



"No Documents, No History"

Maarten Couttenier

To cite this article: Maarten Couttenier (2010) "No Documents, No History", Museum History Journal, 3:2, 123-148, DOI: [10.1179/mhj.2010.3.2.123](https://doi.org/10.1179/mhj.2010.3.2.123)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/mhj.2010.3.2.123>



Published online: 18 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 183



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

"NO DOCUMENTS, NO HISTORY"

The Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section of the Museum of the Belgian Congo, Tervuren (1910–1948)

Maarten Couttenier

Royal Museum for Central Africa, Colonial History, Leuvensesteenweg 13, 3080 Tervuren, Belgium, email: Maarten.Couttenier@africamuseum.be

ABSTRACT

With the creation of the Moral, Political, (and Historical) Sciences Section of the Museum of the Belgian Congo, the Ministry of Colonies, wanted to highlight the positive aspects of Belgian colonization. Assuming that history began with the appearance of written documents, researchers only studied the activities of Belgian colonizers and paid no attention to Congolese history. Guided by the motto "no documents, no history," archives and collections were gathered on art, moral evolution, political evolution, and the history of Belgian colonization in Congo. However, only a limited series of archives were opened for researchers. The museum public was also offered a roseate image of the colony when they visited expositions on Catholic and Protestant missions, transport, and history. The Memorial Room became a "National Pantheon." The museum clearly served colonial propaganda and negative aspects of colonization, such as economic exploitation and the violent military occupation, were kept outside museum walls.

CONGO IN TERVUREN

The history of the museum in Tervuren dates to 1897, when King Leopold ordered the construction of the Colonial Palace on the green outskirts of the Belgian capital in order to house the colonial section of the Brussels International Exhibition. The building was approximately ten kilometres from the exhibition site of the "Parc du

Cinquantenaire,” which Leopold II had built in 1880 in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Belgian independence. A newly built majestic “Tervuren Avenue” linked these two sites. The exhibitions in Brussels, which featured the marvels of the Industrial Revolution, contrasted with the representation of the “other” in the Colonial Palace, helping to create the idea of “Europeanness.”¹ Following the temporary exhibition, the museum building in Tervuren housed the first permanent “Congo Museum” (1898-1909), which in the wake of the Belgian state’s 1908 annexation of the colony was renamed the “Museum of the Belgian Congo.” At its creation in 1898, the institute was both a public museum and a scientific organization with five sections: Anthropology, Ethnography, Fauna, Flora, and Geology.

Because the original building soon proved to be too small, the king commissioned a new one, but he did not live to see the finished product. Although the structure was erected between 1904 and 1908, its interior was incomplete at the time of Leopold II’s death in December 1909. His successor, King Albert I, opened the new museum on 30 April 1910 during yet another International Exhibition. Both the Colonial Palace and the new museum were paid for by King Leopold II using revenues from his “Foundation of the Crown,” a royal private territory of 25 million hectares in the colony. Since the king invested his controversial colonial profits in Belgium and not in Congo, he was criticized by many early colonists and the buildings in Tervuren can be seen as symbolic artifacts in which scientists formulated a “situated rationality.”²

A royal decree of 1 January 1910 reformed the museum organization and resulted in the creation of the Ethnography, Natural Sciences, Economy, Photographical Documentation and Vulgarization, and the Moral and Political Sciences Sections. The Ethnography Section continued to focus on material culture, while the Natural Sciences Section now concentrated on zoology, geology, mineralogy and paleontology. Economy Section scientists studied and exhibited both the potential of Congo’s natural resources and Belgian products that could be exported to the colony, in order to convince Belgian industrials to invest in the colonial project. Photographical Documentation and Vulgarization Section personnel photographed objects and inventoried photographs and glass plates that were sent to the museum. The latter section was eliminated after a 1928 reorganization that also created the Botany Section, re-established the Anthropology and Prehistory Section, and set apart from the Zoology and Entomology Section a stand-alone Geology and Mineralogy Section.

¹ F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler, “Between metropole and colony. Rethinking a research agenda.” In *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*, eds. F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997: 5. See also: A. F. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: museums, material culture and popular imagination in late Victorian and Edwardian England*. New Haven: Yale University, 1997.

² S. Forgan, “Building the museum: knowledge, conflict, and the power of place.” *Isis*, 96(4): 572-585, 2005.

This article will deal with the general history of Moral and Political Sciences Section (MPSS)³ and addresses colonial propaganda, personnel, collecting, research, and exhibiting. As the MPSS focused mainly on the accomplishments of Belgians in the colony, it played a major role in official colonial propaganda. Personnel history elucidates the crucial influence exerted by the scientific insights of individual scientists in the museum, which was typically seen as an “impersonal” institution that generated “static” knowledge about its collections. By studying the history of collecting, research and display practices, changes in the “social life of things” can be followed. As African objects and European archives were sent to different Belgian institutions and were even shifted subsequently from one section to the other within the same institution, the objects gathered “meanings through associations with people they encountered on their way to the collection.”⁴

COLONIAL PROPAGANDA

The MPSS was led by the Catholic Baron Alphonse de Haulleville, who at the same time was nominated museum director. With the creation of the MPSS Jules Renkin, the Minister of Colonies from 1908 until 1918, wanted the museum to highlight the positive aspects of Belgian colonization. Since the 1890s the Congo Free State had been heavily criticized in Belgium and especially abroad. Leopold II had already tried to counter the condemnations of Edmund Dene Morel and others. In 1907 he created the “Office colonial” in order to organize colonial propaganda that portrayed the colonization of the Congo as a scientific and humanitarian project. An organization with the same name and goals already existed in France since 1899.⁵ The creation of the MPSS clearly served colonial propaganda. After the annexation, the Ministry of Colonies used the museum to create a glowing image of the Congo Free State and Belgian colonization. Negative aspects such as that forced labour,

³ So far, the history of the MP(H)SS before the Second World War has only been discussed briefly in M. Luwel, “La section des sciences morales, politiques et historiques.” *Congo-Tervuren*, 6(2): 67-69, 1960, and in P. Marechal, “De Afdeling Geschiedenis van de Belgische aanwezigheid overzee.” In *Africa Museum Tervuren 1898-1998*, ed. J.-L. Grootaers. Tervuren: Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, 1998: 239-51. G. Vanthemsche, “De historiografie van het Belgisch kolonialisme in Congo.” In *De tuin van heden: dertig jaar wetenschappelijk onderzoek over de hedendaagse Belgische samenleving*, eds. G. Vanthemsche, M. De Metsenaere, and J.-C. Burgelman. Brussels: VUBpress, 2007: 417-441, only examines the period after the Second World War. M. Poncelet, *L'invention des sciences coloniales belges*. Paris: Karthala, 2008, addresses the museum in Tervuren only on pages 104-107. My article is based on extensive and original research in the Central Archives (CA) of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) and the Departmental Archives (DA) of the MP(H)SS.

⁴ J. M. M. Alberti, “Objects and the museum.” *Isis*, 96(4): 559-571, 2005. See also: A. Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value.” In *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 3-63.

