Must Leopold Fall?

The Renovation of the AfricaMuseum and Belgium’s Place in International Debates on the Decolonisation of Public Heritage

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‘None of us starts with a clean slate but the historicity of the human condition also requires that practices of power and domination be renewed.’

Michel-Rolph Trouillot.

In December 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in the Brussels suburb of Tervuren reopened its doors to the public after five years of extensive renovations. Guido Gryseels, the director who oversaw the transformation of what had often been described as ‘Europe’s last unreconstructed museum of the colonial era,’ vaunted ‘the work of decolonisation’ realised through the renovation and expressed hope that it would ‘become a real space of contact and dialogue for all people truly interested in Africa.’ No one, including the museum’s leadership, would claim that the RMCA was starting with anything like a ‘clean slate.’ Indeed, the renovation had been premised in part on the idea that the RMCA needed to ‘shed its colonial image.’ But the extent to which the process and outcomes of the renovation represented a renewal, a reshaping, or a rejection of the ‘practices of power and domination’ that had long defined this most colonial of museums remains highly contested. The story of the RMCA’s transformation is illustrative not just of shifting and competing understandings of colonial pasts and presents in Belgium but also of broader international trends in the way institutions and societies grapple with empire and its legacies.

The institutional history of the RMCA and the ways in which it has always been both reflective and constitutive of broader attitudes to colonial pasts and presents in Belgium is the subject of a rich historiography. It has also been incorporated into broader comparative histories of the colonial museum within Europe. I do not intend to revisit that ground here. Instead, this chapter seeks to place the renovation and the critiques that followed into the context of broader evolution of international heritage practices by examining the chronologies of
change at the RMCA, considering how change was conceptualised by those leading the renovation and its critics, and finally, asking what future lies in store for the institution. In doing so, it seeks to move past longstanding narratives of exceptionality that have surrounded both Belgian attitudes to colonialism generally and the RMCA specifically to ask what lessons they can offer to heritage professionals, activists, historians, and engaged citizens in other parts of the world.

**Contested Chronologies of Change**

The reopening of the RMCA was by no means the only major event on the international heritage scene to mark the final weeks of 2018. On 21 November, the Senegalese essayist and scholar Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy launched their Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, calling for the widescale return of expropriated artefacts to Africa as a means to open a ‘pathway toward establishing new cultural relations based on a newly reflected upon ethical relation’. Two weeks later, on 6 December, the newly constructed Museum of Black Civilisations was inaugurated in Dakar, Senegal. Its director, the archaeologist Hamady Bocoum, promised that this avowedly transnational and Pan-African institution would ‘introduce a radical paradigm shift towards a new era of museum practice’, that would, he affirmed, ‘no longer content itself with the inherited institutions of colonialism’. These two interventions offered a bold decolonising vision of how the heritage of Africans and Afro-descendant peoples should be preserved, collected, curated, and interpreted. In contrast, the new and shiny RMCA that once aspired to be a leading exemplar of the post-colonial multicultural museum came under sustained criticism from scholars and activists as outdated and regressive as soon as it reopened its doors. What happened between 2005, when the museum’s leadership felt comfortable claiming that it was ‘a forerunner internationally’ and 2020, when its operational director acknowledged that ‘when societal demands change at a speed higher than the slow museum setup allows, the museum is always behind’. The story of the eclipsing of the RMCA’s renovation is one not just of an institutional incapacity to deliver profound change but also of the shifting definitions of change within the colonial museum over the last two decades.

The long overdue reforms at the RMCA that began at the turn of the millennium coincided with the high point of the influence of the so-called New Museology within colonial museums. The incorporation of theoretical insights into museum practice from the 1970s on led to a greater stress on institutional reflexivity within museums, as critical scholars and practitioners sought to deconstruct and move past old visions of the museum as an elite, authoritative, and mono-
lithic cultural institution. Although the New Museology embraced a range of sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary perspectives, it was defined by a broad commitment to transform the museum from a ‘site of determined edification’, reflecting the narratives of ruling elites, into a space of ‘educational engagement’ with diverse publics and histories. The social responsibility of museums to represent and reflect the lives of all in the communities they served became central to the rhetoric, if not always the practice, that emerged from the New Museology. This found concrete expression in the participatory methodologies that sought to engage with those sections of society from which museum collections originated, so-called ‘source communities’. While the New Museology presented challenges for all types of cultural institutions, it was particularly disruptive and potentially transformative for museums whose origins lay in the display of collections amassed through the exploitation of colonised populations.

