

Arts

The nuanced republic

Africa | An exhibition in Paris showcases Congolese art and explores complicated postcolonial realities.

By Emma Crichton-Miller

The Democratic Republic of Congo has become an exemplar of Africa's postcolonial woes. A vast country richly endowed with natural resources, it was freed from Belgian rule in 1960 but has subsequently suffered dictatorship, repression and, for the past 18 years, vicious civil war.

The Fondation Cartier's exhibition *Beauté Congo-1926-2015-Congo Kitoko* offers an alternative picture. It recreates for us the experience of its curator, André Magnin, who discovered in Kinshasa in 1987 a thriving community of artists whose work defied perpetual crisis with wit, sensuality and creative freedom. These artists, self-defined as "popular" by their founding member Chéri Samba, had started out as billboard painters, decorators and illustrators but began to use oil and acrylic on canvas to capture their city – its night bars, its rich local musical tradition, its politics, its delight in colour and fashion, its dreams and its rage – and had built a strong local following.

Magnin has spent nearly 30 years following these artists – both as a curator

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and in building the vast collection of the entrepreneur Jean Pigozzi – as well as a younger generation from the DRC who have been encouraged by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Kinshasa. These include Pathy Tshindele, co-founder of the artists' collective Eza Possibles, and gifted photographer Kiripi Katembo, who will have a solo show at this year's 1:54, the art fair dedicated to African work in London in October.

In this show, Magnin also offers us work from two previous generations of Congolese painters, reaching back to the 1920s, who were encouraged by Europeans to produce work of a quite different kind, one rooted in the natural world. Exhibited and collected in Europe and America from the 1930s to the 1950s, they were largely forgotten by 1987. Magnin here insists on their relevance to the story, making the show an homage to an entire tradition.

The exhibition opens provocatively with the work of JP Mika, who was born in 1980. His "La SAPE" (2014), is a swagger portrait for contemporary Africa, the artist heroic in a red velvet suit and black patent-leather boots, standing on the globe (portrayed as a



bright green apple cut open) against the dark universe, with his giant paintbrush as a gentleman's cane.

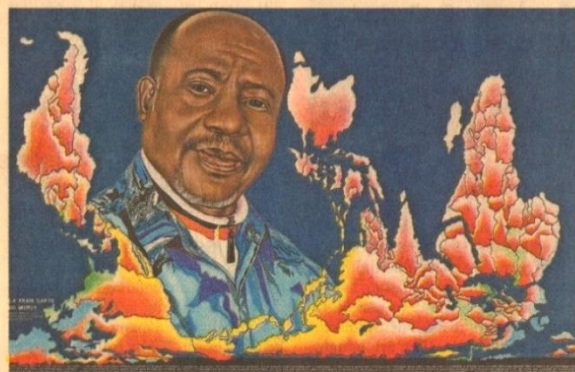
The *sapeurs* (taken from Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes, or Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People) are common to Brazzaville and Kinshasa. For them dressing up smartly is a political act, a defiant appropriation of mastery. Mika

shows Mandela and Obama, for instance, transformed by political success into *sapes*. With his references at once to the Malian photographers Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita and to Picasso, he suggests that his is an African art come of age.

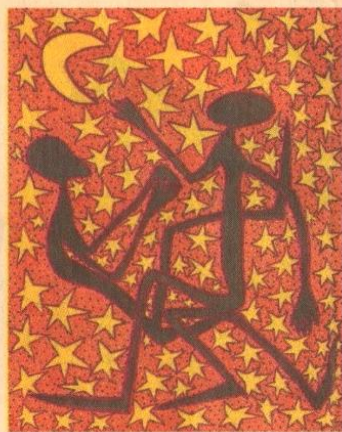
His confidence is echoed in Mosengo Shula's more whimsical "Sooner or Later the World Will Change" (2014),

Clockwise from main picture: 'La Nostalgie' by JP Mika (2014); untitled work by Antoinette Lubaki (c1929); 'Le calendrier lunaire Luba' by Mode Muntu (1979); 'La vraie carte du monde' (2011) by Chéri Samba

JP Mika: Michael De Ploert; Florian Kleinermann



For a slideshow of more works by Congolese artists, go to ft.com/congolese



which playfully suggests that colourfully dressed African astronauts may one day conquer space. For an older generation, however, *sapeurs* appear in a less positive light. They are cruelly mocked in the paintings of Pierre Bodo (born in 1953), where they are given bird beaks and wear mobile phones on their feet. In “SAPE” (2011), Chéri Chérin, JP Mika’s teacher, offers a jaundiced view of these snappy dressers, seduced by diamonds and cigars.

Chéri Samba, the founding father of this populist movement, is another subtle and mischievous satirist, using the tools of popular art – bright primary colours and flat backgrounds, painted text and his self-professed auto-didacticism – to challenge warring armies and governments. His boldest image, “Little Kadogo, I am for Peace, That is Why I like Weapons” (2004), is a picture of himself as a child in bright trainers and a camouflage shirt. He is flanked by roses, his empty hands up, while an adult hand holds a pistol at his waist and a machine gun stands in the foreground.

Continuing the counterintuitive backward journey through time, Magnin then presents two towering figures in postcolonial Congolese art. The painter Moké, who died in 2001, depicted Kinshasa throughout the 1970s, using his own figure to animate its crowded streets and steamy late-night bars, recording its love affair with boxing and beer. The works here, from the collection of his early patron Pierre Haffner, have never before been exhibited.

Meanwhile Bodys Isek Kingelez, who died this year, a sculptor of fantastical miniature buildings, is represented by two of his futuristic cities. “La ville de Sète en 3009” (2000) shows us a world cleansed of chaos and misery, a city that could be built, you feel he urges (though despairingly), if only the political will were there.

Works by the region’s earliest painters include the delicate watercolour paintings of figures and animals by Albert and Antoinette Lubaki and the highly assured patterns and silhouettes of their contemporary, Djilatendo. What once would have been called primitive art was translated from the walls of huts on to paper by the intervention of Georges Thiry, a Belgian civil servant with a discerning eye, who supplied paper, paint and ink. One painting by Albert Lubaki, an untitled profile of a boy dated c1929, is reminiscent of a Picasso.

A later episode of Congolese art was initiated by French naval officer and amateur painter Pierre-Romain Desfossés, who in 1946 founded a workshop of indigenous art, the “Hangar”, encouraging a dozen different artists to explore their own genius. What resulted was a range of highly patterned and poetic evocations of the natural and supernatural environments, of everyday life in rural Congo. And from two artists educated at the Belgian-run Academy of Beaux Arts in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) in the 1950s come the beautiful, fierce natural scenes of Jean-Bosco Kamba, with birds and fish, and Mode Muntu’s Keith Haring-like highly stylised figurative gouaches.

This exhibition reflects the franco-phone world’s complex relationship with its former colonies. Magnin is passionate in his celebration of the vibrant creativity on display here but his choices neglect aspects of contemporary Congolese art – performance, video, installation – that are perhaps less pleasing to the European collectors he advises.

But while, as some critical voices have suggested, African art no longer needs the patronage or mediation of its former colonial masters, it can only be to everyone’s benefit to encounter the powerful and beautiful works displayed here and to recover some of their turbulent historical and cultural context.

To November 15, fondation.cartier.com