

Exhibition Texts

CONGO AS FICTION – Art Worlds between Past and Present

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Today, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is famous for its vibrant art scene across the world. However, in the past, too, the Congo produced impressive masks, figures, and design pieces, many of them today icons of African art. Now, for the first time, these two time levels are interwoven in an exhibition on the Congo in which historical photographs and artworks are juxtaposed with expressions of contemporary art.

The ensuing dialogue pivots on the extensive archive of Hans Himmelheber which was donated to the Museum Rietberg over the past five years. Himmelheber (1908–2003) was a German art anthropologist who travelled widely in the former Belgian colony in 1938/39. The archive includes his private collection as well as his photographic and written legacy. The impressive artworks and photographs, some of them on display for the first time, bear testimony to the aesthetics and significance of artistic creativity in the Congo of the 1930s. Moreover, with the help of his diary we were able to reconstruct the context and the conditions under which he acquired the objects in the field.

At the same time, however, we wished to avoid a biased Western view of the art of the Congo, so we invited six Congolese artists to creatively engage with Hans Himmelheber's archive. These newly created works are complemented by works of seven further artists from the Congo. What they all have in common is that they not only deal with their own cultural legacy but also critically address colonial history and European ways of collecting.

In the conversations with artists from the Congo and Congolese diaspora, a specific turn of phrase popped up time and again: "Le Congo, c'est une fiction". This implicit call to perceive the Congo's past and present as constructed and imagined, dependent on time, place, and agency, served as the exhibition's guiding principle.

Chéri Samba

When the artist Chéri Samba visited the Zurich Ethnographic Museum thirty years ago, he was impressed by the many old pieces from the Congo he encountered. The objects belonged to the collection of Han Coray. To Chéri Samba it remained a mystery why Coray had never visited Africa despite his apparent love for African art.

Chéri Samba's painting embodies the idea of this exhibition. An African artist finds himself confronted with artworks from his home country in a Western museum and goes on to process the encounter in his own art. For *Congo as Fiction*, Congolese artists critically examined Hans Himmelheber's archive. While Samba's picture merely represents a

“Hommage aux anciens créateurs”, the exhibition pays regard to past as well as contemporary artists from the Congo and the Congolese diaspora.

ARRIVAL AND CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Ever since the 15th century, the Congo region has been closely linked with the outside world through trade, missionization, and colonization. Right from the start, the Congo has served as a screen for the projection of Western as well as African ideas and fictions, some of which are now presented in the exhibition.

Hans Himmelheber undertook his research and collection trip through the central provinces of the former Belgian colony from May 1938 to June 1939. In the process, he created in his diaries and photographs his own personal fiction of the Congo while, at the same time, conducting his innovative investigations on African art and artists. In addition, he purchased numerous objects on behalf of a number of Swiss museums and international art galleries. During his thirteen-month stay in the Congo, Himmelheber was highly mobile. Before he was able to afford a car, he relied on a *tipoye* and carriers to get around. Such litters served the rich and powerful in central Africa as favoured modes of transport long before the colonial era.

This gallery attempts to prompt a change of perspective in a double sense of the term. For one thing, we see people Himmelheber encountered on his travels, but we also meet contemporary Congolese artists. Their critical gazes remind us that the historiography from the African perspective is just as important as that of the global North. They caution us not to forget that the purchase of the traditional artworks on display and the corresponding generation of knowledge occurred in the context of Belgian colonial rule.

Transporting the Powerful: *Tipoye* through Time I

Tipoye refers to a means of transport that looks back on a 500-year-old history in central Africa. The term derives from the Portuguese word *tipóia*, originally a loanword from a Brazilian vernacular meaning a baby's sling. Even in pre-colonial days, kings and other dignitaries were carried in such litters.

In traditional Congolese art, one encounters the motif – the chief in a *tipoye* – quite frequently, as on this prestigious Chokwe pipe. The Suku mask, on the other hand, shows a white man in a litter. Stuck in the book he is holding in his hands is a slip of paper featuring Flemish words.

