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Vienna-New York, Springer (catalogue of an exhibition with the same name in Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, February-July 2001) ; 191 p. (with 167 pictures of paintings).

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- 1 How do people manage to cope with continuing economic and political chaos? In the case of Congo/Zaire this question has imposed itself, unfortunately, already for decades. Another special trait of this country is that its popular paintings provide if not an answer to this question, then at least a vivid image of how people struggle to cope. The beautiful and well-documented catalogue by Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Barbara Plankenstein of Congo paintings from the 1990s—for an exposition in the Vienna Ethnographic Museum—shows, moreover, that this art form remains very much alive despite all the turmoil of this decade. Indeed, the long-last fall of Mobutu, the rise of Kabila and subsequent political reversals provided new (and strong) stuff for the painters' imagination.
- 2 Plankenstein is the Africa conservator of the Vienna Museum. Jewsiewicki, a leading historian of Congo/Zaire, started already in the 1960s to build up a collection of popular paintings; he is also one of the few Western researchers who still regularly visit the country. Their collaboration is very successful. The exposition brought together an impressive set of 167 paintings from the Vienna and the Jewsiewicki collections, covering a wide range of topics and styles. Both for the exposition and for the catalogue, the initiators have clearly chosen for a socio-cultural approach. The catalogue opens with a general introduction by Plankenstein, emphasizing the impact of the paintings as a reflection of everyday life, and a more analytical piece by Jewsiewicki on new aspects of

the paintings from the 1990s. Jewsiewicki signals that the old ikons-like Mami Wata (the beautiful white mermaid who promises riches but takes your soul) or *Congo belge* (colonial scenes with whip or palanquin)–seem to have lost their topicality. In the 1990s, painters continue to try and make sense of the “madness” of the post-colony, but they search new themes, especially more recent events.

- 3 This accent on the dynamics of painting is elaborated in a seminal way by focussing the exposition and the catalogue on three differing urban settings in the country where the continuing crisis takes varying forms and evokes different reactions. In fact, the paintings seem to reflect the crumbling of the country. Much more than in earlier decades, each region seems to develop its own styles and its own subjects. Jewsiewicki introduces each set with a short but very informative introduction on the city or town concerned and the specific aspects of its painting tradition. The first two sets concern, of course, the political and the economic capital of the country, respectively Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. In the first, paintings, often of a surprisingly large format and with vivid colours, express stifling overcrowdedness–salons full of sleeping refugees–but also a somewhat desperate feasting: despite growing poverty “Kin Kiese” (gay Kinshasa) remains very much present in the painters’ images. In “Lubumbashi-kazi” (labour), paintings are more modest, both in size and in design; recurrent topics are rather the forced exodus of Luba labourers, chased by the “autochthons”, but also the violent attempts at regional secession. The third choice is the more original one: Bunia, a relatively small border town in the extreme northeast of the country where gold-mining and very animated smuggling circuits create chances for spectacular but often ephemeral enrichment. In “Bunia-nyama” (meat–because of its rich cattle stocks), painters seem to struggle with the transient character of the town’s population, in their emphatic efforts to fix historical events and cultural variations. The very fact that even for such a smaller centre a variegated collection could be brought together by various painters and on a wide array of themes emphasize, once more, that Congolese paintings is not just an affair of a few international stars, but very much a popular phenomenon.
- 4 The last two contributions underline this point since they are about the *salon*, the centre-piece of the houses of the new urban middle classes, and the place where all these paintings are normally destined for. Barbara Plankensteiner provides a brief ethnography of the *salon* in the 1990s that is a bit over-theorized (“Die konsumorientierte Auseinandersetzung mit dem Ding” may be of growing interest to anthropologists, but seems to be a bit far from the reasons why a Congolese couple wants to hang a painting in their drawing room). Fortunately, this is contrasted with a brief exposé by Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo on the *salons* from earlier periods. The differences are striking, notably when Makombo signals that, still in the 1950s, it was unusual to hang paintings on walls (ornaments like wooden figures or animals from ivory were more current). This raises the question why, later on, local paintings seem to have become so popular in Congo, at least in urban settings. Of course, elsewhere in Africa, popular painting has also developed to some degree and in some middle-class houses one can find exhibits on the wall. Yet nowhere does painting seem to have developed to such a degree as in Congo: the international breakthrough of a few Congolese artists is clearly carried by a broad stratum of painters and styles. Is this because buying a local painting became so much a fashion for the emerging middle classes of this country? But why is this so? Is it because post-colonial history (like the colonial) was so tormented that painting as a way of interpreting it acquired a particular momentum?

- 5 The catalogue may have a socio-cultural outlook, but the aesthetic side of the paintings does get its due—if only because of the fascinating images of the paintings. The most striking for me was “Animal-Band” by Gabriel Londe Jodio (from Bunia) which pictures a chimpanzee band playing for couples of nicely dancing animals (who would normally tear each other up). The anti-violence message is quite clear, but the painter succeeds in evoking a sphere of peace and fun that conveys much more than just a moral admonition. Images like this and all the care with which they are presented make this a beautiful catalogue that conveys how fantasy remains alive in a setting where only survival seems to count. It is to be hoped that this exposition can be exhibited in other parts of the world as well—maybe even in Congo itself?