
African art in Brussels

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This article sketches the primarily African tribal art scene in Brussels, a former colonial metropole, and its emergence in the course of the twentieth century. It is based on a number of formal interviews and frequent informal contacts with Belgian and some foreign dealers, a close monitoring of the goings-on in and around the Brussels tribal art galleries since 1995, archival and historical research, and the sparse scholarship available on this particular subject.

Many hundreds of Belgian and foreign collectors of ethnographics regularly satisfy their hunger by visiting a number of galleries specializing in *art tribal*, *primitieve kunst* or *art premier*, around the Grote Zavel square (Place du Grand Sablon) in the centre of the bilingual Belgian capital. Several dozen dealers do business around the Grote Zavel, either through galleries or as *marchand en chambre* – behind closed doors. Some of them live in Antwerp or in the provinces, but for them too the capital is where it happens. A few thousand of collectors and foreign dealers visit the yearly Grote Zavel ‘open days’ in June, when some twenty-five local galleries and an equal number of foreign

dealers, hosted by them, show their treasures (*Illus. 1*). This has been a yearly manifestation of the Belgian Association of Dealers in Tribal Art (BADNEA), since 1990.

That the following look behind the scenes of the Belgian tribal art market (cf. MacClancy 1988 on Great Britain) deals only with a small part of the history of western dealings with ethnographics becomes clear when glancing through *Who = Who in African Art*, a reference work which alphabetically lists and shortly describes no less than twelve thousand twentieth-century dealers, collectors, scholars, curators, consultants, explorers, missionaries, artists, auction experts and other individuals who somehow have, or have had, something to do with African art (Van Rijn 1999). On the other hand, Belgium was the main channel through which the fabulously prolific and beautiful ritual art from the Belgian Congo and other parts of Africa reached museums, collectors and auctions in north-atlantic societies, and is presently third in rank among the global centres of tribal art trade, after Paris and New York. In that respect, this small country’s tribal art scene is not so insignificant.



Illus. 1. An Austrian and an American dealer in the latter's stand in Galerie Ambre, at the yearly 'open days' of the Grote Zavel tribal art galleries in Brussels, June 1997. They are discussing the double-faced Bembe (Eastern Congo) helmet mask on the pedestal. Photo Ph. Konzett, Vienna.

The colonial period

A few kilometres to the East of the Grote Zavel, at Tervuren, is the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden Afrika, a spin-off of the 1897 international exhibition there, with collections from that area that are unequalled anywhere in the world. Some 250,000 items cover more than a hundred and fifty ethnic groups – Vili, Luena, Kuba, Lega, Mangbetu, Ngbaka, and so on – in the Congo basin, each with its own art style. Well-known specialists in the ethnography and material culture of that area such as Joseph Maes, Frans Olbrechts, Albert Maesen and Huguette Van Geluwe were attached to the museum.¹ The other specialized ethnographic museum in Belgium is the much smaller Etnografisch Museum Antwerpen, which was formally established in 1952 on the basis of ethnographics held by the city of Antwerp in an earlier museum, the Vleeschhuis, and has some 20,000 artifacts from all over the world in its charge. Missionary museums or missionary collections were put together in this predominantly Roman-Catholic country by, among others, the Jesuits in Heverlee, the Holy Cross Fathers in Diest, the White Fathers in Mechelen and Antwerp, the Redemptorists in Antwerp, the Scheut Fathers in Brussels, and the Capucins in Izechem.² All these collections are part of the legacy of the Belgian colonial activities in Central Africa, which ended at the beginning of the 1960s.