The art dealer Robert Visser is depicted on a postcard in a *tipoye*. He had his portrait enshrined on an ivory walking stick which he had made by a local carver.

Tipoye II

Reaching back to the 16th century, the *tipoye* served the local elite as a mode of transport. In the colonial age, the *tipoye* became a symbol of oppression and exploitation. European travellers, colonial officials, and missionaries had themselves conveyed in such litters by African carriers.

The carriers often sung special “caravan” songs that made reference to the person being transported in the *tipoye* and to the hard work they were forced to do. Since the Europeans usually didn’t understand the words, the subtle criticism of the colonial power relations remained hidden from them.

After independence, African politicians like Patrice Lumumba made use of the *tipoye* as a traditional-modern symbol of power. The Ugandan ruler Idi Amin even turned the relationship on its head by having himself carried around by British businessmen.

Michèle Magema I

Michèle Magema engraved the boundaries of the Congo with its nine neighbouring countries in fine lines on 81 rubber tree panels. With this work, the artist is, for one thing, alluding to the Berlin Congo Conference of 1884/85 where the European colonial powers divided up the African continent between them with the help of fictive boundaries.

For the other, Michèle Magema is criticising the many atrocities committed in the Congo Free State, a private colony owned by Belgian king Leopold II which he exploited ruthlessly between 1888 and 1908. Forced labour and violence were part of the daily routine in the rubber extraction business. By taking on the arduous work of incising lines into the hard wood of the rubber tree, Magema is calling to mind the gruelling and degrading work people were forced to do in those days.

DESIGN AND ELEGANCE

Design and elegance are distinctive hallmarks of the Congolese artworld that transcend the boundaries of time and space. Back in the 1930s, Hans Himmelheber was fascinated by the creativity and design diversity among the various Kuba groups he visited. According to Himmelheber, their art aimed at transforming the world as specified by aesthetic principles. Engaging in artistic creativity was, regardless of age, gender, and status, of great significance and contributed to the reputation of the respective artist. The more carefully an object was crafted, the more valuable it was in the eyes of the people.

Richly decorated items of daily use and prestige objects not only communicated an individual’s social status, they also played an important part in feasts and ceremonies such as funerals. The Kuba kings’ magnificent robes adorned with glass beads and cowrie shells

were so heavy that they could hardly move in them. This provided the Kinshasa-based artist Pathy Tshindele with the inspiration for his own vision of an ideal Kuba king. The portrait of a Chinese ruler serves as his head, which one can take as an allusion to China's powerful influence in Africa today.

Now, as then, the medium of photography plays a major role in the context of self-presentation. The historical portraits shot in the 1930s by Hans Himmelheber and by the Congolese photographer Antoine Freitas are made to interact with current photo series depicting the extravagant lifestyle of the *sapeurs* in Kinshasa (Yves Sambu) and Zurich (Fiona Bobo). The juxtaposition highlights the striking significance fashion and elegance had in the past and still have today, in the city and beyond, as well as with regard to tradition and modernity.

Creativity and Innovation in Kuba Textiles I

Among the various Kuba groups, artfully crafted geometrical motifs were the hallmark of all forms of visual culture – from architecture, to carving, to body adornment. However, in a wider context, the Kuba are above all famous for their textile art. Owing to their graphic design, Kuba cloths were extremely popular among artists in the early 20th century, such as Gustav Klimt, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. In the West, this kind of cut-pile fabric became known as “velour” or “plush”.

The designs are usually asymmetrical with different colour and motif blocks set next to each other. The creation of a new pattern came with a gain in prestige for the respective artist; for example, in the 1920s, the tire tracks of a missionary's motorcycle served the Kuba king as inspiration for a new ornament (see textile on sloping surface).

Kuba Textiles II

Hans Himmelheber already pointed out how unusual it was that, among the Kuba, not only men were artistically active, but women too. While weaving and making the borders was the task of men, the women were responsible for the embroidery and the appliqué – often done in month-long joint work.

