



Large, but simple modernist glass showcases contrast with the neoclassical interiors.

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka

Too Beautiful to Hurt Anyone: The New Permanent Exhibition at the AfricaMuseum Tervuren

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Cultures of History Forum, published: 29.09.2020

DOI: 10.25626/0121

The Royal Museum for Central Afrika in Tervuren, Belgium, has long been seen as a racist institution. Recently it has come out with a new permanent exhibition that aims at a more (self-) critical approach to the colonial past. The article reviews the new exhibition and the criticism against it. In an epilogue it shows the various ways in which the new AfricaMuseum and its exhibit carry valuable lessons also for museums in Central and Eastern Europe.

Recommended Citation

Zofia Wóycicka: Too Beautiful to Hurt Anyone: The New Permanent Exhibition at the AfricaMuseum Tervuren. In: Cultures of History Forum (29.09.2020), DOI: 10.25626/0121

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Too Beautiful to Hurt Anyone: The New Permanent Exhibition at the AfricaMuseum Tervuren

In recent months, social activists have twice defaced the bust of King Leopold II which stands in the park outside of the [Royal Museum for Central Africa](#) (RMCA), or as it has recently been renamed, the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, Belgium by [spilling red paint over it](#). Though this sculpture is not without irony – statues of mutilated Congolese people stand behind King Leopold II's bust with their feet cut off while a lion and an elephant are depicted turning their backs to the monarch – representatives of the Congolese community in Belgium have always perceived it as offensive.

Leopold II was responsible for the exploitation and deaths of millions of Africans in the Congo Free State, which was his private property from 1885–1908.^[1] The profits that were made from the colony, and foremost from the lucrative rubber business, financed major urban projects in Brussels at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the construction of the Musée du Congo (Museum of Congo), the predecessors of today's RMCA.

The recent vandalism of Leopold II's bust in Tervuren came in the wake of the global Black Lives Matter protests that were sparked by the murder of African-American George Floyd on 25 May 2020. In Belgium, statues of colonial figures were torn down or defaced, and petitions were signed en masse asking the government to take proactive steps to confront Belgium's racist colonial past. Thus under pressure, in June 2020 the Belgian parliament decided to set up a special 'truth and reconciliation commission' to investigate Belgium's colonial past; and the Belgian Education Ministry announced that, beginning next year, colonial history will finally be taught in schools.^[2] In a [letter to the Congolese president](#), sent on 30 June, the Democratic Republic of Congo's independence day, King Philippe of Belgium expressed regret for the "acts of violence and cruelty" committed during the years of the Congo Free State and the "suffering and humiliation" inflicted on the Congolese people in the years that followed.^[3]

Over half a century after Congo gained its independence, Belgians are still having difficulty confronting their colonial past. The first step towards a more (self-)critical assessment were made with the publication of Adam Hochschild's renowned book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1998), and Ludo de Witte's *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999). Yet, as the recent defacement on monuments and statues around the country demonstrate, the painful process of reckoning with the past is still far from reaching any form of closure.^[4]

The history of the RMCA is in many ways a reflection of this slow and difficult process. For a long time, it was viewed as a racist institution. Since 2018, however, the museum has been trying to confront this image by installing a new and fully revised exhibition; they have also re-branded themselves as "AfricaMuseum" (while formally keeping the old name). It is the new permanent exhibition that is the focus of this review. However, against the backdrop of recent events, I will begin with a brief history of the museum before turning to my review of the 2018 exhibition.

A Brief History of the Museum

The idea to establish a museum first came up during the World Fair which Brussels hosted in 1897.^[5] For this occasion, the royal domain in Tervuren was turned into an exhibition dedicated to the Congo Free State. A human zoo supplemented the show. Seven of the 267 Congolese men, women and children that

were brought to Brussels for the exhibition died during the fair. One year later, the Musée du Congo was officially founded. However, the construction took over a decade and the museum was only inaugurated in 1910, two years after Belgium annexed the territory of the Congo Free State. The annexation was the result of international pressure following the revelation of the crimes committed during Leopold's II rule. Though the worst atrocities stopped with Belgian annexation, the colonial system was still built on racial injustice, violence and exploitation. The aims of the Congo museum, then, were to legitimize colonialism, convince Belgians of how profitable colonies could be, reassure Belgians of their racial supremacy and reinforce their "civilizing mission" in Central Africa.

