

Izabela Skórzyńska

Interview:
Bogumił Jewsiewicki
Wojciech Luchowski

To see the word, to hear the painting, to talk?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki and Wojciech Luchowski, curators of the Poznań exhibition *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese. Congolese Painting 1960–1990* in an interview with Izabela Skórzyńska

Izabela Skórzyńska: Bogumił, the Poznań show *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese. Congolese Painting 1960–1990* is the effect of your many years of studying Congolese history and memory. You arrived there as a historian and anthropologist in the 1960s. Already then, you encountered the phenomenon of Congolese painting, discovering along the way its contribution to the construction of the Congolese identity. What can you say about this identity from the perspective of the present, when Congo is in chaos and in a state of war?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: When we talk about the Congo, I personally fear what I call Haitianisation, a repetition of the tragic, intractable cycle where there is almost no way out, where society devours itself. The West plays a role in all this, and there is a question that is difficult to answer: is it better to support corrupt politicians and sustain a minimum of internal cohesion, or to let it all unravel? It is easy to wash your hands and to stop providing aid, but for humanitarian and political reasons this is unacceptable. Hence my concern for the future of Congo. One of my doctoral students, Erik Kennes, who knows Congo very well, says that a revolution will take place there in the near future, and if it happens, it will be thanks to the generation of today's forty-year-olds. This generation is unique in that they are people who, unlike the young, do not fight in armed groups, do not steal or murder, and, unlike the old, do not allow themselves to be marginalised. This is because this generation does not have the experience of colonisation and therefore is not burdened by dependence and subordination. This, moreover, does not interest them at all. This is the first generation of Congolese who lived in a relatively free country, who until recently had the potential for development, who lived the dream, the promise of being in charge. The problem they face today is a weighty one,

that of rigged elections and a corrupt presidency. You know, Mobutu Sese Seko compared to what's going on there today, was a very honest man and that shows the scale of the problems that Congolese face today.

And now Congolese society... Today's tragedy of the Congolese is primarily the divisions of this society, reduced by necessity to meeting the most basic needs in order to survive. The only value binding this society today is therefore money. If you have money, you can literally buy or sell anything there. The society is undergoing some kind of colossal crisis and it is difficult to say which direction it will take. The only hope is that Congo holds on as a country, because we have there in some sense a Congolese nation. In the face of conflict and chaos within the country, people would be much better off in the neighbouring countries, yet the Congolese persist in the borderlands and do not leave Congo. Thus, after half a century of relatively independent Congolese statehood, some sort of identity has emerged. However, this society is internally polarised, torn and divided. Let me give you some examples: when I started working in Congo, and later when I was still travelling there, respect for old women and mothers was something absolutely unquestionable. Today there is no trace of this; family and local ties have disintegrated. It is money that determines the value of interpersonal relations. In the Congo I know from the 1960s and 1970s, there were no orphans either; every child was welcomed by a family, accepted by a group and was somebody's child. In the 1990s, these children started to be thrown out onto the street, accused of witchcraft, condemned to vegetation; this had been unthinkable before. The only people in a social sense who hold it all together are the women in Congo today. This, by the way, is why they are subjected to violence and rape, because the fury for the evils of the system has turned against those who hold this society together somehow, who make it possible to survive, who guarantee an existence.

Let us dwell on Congolese identity a bit longer. In the ongoing discussions on the social function of language since the 1960s, much attention has been devoted to the language/speech-consciousness-experience relationship. Gareth Stedman Jones wrote explicitly that "consciousness cannot be grasped in relation to experience if one ignores the position that language occupies between them". Furthermore, he claimed that the language of opposition and presence deserves attention in itself, for it is a language that works! You said, Bogumił, that there is a Congolese nation and that the Congolese have an identity on which they build an attachment to a place, or also to their own history? What role does history play in the construction of the Congolese identity, and what role does memory play?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: This is a question about the oral history of the Congolese vis à vis their memory and concerns the difference between the telling of what is remembered and the oral history of political units such as the state or an ethnic group. These political units have their history and use it the way we use written history. This history legitimises the people who head these political units and these units themselves. It differs from written history in form, of course, but the content, as in any history, comes from specialists and is subject to the same constraints as written history. Yet the form is indeed different, which is especially true of the circumstances in which the transmission and reception of the oral history takes place, including the reactions of the individuals who listen and compare, in changing ritual circumstances, what they have just heard with what they remember from previous ritual recitations and check how it relates to what the specialist is saying to them now. Moreover, because this specialist is literally a member of the group that has gathered to hear the story, he or she has to attend to their reactions. People's reactions can therefore cause the nuances of oral history to change. However, we can say the same about written history; after all, it too is subject to modification and sometimes falsification. By the way, this distinction between history and memory is crucial because what is often mistaken for the memory of political actors is in fact their professional history, so to speak, a history that has nothing to do with memory understood as the evocation of the past, a memory which can tell us something about the present, and in fact only about the present. Recognising the difference between oral history and memory is also important from another point of view. Namely, we are talking about societies in which communication between people from generation to generation is by word of mouth, face to face. It is performative, i.e. involves gestures, facial expressions and, if we are talking about the Congo, also involving dance or at least body movements that correspond to what is being said. In view of this, in Congo the word is not isolated from visual elements. Just as importantly, it is not only a performance by those who speak, but also by those who listen and join in the story; it is therefore a whole series of verbal and physical sensations and interactions. Here the word is not isolated through writing and is not conserved. It is very much alive; the history is alive. This aspect is very important in collective societies and Congolese society is one.