By the time the RMCA was starting down the long path towards renovation, colonial museums across the Global North had already begun to deploy methodologies drawn from the New Museology to transform their exhibitions. One concept in particular came to embody this new vision for the old colonial museum: the ‘contact zone’. Originally articulated by the literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt, the term was popularised in the museum sector by the cultural historian James Clifford. Clifford argued that engagement with what are often called ‘source communities’ can transform museums into ‘places of hybrid possibility and political negotiation, sites of exclusion and struggle’. In the Cliffordian vision, the kind of mutual if uneven forms of reciprocity that arose from contact between institutions and ‘source communities’ opens a space in which the ‘aspirations of subaltern and dominant populations can be articulated’ alongside, intertwined with, and in conflict with one another. This concept became prominent in the rhetoric, if not always the praxis, surrounding the reinvention of colonial museums throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

The influence of the New Museology was clear to see in the language deployed and some of the structures created in the renovation plans for the RMCA. In their public presentation of the initial outlines of the renovation, leading members of the museum’s team asserted their belief that the application of ‘research and museological expertise’ could ‘transform the RMCA without compromising any of the institution’s attributes’. The fairly vague commitment outlined in the document to the RMCA ‘shedding its colonial identity, evolved over time to become a recognition that the new RMCA would have to engage in reflection about its ‘own history as a colonial institution’. The museum was, according to its leadership, to be reimagined as ‘a place of contact between peoples and cultures’ in which ‘African communities’ would be empowered ‘to voice themselves’.
This iteration of the museum as ‘contact zone’ would find expression in specific structures set up to formalise relationships with African diasporic communities in Belgium. Initially invited to participate in a work group, representatives of the diaspora were subsequently formally integrated into the museum’s structures in the COMRAF (Comité de concertation Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale-Associations Africaines), a consultative body bringing them together with RMCA staff members. The COMRAF helped organise a number of temporary exhibitions and events at the RMCA or with the institution’s support in the lead-up to the renovation. It also featured prominently in the museum’s promotion of the renovation process at national and international levels, solidifying the impression that the RMCA was transforming, through the application of practices integral to the New Museology, into a leading post-colonial museum.

Prior to the closure for renovation, the RMCA hosted a range of significant temporary exhibitions that each deployed elements of the New Museology to reinterpret the museum’s overtly colonial displays. These exhibitions hinted at the potential, the limits, and the contradictions at the heart of efforts to mobilise the New Museology to remake the colonial museum. In October 2000, the RMCA opened its first openly self-critical exhibition, entitled ‘Exit Congo Museum’. Ethnologist and curator Boris Wastiau focused on exposing the ways in which the provenance, cultural and geographical origins, symbolic and practical functions, and authorship of artefacts had been misrepresented in the museum’s displays and challenging the public to think through the broader power dynamics and colonial logics underpinning them. Interspersed among these new critical displays was a selection of contemporary art pieces, curated by Congolese artist Toma Muteba Luntumbue, that sought to ‘break the codes of hegemonic’ forms of representation within the museum. While this new departure was limited in scope and met with resistance among some of the RMCA staff, it did seem to offer a vision of how the museum could, through co-productive forms of curation, begin to deconstruct its own role in propagating racist and colonial ideas about Africa, past and present.

A subsequent exhibition in 2005, entitled ‘Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era’ and curated by historian Jean-Luc Vellut, was much less radical in its narrative but found a much wider audience. While the greater focus on the lived experience of Congolese under colonial rule was commended, some academics critiqued its ‘defensive’ narrative of atrocities that insisted on the importance of contextualisation and the distinction it drew between the Leopoldian regime and the subsequent Belgian administration. Here the museum struggled to reconcile what it saw as its mission to engage and educate, without alienating the broader Belgian public, with its commitment to a critical vision of the
museum past, exposing the tensions between the different priorities encoded within New Museology approaches. The controversies it generated reflected and fuelled a broader, activist-led interrogation of Belgium’s attitudes towards its colonial past that would have significant repercussions for the conception and reception of the renovation.\textsuperscript{29}

Finally, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Congolese independence, the RMCA hosted an exhibition entitled ‘Indépendance: Congolese Tell Stories of Fifty Years of Independence’, curated by the Afro-Belgian anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens. This exhibition was radical in its centring of Congolese perspectives and in its focus on interviews and popular cultural material produced by and for Congolese rather than the older types of ‘ethnographic’ objects traditionally valorised by the museum.\textsuperscript{30} Its curator has argued that, rather than fixating primarily on a denunciatory narrative of past colonial violence, the museum should dedicate itself to the promotion of African narratives as the best of form of restorative justice, ‘highlighting their artistic mastery, creativity, humanity, ingenuity, and resilience as actors in their own history and creators of their own cultures’.\textsuperscript{31} In doing so, she advocated a critical vision of the museum as ‘contact zone’, in line with Clifford’s original conception, that seeks to remake the museum by empowering those it once excluded and belittled to tell their own stories.\textsuperscript{32}

