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Le voyageur qui ne savait pas lire.
Kpagbo (*1946),
RMCA collection, Tervuren, HO.0.1.3865. Oil on canvas.
104 x 134 cm. Rights reserved.
It was in 2013 that the Royal Museum for Central Africa acquired nigh on 2,000 canvases, collected by Bogumil Jewsiewicki and his Congolese colleagues between 1968 and 2012 in 15 DRC towns and cities: Beni, Bukama, Bunia, Butembo, Goma, Isiro, Kananga, Kikwit, Kinshasa, Kisangani, Kolwezi, Lubumbashi, Matadi, Mbandaka and Mbuji-Mayi. It is described as a ‘major’ collection owing to the number of works and their scale and to the associated archives: photographs of workshops, life stories, interviews with artists and chronicles.

The public acclaim with which recent exhibitions of popular Congolese painting have been greeted offers proof, if any were needed, of just how vibrant popular culture is in the DRC. However, apart from their cheerful, provocative dynamism and their dizzyingly creative exuberance, popular paintings are a direct reflection of the never-ending crises undermining the Congo. This situation is echoed in the title of this catalogue, *Congo Art Works*, which is also the title of the BOZAR exhibition being held from 7 October 2016 to 22 January 2017.

This is because the artists are busy working to earn a living, generally seeking to fulfil the orders they have received. And work is something paintings do, too, creating discussions, sparking off debates, raising issues within society. Up until the 1990s, the people buying these paintings tended to be Congolese citizens but ever since then, and whenever the opportunity arises, the works have been sold on the international market.
This collection is of considerable relevance for the general public, including the Congolese diaspora in Belgium: the paintings, the themes chosen, the obsessions and the allegories cover the everyday preoccupations of the Congolese people over the last 40 years. It chronicles the memories of the post-colonial epoch, a unique record to be studied, exhibited and annotated, evoking Congo-Zaire during the time of Mobutu, during the war years, during the crisis years.

The only collection to equal Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s is the one found in the DRC, in Lubumbashi: Father Léon Verbeek’s amazing collection of popular paintings. We would like to see this collection, whose content is similar to our own, remain in the Congo, where it can be studied, promoted and exhibited.

I would like to pay thanks to the RMCA staff for their efforts in acquiring this major collection, to Bambi Ceuppens and Sammy Baloji for this splendid exhibition and to all the personnel within the Museology, Collection Management and Publications services involved with this project and its catalogue.

Guido Gryseels
Director General of the Royal Museum for Central Africa

Bruno Verbergt
Director for Public Services, RMCA
CHÉRI CHÉRIN (*1955),
LA VENDEUSE DE PAGNE.
Kinshasa, DRC, 2002.
RMCA collection, Tervuren,
HO.2013.57.1724.
Oil on canvas. 105 x 133 cm.
Rights reserved.
**FOREWORD**

*Congo Art Works* marks the last of the series of exhibition partnerships between the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) and the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR) which had been planned during the three-year closure for the renovation of the museum and its temporary residence at BOZAR. It is also the second time in six years that BOZAR welcomes collections of the RMCA. It all started in 2010 with *GEO-graphics. A map of art practices in Africa, past and present*, curated by David Adjaye, Koyo Kouoh, Anne Marie Bouttiaux, and Nicola Setari.

The collaboration between RMCA and BOZAR, two very complementary federal institutions when it comes to presenting Africa, is an ongoing one, focused on contemporary art and issues related to Africa, as evidenced by these photography exhibitions: *Bamako Encounters* in 2012, *Where we’re at! Other voices on gender* in 2014, *Dey your Lane! Lagos variations* in 2016; *Timbuktu Renaissance* in 2015 on endangered heritage, and *Afropean* on Diaspora arts in 2015. This collaborative written story will continue.

BOZAR is particularly honoured to host *Congo Art Works*, for several reasons. Firstly, because the exhibition is co-curated by two prominent representatives of the African diaspora in Belgium, Bambi Ceuppens, anthropologist at the RMCA, and Sammy Baloji, Congolese artist of world stature, based in Brussels. Such a curatorship choice made by the RMCA leadership is significant and important. It is in line with the museum’s new vision of sharing ownership and interpretation of its collections, and with BOZAR’s mission to offer a platform to Afropolitan creativity. It encourages Belgian society to question further the integration and representation of Belgian citizens of African origin in our society. Secondly, because this exhibition is an opportunity for all of us to reflect
on and revisit shared Belgian-Congolese history through the eyes of Congolese artists, who as painters were astute social and political commentators. Thirdly, because the exhibition contributes to officially bring recognition to Congolese popular painting as a major artistic practice. Finally, because in welcoming this exhibition, BOZAR symbolically reverses a decision of almost a century ago, when the former management of the Centre of Fine Arts had refused the inclusion of Congolese paintings – other than paintings representing ‘images of the bush’ by Albert Lubaki – in its 1929 exhibition *Art nègre*, on the grounds that they were not on par with the exhibited ethnographic works, esteemed by European collectors and audiences.