Let's stay with oral history for a moment. Sara Richards, who has been researching African-American cultures for years, has devoted much space to orature, pointing to the postcolonial potential of storytelling understood as a type of oral art and its popularity in response to the many oppressions faced by Africans or African-Americans in the Western world. This question is all the more important in the

context of the question concerning the Congolese speaking in their own voice and the agency of their stories in the contemporary world. It is a question about who is speaking and to whom and about whether it makes a difference?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: Storytelling requires professionals. At least that's how it was in the Congo when I worked there.

Does this mean that non-professionals did not use to tell stories there?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: They didn't tell their own story, or the life story, if you will. I often refer to the experience of my research in the Congo, when we were gathering oral histories of the women and men there; at least we wanted to gather them, somewhere around the turn of the 1970s. It turned out then that simple people with no education, including almost always women, had no stories. Of course, they told us that they had given birth to one child and then another child. They talked about the dowry when entering into marriages, but all in all it was just a list, an inventory of facts from their lives, typical of each and every one of them. The men, the workers, on the other hand, would tell us that there was such and such a shop here, that they went to work this way and that way, that they earned this much and that much; actually, they remembered their earnings very well, because we checked it. In the colonial times in the Congo there were work books and some of the workers preserved them, so when we later checked what they said about their earnings against the work books, it turned out that they remembered the amounts perfectly well. Yet even here there were no stories as such. This was completely incomprehensible to me. And then all of a sudden people started to talk for hours about their lives, which was the result of the arrival of evangelical groups in the Congo, who popularised life stories as a kind of testimony offered to God. In other words, evangelical teaching provided people with a model of how to build a story. In addition, there was the teaching in schools and the ability to read the Bible, which also provided such a model of storytelling. This had not been possible before, because during the colonial period, this was a Roman Catholic society and no one would give the Congolese the Bible to read; the priest announced from the pulpit what was right and they would merely listen. In other words, thanks to the Protestants, the Congolese gained access to the narrative model taken from the Bible and to the model of bearing witness to life. This formed them. Not many years later, I started to get cassettes of testimony recordings, even from Quebec, where there is a Congolese Diaspora, and I found that both in

Congo and in Quebec, as they all speak French, they used the same models of constructing stories about their own lives. Moreover, the popularity of collecting accounts and recording them meant that this model spread further. This also applied to women, who had previously not only lacked a storytelling model, but were generally frowned upon for stepping out; they risked being suspected of witchcraft and being punished. Thanks to evangelisation, however, this changed; storytelling was used to glorify God, to bear witness to one's faith and was no longer so dangerous. Working in a team with my Belgian colleagues, I collected thousands of such stories from all sorts of people. When the model was there, their social recognition came along; the whole threat of social sanctions, sometimes extremely dangerous, was gone, because it was not socially bearable to be recognised as a sorcerer or a witch. Such a person ended up on the margins of their community, and although it was very difficult to kill them in the Congo (this has changed today, as human life has come to be worth very little there for some time), being on the margins of the community meant not being able to survive.

How about Congolese painting? If the word can be seen, the painting can be heard. If so, what and how do contemporary Congolese painters tell stories to their compatriots?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: First of all, Congolese painting created for Congolese has to be seen in the same context of finding a model for self-expression. Again, it has not always been personal. The same cultural patterns of not standing out of the crowd and of not wanting to be in the limelight were at work here. If, for example, a sorcerer gained some knowledge about us, he could use it against us, and if somebody hostile to us had such knowledge, he could go to the sorcerer and ... Besides, standing out of the crowd and publicly telling one's story was not compatible with community, while in Congo, as I said, you can only survive as part of a collective. This is where painting came to the rescue. A painting, its frame, like a testimony of faith or the Bible, served to carve out the everyday and the personal, so that this story of life could begin to unfold inside the painting, inside the performance, which was no longer heavily sanctioned for excessive exaltations about oneself ... In this sense, the painting created a new context for storytelling, different from sitting down with a glass of beer on the doorstep and talking about oneself or one's family, as the two were exactly the same for the Congolese. Throughout my history of understanding these Congolese images, the two elements are closely linked.

In the beginning, the paintings were a matter of curiosity. I did not see much use in looking at them and collecting them. I did not think to myself: "Well, one day I'll sit down and write their story". It wasn't until

I heard these images in the stories that people started to tell on a mass scale that I realised I was dealing with something important. It was a ‘click’ and I already knew that these paintings weren’t an illustration or decoration. Obviously, there is a little bit of it here, but not only that. I grasped a clear connection between what was being said and what was conveyed on a piece of canvas, and that it was the same conversation.

