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Cover image

A. Kipinde
Untitled (Women, Birds and Antelope)
Oil on paper, 46 x 56.5 cm
Signed 'A. KIPINDE', ca. 1950
Pierre Loos Collection
Photo: Michael De Plaen, Brussels

Inside cover image

Djilatendo
Untitled (Composition with Raffia Textile Patterns)
Watercolour on paper, 91 x 120 cm
Signed 'Moi Biduaya tshela tendu Ibandi', 8 juillet 1930
Felix Collection; Ex Gerard Family Collection, Namur, Belgium
Photo: Maureen Vincke

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Tapestry based on a design by Henri Charles Kazadi made for the Colonial Pension Fund by the Royal Manufacturers De Wit in Mechelen, Belgium. (P. Loos; Photo: Michael De Plaen)

Preface

Florian Knothe

Accompanying the exhibition *Colours of Congo: Patterns, Symbols and Narratives in 20th-Century Congolese Paintings*, this publication presents the scholarship of both established and young researchers. A strong international interest in Congolese art, its collection and public display has grown steadily since the second half of the nineteenth century. It was first institutionalised with the foundation of Belgium’s Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA) in 1901, and since the museum’s official opening in 1910, a broad European audience has become aware of the traditional and contemporary artefacts collected in government-funded cultural institutions and private galleries.¹ The 120 years of institutional engagement with Congolese art in Belgium have run parallel with the key political and societal changes in both the Congo—exactly half the period of time that the Congo was a colony of Belgium before the regime change in 1960—and in Europe, where most monarchies became democracies struggling to manifest their power within Europe and largely surrendering their colonial presence.² Over this same period, the increased interest in African art has led to unprecedented academic development and the establishment of scientific disciplines—including anthropology, ethnology and ethnography—which were built on the study of cultural materials from far-away civilisations.³

Important research was carried out over these years to examine, evaluate, display and communicate Congolese art to an expanding general public.⁴ In the mid-1920s, Gaston-Denys Périer, as an official in the colonial administration, used his connections to and within the Congo to bring paintings to Brussels, publicising their artistic quality and similarities to European art with unparalleled conviction.⁵ From 1947, when Frans M. Olbrechts became director of the RMCA, he carefully considered the presentation of these little-known artefacts, and proved influential in establishing their standing in the contemporary art scene before and after World War I.⁶ The advancement of understanding was first shaped by Olbrechts’ vision, and then by scholars who include Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Kathrin Langenohl and Sarah Van Beurden, who published critically on, for example, Congolese paintings

1. Langenohl 2013, 160–62.

2. Stanard 2019, ‘Belgians and the Colonial Experience before 1960’, 39–64.

3. Van Beurden 2013, 472.

4. Numerous publications are concerned with the legacy of royal arts in Africa, and in particular with the influential Kongo and Kuba Kingdoms. See Blier 1998, 201–251.

5. Périer 1957; Salmon 1992, 190.

6. Olbrechts 1952; Claerhout 1958, 72.

by the ‘Precursors’ and the colonial interests and exploitation of local Congolese artists.⁷ This newly presented collection of essays aims to build upon these varied and historically influential voices by presenting the research of scholars who engage with the history and art of painting in the Congo, as well as with the socioeconomic circumstances and political limitations present in a culturally rich community under European colonial rule.

In order to represent the chronological development of painting studios in Elisabethville and Brazzaville, this publication is organised into three sections. Following a general introduction to Congolese art since the first colonial encounters, and Congolese painting more broadly, the first section describes the emerging workshop initiated by Georges Thiry. The book’s second section discusses the studio established by Pierre Romain-Desfossés, and the final section focuses on the students of Laurent Moonens and Pierre Lods, highlighting the development of similar but decisively different institutions that brought European art materials to the Congo, taught established techniques and made famous in Europe some of the better established local artists.⁸ By presenting historical facts and critical observations, this study hopes to provide an academic context along with an extensively illustrated catalogue that includes biographical data on more established painters. These are neither the first nor the last voices to discuss this historically important and visually impactful art form, the colonial circumstances that led to the development of this phenomenon, or the international reception of these unique and increasingly influential painters. Rather, the aim is to draw attention to a significant part of African art history that arose with international exchange, and which continues to arouse interest in the African continent within an increasingly global world.

Through varying pedagogical models and administrative arrangements, Thiry, Romain-Desfossés, Moonens and Lods each sought to teach art, and did so quite successfully. However, their workshops were all privately funded or government-supported, and their own relationships with the colonial administration varied greatly.⁹ Outside of these formal training programmes, the choice of artists’ materials and subject matters created further significant factors that shaped the production of paintings from the mid-1920s to 1960s, along with their international reception today.¹⁰ Unlike the more ethnographic African artefacts

collected over the last 120 years and more, the paintings executed in separate regions—and during two distinct and well-defined periods of time—have influenced contemporary art abroad, while paving the way for stylistically diverse paintings with a greater sociopolitical focus within the Congo.¹¹

Although the time period described by this publication ends with the fall of colonial rule, the 1950s painters’ studios have continued, and their artistic output is currently enjoying a renewed global reception that likely none of the Precursors could have anticipated back in the 1920s.

The pictorial composition and exemplary colour schemes that characterise many of these Congolese paintings were themselves influential internationally, still, this volume does not focus on Congolese influences in Europe, or on artists working elsewhere who had contact with Africa. It is worth acknowledging that abstract forms, and indigenous flora and fauna, were of great interest beyond Africa. Congolese paintings inspired and were imitated, as with the detail of the tapestry that opens this section. Based on a design by Congolese artist Henri Charles Kazadi, the work was commissioned from the Moonens Academy by the Colonial Pension Fund and woven by the renowned Royal Manufacturers De Wit in Mechelen, Belgium. This transfer of style and pictorial contents to another medium highlights the interest abroad in the diverse ‘lived’ experiences that came together to inspire paintings produced on the African continent, and the influence of the African diaspora.

7. Jewsiewicki 1991; Langenohl 2013; Van Beurden 2013.

8. Whereas most painters included in this publication trained and at times later worked in at least one of the ateliers, Muila, Kabinda and Ilunga worked independently in Lubumbashi. They were not connected with the workshops of Thiry, Romain-Desfossés, Moonens or Lods.

9. Vellut 1992.

10. Congolese paintings were exhibited in Brussels, Paris, Rome and Geneva in 1929, and more recently in the *Kunst aus Afrika* exhibition at Horizonte—Festival der Weltkulturen in Berlin in 1979; in *La naissance de la peinture contemporaine en Afrique centrale 1930–1970*, an exhibition at the RMCA in 1992; and in *Beauté Congo 1926–2015*, an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2015. See also Cornélis 2008.

11. Corbey 2000, 37–53.



Fig. 1 Map of the Congo River Basin.

Crossing Rivers and Pathways: Congolese Art and Culture in the Bakongo and Bakuba Kingdoms

Ian Paolo Villareal

The history of the Congo is contained within the Congo River Basin (fig. 1). Bordered by the Congo River, formerly known as the Zaire—the world’s deepest river and one of Africa’s most dangerous commutes and river crossings—this basin includes the modern nation states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo. The area also includes the Bakongo and Bakuba Kingdoms, both of which reached their apexes well before their first encounters with European colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century.¹

Evolving scholarship shows that the Congo’s history has been one of opulence, diversity and multilingualism, and any history must begin by focusing on specific vantage points within the Congo River Basin, utilising its languages, art objects and cultural contexts. Cultural traditions, cosmological and religious dynamics, languages, artworks and philosophies found in the Congo are incredibly specific and vastly different from the experience of observers like the European missionaries.

The Kingdom of Kongo

Cross-river exchanges between the Kingdom of Kongo and the Portuguese Empire developed after the first explorer Diogo Cão reached the mouth of the Congo River in 1483. Cão was greeted by King Nzinga a Nkuwu (Christian name João I), who was baptised in 1491. From this date, and with the growing influence of the Portuguese imperialists, Christianity reached the Kongo and religion became a vital part of the cultural, social and sociopolitical development of the community.² It is noteworthy that in the late 1400s, the Kongo was not a kingdom as Europeans would have understood it, but, according to anthropologists Wyatt MacGaffey and John Thornton, existed as a “symbolic entity where most power rested with local groups”.³ This situation was repeated in earlier polities such as the federations of Mpemba Kasi, Seven Kingdoms or Vungu, but in less than a decade after 1480, the Kongo became more highly integrated with surrounding groups, and more ‘kingdomly’ in the European sense of being a fixed centre of power. Before the Christianisation of the Kingdom of Kongo, the king’s authority was based on perceived spiritual influence. This refers to the fact that the king’s authority could wane without the cooperation of religious structures and figures, such as the earth-priests and *nganga* operating under specific cosmological ideas.⁴

1. Vansina 2010.
 2. Thornton 1984.
 3. Thornton 2018.
 4. In the Kikongo language the term *nganga* describes a spiritual healer, herbalist and person able to communicate with the supernatural world and to apply natural medicine to treat illness and misfortune. With the conversion to Christianity in the late fifteenth century, the term *nganga* was applied to both Christian priests and traditional spiritual mediators. See Vansina 2004, 51.

