

Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium

GUIDO GRYSEELS, GABRIELLE LANDRY
and KOEKI CLAESSENS

Royal Museum for Central Africa, Leuvensesteenweg 13, Tervuren 3080, Belgium. Email: guido.gryseels@africamuseum.be

The Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren is often referred to as one of the last colonial museums in the world. This article provides an overview of the various steps taken in the fundamental transformation process and the plan for renovation of the museum with a view to making it a modern and dynamic Africa museum. For this institution, which is simultaneously a Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination, a mere change of décor is not sufficient: a fundamental shift in vision, a series of risks, and especially a move towards dialogue and transparency have been part of the process, which has implications that extend far beyond the walls of the museum.

Origins

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, was founded in 1898 as the ‘Musée du Congo’ (Museum of Congo) by King Leopold II. It originated as a temporary exhibition under his supervision, presented in 1897 as the Colonial Section of the Brussels World Fair. By 1885, Leopold had become King Sovereign of the Congo Free State, which he himself had founded. The colonial exhibition developed into a showcase for ‘his Congo’, and was intended to convince Belgians that the colony was not only justified, but a worthy undertaking. The exhibition’s aims were as much propagandist as they were commercial: the Belgians were to be convinced of the economic possibilities in the Congo and of the good to be done in civilizing and developing this region. The effect of this exhibition, which displayed the most investment-attracting export products surrounded by an array of ethnographic objects and animals prepared by taxidermists, in addition to the

reconstituted Congolese villages, with real Congolese villagers on site, in the surrounding park area, was that scientific interest in the region was greatly aroused. It was thus that the dual function of the museum was born: an exhibition and research institute, one of the many legacies that have remained until today. The scientific research of that period involved extreme collecting practices in the natural sciences and humanities and social sciences. As the research interest increased, publications were also initiated and the collections grew even more substantial. Early on, it was clear that the already expanded exhibition would be too limited for the collections and for research. King Leopold II began another plan to create a large complex of various museums and international schools, making Tervuren a veritable window on the world, a place where anyone who wanted to know about the world would necessarily have to come. The only project of this grand plan that came to fruition was the construction of the current museum building, which was not fully completed by the time of Leopold II's death in 1909. This new 'Musée du Congo belge' (Museum of the Belgian Congo) was officially inaugurated in 1910 by King Albert I. When it opened its doors, the new museum came under the auspices of the Ministry of Colonies, which continued its propagandist policy. Between 1910 and 1922, the Minister of Colonies commissioned several artists to create sculptures to decorate the niches in the rotunda of the museum building. The sculptures were intended to emphasize the benefits of colonization in the Congo. They portrayed an affluent Europe civilizing the 'primitive' peoples of this land, victims of slavery. These sculptures are still found in their original place and attest to this 'civilizing' project. The museum grew considerably throughout the decades following 1910. The collections served as a basis of a very active programme of scientific research. This trend continued in much the same way, with varying degrees of support from the Belgian Colonial government, until 1960, the year that the Congo obtained independence.

The museum, having been, among other things of course, a tool of propaganda for the colony, was to undergo simultaneously a fundamental change in terms of research and a great stagnation in its exhibition space. Having been renamed the 'Royal Museum for Central Africa' (thus extending the focus of interest beyond the borders of the Congo), the museum researchers began to undertake direct fieldwork in the Congo and in various countries surrounding it. At the same time, what was the 'showcase of the colony', was left relatively unchanged as the museum suffered from severe budget cuts. Indeed, the colonial government had financed a great deal of the institution's activities, and independence for Congo left it with no compensation from the Belgian government for the missing funds. These so-called 'historical reasons' for the lack of funding have not been addressed until recently. Like it or not, the Royal Museum for Central Africa was still a colonial institution and not a priority in the postcolonial period. The Belgian

view on Africa had fossilized the institution's identity, indirectly making it a kind of orphan, with respect to the other nine Belgian Federal Scientific Establishments.