After what you have said so far, Bogumił, two conclusions emerge. The first is that the aesthetic qualities of Congolese paintings are not that important to their authors and users; people did not hang them in their living rooms for their beauty. But there is also a second conclusion; like oral history in the form of orature, the story within the frame of a painting could exist autonomously, precisely because it was a kind of art or craft, something that allowed the stories of Congolese life to be carved out of their everyday life and transferred into a slightly different space, where accusations of witchcraft or allegations of excessive pride do not work, while the Congolese story begins to work. In Western terminology that might be called social art, but what do you call what the Congolese painters did in their world?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: In reply to this question, I would like to start with a quote from Chéri Samba, selected by Wojciech Luchowski for the poster of the Poznań show: “If Western artists have nothing to say through their works, that is their business; we create to make a difference in the society”. These words may sound provocative, yet are very truthful. Namely, similarly to oral history, paintings in Congo were made to foster conversation and interpersonal contact. This is the primary role of these paintings. However, I constantly emphasise this and sometimes I am accused of ignoring their aesthetic value. The paintings, like oral histories, can be better or worse depictions yet they include also interesting, beautiful and aesthetically pleasing works. Far more important here is first the what and the why, and only then how it is made. There are, after all, people who possess the ability to tell a story but have little to say, and those who have a lot to say but no one cares to listen since there is no form. The same is true of paintings. They were not meant to decorate interiors. They were meant to create interpersonal situations in order to reflect on something, communicate something, teach about something important, and talk about something. These paintings, then, took an active part in the conversation. They resonated and were interactive; they worked. This is the main purpose of Congolese art, the same as that of their oral histories, dances or songs. This culture we call artistic in the Congo is about creating situations where people interact with one another. Incidentally, isn’t Western art the

same, albeit perhaps in a more individual dimension of personal aesthetic, social and communicative experience.

This function of visual art in the Congo, a person's sharing something with another person, is much more social there, because in the Congo you can't go outside society. You cannot survive without society there, hence the importance of the patterns that make people genuinely communicate with one another. This is the role of this art. It should not be confused with what we in the West used to call primitive, naive, spontaneous or, on the other hand, social art. It is not that convention and not that frame of references. Congolese painting is not spontaneous; neither is it simple. One has to enter into this convention, to make oneself at home in it because these are issues, problems and themes that people subconsciously already know, but which they do not see. This seeing, therefore, facilitates communication, which is why painting pure fantasies in the Congo is not accepted because it leads nowhere. Therefore, it is normal for a painter to be a craftsman and to undergo a typically craftsman-like formation at school and in the workshop of another painter. This, too, is a kind of collective expression, this workshop, this learning and working. And if so, the single most important criterion of the value of their art for Congolese artists is that their paintings are commissioned and bought, because they are a tangible part of their conversation. In the West there would be talk of commercialisation, but in the Congo this is not the case. To have such a painting at home in the living room; today this need is no longer so strong. Yet until very recently it meant that painters not only had work and money, but that people had a reason to talk. Moreover, in the workshops where the paintings were made, they were often repainted but not copied, because if people were buying them, it made sense to them, it meant that they ought to be repeated. It is like the aforementioned oral history, which, although told by specialists, is the same, it is never so identical. Each successive rendition is therefore slightly different from the previous ones, because it is a conversation. The case of paintings is similar. They, too, take part in the conversation, together with the people they co-create the best conditions for this conversation, because it is a shared view of the same image. However, there are limitations to what I'm saying, because the performative function of images in the Congo is mainly about conversations between men of a certain generation. Consequently, these are not the conversations of a democratic society in a forum where everyone shares in the conversation to the same extent and has the same right to speak. And yet, this actually came to an end in the Congo in the 1990s, when the internal conflicts impoverished the Congolese, when first the living rooms on whose walls you could hang such paintings and talk while sipping beer, disappeared, and then the paintings themselves disappeared. This was because no one bought them any longer and no one painted them.

Wojtek Luchowski: And yet, the exhibition features a recent work by Lucie Kamusoreka. The work is intriguing for two reasons. First, because it is the only work by a female artist and second, because Lucie continues to embroider her paintings.

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: Meeting Lucie Kamusoreka was extremely important to me because of the feminist motifs in Congolese society and the role women play in Congo today. Along with the work of male painters, her work frames the story of the transformations in contemporary Congo and the changing role of women and men there.

Lucie works with a cross-stitch embroidery technique that she learned from her sisters at school. This cross-stitch of hers is an old technique known from Europe, where embroidery was considered a typically feminine activity. But not in the Congo, where painting, raffia weaving or sewing was a men's task.