⁵ On the French “Office colonial” that was renamed “Agence générale des colonies” after 1919, see: S. Lemaire, “Propager: L'Agence générale des colonies.” In *Culture coloniale: La France conquise par son Empire, 1871-1931*, eds. P. Blanchard and S. Lemaire. Paris: Autrement, 2003: 137-147.

mutilations, rapes and murders that occurred during the economic exploitation of “red rubber” and the violent military occupation were kept outside museum walls.⁶

Hence, for the first exhibition of the MPSS in Tervuren, organized by de Haulleville for the 1910 International Exhibition, the Ministry only offered museum material concerning education, missions, and transport, in order to illustrate the colony’s “intellectual and moral development” towards “progress.” In the first museum guide de Haulleville stated that before the arrival of Europeans there were no traces of civilization in Central Africa. It was only thanks to the construction of roads, railroads, cities, schools, hospitals, telegraph lines, mission posts, and factories that Africa became incorporated into the civilized world. “The exhibition is here; it evokes the entire past; it recounts our struggles, our setbacks and our victories; it brings home our accomplishments on that soil that the best among us fertilized with their sweat and blood.”⁷ Relief maps, photographs, and scale models of newly constructed cities, mission posts, and “European” buildings provided an overview of the early attempts of urbanization and Christianization. Part of the exhibition, based on the example of the British Museum, was devoted to the fight against sleeping sickness. On one hand, showcases displayed Arabic flags and portrayed the “Arab campaign” as a life-saving battle against the slave trade. On the other hand, a photo album belonging to Major Paul Thélie showed all the military officers who died in the colony during the period of the Congo Free State and portrayed Belgian soldiers as heroes (Figure 1).

ROCKY START

Because of de Haulleville’s double mandate, he had little time to organize the MPSS after the International Exhibition. During his first year the director complained he had to deal with 4,700 administrative dossiers. In 1912, the 28-year-old Frans Cornet, who earned a master’s degree in commercial and consular sciences, was appointed to assist de Haulleville. A year later, Justin Bataire was selected to manage the collections.⁸ However, during the First World War Cornet joined the Belgian army. After the war he became a delegate of the Inter-allied Rhineland High Commission, which occupied German territory between 1918 and 1930. While Cornet stayed in Germany, MPSS activities were limited to the conservation and registra-

⁶ J.-L. Vellut, “La violence armée de l’Etat Indépendant du Congo.” *Revue internationale des sciences du développement*, 16: 671-707, 1984. D. Vangroenweghe, *Du sang sur les lianes*. Bruxelles: Hatier, 1986.

⁷ A. de Haulleville, *Le Musée du Congo Belge à Tervueren*. Bruxelles: Lesigne, 1910: 51.

⁸ Cornet was born in Tienen and studied at the Catholic University of Leuven. He took a job at the Ministry of Colonies prior to working for the museum. In 1916 he married Germaine Van Dooren. Bataire began work in the museum in 1904. In 1910 he was appointed attendant in the new museum. He married Bertha Borsin, who also worked in the museum, as concierge. Toward the end of his career, in 1924, he was promoted to assistant.



Figure 1. The Moral and Political Sciences Section's first museum room, with showcases designed by the French architect Charles Girault. HP.1960.5.66, collection RMCA Tervuren; anonymous photographer, © 1910 RMCA Tervuren.

tion of incoming collections. Compared to other museum sections, its collections grew slowly and were not studied, resulting in an absence of publications and exhibitions. The 1910 exhibition remained unchanged until 1913, when it was replaced by pottery of the Ethnography Section, where collections had grown spectacularly.

Since de Haulleville was Renkin's protégé, criticism was rare and no steps were taken to address the section's stagnation. Criticism came mainly from the museum's Commission of Surveillance (CS). In 1911, a Jesuit CS member complained about the lack of information on recent mission accomplishments in the Congo and "the transformation which has taken place in the mentality of the native under the influence of the missions." He also wanted to incorporate diagrams to illustrate the rise of Christian weddings and the decline of "idoltrous practices and their often barbaric consequences."⁹ After Renkin's dismissal, the historian Théophile Simar, Secretary of the CS and the Ministry of Colonies librarian, criticized the exhibition's removal and stated that the MPSS had to exhibit the material signs of progress that had taken

⁹ CA 1910-1931, RIII, Letter from the Ministry of Colonies to de Haulleville, 14 June 1911.

root since the beginning of the European occupation of the Congo. Louis Franck, the new Minister of Colonies, rearticulated de Haulleville's responsibilities and ordered him to create a gallery on "African pioneers" based on Thélie's photo album.

Although he always showed a polite interest, de Haulleville clearly wanted to avoid the extra work. For example, he stated that diagrams were "scientific" instruments and doubted their usefulness in popular exhibitions. "By using [them] we risk tiring out the public and alienating instead of enticing them."¹⁰ His other complaints revealed the real reason for his disapproval. "A diagram of a few centimeters can represent months of work, study and reading of documents and questionnaires. Did the Commission think about the considerable work it takes only to keep these diagrams up to date."¹¹ The director blamed the exhibition's removal on lack of time, resources, displays, and useful material. After all, objects did not easily explain religion. "Religion is not 'quite the thing.' Being a cult and a doctrine, it is not "concretizable" in a museum."¹² When the Ministry of Colonies paid for new displays for the "African pioneers" gallery, the showcases remained unused in the museum basement.¹³ de Haulleville also complained several times about the lack of personnel and asked for the temporary assistance of museum personnel in other sections or of colonizers who were on leave in Belgium. Due to this staff shortage, the director refused to take responsibility for MPSS stagnation.

Finally, in early 1925, the newly appointed Minister of Colonies, Henri Carton de Wiart, visited the museum and insisted on energizing the MPSS. "[...] for five years the Moral and Political Sciences Section has seemed dead."¹⁴ Georges Verleyen, a former Moto mining company secretary who was too sick to return to the Congo, supported de Haulleville and helped him organize an exhibition on Catholic missions. The latter described the work as very delicate and meticulous—selecting objects, writing labels and composing charts. A questionnaire was sent to missionary posts in the Congo in order to gather charts, photographs, and information about their accomplishments and publications, the geographical dispersal of evangelization, the number of posts and missionaries, death rates, etc. However, when Verleyen left the section after one year, all activity stopped even though only three of the nine showcases that were supposed to feature Catholic missions were on exhibit. In a letter to the Minister of Colonies, de Haulleville nevertheless stated that the visitors were impressed by the results. The missions exhibition was unique, establishing the museum of the Belgian Congo among the most prominent European museums.¹⁵

¹⁰ CA 1910-1931, RIII, Letter from de Haulleville to the Minister of Colonies, 26 January 1912.

¹¹ CA 1910-1931, RIII, Note from de Haulleville, 12 December 1926.

¹² CA 1910-1931, RIII, Letter from de Haulleville to the Minister of Colonies, 26 November 1920.

¹³ E. Van Impe, *De inrichting van de zalen vanaf 1910*. Tervuren: Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, 2002, room 5, 3-5.

¹⁴ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from the Minister of Colonies to de Haulleville, 13 November 1924.

¹⁵ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from de Haulleville to the Minister of Colonies, 15 February 1927.

However, de Haulleville had a selective memory and forgot to mention that religious congregations frequently had the opportunity to exhibit at several European World Exhibitions. In 1924-1926 Pius XI even organized the impressive “Missionary Exhibition” in Rome, where a special gallery was devoted to the Belgian Congo. The event led to the creation of a permanent Museo Missionario Etnografico directed by Wilhelm Schmidt, who regarded the museum as a means to document the history of the missions and as an opportunity to educate future missionaries. Still, the museum in Tervuren was a unique institution. Colonial museums in Europe focused on ethnography, anthropology, prehistory, zoology, botany, and geology, but the Museum of the Belgian Congo, with its MPSS and Economy Section, both serving “formal” colonial propaganda, employed an incomparable combination of scientists. The British Imperial Institute had similar goals to those of the MPSS but given its funding problems and limited success, colonial propaganda in Great Britain was organized mainly by private societies that “prevented imperial propaganda from becoming institutionally ossified.”¹⁶

PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY

Cornet returned to the museum in February 1926 after a period de Haulleville described as “seven years of disloyalty.”¹⁷ Due to personal conflicts with Cornet, Bataire was replaced by Jean Swinnens, who had worked in the Ethnography Section. After Swinnens’s retirement in January 1944, Louis Jockmans took over. The departure of de Haulleville and nomination of Henri Schouteden as the new director in June 1927 marked the true beginning of meaningful collecting and the organization of a comprehensive exhibition. Cornet was blamed for his lack of initiative, which had resulted in a situation where “[...] the section of moral sciences was a little bit trailing behind other Sections of the Museum.”¹⁸ Despite the MPSS’s lack of adequate collections and documentation, and even though Cornet wasn’t a historian, he was named head of the MPHSS with the support of Schouteden in January 1931.