The hegemony of references to New Museology practices in conceptions of reform within the RMCA in this period is clear. The RMCA was variously reinvented in these exhibitions as a space for the interrogation of institutional complicity in colonial violence and the propagation of racism, a site for the education of the broader public on African pasts and presents, and a venue for the articulation of African visions of their own history. The museum leadership’s presentations of the renovation to scholarly audiences stressed each of these aspects, arguing that the combination of new museological approaches with the institution’s scientific expertise would transform a relic of pro-colonial museology into a model for the post-colonial museum. At no point in this initial period before the doors of the museum shut for the definitive renovation did the intellectual framework of decolonisation feature in the public discourse of the RMCA.\textsuperscript{33} The renovation was not conceived of as a ‘decolonisation’ of the institution but rather as a modernisation effort, one that would strip the displays of their overt racism; diversify the museum’s publics, staff, and collaborators; and ensure the institution was relevant to contemporary Belgian and African societies.

In his 2020 account of the renovation of the RMCA, the museum’s director of operations, Bruno Verbergt, rebuffed criticism of the minimal impact of decolonising perspectives on the new exhibition by arguing that such ideas were marginal at the time the renovation process had begun. There is, perhaps, a kernel of truth to his claim that the museum ‘had developed all its intentions
and concepts well before the terminology of, and academic, activist, and public pressure for, decolonization became as widespread as it is now.  

And yet, critiques calling for the decolonisation of museums and the epistemologies underpinning them had been around for decades. Writing in his famous *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues that Europe’s pride in its museums and their colonial objects was misplaced. It would have been ‘better if they had let those civilisations develop and flourish rather than offering up random limbs, dead limbs, duly labelled, for us to admire’. Césaire’s insistence that the history of colonialism is not one of ‘kilometres of roads, canals, and railways’, or indeed of museum collections amassed, but rather one of ‘societies emptied of themselves, cultures trampled underfoot […] extraordinary possibilities eviscerated’ would echo through broader appeals for cultural and intellectual decolonisation over the decades that followed.

These ‘extraordinary possibilities’ were of great interest to the scholars of the new field of decolonial studies that emerged, primarily from Latin America, in the 1990s and 2000s. They developed an analysis of the ‘coloniality of power’ in the contemporary world that challenged the universalism of Western modes of thought, highlighted the eradication of indigenous epistemes, and celebrated the potential of forms of living and thinking that exist, as far as possible, outside of, and often against, a Western modernity that is inextricably bound to colonial logics. Decolonial studies’ focus on the way in which colonialism was and is intrinsic to European modernity and its highlighting of the marginalisation of alternative systems of interpreting the world and the objects within it have clear resonances in debates around the decolonisation of the museum. Of course, decolonial approaches coexist, sometimes uneasily, with a whole range of pre-existing and evolving postcolonial critiques that also seek to challenge and undo colonial logics, whether in the museum or in society more broadly. These have all contributed to the growing calls for radical change to cultural institutions, especially colonial museums.

Finally, strands of both intellectual thought and praxis that have come into prominence in Africa itself in recent years, from the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa and beyond to Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe’s critiques of the necropolitics of the museum, have fuelled calls for a deeper interrogation of the coloniality of cultural institutions in the Global North and Global South. The fusion of these different strands of critique led to an increasing contestation within the heritage sector of the authority of Western epistemologies and of the potential of old participatory models of reform.

By the time the doors of the museum closed for the wholesale renovation, the approaches that had initially informed the planning stage of the renovation were increasingly questioned by heritage professionals. In particular, the dis-
tinction between the limited recalibration within institutions provided by New Museological concepts such as the museum as ‘contact zone’ and a more radical change delivered by a form of cultural ‘decolonisation’ became key. In her 2009 account of her participation in co-curation at the new National Museum of the American Indian in the United States, the Indigenous scholar Amy Lonetree welcomed the ‘important collaborative methodologies’ advanced by the museum but balked at the use of the language of ‘decolonisation’ to describe displays that ‘failed to tell the hard truths of colonisation and the genocidal acts that have been committed against Indigenous people’. Real change could not be effected without honesty about the pervasive violence of colonialism and its enduring legacies within the museum and society more broadly. Robin Boast’s 2011 article drew the attention of curators in Europe, including at least one staff member at the RMCA, to a range of critical perspectives on the co-option of the ‘contact zone’ concept by museums and their inattention to the ‘fundamental asymmetries’ inherent to the relationship between institutions and the communities whose heritage they detained and displayed. He argued that, for museums to transcend their coloniality, they would have to go beyond the ‘engagement’ advocated by the New Museology and recognise that the institutional conceptualisation, structures, and practices of the museum would have to be ‘completely redrafted’. Museums must ‘learn to let go of their resources, even at times of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control’. Well before the definitive closure of the RMCA for the renovation, prominent voices within the international heritage community were arguing that yielding authority was key to delivering radical change to the colonial museum. But would the leadership of the museum listen?

