

Presseinformation

Museum am Rothenbaum

Rothenbaumchaussee 64 | 20148 Hamburg Germany | markk-hamburg.de

Bakuba Art - Geometry of Life

March 7 to August 3, 2025

The MARKK is showing outstanding works from the former Kuba kingdom in the Kasai region of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo. One focus lies on textile works made from raffia palm fibers. Geometric patterns run through the works, filling the space with their ramifications and inviting visitors to explore the cultural landscape of the Kuba kingdom. The term "Bakuba", coined by the neighboring Luba, refers to the inhabitants of the kingdom and means "people of lightning". The kingdom itself is known for its rich artistic and spiritual heritage and is located in the southwest of today's Democratic Republic of Congo. Over a hundred historical and contemporary exhibits offer a multi-layered insight into the history and cultural expressions of the region. In addition to the raffia textiles, the exhibition also includes everyday objects and historical ceremonial masks. These cultural assets invite visitors on a visual journey through a variety of geometric patterns that are characterized by extraordinary aesthetic freedom. The motifs are much more than mere decoration - they have a specific cultural meaning, tell stories and provide an insight into the Cuban understanding of the world.

The historical artifacts from the MARKK collections, which have rarely been shown or studied to date, were acquired by the German Africanist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) on his first African research and collecting trip from 1904 to 1906 in the colonial Congo state, which was owned by the Belgian King Leopold II. The curators Oussounou Abdel-Aziz Sandja and Kabila Kyowa Stéphane critically reflect on and reclassify this acquisition context. The MARKK houses around 26,000 African artifacts from Frobenius' deliveries, including around 9,700 from the Kasai region. The then "Museum für Völkerkunde" (now MARKK), under the direction of Georg Thilenius, pursued an active acquisition policy aimed at acquiring large numbers of so-called "ethnographic objects" - a constructed foreign designation that robbed a wide variety of artworks and everyday objects of their specific meaning - through purchases and intermediaries. During Frobenius' expedition, King Nyim Kot aPe (reigned 1902-1916) was the regent of the Cuban kingdom. This period was marked by forced labour in rubber mining, organized by the Belgian Compagnie du Kasai, and by revolts by the Cubans against the Belgian colonial regime. The brutal suppression of the revolts by colonial troops led to devastation, famine and epidemics. It was against this backdrop that Frobenius procured the cultural assets that are now the focus of the exhibition. Frobenius published a report on his journey, which documents the power relations between the Belgian colonial administration and the Cuban kingdom and offers insights into the background to the acquisition.

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The graphic novel created for the project by Congolese artist Dr. Sixte Kakinda, which is presented on a large scale in the exhibition, refers to Frobenius' travel notes. Using the fictional character Super Kadogo, Kakinda unfolds the perspective of subsequent generations on the events of the time that led to the dislocation of Congolese cultural assets.

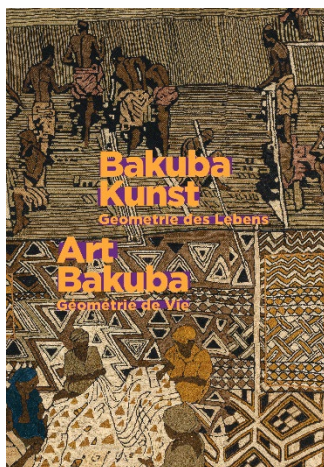
Through research stays in Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, Ilebo and Mushenge, which Kabila Kyowa Stéphane, Fellow of the Gerda Henkel Foundation at MARKK, carried out in the summer of 2024, artists, curators, researchers and civil society actors there were able to reflect on the historical works in joint discussions.

The exhibition also focuses on contemporary raffia textile works by artists from Ilebo who have joined forces to form the "Futur-Velours.com" cooperative. Their works combine the rich heritage of raffia textile art with modern artistic and design practices. Among other things, they deal with the Belgian colonial period and are thus also an expression of the reception of this period in the Congo. MARKK was able to acquire six outstanding works through the Hamburg Art Collections Foundation. The artist Dr. Fabian Czolbe created a sound installation for the exhibition that highlights the royal songs of the Kuba and lends the exhibited masks a lively presence.

The exhibition "Bakuba Art - Geometry of Life" aims not only to open a window on the historical past of the Kuba, but also to shed light on the importance of preserving the ecological environment in local African communities, where artistic creativity and daily life are inextricably linked.

Through interdisciplinary collaboration, the exhibition makes a valuable contribution to the recovery of Cuban cultural knowledge and the process of reappropriating lost art history.

Exhibition catalog:



Bakuba Art – Geometry of Life

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Oussounou Abdel-Aziz Sandja, Kabila Kyowa Stéphane

Contributions from: Bren Heymans, Sixte Kakinda, Barbara Plankensteiner, Oussounou Abdel-Aziz Sandja, Kabila Kyowa Stéphane

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