

## RE-TURNING THE SHADOW

### Museological reflections on the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, BELGIUM

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#### A monument to Western Civilization?

The Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, near Brussels in Belgium, advertises itself as, and I quote: "one of the major centres for the study of Africa in the world". Its "meticulously documented" collections are "exceptional for their historical value". They house "more than two hundred and fifty thousand items that illustrate the extent to which scientists and collectors contributed to our knowledge of the African cultural heritage at the turn of the twentieth century." [End of quote].

Given the emphasis placed on the scientific, historical and ethical nature of its research and collections, it comes as something of a surprise to visit the museum in Tervuren and to see the dichotomy between the way the museum presents itself and the reality. The former colonial museum is still first and foremost a hugely symbolic institution where there is little, if any, sign of the supposed impartial objectivity of science.

There is certainly evidence of a concern for history, but it has less to do with the historical and original value of the objects in the collections than with demonstrating the late-nineteenth-century notion that some cultures – namely Western and more specifically Belgian – have history, while other cultures – in this case African – don't. The museum operates as an exercise in comparisons. The visual and textual signs constructed around the African objects on display force an understanding of African culture as primitive, while reinforcing the notion of Belgian culture as civilized.

The neo-classical museum and the formal gardens laid out in the 'French style', the commissioned sculpted figures in the rotunda at the entrance bearing titles like *'Belgium grants civilization to the Congo'*, and the rooms dedicated to sanctifying explorers, adventurers and the so-called 'anti-slavery campaign' against the Arabs, speak volumes about the founding ideologies of the museum and – as very little seems to have changed since its foundation – attest to the continuing belief in these widely contested ideologies on the part of the 'elderly white gentle man' running the museum today. Rather than a Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren was constructed as – and indeed still is – a monument to Western civilization. Conceived as a cultural front to King Leopold II's imperial aspirations, it saw service as a not very subtle form of the legitimisation and promotion of the ongoing Belgian colonial project, and is still a symbol of a coveted cultural distance that Europeans like to keep between themselves and Africans.

[I'm more or less citing the first paragraphs of a paper Wendy Morris wrote as part of the Art History Honours degree [Unisa, South Africa, 1999], in which she examined the visual symbols that make up the Museum in Tervuren.]

The actual Royal Museum for Central Africa is one of the few remaining examples of a colonial museum in Western Europe. In that sense it is unique. Forty years after the independence of the Congo, the museum tells you more about the colonial representation of 'the Other' than about Africa. It is a cliché-ridden institution, full of trophies and racist prejudices, where you are likely to encounter the big grey Elephant, the huge Canoe and a sculpted member of the terrifying murdering Secret Society *Anyota* in the shadowy, dark rainforest...

#### ExItCongoMuseum, more than an exhibition

What is to become of this museum steeped in history and emotion? As museologist and communications manager I was associated with the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren for just over a year, until the end of 2000. My brief was: the museological 'modernization' of the museum. The moment I took up my post, I asked for my responsibilities to be redefined and I worked out a comprehensive master plan with a view to updating and renovating the museum's permanent collection. At the same time I came up with a concept for and coordinated an exhibition project entitled 'ExItCongoMuseum, A Century of Art with/without Papers'.

The exhibition was a critical consideration of the eventful 'social life' of the remarkable ethnographic collection, which had been travelling the world for years as 'Tervuren's hidden treasures'. At the same time ExItCongoMuseum set out to pay posthumous homage to all the unjustly forgotten makers of these *objets d'art*. Now approached from a totally different concept, for the first time the material was also juxtaposed with maps and photographs from the archives. Underlying the

exhibition were three basic questions: How did these *objets d'art* find their way to Belgium in the first place [Exit Congo]? How did they come to be 'museum pieces' in Tervuren [Ex Congo Museum]? And what is the relevance of this African and colonial heritage today and tomorrow [Exit Museum]?

In this last part of the exhibition, ten contemporary artists from Africa, Europe and America were invited to make a visual, artistic statement about the question of the relevance of this African and colonial heritage today and tomorrow. They were given the run of the museum, they could do whatever they liked, provided they did not change or touch any item in the existing display. The young art historian Boris Wastiau, working as researcher in the museum, was appointed curator of the historical part, while Toma Muteba Luntumbue – the first Congolese guest curator in the history of Tervuren – was responsible for selecting the contemporary works.

[And in parenthesis: the sudden disappearance of the newly appointed, new-style director, who had recruited me to the museum, created a power vacuum. With a weak director ad-interim at the helm, the 'bureaucrats-old-style' had no difficulty recovering their grip on the institution, but that also meant there was a brief opportunity to experiment.]