The square pieces of fabric were sewn together into long panels and worn as dance skirts by both men and women. The textiles were a reference to a person's social standing and affluence. In honour of a deceased person, the cloths also served as funerary gifts. The old and particularly fine embroideries in red, of which Himmelheber acquired several pieces, were a prerogative of women at the royal court.

The Female Art

The so-called *mboong itol* (referred to as *bongotol* by Himmelheber) are artworks created for the deceased. They come in the shape of small geometrical or figurative sculptures made

from a paste consisting of camwood powder, sand, and water, which is formed then dried or smoked over a fire.

At funerals, *mboong itol* served as burial gifts; they were placed under the head of the body of the deceased and later also transferred to the grave. The miniature figures provided information concerning the deceased's social status and material wealth. For Himmelheber, they represented small but exquisite works of art which were – quite unusual for Africa – created by women.

Strategic Spectacle: The Royal Masks of the Kuba

Hans Himmelheber was deeply impressed by the royal dance performances of the Kuba with their colourful masked figures. Certain masks featured faces made of glass beads on either leopard or elephant skin and were richly adorned with eagle feathers. The costumes consisted of animal skins, luxurious glass beads, feather crowns and beaded gloves. The masks' primary function was to display the power of the king and his aristocratic followers. Members of the Kuba social elite had Himmelheber take photographs of them on these grand occasions, but, at the same time, acquiring these rare and valuable masks was made difficult for him.

Kuba Design: Transforming the World in Line with Aesthetic Principles I

The intricately carved Kuba cups and boxes were highly sought after by museums and collectors. The entire surface is covered with interwoven geometrical forms, very much like the elaborate Kuba cloths. The wooden cups served as vessels for drinking palm wine while the lidded boxes were used for producing a paste from camwood powder which people used in body and hair care as well as for dyeing cloths and colouring carvings, but also for ritual purposes such as funerals.

For Himmelheber, these cups designed as faces with shaved hairlines, represented portraits. Whether some of the forms were actually based on European models, as Himmelheber suspected, has not yet been answered conclusively.

Kuba Design II

In the highly hierarchical Kuba society, elaborately designed objects communicated a person's social status and material wealth. An important accessory of a Kuba chief, for example, was his tobacco pipe. Likewise, Chokwe, Pende, and Yaka artists created prestige objects such as combs, whistles, and headrests with great skill. Objects such as combs occasionally also featured Europeans. Among the Pende, particularly skilled carvers received a decorative axe as a mark of distinction.

Although Himmelheber hardly came across any old objects among the northern Luba, he was able to purchase this three-pronged bow holder on which a Luba chief had previously

kept his insignia of office. The kneeling female figure holding a bowl once belonged to a chief or a royal diviner and commemorated the founding ancestor of the Luba kingdom.

Yves Sambu

The performances of the so-called *sapeurs* have turned Kinshasa and Brazzaville into “cities of spectacle” and made *la sape* (short for *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*) an art of living. The term *sapeurs* refers to extravagantly dressed men – and increasingly also women – whose elaborate outer appearance stands in stark contrast to the harsh living conditions in these mega cities.

The photographer and artist Yves Sambu portrayed *sapeurs* in places such as cemeteries or in the streets of his home city of Kinshasa. For the exhibition *Congo as Fiction*, he combined his *sapeurs* pictures with photographs taken by Hans Himmelheber. During his travels in 1938/39, the anthropologist took photos of individuals whose poses and airs need not shy comparison with today’s *sapeurs*. Just like the modern *sapeurs*, they donned Western clothing and accessories in order to express their modern self in front of the camera.