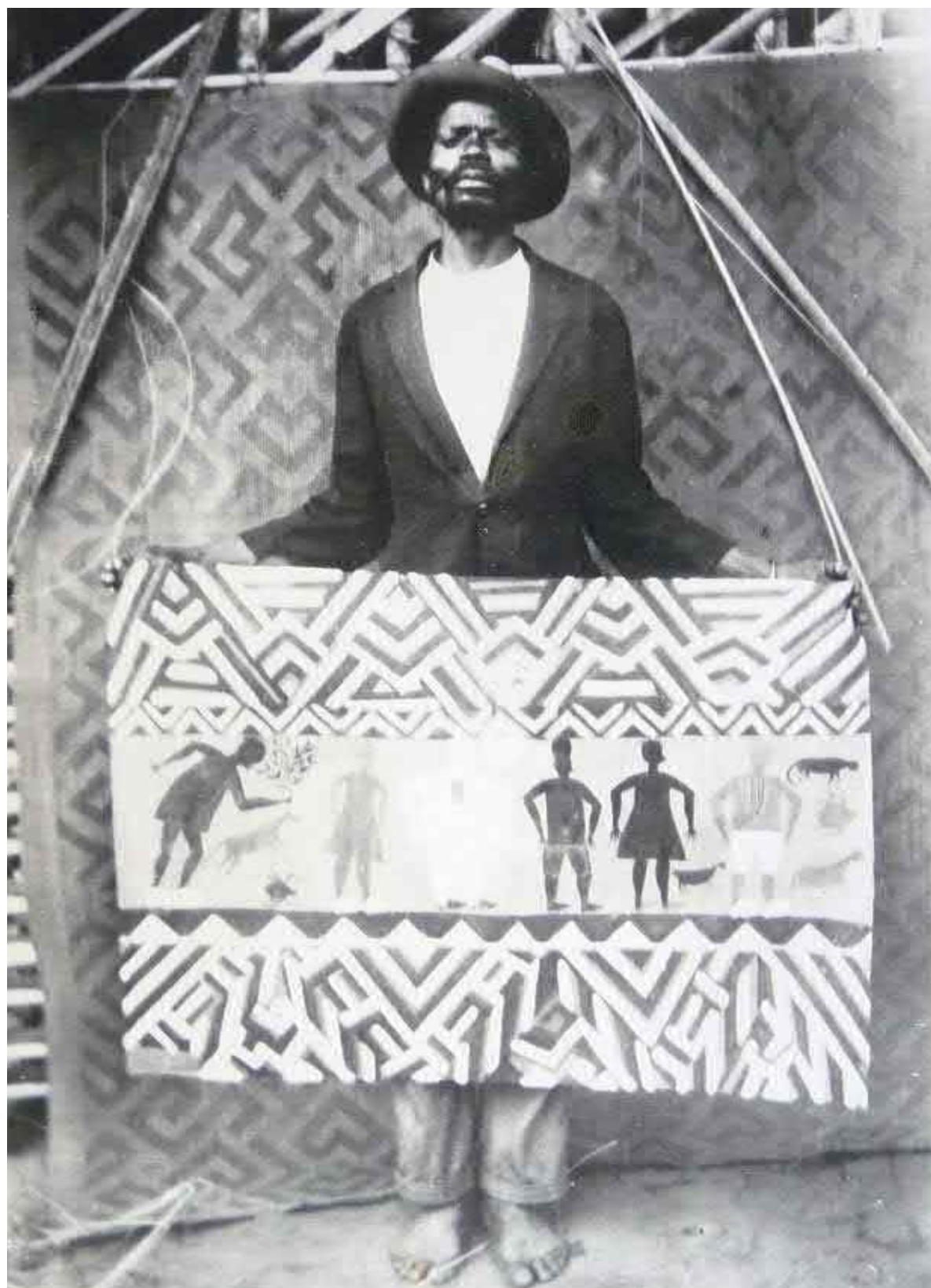


Fig. 1 Djilatendo standing in front of a woven Kuba floor mat with one of his paintings.
(Photo exhibited at the Schwarzenberg Gallery, December 1931. Dierickx Archives; P. Loos Archives)

20th-century Congolese Easel Painting

Thomas Bayet

The history of what is generally referred to as Congolese ‘easel painting’ began to develop around 1926, driven primarily by Europeans from Belgium and France who were quick to recognise the creative genius of the local population, and who were willing to flout the traditional European aesthetic canon. Georges Thiry and Gaston-Denys Périer, followed by Pierre Romain-Desfossés and Laurent Moonens, were visionaries who worked against prevailing trends, and predominately very much on their own.

For many people in the first half of the 20th century, colonisation was seen as bringing civilisation, culture, education and medical advances to the Congolese people, radically transforming their attitudes and beliefs. The so-called traditional arts—sculptures, masks and other ritual objects—belonged to the past. In the press and colonial journals from the time, a clear distinction was made between white- and black-coloured individuals, and within the division of the local population, ‘illiterate’ natives were further separated from the circle of the ‘evolved’.

While the majority of Europeans saw themselves as bringing culture to the Congo, others took a profound interest in local Black culture. The visionaries discussed here understood what no one else would consider—that the indigenous population had their own history and culture, with forms and codes that were simply foreign to these new observers. And in the face of the rapid changes brought along by the colonial administration, what place was to be given to this indigenous and authentic culture? How was it to be preserved and, above all, how was it to be kept alive? For it was not a question of slavishly reproducing works from the past. It was necessary, in this Africa that was both ancient and modern, in this Congo that was undergoing massive changes, for local culture and artistic creation to evolve. In the face of opposition, and cultural and artistic impact, these fervent defenders of Black culture led a battle to defend their beliefs. They attempted to understand the society around them and to search out these ‘unknown’ artists. But while their actions were essential, it is important to note that the emerging work was the sole creation of the indigenous artists, primarily Congolese, who drew on the depths of the African landscape for their inspiration.

In 1986, Belgium and the Congo celebrated painting from Zaire (the previous name of the DRC) with the publication of a lavishly illustrated volume, *60 ans de peinture au Zaïre* [60 Years of Painting from Zaire] that allowed the public to discover, often for the first time, the work of artists known as the ‘Precursors’, such as Lubaki and Djilatendo; some of Pierre Romain-Desfossés’ students, Pili Pili, Bela and Mwenze; members of Moonens’ Academy like Amisi, Muvuma, Mwembia and Mode Muntu; as well as artists from Kinshasa, including Mongita, Kiabelua and Koyongonda. A few years earlier, at the Horizonte Festival in Berlin in 1979, an event spotlighting Africa had already showcased Congolese painting.

The exhibition travelled to Bremen, Stockholm, Erlangen, Amsterdam, Frankfurt and London. In 1992, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, organised *La naissance de la peinture contemporaine en Afrique centrale, 1930–1970* [The Birth of Contemporary Painting in Central Africa, 1930–1970].

Several events were more limited until the *Mawazo* exhibition, organised as part of the Yambi Festival in Mons, Belgium, in September 2007. This was accompanied by a monograph by Roger-Pierre Turine on arts from the Congo past and present. More recently, two large exhibitions, *Histoire de voir* [Show and Tell] and *Beauté Congo—1926–2015—Congo Kitoko*, both organised at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in 2012 and 2015, revealed this work to a broader public.

The historiography of easel painting in the Congo is essentially quite recent, as the first documented works date to 1926–33. However, an account of the beginnings of this new form of painting, initiated by Europeans, shows that it clearly fell within an established pictorial tradition that is unfortunately not well-known and still poorly documented.

When studying the origins of the general history of painting, reference is made to the prehistoric paintings and engravings known throughout the world. In Africa, one immediately thinks of the famed rock art from the Sahara or southern Africa, the oldest of which dates back more than 20,000 years in southern Africa and 8 or 9,000 years in northern Africa.

The Congo is not known for its rock paintings, however, and it should be recognised that its study and inventory lag behind in relation to other regions of Africa. Three principal zones have been the subject of ongoing research:¹ the vast Lovo Massif in Bas-Congo, between Matadi and Mbanza-Ngungu; the cave of Kiantapo at Katanga; and in Uélé, in the north of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where engravings were found on slabs of laterite, similar to rock engravings in the Central African Republic.

While certain paintings or engravings may date to the prehistoric era, other representations are much later, contemporary with the Kingdom of Kongo (between the 14th and 18th centuries). In the Lovo Massif it has been possible to date nine pigment samples that place these pictorial creations between the 14th and 18th centuries. Only one analysis is earlier, dating to the 7th or 8th centuries.² These are the only reliable dates available for rock paintings in the Congo. Certainly, there are earlier creations, but without further scientific analysis it is difficult to establish the chronological links between the remnants of activities discovered on the floor of the caves and the wall decorations.