But to return to the subject of ExItCongoMuseum, the exhibition was very well received by the national and international press, but also triggered a great deal of discussion and reaction in house. Newspaper headlines like 'Tervuren, ripe for revolution' and 'Congo exhibition divides Belgium' speak for themselves. What was intended as a practice run to give the former colonial museum of Belgium a new lease of life and a project for the future, turned out to be the last test flight of the apprentice magician who is standing before you now. If we were to sum up the situation, we might say that inroads had been made into the conservative bastion of Tervuren, but the agitator had to go. My master plan – which was my real mission – was shelved as too ambitious and unrealistic. However, I reported the relevant Administration and ministries, who promised to give the thorny and complex file their full and undivided attention – but at a pace that is all their own.

### **A future for the past**

What then is – or should I say 'was' – my proposal? The new museum in Tervuren would have three cornerstones.

#### (1) Tervuren as a '*lieu de mémoire*'

The present-day, hopelessly old-fashioned museum would be classified in its entirety as a 'national monument'. As one of the few relics from the colonial period, with a museological approach that spans some fifty years, from 1910 – the year the museum was founded – to the World Fair in Brussels in 1958 and the independence of the Congo in 1960 –, the existing museum would live on as a remarkable 'place of memory'. A '*lieu de mémoire*' – after the concept of the French cultural philosopher Pierre Nora – where 'past time' is still present and tangible in all its layers, but at the same time would also be interpreted and discussed from a contemporary standpoint. In that way Tervuren would find its niche between the 'living memory' of society and 'measurable' history. The '*lieu-de-mémoraliser*'-method would at any rate provide an opportunity to do justice to the complexity of the past, without reductionism and without the risk of falling back into a 'Big Story'.

#### (2) Tervuren as a 'contact zone' between people and cultures

A completely new museum space would be created underground, with the necessary amenities and exhibition facilities and good circulation, all in accordance with modern-day standards. [I will look more closely at some basic principles of this new, large-scale project in just a moment.] In contrast to the 'monument' above ground, this new underground complex would serve more as a 'social focus and forum of interpretation and communication' for, about and with Africa. The vast, sprawling museum site, which comprises several buildings, would become more of a contemporary centre for North-South issues and relations, with space for international congresses, for living culture with a cafeteria and a stage for live music and performances, for science and study with a library, an 'open depot/repository' and research material for a wide public and special attention for the African minorities in Belgium and for young people.

#### (3) Tervuren as a 'virtual museum'

In addition work would begin on a 'virtual museum' with on-line databases linked to a network, which it would be possible to consult worldwide and – thanks to the support of the Ministry of Development Cooperation – in African universities and colleges of higher education as well. This initiative should be seen first and foremost as a form of restitution for the once colonized peoples in Africa. Belgium should do everything in its power to make the African cultural heritage and scientific expertise available to the descendants of the original heirs and their next of kin. Furthermore, not too expensive, educational spin-offs in and outside Africa could also be derived from this fully digitalized museum.

### **Towards a new museology...**

There were several principles basic to the plans for the museological development of the new underground museum in Tervuren. I would now like to separate them out for a moment from the specific situation at the Royal Museum for Central Africa and to put them to you here as general points for consideration in your own practice. I will present them as three separate propositions, in search of a common strategy. At the same time they are an invitation to all museum directors and employees to radically revise the concept of 'quality control' and to give it a new slant which has the public's interest at

heart. These propositions are also an appeal to closely involve in the museum policy those employees whose work might loosely be described as ‘customer relations’. The propositions deliberately offer the advantage and disadvantage of clarity.

### (1) Farewell static order

To what extent do museums and public still need a permanent display? In my view, the notion of permanent collections in a more or less definitive display is hopelessly out of date. It is indicative of a one-sided, classic or modernistic belief in an ‘absolute, panoptic view’ of man and the world. Today, we know better...

Museums must urgently think about how they are going to reach the public with their collections in future. Like it or not, ‘temporariness’ is the destiny of us all in this fast-moving, changeable, throw-away world. These days permanent collections can only come into their own in temporary projects, in varying presentations, which are also more likely to appeal to and cater for the needs of the contemporary ‘culture shopper’ the common museum visitor is. And it is high time museums thought long and hard about the accessibility of their repositories, full of hidden treasures, duplicates and knickknacks.