Since about 1920, there have been many small exhibitions

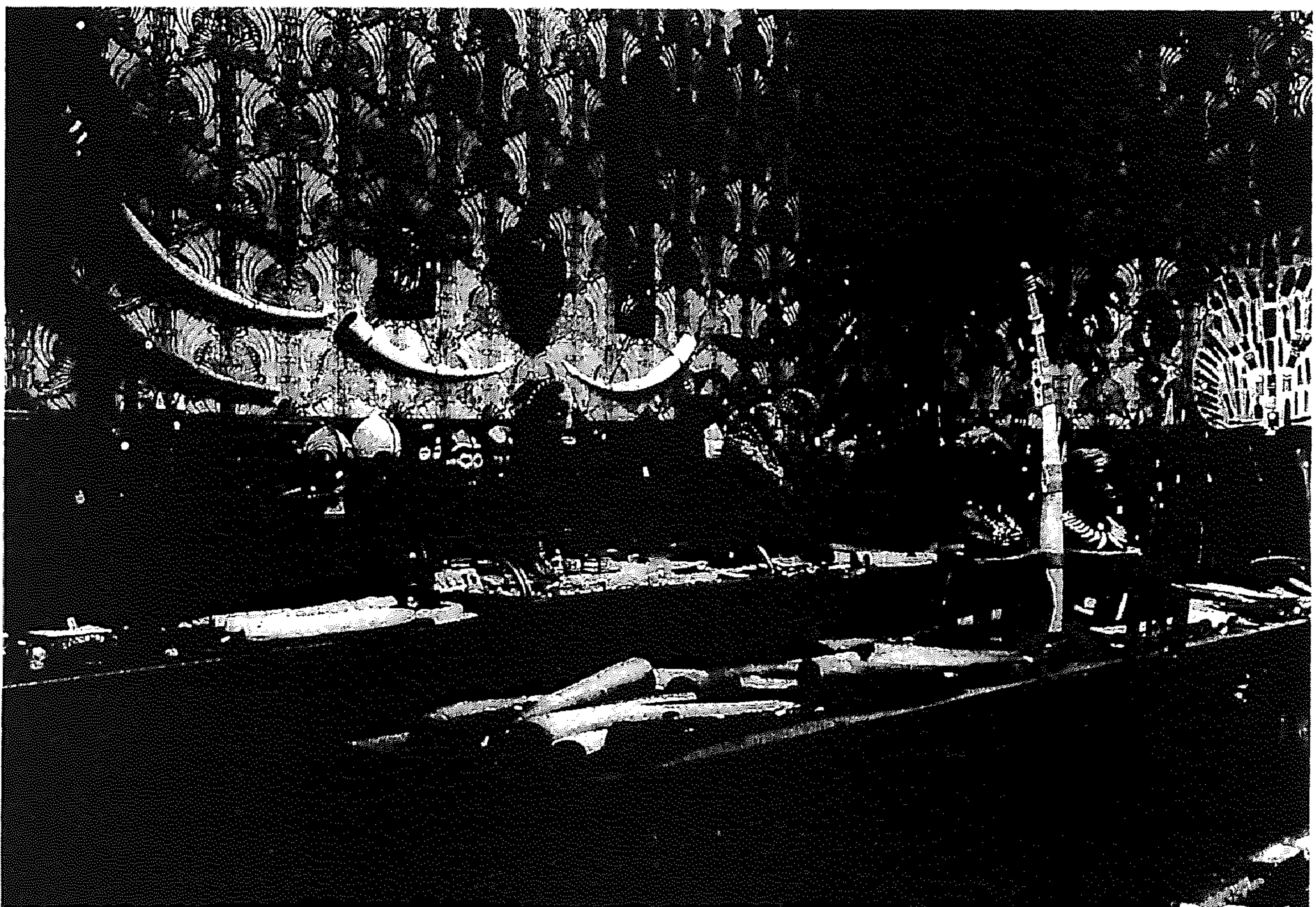
of Congolese art in Belgium, mostly in the context of commercial, colonial, and arts fairs, many featuring objects from private collections. From the lists of lenders to the Premier Salon National d'Art Nègre and the Exposition d'Art Nègre in the Palais des Beaux Arts, both in Brussels in 1930, together mentioning a few score of Belgian collectors, it can be seen that in those days people were collecting on a certain scale, and, as one would expect, such activity was focused upon the Belgian Congo (Anonymous, 1930). An Association des Amis de l'Art Congolais had been founded in Brussels in 1922, and in those years already there were complaints of falsifications hitting an emerging market for African art. The catalogue of a another exhibition, in the Stadsfeestzaal of Antwerp from 24 December 1937 till 16 January 1938, also records about fifty collectors, among them a fair number of former colonial officials (Anonymous 1937:7-9). The pieces illustrated – Luba, Songe, Lulua, Kuba, Bushongo, and Yombe, among others – are of high quality. The list of lenders of ethnographics for the world exhibition in Brussels in 1958 is even more impressive. In line with these collecting activities, the Belgian ethnographics trade became increasingly more lively in the course of the twentieth century.