Changing tendencies and solid decisions for the future

The fact that the museum exhibition spaces remained stagnant from the colonial period until recently had some advantages. Of course as we renovate the RMCA today, as would be the case in any period, we are doing so within current paradigms – from which it is not possible to depart. The museum was founded on a multidisciplinary approach, and was based on collecting and cataloguing, as were many museums of its time. Twentieth-century ideas about theory and practice in museums, however, would consider such a pseudo-integrated approach as inappropriate, meaning that combining various research domains in one exhibition space did not conform to the general tendency to specialize in the museum (and academic research) world. The 1970s, with the advent of what has been called the 'new museology', brought about seminal changes in this penchant for specialization: a tendency towards a more integrated or holistic approach began to see the light of day. Having remained relatively unchanged since the colonial period, the museum finds itself in a rather fortuitous position with respect to an integrated approach: what was multidisciplinary research (rather disconnected from the exhibition spaces) can be maintained and especially transformed into interdisciplinary research and this research can be translated in the exhibition spaces, potentially placing the museum – in a sense – at the cutting edge. But the question has been and has to be posed as to whether this is the direction the RMCA should take, knowing that what is decided today will affect the institution profoundly in the long term. This critical reflection is being carried out on a continued basis, and will be dealt with further. This reflection aside, it is important to note that research and museological expertise are now in place to transform the RMCA without compromising any of the institution's attributes.

In any case, there are a few issues that are crystal clear, regardless of paradigms: the RMCA had to shed its colonial image, and closer ties with the African communities and diasporas had to be established to ensure relevance and balance in the work carried out on natural and cultural phenomena of contemporary as well as historical Africa.

Transformation: an institutional vision

The RMCA houses the most important collections on Central Africa in the world, both in number and in quality, and it has a long tradition of research in the natural and earth sciences as well as in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, it has a long tradition of partnerships with African institutions and other

institutions around the world. Through its educational and cultural activities and through its exhibitions, the museum also encourages the interest of the public at large in the natural and cultural diversity of Africa, its people, its societies, and its environments. It was clear that this unique combination of disciplines, expertise, collections and partnerships would be maintained and accentuated in the vision for the future, giving the RMCA the potential to become *the* institution of reference for past and present societies and natural environments of Africa, and Central Africa in particular. The historic dual function of museum and research institute would thus be extended to a triple function, which aims at optimal relevancy: Museum, Research Institute, and Centre of Information Dissemination about Africa.

A recipe for reform?

So how does one actually go about instituting change in such an institution? Although there is no easy recipe for reform, some steps in the process have proven useful either in terms of process or in terms of result.

Defining core business

The basic strategy was first to formulate a mission statement of the institution. This was a fascinating process of working together with a core group of one or two researchers from each of the research departments and various public-oriented and technical services within the museum. This resulted in a setting of priorities for the institution. A proposal was made to the Management Committee and the Scientific Council of the RMCA, as well as external experts and stakeholders. The resulting version was then proposed to the 275-member staff of the institution on two subsequent occasions. The final version was as follows:

The Royal Museum for Central Africa must be a world centre in research and knowledge dissemination on past and present societies and natural environments of Africa, and in particular Central Africa, to foster for the public at large and the scientific community a better understanding and interest in this area and, through partnerships, to substantially contribute to its sustainable development.

This mission statement, albeit just one sentence, had great implications for the reform process of the institution, which was then, in 2001, just beginning. In short it meant that the RMCA would have to extend its critical mass of scientific research, should financing otherwise not be forthcoming, by creating partnerships with other institutions around the world. It meant potentially streamlining existing research and developing new research domains as well as a totally new approach to the representation of present-day Africa in all of its facets. It meant that the

public services would have to be reformed so as properly to convey knowledge on Central Africa to the public at large, for example, by working directly with the African communities and diasporas. And finally, it meant contributing its expertise to development cooperation projects to build national capacities and contribute to sustainable development in Central Africa, which implies interdisciplinary approaches.