This is also a plea for the ‘fragmented, multi-layered, transparent, democratic stance’. Many museums and their permanent public-oriented presentations are no more than what might be described as a collective warehouse for obsolete memories. They often refer to what once was. Like a theatrical gesture, a funny greeting from bygone days. There is nothing against that, but the question remains: how do we transform those musty, sometimes rather intellectual and yet sometimes magnificent treasure-houses into veritable ‘palaces of memory and imagination’?

### (2) Dormant assets

Museums usually contain a sort of idle or matured heritage. They are often even housed in monuments. Once in a while their presentation is spruced up and the contents rearranged, but the underlying museological concept is only rarely called into question. Moreover, many (bulging) museum cellars are in a comatose condition...

Fortunately, thanks partly to recent legislation – also in Belgium, or at least in Flanders –, we are starting to see museums all over the world reflect on their role in society. Yet many museums have difficulty keeping their heads above water and creating a distinct image for themselves in the radically changed and rapidly changing world around them. Sometimes their relationship with the public comes under threat. But what else should museums do and offer? What else can they do? Recently much attention has been paid to the ‘transfer of culture’ and now the emphasis no longer lies exclusively on knowledge and conservation.

Let’s make a comparison! Unlike museums, the performing arts are by definition obliged to work with and for the public, because no actor or orchestra will perform for an empty auditorium. But there is more to it than that. Whereas in the theatre or in the music business contemporary interpretation plays a vital role, many museum pieces are still all too often the undisturbed, silent witnesses of a society it has forgotten. At best, (art) objects in a museum are cherished and studied by a handful of scientists. Collecting, preserving and studying material culture without reaching the public, is – however reprehensible – certainly possible and sometimes even a reality. Yet it would be impossible to produce theatre or concerts without a public.

This does not mean that the public should be the ‘be-all and end-all’ of the museum. Indeed, if we question the interpretative interaction with the artistic and cultural heritage which museums store and manage, we might also query the relevance of conservation and research. If museums want to contribute more to society, then they have to reevaluate all the museum functions, including the way they manage the collection and their scientific policy. In that way museums become laboratories of reflection and explanation, which helps them define and understand their role in society.

### (3) Energetic public curator

The crunch question is still: how can we put all that academic and sometimes detailed knowledge and understanding of material culture across to a wider public? It is not always easy to penetrate the ‘soul’ of our heritage. But the threshold can be made and kept as low as possible. You can explain something difficult in simple terms, but that will never really make it easy. It is here that the difference between justified vulgarisation and simplifying popularisation lies. In the context of a museum, what we have referred to as ‘customer relations’ has to do with ‘inviting and guiding’ the public to, in and round museums and their collection(s) to its entire satisfaction.

Do museums offer the public the necessary space and a climate that is conducive to achieving understanding, aesthetic pleasure or other experiences, which touch and possibly really move them, but which at the same time also develop and stimulate the (self)awareness of the visitor? And who manages all that? A fully-fledged ‘customer relations’ service implies that the museum maintains a dynamic relationship with the changing society through deliberate interaction with its public. And so communication and interpretation are all-important, just as they are in the performing arts.

Hence the plea to involve those in ‘customer services’ – including educational staff – more closely and structurally in a contemporary museum policy. All too often – and quite unjustly – they are seen merely as added value, as translators and

interpreters of the 'real, scientific work' of others. The reality, however, is different: as far as the outside world is concerned, it is those in 'customer services' who tend to be the face of the museum and sometimes the only people who mediate between the material heritage and the public.

Our so-called 'customer services' staff are as it were the communication experts in and of the museums in which they work. Yet rarely is their potential fully appreciated. Why don't museums appoint 'public curators' who (temporarily) work with those responsible for the scientific and artistic aspects to draw up and implement interpretation and communication strategies? They would be able to question and possibly influence the museological approach and communications. After all, every museum presentation or exhibition requires a touch of dramaturgy and stage-management if it is to have public appeal.

### **Museum of...**

Imagine for a moment that at the beginning of the twenty-first century museums were to throw their name overboard and all become 'museum of ...'. They would have to thoroughly review their identity, function and working. Even the existing permanent public-oriented presentations would have to do this. And their repositories would suddenly be accessible to everyone. The new 'public curators' would be able to put their cultural entrepreneurship into practice to rouse much of the artistic and cultural heritage from its slumbering existence. After all, a 'museum of ...' requires a constant rethink.

In practice what this would mean is that what was yesterday still the 'Museum for Central Africa', would become the 'museum of slavery' or the 'museum of African magic and art', or the 'museum of colonial imagination', 'museum of extinct, stuffed animals', 'museum of displaced heritage'... And then, for a year, the museum as we know it today, would be a 'museum of a museum'...

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ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

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