One of the earliest Belgian dealers was Henri Pareyn. In the large seaport of Antwerp, where ships from the Congo arrived daily, he began to buy and accumulate *negerkunst* in 1903, for his own collection as well as for trading (Leurquin 1988:318-319; Van Schuylenbergh 1995:35-36). Initially, he walked or took a bicycle, but soon he had to use a carrier tricycle, and then a car. He delivered to private collectors, other dealers and museums, and published a few short articles on Congo art. In 1911 and again in 1924 he sold a number of objects to the Tervuren museum, while some 1600 ethnographic items, acquired by the city

of Antwerp between 1920 and 1923, were to become the basis of the Etnografisch Museum Antwerpen. French surrealists like André Breton and Tristan Tzara regularly came to Antwerp to buy from him, as did several Paris dealers. The prices realized for good African objects, hailed as fine art in that era of primitivist *négrophilie*, were high and it is clear that national boundaries were no obstruction for the traffic in such possessions.

The largest auction of ethnographics ever to take place in the Low Countries – and one of the largest ever in the world – was the sale of almost two thousand lots of 'Art nègre du Congo', brought in by Pareyn, in Antwerp in 1928 (*Illus. 2*). It went on for five whole days and raised the then phenomenal amount of two million Belgian francs. Before putting his collection up for auction, Pareyn had offered it to both the Tervuren museum and the city of Antwerp for 300,000 francs, but in both cases the offer was refused. This was bitterly deplored in the Belgian press coverage of the event when it became clear that about ninety per cent of the collection had been bought by an English dealer, possibly W.D. Webster, and disappeared abroad. A substantial part ended up in the Wellcome Historical Institute in London in 1936, and was donated or sold by that institution to the Museum of Cultural History of the University of California at Los Angeles in 1965-1967, where it remains today.³

While Pareyn was certainly the most prominent Belgian dealer/collector of his day, the most outstanding collector/dealer in Belgium of the subsequent generation may have been Jef Vander Straete, a furniture maker by profession, who grew up in England where his parents had fled during the First World War.⁴ In 1952 he bought his first African item, a Luba staff, which proved to be the cornerstone for an enormous collection of ethnographics from Africa and Oceania. Vander Straete built up this



Illus. 2. A small part of the enormous Central African collection of the Antwerp dealer and collector Henry Pareyn, sold at auction in Antwerp, 10-15 December 1928. Against the left wall, there are, among others things, Songe, Chokwe, and Kuba masks; hanging from the right wall are four Kota reliquary figures. Photo, Tribal Art Documentation Centre, Antwerp.

collection in part through advertisements in newspapers that brought him into contact with ex-colonials, but also through contacts with the home bases of a whole series of Roman Catholic missionary societies: Jesuits, White Fathers, Redemptorists, Capucins, and so on. Top pieces from the Chokwe, the Songe, and many other tribes came into his hands and were incorporated into his collection; material of lesser quality was sold off. In 1955, he opened a private museum in Lasne, near Brussels. His son René, who is still active, was also involved, and numerous others were inspired by the two. They made real discoveries, not in the *brousse* of Central Africa, but in the Belgian countryside, for instance, in a village pub full of old masks of the Yaka and the Suku tribes or in the attic of a retired colonial civil servant filled with Zande articles which had been collected during a posting to the north of the Belgian Congo. Ironically, Joseph Cornet's standard work *Art of Africa: Treasures from the Congo* (Cornet 1971), commissioned by President Mobutu of Zaire, is illustrated with stunningly beautiful objects not from Zaire (see below), but from the Vander Straete collection.

