

## Exhibition review

# Decolonising the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium's Second Museum Age

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In December 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, reopened its doors after a renovation project that started nearly 20 years ago. Founded by the infamous King Leopold II, the RMCA contains cultural and natural history collections from Belgium's former colonies of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, as well as other parts of Africa and beyond. Today, a new 'Welcome pavilion' leads the visitor through a monumental subterranean corridor to the historic building's basement and to an introduction to the history of the collections. The exhibition halls on the ground level have been refurbished, including the old colonial maps painted on the walls, while in the Crocodile Room, the original display has been retained as a reminder of the museum's own history. The largest halls now present displays linked to the scientific disciplines and themes within the museum's research remit (Figure 1): 'Rituals and Ceremonies' (anthropology), 'Languages and Music' (linguistics and ethnomusicology), 'Unrivalled art', 'Natural History' (biology), 'Natural resources' (biology, geology) and 'Colonial History and Independence' (history, political science). Eye-catching developments include: a room featuring some of the statues of a racist style and subject matter, which were formerly exhibited throughout the museum, and are now collected together in a kind of 'graveyard' (although this symbolic rejection is not properly explained); a new Afropea room focusing on diaspora history; a section on 'Propaganda and representation' (Imagery), a Rumba studio and a Taxolab. In place of racist statues, and occupying a central position in the Rotunda, is a new sculpture by Aimé Mpane named 'New breath, or burgeoning Congo'. The accompanying label states that this piece "provides a firm answer" to the remaining allegorical colonial sculptures in the Rotunda by "looking at a prosperous future". Alas, this answer is not as clear as is claimed and its message may be lost on many visitors.

Despite huge efforts to innovate the display, to add a stronger research focus and to highlight continuity between historical and contemporary Africa, the renovation project has received a fair amount of bad press. In February this year, a UN expert group stated that the renovated RMCA did not sufficiently bring to light the abuses of the colonial era, recommending that Belgium apologise for its colonial past (Crisp 2019). While the museum management and politicians have reacted with surprise to such a judgment, some aspects of the display can clearly be criticised on deontological grounds. There is little consistency in the scenography, with the tone of the narrative at times self-reflexive and critical, and at others, it digresses from the abuses of the colonial past.

The current review assesses the uneven outcome of the renovations as the result of both a lack of unity within the museum and the management's indecisiveness to engage critically with colonial history. This situation is exemplified by the museum's distancing itself from the racist 'leopard man' statue (created by P. Wissaert in 1913) by relegating it to the 'graveyard' room, along with Cheri Samba's painting of Africans removing this sculpture from the museum. An enlarged reproduction of the same painting also now features at the entrance to the exhibition. The revolutionary nature of this redisplay of the 'leopard man' alongside Cheri Samba's painting is over-stated in the RMCA's communication (Figure 2). It would have been more appropriate instead to explain the role of the museum in the creation of the gruesome leopard men mythology, as connected to the conviction of leopard men militias in the colony. The tententious use of these two images epitomises the overall curatorial approach, addressing complexities indirectly when such issues need more direct and full discussion. Too much is left unsaid.

