

CULTURE

Congolese Art in Full Color

'Beauté Congo' at Paris's Fondation Cartier is a treat

BY TOBIAS GREY

THERE IS ONLY the most fleeting sense of a Conradian heart of darkness in "Beauté Congo—1926-2015—Congo Kitoko," the Fondation Cartier's sparkling new show of modern and contemporary Congolese art. The exhibition, which opens in Paris tomorrow and runs through Nov. 15, is a showcase of popular art, neither stiffly academic nor fashioned by European tradition—one that reflects

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the buoyant resilience of the Congolese character, which refuses to dwell on a grisly colonial past.

Curated by Frenchman André Magnin—who for the past 30 years has been instrumental in introducing contemporary African artists to European audiences—the show's scope is ambitious, spanning 90 years and featuring 350 paintings, photographs, and sculptures from around 40 Congolese artists.

"I wanted to tell the story of 90 years of Congolese art, which has always been described partially, and was visually familiar but only fragmentarily until now," explains Mr. Magnin.

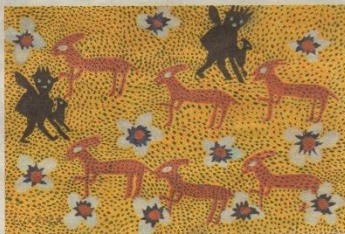
The show, laid out in reverse chronological order, begins on the ground floor with work by newer artists such as the EZA POSSIBLES collective, established in 2003 in Kinshasa, and J.P. Mika.

Mr. Mika, who was born in Kinshasa in 1980, is part of a new generation of artists whose narrative, figurative paintings are inspired by the colorful exuberance and dandyish demeanor of Congolese street life. His recent paintings, on patterned fabrics, take their inspiration from the dynamic composition of African photographic studio portraits of the 1960s.

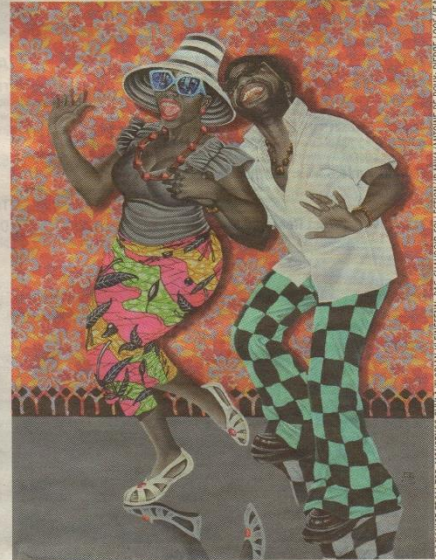
The artist, a graduate of Kinshasa's Académie des Beaux-Arts, which has existed in various guises since 1943, received additional training from Chéri Chérin. Along with Chéri Samba, Mr. Chérin is one of the leading lights of the self-avowed generation of "popular painters" who began to develop their politically aware cartoonish style, mixing text and images, in the 1980s.

Both artists, who started out making commercial billboards, have several paintings on display, including a denunciatory portrait by Mr. Samba of one of his sons dressed as a boy soldier, hands held high in the air.

In the basement is a series of black and white photographs by Jean Depara, who was born in An-



BOLD MOVES
Clockwise from top, Monsengo Shula, 'Ata Ndele Mokili Ekobaluka (Tôt ou tard le monde changera),' 2014; J.P. Mika, 'Kiese na Kiese,' 2014; Jean-Bosco Kamba, 'Untitled,' 1958; Lukanga, 'Untitled,' c. 1950; Mode Muntu, 'Le Calendrier lunaire Luba,' 1979



gola but went into exile in what was then the Belgian Congo in 1948. Mr. Depara, who died in 1997, left behind an extraordinary collection of photo-reportage depicting Kinshasa before and after independence. Particularly striking are his images of the "Bills," young Congolese hoodlums from working-class neighborhoods who, in the 1950s, dressed in the style of their American Western heroes.

In the same room is a remarkably intricate construction of a cardboard city by Bodys Isek

Kingelez, who became famous for his cardboard models of imaginary buildings. From 1992 until his death this year, he conjured up entire cities based on the kind of utopian designs he dreamt of being built.

But perhaps the greatest discovery of this entrancing exhibition is to be made in the next-door room, where vibrant Congolese paintings from the first half of the 20th century are on display. It is something of a shock to stumble on the geometric paintings by Congolese artist

Djilatendo from the 1920s to '30s and realize how thoroughly modern they still are.

Very little is known about Mr. Djilatendo's life and work other than that he was a tailor by profession and was inspired by the work of local carpet weavers to produce his geometric panels. He and Albert Lubaki, another early artist on display, were encouraged by a Belgian administrator, Georges Thiry, who supplied them with paints and paper to produce figurative work of

animals and village life.

The simple lines and bold use of color in an untitled snake painting from 1931 by Djilatendo call to mind the red fish paintings Matisse did in Morocco from 1911 to '12. Mr. Magnin, however, is keen to stress that any similarities are coincidental, as it is highly unlikely that Djilatendo had ever come across Matisse's art before. The comfort is knowing that, without the need for any introductions, the innate elegance of one artist later found its echo in another.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MONSENGO SHULA/ART COLLECTION; J.P. MIKA/ART COLLECTION; JEAN-BOSCO KAMBA/MICHEL DE PLACEN; LUKANGA; MODE MUNTU; 'LE CALENDRIER LUNAIRE LUBA' DE PLACEN