Postcolonial developments

Decolonization brought a new stream of objects to Belgium. Planters and traders, missionaries and officials, doctors and teachers came back with their families and their possessions. As can be seen in their yearly records, the two Belgian ethnological museums acquired a great deal from such ex-colonials, by donation or purchase. Many dealers, often ex-colonials themselves, did good business with them, and a lot of what they brought back wound up in the hands of private collectors through dealers or auctions. Most of the old supply channels vanished along with colonial rule, and new routes came into being, though the supply of authentic – in the sense of indigenously used – old articles decreased due to the loss and the modernization of local African traditions. Replacing such old objects, series of fresh woodcarvings, more or less mass produced, began to flood the western market.

While previously it had been the colonial, military, or missionary personnel who brought things back with them, it was now much more likely to be the western dealer who went into the field to buy and collect, and also increasingly the travelling African dealer. Civil war, famine, or other such circumstances, for instance in Biafra, led to a stream of objects to western societies, as did more banal events such as new roads through formerly relatively inaccessible areas, though on a smaller scale. The political instability in Congo-Kinshasha in recent years facilitated the plundering of museums there, and persistent rumours have it that top pieces from that source were offered to Brussels, Paris and New York dealers. In a recent interview with a Belgian periodical, Thys Van Den Audenaerde, director of the Tervuren museum, points to a large-scale sale of the Congo cultural heritage, along dangerous criminal channels, with the help of Congolese customs officials, high ranking military, and politicians (Geers 1998).

The endangered ethnographical collections in Congo have a chequered history. The colonial Musée de la Vie Indigène was nationalized in 1960, and within a few years everything from its rich holdings except one Pende mask of poor quality had disappeared or been sold. In the first half of the 1970s the newly founded Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo brought together some 50,000 objects by means of detailed survey and collecting activities throughout the country, becoming the basis for a number of new, but badly managed, museums

scattered throughout the country. From that national collection, supplemented with two hundred fine objects from the storerooms of the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika donated by the Belgium government, a great many objects have again disappeared since, especially in recent years, and almost certainly found their way into western collections.

An auction catalogue entry pertaining to a fine Hemba *singiti* ancestor figure from Congo frankly traces one pattern that was typical for the postcolonial era. The 74 cm. high statue was offered for sale at Christie's of London on 29 June 1994, as lot number 25, with an estimated value of \$80,000 to \$135,000. The art of the Hemba, the entry states, 'was known only by a few sculptures, those mostly in museums, before the 1960s, when some enterprising entrepreneurs, encouraged by a growing market in African art, explored the area from the north. They persuaded the villagers to part with their heritage, racing their spoils across the Sahara to the market places of the United States and Europe' (Anonymous 1994:24). Export was not always legal; a stamp reading *Département de la Culture* could easily, though illegally, be bought from officials. It was the same in West Africa: in the aforementioned interview Van Den Audenaerde remarks that when he did biological research there in the late sixties he met people everywhere who searched the villages systematically for old masks and statues.

Objects in motion

Tribal objects that reached Belgium much earlier, in colonial times, still surface in the provinces – at flea markets, in antique shops, or at local auctions – and quickly find their way to the Grote Zavel dealers in the capital, through various channels and networks. Dozens of small-time provincial entrepreneurs systematically track down colonial families and see if they have any ethnographics left, going from one family to the next, tracking their relations, ex-colleagues and friends, working very thoroughly, also covering garage sales, local auctions, fleamarkets and antiques shops, sifting through everything. This group, most of whom are not officially registered as dealers, form the base of the dealing pyramid, so to speak. They mostly sell to the middle layer, which is formed by fifty or so official dealers in tribal art, both large and small, around the Grote Zavel. The apex of the pyramid consists of only a handful of dealers, who trade in the best, most expensive pieces. Every week scores of new objects come in from the hinterlands, and real surprises turn up regularly – exceptionally beautiful, old, or rare pieces. This is one of the exciting features of the trade for those involved.