In an interview just after the nomination of Schouteden, the director suggested changing the name of the section by calling it a “Historic” or “Documentary Section.” A royal decree of 18 May 1928 altered its name to the “Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section” (MPHSS). Its goals, however, remained unchanged. Cornet was charged with casting the activities of Belgian colonizers in a

¹⁶ J. M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and empire: the manipulation of British public opinion 1880-1960*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984: 148. The creation of the Museo Missionario Etnografico has been discussed by: F. Morimont, “L’aficanisation de l’art chrétien au Congo belge, 1919-1950.” In *Rencontres artistiques Belgique-Congo, 1920-1950*, eds. P. Van Schuylenbergh and F. Morimont. Louvain-la-Neuve: UCL, 1995 : 63-70.

¹⁷ CA 1910-1931, E. Cornet, Letter from de Haulleville to Cornet, 26 November 1925.

¹⁸ CA 1910-1931, E. Cornet, Letter from Schouteden to the Minister of Colonies, 20 December 1930.

better light. Despite the name change, the MPHSS did not begin paying attention to Congolese history. In accordance with contemporary norms of historical research, Cornet assumed that history began with the appearance of written documents and thus with the presence of Europeans in Africa. Although contacts between scientists of different sections were almost nonexistent and interdisciplinary research was not pursued, Jean Collette, Cornet's colleague in the Anthropology and Prehistory Section, agreed: "If you say history, you say written documents." According to this criterion, history did not exist in the Congo before the arrival of Europeans. "[...] the history of our Congo only dates back one century." African oral history was not studied, as it was considered to be part of the domain of myths and legends. "Since the last century, the Congolese have a written history, a glorious history, even being very young. They know nothing of their history, except for invented traditions very often created for the pleasure of the white person who likes stories."¹⁹ In this way, Congolese history before the arrival of Europeans became "whited out."²⁰

DONATIONS

Guided by the motto "no documents, no history," Cornet began to enlarge the collections.²¹ Any failure to gather material had to be prevented at all costs. "We passionately started with the search for owners of these archives. We will use all possible means known to human psychology to make them hand over their relics."²² Since the section primarily focused on the history of the Belgian presence in the Congo, Cornet contacted former colonizers or their widowers and other relatives. In a series of very polite letters Cornet and Schouteden asked colonials or family members to donate souvenirs, books, diaries, and photographs. In 1929, for example, after the death of Albert Sillye, who had served in the Congo Free State, Schouteden sent a letter to his widow: "Having just been informed of the death of our dearly missed Colonel Sillye, I speak for the Museum of the Congo and for myself in extending my heartfelt condolences." At the end of the letter Schouteden asked for a photograph of her husband. "The memory of your husband will thereby be preserved in the special materials that we are gathering, including all documentation we are able to recover (photographs, papers, travel diaries, etc.) concerning the heroic period."²³

¹⁹ The three quotations are taken from: J. R. F. Colette, "Complexe et convergences en préhistoire." *Bulletin de la Société Royale Belge d'Anthropologie et de Préhistoire*, 50: 51-52.

²⁰ M. M. Ames, *Cannibal tours and glass boxes. The anthropology of museums*. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 1995, 119.

²¹ F. Cornet, "La Section Historique du Musée du Congo Belge." *La Revue Coloniale Belge* 1(9): 6, 1946.

²² Cornet, 1946: 6.

²³ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from Schouteden to Madame Sillye, 20 November 1929. M. Coosemans, "Sillye." in *Biographie Coloniale Belge*, 2: 856-860, 1951. Between 1930 and 1963 Gabrielle Sillye would donate several documents to the RMCA. A. Thuriaux-Hennebert, *Inventaire Papiers Albert Sillye, Capitaine-Commandant (1867-1929) et Inventaire Papiers Emmanuel Muller, Général (1879-1956)*. Inventaire archive historiques, 6. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1975.

Despite the letters and the generosity of some, the number of donations was “relatively unsatisfying” initially.²⁴ Several former colonizers refused to part with their collections. “The answers given to us while we were begging for relics for our historic section are characteristic—some affirmed that they didn’t feel authorized to hand over certain confidential documents, even for the benefit of the museum. Others honestly pretended that the things they possessed were of no value and unworthy of being presented in the Museum of Tervuren!”²⁵ Cornet’s only encouragement was that the collections still existed. If persistent, he hoped he might still get hold of them. Some reactions of famous former colonizers, however, made it unlikely.

Can you imagine the poignant memories, the stoically endured sufferings evoked for us on the pages of these travel diaries yellowed by time, loyal confidants of a young and generous heart, written at times by candlelight and often with a hand trembling from fatigue... during a time when fever, haematuria and dysentery decimated our ranks? Do you realize that this is all we have, that we live on these souvenirs? And now you would like to deprive us of them and lock them in I don’t know what cupboard or to hand them over with no sense of shame to the indiscretion of I don’t know what youths, incapable of comprehending our bright-eyed naivety and who might laugh at the fame of our miseries... No, we will not take your request, which is no doubt honest, badly, but please stop insisting, or else we will have every right to get angry.²⁶

In order to increase the number of collections several calls for donations were published in colonial papers and journals between 1927 and 1930.²⁷ Readers were informed that several former “Africans” did not recognize the value of their souvenirs, which was regrettable for our “National Glory of which the Congolese were fine laborers.”²⁸ Colonizers were promised that their collections would be exhibited in the museum, where the memory of the pre-First World War “heroic period” of colonization was kept alive. The League of Congolese Memory (LCM) also encouraged their members to part with their archives. The LCM was created in 1929 in order to “keep the devout memory of the trailblazers of the African work alive” in Belgium and the Belgian Congo.²⁹ At first the calls for donations seemed to pay off. In late 1929, Cornet stated, “It is comforting to see the fortunate turnaround which

²⁴ CA 1910-1931, RV/17, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 6 January 1928.

²⁵ CA 1910-1931, RV/17, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 6 January 1928.

²⁶ Cornet, 1946: 6-7. Cornet did not mention the name of the “famous former colonial.”

²⁷ These included the *Essor Colonial et Maritime*, the *Action Nationale*, the *Tribune Congolaise* and the *Bulletin de l’Association des Vétérans Coloniaux*.

²⁸ “Vieux papiers coloniaux.” *Bulletin de l’Association des Vétérans Coloniaux*, 11: 10, 1930.