Could you say something more about Lucie?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: My contact with Lucie and her work is difficult. I know that she runs a kind of workshop, just like the male painters of the past. She has a boy at home, probably her grandson, and two girls, teenagers, who she believes are orphans and who she has taken off the streets. She educates them to pass on her technique. Of course, as is often the case in such workshops, there is the problem of quality, because she is outsourcing more and more of this embroidery to these girls and it is already mass production. However, in order for these paintings to have a social impact, they need to be bought. Besides, they are produced and sold also because if they are not sold, there is nothing to eat, in a very fundamental sense, we are talking no luxuries here. I myself bought Lucie's paintings through my doctoral student Erik Kennes, who, however, is about to end his stay in the Congo. If Erik finds the time to go to Lucie in Goma, it is possible that he will still buy something for me; if not, this contact will end. The hope is that this work has attracted the interest of the young Flemish sociologist Maarten Hendriks, who not only helped me in my contacts with Lucie, but also bought embroideries from her and is holding her exhibition *Lucie Kamuswekera – Passé brodé, futur imaginé au Congo* at Gent in collaboration between the local university and Ohio State University. There are other Belgian researchers who go there. The thing is that Lucie is already a very old person, especially in Congolese terms, so the question is how long she will continue to work, how long she will live. There are, of course, her pupils, those girls, her apprentices. If she can educate them, she will have continuity. But there everything hangs in the balance, rebel groups

instigated by Rwanda are threatening to attack Goma, the place where Lucie lives and works. She has already survived one volcanic eruption; will she survive a rebels' attack? What will then happen to her work?

Lucie claims to sell a lot of embroideries, but maybe this is just her wishful thinking? I don't know. I've asked Congolese friends to check if there are her works somewhere in houses, in living rooms, but they haven't noticed anything like that. The other thing is that she creates in large formats and, as I said, in Congo such living rooms in impoverished houses are no longer available for Lucie's embroideries to fit in. Be that as it may, Lucie obsessively reiterates that she is addressing her society, that she is a teacher of history, that she is keeping the memory alive, and that the young remember nothing, that it needs to be told to them. Whether this is really the case, whether there are ordinary Congolese somewhere to watch these stories of Lucie, I unfortunately do not know. Lucie's story is fragmented from the point of view of access. I know something, I can guess something. Unfortunately, due to my age, I'm unlikely to go to Congo or to Lucie's place anymore.

Bogumił, you said that the history of Lucie Kamusoreka is part and parcel of the situation of women in today's Congo. Could you elaborate on it?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: This situation has evolved over the last two decades. Today women there are almost entirely responsible for being the breadwinners of their families and for sending their children to school; this has a big impact on their position. This is all the more accurate of women who, like Lucie, are widows. As a widow herself, Lucie has just stepped out of her position as a woman and become an honourable man. As a married woman, she probably would never allow herself to do this, but as a widow and a grandmother, it gives her much more freedom. Lucie is not the only one, though. Many women in the Congo have assumed male roles which men have abandoned over these past twenty years. Even so, they have not deprived men of their privileged position and related position of power but have stepped into a place that has been abandoned because men have retreated and stopped making a living. It was women who went to work and took over the role that had previously been male. This is also the case with Lucie, who additionally, through her work, puts herself somewhat in the position of a political actor. Whether this applies to other women in Congo, whether they could enter politics and take over political functions, I don't know. We don't see this in Congo; for the time being men still dominate there, except that they no longer govern Congo but plunder it.

Lucie set up her own workshop and is developing her craft in this way. How about male painters – were they also formed by any schools or workshops?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: In the Congo, children learned drawing at school, and this also applied to future painters, including those whose work was shown in Poznań. Many of the men later learned technical drawing at vocational schools. Hence, for example, the painting shown at the Poznań exhibition entitled *Attack of the Paratroopers on Kisangani*. Its author, Londe, adopted such a classical, rigid perspective, because he had been trained... as a locksmith? When painting, therefore, he used what he had, what he could do, i.e. technical drawing. Others, like Lucie's apprentices, practised in workshops.

Wojtek, you and Bogumił were working on this exhibition for many months. You saw reproductions of paintings by Congolese artists and knew their history. What was your first reaction when you saw these paintings live?

Wojtek Luchowski: They impressed me enormously because of their visual power. Somehow, I was already prepared for that. However, what surprised me as an art historian were clear references to European iconography. I had thought that when I would open the crates containing the works, it would be very..., well just..., exotic? Instead, when I saw the paintings, I was struck by their visual connection to some shared iconography, including European one. It was such a compelling visual experience that it really swept you off your feet. It seemed to me that these paintings would be so very archaic, so distant, ludic, heavily outside our visual culture. Yet it turned out that the motifs, themes, iconographic patterns, and compositional solutions were anchored in our common pictorial heritage. In principle, an infinite number of references to the contemporary visual culture of the world could be shown. Of course, we might ask whether this is a matter of coincidence or of the artists' awareness of and drawing on various traditions and, as was the case with oral storytelling, searching for a model of imagery that is more personal and, at the same time, safe and accessible to everyone.