An example of how a good piece popped up and what channels it traveled through before ending up somewhere up-market was reported by a major Brussels dealer. A few years ago, somebody bought a small human figure, cut from elephant ivory, at an auction in a little town in Belgium for 13,000 Belgian francs, which is about \$300. It was a so-called *bwame* statue from the Lega in East Congo, probably centuries old. That individual sold it to a small-time antique dealer in the same region for three times as much. The antique dealer suspected that it was something good, and took it to a small tribal art dealer in Brussels, who paid him about \$3,000, three times what the antiques dealer had paid for it. The tribal art dealer in turn came to the major dealer, specializing in Central African art, and received \$12,000, four times what he had paid for it – still for the same little African statue. The major dealer, in turn, received an offer of \$25,000, the very next day, which he refused. The figure, one of the finest he has ever seen, he says, is now in his private collection.

1 Cf. The entries in Van Rijn 1999.

2 Leurquin 1988:327. I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to this short but useful text on tribal art collections in Belgium, based on a number of talks with the Tervuren curator Albert Maesen, as well as Patricia Van Schuylenbergh's thorough 'Découverte et vie des arts plastiques du Bassin du Congo dans la Belgique des années 1920-1930' (Van Schuylenbergh 1995).

3 A copy of the auction catalogue (Anonymous 1928) and several undated newspaper clippings – probably from around December 18th, 1928 – are preserved in the Pareyn Dossier in the archives of the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden Afrika, Tervuren, Belgium. For more on the Wellcome collection, compiled by Henry S. Wellcome (1853-1936), founder of the immensely successful pharmaceutical firm of the same name and of the Wellcome Trust, a charitable organization, see Anonymous 1965.

4 The following is based on Leurquin 1988:327-8, and on personal communications with several dealers and collectors who knew Jef Vander Straete personally.

5 Personal communication with Emile Deletaille and Philippe Guimiot, Spring 1998.

Another source of ethnographics is constituted by many, predominantly small, traders, sometimes still called 'runners', from Subsaharan Africa who arrive with bulging suitcases to do business. Commuting between Africa and Europe to sell their wares, which they often have on commission, they act as middlemen between two cultural worlds, that of the African producers of the wood-carvings and that of western consumers. Hotel Galaxy, near railway station Brussels North, presently is one of their favourites. These traders depend on networks of contacts on both sides, some along family lines and some developed while making their rounds of the shops, galleries and markets in cities in Europe and North America. Most of what they carry is not the sort of thing the Grote Zavel dealers are interested in – too ugly, or too new. A small number of African dealers, some of them based partially or permanently in large cities in the West, deal in the better pieces.

Such transnational chains of supply and demand and the concomitant changes in appreciation have been analyzed in some detail by Chris Steiner. In his monograph on commodification and other aspects of the trade in ethnographics in Ivory Coast, including fakes, based on intensive fieldwork done in the 1980s, he focusses his attention on art traders as cultural brokers or mediators of knowledge who add 'economic value to what they sell by interpreting and capitalizing on the cultural values and desires from two different worlds' while manipulating 'both the meaning and value of objects through contextualized presentation, verbal description, and physical alteration' (Steiner 1994:14-15; in particular, see Chapter 6).

Some Brussels dealers

One of the Brussels dealers who went into the field himself is Marc Felix, for a long time a real *coureur de brousse*, in Africa and in Southeast Asia. He was one of the first western dealers who concentrated on the tribal areas of Indonesia in the 1970s, and then on Eastern Africa. Felix, a central and powerful figure in the networks of the trade, is also a leading consultant and a prolific writer on Central African art, working for and with museums worldwide, and directing the privately funded Congo Basin Research Institute in Brussels. Three others from among the reputable and high-priced dealers in Brussels are Pierre Dartevelle, son of a curator at the Tervuren museum and renowned for his fine private collection of African art; Philippe Guimiot who is also an auction expert in Paris; and Emile Deletaille, who previously did a lot of business with the Tervuren museum and sold his fine private collection of Congo art to the new National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC in the 1980s.