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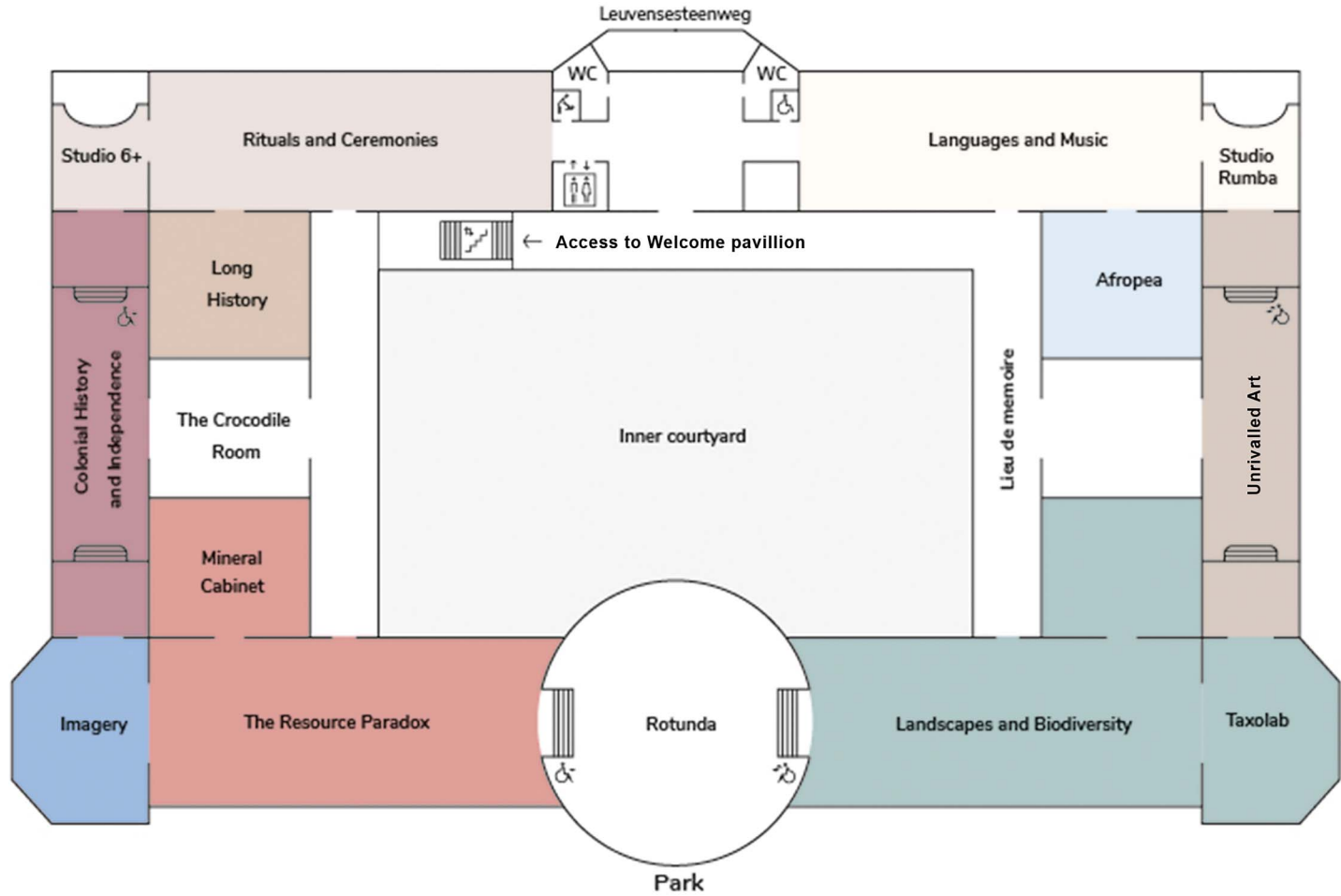


Figure 1. Ground plan showing the exhibition halls of the Royal Museum for Central Africa.



Figure 2. The director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, G. Gryseels, with a replica of Cheri Samba's painting at the museum's entrance (photograph from press file; © C. Dercon).

## Background

The seeds for the renovation project were sown in the 1980s, when the RMCA came under increasing scrutiny as a showcase for King Leopold II's (1835–1909) megalomania and of Belgian imperialism. The king's role in the founding in Congo of an exploitative and violent system based on the rubber trade was revealed internationally in Adam Hochschild's (1998) best-seller *King Leopold's ghost*, and by Peter Bates's documentary for BBC 4 *White king, red rubber, black death* (2003). Both the documentary and the book owe a debt to Belgian and Congolese anthropologists and historians, such as Jules Marchal, Daniel Vangroenweghe and Elikia M'Bokolo, whose work had stirred debate since the 1980s, but which had been ignored or downplayed by the Belgian political and academic establishment. Tellingly, the diplomat Marchal first published under a pseudonym, while Vangroenweghe's work was questioned both in the Belgian Parliament and academia. The international interest in Leopold II's legacy sparked by the work

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of Hochschild and Bates, however, was more difficult to ignore, and intensified the demand for Belgium to address its collective amnesia regarding its colonial history.