**Conceptualising Change at the RMCA**

At the heart of the dispute over both the processes and the results of the renovation is a fundamental disagreement over what change should look like, not just within the RMCA but within the colonial museum more broadly. While there was broad agreement that the RMCA’s openly pro-colonial displays would have to go, there was no consensus as to what would replace them and who would shape the new exhibition. The new displays and the discourse they generated would crystallise many of the tensions around the persistence of colonial pasts that were not necessarily specific to the RMCA or to the Belgian context. Here multiple competing visions of how the colonial museum should be remade were pitted against each other in arguments that resonate far beyond the palatial halls of the RMCA.
When presenting the plans for the new RMCA at an international academic conference in 2014, the museum’s director, Gryseels, outlined for his audience the key distinction between what he suggested was the ‘colonial’ museology that defined the museum pre-renovation and the ‘post-colonial’ model that it hoped to embody post-renovation. The principles he elaborated did advocate a real break with the museum’s openly colonialist museological practices, but for those who were unconvinced by the renovation, they were insufficiently radical to undo the colonial logics underpinning the institution. Firstly, the director committed to abandoning the ‘contrast between European “civilization” and African “primitiveness”’ and instead being guided by ‘a principled insistence on African cultures and an age-long history of cultural influence’. This did mark a significant rupture with past practice but, in the eyes of the critics of the renovation, fell short of the necessary challenge to the universality of Western epistemologies and interrogation of their use to represent African experiences, past and present.

His commitment to ending the ‘juxtaposition of timeless nature and culture’ in the representation of Africa and Africans and insisting on Africa’s ‘long and dynamic history’ was notable, but again, critics felt the renovation process insufficiently acknowledged Africans’ long history of studying, analysing, and representing their own societies. For Gryseels, the museum’s gaze would have to turn from ‘specimens and objects’ to African men and women. For the critics, the gaze itself was limiting and problematic; African men and women should be represented within the complexities of African societies.

While the new RMCA would shift from presenting ethnographic objects ‘on the basis of aesthetic and material criteria’ to telling ‘the story of their history, origin, use and meaning’, the director made no mention in his presentation of the question of future restitution, seen by many critics of the colonial museum as fundamental to establishing a new ethical relationship in international heritage. Finally, the new museum was to move away from ‘European representing Africans’ and instead prioritise ‘Africans representing themselves’. This, as we shall see, was one of the most criticised aspects of the renovation, as activists insisted that real change would mean Africans and members of the diaspora shaping the terms of their own representation. The tensions between these competing ideas about whether and how the museum could break free from the colonial logics that had long defined it would be reflected within the new exhibition spaces and the reaction they provoked.

The museum’s new ‘Ritual and Ceremonies’ display is emblematic of the broader conflict between rival visions of change within the colonial museum. Using the lens of anthropology, this room narrates the life journeys of the inhabitants of Central Africa by focusing on key rites of passage. The unabashedly racist language and openly exoticising imagery that had once been the
staple of the RMCA’s anthropological was now banished. The room includes direct testimonies from residents of region about their experiences of and relationships with culturally specific rituals and ceremonies. It also features popular cultural and artistic representations of the role these rites occupy in contemporary Congolese society. Thus, the display seems to tick most of the boxes in the ‘post-colonial’ museum column suggested by the director.

However, this same display has been the subject of extensive critique from the advocates of a radical decolonisation of the museum. The RMCA’s insistence on viewing the inhabitants of Central Africa through the ‘prism of rituals and ceremonies’ is, as Congolese historian Elikia M’Bokolo puts it, ‘the product of a colonial gaze’, perpetuating a long tradition of anthropological fetishisation of African cultural practices. Moreover, the fact that the displays combine testimonies and cultural production from contemporary Central Africa, a welcome addition to the museum, with artefacts from the collection accumulated during the colonial period, leads to a dangerous flattening of chronologies in the exhibition. The old chronopolitics that openly asserted African backwardness may be gone, but the new displays, in their focus on rituals, imply a timelessness to African lives, presenting them as bound to ancient (albeit evolving) traditions but unmoored from contemporary political, social, and economic realities. Central Africans remain the subject of the anthropological gaze.