²⁹ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 30 December 1936.

has manifested among the colonial veterans towards the Museum: they no longer systematically withdraw from our requests!³⁰

In 1935, however, the number of donations decreased. Taking the director's advice, Cornet paid personal visits to the widowers or other family members of former colonizers. Several colonizers or their families were invited to Tervuren to visit the MPHSS, allowing Cornet to establish a network of possible donors. During guided tours, visitors could see how carefully the documents were preserved. They were reassured that their names would be mentioned in the showcases next to the objects. Cornet explained that he wanted them to hand over their precious collections "in order to pass them over to future generations in our Congolese Pantheon."³¹ After 1938 the number of donations increased again and their quality improved. Typically, when a donation agreement was reached, Swinnens or Cornet was sent to acquire the objects. In 1942, Cornet was provided a museum car to collect objects all over the country. After a while several colonizers even contacted the museum on their own initiative. Driven by self-interest, they tried to sell or donate portraits or photographs of themselves in order to become immortalized in the museum among the first pioneers or to obtain a royal honor.

Finally, the organization of temporary exhibitions also caused collections to grow. After International Exhibitions in Antwerp (1930) and Paris (1931), several objects were transferred to the MPHSS. In Antwerp, for example, Cornet helped install a "Salon of Old Congo" in the Palace of the Belgian Congo, where the history of the Belgian presence in the Congo was presented. After the exhibition, which was housed in a temporary steel, wood, and plaster building, Cornet obtained photograph enlargements, medals, postage stamps, mannequins, flags, and paintings by the Congolese artist Albert Lubaki.³²

COLLECTIONS

Because of the broad scope of the MPHSS, collections varied widely. All objects were meticulously inventoried on index cards and stored in four subsections—art, moral evolution, political evolution, and history. The art subsection included all kinds of sculptures, medals, drawings, paintings, colonial literature, and musical instruments and scores. Several sculptures and paintings represented Belgian kings and famous colonizers immortalized by Belgian artists. Other art works were by Europeans in the Congo, inspired by African personalities and scenery. "Modern"

³⁰ CA 1910-1931, RV/19, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 21 December 1929.

³¹ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from Schouteden to Vendelmans, 20 December 1928.

³² *Wereldtentoonstelling voor koloniën, zeevaart en Vlaamsche kunst. Antwerpen 1930. Paleis van Belgisch Congo. Officiële Gids*. Brussel: Etablissements généraux d'imprimerie, 1930: 17.

paintings by “natives” showed signs of “European inspiration.” Sculpted ivory tusks also “served as evidence of the European influence on native art.”³³

The moral evolution subsection included objects concerning missions, justice, and education. In fact, the first objects to be inscribed in the General Register in January 1910 were children’s uniforms and rosaries from a mission post in Bamani, testimonies to missionary education efforts. All kinds of plaiting – belts, mats, and wastepaper baskets – made by mission children “proved” that Congolese were “susceptible to civilization.” Given their interest in such objects suggested the possibility of “moral evolution” among the Congolese, several Ethnography Section collections were transferred to Cornet’s section—objects made in technical schools, “modern” pottery and ivory, weapons, basketry, sculptures, etc. According to Ethnography Section Head Joseph Maes, these “export products” were especially made for a European tourist market and therefore had no scientific value.³⁴

The third subsection, on political evolution, stored objects concerning the colony’s administrative organization, the Congolese army, medicine, housing, demography, monetary systems, and postal, telephone, telegraph and transport services. Important documents on the early history of the Congo Free State also were maintained, such as correspondence between King Leopold II and the first Governor General, Francis de Winton. The only written documents revealing the presence of Africans were contracts between colonizers and local chiefs. The latter, unable to read or write, signed with a cross and “donated” their territory to the Congo Free State. Uniforms pinned with all kinds of decorations, and the weapons of the Force Publique, illustrated the efforts of the Congolese army to “pacify” the territory. Belgian efforts in transport and communication were represented by photographs, postage stamps, coins, and bank notes.

Cornet also helped to glorify the famous explorer Henri Morton Stanley by collecting a scale model of his demountable steamer, “Le Royal,” and two pairs of wheels that were used by Stanley’s porters to carry heavy loads, such as his disassembled steamer, from Matadi to Léopoldville in the Lower Congo during his 1879 expedition. In 1929, three pieces of a demountable boat were found in the Congo, which were identified as the remnants of the “Lady Alice.” Stanley had used the boat to circumnavigate Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika and to sail downriver on the Congo in 1877. The vessel was named after Alice Pike, the fiancée Stanley was to

³³ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 9 December 1927. On Belgian artists and Congo, see: S. Cornelis, “Contacts culturels entre Europe et Afrique au Congo. Quelques répercussions sur l’art du XVème au XXème siècle.” In *Africa Museum Tervuren 1898-1998*, ed. Jan-Lodewijk Grooeters. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, 1998: 253-259.

³⁴ On the history of the Ethnography Section and Belgian anthropology in general, see: M. Couttenier, *Congo tentoongesteld. Een geschiedenis van de Belgische antropologie en het museum van Tervuren (1882-1925)*. Leuven: Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika/Acco, 2005. (Congo exhibited. A history of Belgian anthropology and the museum in Tervuren).

marry after his return. After a journey of 11,000 kilometers, Stanley left the ship near Isangila “to bleach and to rot to dust.”³⁵ When a Belgian administrator thought he had rediscovered the boat, it was immediately regarded as an “invaluable historic treasure” and an icon of the “heroic period” of the exploration of the Congo. Soon plans were made to move the remnants of the “Lady Alice” to Tervuren. Parts of the vessel were first exhibited in a park in Ostend and later were transferred to the museum.³⁶

In the last subsection, on history, Cornet collected old maps and commemorative medals, in memory of the Arab Campaign and the First World War in the Congo, for example. Among the war trophies were “Arab” and German flags “captured on the enemy,” weapons, hats, and the clothing of “Arab” chiefs. Finally, thanks to calls for donations and his personal contacts, Cornet was able to get hold of the personal archives of many former colonizers.³⁷ According to the CS, who visited the section in 1941, the collection included a series of exceptional documents. Cornet was praised for his efficient organization.³⁸

REPRESENTATION IN THE MUSEUM

Because of the growth of the collections Cornet was offered more and more space in the museum. By 1934 four out of the nineteen rooms were at his disposal.³⁹ Mounting the exhibition was very time-consuming, including the selection of objects and photographs and their periodic replacement to keep the showcases fresh and interesting. Labels, maps and diagrams were drafted and kept up to date. Dated or lacking information was repeatedly discovered by visitors or the director. Due to new language laws in Belgium, French labels had to be translated into Dutch, a task that continued until 1939.

In the period 1927-1929 Cornet completed the exhibition on Catholic and Protestant missions that had been initiated by de Haulleville and Verleyen. Each denomination was given its own showcase. According to Cornet, this created a “healthy spirit of competitiveness,” which spurred an increase in donations.⁴⁰ Texts, maps, photographs, and statistics depicted the development and spread of “civiliza-

³⁵ H. M. Stanley, *Through the dark continent or the sources of the Nile around the great lakes of Equatorial Africa and down the Livingstone River to the Atlantic Ocean*. New York: Harper, 1878, vol. 2: 443.

³⁶ CA 1910-1931, C, Note from Schouteden, 26 March 1929.

³⁷ For an overview of the private archives kept in the RMCA, see: P. Van Schuylenbergh, *La mémoire des Belges en Afrique centrale: inventaire des archives historiques privées du Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale de 1858 à nos jours*. Inventaire des archives historiques, 8. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale Tervuren, 1997.

³⁸ CA 1910-1931, RIII, Report of the meeting of 19 December 1941.

³⁹ Luwel, 1960: 68. H. Schouteden, *Geïllustreerde Gids van het Museum van Belgisch Congo*. Tervuren: Museum van Belgisch Congo, 1946: 37-42.

