing the Congo as seen through the eyes of the colonizer, making the viewer complicit in that approach while also offering a clear critique of that perspective.<sup>38</sup> The way in which historic photographs were often presented only in part, almost as if the viewer was glimpsing them through a

screen, was very effective in enhancing the sense that a complete understanding of such historical phenomena is impossible at the remove of over a century and many thousands of kilometres (Figure 3.5). This was perhaps especially true of the colonizer's Congolese servants, who often wore the cast-off clothing of their employers as a badge of their modernity.

The other contribution that returned one to the Congo was a provocative installation by Jean Katambayi Mukendi, a Congolese artist who has long played with the infrastructure of electricity. Taking as his point of departure an exhibition held in what was then the colonial city of Elizabethville and is now known as Lubumbashi in 1931, he created a meditation upon the incompleteness of the modernity that Belgium promised its colonial subjects but failed to deliver. The detritus of electrification provided him with the materials with which to express the conditions in which many Congolese continue to be forced to live. In 1931 electricity travelled along wires made from Katangan copper; today rare earths from the same region are crucial to the working of many smart phones. In the region from which these crucial components of technology come, it is the poverty rather than the appliances that are modern, however.

The remaining work addressed the presence of traces of the Congo in Europe, especially in Brussels. This was entirely by design. The curators wrote in *e-flux Architecture* that:

Decolonization cannot be limited to questions or acts of repatriation, restitution, reparation. While each of these processes are essential in healing



Figure 3.5 Paoletta Holst and Johan Lagae, *Objects that are dear to him* (2023), presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

the wounds and addressing the historical injustices enacted by colonization, decolonization requires reckoning with how the west – its places, its ideas, its cultures, its selves – remains a colonial construct.<sup>39</sup>

The largest of the remaining installations, and one of the most effective, was the display of Barry’s seminal “Work of the Forest”. Making many of the same comparisons, but in a single photo collage, was “Ornaments and Crime” by ayoh kré Duchatelet, which served as the signature image for the exhibition (Figure 3.6). Duchatelet placed a historic map of the Congo, part of which was blocked out in red, atop a black and white photograph of “Mysterious Sphinx”, whose head was carved out of ivory in 1897 by Charles Van der Stappen. This was itself overlaid on a colour photograph of Art Nouveau architectural decoration. Although the red in the map appears to delineate river basins, the effect is to suggest the blood, as well as the geographic source, of both the ivory and the wealth that created the two Belgian works. The sinuous curves of the rivers on the map also suggestively echo many of the ornamental lines in the abstract Belgian art. This was part of a larger installation that combined sound, drawings and a text, whose title clearly referenced Adolf Loos’s notorious essay, first published in 1913.<sup>40</sup>



*Figure 3.6* Ayoh kré Duchatelet, *Ornaments and Crime*, 2023.



*Figure 3.7* Chrystel Mukeba, *Leonie Ngoie, Maison Van Eetvelde* (2022); *Lewis Ossoko Hang, Maison Horta* (2021); *Leonie Ngoie, Maison Van Eetvelde* (2022); *Drucila Clément, Hôtel Frison* (2021); *Badibanga Ndeka “Badi”, Maison Horta* (2021); *Agnès Kena, Maison Horta* (2021), presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

Especially effective were the Brussels-born photographer Chrystel Mukeba’s portraits of people of Congolese descent, sometimes in modern African dress, posed in some of Brussels’s most celebrated examples of Art Nouveau. For instance, she placed Leonie Ngole in the mansion Horta built for Edmond van Eetvelde, who administered the Congo Free State for King Leopold. In one the middle-aged Ngole wears a long dress and a head wrap and sits slightly slouched and sideways in a chair whose curved feet and tapering back echo the decorative designs on the wallpaper behind her. With the light falling across her face and chest, she stares out at the viewer, apparently conscious that she does not belong here. Another work from the same series, however, shows her standing proudly in silhouette with one arm extended on the mantelpiece, elsewhere in the house, which now appears slightly decrepit in the half-light (Figure 3.7). The letters printed onto the fabric out of which her ruffled dress has been stitched establish an alternate pattern to the seemingly exhausted Art Nouveau, even as its brown and cream colours chime with the rest of the composition. Mukeba posed other models, some in contemporary western dress, in Horta’s own house, which they occupy with confidence.

The same theme was restated in relation to plants as well as people in “The Rebellion of the Roots”, a series of paintings by the Peruvian-born artist Daniela Ortiz. She describes these as “depict[ing] a series of situations in which tropical