Similar tensions are also evident in the reactions the new exhibition’s historical narrative has provoked. The museum now openly acknowledges the violence underpinning the colonial project, displaying objects of torture and including accounts of the exploitation and brutality that defined experiences of Belgian colonial rule. Its ‘Representations’ corner interrogates the way Africans have been portrayed in European narratives, showing a degree of institutional reflexivity and awareness of the links between contemporary racism and colonialism. The museum’s new display includes some information on Central Africa’s precolonial past and the history of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda after the formal end of colonialism, pointing the public to African histories prior to and after colonisation. Prominent African experts offer critical assessments of the colonial period and its longer legacies in African societies, an example of what the museum director would likely dub ‘Africans representing themselves’. Here again we see how the key categories identified by Gryseels have shaped the new exhibition.

However, both the historical narrative promoted within the displays and the way the museum yields its authority to legitimise it remain deeply controversial. In a break with the institutional reflexivity advocated by the New Museology, one of the exhibit panels in the history section confidently asserts that ‘historians share fundamentally the same reconstruction and narrative of the colonial past’. This is contrasted with the ‘very controversial’ debate around the colonial
period in Belgian society more broadly, underlining of the museum’s self-conception as a ‘positivist’ institution telling a ‘truth that ought to be neutral’. Here we can see how even the attenuated authority conferred on the museum by New Museology approaches proves too restrictive and the RMCA reverts to type by affirming its academic authority over Central African pasts and presents. Indeed, the analysis offered by critical African voices within the exhibition itself, accessible only to the dedicated visitor who is willing to watch all the media presentations, contradict the claim in the display, yet their expertise does not win them a place among the ‘historians’ described in the panel. This is one of a number of examples throughout the exhibition where the commitment of the RMCA leadership to what they considered to be ‘scientific views’ over ‘personal opinions’ limited their capacity to engage in the sort of critical analysis necessary for the delivery of the post-colonial museum they themselves claimed to envision, let alone the decolonised museum their critics advocate.

The exhibition may highlight a range of gross acts of violence perpetrated by the Leopoldian and, to a lesser extent, Belgian administration in Congo, but it eschews a structural analysis that explains how they relate to the social and cultural project of colonialism, in which the museum itself is enmeshed. The positive presentation of colonial healthcare within the displays reinforces the idea that different elements of the colonial project can be disaggregated from each other, a logic that is both heavily contested among historians and seems to underpin the broader renovation project of the museum. Whereas the museum is conscious of the need to acknowledge some of the violence perpetrated during the colonial period, it is largely silent on the continued interference of the Belgian state and international corporations in the region after formal decolonisation. Instead, we are told that ‘the post-colonial history of Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda is dominated by complex, tragic, and controversial conflicts’ whose sole relationship to Belgium seems to be that they occasionally feature in ‘the Belgian Press’. The need for ‘balance’, seen as a marker of positivist, fact-based narratives of the colonial past, seems not to apply to the post-colonial period.

The same persistence of colonial practices would be central to critiques of the museum’s collaboration with the Afro-Belgian diaspora. When the RMCA reopened its doors to the public in December 2018, the otherwise celebratory press release acknowledged the ongoing tensions with the representatives of the diaspora community. The euphemistic claim that ‘despite our best intentions, cooperation has not always been easy’ offered little insight into how and why the RMCA’s much-vaunted collaborative model had failed. The museum’s reliance on and public trumpeting of participatory methods seems to have been completely impervious to the increasing body of scholarship and praxis that questioned the limitations of a ‘contact zone’ model of collaboration for the
colonial museum. In 2014, six expert representatives were nominated by the COMRAF to take a more active (though still not clearly delineated) role in the renovation. The informality of this procedure, done without a public call, coupled with remuneration packages below typical rates for experts, called into question the value the RMCA would assign to their input. That this new subgroup had no official title – variously called the Group of 6, the Diaspora Group, or the Diaspora – was indicative of the ambiguity surrounding its role. The Group’s initial plans to launch a consultative process involving international experts co-selected with the museum’s administration were scotched by the leadership, who had already laid down the parameters of the renovation themselves. The diasporic experts were to serve as consultants, passive actors in the renovation who could offer opinions but not make decisions. Collaboration would take place on the RMCA’s terms.