⁴⁰ CA 1910-1931, RV, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 6 January 1928.



Figure 2. Exhibition on missions and medical services in the Congo. The exhibition room also contained artworks by Herbert Ward and ethnographic life groups. A still taken from the film “The Museum of Belgian Congo Tervuren. The Biggest Colonial Museum in the World” by Hélène Schirren. HF.1407/08, RMCA Tervuren collection, 1939.

tion efforts.” A new exhibition on medical and agricultural services detailed the initiatives of the Association Universitaire Catholique pour l’Aide aux Missions (AUCAM), la Fondation Médical de l’Université Catholique de Louvain au Congo (FOMULAC), le Centre Agronomique de l’Université de Louvain au Congo (CADULAC), and the Fonds Reine Elisabeth pour l’Assistance Médicale aux Indigènes du Congo Belge (FOREAMI). The photographs were delivered by the Propaganda Service of the Ministry of Colonies. However, the public wasn’t told that medical services and agricultural institutes in the Congo were created to counter the demographic catastrophe caused by colonial violence (Figure 2).⁴¹

After 1930 Cornet worked on the installation of the history room, which was previously reserved for the Ethnography Section. Showcases provided an overview of the most important steps in the creation of the Belgian colony—explorations

⁴¹ N. R. Hunt. “‘Le bébé en brousse’. European women, African birth spacing, and colonial intervention in breast feeding in the Belgian Congo.” In *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world*, eds. F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1997: 287-321. N. R. Hunt, *A colonial lexicon of birth ritual, medicalisation and mobility in the Congo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999. On the history of AUCAM, FOMULAC and CADULAC see: R. Mantels, *Geleerd in de tropen. Leuven, Congo & de wetenschap, 1885 - 1960*. Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2007: 64-84.



Figure 3. The History Room, with a central showcase decorated with an arrangement of ivory. The walls were decorated with tusks. HP.1960.5.67, collection RMCA Tervuren; anonymous photographer, © 1936 RMCA Tervuren.

between 1877 and 1885, the Stanley expedition, the creation of the Congo Free State, the Arab campaign, and the First World War. Belgian officers and soldiers were represented as heroes, using photographs, diaries, and medals. The “Arab” adversary was depicted as the aggressor by displaying weapons, bullets, and slave chains. Flags and clothing of “Arabs” and Madhists were exhibited as war trophies (Figure 3).

In 1928 all the objects concerning transport were transferred from the Economy Section to Cornet’s section. In a new room he exhibited scale models of boats, trains, and airplanes. The exhibition also included maps drawn by Swinnens and showing modes of transport: roads, navigable rivers, railroads and aerial routes. Photographs illustrated the construction of the railroad between Matadi and Léopoldville with its impressive bridges and train stations (Figure 4).

Six years later Cornet was given a fourth room, which was created by closing the museum’s inner court arcade. One of the new exhibition spaces became the Memorial Room, named after a monument in memory of all the Belgian colonizers who died in the Congo between 1876 and 1908. A total of 1,508 names were painted on Memorial Room walls. Beneath the memorial the recently deceased King Albert I was quoted: “...merciless death swept in the ranks of the first pioneers. Never shall we pay enough tribute to their memory.” The memorial was inaugurated on 14 November 1934 in the presence of Cardinal Jozef Van Roey and the Minis-



Figure 4. The Transport and Communication Room with scale models, maps, and photographs, for example showing boats of the Union Nationale des Transports Fluviaux (UNATRA). HP.2009.15.17, collection RMCA Tervuren; anonymous photographer, © unknown date, RMCA Tervuren.

ter of Colonies. Former colonizers and widows and children of deceased pioneers were invited. In his speech, Schouteden paid tribute to “the genius of the illustrious Founder of the colonial Empire.”⁴² For the families of the deceased colonizers it was an emotional, unforgettable day. A son of a colonizer wrote to Schouteden after the ceremony: “Our mother was very honoured by all the tributes towards her, but above all proud and happy that the work of the First Belgian Pioneers had been recognized and admired. She vigorously endured the emotions and fatigues.”⁴³ After the ceremony, the memorial was visited by thousands.

The idea for the construction of a memorial certainly wasn’t new. Charles Lemaire had wanted to reserve a place of honor for fallen pioneers at the 1897 International Exhibition.⁴⁴ As has been mentioned above, Paul Thélie collected photographs

⁴² Schouteden, 1946: 12.

⁴³ CA 1932-present, S3, Letter from Antoine to Schouteden, 21 November 1934.

⁴⁴ RMCA, Colonial History Section, Archive Lemaire, 62.45.13, 1-9.



Figure 5. The Memorial Room. Half of the 1,508 names of Belgians who died in the Congo before 1908 are shown. Today, this smaller, colonial version of the Menin Gate in Ypres is still visited by family members of former colonizers who wish to photograph the name of their ancestor. HP.1956.64.3, collection RMCA Tervuren; anonymous photographer, © ca. 1934-1949, RMCA Tervuren.

of deceased officers in 1910 and the Minister of Colonies wanted to install a gallery of heroes in the 1920s. In the “Salon of Old Congo,” at the 1930 Antwerp International Exhibition, photographs of famous former colonizers were exhibited, although several pioneer descendants complained that their relative’s photograph was missing despite their ultimate “patriotic sacrifice” of dying for the colony.⁴⁵ A year after the International Exhibition, the LCM published a book devoted to “Our Heroes who died for Civilization.”⁴⁶ It was in fact Nicolas Arnold, the LCM president, who suggested creating a Memorial Room in Tervuren, as its creation was closely related to LCM goals to maintain “the pious memory of the pioneers.”⁴⁷ This time, however, serious research was conducted to prevent the exclusion of deserving names (Figure 5).

Also beneath the names of the 1,508 Belgians, Cornet and Swinnens placed two series of enlarged photographs, again provided in part by the Propaganda Service. The

⁴⁵ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from Stroobant to Leplae, 15 February 1931.

⁴⁶ Arnold, Nicolas, Josué Henry, Gustave Dreypondt, René Detry, Paul Closet, Léo Lejeune, et al., *A nos Héros coloniaux morts pour la Civilisation, 1876-1908*. Bruxelles: Ligue du souvenir congolais, 1931.

⁴⁷ CA 1910-1931, RVII, RVIII/45, Letter from Schouteden to Arnold, 7 August 1929.

enlargements were arranged according to a “before and after method” that compared the current situation with the period when Europeans had just arrived in the Congo. In a letter to Schouteden, Cornet argued, “The resulting contrast between the two big panels will be striking. The abundant documentation which we possess at the moment will shed light on the realized progress [...]”⁴⁸ On the left, around the portrait of Leopold II, the public could see photographs of the “negro life”—types of habitation, ceremonies, and crafts. Images on the right showed the introduction of the “perfection of the current medical services and the importance and beautiful organization of the mine exploitations.”⁴⁹ Visitors guided by Cornet seemed impressed by “the grandiose work accomplished by Belgium in the heart of the African continent.”⁵⁰

Twenty-three panels provided an overview of the history of the exploration of the Congo. The first panels showed 19th century maps “illustrating the ignorance concerning the geography of Central Africa at that time.”⁵¹ The maps also showed the “progressive results of the occupation of the territory.”⁵² On the next panels visitors were introduced to Portuguese colonization in Africa, Stanley’s travels, railroad construction, and the military occupation of Lower Congo, Kasai, Katanga and East Africa during the First World War.