We decided that out of the paintings shown in the exhibition, one of the subjects, flogging, should exemplify the infiltration of the conventions and motifs of European painting into Congolese iconography. The flogging scene is one of the most popular subjects taken up in Congolese painting. The motif of this scene is deeply rooted in the collective memory of the Congolese due to the painting titled *Le Châtiment des Quatre Piquets dans les Colonies* (1843, The Menil Foundation Collection, Houston) by

the French painter Marcel Verdier (1817–1856). The transposition of this motif is very interesting, if only because of the multiplicity of new themes arising from it. On the one hand, these are scenes of flogging, the meaning of which is obvious to every Congolese: each of them has been a slave of the state rather than a citizen of it. On the other hand, based on Western Christian iconography, e.g. paintings depicting the scourging of Christ, a pictorial pattern has been created depicting in a sanctified perspective the figure of Prime Minister Lumumba portrayed as a martyr, a world hero of the struggle for the liberation of all the oppressed. This example is a perfect exemplification of how certain patterns migrate and how they anchor in otherwise disparate histories. We could demonstrate more of these examples of transpositions and migration of conventions and motifs, which at the same time offer them new meanings in new contexts and readings.

The works that came to Poznań varied in terms of technical quality. Some were painted on ordinary pieces of canvas, cropped unevenly without a stretcher bar; sometimes the ground was a fragment of an old sack or shirt. The paint layer was often very fragile and unstable due to the use of different quality paints. But there were also paintings on professional grounds, painted with professional paints, made not necessarily just for the internal Congolese market anymore. Here the influence of the art world was already clearly visible. But that is not the point here. The point is not the technical quality, proficiency or level of artistic skill, because the Congolese used art to do what Bogumił pointed out – to create a painting through which they could tell a story about themselves. This was possible because these artists assimilated the Western painting technique, adapting this medium as a vehicle for their story. In doing so, they acquired a certain dimension of universality; many viewers of the Poznań exhibition clearly perceived this mechanism through which, in order to express the trauma of colonialism, the Congolese reached for the means of expression of the colonisers, yet spoke in their own name.

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: In the Congo, there was also the need to be contemporary or perhaps, in our terms, modern. In order to be modern it was impossible to negate everything related to world development, to things created elsewhere, perhaps even against the Congolese, which could nevertheless be profitably transferred to one's own land to foster one's development.

Wojciech Luchowski: I was captivated by one painting, a traditional subject depicting a scene of a leopard hunting an antelope. I was so engrossed that I think I will be tempted to do research on the subject. I am very fond of the work of Henri Rousseau, a tax collector. In Europe, he is portrayed

as a naive painter, painting from his imagination, someone who has never been to any exotic country. However, when I pulled out one of the Congolese paintings... I will honestly say that the resemblance was striking. And I have the feeling, bordering on certainty, that Rousseau did not invent these paintings of his himself, that there was a pattern somewhere, not least among the now-famous sources cited in studies by art historians. He was probably copying something that he had acquired somewhere else. He was active at the end of the 19th century, when in the Congo painting was traditional on the walls of huts, and in Europe world exhibitions and ethnographic shows of exotic cultures were held. What's more, photography appeared at that time, and postcards, which he was certainly familiar with.

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: Of course, by all means, this is in a way an effect of globalisation, including the spread of the Western way of looking at the world. Only that the Congolese still wanted to be modern. They paid dearly for this modernity, if only with this humiliating butt flogging and hard slave labour, but at the same time, being modern was very important to them. They didn't want to be abandoned half-way. They did not want to be a peripheral country and modernity offered a promise that it need not have to be that way.

Going back to Rousseau the tax collector, for me the inspiration for the research that never materialised came from collections of colonial postcards, to see what the relationship was between these postcards and Congolese painting. You refer to Rousseau and yet in the Congo it was the Congolese who laid out mail in the post office; the whites didn't do it after all, they just supervised the work of the blacks. And since the latter laid out the mail, they must have had many such postcards in their hands, which came from the world of the whites, but which were about them, only they did not represent them from their own point of view. Take Kazimierz Zagórski, who sent photographs to Europe from the Congo. Zagórski deliberately took photographs that were then used to produce postcards. He took care of this personally and sent selected photos to Germany, where these postcards were printed. His ambition was to capture and disseminate the image of Africa precisely through the postcards created on the basis of his photographs. He believed that the 'real' Africa was disappearing and wanted to capture it in good time in his photographs, to show it to the world before it disappeared.

We move closer and closer to the Poznań exhibition. However, for this to be possible, first the paintings by Congolese artists you collected, Bogumił, had to be transferred to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Given the history of the place