Blueprints for transformation

In order to engage the various research departments and public-oriented services in what can be considered the ‘internal renovation’ of the museum, to move to develop new policies, our investigation was launched to promote reflection on what each service and department does, for whom, why, and how. The process here is as important as the result. It implies standing back from one’s position, thinking of the institution as an interconnected living organism, out-of-the-box thinking, and a readiness to streamline and change. The first of the policies to be established was the publications policy, which set out a clear strategy for guaranteeing the scientific quality of the publications, professionalizing the selection and reviewing methods, and giving greater visibility to the museum by increasing distribution worldwide. A museology policy was developed as well to lay the framework for this new service and the strategy for bringing the museum to the standard it aims at reaching and by a goal of awareness-raising through an active temporary exhibitions policy. The public services in general have begun the groundwork for an integrated policy, in which all these services work together to increase dialogue, awareness-raising, and re-branding of the museum with respect to the public at large. A research policy is under development and will also ensure the relevance and high quality of research conducted within the RMCA. Finally, a collections policy is in the final stages of development and aims to bring a centralized approach to collections management, no easy task for the immense and diverse collections housed in the museum. It comprises a general state of affairs of the management of the collections, an inventory of the main problems and necessary improvements, and determines priorities for the coming 5 years. It also lays the groundwork for a digitalization project, which aims at increasing the accessibility of the RMCA’s collections by creating a virtual museum on the web. At the moment, less than 1% of the RMCA’s collection is on display in the permanent exhibition of the museum, while the remaining 99% is kept in reserves and is accessible only to scientific researchers by appointment.

The establishment of clear policies is contributing directly to clarifying the functions of the museum proper and the research institute, reinforcing the two independent aspects and thus allowing them to reinforce one another, also

allowing for the centre of information dissemination to be more clearly defined. In short, they lay out the blueprint for transformation.

Re-branding

A full-fledged process of re-branding was necessary to communicate a new image of the museum to the outside world. This process was launched by rethinking the concept of the museum logo, publishing a brochure on the institution as an integrated entity, refurbishing the website so as to serve as a clearinghouse of information on the museum as a whole and on Central Africa in general, revamping the scientific and other publications, organizing ‘Behind the Scenes’ visits to our collection reserves, and forming a full-fledged museology service to ensure, among other things, that the museum space would also express a new image. In this way, the re-branding process would be comprehensive.

The previous museum logo comprised an image of the main building of the museum. Although the building is inextricably linked to the RMCA and its past, and will always be, it was not necessarily what should come to symbolize the institution. Developing a new museum logo was again a process of institution-wide reflection. It had to render simple the complexity of the triple function of the museum, transcend the language barrier (Belgium having three official languages, and even four official names for the museum!), and find a simple word or image that would not mislead visitors to thinking that the museum was only an ethnographic museum or only a natural science museum. Of course an image of the museum building would have been an easy option, but as we were looking for renewal, looking to become a museum for and of Africa, a logo that expressed a ‘mirroring’ of ‘Africa’ was chosen, with simply the word ‘Africa’ joined with the same word upside down and with the word Tervuren beneath. The logo reflected the museum’s spirit of change and openness to African communities.

The RMCA had been publishing since its inception, and the titles of the publication series and their graphic design, were not to be an exception to the overall renewal. All the series were renamed and revamped, reflecting current publication practices and rendering them more attractive. In addition, the entire process of selection of publications was reorganized so as to correspond to the new mission statement of the museum.

A museology team was also established in order to rethink, together with the researchers, the exhibition spaces. This team modernized the new exhibitions and is in charge of what will become the museography of the permanent exhibition. Also, since interdisciplinary research was to become an important aspect of the museum spaces, and for several other obvious reasons, it was vital to centralize the coordination of exhibitions.

Awareness raising and dialogue

Museums in general have tended, in the latter decades of the twentieth century as well as in the twenty-first, to become places in which groups that are represented increasingly begin to represent themselves, or in any case to participate more closely; this is a positive trend. This trend indeed corresponded to the RMCA's need to become a forum for dialogue, a place of contact between peoples and cultures. In order to provide a means for African communities to voice themselves, several initiatives were taken. A working group was set up with representatives of many of the African associations in Belgium. This group, after a first phase of dialogue, developed into a smaller advisory committee, in which the nominated representatives meet regularly with representatives of the public services and research sections of the museum. This dialogue is still maintained and is intended to ensure that the museum realizes its vision. It is one of the museum's lifelines to the African communities and diasporas. In this same spirit, the educational and cultural programmes are developed in close collaboration with partners from Belgium's African communities and what has become an annual 'Africa-Tervuren' event aims at bringing the African communities to the museum and raising awareness about Africa amongst the public at large. In collaboration with the World Bank and African diasporas, an international conference was held at the RMCA on the 'Role of Diaspora in Economic Development of Africa'. Major efforts were also made to improve the dissemination of information on Africa through websites, online databanks, and a digital information centre (Metafro).