The paintings feature human beings, animals and signs, as well as rare objects and hands (fig. 2). Several inscriptions in French have also been recorded in Kikongo. The men are generally pictured engaged in hunting or acts of war,

sometimes carrying a gun or a bow, or smoking a pipe. Some have their left hand on their hip and their right hand raised. Among the animals, Lacertiformes—the family of Sauria or lizards—recur most frequently, followed by Canidae, quadrupeds with a long neck and tail—including antelopes, aardvarks, tortoises and birds. As for the designs, linear patterns are the most frequent, followed by cruciform patterns, grids and geometric shapes such as the oval, diamond, rectangle, circle and square. Interlacing designs and barbs also appear.

The same elements are found in different registers of the iconography of the Bakongo people, as shown by Geoffroy Heimlich in his study of the Lovo Massif. This detail takes on significance after learning that the painter Lubaki was Bakongo, and a sculptor of ivory who had trained at a very young age with an artisan familiar with the commonly used decorative motifs.³

Similar geometric and figurative motifs are found not only in the Kongo Central province, but throughout Central Africa, and in many different formats: on the walls of homes or wooden panels, on matting or finer weaving, on wooden bowls and boxes, and on gourds and other objects.

Immortalised in the photographs of Kazimierz Zagórski, in his collection *L'Afrique qui disparaît* [Disappearing Africa], the geometric paintings on the walls of the Mangbetu tribe from the village of Ekibondo,⁴ in the Niangara region in the northeast of the Congo, caught the attention of Westerners and served as a source of inspiration for the decoration of numerous African pavilions in the colonial and international exhibitions of the 1930s (fig. 3). Beyond these abstract decorations, the best-known example of which is the indigenous court of Niangara (or Ekibondo), the Mangbetu also portrayed figurative frescoes that present characters or friezes of characters which are also geometrically constructed (fig. 4).

But painting on walls was not a tradition exclusive to the Mangbetu, and similar paintings have been recorded throughout the Congo and across Africa. Examples of wall frescoes exist among the Mangbetu's neighbours, the Amadi in Matafa, among the Zande, the Banja in Lake Likimi, the Ababua in Bata, on the house of Chief Yaora in the Ango territory (fig. 5), as well as among the Ngbandi at the post of Yakoma, among the Wangwana in Kabalo, the Songye, and in the territories of the Tschokwe and Luba people. This tradition was also alive in Kasai. During his pilgrimage to the Congo, Belgian doctor Emile Müller took photos of houses,⁵ the paintings on which are similar to the compositions of Djilatendo, who lived in the Kuba region of Ibanshe, between Mweka and Luebo (fig. 6).

In rare cases, decorated wooden panels were used to cover interior walls. This can be seen in the well-known photo of an interior belonging to a sorcerer among the Metoko people, in the region of Kisangani (fig. 7).

3. Thiry 1982, 18.
4. Loos and Bassani 2001, 206, photo series I, 66–69.
5. Loos and Buch 2007, 86–89.

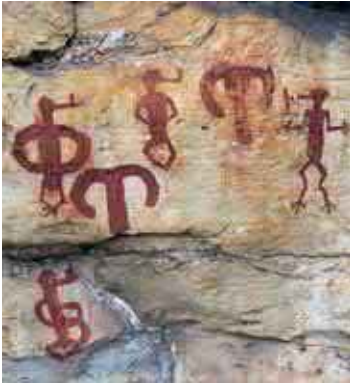


Fig. 2 Cave painting of silhouettes smoking a pipe, usually described as 'therianthropes'—mythical beings with both human and animal traits, Lovo Massif. (Photo: G. Heimlich)



Fig. 3 Painted Mangbetu homes. (Kazimierz Zagórski from the collection *Disappearing Africa*, series 1, no. 66; P. Loos Archives)



Fig. 4 Painted Mangbetu homes. (P. Loos Archives)



Fig. 5 Painter Albert Lubaki standing among friends in Panda, Likasi; the woman next to him is believed to be his wife Antoinette, though Georges Thiry (Thiry 1982, 12) only mentions Albert Lubaki. (P. Loos Archives)

While people at the time only mentioned Lubaki, he does not appear to have worked alone. The correspondence preserved between Thiry and Périér clearly mentions on several occasions the *École d'essais picturaux* [School of Pictorial Testing or “Georges Dulonge’s school of Congolese painting in the Belgian Congo, which aims to save the art of the Congolese fresco.”¹³

And in fact, several names appear on works attributed to Lubaki (fig. 5). First and foremost, that of his wife Antoinette, which arises most frequently, generally spelled ‘Atoinet’, but also on several occasions ‘Antionette Mfimbi’ or ‘Antoinette Mfumbi.’ There is also a Pierre, an Alphonse Kalenga, a Louis Makonga, a Léonard Tshibambe (or Tshibambe Raymakers), as well as an S. Jean or Mie Niembo. On two works kept at the Cabinet des Estampes in Brussels (the drawing and printing department at the Royal Library of Belgium), the name of Alphonse Kalenga has obviously been concealed to leave space for the countersignatures of Lubaki and Antoinette. Lubaki even asked Thiry for money in February 1927, to pay some men who worked with him.¹⁴

13. Letters from 24 April 1931 and 20 February 1932, Dierickx Archives; P. Loos Archives.

14. Letter from Lubaki to Thiry, 10 February 1927, Dierickx Archives; documentation by Pierre Loos.

While nothing has been written on this subject, it seems likely that Thiry and Lubaki had developed a small production centre that brought together several artists under the ‘direction’ of Lubaki. During a visit, Thiry mentions the arrival of friends such as Pierre, Gabriel and a man named Papaye.¹⁵ Was this Pierre the same artist who had signed the masked figures (cat. p. 66)?

Around 1929, Thiry became head of the station at Mweka, a small town in the Kasai between the Lulua and Bakuba tribes. Regularly travelling the roads to check their condition, he discovered a house in Ibanshe, between the villages of Mweka and Luebo, decorated with soldiers sounding the bugle. The painting had been done by Djilatendo (Tshyela Ntendu)—the chief of a family from the Lulua tribe; a thin, slight man, with a goatee and tapered moustache. Djilatendo had three wives and numerous children. He repeated what he had said to Lubaki, suggesting that he provide him with paper and colours to compose this pictorial world on paper.

Thiry relates that he drew “ferocious leopard hunts, battles between mongoose and spider, scenes where the spider captures the rainbow in its web and others where the snake marries the daughter of the moon while a grasshopper gives birth to a star.” Out of this simple enumeration emerged an entire poem taken directly from the realm of fables. He tells us that he “invented geometric motifs that some will call rhymes.” He sometimes worked inside his home, but he preferred drawing in the fresh air, at a makeshift table out front, while “this immense bush stretches all around him, from which he composes familiar scenes” (fig. 6). Thiry continues, “He regularly comes to bring me his rolls of drawings, equipped with a lance, in the event that he finds himself facing a leopard on the way.”¹⁶



Fig. 6 Djilatendo working in front of his house. Photo exhibited at Galerie Schwarzenberg, December 1931. (Dierickx Archives; P. Loos Archives)

15. Thiry 1982, 17.

16. Ibid.



Fig. 4 Djilatendo, *Untitled (Cyclist)*.

lengths of raffia textile.⁹ This painting is held in the Royal Library of Belgium. Many depictions of the *Force Publique* appropriately depict them as a colonial policing force, though by the interwar period restructuring had changed their role. Their presence was felt down to district levels, where they were called on to aid administrative initiatives, including vaccination campaigns.

The painting of the cyclist by Djilatendo is part of a group of paintings that deal with colonial society (fig. 4). In the Congo and much of tropical Africa in the 1920s and '30s, bicycles were a modern form of transport that served as an efficient means of connecting rural and urban areas. In this painting, Djilatendo depicts a man with a hat riding a bicycle. A child is sitting on the crossbar, holding on with both hands. They ride past a woman in a sleeveless dress who is wearing heels, while carrying a basket on her head with fruit and vegetables. This scene could be from any African city of that period, or any of today's small towns. Albert Lubaki also painted the traditional life of the suburbs and rural villages. In one painting, traditional round houses with thatched roofs, sometimes under construction, lead to a centre space where two women with long pestles are

9. Mudekerezwa 2015.

pounding grain (probably maize) in a mortar. Two different types of raffia trees grow beside them and a goat is attempting to climb a tree. Bright tropical birds watch the women for any fallen pieces of grain.

Albert Lubaki also painted a traditional chief, knees bent slightly and arms in the air, in a pose of joy and welcoming. His lower garment is made of hide; feathers and two pelts of leopard skin are indicative of his position of authority (fig. 5).