Antoine Freitas

On his journey, Hans Himmelheber purchased these black-and-white impressions printed on postcard paper. They were taken by the Congolese photographer Antoine Freitas who, from 1935 on, travelled widely across the Congo as an instant photographer with his homemade camera, before opening his studio Antoine Photo in Kinshasa in 1947. What makes his photographs so particular are the creative image compositions as well as the playful poses of those depicted. For Freitas’s clients it was all about staging a desired self-image for which Freitas also used art techniques such as collage. From today’s perspective, the photographs, which were taken in the same era and in similar locations as Himmelheber’s pictures, reveal a parallel pictorial world and bear out the constructed nature of photographs.

Fiona Bobo

In her installation, which translates as “Style of dress, our country, and Switzerland”, the young Zurich artist Fiona Bobo addresses the self-confident manner in which *sapeurs* present themselves in Switzerland. The photographs and interviews are the result of research in the Congolese community in and around Zurich over a period of several months. Together with Fabrice Mawete, Fiona Bobo documents the importance of extravagant clothing, style, and fashion in the Congolese diaspora.

At the same time, *sapeurs* often face criticism due to their luxurious life style, not only in the Congo but also in Switzerland. Bobo has created a work that challenges us to reflect on identity, migration and peaceful coexistence in Switzerland.

POWER AND POLITICS

In this section of the exhibition, the focus is on the power and political dimension of artworks. The so-called power figures *nkishi* and *mangaaka* refer to wooden sculptures to which a ritual specialist applied additional substances to the outside and inside, thus activating their supernatural forces. Figures charged in this way had the power to heal as well as to avert misfortune. Hans Himmelheber already made the distinction between the small power figures made for personal use, and the awe-inspiring large sculptures which entire village communities relied on for protection.

In the colonial age, so marked by violence and vulnerability, these power figures gained even greater significance. With their help, local chiefs attempted to retain control over trade and political relations, upon which the colonial government and mission authorities had the powerful figures destroyed and the secret societies (e.g. *kifwebe*) including their masks banned. Occasionally – such as the Pende Revolt of 1931 – the people attempted to resist colonial oppression, and art objects became a token of resistance against Belgian domination.

In contemporary art, themes such as power inequality, exploitation, and the charging and discharging of sculptures also play a part, such as in the case of Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko. The fact that objects were torn out of their original context is addressed by Sammy Baloji in his installation *Kasala* through which he attempts to give museum objects back their voice.

Visible and Invisible Worlds: Songye Power Figures

Power figures (*nkishi*) were believed to exert a positive effect on people, but at times also impact on them in a negative way, in other words, they had what Alfred Gell calls social agency. To begin with, a carver made a wooden sculpture. More importantly, a ritual specialist then applied an array of vegetable, animal, as well as mineral substances to the figure's outside and inside, thus charging it with supernatural powers for the purpose of fending off illness, infertility, and other dangers.

Among the Songye, the large communal figures were given names and adorned with insignia of power and wisdom, such as a beard, a headdress, a chain of beads, or a raffia skirt. An ancestral figure described by Himmelheber as a Bekalebue sculpture exerts a special air of peace and harmony by means of its dignified features and the unusual gesture of the open palms.

Mangaaka and Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko

The majestic power figures (*mangaaka*) from the Congo kingdom evoke a mixture of amazement and trepidation up to this day. Iron blades and substances inserted in the belly or head activated the figures' supernatural powers.

In the course of the 19th century, the colonial authorities increased their pressure on the local population. The local chiefs tried to retain control over trade and politics with the aid of such power figures. New trade deals or pledges were sealed with the insertion of a nail, and people who did not abide by the agreement were punished accordingly. The colonial government regarded this practice as a threat to their authority, so they had the powerful protectors destroyed.

The Kinshasa-based artist Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko has charged his *Nkisi numérique* with electric waste – a powerful reference to the mineral coltan which is in every mobile phone and other electronic devices and which is mined in the Congo under inhuman conditions. Hilaire Balu draws up a gloomy vision of the future for a world economy based on capital, consumption, and exploitation.