and the fact that the Museum arose from the spirit of colonialism in its pure form, the decision to transfer your collection there might seem... controversial?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: You know, Iza, it's not necessarily like that. Instinctively, the answer to why I transferred the paintings there is very simple. It was about their material condition and conservation. Either they were to be handed over to an institution that had the means, the experts, the conservation studios that would save these works, or they were to be thrown away. You were in Quebec and saw the conditions in which I stored them. Without a real museum, these paintings would cease to exist, which, of course, in the conception of the Congolese themselves, would be normal, because for them these paintings have no value in themselves; if they get damaged, they are gotten rid of. From my point of view, however, this is part of the cultural legacy of this society and this legacy should be cared for and preserved. There was no question of transferring it to the Congo, because there was no place, no desire and no interest. In a sense, the Tervuren Museum was the only choice, if only to save, preserve and digitise these works so that they could one day be available to researchers as a visual archive. It was also in the interest of the Museum itself, although at the beginning I didn't think, knowing the Museum for over half a century, that it would ever take an interest in this. I came in for a surprise here, as the decision to take over the collection came from a very young researcher who had no interest in Congolese art but offered to try to convince the director from Tervuren to include my collection in the Museum's holdings. Of course, it was clear to the museum people there that this was not art, that it was not worth preserving or conserving, but here another happy coincidence happened, because the director who accepted the paintings was, by the way, an agronomist by training still from colonial times. He became one as a result of internal frictions in Belgium and amidst conflicts between the linguistic communities there. In this sense, he was completely free of all the institutional ballast and approached this collection without any presuppositions as to what was art and what was not; he just decided to take it on. When I came to the museum with all of this, half of its staff were absolutely against these paintings. They thought it didn't make the slightest sense and was worthless. Therefore, taking over this collection was a kind of symbolic revenge on the institution, which only a little later, after the exhibition of these works in Brussels, made them a symbol of transformation, confronting its own colonial past. What of these paintings will survive? Some will survive, others are in appalling condition. That is why I am grateful to the Tervuren Museum. You know, I tried for years on university grounds to convince some of my colleagues that this collection

was not paintings for tourists and that it related to Congolese society as such. Hence, wherever I could, I purchased these paintings from people who had them in their homes, in their living rooms. I kept proving that these paintings were important, that they needed to be saved, but it took me a long time to convince others of this. However, even when I succeeded, my own university did not want these paintings.

Wojciech Luchowski: Prior to our exhibition, questions arose about the post-colonial turn in world museums, including Tervuren. I was asked about this too. I therefore asked Bogumił to answer by email, since he could not be with us due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I mention this because it shows the complexity of this problem and because just handing over the collection of Congolese paintings to Tervuren was a bit like throwing an unlocked grenade in there to shatter old colonial narratives. I would only mention that the Museum was already in the process of reconstruction and shortly afterwards part of Bogumił's collection entered the main exhibit. By the way, other museum exhibitions are also changing in this way. Alongside ethnographic objects and traditional culture, contemporary objects are increasingly included. Incidentally, can you imagine a story about Poland in another country if it were only cut-outs from the Kurpie region or outfits from Łowicz? You cannot build a picture of a country's culture without taking into account its historical development and the present day. Such a story is always an unfair simplification. Furthermore, the Poznań exhibition of contemporary Congolese paintings reverberated throughout Poland because in domestic museums or private collections, we have almost exclusively traditional African art. One more thing - the exhibition in Poznań was originally supposed to take place in 2020, but due to the pandemic this proved impossible. In the meantime, the Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren has done a tremendous amount of work and has probably digitised virtually the entire collection of contemporary Congolese painting. I have experienced this personally, as every request I made for a photograph of an object ended with the answer, "yes, we have it and can make it available for free!"

I remember discussions about the title of the Poznań exhibition, and more specifically about how to show something as distant as Congolese contemporary painting to a Polish audience, how to show it in its uniqueness of participation in a shared conversation. Within the framework of this discussion, the idea of a series of four workshops on artistic creation inspired by the works of Congolese artists and targeting audiences of different ages was also raised and these workshops were successfully held. The title *Self-Portrait of Poles* also came up in conversations about the workshop project, as this is the research

focus of Justyna Budzińska, who co-created the project alongside Magda Parnasow, Jaś Wasiewicz and Marc Tobias Winterhagen. There was, then, something to this "self-portrait". However, calling the Poznań exhibition *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese* was a brave gesture, was it not?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: This was Wojtek's idea. It was brilliant. Actually, since I had not lived in Poland for decades, I had no idea of the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of Poles*. I only found out about it when I was working on the Poznań show and immediately saw the potential of this similarity between the Polish and Congolese experience. This title opened up Polish viewers to the exhibition.

I agree, it really did open Poles up to it. Especially as there were fears that it would be treated as an exotic experience of distant and essentially alien worlds. Yet, Wojtek, you managed to activate the Polish audience's honest thinking about the Congo using our own clichés... ?

Wojtek Luchowski: Contrary to what Bogumił says, he needs to take credit for it because he created the storytelling space about Congolese painting. From the very beginning there was a strong sense that we had to get away from the exoticisation of this collection, to do everything we could to include these paintings in our internal conversation, so that the audience would not stay outside, to shatter this comfort zone where the audience is offered a safe margin and believe that it does not concern them and that it is neither their world nor their story.