Paul Mampinda's 1933 painting is of a garden where plants are growing on raised beds and in pots. Some of the plants are flowering under the shade of three trees (fig. 6). Speckled butterflies and flies hover. The European concept of gardens with bright flowering plants and shaded trees was another colonial import that contrasted with the African concept of gardens, or *shamba* in Kiswahili, where food crops were sometimes grown in a seemingly random fashion.

Antoinette Lubaki produced several works that include people in a variety of garments, from Europeans in tailcoats and large hats, to shirts and waistcoats. In one painting she narrates a story where a couple is making love in bed (fig. 7). Outside their dwelling, which appears to be next to a river, a man on a riverbank plays with a child sitting on his knee, while a woman approaches carrying a calabash (*nkalu* in Kikongo) with palm wine made from either the *Raphia hookeri* or *Raphia farinifera* palms.



Fig. 5 Albert Lubaki, *Untitled (Chief)*.



Fig. 6 Paul Mampinda, *Untitled (Garden)*.



Fig. 7 Antoinette Lubaki, *Untitled (Marital Scene)*.



Fig. 8 Djilatendo, *Untitled (Hunt)*.

Hunting scenes were a favourite of Djilatendo, whose name means ‘the person who shoots the gun’. The scene is dominated by an African buffalo (fig. 8). On the right, a European hunter is depicted wearing a pointed hat and aiming his rifle. Crouched as if taking cover to the left is a man wearing a cap. A long green snake attacking a small animal in the background may be a metaphor for the hunt. The small animal is likely a mongoose. This painting recalls Thiry’s description of the wall murals of Ponthierville (now Ubundu) with the “d’Européens tamponnant un éléphant” (Europeans shooting an elephant).¹⁰ Thiry sent Djilatendo’s artwork to Belgium where the paintings were first shown and reproduced by Périer as part of the illustrations for the book *L’éléphant qui marche sur des oeufs* [The Elephant That Walked on Eggs], which was the first publication of folktales transcribed by the Congolese author Badibanga.¹¹

Ngoma’s painting from the Cabinet des Estampes in Brussels depicts a struggle between two creatures: a black snake and crocodile in the water among swirling plants. It also includes a bird in flight (fig. 9). The natural elements of air, earth and water are represented by the animals. The battle takes place by a riverbank, which scares the bird into flight as a startled woman runs by on a track of red earth that is highly typical of the region and much of tropical Africa.



Fig. 9 Ngoma, *Untitled (Crocodile and Snake by the River)*.

10. Thiry 1982.

11. Mudekereza 2015.



Paul Mampinda
Untitled (Garden)
 Watercolour on paper, 32.5 x 50.5 cm
 Signed 'Be=Kashama/Muana
 Mushiku/Mampinda Paul',
 20 August 1933
 MRAC, Tervuren, A. 3405

Paul Mampinda

Paul Mampinda, son of Mushiku, belonged to the Bena Kashiama tribe. He was from the village of Sapo Bumba, 56 km to the north of Luluabourg (now Kananga). Nothing has been written about him, but he left twenty remarkable drawings made in 1933, around the time that Georges Thiry left the Congo. It is possible that Thiry had met Mampinda when he was in the Congo, as several pages of one of Djilatendo's notebooks appear to have been drawn by another hand in a style quite similar to Mampinda's.

His painting, precise and descriptive, was regularly captioned in Tshiluba (a language of the Luba people). With a great sense of detail, he represents women's work in the village, hunting scenes, fish swimming in the river, the local vegetation and rows of white- and black-coloured men and women arranged in layered registers—all of them quite well dressed. These drawings are enhanced by a chromatic palette that is both subtle and harmonious. [TB]

Ref:
 Dierickx Archives; P. Loos Archives.



Fig. 1 Pierre Romain-Desfossés in the garden of his studio surrounded by students. (P. Loos Archives; Photo: *Congopresse*)

The Pedagogy of Pierre Romain-Desfossés

Jenny Leung Yuen Ki

During Belgium’s period of colonial rule in the Congo, Pierre Romain-Desfossés was one of the few individuals to open an academic art studio devoted to indigenous art (fig. 1).¹ He established the fine arts school ‘Le Hangar’ in Lubumbashi in 1947, an institution that was officially known as the Académie d’art populaire indigène, before being merged into today’s Ecole de Lubumbashi.²

Considering the techniques and perception of Congolese paintings nurtured within Romain-Desfossés’ studio allows for a general critique of the direction imposed on Congolese artists by European influence. Further to this point, an analysis of the paintings of individual Congolese artists facilitates an aesthetic discussion concerning the avant-garde label placed on Congolese paintings from the 1940s–50s. During the time of the European colonial regime in the Congo, these painters enjoyed a particularly positive reception in some of the colonial power’s best-established international art centres.

Medium, Materiality and Techniques

The aesthetics of Congolese painting from the 1940s on began to diverge from the pioneering work of ‘modernist’ artists in the 1920s—such as Albert Lubaki or his wife Antoinette Mfimbi—both of whom had worked with Georges Thiry, expertly employing the use of negative space to portray the modern conditions of the human experience (fig. 2). A decade later, Congolese paintings differed greatly in style, as they revealed dense pictorial compositions filled with highly textured patterns that transformed minimal spaces into more vibrant, kinetic scenes.

Several artists working under Romain-Desfossés developed personal styles distinguishing them as some of the earliest internationally renowned Congolese painters. Mwenze Kibwanga became known primarily for his fabric-like strokes, Bela for his tactile paintings and Pili Pili Mulongoy for his pointillist technique. Mwenze’s painting *Dance with Masks* (1954) represents a ritual dance scene that is contrasted with vividly alternating hues of blue, beige, brown and ochre worked into a composition densely knitted with impressionistic streaks that fill the background in woven rhythms (fig. 3). As the son of a weaver, Mwenze’s work regularly demonstrates his affinity for fabrics and traditional tapestries. Through a process of cross-hatching, he employs layers of earthen colours against blue and white strokes.



Fig. 2 Antoinette Mfimbi, *Untitled (Marital Scene)*.



Fig. 3 Mwenze Kibwanga, *Untitled (Dance with Masks)*.

1. Magnin and Sacremone 2015.
2. Sylla 1998, 53.



Fig. 4 Mwenze Kibwanga, *Untitled (Metamorphoses)*.

The distinctive background in *Dance with Masks* resembles Kuba cloth, a fabric unique to Katanga and neighbouring central African regions. It is handwoven from raffia palm leaves by men and then painstakingly embroidered by women, forming interlacing weaves of an ‘over/under’ pattern. The medium and techniques in Mwenze’s paintings remained consistent throughout his life. *Metamorphoses* (1954) is a strikingly similar piece to *Dance with Masks*, both of which were painted in oil, an inherently European medium taught and applied at Le Hangar on paper, board and canvas (fig. 4). The most frequent topics were scenes of initiation and figurative representations of nature. The scenes that Mwenze composed relate strongly to his own environment and culture.



Fig. 5 Bela, *Untitled (Lakebed)*.

Bela, also a pupil of Le Hangar, painted impressionistic, textured strokes with his fingers. Known for his interest in marine life—a favourite subject matter he shared with Romain-Desfossés—Bela positioned fish species in primary colours against dotted blue backgrounds (fig. 5). He had followed Romain-Desfossés from Chad to the Congo, where he began to devote his time to painting and woodblock printing, keenly following the artistic direction and advice provided by Romain-Desfossés. Bela excelled in a variety of techniques depicting flora and fauna in vividly coloured paintings, while his woodblock work exemplifies his mastery of diverse forms and shapes.

Another remarkable artist from Romain-Desfossés’ studio, Pili Pili Mulongoy, shared many of Bela’s techniques. Pili Pili focused on painting exotic animals in the jungle, accentuating colourful representations of nature with a distinctive pointillist technique. Like Bela, Pili Pili filled the background with short, pronounced strokes that give the static paintings a sense of movement (fig. 6).

Romain-Desfossés’ Influence and Pedagogy

The pictorial compositions of Bela and Pili Pili demonstrate both the Congolese painters’ freedom to express their personal artistic vision and their affinity for depicting topics drawn from life in the bush, which fascinated Europeans living in the Congo who were themselves often immersed in the rich wildlife. This choice of topic was perhaps due to Romain-Desfossés’ teaching methods, which were based on encouraging his students to “sit under a tree” to find their original “black soul”.³ This language now resonates as offensive, and his words can be viewed as dating to a specific moment in time, however, the sympathetic nature of Romain-Desfossés’ pedagogy is remarkable for the fact that members of Le Hangar concentrated almost exclusively on the natural world, emphasising the beauty of the African flora and fauna—a stylistic departure from the Precursors of the 1920s who also painted nature and scenes of daily life. Romain-Desfossés’ personal experience was further influenced by his own life as a foreign, though French-speaking, member of a community that was Congolese and Belgian.



Fig. 6 Pili Pili Mulongoy, *Untitled (Elephant Hunt)*.