Power Figures in Transformation I

The Congo has been closely linked with the wider world through trade and exchange ever since the age of discovery. Artists, too, were inspired by novel ideas, forms, and materials which they integrated into their image repertoire. In the 15th century, the elite in the Congo kingdom converted to Christianity, as borne out by this figure featuring a crown of thorns and the crucifix: here Jesus is flanked by two small helper spirits.

The abolition of slavery in 1830 also had political repercussions in the hinterland of the Congo. Thanks to emergent trade in ivory, the influence of the Chokwe people grew significantly. To mark this newly acquired power, Chokwe chiefs commissioned the carving of commemorative figures which depicted them as invincible hunters in the style of the legendary Prince Chibinda Ilunga.

Power Figures in Transformation II

The fact that artists incorporate new elements or adapt to global trends also applies to the more recent past, as in the case of this power figure collected in the 1980s which a ritual specialist charged with Chinese door locks as a symbol of modernity and the growing influence of China in Africa.

Today, many of the power figures are no longer in the condition they once used to be. As the pieces acquired by Himmelheber in 1938/39 show, the sculptures were often “discharged” – either by the original owners prior to sale or by the later holders – to fit the aesthetic appeal of the Western art market.

The creator of this Congo style sculpture – an example of early airport art – went even a step further. Its surface is smooth and dark in colour, quite in the taste of European collectors, and the “charge” has been reduced to a small mirror.

Interior View of a Power Figure

State-of-the-art imaging techniques reveal the surprising inner life of power figures. For a long time, one did not realize that ritual experts not only applied deterrent accessories to a figure's outside but that it also contained ritually charged deposits and ducts on the inside. Arrows and metal rods were associated with mythical culture heroes, such as the hunter or the blacksmith, but also embodied bolts of lightning which could be directed at enemies. The question remains whether it is ethically correct to bring to light the hidden inner life of such figures. What makes the practice partly acceptable is the fact that the power figures were merely temporary and spatially-bound containers of supernatural powers which only came into effect through the words, gestures, and offerings rendered by a ritual specialist. Still, a certain amount of unease remains, an issue that is raised by the artist Sammy Baloji in his installation *Kasala*.

Power Figures in Transformation III

Here in the West, Luluwa power figures with their striking scarification marks and artful hairdos rank among the classical canons of Congolese art. Furnished with magical symbols and medicinal substances, they were responsible for the safety and protection of the respective ruler and his people. Figures of this kind can be seen as commemorative portraits of historical persons.

In response to the changes brought about by colonialism, missionization, and global trade, new religious movements began to emerge in the early 20th century. Among the Luluwa, each separate cult had its own, distinctive pictorial expression. However, these cults were usually quite short-lived and quickly succeeded by a next movement, in which case the ritual paraphernalia of the preceding cult were usually burnt. The half-charred monumental figure acquired by Himmelheber bears evidence to such inherent dynamics.

Feared Masks, Cubistic Icons: *Kifwebe* from the Songye-Region

As soon as the first abstractly carved *kifwebe* masks began appearing in Europe, they were declared as icons of Cubism by avantgarde artists and collectors. Among the Songye of the Congo, these masks were responsible for upholding the social and political order in their respective communities. Feared by women and young children, the masks embodied the secret knowledge imparted to boys during initiation, reason enough for the Belgian colonial government to ban and confiscate the powerful masks in the course of the 1920s.

As a result, Himmelheber was only able to purchase a few *kifwebe* masks which enjoyed such popularity in the West. In his diary, he noted that the owners of the few masks that had not been destroyed often tried to conceal their real function in order to retain control over the knowledge associated with them.

Art as Expression of Resistance: Pende Power Figures and Pendants

Towards the end of the 1920s, the oppression suffered under colonial rule led to a revolt in the Pende region. Political resistance occasionally also found expression in works of art, such as in this Pende power figure featuring a portrait of the Belgian colonial officer Maximilien Balot, including the faithful and detailed reproduction of his side-parting, high forehead, and uniform. Balot was killed in a confrontation with locals in 1931. The harsh punishment of those responsible for his death led to the Pende revolt.