For decades, the original museum exhibition hardly changed. The last major changes to the permanent exhibition were made in the late 1950s, shortly before Congo declared its independence. The museum's name was changed to the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale) but the lack of funds, reluctance on behalf of Belgian society and political stakeholders hindered any major reconstruction projects. Many Belgians profited from the colony and, after their expulsion from Congo following its independence, felt victimized; racist stereotypes persisted.

In 2005, the Tervuren Museum opened a new temporary exhibition titled *Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era*. The exhibition was a first attempt by the museum to take a more critical stance towards Belgium's colonial past. The new director, Guido Gryseels and his team introduced some commentaries and minor artistic interventions in the permanent exhibition, which demonstrated their distance to some elements of the old exhibition. An audio guide delivered a metanarrative that explained the history of the museum and critically commented on how it portrayed Africa and its inhabitants. However, it took another thirteen years, including five years of renovation and reconstruction, until the museum reopened in December 2018 with a revamped permanent exhibition, having rebranded as themselves as AfricaMuseum.

The New Permanent Exhibition

The changes in the new exhibition are indeed far-reaching. A brand-new visitor centre in what one could call a modernist or international style has supplemented the old colonial palace. As observed by Ellen Mara De Wachter, the minimalist style of the new building "provides a visual contrast to the museum's neoclassical palace architecture" and stresses the out-datedness of this "form of cultural authority".^[6] This is to signal the reservations of the curatorial team towards the old museum and the ideas that stood behind its establishment. An underground gallery connects the visitor centre with the old museum building. The long, white corridor is occupied by only one object: an enormous pirogue that ferried the former King Leopold III down the Lualaba River during his visit to Congo in 1957. The canoe is accompanied by the quote, "Everything passes except the past", an allusion to the title of Luc Huyse's book in which the Belgian sociologist describes how people in different countries try to come to terms with occupation and colonialism.^[7] At the end of the corridor, visitors encounter a large reproduction of a painting by the Congolese artist Chéri Samba titled, *Réorganisation* (Reorganization, 2002). The painting depicts representatives of the Belgian-Congolese community dragging a taxidermic elephant and an offensive bronze statue of the Anyota leopard man out of the museum (1913). The employees of the museum are standing at the entrance of the building trying to pull the objects back inside.

Visitors enter the historical building through the basement where they first pass through an introductory exhibition on the origin of the museum and its collection. The display mentions both, the human zoo at the World's Fair of 1897, which form part of the origin of the RMCA and the robbery and violence, which contributed to the development of the museum holdings. At the same time, however, it stresses that now

this collection serves as a source of knowledge about Africa. All the racist, offensive sculptures depicting the Congolese, including the leopard man – which, until recently, were part of the main exhibition – are now banished to an open depot in the basement. As explained by the museum director, the curators wanted to keep the sculptures on show, so that they could say: “This is how we looked at Africa before.”^[8]

After seeing the introductory exhibition in the basement, the visitor climbs the stairs to enter the old museum rooms on the ground floor. This arrangement takes the old colonial palace in quotation marks and turns it into the key-object of the new AfricaMuseum. The reversed museum-tour – to have the visitor enter the exhibition not through the front door (and through the Rotunda), but from the back entry, starting with the section “Rituals and Ceremonies” (see [a map of the exhibition](#)) – is yet another way of creating a distance from one’s own heritage.

But whoever expects the museum to be dedicated entirely to denouncing colonialism and condemning colonial atrocities will be disappointed. The curators at the AfricaMuseum–RMCA have taken a different path. They want this to be foremost a “scientific reference centre for Africa and a nexus for cultures and generations”.^[9]

The main exhibition on the ground floor of the old building is divided into five thematic displays dedicated to what is now Ruanda, Burundi and Congo: Rituals and Ceremonies, History, The Resource Paradox, Landscapes and Biodiversity, and Language and Music. With a total surface of 11,000m², the exhibition offers sufficient space to present the full richness and variety of the collection. It is exactly this diversity – ranging from natural history exhibits, ethnographical artefacts and arts, to historical objects – which makes the museum so enchanting. The enormous but simple, modernist, glass showcases contrast the neoclassical interiors restored according to the original plans. This, including the taxidermic animals (the elephant, giraffe, lion and hippo restored to their former splendour), make the exhibition a grand show. The visitor feels, as if she/he were travelling through time and space. “It is a museum of the Congo that takes us to Africa,”^[10] says Billy Kalonji, a Belgo-Congolese expert for cultural diversity and museum adviser.