3. Njami 2007, 234.

As a Frenchman, he had no contacts to the colonial government, its mandate or funding. Consequently, Romain-Desfossés was an outsider who supported himself and the painters in his studio by supplying them materials and modest incomes. Romain-Desfossés provided and taught traditional brushwork without the ambition to force upon Bela, Pili Pili and others any direct influence from Western ideas of art (fig. 7). While painters at Le Hangar were afforded a certain level of autonomy, their artistic careers and training were still fostered in European painting techniques,⁴ and as such Pili Pili’s use of gouache and oil on paper was directly influenced by Western techniques of art.

In Romain-Desfossés’ own words, he noted that “we must strongly oppose every method tending to the notion of the [African] personality to the advantage of a uniform aesthetics of White Masters”.⁵ His protection of the painters from colonial influence, and his ambition to support their well-being, is further exemplified by the fact that Bela and Pili Pili both studied and worked for him. Their relationship was close and personal and Romain-Desfossés often referred to his students as “his children”, assuming the role of a protective father.⁶



Fig. 7 Pierre Romain-Desfossés and students at Le Hangar. (P. Loos Archives; Photo: *Congopresse*)

4. Sylla 1998, 56.
5. Mudimbe 2005, 156.
6. Ibid 159; Njami 2007, 234.



Fig. 8 Mwenze was the only painter who preferred to work at the easel. Here 'Lady Bela' is replicating on canvas her husband's compositions. Hanging in the background is one of the panels done in collaboration with Pili Pili and Ilunga for the decoration of the 'Charlesville', a new steamer on the Belgium-Congo line. (P. Loos Archives; Photo: C. Lamote, *Inforcongo* no. 32,422/52)



Nkulu

A young prodigy from Pierre Romain-Desfossés’ studio, there is little information available about him. He joined the studio quite early and, among others, took part in collaborative works, including the 15 panels of *The Mysteries of the Rosary*, along with Pili Pili, Bela and Ilunga. The caption from a *Congopresse* photo taken by C. Lamote in November 1950 reports that the “drawing is by a young N’Kulu, whose death deprived the studio of a charming miniaturist.” [TB]

Ref:
Photo C. Lamote, *Congopresse* no.
32.422/97, Nov. 1950—P. Loos Archives.



Pili Pili Mulongoy, Nkulu, Bela and Norbert Ilunga (collaborative work)
Flagellation, one of fifteen panels depicting *The Mysteries of the Rosary*
Oil on panel, 121 x 90 cm
Signed 'Pilipili, Nkulu, Bela, Ilunga', 1949–50
Pierre Loos Collection
Photo: Michael De Plaen
The fifteen panels were presented to the Abbaye de Saint-André-lez-Bruges (Belgium) in 1950.

Nkulu
Untitled (Parade)
Oil on paper, 44 x 54 cm
Signed 'NKULU', ca. 1950
Pierre Loos Collection
Photo: Pierre Buch



Norbert Ilunga
Untitled (Initiation Ceremony)
 Oil on paper, 35 x 43.5 cm
 Signed 'ILUNGA.N.T.', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Pierre Buch

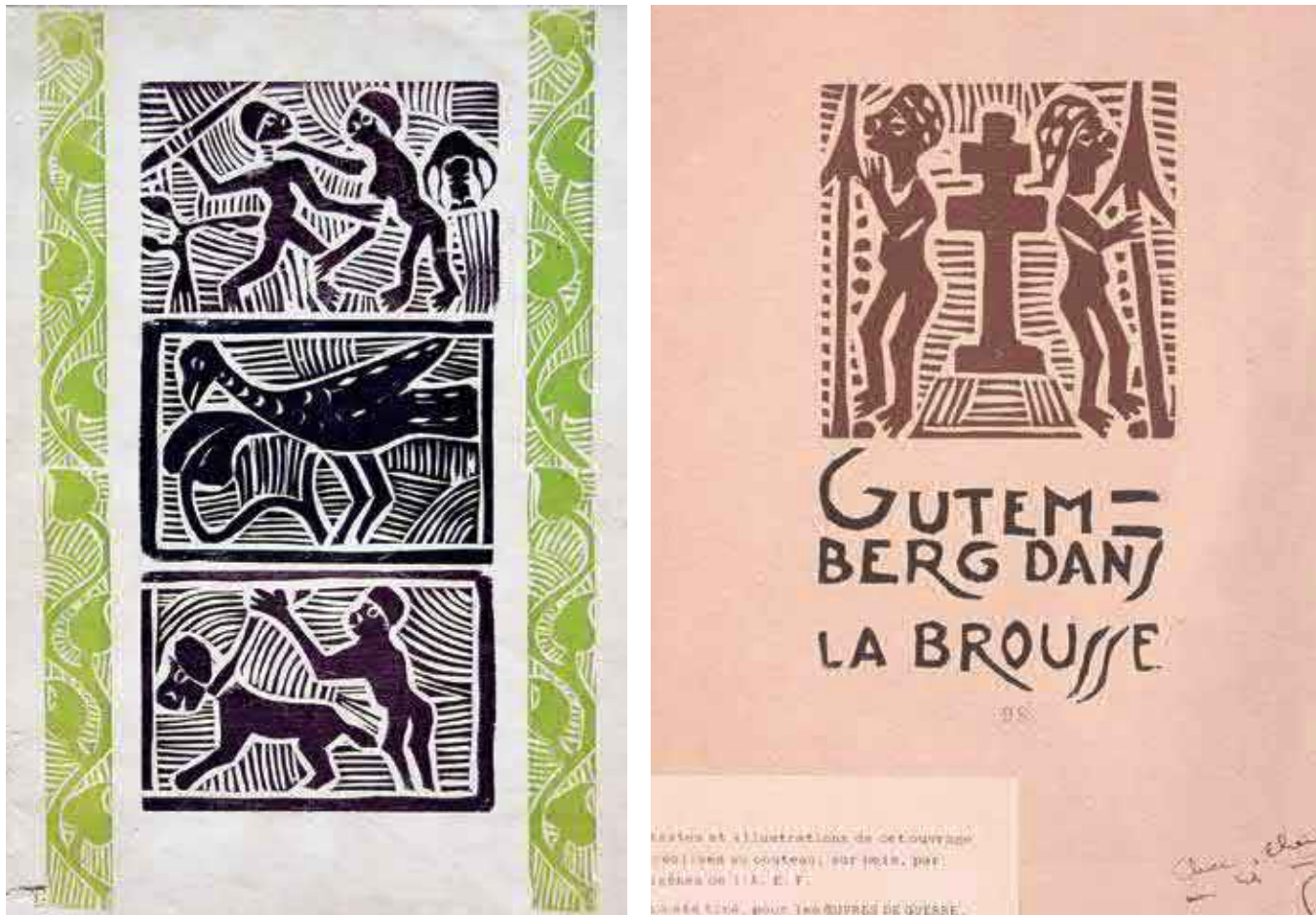
Norbert Ilunga

Ilunga was a Muluba from Shaba province. He joined Pierre Romain-Desfossés' studio just after Pili Pili and Kilima and exhibited in Brussels and Paris in 1949, along with Pili Pili, Bela, Nkulu and Kaballa. His meticulous form of naturalist paintings were similar to that of Pili Pili, with whom he collaborated regularly, in particular on the creation of a series of panels in 1950 that formed part of the decoration of the Charlesville liner on the Belgium-Congo line (Antwerp-Matadi). According to an account from Mwenze in 1973, it appears that he left to live in Kayeye where he abandoned his old style in order to paint landscapes. [TB]

Ref:
 Photo C. Lamote, *Congopresse* no. 32.422/50, Nov. 1950—P. Loos Archives; Fabian 2011—conversation with Mwenze, 1973; *La naissance* 1992, 52; *Beauté Congo* 2015, 363.



Norbert Ilunga
Untitled (Insect Hunt)
 Oil on paper, 36 x 45 cm
 Signed 'ILUNGA', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen



Gutenberg dans la brousse [Gutenberg of the Bush] was published in two editions in Brazzaville in 1943. The first edition consists of 100 numbered copies printed on Lafuma paper; the second edition of 200 is numbered from 101 to 300. Both editions contain 14 pages with several colour plates (35.4 x 26 cm). The edition displayed here is no. 98.

In October 1944, the plates were published in the French political magazine *Renaissance* (22 x 15.2 cm), and then republished in 1980 as a reprint of the original version, though in a considerably smaller format (20 x 16 cm).

This limited-edition volume contains folktales as told by Bela Sara and published by Pierre Romain-Desfossés in Brazzaville in 1943. The title *Gutenberg of the Bush* references the mono- and polychrome woodblock prints written (carved) with a knife by Bela, as well as the German Renaissance printmaker Johannes Gutenberg (1400–68), the inventor of the European printing press. The book's foreword describes the folktales as being in the style of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–95) and his famed *Fables Choies* published in 1668.



I say to you the ways of the bush
by Bela, Sara—the commander's boy



Reader, these stories are for you. The animals know so many things running through the forest and bush, seeing at night.