The status of curatorial consultants, and the oft precarious conditions of employment and limited powers of decision-making that came with it, had been central to the way institutions conceived of community co-curation in the wake of the New Museology. However, by the time the RMCA’s renovation was under way, this model was increasingly contested by experts from source communities. In her November 2017 article, ‘The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised,’ the independent scholar Sumaya Kassim recounted her experience as a curator brought in to address the colonial history of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The stress she placed on the emotional labour, the precarity of employment, and the limited agency of the team of co-curators chimes directly with the accounts of some of the COMRAF’s experts. Indeed, in her scathing assessment of the consultation process for the renovation of the RMCA, the COMRAF expert and art historian Anne Wetsi Mpoma approvingly quoted Kassim’s assertion that ‘decolonising is deeper than just being represented.’ In her critical assessment of the renovated museum, the Afro-Belgian anthropologist and fellow Group of Six member Gratia Pungu went as far as to suggest that the opacity of the operation of the renovation and its marginalisation of the consultants to ‘might even recall the way the “native” subjects were treated in the colonial era.’ When the representatives asked the RMCA to formalise the position of experts from the diaspora into the future by providing an office and an official status in the museum once it was reopened, they were rebuffed by the director, who informed the Group that if the conditions under which they were working were unsatisfactory, he could always find other African partners. This assertion of power led to a definitive rupture and saw the withdrawal of the Group from the process, meaning that the participative methodologies were abandoned in the final stages of the renovation. The museum’s vision of an ill-defined ‘consultative and to a certain extent also co-creative’ role, couched
in the language if not the practice of the New Museology, proved incompatible with the Group's call for a fundamental redistribution of power and resources rooted in a radical vision of the decolonising museum.\textsuperscript{64}

The museum's insistence on maintaining its monopoly on decision-making was reflective of its commitment to its own epistemic authority. The leadership's resistance to yielding control to and embracing the suggestions of the Group was, in part, due to a narrow and exclusionary understanding of the concept of 'expertise'. Although the highly qualified members of the Group had specialist expertise accredited by Western institutions, they were understood to be providing only 'sensitivity expertise' within the renovation process.\textsuperscript{65}

The curatorial authority of the RMCA's in-house experts was left completely intact, and the Groups' critiques of the enduring coloniality of the displays were largely ignored.\textsuperscript{66} Their role, it seemed, was to adjudicate whether displays were openly racist or not, not to expose and undo enduring colonial logics within the exhibit. Here we can see the sharp contrast between 'contact zone' models of collaboration, which 'appropriate resources that are necessary for the academy' and ignore those 'that were not necessary', and a more radical form of change, 'decolonising the museum', which grapples with the broader coloniality of the museum as an institution.\textsuperscript{67}

Ultimately, activists outside the museum and many of those working within the COMRAF and the Group of Six came to see the process as an 'instrumentalisation of black bodies' to obscure the enduring 'coloniality of the institution'.\textsuperscript{68}

The RMCA's commitment to asserting its institutional authority was perhaps most evident in its attitude towards its ownership of and control over the items in the collection acquired through acts of violence and exploitation in the former colonies. A central axis of the project had been to transform the institution's collection from the booty of colonial conquest and exploitation into what the new displays called the 'heritage of humanity' by using the frameworks of the New Museology to recontextualise and revalorise the collection. The museum was to move away from the ahistorical colonial models of display that grouped items by their aesthetic qualities and instead focus on the cultural contexts in which they were produced; their cultural, social, and economic significance; and their use within their society of origin. The end result, like many other applications of New Museology principles to the new exhibit, is inconsistent and incoherent. The new 'Unrivalled Art' exhibit celebrates the ingenuity of African cultural production but relies on an 'old-fashioned display of objects as masterpieces' that elevates their aesthetic significance over their cultural, social, or spiritual meanings.\textsuperscript{69} Likewise, the museum's narrative of the origins of its collection is uneven throughout the renovated displays. While in some places, the expropriation that defined the acquisition of artefacts is openly acknowledged, elsewhere
euphemisms such as ‘collected by’, ‘originating from’, or ‘acquired in’ obscure the true nature of collection processes. This is true even in cases, such as that of the *nkisi nkondi* associated with Alexandre Delcommune, where staff at the RMCA have done extensive research on the particular history of plunder that led to the artefact’s incorporation into the collection. Here, the imperative to recast the collection as a part of a universal and global culture that the museum had every right to showcase to a Belgian public won out over its supposed commitment to institutional reflexivity and interrogation of the museum’s colonial past.