It is noteworthy that, unlike some other ethnographic and colonial museums, the Tervuren museum does not present Africa as a world frozen in time. Its ambition is to also show current developments. Contemporary objects supplement the collection and the exhibition deals with the recent changes in lifestyle, language, art and economy. Another part of the exhibition is dedicated to people from sub-Saharan Africa living in Belgium today. The exhibition also underlines African history, showing that they developed civilizations long before the Europeans arrived, a fact that we tend to forget.

That is not to say, however, that the museum does not take a stance towards colonialism. In fact, it is quite explicit about its approach towards Belgian colonial history. The critical interventions are not centred in one place, rather they are spread throughout the exhibition. Apart from the introductory exhibition in the basement and the open depot, worth mentioning is also the section “Imagery”. Here, the curators present colonial films and photographs made by white people. Contextualized by the curators and contrasted with works by African artists, these images reveal patterns of stereotyping still existing in Belgium and other European societies. A separate room is dedicated to colonial history and to Congo’s independence. This exhibit deals with the conquest of Central Africa and the atrocities committed during the time of the Congo Free State. It also addresses the state-sanctioned racism and exploitation that continued after the Belgian takeover of that territory. At the same time, the exhibits also point to some positive developments, such as the establishment of a primary and vocational education or a health-care

system. Finally, it mentions – albeit in rather vague terms – Belgium’s complicity in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (1961). It is noteworthy that, dealing with crimes and atrocities, the exhibition does not present Africans as passive victims of perpetration, but rather as agents of history. For example, it shows different forms of resistance to colonialism. One of the sections, the so called “Crocodile room”, has been preserved and looks as it did in the 1920s, with murals depicting virgin African landscapes. This ‘museum within a museum’ illustrates the romanticized and embellished picture of the continent that the original museum conveyed to its visitors.^[11]

Another form of critical intervention is seen in the works of art by [contemporary Congolese and Afro-Belgian artists](#), commissioned by the museum, which comment on the museum and its heritage. Most impressive is the installation “Ombres” (Shadows) by Freddy Tsimba (2016). In this installation, the names of the Congolese who died in human zoos as part of the World Expo in Antwerp in 1894 and the 1897 World’s Fair are inscribed on the windows of one of the museum corridors. When the sun shines, shadows of the inscriptions fall on the opposite wall, beneath a memorial listing the names of the over 1500 Belgians who died in the Congo between the years 1876 and 1908.

Criticism over Issues of Restitution and the European Perspective

Despite these efforts, the new exhibition raises serious questions. First, as some have pointed out, the museum cannot claim to be truly decolonized as long as it displays and keeps in its collection goods that were robbed or stolen from their proper owners.^[12] As Mirelle-Tsheusi Robert from the Belgian intercultural NGO Banko-Cran formulated it in a [TV interview](#), “there is no decolonization without restitution”. Though claims for the restitution of objects from Africa have been raised in the past, the criticism was fuelled by [a 2018 report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage](#) commissioned by the French president Emmanuel Macron and co-authored by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwin Sarr. The report, which was released a few days before the re-opening of the Tervuren Museum, recommended automatic restitution and the return of all artefacts taken “without consent” to the African countries of their origin. This was followed by an announcement by the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo at that time, Joseph Kabila, that he would officially request the restitution of objects seized by the Belgian colonizers.^[13]

The museum’s director, Guido Gryseels generally agrees with the restitution claims. However, he argues that, first, the decision is not to be made by the museum but rather the national government needs to find a workable solution.^[14] Second, he persists that the process must be preceded by a detailed analysis of the provenance and the determination of the rightful heir of each and every object. Finally, he points out that some African countries and their museums may not be well prepared to safeguard the precious objects – an argument, that, even if accurate, may seem quite patronizing and offensive to the potential beneficiaries. For the time being, many of the looted objects still feature in the exhibition. As an example, in the room dedicated to colonial history, the museum shows an ancestral statue representing Lusinga, a chief of a local Luba clan. The statue was taken as war booty by the Belgian officer Émile Storms during a bloody raid on Lusinga’s village in 1884. Even, if the artefact serves here to expose the violent character of the conquest of Congo, the sole fact that the items from Storms’ collection have not yet been restituted remains problematic.^[15]