An ivory bust of King Albert I, who just had died in a Marche-les-Dames climbing accident, was placed in the middle of the Memorial Room. In front of it stood the pillar of the grave of Louis Crespel, leader of the first expedition of the Association Internationale Africaine (AIA), who died in Africa in 1878. The pillar was removed from the original burial site in Zanzibar, probably by a local fisherman who used it as ballast, but was relocated near the Persian Gulf in 1913. Once it arrived in Tervuren it was seen as a collection masterpiece. In the niches next to Albert I’s bust, busts of Emile Storms and Edmond Hanssens, respectively, represented the occupation of Central Africa from the east coast by the AIA and from the west coast by the Association Internationale du Congo (AIC). Further along, the public encountered the Stanley’s transport wheels and a section of what was considered to be the “Lady Alice.” After the Second World War, Marcel Luwel, Cornet’s successor, removed the *steel* boat parts from the exhibition because the original “Lady Alice” was made out of “Spanish cedar 3/8 inch thick.”⁵³ In sum, the Memorial Room exhibition, its walls painted with 1,508 names, became a “National Pantheon.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸ CA 1910-1931, C, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 13 December 1930.

⁴⁹ Schouteden, 1946: 44. J. Marchal, *Forced labor in the gold and copper mines: a history of Congo under Belgian rule*. San Francisco, CA: Per Ankh Publishers, 2003.

⁵⁰ Departmental Archives (DA) of the MPHSS, Service intérieur, Direction du Musée, Letter from lieutenant-general Van den Bergen, 14 December 1938.

⁵¹ Schouteden, 1946: 46.

⁵² DA, Service intérieur, Direction du Musée, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 1 August 1929.

⁵³ Stanley, 1878, vol. 1: 4.

⁵⁴ DA, Service Intérieur, Demandes de collaboration, Letter from Cornet to the General Consul, undated.

Finally, four central Memorial Room showcases featured objects made by “natives.” The exhibition of basketry, textiles, pottery, and ivory and wooden sculptures marked by European influence was intended to make the case that the Congolese were susceptible to European civilization. The objects were often used in the Congo to decorate European houses. According to Cornet the objects proved “[...] how desirable it was that a primitive art, which could produce such spontaneous productions, was preserved.”⁵⁵ Art by Belgian artists who were inspired by the Congo also was exhibited, but to a surprisingly limited degree. The Memorial Room contained some sketches by Léon Dardenne, while the missions exhibition room hosted a few statues by Herbert Ward.

SCIENTIFIC STUDY

Before the donated collections were opened to research, they went through a strict procedure. New collections were inscribed in the General Register and an administrative file was kept for each donation. If needed, restorations were meticulously carried out by Swinnens before the items were stored in the reserves. Although the section collected a wide variety of objects, written documents were attributed more scientific value than art objects and photographs. It is perhaps telling that several of Dardenne’s paintings were lent to the Ministry of Colonies to decorate offices; German troops stole several during the Second World War. After the war, the Minister of Colonies asked for new pieces, a request that was denied.⁵⁶ According to Cornet, the photograph collection made it possible to “follow the progressive stages of civilization and the changing aspects of the colony from a moral and political point of view.”⁵⁷ By the end of 1929, 3,000 photographs were carefully inventoried on index cards.

Conforming to the prevailing methodological approach to history science, most attention was paid to diplomatic and political history, which was seen as “[...] the only one that seriously could be considered from a scientific point of view [...]”⁵⁸ By collecting important written documents and creating a specialized library, the MPHSS gradually became an important study center “where all documents, all information best suited to elucidating the increasingly important, increasingly pressing questions about the history of the colony and its moral and political development [...]” were consolidated.⁵⁹ Non-museum scientists also began to acknowledge the museum’s importance. “[...] Tervuren gradually acquires the reputation in the world for being an important centre concerning African documentation.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Schouteden, 1946: 48.

⁵⁶ CA 1932-present, S3, Letter from the Ministry of Colonies to Schouteden, 30 April 1945. See also the reply from Schouteden, 2 May 1945.

⁵⁷ CA 1910-1931, RV/19, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 21 December 1929.

⁵⁸ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 30 December 1936.

⁵⁹ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 8 January 1943.

⁶⁰ “Le voyage de M. F. Cornet dans la Colonie.” *Le Courrier d’Afrique*, 28 September 1948.

However, as will become clear, colonial archives were “themselves cultural artefacts, built on institutional structures that erased certain kinds of knowledge, secreted some, and valorized others.”⁶¹ Prior to opening donated archives to the public, they were first read carefully. Next, manuscripts were copied so the original didn’t have to be used by scholars, limiting the risk of damage. For example, Storms’ diary, partly destroyed by fire in Africa, was later copied by his widow. Later on, Schouteden stated that only staff could make copies, but it’s remarkable to see that certain passages were left out before the texts were handed to students and researchers.⁶² Cornet explained why: “Because it’s best not to show strangers travel diaries that tell stories of relationships liable to provoke controversy among persons still alive, or private notes, during the copying process the texts are edited as necessary.”⁶³ Afterwards, documents were evaluated on their “moral value.” “After appraising the documents, that is, evaluating the author’s competence, objectivity, sincerity, the facts reported first- or second-hand; once all the text has been reviewed, studied and evaluated, it’s assigned a moral value rating.”⁶⁴ Cornet considered monitoring the documents an ungrateful task, but also one of unmistakable importance.⁶⁵

Opening the archives to scholars required the creation of a bibliographic file system. Written sources and publications were systematically checked and important names and subjects were noted on thousands and thousands of index cards, which were kept in special cabinets. By 1932, 15,000 index cards had been made, offering a structured view of archives and publications on European exploration and colonial history. According to Cornet, the bibliographic catalogue was an indispensable tool for students and scientists. The work was “tedious but useful.”⁶⁶ As one can imagine, the creation of the index cards was time-consuming and not very stimulating. Hence, Cornet asked repeatedly for administrative assistance, but his request never was granted. In 1935, a list of all the colonial posts in the Congo was ordered, which required checking all the archives again. Three years later a timeline was created that made it easier to locate information gaps and better account for poorly documented periods (Figure 6).⁶⁷

By using the bibliographic catalogue, the list of toponyms and the time line, students and historians could easily access a wealth of data. Although clearly the data were censored, Cornet stated that researchers could begin the historical synthesis immediately. He considered receiving students very useful, because they could be indoc-

⁶¹ Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 17.

⁶² CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 10 January 1932. CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Schouteden to Cornet, 4 January 1936.

⁶³ Cornet, 1946: 7.

⁶⁴ Cornet, 1946: 7.

⁶⁵ CA 1910-1931, RIII, Report of the meeting of 19 December 1941.

⁶⁶ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 10 January 1944.

⁶⁷ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 3 January 1938.



Figure 6. Jean Swinnens in the Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section, on the top floor of the Museum of the Belgian Congo. As smoking was forbidden in the museum, Swinnens chewed tobacco. Notice the spittoon on the floor next to his chair. HP, 2009.15.6, collection RMCA Tervuren; anonymous photographer © before 1944, RMCA Tervuren.

trinated in the “colonial cause.”⁶⁸ Robert Stanley Thomson, the American Professor of the Russel Sage College in New York, visited the section in 1936. Thomson was considered an authority since the publication of his *Fondation de L'Etat Indépendant du Congo*, an overview of the Congo Free State's history from 1876 until 1885.⁶⁹

Cornet opened the archives for research, but, strangely enough, never published anything on the history of colonization. In a 1929 annual report, he didn't present any publications. Joseph Maes of the Ethnography Section presented 12, bringing his total to 66. A year later, Cornet stated that he was working on biographies of former colonizers, using documents in his own section. He promised the widow of Emile Storms to publish a book on her late husband. But Cornet would only end up publishing an article on his section.⁷⁰ He did, however, provide useful data for the authors of the *Biographie Coloniale Belge* published by the Royal Belgian Colonial Institute (RBCI) beginning in 1948. He also sifted through all the volumes of the *Mouvement Géographique* and noted useful biographical information on thousands of index cards that were added to the bibliographic catalogue (Figure 7).