The implementation of such initiatives should be evaluated at an institutional level, and not just on the basis of each activity alone; the impact of dialogue is indeed not always quantifiable. However, the fact that the meeting of African Ambassadors in Brussels chose the museum as the place they would host the annual 'Africa Day' last year, was an indicator that dialogue was working. It was a clear message that the representatives of Africa had adopted the museum. This was taken as confirmation that we were heading in the right direction.

Another important aspect of awareness-raising is the contribution it can make to the sustainable development of Africa. The RMCA collaborates with more than 15 African countries through scientific partnerships, training, national capacity building in the conservation and management of cultural and natural heritage, and repatriation of data, archives, and documentation. Every year, the RMCA contributes to the training of more than 150 scientists and museum professionals, more than half of whom come from Africa, through individual coaching or group training courses.

To further fulfil the sustainable development aspect of the mission statement, the RMCA accepted the invitation of UNESCO and the World Heritage Centre to organize an exhibition on the natural and cultural diversity of the Democratic

Republic of Congo and the relationship between man and his natural environment in that country. This was for the occasion of an international donor conference organized at UNESCO in 2004 for the preservation of national parks in the Congo. The exhibition, 'Congo: Nature and Culture' gave the museum the opportunity to conduct a 'trial run' of sorts on interdisciplinary research and exhibitions. It was brought back to our own exhibition spaces where it stands now.

Renovation of the museum

The plan

A plan for the renewed permanent exhibition was established at the end of 2002. This plan emphasized taking into consideration the bond between Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Belgium, stipulating that this should be taken into account and that new bases of respect for diversity should be developed. It recognizes the incredible wealth of the collections, which serve as reference collections and for which the museum is responsible, and the research conducted in the natural and human sciences, which is unique within one such institution. It also stipulated that the building, being listed as a historical monument, should be dealt with in such a way that its original architectural spirit be respected and that, where possible, the building should be utilized to communicate about the colonial project. In fact, the uniqueness of the institution was brought forth in this plan, which served as a theoretical framework for the initial phase of the renovation.

General plan

In parallel to this, a general plan was set up, which outlined what was expected from the architectural project for the restoration, renovation, and reorganization of the public museum spaces (the museum building). It describes the functional and technical necessities for each space. This general plan was integrated in a broader plan of the Belgian government's Buildings Agency for the renovation of the entire site, including the five buildings of the institution, the surrounding park, and its archaeological sites. The aim is to complete the renovation of the museum by 2010, the 100th anniversary of the opening of the museum building, and the rest of the site by 2017.

Intermediary steps.

Historic Stroll, an innovative way of introspection

The 'Historical Stroll', a brochure that guides the visitors along a distinct path through the museum, was conceived to offer visitors a step back from the first level

of information provided in the exhibition spaces. It comprises short texts and illustrations at selected points within the museum, placing a number of objects in their historical context, explaining the (yet unchanged) style of display and often referring to the ideology that dictated the content at the time it was determined. Although the 'Historical Stroll' is not part of the actual renewal of the permanent exhibition, it can be considered a transitional step towards a new more critical approach. Also in this vein, a visitor's guide was published, *The Museum Key*, which followed the same spirit of presenting information, providing the visitor a historical lens through which to view the museum and also communicating the spirit of change and transparency.

Living science

Another intermediary step towards renewal was to explicitly bring the current scientific research being carried out in the research departments of the museum directly into an exhibition space. This was done by creating the 'Living Sciences Hall'. This hall hosts temporary exhibits that emphasize not only the research but the relevance of the research being conducted in the RMCA, especially with respect to sustainable development. The public at large not only comes to understand the triple function of the RMCA as museum proper, research institute, and centre of information dissemination, but also gains a deeper understanding of the importance of research for present-day society. To date, exhibits on millipedes, linguistics research, and climate change have been organized here.