Deletaille started out as a private collector of Mediterranean and pre-Columbian antiquities, then started to deal in pre-Columbian art, and later, stimulated by contacts with Jef Vander Straete, began to deal in tribal art as well. Guimiot is one of the many Brussels dealers who have lived and worked in Africa and started to collect and deal there. His interest in ethnographics was sparked when he worked in Gabon as an official, and around 1960 he set himself up as a full-time dealer based in Cameroon, channelling many thousands of objects from Cameroon, Gabon, and Nigeria out of Africa.⁵

Most dealers in and around Brussels handle a broad range of objects while specializing in a certain segment of the field. Alain Guisson, for example, specializes in South African art, especially Zulu and Ndebele, and travels a lot for it; Jos Christiaens, in the 1960s a sports instructor in Zaire, in Hema art; Lucien Van de Velde, formerly an

UNESCO-official in Côte-d'Ivoire, in West African art; Pierre Loos, of Ambre gallery, in West African terracottas; François Coppens in Borneo Dayak; Kevin Conru, an American, formerly classical musician, collector and auction expert, presently based in London and Brussels, in Melanesian art. Jac Van Overstraeten is an artist and a dealer. Sulaiman Diané, originally from Guinea, is based in New York and Brussels and works along that axis.

Tribal art consultant Guy van Rijn's *forte* is a 100,000 item pictorial archive of African art objects that have been auctioned, collected, published, handled by dealers, exhibited, or documented otherwise. Samir Borro, collector/dealer in Brussels, from a well-to-do Côte-d'Ivoire family of Lebanese origin, has a fabulous private collection of art from that country. There are of course many, many others. Some have become or are becoming quite rich in the process, some not; some are real intellectuals, others not; but all are very passionate about tribal art.

How it works

Apart from the usual passers-by, each Grote Zavel gallery has a more or less fixed clientele, which shifts to some degree over the years. Serious dealers attach importance to a relationship of trust with good customers, although repeated incidents show that the interpretations of trust can differ. Most business, however, is conducted between dealers, locally and internationally, directly or through auctions, on all levels of quality. Auctions also provide suitable occasions for business contact before and after the event, also with private collectors and museum staffers. Most of what is auctioned at posh specialized tribal art sales with glossy catalogues in New York and Paris is brought in and acquired by dealers. Tricks and dirty games are not unusual in those arenas, as countless anecdotes and regular bitter or ironic complaints illustrate. In Paris most auction experts for tribal art are dealers too, which creates conflicts of interest. Ethnographics of lesser quality are auctioned in Belgium. Some Brussels dealers participate in up-market antiques and tribal art fairs in Europe and the United States. Most really important pieces never hit the public space of the gallery or the official *vernissage*, but are traded behind the scenes, or through auctions.

The amounts of money that change hands in a typical week in Brussels are very considerable. Transactions often involve several people and may be quite complex, for example, when a collector gives a piece he or she – mostly he – wants to sell on commission to dealer A, who passes it on to dealer B to offer it to dealer C who is a specialist for the region it concerns but doesn't get along with A or would pay A much less than he – mostly he – would pay B, to whom he is closer. Dealers often team up to share the risk, the buying sum, and the gains when one of them comes across a potentially important carving. How they team up and where and when they gather to talk, drink (usually a lot), and do business reveals the existence of a number of small, changeable, partly overlapping networks.