As a collaborator of the RMCA at the time (2002–2007), I witnessed this process from within. In Belgium, international critique contributed to a growing uneasiness, perhaps stronger than in other colonising nations. This manifested in outrage at colonial abuses combined with indignation and defensiveness. The generation of Belgians that had built their lives and self-worth working in the former colonies still believed their efforts were a contribution to a greater cause, despite awareness of the exploitative and racist nature of the system. Internationally, the rich museum collections of the RMCA were regarded as symbolic of Belgian imperial greed. This atmosphere determined how ethnographic collections were managed within the museum, and across the wider Belgian academic and heritage sectors—that is, with unease and neglect. Fowles (2016) has argued for a correlation between the post-colonial representational crisis and the rise, since the 1980s, of object-oriented

research, causing an analytical shift from people to things, which are safer to study; but this certainly did not happen in Belgium. The renovation process began around 2000 and was compromised by the same contradictory, collective attitudes.

As a Federal Scientific and Royal Institution, the museum lies at the centre of a nexus of different forces in Belgian society. Its public stakeholders include both former colonials and the African diaspora. It sits at an intersection between progressive and conservative political forces, intergenerational divergences and opposing academic traditions. The museum has historical links with the international art trade in the Sablon district of Brussels, as well as with university partners. Divergent stances vis-à-vis the colonial past and, more specifically, the collections have affected intellectual and representational struggles within the museum and, ultimately, the outcome of the renovation. Such internal tensions seldom feature in the media, but the conflicting views of museum staff on the issue of restitution have recently been revealed (Beckers 2019). These divisions are evident in the displays, which are eclectic to the point that the work of different curators is recognisable, mixing progressive and conservative messages, and self-reflexivity with defensiveness.

Over several decades, the RMCA pragmatically attempted to mask its negative colonial associations by rebranding itself in line with new museological trends (Vanhee 2016). ‘Democratisation’ required that the communities represented in the displays should be acknowledged and have an equal voice in the portrayal of their histories. In 2005, the RMCA attempted to start dealing with the colonial legacy through an exhibition entitled ‘The Memory of Congo’, claiming it would tackle the subject with an objective attitude, balancing different perspectives in a nuanced way. The exhibition was curated in consultation with diverse stakeholders and for different publics, including former colonisers and colonised. Difficult aspects of colonisation, however, were underplayed, the merits of colonialism still highlighted, and ‘lighter’ subjects, such as the history of Rumba music, included to ensure that the exhibition was not too negative. Critics of such democratisation have observed that, in museums’ attempts to please the wider public, they have used scientific knowledge selectively, eschewing contested histories and human misery, favouring populism over radical approaches. Hochschild (2006) fiercely criticised ‘The Memory of Congo’ for failing to address the history of the

pervasive, long-lasting, forced labour system and its massive death toll. Critiques of the now completed renovation—including, notably, the UN report—raise similar concerns. The propagated neutrality of the curatorial strategy is tendentious, when the optimistic statue of established artist Aimé Mpané is selected via a competition for display, while in recent decades the work of diaspora ‘Artivists’ has been repeatedly declined for being too radical. The celebratory tone that the RMCA has cultivated to convince itself and its public of the important heritage it preserves—and to assuage its colonial discomfort—sits awkwardly with historical reality.

Since the early 2000s, the museum has been working on the renovation process with an advisory group, the Comité de Concertation MRAC-Associations Africaines (COMRAF), as part of its ‘inclusive practices’. Over the years, the RMCA management failed to build a sustainable relationship with COMRAF, which often felt it was consulted only retrospectively to legitimise decisions already taken. This is in line with general critiques of democratisation, which argue that museums pay lip service to source communities, providing a thin veneer of political correctness but failing truly to share authority. Several diaspora researchers, artists and activists critically rejected the renovation for not collaborating with diaspora representatives and for failing to address colonial history critically (Vallet 2018). On the museum’s opening day, a diaspora group advocating restitution organised a performance entitled ‘Not my Africamuseum’ in the museum’s park, with the slogan “My history is not your commodity”. Critiques of colonialism are not wholly absent from the museum, but are provided only selectively, and presented through neutralised and detached messages, which may be shocking to those whose parents and grandparents experienced colonial rule first hand. Support groups representing former colonisers are also unhappy. A lack of audacity to address the colonial past fully has led to disappointment on all sides, and also within the museum.