After the revolt had been brutally put down, chains with pendants representing different Pende masks began to spread across the region. They were not only cherished for their beauty, they were also sign of a new emergent Pende identity and their united resistance against colonial rule.

Art at the Service of the Colonizer: The Pende Chair of a *Chef médaillé*

Art was not only used to oppose the colonial system but also as a resource to support the colonial state. The colonial administration appointed so-called *chefs médaillés* and equipped them with medals which they wore on a chain around the neck. In order to improve their controversial standing among the people, some *chefs médaillés* had impressive stools carved for themselves.

The pictorial idiom applied here underlines the power held by these new office holders and their proximity to the colonial government. On the armrest of the exhibited stool, one of the power figures is shown as a European wearing a hat. A second colonial officer is depicted below, in this case being carried in a *tipoye* by soldiers armed with rifles. The dots and the stool's feet in the shape of paws are a reference to the power of the leopard and thus also to the ambiguous position of the *chefs médaillés* in their role as tax collectors and colonial agents – like predators they snatched everything but returned nothing.

Sammy Baloji

In his installation *Kasala: The Slaughterhouse of Dreams or the First Human, Bende's Error*, the internationally renowned artist Sammy Baloji addresses Hans Himmelheber by questioning the way the West deals with colonial collections and archives: what happens to objects from Africa that have landed in museums of the global North, robbed of their original cultural context? In how far is it legitimate to expose the secret inner life of power figures? How can objects reclaim their voice? What alternative forms of remembrance are there? The writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila composed a Luba-style commemorative poem (*kasala*) for Baloji's installation in which he not only captures in poetic words the inhumanity of mining practices, but also goes in search of his own roots at the same time.

RESEARCH AND THE ACQUISITION OF ART

A point of special interest in our post-colonial age is the question of how an object came to the museum and who was involved in the knowledge production concerning the piece. As far as Hans Himmelheber's archive is concerned, we are in the lucky position of being able to provide answers to such questions thanks to the abundant source material he left behind. In 1938/39, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, Hans Himmelheber travelled extensively in the Belgian colony of the Congo. He was one of the first outsiders to interview artists about their practices and document the creative process of their work. His insights into aesthetics and the social role of artists continue to provide important impulses for the study of African art today.

Apart from his research and aesthetic interests, his trip to the Congo also had economic ends. Himmelheber never held a position at a university or a museum and relied on the trade of artefacts from Africa to fund his work and livelihood. Two institutions that benefitted from his collecting endeavours in the Congo were the ethnographic museums in Basel and Geneva.

The camera was his steady companion, for one thing, to illustrate his motives as an anthropologist and collector, for the other, to document his research work. Through his photographs he created the fiction of a traditional Africa yet unspoilt by modern influences. The artists Michèle Magma and David Shongo critically address Himmelheber's pictorial world. While Shongo is concerned with the colonial gaze that permeates his photographs, Magma establishes a link between her own family history – her grandfather worked for the colonial government – and Himmelheber's travels.

David Shongo

In his series *Blackout Poetry*, *Idea's Genealogy*, the Lubumbashi-based musician, composer, and artist David Shongo turns to the colonial gaze that permeates Himmelheber's photographs. In an impressive series of collages, Shongo unveils this view and enhances it by updating the photographic subjects with elements we are all familiar with such as astronaut helmets, barcodes, electronic panels, virtual reality goggles and machine guns. On the one hand, he applies these elements to address the conflicts that result from exploitive mining practices and the trade with raw materials, on the other, the depicted figures look familiar and yet more distanced at the same time.

Michèle Magma II

In her installation *EVOLVE*, the artist Michèle Magma links the history of her own family with that of Hans Himmelheber. When the German anthropologist was in the Congo, Magma's grandfather, Malongo Isaac Magma, was twenty years old and working for the Belgian colonial administration. He was an *évolué*, a member of the educated urban elite who lived a

“European” life and believed in education and economic development as advanced by the colonial project.