Turning the page: the past as a step towards the future

As the institution launched a process of transformation and renovation so as to become a modern and dynamic museum for Africa, which takes into account the evolution of society at large, it was necessary first to deal with the crucial page in the history of relations between the Congo (DRC) and Belgium and with what can be deemed the 'history of a colonial institution'. This meant organizing a large-scale exhibition on Belgium's colonial past. This exhibition was considered a fundamental step in the transformation of the institution and the first step towards shedding its identity as a colonial museum, neither by suppression nor institutional self-hatred, but rather by exploring critically and integrating its colonial past. The exhibition was indeed a difficult process for the institution as it meant working together with the various research departments, a hitherto little-known working method working on a large-scale project with the newly established museology service, and especially dealing with sensitive issues; not only for itself but for two nations, if not more. An international scientific supervisory committee was set up, comprising Congolese and Belgian scholars. In addition an 'antenna group'

in the DRC was set up to collaborate on the development of the scenario of the exhibition. The international media had launched a major debate even before the exhibition had begun to take form. The exhibit, 'Memory of Congo. The Colonial Era', finally opened in February 2005, after three years of preparation and has already fulfilled its mission of encouraging debate and critical reflection. The exhibition is built around six themes: the history of Congo before the colonial period, changing power structures, the economy and infrastructure of the colony, cultural encounters, the museum as a propaganda instrument, and independence and the period after decolonization. The exhibition provides a critical but constructive overview of the colonial period, and gives considerable attention to personal accounts by both Congolese and Belgians. The exhibition was part of a broader RMCA project and was accompanied by educational activities, an international scientific colloquium on colonial violence, debates between former colonials and African communities, and film presentations, to name but a few. In the first five months since opening, more than 100,000 people have visited the exhibition.

A major impact was seen in school activities in Belgium: teachers took the opportunity to deal with Belgian colonialism in their lesson plans, bringing their students to the exhibition and following workshops organized by the RMCA's education and culture service. Hundreds of press articles appeared (and still appear) nationally and internationally and many television programmes covered the exhibition from every imaginable standpoint. The RMCA had taken a great yet inevitable risk as an institution, and although it may have been lagging behind in the 'decolonizing' process as a museum, it has been hailed as a forerunner internationally for its transparency and critical reflection.

Towards the future

Let us repeat that there is no easy recipe for change. These are simply some of the steps taken according to the decision to launch a comprehensive transformation of the institution. The renovation of the permanent exhibition will be one of the visible manifestations, but it is not just by superficial changes that a colonial institution can become a forum for intercultural dialogue. The Royal Museum for Central Africa was at a crossroads and it had to be decided whether it would remain unchanged, becoming veritably a museum of a museum, which could have been visited as a place of nostalgia or as a retrograde institution, or it could change fundamentally with all of the risks involved. And while it may not be following the path of least resistance, it can be said that the steps already taken have engendered a nationwide and even worldwide reflection on the history of a colonial institution. None of this would have been possible without directly engaging its source communities, and in this sense there is always room for

improvement. But as the first phase of the architectural renovation of the main museum building begins, it is clear that the transformation of this former colonial institution into a modern and dynamic Museum, Research Institute, and Centre for Information Dissemination of the Africa of yesterday and more importantly the Africa of today and the future, is well under way.

Sources

The Museum Key: A Visitor's Guide to the RMCA (2003) Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa: A Centre for Research and the Dissemination of Knowledge (2004) Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa (revised edition).

Van den Audenaerde, D.T. (1988) 'Le Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale à Tervuren. Aperçu historique', in *Africa Museum Tervuren, 1898–1998* (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa).

About the Authors

Guido Gryseels has been Director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa since 2001. From 1987 to 2001 he was a senior staff member of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and also was Deputy Executive Secretary of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC, now Science Council) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (GIAR). From 1979 to 1987, he worked at the International Livestock Centre for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

He currently serves on the Board of Directors of Belgium's Federal Science Policy Department and of the Fund for Scientific Research and of the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA).

Gabrielle Landry is Head of Publications and **Koeki Claessens** is Head of Museology at the Museum.