⁶⁸ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 3 January 1938.

⁶⁹ R. S. Thomson, *Fondation de L'Etat Indépendant du Congo: Un chapitre de l'histoire du partage de l'Afrique*. Bruxelles: Lebègue, 1933.

⁷⁰ Cornet, 1946: 6-7.

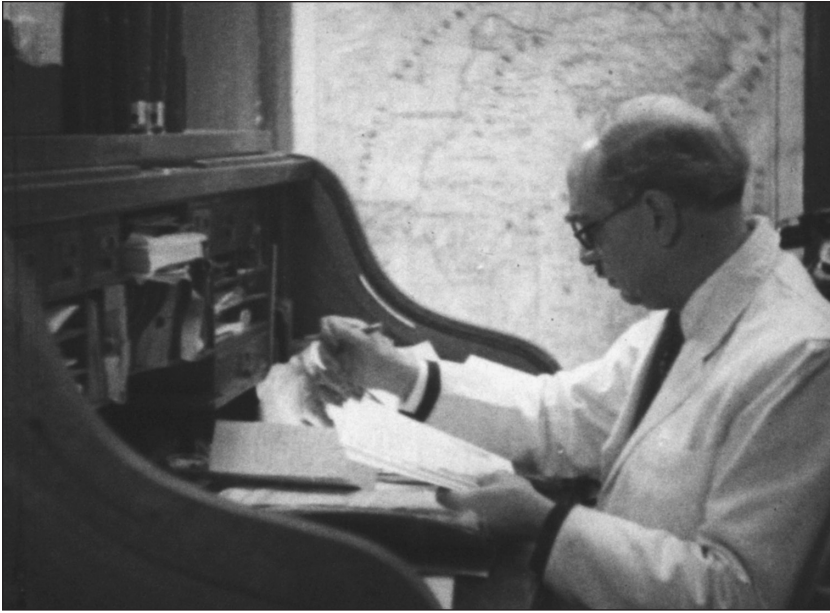


Figure 7. Frans Cornet at his desk in the Museum of the Belgian Congo. Cornet's desk is still used in the Colonial History Section. A still taken from the film "The Museum of Belgian Congo Tervuren. The Biggest Colonial Museum in the World" by Hélène Schirren. HF.1407/08, RMCA Tervuren collection, 1939.

The fact that Cornet himself didn't publish did not prevent him from having an opinion about others. He admitted that the redaction of a synthesis about the history of the Congo, given the abundance of documents growing each day, was not a sinecure. Moreover, writing the history of Leopold's "exceptional and grandiose oeuvre" was tricky.⁷¹ Many had tried, but most had lapsed into rambling hypotheses and wrong conclusions. According to Cornet, foreign scholars especially were unable to remain objective, and published tendentious and fantastic allegations. He advised readers to ignore books like *Leopold der Ungeliebte: König der Belgier und des Geldes* by Ludwig Bauer. However, within a year of publication Bauer's book was translated and published by American, British, and French editors.⁷² Despite its success, Cornet described it as "a bad book, written by a bad historian!"⁷³ The head

⁷¹ Describing the work of Leopold II, Cornet used the words "oeuvre étrange et grandiose." Note that the French word "étrange" has a double meaning. It can either be translated as "exceptional" or as "strange." Cornet, 1946: 6.

⁷² L. Bauer, *Leopold der Ungeliebte: König der Belgier und des Geldes*. Amsterdam: Querido, 1934. L. Bauer, *Léopold le mal-aimé, roi des Belges*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1935. L. Bauer, *Leopold the unloved. King of the Belgians and of money*. London: Cassell, 1934. L. Bauer, *Leopold the unloved, King of the Belgians and of wealth*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935. Today, only the German book is kept in the library of the Colonial History Section.

⁷³ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 3 January 1938.

of the MPHSS suggested that readers should visit his collections in Tervuren, where Bauer's "fantastic allegations" could be refuted.

On the other hand, Cornet was a great admirer of Robert Stanley Thomson, whom he regarded as a first-rate historian. Thomson had consulted archives in Belgium, the United States, France, Germany, and Great Britain, and, according to Cornet, clearly understood that a history of the Congo Free State had to be a diplomatic and political history. His book would never become obsolete. Nevertheless, Cornet criticized Thomson for only using official documents. By this limited approach the personal story of colonizers risked being drowned out by a narrative on institutions. Thomson didn't study the private archives of veterans, who therefore faded away from his history. Yet in the MPHSS, Cornet maintained a large amount of letters and diaries that he considered "some sort of mirror in which the historical truth was reflected." A history of the Congo couldn't be reduced to "plutocracies perfumed with rosewater and punctuated with lovable anecdotes." Still, the inclusion of private archives could have offered a more "social history" and explained the different phases of the "African tragedy."⁷⁴

CORNET IN THE CONGO, ARCHIVES IN TERVUREN

Although Cornet kept an important collection of private archives in Tervuren, other institutes with "competing agendas,"⁷⁵ such as the Royal Museum of the Army and the Ministry of Colonies, rivaled it. In particular, most political and diplomatic documents, so highly prized by Cornet, were kept in the Ministry. Hence, Cornet lobbied to centralize colonial archives in Tervuren. He requested Schouteden and the new director, Frans M. Olbrechts, take steps to transfer the archives from the Ministry to the museum, where they would constitute "the supplement to the documentation we already possess."⁷⁶ The centralization would ease the logistics of scientific study and could offer the means to more efficiently counteract foreign scholarly criticism of Belgian colonization.

Cornet was supported by Robert S. Thomson and René-Jules Cornet (no relation). During his visit to the MPHSS Thomson explained how he had lost valuable time by running around between different institutes in Belgium. As Thomson was a great admirer of Leopold II, he considered Tervuren the ideal location for the centralization of colonial archives – a viewpoint gladly accepted by Frans Cornet: "Concerning the colonial Belgian archives, it is evident that the Museum of Belgian Congo must be chosen as the central depot."⁷⁷ According to René-Jules Cornet centralization in Tervuren was an urgent necessity because so many precious documents were in danger

⁷⁴ Cornet, 1946: 6. P. Burke, *The French historical revolution. The Annales School 1929-89*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

⁷⁵ Cooper and Stoler, 1997: 6.

⁷⁶ CA 1932-present, D15, Letter from Cornet to Schouteden, 10 January 1935.

⁷⁷ M. Luwel, *Inventaire des documents provenant de la mission Frantz Cornet au Congo (1948-49) et conservés au Musée royal de L'Afrique centrale à Tervuren*. Bruxelles: Académie royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1960: 3. Cornet, 1946: 7.

of being lost or destroyed. “We are afraid that the generations that follow us will accuse us of lethargy, apathy and negligence, of carelessness and indifference concerning the souvenirs, testimonies, and relics of those who have built the Belgian Congo.”⁷⁸ Centralization would turn Tervuren into a unique institute in the world. René-Jules Cornet even suggested again renaming the section, this time to “Archives of the Belgian Congo.” However, he also argued that the new section had to be led by a young doctor in history who could devote his whole life to its development, a clear critique of Frans Cornet with his master’s degree in commercial and consular sciences. Nevertheless, René-Jules and Frans Cornet did agree that the archives had to be kept in Tervuren and not in the Congo. Colonizers were often supporters of decentralization because it enabled collections to be kept in part in the colony. Frans Cornet, however, argued that valuable pieces were at great risk in Africa and might even disappear. Belgium offered the possibility of safe storage and provided well equipped libraries.