Gossip is very important. 'I couldn't do without it', one dealer remarked, 'it guards you from making mistakes and fills you in on what's up; it's how we work'. Debts between dealers are typically cancelled out at least partly with pieces or with other debts, past or future. Quite a few conflicts arise in the process, some long-lasting. Negative comments on an expensive piece in the hands of a colleague which are broadcast can do much harm. There are dealers who see each other every week but have not spoken or even greeted each other for years. Competition is stiff, foul play not exceptional, and the hierarchy strict.

Most Grote Zavel gallery owners and dealers strive for and guarantee quality, a code of honour which in this

- Anonymous. 1928. *L'Art Nègre du Congo: Catalogue de la remarquable collection de feu Monsieur Henry Pareyn d'Anvers*. Antwerp: F. & V. Claes, Experts.
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small world is enforced by social control through the grapevine, but is not always adhered to too strictly. Another category of the western tribal art market is formed by those who don't pay too much attention to authenticity or don't find it very important. In this segment of the market, it is often not very clear what is authentic and old, what is old but was made for sale to westerners, what has been produced to appear to be something which it is not, and what is simply recent serially produced arts and crafts. These dealers are not too concerned about giving honest information about the nature and provenance of what is offered for sale.

'It's a national sport', one Brussels ethnographics dealer said when I asked him whether the manipulation of old labels on pieces was something that, generally, not specifically in Brussels, happened frequently; 'I could tell you stories that would make your hair stand on end.' Blank labels with the name of Charles Ratton – a very prominent mid-century dealer in Paris – printed on them, for example, are known to have gotten into circulation. The fine, signed wooden mounts by the famous Japanese mountmaker and restorer Inagaki, who worked for the best Parisian collectors and dealers in the 1930s, lends additional prestige and value to the pieces mounted on them, but unused mounts are similarly known to have wound up in circulation. Provenances – again, generally speaking, not especially in Brussels – are faked as well. 'It is so easy to fabricate a pedigree', another dealer said, 'you just have to pick the name of a minor figure or family at some outpost from an early travelogue or missionary periodical.'

Objects that have been tinkered with are often seen. An object is either 'good' or, better still, 'important', or it is *kloterij* – a rough term Flemish-speaking Brussels dealers use for objects they don't like. A few examples of 'improvements' to pieces that are in themselves 'authentic' are the mysterious and sudden appearance of inlaid eyes instead of carved ones, of an expressive and finely drawn face replacing the original roughly carved one, or of a beautiful 'old' patina on a figure that through years of polishing in somebody's sitting room had lost its original one, or initially had none at all. Worse than this are falsifications proper where no effort has been spared to make the pieces appear authentic, i.e., old and ritually used, and therefore valuable.

The milieus of collectors are just as diverse as those of the dealers: small collectors, artists, aficionados, aesthetes, ethnographically interested intellectuals, people who lived and worked in non-western areas, snobs, lunatics, investors, connoisseurs, speculators, or combinations of the aforementioned. A few score of the Belgian collectors buying regularly at the Grote Zavel are serious, discreet and very well-to-do – judges, university professors, high officials, captains of industry, members of the Belgian nobility and the like.

A look at the discreet but flourishing world of the better private collections in Belgium was offered by the exhibition *Utotombo: Kunst uit Zwart-Afrika in Belgisch privé-bezit* (Utotombo: Art from Sub-Saharan Africa in Belgian Private Collections) in the Paleis voor Schone Kunsten in Brussels in the Spring of 1988 (Anonymous 1988). *Utotombo* is a word used by the Chokwe in Angola meaning 'a good and effective object made with craftsmanship and love', and indeed all of the exhibits at the show were of exceptional quality. There were over three hundred objects from about fifty Belgian private collections, more than a third of which originated in the former Belgian Congo. A number of dealers were listed among the lenders, testifying to the fact that many dealers are also, or even primarily, collectors.