Preparations for the show coincided with the updating of memory of the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of Poles* at the National Museum in Krakow. Namely, a few months earlier the Museum held the exhibition *#Heritage*, widely covered by media. It grappled with the question of Polish identity, asking relevant questions from the perspective of 2018, 50 years after the exhibition *The Self-Portrait of Poles* and 100 years after Poland's regaining independence. As I indicated, *#Heritage* resonated far and wide and while I did not manage to visit it, it was at the back of my mind and I wondered how to tap into the potential of a lively discussion of Poles on themselves and to open them up to the stories told by the Congolese about themselves. We had a few proposals which we took into consideration yet the title *The Self-Portrait of the Congolese* seemed the most adequate right from the start, also in that the title has entered the Polish language and has become a common phrase. Furthermore, the transfer of this phrase to the Congolese directly expressed their subjectivity, which is what we wanted. On another note, this title is actually untranslatable into English,

so there was some hesitation about how to inform the world about this exhibition. But that shouldn't have been an obstacle.

The second thing was the exhibition poster. The promotion department at CK ZAMEK looked a little wryly at the fact that in working on a poster to promote the exhibition we didn't go for the colourful Congolese paintings. It seemed to me that picking up one painting to go on the poster would always be something a little stigmatising for the entire exhibition. I even looked at a lot of posters promoting similar exhibitions travelling around Europe to see what images their curators chose for the poster, and these choices immediately determined the perspective of reading the paintings, pre-empting a certain idea of them before you even come to the exhibition. On the other hand, I was captivated by the exhibition in Tervuren, curated by Sami Baloji and Chéri Samba, who hung copies of the works in the part of Brussels where the Congolese community lives, in hairdressers' salons, shops and so on. There these posters functioned in similar venues as they used to in the Congo and in correspondence with contemporary advertisements; these stories began to intertwine. Therefore we decided that our poster should not include an image, but instead we used a text, a quote from an interview by the artist Chéri Samba, a very strong, somewhat provocative one. I also felt that this kind of action, a visual reference to a social campaign, and this kind of manifesto is more important, because it touches on the essence of this painting, rather than focuses on the artistic and formal aspects, let alone the more exotic aspects of Congolese paintings. And it worked, because a journalist came to me with the words: "I'd seen the poster, I'd read it, and I couldn't imagine what it was, what I was going to find there". This was a measure of success for me; she couldn't come to terms with it, exhibited curiosity and a desire to see and to find out. When she saw the exhibition, she said "I have to come here with my child, because I have to show him this story; he won't see it anywhere else". That was the key to this poster action, not to impose an image on the viewer, to force them to face their own image, the image of Kongo, so that when they came to the exhibition they would have to come face to face with it; it was a kind of invitation to a conversation. It seems to me that the title played its role. It turned out to be an excellent bridge connecting many topics, including those contained in the descriptions of the paintings, which the audience also referred to their own reality, for example the times of transformation and nostalgia for the People's Republic of Poland, and there for the colonial times, of all those who failed, for whom the transformation was a disaster. This was one of those interfaces where mutual understanding was particularly close.

Many visitors to the exhibition, despite the natural detachment they assumed at the outset, largely due to their cultural perspective, quickly succumbed to the suggestiveness of the Congolese story, becoming drawn

into its content and identifying with the experiences of Congolese women and men. People genuinely felt moved by it, affected to the extent that they felt provoked to talk about it. They initiated conversations among themselves and very often with me during the guided tours of the show. And these were not easy conversations, confined only to what was depicted in the paintings. It was a bit of a surprise to me that during this exhibition people needed to talk, about something other than themselves, although of course that too. They were talking about the Congo, whereas our story, mainly in the media, is almost exclusively about our neighbours. Here we were talking about the Congo. Someone in the audience told me, for example, that they'd been on a tour in Belgium and tried to ask the Belgian guides about their past but was met with reluctance; Belgians would not confront their own colonial past.

And then there is the difficult context, which also resonated during the exhibition, that of mass migrations from Africa to Europe. In our own backyard, there is the wall against migrants, which includes people migrating from Congo, the wall on the Polish-Belarusian border. I have a nagging feeling that in the media migrants are anonymous, deprived of subjectivity, while our exhibition has restored this subjectivity to some extent and has given a chance to look at the Congolese in a completely different way, to reach out and experience stories we don't have. We are not a multicultural society, we don't have many opportunities to confront our ideas of who a Congolese is, for example, what their lives are like and what problems they have to face. This aspect of the exhibition is also important because we are not a museum; the ZAMEK Culture Centre is an institution focused on the present day, a living place for human encounters, where conversation is paramount.

The exhibition consisted of two parts arranged in two different rooms. The first was a little predictable; a darkened space, numerous artefacts, above all photographs and literature about the Congo and Africa known to Poles, if only from the school reading list.... The idea was that without a reminder of the Polish *imaginarium* of the Congo, it would be difficult to enter into dialogue with its paintings?