Another important point of criticism is that the RMCA is a museum created by Europeans for Europeans. The curators of the new exhibition tried, with varying success, to give Africans a voice and to present

their perspective on the past and the present. However, reviewers claim that it is not enough to include the African perspective in the exhibition; one has to empower the Congo-Belgian community by inviting its members to participate actively in the reconstruction process. In 2004, the museum established a special consultative committee (Comité de Concertation Musée Royal de L'Afrique Centrale - Associations africaines, COMRAF) composed of representatives of the African diaspora. COMRAF nominated six experts on African arts, culture and history to advise the museum staff throughout the renovation process. Yet, members of the committee complained that they had a limited impact on the final shape of the new exhibition and that their comments and suggestions, even if coming from experts, were not always taken seriously.^[16] As formulated by political scientist Tracy Tansia, one could even get the impression that COMRAF and its experts were only there to legitimize the new exhibition but not to have a true impact on its final form.^[17] Some have claimed that the museum should hire more people of African descent. Some Afro-Belgian activists also demanded that, beyond consultations, the subjects of the museum's exhibition should be given a share of power in the institution.

Last but not least, critics say that despite its official condemnation of colonialism, the new exhibition is not thorough enough on this issue, and that at times it even perpetuates old stereotypes.^[18] An example often cited is the section "The Resource Paradox" where the poverty of the resource-wealthy region is ascribed to the lack of "good governance focused on sustainability."^[19] At the same time, the information that this situation is rooted in its (post-)colonial past can only be deduced indirectly.^[20] Such a statement reinforces the stereotype of Central Africa as an uncivilized, conflict-ridden, and badly governed region, and nourishes a sense of European superiority. Kaat Raymaekers and Elke Mahieu suggest that the embellished narrative is a result of the fact that the new exhibition was co-sponsored by Umicore, a Belgian mining company that operated in Congo from 1906 until 1967 and interfered in Congolese politics even after independence.^[21]

On the day of the opening of the new exhibition, a commemorative ceremony was held at the church cemetery in Tervuren at the graves of the seven Congolese who died during the Brussels World Fair.^[22] This ceremony organized by Intal Congo and several other Belgo-Congolese organizations was meant to highlight the fact that while the museum spent tens of millions of Euros on its renovation, the graves of the people whose remains lie literally at the foundations of this institution were neglected and poorly labelled. According to Tansia, the museum has changed its narrative, and now publicly denounces the "racist system that was colonization." However, she continues, the museum still does not give the impression [that] it is interested in informing people of African descent of their history, but is rather centered on informing white people about Africa, and on «the work» white colonizers did. The museum gives the impression that it has included the history and culture of the African diaspora without upsetting those involved in the colonial endeavour: the white colonizer.^[23]

And maybe she is right: the history of Belgian Congo is predominantly a history of violence, exploitation and racism. Therefore, the AfricaMuseum is a site of "difficult heritage" and as such, it should hurt and irritate its visitors. But with its exotic masks and fabrics, colourful butterflies, taxidermic animals that appear to be alive, everything presented in a glamorous, newly renovated nineteenth century setting, the museum is just too beautiful to hurt anyone's feelings.

Epilogue: Shifting perspective

From a Central-Eastern European perspective, the disputes on the refurbishment of the AfricaMuseum may seem like sounds from a remote battlefield. However, at closer inspection they also prove relevant

to this region. First, they raise a more general question concerning the democratization and ownership of museums and their relationships with their public and private donors. The issue of state interference in museum leadership or curatorial decisions has been most [acutely debated in recent years, especially in Poland](#). The example of the RMCA shows that problems with regard to the dependency of museums from their benefactors occur also elsewhere.

Another important issue is the relation of museums with different agents of memory, especially with those groups whose story or culture are the very subject of the exhibition. One question that arises here is how to find the balance between empowering such memory groups, local communities and other agents on the one hand and retaining the professional autonomy of the museum on the other. Other questions concern who to include in negotiation processes and how to mediate between different groups with potentially contradictory expectations towards the museum. Again, Central and Eastern European museums face similar questions and the case of the RMCA gives a lot of material for reflection.

Last but not least, there are also content-related issues raised by this exhibition that can reverberate in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular when museums in this region speak about the experience of being in the nineteenth century, during the Second World War and arguably also during the Soviet period subject to semi-colonial exploitation.^[24] In Poland, the situation is even more complex when we speak of the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteen-eighteen centuries or of nineteenth century Poles who acted as colonizers. Since 2016, the Lublin City Museum is creating a new, publically financed [Museum of the Eastern Lands of the Former Republic of Poland](#). The AfricaMuseum in Tervuren raises questions that should be posed to the museum creators in Lublin as well: How will the new exhibition tell the story of the not always peaceful interactions between different social, ethnic and religious groups in this region? Will it give account of the semi-colonial relations between the predominantly Polish-Catholic nobility and the Ruthenian, mostly Orthodox or Greek-Catholic peasants^[25]; or will it rather provide an embellished and sentimental picture of the Commonwealth and the so called Kresy (Eastern Borderlands)? Are the curators consulting and cooperating with experts from Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania and/or with representatives of the respective national minorities when creating the exhibition, or will it be a museum created by Poles and for Poles only? The ["Assumptions and scenario for the permanent exhibition"](#) that are made available on the museum's website seem to indicate that, unfortunately, it will be rather the latter.