I say to you, this is a good book for you and the little ones. A schoolbook like La Fontaine. It's a good book. Bela, Sara



When you fall from a short tree your bones won't break like from a bigger tree.



Pili Pili Mulongoy
Untitled (Scorpions)
 Mixed media on paper, 37 x 52 cm
 Signed 'Pilipili', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen

Pili Pili Mulongoy

Pili Pili Mulongoy, the son of a fisherman from the Lualaba people, was born in Ngolo around 1914, in the district of Kongolo, Katanga province. In 1944, he settled in Lubumbashi where he worked at the *Travaux publics* [Government services] as a house painter and plumber before joining the studio of Pierre Romain-Desfossés in 1946. Pili Pili was the studio's first student; he was followed a few months later by Oscar Kilima, Norbert Ilunga and Bela.

Pili Pili quickly became one of the studio's most talented artists. He offered up an extremely refined and meticulous style of painting, presenting African nature in all its stages, following the cycles of life and death. Deer graze peacefully in a vision of nature that is apparently without danger, while civets, snakes and other predators hunt birds and eggs in the trees. In another painting, a snake trying to seize a bird's eggs is in turn attacked by the wading bird protecting its nest. Today's predator becomes tomorrow's prey. He executed these animal scenes with a great mastery of colour and nuance. A meticulous painter, he took great care with the outlines and details. He left no empty spaces, which, when he began, would be filled with a multitude of circles or tufts of grass, and then later with delicate, parallel strokes of bright colours.

In 1954, after the death of Romain-Desfossés, the 'Le Hangar' studio was integrated into Laurent Moonens' Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville as the 'D Section'. Pili Pili became an assistant and remained there until 1959, when he became a supervisor at a high school in Katuba. Retiring in 1970, he painted until the end of his life in Lubumbashi in 2007. [TB]

Ref:
 Fabian 2011—conversation with Pili Pili, 1979; Lihau Mamiyo Moseka Ligo 1980, 60–62; *La naissance* 1992, 47; *Beauté Congo* 2015, 366.



Pili Pili painting in the D Section of the Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville, ca. 1954–55. (Photo: Laurent Moonens)



Mbayo
Untitled (Bird Attacking Serpent)
 Oil on paper, 35 x 47 cm
 Signed 'MBAYO', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen



Mbayo
Untitled (Antelope and Birds)
 Oil on paper, 36 x 47 cm
 Signed 'MBAYO', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen



Mbayo
Untitled (Ox-pickers)
 Oil on paper, 13 x 19.5 cm
 Signed 'MBUYA.M.', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen



Mwenze Kibwanga
Untitled (Battle)
 Oil on panel, 59 x 71 cm
 Signed 'MWENZE KIBWANGA.', ca. 1950
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Pierre Buch



Mwenze Kibwanga painting in the
 D Section of the Académie des
 Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville, ca. 1954–55.
 (Photo: Laurent Moonens).

Mwenze Kibwanga

The son of a weaver, Mwenze Kibwanga was born in 1925 in Kilumba, in the Malemba-Nkulu territory, Katanga province. He died in Lubumbashi in 1999. He began attending classes at the Protestant mission of Mwanza in 1934, where he also took drawing lessons. In 1942, he left the village to settle in Elisabethville and continued his primary education with the Methodists for another two years. Forced to earn a living, he began drawing and was spotted by a Belgian, Gaston Pletinckx in 1946, who took him under his wing and encouraged him to specialise in portraiture.

When he joined Le Hangar in 1950, Mwenze already had a specific artistic path and style, which he would quickly abandon. Thanks to the spirit of Pierre Romain-Desfossés, he developed his own style, bringing his subjects to life through a technique of hatching and parallel lines alternating between light and dark shades that followed the shapes of human beings, animals and vegetation. By reproducing the geometry left by the blows of the adze on wood, Mwenze developed a form of 'sculptural painting'; he developed this technique by taking inspiration from sculptors of traditional statues, as he explained in an interview with anthropologist Johannes Fabian in Lubumbashi in 1973. Fabian was a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam who developed his research on language and popular culture in Shaba province (RDC). It was in this context that he carried out interviews in Swahili with the painters Mwenze and Pili Pili.

Mwenze painted nature, a subject dear to Congolese artists, but also afforded an important place to man in his works. What interested him most was village life which, along with his childhood memories, he perceived to be an authentically African experience. In the same interview in 1973, he expressed that: "What I have in my head when I paint are those that have not left for the world of the white man." And he represented this man in all his forms: hunting or fishing, quotidian scenes, or in the chief's courtyard fighting or dancing. He also revisited the crucifixion and created mysterious compositions where man and beast are interwoven in a frenetic rhythm.

Pierre Romain-Desfossés spoke about him in these terms: "Mwenze's technique is made of short lines that follow the form of objects, revealing a more complex being than the average native. His painting expresses psychological conflicts and displays a rare imaginative power. Sometimes he even explores the field of eroticism. In the intertwining of human forms, for example, Mwenze blends his own subjectivity with material representation and achieves a perfect balance. Within an atmosphere of tragedy, his bacchanalia of goats and snakes have such an 'expressivity' of tone and matter that it could be said that Mwenze makes colour sing. Indeed, it is through the use of colour that he accentuates the emotive tension of the conflicts that he represents. There are among his works several remarkable compositions; one can point to a battle between a man and a crocodile which, through its undulating rhythm, reminds one of certain El Greco paintings, even though the technique and inspiration are vastly different. Mwenze's painting displays a violence in its subject matter that contrasts with the harmony of

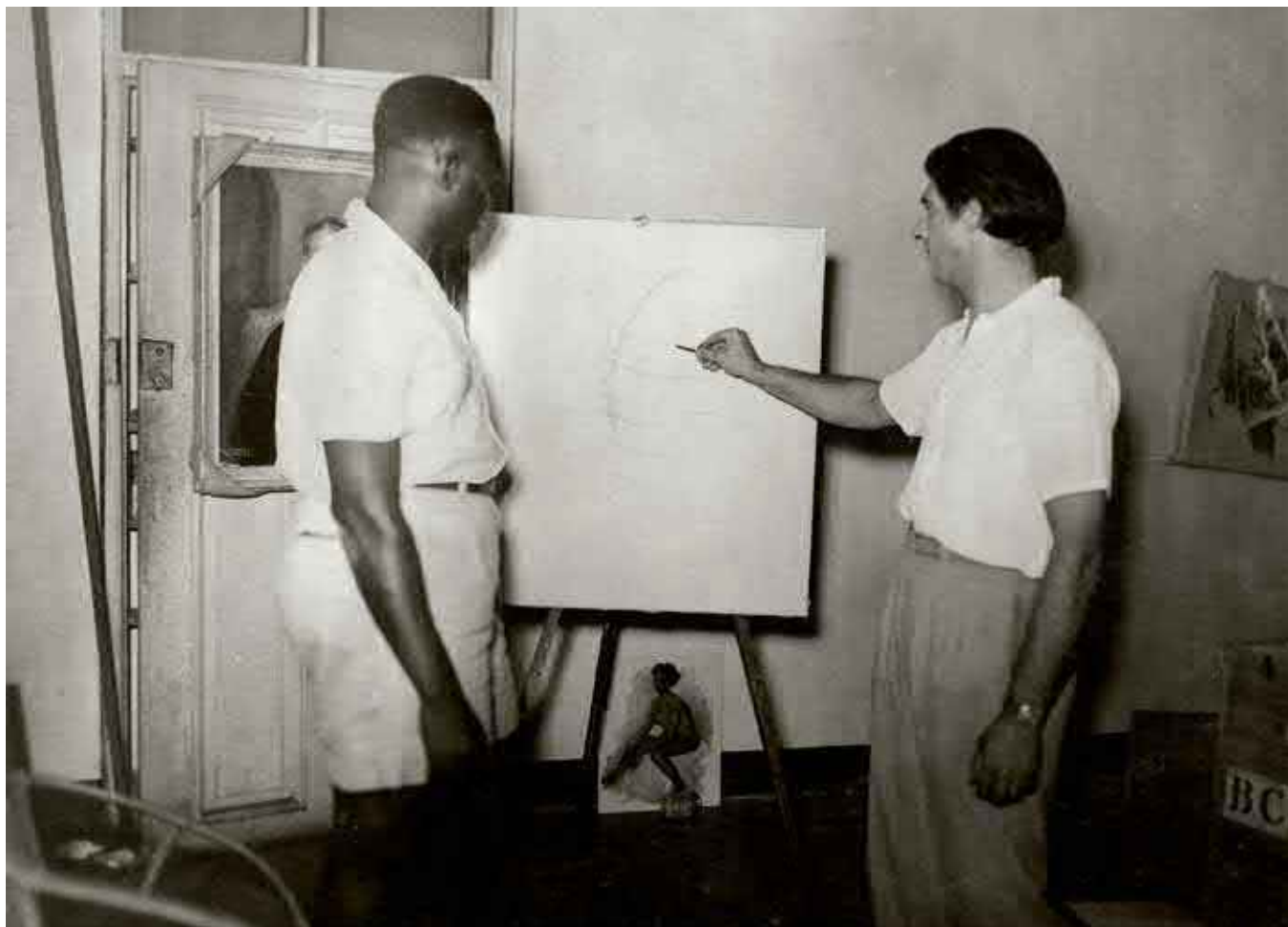


Fig. 1 Laurent Moonens in his Léopoldville atelier with artist Albert Mongita, 1948–49. (Moonens Archives)

The Academy of Fine Arts of Elisabethville

Thomas Bayet

In 1948, Laurent Moonens, an artist and teacher at the Molenbeek Academy in Belgium, obtained a grant from the Colonial Office to relocate to the Congo for one year with the stated objective of contributing to cultural relationships between the two countries.¹ He disembarked in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa) on 11 November 1948, and first settled in a temporary studio in order to complete several portrait commissions that he had received upon arrival (fig. 1).