## **Institutional split personality: self-reflexive or not?**

The efforts of the museum to update its displays with new research and self-reflexivity are significant but unbalanced. The new and meticulous Afropea room touches upon difficult subjects, such as stolen children, and speaks effectively to diaspora communities

by focusing on detailed lived histories. In several halls, the division between historical and contemporary Africa has been bridged by focusing on continuity and change. In the Languages and Music hall, for instance, where different means of communication are explored, one section is devoted to the grammatical specificities of Bantu linguistics, explaining tonal languages. The same gallery examines popular paintings and comics (fanzines) and the history of Rumba music. Such a dynamic focus, however, is lacking in the Unrivalled Art room, wherein the balance falls in favour of a traditional display where ethnographic objects are presented as decontextualised masterpieces. It is stated, for example, that Belgian scientists played a historically significant role in acknowledging African objects as 'art' and in highlighting African artistry. To state this as a manifest truth is a form of Eurocentrism, as the methods employed by these researchers—regardless of their appreciation for African artists—have long since been criticised for their colonial biases. Discussion of the continuity of creativity within this Unrivalled Art hall is completely absent. This is in stark contrast to the adjoining gallery, where the traffic light robot, Moseka—designed by Izay Kirongozi and a team of female engineers from WOTECH (the Women's Technology organisation) to improve traffic safety—is exhibited. Perhaps it is the marked contrast of this room with the Unrivalled Art gallery that makes some critics consider the traffic light display, with its urban background pictures, as exoticising; in reality, this criticism should be directed at the Unrivalled Art room.

Similar contradictions exist between some of the displays on 'Natural resources' and 'Imagery'. Like other halls, 'Natural resources' suffers from a lack of overview and appears incomplete, with lacunae around the informal economy and creativity, or in place of artisanal mining and conflict. This is awkward, given the fact that Umicore and George Forrest—large companies with roots in Congo's colonial mining industry—are among the museum's sponsors. In contrast, in the next display, 'Imagery', black activist artists and academics explain how colonial propaganda photography and film have created a visual hierarchy by literally looking down on Africans. Medical screenings are identified as a favoured subject in propaganda, testifying to the exercise of bio-political control over colonial subjects. The split personality of the museum is reflected clearly in these divergent attitudes, which seep through the scenography.

## **Scenographic choices and effects**

Many of the exhibition halls lack narrative overviews, and information is not always clearly presented in a visual hierarchy. Consequently, visitors may miss the main messages of the exhibits. In some places, there are too many panels; sometimes the font is too small and the text too detailed; object legends are occasionally missing. The decision to work with audioguides and remove (nearly) all of the audio within the display may not have been the best choice, as the audioguides do not work properly, depriving the visitor of crucial information.

The highly anticipated, and unexpectedly small, 'Colonial History and Independence' hall appears to be the work of different curators. There is a focus on the ivory trade under the Congo Free State and on territorial administration, and on work and schooling in the colony. Except for the independence section, little attention is devoted to resistance movements and African agency—there is one audiovisual display on Simon Kimbangu's African church as a form of non-armed resistance. The history of leopard-men, of which a few objects are displayed, is not explained, although the museum itself played an important role in the creation of propaganda around this subject. What information there is to discover about the lives, sacrifices and resistance of Congolese populations under colonialism is unfortunately lost in the multiplicity of themes addressed and the unclear scenography. In contrast, the section on independence provides much detailed information, and is clearly the work of the same curator as the Afropea display.

The 'Long History' (or archaeology) hall and the 'Rituals and Ceremonies' hall both have a clear design. The 'Rituals and Ceremonies' hall follows the cyclical logic of rites of passage. Links are made via audiovisual installations between rites of passage from the past and contemporary practices and experiences. A 'second layer' of texts provides a deeper critical focus on some matters (e.g. grave robbing and colonial collecting). In the 'Long History' hall, which, surprisingly, is among the smallest in the museum, the displays follow a clear timeline from AD 900–1200, focused on the excavations in Katanga, the most significant undertaken by the museum. The highlight is a Kisalian grave display from the Upemba Depression. Two other displays focus on important work in which the

Archaeology Department is involved—notably, research into early Bantu expansions and the origins of the Kongo kingdom. Further attractions are the Liavela mask—the oldest-known wooden sculpture from Central Africa (eighth or ninth century AD)—and the Ishango bone, a deep-historical counting instrument from the Semliki valley (25 000–20 000 BC). The more effective narrative display presented in this ‘Long History’ hall offers a point of repose in the otherwise puzzling totality of the new RMCA.

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