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2. Alan Hope, [Congo commission: apologies are not enough](#), The Brussels Times (22 June 2020), retrieved 11 August 2020.
3. See [Belgian king expresses «deepest regrets» for colonial cruelties in Congo](#), The Brussels Times (30 June 2020), retrieved 11 August 2020; Maïthé Chini, [«First step»: praise for King's letter to Congolese president](#), The Brussels Times (30 June 2020), retrieved 12 August 2020.
4. See amongst others: Idesbald Goddeeris, *Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space*, *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 397–409; Véronica Curto, ["Recontextualiser" les monuments coloniaux Belges. Une étude des cas portant sur trois monuments à Bruxelles](#), Brussels: Kwadika de Banko-Cran asbl, 2018.
5. See the Royal Museum for Central Africa – Guidebook, edited by Min De Meersman and Sari Middernacht, Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2019, pp. 22–24.
6. Ellen Mara De Wachter, [Has Belgium's Newly Reopened Africa Museum Exorcized the Ghosts of its Colonial Past?](#), Frieze (11 December 2018), retrieved 11 August 2020.
7. Luc Huyse, *Alles gaat voorbij, behalve het verleden*, Amsterdam: van Genneep / Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2006.
8. Associated Press, [Belgium's colonial-era King Leopold faces reckoning as anti-racism protests grow](#), Los Angeles Times (11 June 2020), retrieved 11 August 2020.
9. Royal Museum for Central Africa – Guidebook, p. 22.
10. ["Ik voel me nergens méér thuis dan in het museum"](#) - Interview with Billy Kalonji, Bruzz (5 December 2018), retrieved 3 September 2020. My translation.
11. Royal Museum for Central Africa – Guidebook, p. 97.
12. See [La Belgique rouvre son musée de l'Afrique, hanté par le colonialisme](#), Jeune Afrique (9 December 2018); [AfricaMuseum: un regard critique sur la colonisation](#), L'Avenir.net (8 December 2018), both retrieved 21 August 2020; see also Dónal Hassett, *Acknowledging or Occluding "The System of Violence"? The Representation of Colonial Pasts and Presents in Belgium's AfricaMuseum*, *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 1 (2020): 39–30.
13. Colette Braeckman, [Joseph Kabila va envoyer une requête officielle pour que la Belgique restitue des œuvres d'art au Congo](#), Le Soir online (7 December 2018), retrieved 7 September 2020.
14. Michel Bouffieux, [Guido Gryseels, directeur du Musée de l'Afrique centrale: «C'est le moment du débat»](#), OverBlog (21 March 2018). Compare also: [Politique de restitution Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale](#), AfricaMuseum.be (31 January 2020), both retrieved 10 September 2020.
15. For an interesting discussion of the history of the acquisition and the problems surrounding the restitution of another object from the RMCA collection see: Maarten Couttenier, [EO.0.0.7943](#), BNGN – Low Countries Historical Review 133, no. 2 (2018): 91–104.
16. Interview with Billy Kalonji, 2018; Anne Wetsi Mpoma, [Quand le temple dédié à la colonisation belge fait peau neuve](#), Bamko asbl. (no date), retrieved 9 September 2020.
17. Tracy Tansia, [Changing the narratives](#), in *Renovating the AfricaMuseum. A conversation with Gillian Mathys, Margot Luyckfasseel, Sarah Van Beurden, Tracy Tansia*, Africa Is a Country (29 April 2019), retrieved 3 September 2020. See also: Hassett, 2020, p. 28–30.
18. See, for example, [Lies Busselen, Si les objets pouvaient parler. Sur l'Africamuseum rénové en Belgique](#), Intal.be (21 August 2020); see also: [Renovating the AfricaMuseum](#), 2019.
19. Royal Museum for Central Africa – Guidebook, p. 104.
20. See Hassett, 2020, pp. 36–39; Gillian Mathys, [Colonial continuities: Tensions and opportunities](#), in *Renovating the AfricaMuseum. A conversation with Gillian Mathys, Margot Luyckfasseel, Sarah Van Beurden, Tracy Tansia*, Africa Is a Country (29 April 2019), retrieved 3 September 2020.
21. Kaat Raymaekers and Elke Mahie, [Royal Museum for Central Africa: Can curatorial re-alignment make good on decades of colonial propaganda?](#), The World Magazine (14 March 2019), retrieved 24 September 2020.
22. [Kumbuka : les 7 tombes oubliées de l'Africamuseum](#), Intal.be (21 August 2020), retrieved 9 September 2020.
23. Tansia, [Changing the narratives](#), 2020.
24. About the continuities between German colonial domination in German South West Africa, the German warfare in the East and the Holocaust see: Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*, Berlin: Lit, 2011. The presentation of (de)colonial heritage in city museums in Warsaw, Amsterdam and Shanghai is subject of research of the Horizon 2020 project [ECHOES. European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities](#).
25. See Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński, szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793-1914*, Lublin: UMCS, 2005.