Michèle Magema’s drawings hinge on Hans Himmelheber’s photographs. The strokes of ink seem to penetrate the “paper skin” like scarification marks. The artist, who lives in France, regards her work as a ritual of redemption to the fateful history of her family and her country.

Himmelheber’s Life and Work

While in the Congo, Himmelheber published three articles in the journal *Brousse* in which he writes about his research on art and artists among the Chokwe, Kuba, and Yaka peoples. Unfortunately, his original fieldnotes were lost during the Second World War but his comprehensive diary has survived. In it he vividly describes his daily life and travels in the Belgian Congo, how he purchased objects on site, and how much he paid for them. Himmelheber’s travels were funded by the ethnographic museums in Basel and Geneva along with the Weyhe Gallery in New York and the Gallery Charles Ratton in Paris. His correspondence with these institutions indicates the high expectations his sponsors had towards him and his acquisitions.

However, Himmelheber not only collected objects in the Congo, he also shot roughly 1,500 photographs. His extensive keyword catalogue and the notes he jotted down on the contact prints serve as an ample source of information for analysing the images.

PERFORMANCE AND INITIATION

Now as well as before, movement, music, and interaction with the audience were key elements in the art of the Congo. In *mukanda* initiations, widespread in the Congo up to this day, colourful masks perform. During this period, boys are prepared for manhood by subjecting them, among other things, to a series of harsh trials and deprivations. At the time of Himmelheber’s stay in the Congo, an initiation cycle was being held, the first in ten years. The dynamics of the dances captured in his photographs emphasises the significance given to the aspects of performance and spectacle in this art form. After use, the initiation masks lose much of their power and meaning, so that it was quite easy for collectors like Himmelheber to acquire them.

One of the most impressive aspects of these mask ensembles is their rich diversity of colours, forms, and materials. Yaka mask makers had to be extremely imaginative and innovative if, as was expected, they wished to surprise their audience with ever new and surprising themes. In the *mukanda* performances, local ideals of beauty and notions of masculinity and femininity were lent expression, next to a hearty portion of humour and eroticism. At times, the masks’ iconography also addressed the colonial structures of power.

The artists Steve Bandoma and Aimé Mpane both make reference to the unusual, because asymmetrical *mbangu* initiation mask of the Pende, but interpret it in quite different ways. The poetic installation by the young writer Sinzo Aanza is mix of own texts and sound recordings collected in villages once visited by Himmelheber.

Pende Initiation Masks: Art That Makes Men out of Boys

Up to this day, initiations among the Pende are marked by the performance of different types of masks, with a clear distinction made between female, male, and hyper-masculine masks. Female masks have a flat forehead, rounded eyebrows, and, above all, “bedroom eyes” referred to as *zanze*, a feature that is regarded as particularly beautiful and seductive. In contrast, the hyper-masculine masks emanate an air of aggressiveness: the face is angular and has sharp contours, watchful eyes peer out from under the eyelids, and the lips are pursed as if the mask is about to issue a roar.

In Himmelheber’s photographs one sees that some of the masks were worn horizontally. This mask type represents a body on its deathbed.

A Snapshot of Artistic Practices around 1938: The Yaka's *Mukanda* Masks

Among the Yaka people, the mask ensembles in the *mukanda* initiation camps included a wide range of masks. *Mbala*, the largest and most beautiful of them, made its appearance at the end of the dance performances. Its task was to amaze the audience with surprising scenes represented by figures worn on the headpiece.

For this, artists enjoyed considerable artistic licence, drawing inspiration from eroticism, humour, and current affairs. Among other things, Himmelheber acquired masks showing couples engaged in love making. Equally popular were masks that parodied colonial representatives, for example, a male nurse with a microscope. Among the unusual masks is certainly the one featuring carved birds perched at the side of the face, pecking out the mask’s eyes. Himmelheber’s picture series of Yaka masked dances show how the masked figures engage the photographer in their act and perform facing the camera.