Local established painters—including Albert Mongita, Louis Koyongonda, Alphonse Kiabelua and Jean Bata—immediately expressed an interest in collaborating with Moonens. What would go on to be called the ‘Stanley Pool School’ formed spontaneously, representing a group of artists that Laurent Moonens helped both materially and with technical advice. He did not formally teach, as this group of artists already had a technique and style on par with the European painters. This was not what Laurent Moonens had come to the Congo looking for. Like Thiry or Pierre Romain-Desfossés before him, he was interested in art that drew its inspiration from African culture.

Moonens expressed his concern on several occasions, revealing the desire to teach in order to allow his pupils to find their own path:

“It is lamentable to see indigenous artists, incapable of finding traditional sources of inspiration err in their attempt to copy European art more or less poorly [. . .] We must put an end to these dreary, soulless paintings that are sold in the evening for 50 francs to customers from the Palace and the Régina [hotels].”²

This desire to show the most gifted painters the artist within would guide him throughout his teaching career. It was necessary to reveal the true artist by eliminating the amateur, and guiding each artist to explore the new genre of easel painting, while also integrating traditional sources of inspiration.

Having spent three months in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), he moved on to Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi), where he arrived on 14 February 1949. The very next day he met Pierre Romain-Desfossés, an encounter that apparently did not go particularly well, although we do not have specific details about the meeting. Based on an initial misunderstanding, the relationship between the two men continued to be difficult. Nevertheless, it should be noted that for the most part they shared the same values and had a comparable conception of Congolese pictorial art. It is highly

1. Little was written about the Académie des Beaux-Arts d’Elisabethville before independence. The majority of information in this chapter comes from the Moonens Archives, which is made up of private letters and press articles, some of which are accessible online at: <http://www.moonens.com/Archives.htm>; see also: *Hommage* 1955, 39–42; Moonens 1957; Maquet 1958; *Musée Vivant* 1960; Badi-Banga Ne-Mwine 1977, 84–87.
2. Moonens Archives, file ‘The Congo years, 1948–1949, Arrival in the Belgian Congo’.



Fig. 9 Henri Charles Kazadi and Jean-Bosco Kamba painting frescoes in the Elisabethville Theater. (Moonens Archives; Photo: Laurent Moonens)

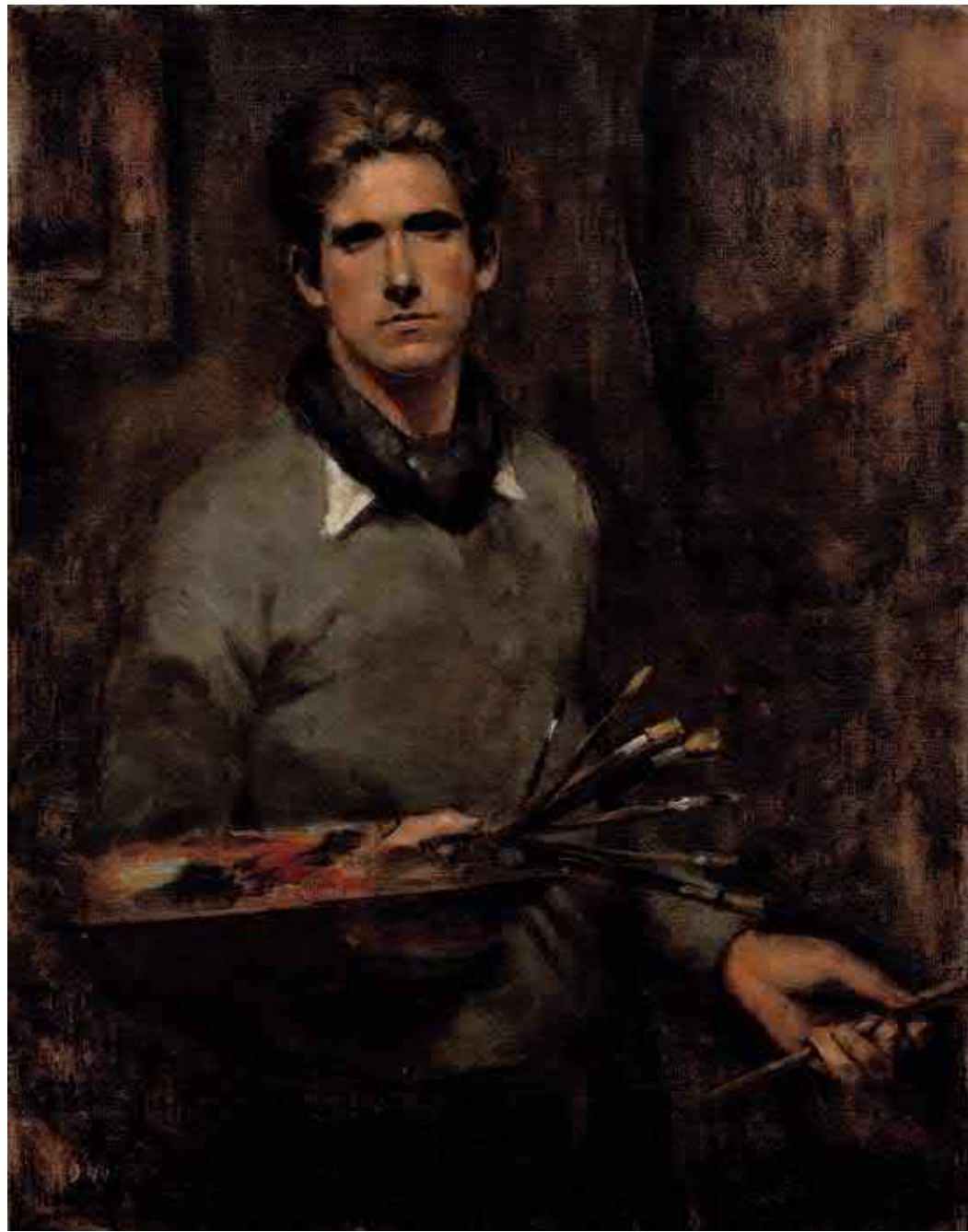


Fig. 1 Self-portrait by Laurent Moonens, 1941. (Moonens Collection)

The Methodology of Moonens and Lods and the Development of an Organic Style

Fatima Soumahoro

In the 1950s, a number of schools and ateliers dedicated to Congolese art emerged across the Belgian and French Congo. Many of these educational institutions were built on the founding myth of a European father figure who wished to bring out or to preserve through art a supposedly ‘pure’ African essence.

The consensus at the time was that in Africa there existed a form of art created by ‘noble savages’ that should be valued and fostered.¹ One of these founding fathers was Laurent Moonens (1911–91), who established the Academy of Fine Arts in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) in 1951 (fig. 1). He was a Belgian painter and art professor who had attended some of the best art institutions in Belgium. He travelled extensively in Central Africa, eventually settling in the Belgian Congo at the end of the 1940s, where he then established his own school. Moonens’ Academy differed from the other institutions as it was a European-style art school in which anyone could enrol. In 1956, the school numbered approximately 150 students. Another characteristic of Moonens’ institution is that he often organised exhibitions of his students’ artwork to assist them in landing jobs related to art and design. He did this in order to help them develop their artistic talent and to provide them with opportunities to earn a living in areas not limited to painting. Apart from painting classes, the school offered courses in architecture, ceramics, advertising design and general applied arts, so that the students could also pursue careers in the fields of tapestry, textile arts or design. Additionally, French, mathematics, and technology courses were offered since most of the Congolese students did not have access to formal education.

While the school welcomed both European and African students, the methods used for these two groups varied. Congolese students began classes around the age of 14. They were not taught the basics of drawing because Moonens believed that they already possessed these skills from birth, as “the native is a born artist”. Students were not expected to imitate Moonens’ artworks, or to learn the techniques of past artists, unlike the European students. Moonens refused any sort of European methodology for Congolese students and his teaching focused on fostering the sensitivity and creativity of individual students. Therefore, his methods seemed more generally educative than instructive.² As an art teacher, he did not believe in the imitation of reality or the repetition of models, but rather in personal expression and dialogue.