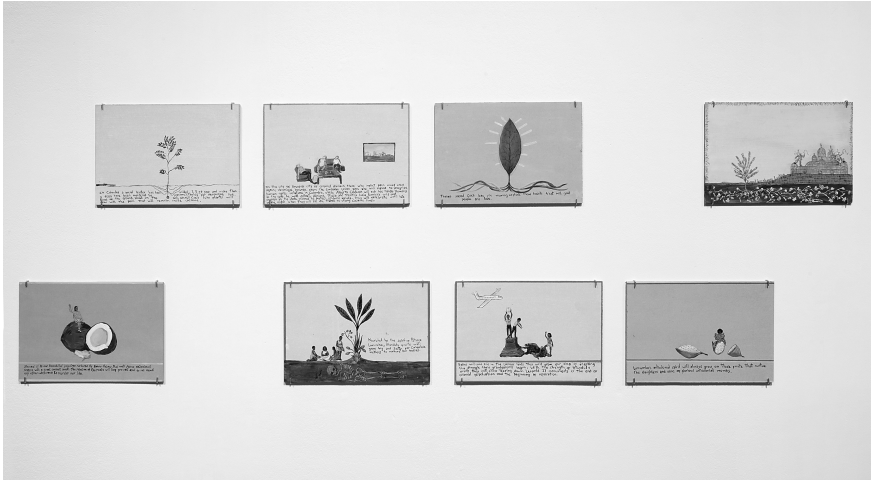


Figure 3.8 Daniela Ortiz, *The Rebellion of the Roots* (2021), presented at the exhibition *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy* at CIVA, Brussels, 2023.

plants kidnapped in botanical gardens and greenhouses of Europe are protected and nurture[d] by the spirits of racialized people who died in the hands of European racism”.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of the small works, which at first appear slightly whimsical, becomes entirely clear only when one reads the texts Ortiz has painted onto them. Some are in Spanish, others in English and one in French. These explicate the revenge the plants, including in two cases a banana peel, take upon the colonizers. Perhaps the most apropos for “Style Congo” was the one showing the Belgian Minister of the Interior being killed in revenge for his policies towards migrants when four coconuts fell on him during a visit to the Royal Greenhouses in Laeken (Figure 3.7).

Despite the relatively small size of the exhibition, press coverage aimed at an international audience was surprisingly robust. Not surprisingly the exhibition was reviewed in the *Brussels Times*, which targets local English speakers, many of them probably expatriates for which it is a second language.<sup>42</sup> Interest in the United States was particularly strong. “Style Congo” merited a brief mention in *Artforum* and an entire article in the *New Yorker*.<sup>43</sup> It had the desired impact upon at least some of those who viewed it. Writing in French for the website *Muinthecitey*, Véronique Bergen argued that,

if it is urgent to question the traces present in Belgian artistic and architectural heritage, to point them out, and to recontextualize them, it also appears that the new perspectives this engenders can only be fruitful if we question and combat the forms of neocolonization which are all the more rampant as society looks back at the compromises and crimes of the past, gives full rein to current economic and cultural pillaging, and the destruction of life and of thought that accompany globalization,

which she describes as itself imperial.<sup>44</sup>

Awareness of the kinds of links the exhibit pointed out is already widespread among specialists, if not necessarily the readers of the *New Yorker*, but so is the appreciation of the art and architecture that the show highlights, which is popular with audiences who are themselves increasingly global. Stimulating as the individual works were, collectively they did not add up to the comprehensive reassessment of the relationship between Art Nouveau and imperialism that remains needed. This requires moving beyond the still all too widespread understanding that an imperial architecture consists only of classicist behemoths like Brussels' vast (and deteriorating) Palace of Justice, begun in 1866 shortly after Leopold II became king but long before the Congo Free State was established, or the arch originally conceived to mark the 50th anniversary of Belgian independence in 1880, while modernism in all its forms, including Art Nouveau, is seen to embody a progressive future. "Style Congo" aimed to shift the dial on the way in which Europeans understand the relationship between culture that is widely cherished and events that undercut European claims to be especially civilized. The capacity of one exhibition to do so, however, is relatively limited.

That does not imply that CIVA took no steps to engage a broader public. On the contrary, it worked hard to do so. The exhibition was embedded in programming, including lectures and other activities, which deftly expanded upon what was presented in the galleries. Silverman gave a public lecture and also contributed to the catalogue.<sup>45</sup> In addition, CIVA hosted the launch of *Congo Style: From Belgian Art Nouveau to African Independence*, written by Sacks, one of the artists included in the show, as well as the exhibit catalogue, published in both Dutch and English, which unfortunately appeared only once the show was about to close.<sup>46</sup> Sacks' thoughtful book, which has been published in an open-access format, provides much of the historical context that could only be inferred through a visit to the galleries. It also takes the story forward into the post-independence years (1965–1997) in which the Congo was known as Zaire. Available immediately, however, was a suite of essays published in conjunction with *Style Congo* that appeared on the internet site *e-flux Architecture* under the heading "Appropriations".<sup>47</sup> This emphasis on widely available disseminations that will long outlast the exhibition itself and be available to anyone anywhere in the world with internet access and the ability to read English or translate it, potentially through an app, is especially welcome.