Beauty and the Beast: Chokwe Masks

On his travels, Hans Himmelheber encountered many different types of Chokwe masks and was also able to interview the carvers, in the course of which he made a discovery significant to art history: *pwo* dance masks, embodying the ideal woman on the strength of their graceful features, incised tattoos, and elaborate hairdos, represent a kind of semi-portrait, based on the fact that the masks’ proportions are modelled after a real woman’s face.

The second type of Chokwe mask, *chihongo*, was produced in the *mukanda* camps and consisted of a blackened resin compound. They served as the camp’s watchmen. One of their tasks was to scare off women with their terrifying appearance, not least because the freshly circumcised boys were strictly forbidden to lay eyes on women.

Masks in the Suku-Region

The *mukanda* headpieces of the Suku people come in the shape of large, hollowed-out helmet masks. They are usually painted white and feature a carved animal on top. The black lines on the cheeks represent a mother's tears after seeing her son leave for the initiation camp.

During the initiation, which lasted several months, the boys were protected by an impressive mask called *kagungu*. It is made of wood, painted red and has a long beard made of bast fibre. The long eyelashes that cover the eyes emanate calm and inner strength. Charged with supernatural powers, the mask's job was to protect the initiates from evil spirits and witches. Measuring over a metre in height, the unusually large mask ranks as the oldest mask type in Suku art history.

Sinzo Aanza

In his work as a writer and artist, Sinzo Aanza has repeatedly dealt with the manifestations of power and injustice in the Congo, from early slavery to colonization to Mobutu's dictatorship up to the armed conflicts of recent years. At the same time, he goes in search of the little freedoms beyond the reaches of power, for instance, when *sapeurs* celebrate the sanctity of the oppressed human body.

In his installation *The lord is dead, long life to the lord*, Sinzo Aanza blends texts of his own with sounds he recorded in villages visited by Himmelheber. By critically questioning European collection practices, he gives the objects and actors back their voices. The result is a kind of theatre performance in which the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the Self and the Other, is constantly renegotiated.

Aimé Mpane and Steve Bandoma

The two contemporary artworks are focused on the unusual because asymmetrical *mbangu* masks. Among the Pende, this initiation mask stood for sickness and healing as well as for suffering and hope. In his painting *Papotage* (chatter, gossip), the artist Steve Bandoma questions the salvific message of Christianization and the work of the missions, in view of the fact that many old masks and figures were destroyed at the church's behest, as Hans Himmelheber documented repeatedly on his journey.

The Kinshasa-based artist Aimé Mpane used the Pende mask as a template for his double-sided portraits on painted plywood panels. Title and motif are a reference to Picasso's painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. By means of this re-appropriation, Aimé Mpane is critically commenting on the takeover of African art by the avantgarde elite.

MY CONGO VISION

In view of the ongoing debate concerning colonial collections, the question of how to deal appropriately with objects acquired in Africa has shifted to the forefront. Intellectuals like Valentin Mudimbe and Felwine Sarr have repeatedly directed attention to the global North's monopoly in writing history and instead call for a decolonization of thought and knowledge production with regard to Africa.

The exhibition *Congo as Fiction* attempts to do away with Western art discourse's sovereignty of interpretation – at least in part – and to advance alternative African perspectives. In response to the historical objects, photographs, and texts offered by Hans Himmelheber, a group of artists has created new works that comment on traditional art as well as its acquisition in the colonial era, thus bringing the nexus into new focus. In addition, the artists from the Congo and the Congolese diaspora address their own fictions as regards their country's past and present. The resulting projection is multivocal, subjective, critical, and hopeful at the same time.

This change of perspective is best captured in two paintings by Monsengo Shula rendered in the style of "popular" art: Afronauts dressed in bright wax-print cloths orbit satellites crowned by figures from traditional art. The Kinshasa-based artist is not only alluding to President Mobutu's ambitious space programme of the 1970s but also envisioning a new world order with the Congo – that is Africa – at the hub of the universe.