The final stages of the renovation coincided with a resurgence in claims for the restitution of artefacts acquired in the coercive context of the colonial system both within Belgian society and across the Global North more broadly. Congolese nationalists had called for the return of cultural heritage in the dying days of Belgian rule in Congo while the Mobutu regime had successfully secured the return of a limited number of artefacts from the RMCA’s collections to bolster its claim to embody Zairian *authenticité*. As Sarah Van Beurden has shown, the museum (and the Belgian state) agreed to the return of these artefacts, the majority of which had only recently arrived in Belgium from the collections of museums in the colony itself, only because their transfer was deemed a ‘gift’, not an act of restitution. The museum’s insistence on its authority over its collections would persist during the renovation and after the reopening, even in the face of increasing contestation. The publication of an open letter by Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, president of the anti-racist activist organisation BAMKO-CRAN, denouncing the exploitative forms of collaboration proposed by the RMCA and calling for a new restitution programme opened a heated debate in Belgian society. Critical voices within the museum expressed support for the idea that the legal frameworks of ownership should not trump the ‘undeniable moral argument in favour of restitution’. The museum leadership was less committal, placing itself in the camp of the restitution sceptics, alongside figures like Tristam Hunt of the Victoria and Albert Museum and Wiebke Ahrndt of the German Overseas Museum, who defended a supposedly universal model of heritage. Gryseels rejected the idea ‘of the return of the totality’ of the museum’s collections, citing the lack of demand from African countries and the ‘catastrophic’ political situation of states like Congo where ‘nothing works’. He evoked a previous ‘bad experience’ of restitution when artefacts were returned to Mobutu’s Zaire and ended up on the black market. Here, the museum director deployed what Achille Mbembe has described as ‘the strategies of obfuscation used by those who are convinced […] that the conqueror is always right and that the pillaged booty is his just reward’. While he did concede that he would consider the return of ‘certain masterpieces of symbolic value’ to an institution ‘with good conditions of security and conser-
vation', Gryseels, it seemed, believed that the collection rightfully belonged in Brussels and any future restitution, however minor, should be in the gift of the administrators of the RMCA.\textsuperscript{78}

Ultimately, the assertion of institutional authority – authority of episteme, of decision-making, and of ownership – became the focal point for critiques of the renovation of the RMCA. The (often uneven) application of methodologies from the New Museology did change both the displays and the narrative presented to the public in the RMCA, but the extent to which this change represented a real rupture with the institution’s colonial past is very much disputed. While the renovation had been designed to help the museum ‘shed its colonial image’, significant sections of Belgian society and the broader international heritage sector had come to embrace a much more profound vision of transformation within the colonial museum by the time the RMCA’s doors reopened. The enduring coloniality of the discourses of knowledge it deployed to interpret its collections, the structures it used to govern the participation of diaspora communities in the renovation, and its attitudes towards the ownership of the artefacts it displayed meant that the RMCA’s renovation did not rise to this new challenge. The whole process had represented a renewal and not a rejection of the ‘practices of power and domination’ that had always defined the institution.

**Conclusion**

The story of the RMCA’s renovation shines a light on the shifting norms within both Belgian society and the international heritage sector when it comes to grappling with the legacies of colonialism. In a context where statues of King Leopold II were being toppled by crowds or removed by municipalities across Belgium and European governments and cultural institutions were gradually adopting restitution policies, the new RMCA increasingly looked out of date. The renovation seemed to have implemented yesterday’s changes for tomorrow’s museum. The leadership’s efforts to recast the renovation as the beginning of a long process of ‘decolonisation’ showed an awareness of this broader cultural shift and an attempt to respond to it rhetorically, if not in praxis.\textsuperscript{79} However, ascribing the shortcomings of the renovation to the inability of the ‘slow museum’ to adapt to shifts in museological practice and societal attitudes obscures the broader structural and methodological pitfalls that dogged the process.\textsuperscript{80} The fact that the museum leadership was not cognisant of the rise of radical conceptions of decolonisation was not the cause of the RMCA’s difficulties but rather a symptom of the broader and enduring coloniality that defined the institution and would hamper efforts to effect radical change. As long as the
renovation was designed, in the words of its director and senior staff members, to ‘transform the RMCA without compromising any of the institution’s attributes’, its capacity to transcend the institution’s long and deep-seated entanglement with the colonial project was limited. Where the rhetoric and, to a lesser extent the practices, of the New Museology promised to rid the museum of its openly pro-colonial and racist discourses, they could not, and did not, deliver the fundamental change the museum’s critics desired.

The RMCA’s renovation thus serves as a cautionary tale of the limits of the types of change that can be realised within the colonial museum by embracing the language and praxis of the New Museology. The imperative towards institutional reflexivity, the diversification of voices and narratives within the displays, and forms of co-production, however limited, did leave a positive mark on the new RMCA. The critical commentary on colonial violence and its legacies, the integration of popular cultural production from Central Africa, the presence of African expert and lay voices in multimedia displays, and the interventions from African and diasporic artists in parts of the new exhibition captured some of the transformative potential that had been shown in the preceding temporary exhibitions. The uneven application of these museological interventions throughout the new displays gave rise to what even the museum’s director recognised was a disjointed narrative. However, the main problem with the renovation was not the inconsistent implementation of New Museological practices but rather the belief, whether sincere or cynical, among the RMCA leadership that a combination of the insights of the New Museology with the institution’s scientific expertise was sufficient to free the museum from the shackles of its coloniality. While many of the concepts and practices associated with the New Museology, including the crucial notion of the ‘contact zone’, are grounded in drawing attention to and seeking to mitigate the unequal power dynamics within the museum, they have increasingly been ‘used instrumentally as a means of masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases’. This seems to hold true in the case of the RMCA, where, for all the leadership’s trumpeting of its embrace of New Museological practices, there was no real reckoning with the enduring coloniality of the epistemologies, the structures, and the power dynamics that defined the museum in the past and the present.