Bogumił Jewsiewicki: It was Wojtek's idea, and the content was shared as I had some things in my own archive. Wojtek was doing the searching, I did it, too. From my point of view, I wanted to show - people often come to such exhibitions by chance and without a prior vision of what they are going to see. They believe that these exotic figures on the canvases are real people, that we have known them for a long time, that, like Conrad and other Poles too, were able to describe them, setting them up like pawns on a chessboard to make the game beautiful, although not particularly

interested in them. Yet they were able to describe what they saw, bearing witness to some truth of place, time and people, as they met them, saw them, as they understood what they saw, experienced them. I tried to find that context to make the viewer of the exhibition realise that a person who looks at another human being without any mental bias, any categories, any notions of who the person they see is, that they simply see another human being in them. I wanted the viewer of the exhibition to see something that surprises him or her in this person, but also to feel a closeness with him or her, as with himself or herself. Therefore the idea was that visitors should also see themselves in these Congolese paintings, and if so, that they should look at the Congolese as they wanted them to look at them, at us.

Wojciech Luchowski: The literary texts in the first room, and quotations from them, attempted to evoke the historical and cultural image of the Congo and the broader stereotypical thinking about Africa embedded in our consciousness. An image that is like a reproduced cliché, the glasses that we inherit from the past and that do not allow us to see differently. We have certain perceptions, a kind of construction of knowledge that helps us organise our image of the world, but which also often gets in the way, obscures it, does not allow us to see things from a different angle. It was vital for us to show how this construction arises and creates our understanding of the world.

The second thing that seems important to me is that we pulled from this literary heritage quotes that stood in opposition to each other, that we made a review of the hundred years of telling the story of Congo in Poland, to show what the story was like, but also how it changed. We felt that these were important works, with a wide impact, showing both the way the story was told and how strongly it affected our image of Africa and the Congo, at the same time addressing the questions of identity and subjectivity of one's own and the Other.

When I showed the viewers around the exhibition and we stood, for example, next to a quote from *In Desert and Wilderness*, they immediately sensed that there was something wrong with the book. And it's not about how many times the writer used the word Negro in it; it's about how he described the identity of others, how he understood their subjectivity and the relationship between the characters and the local population. These terms, on the one hand paternalistic and on the other denying the right to their own identity, very much constructed our ideas about these people. Although at first glance they appear to be full of concern, in reality they resound with the superiority of indulgence. These are clichés that, unconsciously reproduced, make us still look at Congolese or more broadly Africans as children in the mist, denying them the right to a futu-

re, to a history, to their own story and identity. This proved very moving for the exhibition's audience. This was Conrad's darkness, which, as it turns out, can be more in the eye of the beholder rather than in the reality being viewed.

On the other hand, the exhibition was also visited by Polish and literature scholars, many of whom stressed the need for a critical reading of Polish literature on Africa, but not rejecting or negating this oeuvre, but treating it as material for a profound analysis of what these texts contain, how they work, how strongly all these colonial images, narratives and descriptions of situations are rooted in us.

By the way, the exhibition was visited by a very diverse audience, it was a surprise for us; there were children with adults, young people, senior citizens. And there were also children or perhaps grandchildren of Poles who, like Bogumil, emigrated temporarily to Africa in the 1960s. This part of the audience came to see their parents' Africa and, after my guided tour, they would say: 'I remember when my father came back' - because they were mostly contract workers, speaking French, working at universities and representing the sciences or technical professions - 'And that father talked about Africa', or that 'he didn't bring such paintings, but he brought something else', or that 'what he talked about was like these paintings'. These people recalled these conversations from their homes, and the paintings in the exhibition reminded them of their subjects. They would walk up to the paintings, say "I remember my father telling me about this, about these events" and pointed their finger at a particular painting. It seemed that there were no such people around, but the exhibition made them visible to us.

Let us stay for a moment longer in this dark room, teeming with sophisticated presentations of literary and ethnographic artefacts related to the Polish *imaginarium* of the Congo and Africa. Standing on the threshold of this hall, one might have overlooked the fact that behind it opens up an utterly improbable whiteness marked by paintings. Instead, one could see a group of Congolese men in a variety of outfits, from traditional to modern, standing or sitting with their backs to the visitors and facing a large mirror...

Wojciech Luchowski: Yes, it was a very deliberate effort to have the exhibition's viewers face the mirror before seeing the Congolese paintings, taking up a position next to the Congolese figures, looking into the mirror with them. The idea was to create a relationship where we cannot stand facing the figures but together with them. Just as they view themselves in their reflections, for a moment we look not only at them, but also at ourselves in their world. This is to visualise this kind of relationship and

connection for the viewers. In the reality of ubiquitous photography, we created a situation where it was impossible to photograph others without photographing oneself. Our idea was to build, first through literature, then through a purely visual experience, a relationship between the viewers and the protagonists of our exhibition, inviting the former to enter into the story of the latter to begin a conversation. This was intended for people to listen to the Congolese talk to one another and to join this conversation, finding common problems, getting closer to one another and trying to understand one another. I think that for some of the viewers this was perhaps surprising, unusual and revealing, while most found it natural. This proves that our thinking about others is changing. ●

Thank you so much for the interview and the exhibition!

Bogumił Jewsiewicki / Wojciech Luchowski / Izabela Skórzyńska
DOI: 10.48239/ISSN1232668241140161