### **Beyond CIVA's Walls**

At least as important as the usual programme of events that took place inside CIVA itself were the walking tours that extended awareness of the impact of the Congo on the city's built heritage beyond the gallery walls. CIVA served as their starting point, ensuring that participants were well aware of "Style Congo" and its contents, whether or not they paired the tour with a visit to the show. I went on a June evening on an excellent one of Ixelles led by the actor and musician François Makanga. The group, many of them quite young, included Belgians

who had lived in the Congo and who had attended other CIVA-sponsored events tied to the exhibition. Makanga is an actor and musician, as well as an aspiring anthropologist. Many of the sites to which he took us, as well as many more than could be included in one evening's stroll, are included in *Colonial tales, trails, and traces*, edited by Nicholas Lewis, to which Makanga also contributed a chapter.<sup>48</sup> Labelled "a critical guide to understanding Belgium's colonization of Congo and how it continues to reinforce racist stereotypes", the volume was available in the well-stocked CIVA bookshop in English, French and Dutch. It provides those who are interested with a deep dive into the way in which sites throughout the city reference its colonial past.

The question is how many are interested. Tours like the ones Makanga also gives through Bozar and the AfricaMuseum unfortunately remain a niche activity. Of the 165 tours listed on the visit.Brussels website the day I browsed it, only one, devoted to the AfricaMuseum, referenced the city's colonial heritage.<sup>49</sup> The series of neighborhoods profiled on the same site includes Matongé, which it bills as "an invitation to discover African culture", while also highlighting a Swedish coffee bar and a place to learn tango and salsa.<sup>50</sup> A newcomer to the area and to the reasons one might find "a strong concentration of African activities unparalleled in Europe" here—and the somewhat anthropological text is clearly written with the assumption that the reader will not be of African descent—would not necessarily understand why it begins by pointing out that a statue of Leopold II is controversial since it does not mention what the Congo Free State was. Other entries on the itinerary are blunter in discussing issues such as the housing discrimination that Blacks in Brussels still face or referencing a campaign to rename one square for Patrice Lumumba.<sup>51</sup> No mention is made, however, of the issues highlighted in "Style Congo". The entry for the Hotel van Eetvelde notes the client's role in governing the Free State, but not his responsibility for the atrocities that occurred there or the degree to which materials from the colony were used in its construction.<sup>52</sup> The evasiveness about Belgium's colonial past that pervades the way in which the city presents itself hints at how distant a comprehensive interrogation of the city's fabric remains. I was startled, after indulging in another of the too often unacknowledged legacies of European exploitation of African labor—the scrumptious chocolates for sale in the Place du Grand Sablon—to stroll down the Impasse Saint-Jacques, little more than a laneway, and find it lined in part with galleries, including one named "Congo", unselfconsciously marketing African "tribal" art.<sup>53</sup> The context was obviously much more precious and expensive than the cluster of busy African restaurants in Matongé past which Makanga had led us through the previous evening.

As long as the city government shields residents and tourists from hard facts about Belgium's colonial past, one cannot expect politicians or the public who elects them to make real progress in implementing the policies necessary to achieve the decolonization called for by the expert committee. There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg relationship here, but one can only hope that the scholarship underpinning "Style Congo", as well as the creative responses it engendered on the part of the many

artists involved, begin to percolate deeper into the consciousness of white Belgians and other residents of and visitors to the city who are not of African descent.

## Conclusion

“Style Congo: Heritage & Heresy” forms just one part of a larger, if still incomplete, reckoning that is taking place in Belgium about the country’s colonial past and the imprint it has left upon the spaces that the country’s residents collectively inhabit. These people may be ethnically Belgian, itself a highly contested identity in a nation linguistically divided between French-speaking Walloons and Dutch-speaking Flemings, or migrants and the descendants of migrants from Africa, Europe and the rest of the world. Decolonial thinking clearly remains challenging for the mainstream of Belgian society, as it does for many others elsewhere. Such an exhibition and the tours that accompanied it can contribute important provocations to those who choose to engage with them, but temporary exhibitions in spaces accessed only after paying admission charges are no substitute for new insertions into prominent public spaces in the city in either effecting or reflecting comprehensive changes in public opinion. The commission on decolonizing public space in Brussels stated:

In order to identify as a member of a Belgian “imagined community [a term they acknowledged borrowing from Benedict Anderson]”, all the residents of the Brussels-Capital Region must be able to recognize themselves in the open-air museum made up of national memorials, statues, and other monuments in public space. In contrast, when a dominant group imposes its vision of national history and the nation state on all citizens, it amounts to a symbolic form of violence.<sup>54</sup>

“They rightly realized that even the new art and institutions they proposed were inadequate”. Or, if you mean the following sentence, then: “Decolonizing public space,” they declared, “is not separate from decolonizing other aspects of Belgian society in general and of Brussels in particular [and thus should] ideally [be] part of a far broader process of social emancipation throughout Belgium”.<sup>55</sup> Style Congo’s curators concurred, stating:

Decolonization, then, cannot be limited to questions or acts of repatriation, restitution, reparation. While each of these processes are essential in healing the wounds and addressing the historical injustices enacted by colonization, decolonization requires reckoning with how the west – its places, its ideas, its cultures, its selves – remains a colonial construct... But necessary for creating a more just, a more equitable, a more inclusive future is to realize that it was perhaps the colonizers who colonization colonized the most.<sup>56</sup>

The work thus continues. It will not be easy, but it is necessary in order to build just, inclusive societies.

## Notes

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