The urge to centralize was also the main motive for Cornet’s scientific mission to the Congo at the very end of his career. In 1948 Cornet was informed that important historical archives in Léopoldville were kept in “dusty galleries, moldy, becoming prey to the devouring teeth of rats and the scissors of insects.”⁷⁹ Urgent measures were needed. In a letter to Director Olbrechts, Cornet wrote that the archives had to be moved to Tervuren: “[...] if we don’t make an effort to save them, they are condemned to oblivion, even to destruction.”⁸⁰ Leopold II himself had burned part of the archives of the Congo Free State; Cornet argued that some documents could still be retrieved from colonial posts in the Congo.

After the approval of Olbrechts and Minister of Colonies Pierre Wigny, Cornet left for the colony and arrived by boat in Matadi on 19 September 1948.⁸¹ Along the way he shared a cabin with the chairman of the Baptist Missionary Society, an organization that would later offer collections to Cornet. In Matadi, Cornet met Olga Boone, a co-worker in the museum’s Ethnography Section. Cornet described the encounter as a meeting between a veteran and a greenhorn. They both took the “White Train” to Léopoldville, a revelation for Cornet. For the first time he saw the railroad he had studied for so long but only knew from photographs. The capital of the Belgian Congo also made quite an impression. ‘Léo is Knokke on a large scale – very artificial – they build big and everyone has a big car.’⁸²

In Léopoldville, plans were made to travel by boat, car and train to Kasai, Katanga, Kivu, Eastern Province, and Equateur.⁸³ Cornet would return to Léopoldville

⁷⁸ R.-J. Cornet, “Une grande œuvre: les archives du Congo belge.” *La Revue Coloniale Belge* 4(91): 450, 15 July 1949.

⁷⁹ CA 1932-present, S3, Letter from Cornet to Olbrechts, 10 April 1948.

⁸⁰ DA, Service intérieur, Letter from Cornet to Olbrechts, 10 April 1948.

⁸¹ Luwel, 1960: 4.

⁸² Knokke still is the most fashionable town at the Belgian seaside. “Le voyage de M. F. Cornet dans la Colonie.” *Le Courrier d’Afrique*, 28 September 1948.

⁸³ Cornet, 1949: 451.

in March 1949, two months after his official retirement.⁸⁴ Along the way, Cornet contacted colonial administrators, soldiers, missionaries, traders, and magistrates and collected maps, journals, archives, letters, books, photographs, and even ethnographic objects. The correspondence of the Governor General and the archives of the Baptist Missionary Society were among the most important archives. African oral history was not recorded.

Because Cornet was already retired during his mission, he never had the opportunity to actually study the archives he brought back from the Congo. Again, the gathering of collections was not followed by publishing research. Moreover, due to administrative complications, a significant number of documents was blocked in Léopoldville, where some resisted the centralization of archives in Belgium. The newly appointed archivist in the Belgian Congo began to tally the archives but never published an inventory. Some of the documents transferred to Belgium joined the archives of the Ministry of Colonies and were inventoried by Emile Van Grieken.⁸⁵ It was only in 1960 that Marcel Luwel published an inventory of the archives that had arrived in Tervuren.⁸⁶

MUSEUM AND MEMORY

The Moral, Political and Historical Sciences Section was housed at the top floor of the Museum of the Belgian Congo. The MPHSS organized exhibitions on the ground floor, making the museum a unique and complex site where scientists and the public interacted. Given that almost 100,000 adults and children visited the museum every year during the 1930s, the MPHSS played a decisive role in organizing official colonial propaganda. The museum, like the “Office colonial,” tried to counter (inter)national criticism of Leopold II and Belgian colonization. While the “other” was associated with the slave trade and violence, the “self” was associated with “pacification” and “progress.” The 1998 publication of *King Leopold’s Ghost* by Adam Hochschild and the RMCA’s 2005 exhibition *Memory of Congo. The Colonial Era* caused (inter)national upheaval among the general public, proving that colonial propaganda had long lasting effects.⁸⁷ While the museum public before the Second World War may have been under the impression that the institute in Tervuren

⁸⁴ “M. Frans Cornet au Katanga.” *L’Essor du Congo*, 7 December 1948. “M. Cornet à Baudoinville.” *L’Essor du Congo*, 3 January 1949.

⁸⁵ Luwel, 1960: 4. E. Van Grieken, “Mission Frans Cornet (1948-1949).” *Bulletin de l’Académie royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer. Nouvelle Série*, 4(4): 805-812, 1958. H. Legros and C. A. Keim, “Guide to African archives in Belgium.” *History in Africa*, 23: 401-409, 1996.

⁸⁶ Luwel, 1960.

⁸⁷ A. Hochschild, *King Leopold’s ghost: a story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. J.-L. Vellut (ed.), *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial*. Gent: Snoeck/RMCA, 2005.

formulated objective knowledge within its “permanent” exhibition, it later became clear that displays and labels were created by personnel with their own agendas, aspirations, and frustrations. Museum exhibitions and scientific insights were not formulated within a vacuum but rather influenced by personal contacts and conflicts.

Addressing collecting, research, and exhibiting together has made it possible to track changes in the “social life of things.” African utensils travelling to Europe were seen as “tourist art” or proof that Congolese were “susceptible to progress.” Personal diaries of colonial agents became valuable scientific documents for the study of the “heroic period” of Congolese colonial history. Guided by the motto “no documents, no history,” the head of the MPHSS began to gather archival material in Belgium and the Congo. Thanks to the work of Cornet and his successors, the Colonial History Section can now provide a wealth of data to present-day scholars. “No documents, no history” was also a statement that was applied by Cornet to Congolese history. Since written sources were lacking, the African past was regarded as the terrain of myths and legends. History began only with the arrival of Europeans in Africa. Since their written documents contained possible controversial elements, copies of the original diaries were censored before they were opened for public research.

This process of remembrance and forgetting also characterized the creation of exhibition rooms in which a rosy image of colonial history was presented. Conflict, illness, and death were hidden and only the positive accomplishments of the “mission civilisatrice (civilizing mission),” such as medical services, transport, and the “pacification” of the territory, were shown. Thanks to the “museum effect,” the exhibition became a place of both memory and amnesia.⁸⁸ Curators created a Congo that existed only in the imagination, a sort of ideal to pursue. The combination of “historical” and “unhistorical” attitudes led to the creation of “mythic fictions” and an “artistic history,” which offered an answer to the feeling of loss and dislocation caused by colonization.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ S. Alpers, “The museum as a way of seeing.” In *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display*, eds. I. Karp and S. D. Lavine. Washington/London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991: 25-32. D. Maleuvre, *Museum memories. History, technology, art*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999: 16.

⁸⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1951 [1874]: 9, 43-45. I would like to thank all my Colonial History Section colleagues for their useful help. Thanks also to Lee Gillette for reviewing the text and to Nathalie Minten, An Cardoen, Lutgard Kenis and Sophie de Ville of the Royal Museum for Central Africa and Bruno Mestdagh of the Cinematek in Brussels for their much appreciated technical support concerning the illustrations. This article is a result of the research project “Congo in Tervuren. A History of the Human Sciences and their Representations in the Royal Museum for Central Africa (1897-2010),” supported by Belgian Science Policy (BELSPO).

