

# Congo Stars

22.09.2018–27.01.2019

## A Tour

Kunsthhaus Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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The exhibition Congo Stars is presented in the frame of steirischer herbst'18 festival.

~~steirischer herbst'18~~  
20.9.–14.10.18

In cooperation with the Royal Museum of Central Africa Tervuren, the Kunsthalle Tübingen, the Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth and PICHA in Lubumbashi.

Curated by Sammy Baloji, Bambi Ceuppens, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Günther Holler-Schuster and Barbara Steiner

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The exhibition *Congo Stars* presents contemporary art and popular painting by Congolese artists from the 1960s to today.

The novel *Tram 83* by Graz-based author Fiston Mwanza Mujila serves as a starting point. It is set in an imaginary African city and paints a picture of the vibrant life with all its downsides and moments of happiness. The fiction of the life at the bar becomes the fiction of an African metropolis, actually even Congo itself. The exhibition is organised in different chapters and thereby introduces a whole spectrum of historic, social and political connections to Congo.

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## DR KONGO

The Democratic Republic of Congo is considered one of the wealthiest countries in the world, if judged by its natural resources. The inhabitants, however, are some of the poorest in Africa. This imbalance is still the unchanged result of colonialism, dictatorial and profit-maximising exploitation and corruption. The most important historic events become visible along the timeline in the exhibition.

It starts with Leopold II, the Belgian King who used the country as a source for incredible wealth, around 1900. Ivory and rubber yielded the necessary funds to transform Brussels into a pompous city of the Belle Époque; for that reason a tacit number of exploited Congolese lost their lives as forced laborers. In 1960, Patrice Lumumba was the first president of the recently independent Congo. Immediately after, the first putsch by Joseph-Désiré Mobutu ensued; he came to full power in 1965. In the area of tension of the 'Cold War', Mobutu was at the mercy of global power relations. He was primarily supported by the US,

who were interested in the mineral resources, but also wanted to prevent the strengthening of communism. The assassination of Lumumba, which has to be viewed in connection to this, paved the way for Mobutu's unrestricted dictatorial rule, which he maintained until 1997. The country, which Mobutu named Zaire, as well as the river and the currency in 1972, was supposed to establish itself as an 'authentic' African state. He abolished all Christian first names and called himself Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Zabanga. During this time, the exploitation of the country proceeded and corruption, which the president was not immune to, was spreading. Instead of investing in a thriving economy, funds were constantly used to increase the president's personal wealth. In 1997, Laurent-Désiré Kabila assumed the presidency, which he conducted in an authoritarian manner and which ended with his assassination in 2001. In his term of office, the country was re-named DR Congo and it was hit by two wars, which shattered the country further from 1997 to 2003, until its economy, infrastructure and health and welfare

system collapsed. Since 2006, his son Joseph Kabila is considered the first freely chosen president of the country, which still has not come to rest due to the continuing exploitation by multinational corporations.

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## ART

Against all odds, Congo brings forth a rich artistic life, which combines music, literature, performance, theatre, utility art, painting, sculpture, architecture and everyday culture with alternating influence. Congolese painting has its roots in wall and house painting. On traditional houses, abstract patterns were painted; its symbolism has developed its own language, which is also related to the one of pattern of cloth. In the 1920s, a Belgian art enthusiast discovered these paintings. He equipped the artists with paper and watercolor and asked them to produce their paintings on it. They painted colorful animals, fish, stylised portrayals of people on patterned backgrounds. A few of these artistic precursors (*Les précurseurs*) can be found on the timeline. The aquarelles by Albert Lubaki, Antoinette Lubaki or Djilatendo from the 1920s and 1930s are reduced and appear incredibly 'modern' in the western sense. They were already received in Europe at that time.

At the atelier of Hangar in Elisabethville, today's Lubumbashi, a

distinct way of painting emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. There, the French painter Pierre Robert Desfossés established his atelier, in which he supported many artists, such as Bela Borkemas, Mwila or Pilipili Mulongoy, in their artistic independence. The style of painting that originates from Desfossés' atelier is poetic-narrativistic; it appears planar and also decorative, due to its repetitive patterns.