Since the RMCA reopened, the leadership has embraced the language of decolonisation, insisting that the renovation marked the beginning of a ‘transition process’ of indeterminate length that will eventually transform the museum. For this rhetorical shift to have any practical meaning, the institution must show itself willing to yield some of its authority and engage in a more-than-superficial interrogation of its complicities, past and present, in perpetuating the logics of colonialism in the narrative of its displays, in its collaborative practices, and in
its governance of its collections. On this final point, pressure within Belgian society and the broader international heritage community has already led to change within the RMCA. The publication of a report in June 2021 by an independent group of experts, including some professionals who work at the RMCA and members of the COMRAF, advocating for a proactive policy of restitution of heritage acquired in the coercive context of colonial rule fuelled calls for a shift in policy. The announcement in early July 2021 that the Belgian state was committing to the principle of restitution of artefacts acquired ‘by force and by violence in illegitimate conditions’ met with reactions ranging from enthusiasm to hostility within the museum. Director Gryseels underlined his openness to future restitution, and while he highlighted the practical obstacles that might postpone the process, his acknowledgement that the destiny of these objects post-restitution is a matter for the Congolese alone is an important step towards the kind of renunciation of authority required to decolonise the museum. We have yet, however, to see the kind of critical engagement with decolonising activists and methodologies that has characterised recent practice across Belgium’s northern border in the former Dutch colonial Tropenmuseum, where the exhibition’s critics were empowered to reimagine the displays. Nor have we seen the RMCA leadership embrace ‘the idea of decolonizing,’ in the words of Wayne Modest, head of the Tropenmuseum’s Research Centre for Material Culture, ‘as a commitment to the labour to undo […] an unravelling, or reorganization, or rethinking, a disintegration’ of the museum as a colonial institution. As long as its institutional authority remains intact, the museum cannot be said to have begun the process of decolonisation.

The key lesson to be drawn from the story of the RMCA’s renovation is that the end goal of processes of grappling with the impact of colonialism across cultural institutions can no longer be the preservation of the institution in the face of shifting societal and museological norms. Instead, the priority must be given to building a new and ethical relationship to the representation, interpretation, and narration of African pasts and presents. This requires a willingness to relinquish control over the systems of knowledge through which African and diasporic experiences are refracted, as well as the authority, institutional and epistemic, to shape their narration, and the collections of objects used to represent them. This type of open-ended and radical programme of change is disruptive, potentially even destructive, to institutions wedded to old structures of governmentality rooted in the colonial past and to neoliberal goal-oriented forms of management embedded in neocolonial presents. Yet the prospect of forging a new and truly universal cultural heritage through a profound rupture with the coloniality of the past and present is surely worth exploring for the RMCA and other institutions in the Global North.
Notes

18. Ibid., p. 218.
20. Ibid., p. 645.
24. Ibid.
32. Ibid., p. 94.
33. The concept of ‘decolonisation’ as a cultural process or museological strategy does not appear in the museum’s annual reports until 2016. Reports are available from 2002 onwards on the museum’s website: https://www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/annual_reports [accessed 01/06/2021].
36. Ibid., p.13.
42. The article is mentioned in Ceuppens, ‘From Colonial Subjects/Objects’, p. 95.
44. Ibid., p. 67.
58. Gratia Pungu, ‘N’est pas post-colonial qui veut… la postcolonie, une alternative muséale utopique’, https://624706d-5149-4618-88b2-ac2f6c6e6fad.filesusr.com/ugd/3d95e3_c54f44132157448283e04058bc8b7e.pdf [accessed 04 May 2021].
64. Verbergt, ‘Transitioning the Museum’, p. 163.
68. Sarah Demart, ‘Resisting Extraction Politics: Afro-Belgian Claims, Women’s Activism, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa’, in Across
Anthropology, ed. by van Oswald and Tinius, pp. 143–72, p. 149.


70. Ibid.


72. Ibid., p. 158.

73. Robert, ‘Lettre ouverte’.


82. Lismond-Mertes, “Nous connaissons un succès spectaculaire”, p. 29.


87. Ibid.