*Congo Art Works* thus affirms loud and clear the modernity of African artists and announces the new museum’s mission to de-compartmentalize collections and decolonize the gaze. May this noble goal, through this exhibition, be the signal of a new era? Not only for the museum and for our future joint African exhibitions, but also for a future Belgium and Europe, inclusive of its African citizens.

Étienne Davignon  
Chair, Board of Directors  
of the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR), Brussels

Paul Dujardin, CEO and Artistic Director  
of the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR), Brussels

Sophie Lauwers  
Head of Exhibitions,  
Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR), Brussels
Oil on canvas. 45 x 79 cm. Rights reserved.
This is not a collection

Bogumil Jewsiewicki

It should be easily apparent to readers that what I am doing here is paraphrasing Denis Diderot,\(^1\) René Magritte\(^2\) and Michel Foucault.\(^3\) I trust that the subsequent text will persuade them that this is not a pointless exercise in erudition. Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* reveals the glaringly apparent fact that the image of a pipe is not a pipe at all, while Diderot makes it clear that a story needs someone to listen to it in order for it to exist. A written story is not strictly speaking a story, a figurative representation on a piece of fabric is not strictly speaking a painting unless there is a specific venue for it to be put on display, an agent to judge how aesthetically successful it is, a specific market. Various types of media for figurative representations are not a collection if there is no collector\(^4\) whose aim is for it to become a personal or collective asset, to stand out in some way.\(^5\)

My scholarly digression here is intended to show that my efforts to create a visual whole could at times be described as an archive, library or an image library but not a collection. As far as I am concerned, the meaning of the object, let us define it as a painting or canvas, changes the more I learn about who produced it, for whom and for what purpose it was produced, put into circulation, exhibition and, sometimes, rejected.

It was in 1968\(^6\) that I bought the first painting, a leopard with a porcupine in its mouth painted on an unframed piece of cardboard. I was then teaching at the Mbandaka Pedagogical Institute, after arriving in the Congo shortly before from Poland. I was giving lessons to future teachers on the subject of European history. My gradual introduction to the history of the country and the regions
(Anonymous),
*Wansungila nganyi lomo 7: 24.*
Oil on canvas.
48 x 30 cm.
Rights reserved.
was derived from the library and the Gustave Hulstaert archives, where the Centre André was subsequently created. In the wake of this first painting, which was hanging on the wall of a bar I entered to enjoy a beer, I purchased several works by a painter of street scenes and slices of local life. He expressed himself only through the medium of his paintings and even with the help of my students I never managed to get him to say a single word about the paintings I bought. I thought he was a bit simple-minded, for one thing because of the unusual images he dared to use, such as a man with his trousers around his ankles defecating in the street. Unfamiliar as I was with certain aspects of Congolese culture I was shocked by the physiological act itself rather than an adult male showing his naked buttocks.

I am dwelling a bit on this initial stage because with hindsight I see that this heady mixture of ignorance and my interest, which I now describe as ethnographic, enabled me during this period to understand why I do not collect, even though I have managed to gather together nearly 2,000 paintings.

Owing to my university training, focused on ethnography and the history of the rural economy and my interest in the visual arts, I was attracted by images produced locally for a local audience. I saw naïve works of art, which were prized in the socialist Poland of my youth for the way they were supposed to express the voice of the people. Accordingly, I came to the conclusion that the painter of street scenes was a bit of a simpleton, whose work could be classed as folk art, therefore providing a channel towards popular culture. The concepts of fantasy, memory, testaments were not part of my intellectual background. I thought of myself as a collector, building up an image library.

After the launch of graduate studies in history at Lovanium University I continued my career in the capital, Kinshasa. Along with a few colleagues, I then committed myself to studying and teaching the history of the Congo (during the colonial epoch in my case). Victor Bol, a romanist with a keen interest in Congolese literature, introduced me to various collectors and historians focusing on Congolese art, including Joseph Cornet. In Kinshasa, I took some interest in artists who had been to the Fine Art Academy and the École de Poto-Poto,