In Mobutu's time, art academies were supported because they aimed at modernism, based on traditional Congolese art, without contradicting the concept of *authenticité*. In the 1970s, *peinture populaire*, or popular painting, emerged and was supposed to operate from the people for the people. Everyday situations were transformed onto the canvas and reflected the country's problems humorously and critically. At that time in Kinshasa, artists like Chéri Cherin, Chéri Samba or Moke were painting political and social events, interpreting the goings-on on the street, in bars and in the music scene. Also the grime, illnesses like aids (Le SIDA), poverty and exploitation can be found in the paintings.

Some artists have experience in painting walls and signs for advertisements.

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## STREET

In many places in Congo, life takes place on the street. It is where people meet, exchange news, bargain, cook, eat, dance or find love. The bustling life in Congolese cities like Kinshasa or Lubumbashi becomes the subject of popular painting. It is characterised by its use of colour, which can sometimes seem loud, and a figurative manner of painting, which, after JP Mika, varies from the abstract painting style that is common at the Academy of Fine Arts. The paintings are statements, pictures that want to be read as critical commentary. Alternative ideas in urban planning are depicted in Bodys Isek Kingelez' powerful and colourful models of a progressive appearing architecture of wealth and cleanliness. They serve as a symbol of an ideal, fantastic Kinshasa.

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## BAR

Several paintings by Moke depict the bustle of a typical bar in Kinshasa. People are dancing, drinking and celebrating. The atmosphere in bars is exuberant and does not conceal the mutual dependence of money and love in a patriarchal society that is practiced there, or the barter in which sex is deployed as a valuable (female) commodity. Moke was, next to Chéri Samba or Chéri Cherin, one of the most significant Congolese painters, who were shown in a western art context and who also became successful. Moke comprehends his paintings, which do not only tell stories, but also have documentary value, definitely as a contribution to his purpose as 'painter-journalist' ('*peintre-journalist*').

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## HOME

The events from the private domain which are represented on paintings are often quite intimate. They deal with gender roles and sexual relations, which are often violent. They deal with families who provide shelter for their relatives. The apartment's inside is exposed and reveals the misery in it. The portraits that were made after passport photographs, however, can be viewed in a western sense as, due to their detailed realism, they represent enlarged memory pictures that are hung up in private rooms. For that reason, they are distinctly smaller than other paintings. The furniture, which depicts European standards, refers to the Congolese that are known as 'Evolués'. They are the 'developed ones', who are committed to a European, often also Christian, way of life, which they represent with their 'civilised progress'.

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## EXPLOITATION

Since Leopold II, Congo is marked by many years of exploitation, corruption and as a consequence also emigration. Coltan, uranium, copper, gold, tin, cobalt, diamonds, manganese or zinc are highly coveted mineral resources, which the globalised industry still dispatches incessantly for their benefit from Congo. The role of politics in this scenario is demonstrated by many paintings in this exhibition. Next to the land, it is the people who are being exploited, but also others suffer losses. Rape, desecration and brutal abuse are a constant tool used by militia and rebels to demonstrate their power in the war over mineral resources. Sexual violence becomes a weapon at command. Women become prey and are then abandoned by their families due to the disgrace of the rape.

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## SPIRITUALITY

According to the author Alain Mabanckou, it was completely normal in Congo in the 1970s, to go to church as a Christian in the morning, to visit a shaman around midday and to become an active communist in the afternoon. Everyone can be everything all at once; this behavior is per se not unusual or contradictory. In this conglomerate of salvation promises, the Christian, which was imported by ambitious missionaries in the colonial era, is central. The Christian proselytisation led to the establishment of schools and health clinics and for the first time in the history of the country, it brought together people from different ethnic groups. However, many pastors were leading an ambivalent, hypocritical life, and—as we can gather from some paintings—did not refrain from corruption and indulged in their sexual urges without restraint. Another important promise of salvation conveys Mami Wata, the 'mother of water'. She is attractive and mermaid-like, always accompanied by a snake and is regarded as both a seductress and a cause of pain, especially

illness. She is depicted as light-skinned and as the symbol for the pursuit of western prosperity and luxury. Regardless of the ideal that is being followed, she unites the hope for a better life.