Dealers and curators

Internationally, people in the academic and the museum world sometimes look down upon milieus of dealers and collectors – even more so nowadays because of the stress on cultural property and the ethics of acquisition. In Belgium too, relations between dealers and academics from museums and universities are complicated; they range from good to very tense or very cool, or even non-existent. At the same time, however, many museum officials worldwide interact more intensely with the tribal art market than they care to admit, buying from, selling to and exchanging with dealers, seeking their advice officially or otherwise, and having wealthy collectors on their boards and as donors. Relations between the auction and dealing world, on the one hand, and the world of museums and academia, on the other, are close but discreet. Along with collectors, dealers belong to the small group of people outside the academic and museum world who know more than the average citizen about what is to be found in museums and what goes on there.

A number of museum people nowadays say, some of them very loudly, that collecting is simply not done and that dealers are criminals, yet, on the other hand, their yearly records are full of donations from the very circles thus frowned upon. Generally speaking, it seems that ethnographic museums do not get on as well with dealers and collectors as aesthetically orientated museums of tribal art. But as the New Zealand museum-based anthropologist, Terence Barrow, once remarked, in the preface of his classic on Polynesian art: 'As museum assemblages generally owe their origin to private collectors, it does not become museum professionals, as is often the case, to regard private collectors with condescension and disdain' (Barrow 1971:8). The same goes, I think, for their attitude to dealers.

Tournaments of value

Collecting, in Belgium and elsewhere, has many aspects, and is too complex to be simply reduced. Among other things, it is aesthetic wonder and delight on a daily basis; a cognitive activity of ordering and categorizing the world, or part of it; a search for and expression of identity; an articulation of taste; a strategy of desire; an activity of appropriation. There is one aspect, however, that is striking in connection with the social life of ethnographic things *sensu* Appadurai (Appadurai 1986), and that is the element of contest. These objects-in-transit not only have many and shifting but also, and in particular, contested meanings all along their complicated paths. In their areas of origin, native, Christian and Islamic views compete, sometimes to the point of physical destruction. To some traders, they are commodities; to others, high art. Collectors disagree about their authenticity, desirability, and value. In the museum, there are the native's, the art historian's, and the anthropologist's points of view on what they mean and where they belong.

An element of contest is also apparent on another level: that of fierce competition between collectors, between dealers, and between institutions. The better Brussels dealers, nearly all also collectors, are engaged in a continuous struggle for preeminence, for status: who has the best private collection, deals in the rarest pieces, organizes the finest *vernissages*? Who has the best taste? Who has 'opened up' new areas? 'Good taste' is an expression you hear a lot in these circles, where the desire for pieces is at the same time a desire for status, and reputed pieces and reputed dealer-collectors are mutually constitutive. Such gestures of competitive display as a Chokwe ancestor figure priced at 1.5 million dollars, on commission in the stand of a well-known Brussels dealer at one of the most

prestigious art fairs in the world in 1997, or the stream of well-researched thick volumes on Central African art published by one of his colleagues, are hard to beat. The Belgian, and indeed the international, tribal art scene strikes one as – in addition to everything else it is – a cultural arena in which a sustained, obsessive, agonistic 'tournament of value' takes place.

That concept was coined by Arjun Appadurai for status contests between those in power, usually through the média of valuable and rare objects which enhance their standing. 'What is at issue in such tournaments', Appadurai writes, 'is not just status, rank, fame, or reputation of actors but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question' (Appadurai 1986:21). Here, the biographies – 'pedigrees' – of things and men are intercalibrated. In particular those few times when I

had the much appreciated privilege of being shown the most private and cherished possessions of some of the top Brussels dealers, I had to think of the *kus fe*, the string of hunted human heads that used to be the inalienable pride of the New Guinea Asmat warrior and guaranteed him prestige. A similar argument can be made about the French or American tribal art scenes, where such tournaments of value are particularly strong due to the intricate connections between collectors, dealers and museums. 'If I don't bid for a piece, it's no good', I heard one of the major Brussels dealers boast.□

I am obliged to a number of people from and around the Brussels tribal art scene who were willing to share information and ideas with me. In particular, I would like to mention Guy van Rijn, Marc Felix, Alain Guisson, and Jo Christiaens, as well as Mamadou Keita and Peter de Boer.