The bust of Leopold II with sculptures of Congolese people and animals - before it was defaced
Photo: Luc Viatour | Public domain (CC BY-SA 3.0)



A human zoo: Congolese village at the 1897 Brussels International Exposition in Tervuren
Photo: Alphonse Gautier / Public domain



The building of the RMCA

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka



A brand new visitor Centre in modernist style has been added to the RMCA.

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka



The pirogue that ferried King Leopold III down the Lualaba River in 1957 - on the back wall the inscription: "Everything passes except the past".

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka



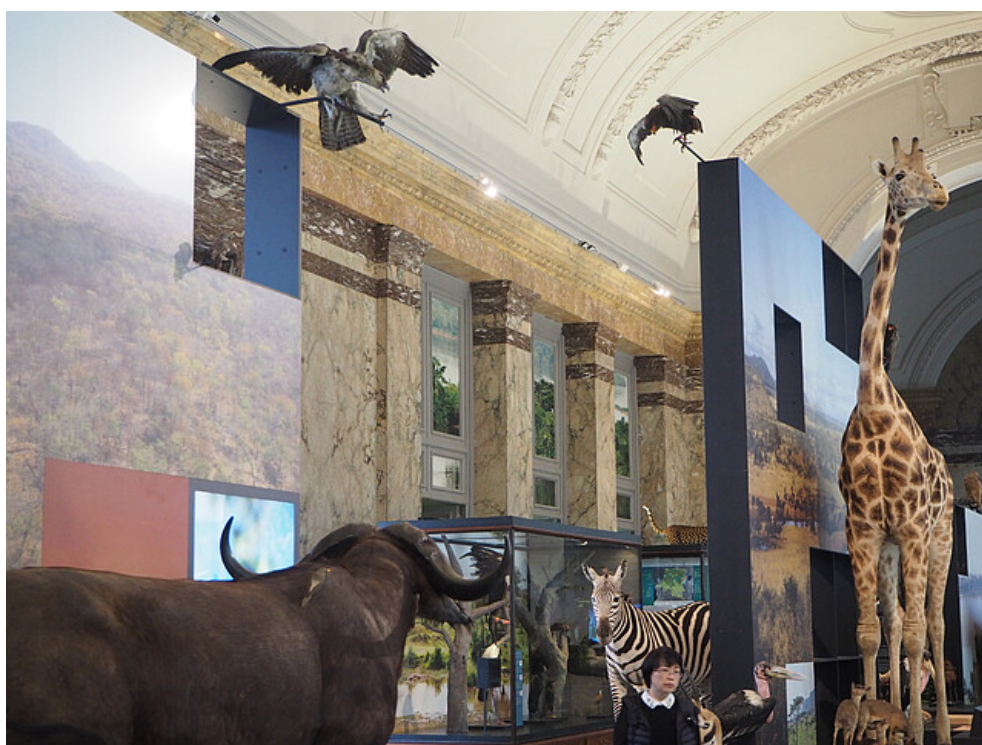
"This is how we looked at Africa before" - open depot in the basement of the museum.

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka



Enlarged painting by Congolese artist Chéri Samba entitled 'Réorganisation' and placed at the end of the underground corridor connecting the visitor Centre with the old museum building.

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka



Many of the taxidermic animals of the previous exhibition have been carefully restored to their former splendour.

Photo: Zofia Wóycicka