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## STARS

Politicians, soccer players and boxers are the stars who are worthy of being painted, because they have achieved epochal accomplishments, which went down in Congolese history. In the case of athletic victories, they are likely to be instrumentalised politically. Attention is also paid to artist friends, who are also successful as musicians. They are 'bien sapé', well-dressed and perfectly styled. The 'sapeurs', which are also known as the 'Congolese dandies' view their outfits of expensive western designer suits as a way of resistance to Mobutu's authenticity regulations. JP Mika, who was doing wall paintings and advertisements just like his teacher Chéri Cherin, loves the colorful designs. In his special type of photorealism, he creates a shiny, vivacious world, which he assembles out of black and white photographs from the 1960s. Monsengo Shula also started with wall paintings and advertising art, before he found a completely distinct pictorial subject via *peinture populaire*. His space paintings show cosmonauts, whose colorful spacesuits shine bright in the

dark orbit and become the 'space oddity' of the afronauts. Actually, Mobutu allowed a German company 'Orbital Transport und Raketen AG' (OTRAG) to test rockets on Congolese state territory, in 1976. The deal was orchestrated by one of the organisers of the legendary boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, a German entrepreneur in Kinshasa. This first international sports event put Congo onto the world map of sports and simultaneously enabled a large-scale, international music event that was commercialised in the west. The fact that the 'Rumble in the Jungle' took place at 4 o'clock in the morning demonstrates that it was mainly a staged media event for the US, so that it could be broadcast at prime time in New York. TV was introduced in the DR Congo in 1978.

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## Accompanying programme

### „My Way from Congo to Europe—Between Resistance, Migration and Exile“

Tuesday, 16.10.2018, 7 pm  
Reading and discussion with  
Emmanuel Mbolela and  
Alexander Behr

### Exhibition talk

Saturday, 20.10.2018, 3 pm  
with Kamdem Mou Poh à Hom and  
Monika Holzer-Kernbichler

### Students' day

Wednesday, 28.11.2018, 2-7 pm

### Tours through 'African Graz'

with Kamdem Mou Poh à Hom  
(Chiala)  
Thursday, 25.10.2018, 4 pm,  
Thursday, 08.11.2018, 4.30 pm,  
Monday, 10.12.2018, 4.30 pm

### Congo-Wirbel

Tuesday, 06.11. till  
Sunday, 11.11.2018  
Extensive programme at the  
Kunsthau Graz with workshops  
to participate, to try one's hand  
and think further!  
Further informations at:  
[www.bigwirbel.at](http://www.bigwirbel.at)

**'Lichtungen' presents: Art and Poetry from Congo**

Tuesday, 04.12.2018, 7 pm  
with Fiston Mwanza Mujila,  
Lisette Lombé, Patrick Dunst and  
Christian Pollheimer

**Austrians in the 'Heart of Darkness'**

Tuesday, 24.01.2019, 7 pm  
Lecture by Prof. Walter Sauer

**African film**

Film weekend at KIZ RoyalKino  
January 2019

**Curator's tours**

Austria and Congo with  
Barbara Steiner  
Friday, 05.10.2018 and  
25.01.2019, 3 pm

with Günther Holler-Schuster  
Sunday, 14.10., 25.11.2018 and  
20.01.2019, 11 am

**Exercises in the contemplation of artworks**

with Barbara Steiner  
Sunday, 07.10.2018, 04.11.2018  
and 02.12.2018 11 am

**KoOgle**

Samburu Beads with  
Peninah Lesorogol  
Thursday, 29.11.2018, 4 pm

African cooking with  
Fatou Kamdem  
Thursday, 20.12.2018, 4 pm

African percussion with Chiala  
Thursday, 31.01.2019, 4 pm