1. Greani 2012, 261.

2. Here the term ‘educative’ is used in its literal sense of ‘ex-ducere’, meaning to bring out the inherent qualities that a person already possesses.

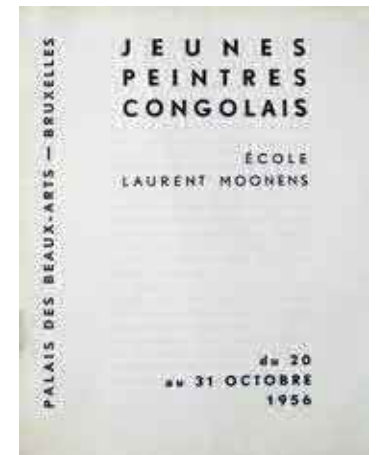


Fig. 2 Exhibition catalogue for *Jeunes peintres Congolais* [Young Congolese Painters] at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. (Dierickx Archives; P. Loos Archives)



Joseph Kabongo Mena
Untitled (Battle of the Crocodile and Serpent)
 Gouache on paper, 32 x 51 cm
 Signed 'Kabongo J.', ca. 1956
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen

Joseph Kabongo Mena

Kipushi (Katanga), b. 1938

Joining the Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville in September 1953, Kabongo was first drawn to architecture, but Moonens steered him towards fine arts after recognising his artistic talent. After three years of training, he was among the eight students selected to work directly with Moonens in his cooperative. Kabongo's work was exhibited during the European tour, and was most likely shown in Liège from 1955–56, and certainly in Ostend and Brussels in 1956. He took part in the creation of the mural paintings at the Elisabethville Theatre in 1956. Kabongo was also one of four Elisabethville artists who travelled to Brussels during the 1958 Universal Exhibition to decorate the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi pavilion. He received the Academy's diploma no. 2 on 16 June 1958, and then joined the Filtisaf textile factory in Albertville (now Kalemie) in 1959, where he became head of design. In 1964, he continued his career in textile design with Solbena in Lubumbashi as head of the photo-engraving department. At the same time, he started the workshop Batika in 1975, in which he practiced the art of batik and embroidery. Following the violence of 1992, and the sacking and closure of the Solbena factory, he left Lubumbashi and set up Batika in Kinshasa, where he has lived ever since. [PM]



Ref:
La naissance 1992; curriculum vitae
 by Joseph Kabongo, September 2010;
 interviews with Mena in 2015 and 2016.



Mode Muntu
(Modeste Ngoy Mukulu Muntu)
Untitled (Warrior Dance)
 Gouache on paper, 28.5 x 36 cm
 Signed 'MODE', ca. 1956
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Thomas Bayet



Ref:
 Moonens Archives; De Plaen 2015;
Beauté Congo 2015.

Mode Muntu (Modeste Ngoy Mukulu Muntu)

Mwanza (Katanga), Lubumbashi 29 May 1940–23 January 1985

A native of the Luba people, Modeste Ngoy Mukulu Muntu [Great Modest Man], Frenchified to Modeste Monde [Modest World], was the eldest of 14 children. In 1954, Mode joined the Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville. Resistant to traditional instruction, his creativity was allowed to bloom freely in the studio. He was among the eight artists selected by Moonens to work in the cooperative and during the European tour of 1955–56 his work was exhibited in Liège, Morges, Ostend, Brussels and Antwerp. Mode Muntu received the Academy's diploma no. 11 on 18 June 1959, but he did not take the departure of his mentor well. Difficulties linked to Congo's independence and the secession of Katanga caused him to return to his birth village. Upon returning in 1965, he ran a fish stall in a market. His career was punctuated by the interest and protection of successive patrons, including Claude Charlier (who had become Director of the Academy) from the end of the 1960s until 1972, Nestor Cocks (Consul of Belgium), and a new audience of art-lovers from 1972 through the mid-'70s. In 1974, Mode Muntu was awarded second prize by the American journal *African Arts*, which made his work more widely known throughout the world. In the mid-1970s, the departure of his remaining sponsors and the growing fashion for popular painting pushed him back out of the art world and to his fish stall. Then in the early 1980s anthropologists Guy de Plaen (then Director of the Musée de Lubumbashi) and Jeanette Kawende tracked him down. They created a studio for him in the Musée and provided him with artistic supplies. His body of work, which is now broadly recognised, was tragically interrupted by a bout of dysentery in 1985. [PM]



Floribert Mwembia
Untitled (Battle)
 Gouache on paper, 34.5 x 44 cm
 Signed 'Mwembia FL.', ca. 1958
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen

Floribert Mwembia

Elisabethville, 1939–Lubumbashi, 8 January 1989

Mwembia was born in an urban environment and did not have much contact with the bush. He joined the Académie des Beaux-Arts d'Elisabethville in 1953, and was among the eight artists selected by Moonens to work with him in the cooperative. His work was selected for the European tour of 1955–56, including shows in Liège, Morges, Ostend, Brussels and Antwerp. Mwembia was one of four Elisabethville artists who went to Brussels for the Universal Exhibition of 1958 to decorate the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi pavilion. In June 1958, he was awarded diploma no. 1 from the Academy, where he would later give lessons. A talented painter, he shifted between styles with disconcerting ease: sometimes decorative, sometimes with humorous human figures; other compositions were nearly abstract, full of arabesques, contrasts, light, colour and movement. An excellent painter of animals, Mwembia gradually concentrated on the human figure, and he often used a dark background and harsh tones that evoke the colour of fire. Illness put an end to his career in 1989. [PM]



Ref:
 Moonens Archives; Stroobants 2006;
La naissance 1992; *L'Art au Congo* 1958,
 biographical notes; Badi-Banga Ne-
 Mwine 1977; and information collected
 from his family in 2016 by Philippe
 Moonens.



Floribert Mwembia
Untitled (Bird)
 Oil on board, 41.5 x 35.5 cm
 Signed 'Mwembia', ca. 1960
 Pierre Loos Collection
 Photo: Michael De Plaen



Floribert Mwembia
Untitled (Parade)
Gouache on paper, 41.5 x 35.5 cm
Signed 'Mwembia Fl.', ca. 1955–58
Pierre Loos Collection
Photo: Michael De Plaen

F. Ilunga
Untitled (Crocodiles)
Oil on board, 65 x 76 cm
Signed 'Ilunga F', ca. 1960
Pierre Loos Collection
Photo: Michael De Plaen



AFTERWORD

Estela Ibáñez-García

Colours of Congo is a pioneering exhibition and book project focusing on a body of work that has yet to receive significant scholarly attention, but which deserves serious consideration within the re-emerging debate on European Colonialism, in this case Congolese paintings created during the Belgian colonial period.

These works are the result of a particular facet of European colonialism, one based on a paternalistic attitude towards the Congolese and their culture, rather than the more commonly documented exploitative colonial stance. Georges Thiry, Pierre Romain-Desfossés, Laurent Moonens and Pierre Lods each fostered artistic creations by native Congolese artists that were based on a mutual appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of Congolese mural paintings. Their primary concerns were to *preserve* Congolese indigenous art and to foster the innate *genius* they saw in these Congolese artists. Yet the Europeans’ understanding of the aesthetics of Congolese art, their obsession with preservation, and the very concept of artistic genius were completely foreign to these painters. For the Congolese, aesthetics and functionality were interwoven.

In his essay, Ian Paolo Villareal explores the critical role that aesthetics plays in Congolese religion, society and government. In Africa, art was rooted in a particular context and served a specific function. The notion of autonomous art and the creation of *objects*—in this case paintings meant to be contemplated—are European constructs that do not apply to the Congolese painters. Precisely due to the contextual and functional dimensions of African art, preservation was never an issue in tropical Africa, as the artworks were meant to be used and recreated. If objects deteriorated through use, they typically would be replaced by new works. It is not the *object* but what the object *does* in a particular context that mattered in traditional Africa. This point also explains why the notion of genius is ‘out of place’. Art in Congolese culture was a community-based phenomenon. Art required the participation of the entire community for its creation. Artistic skills were relevant in African cultures, and individual artists were acknowledged and valued, but not for being extraordinary. Quite the opposite, their skills and knowledge were always rooted in, and shared with, their respective communities.

Thomas Bayet, through unparalleled access to the Ivan Dierickx and Pierre Loos Archives, prepared the volume’s extensive historic overviews on the various workshops and their founders. His profound knowledge of Congolese art, and extensive background on the painters, forms the backbone of an account that values the artworks’ historical development and critical discussion. We are indebted



Scenes engraved on an ivory oliphant
by the artist Songo depicting Chief Akengai
and his life at court (see p. 28, fig. 9).
(P. Loos Archives; Photo: Paul Louis Brussels)