

MORIDJA KITENGE BANZA

Exiled in Eden

Curator: Julie Alary Lavallée

“At the dawn of colonization, in [the Democratic Republic of] Congo, one question echoed in the hearts of the oppressed: how could those who preached the Word of God also inflict so much suffering? This paradox still resonates today, here in Québec and elsewhere. Through my work, I want people to look beyond appearances—I am not only a colour or a label as an immigrant. My work is a reflection on the deep scars left by colonization, both here and in the rest of the world.”

Dedicated to Christ Pantocrator, the Byzantine representation of the Messiah in all of his glory, this new chapel by Moridja Kitenge Banza activates the complex codes of the Christian Church as mechanisms of public persuasion. This very personal work is a tool to help explain and reveal the power of colonization and the mission of religious conversion throughout the world, from the past to the present. More specifically, it reflects the reality of Kitenge Banza's native Congo, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. Colours, architectural elements, iconography, and a system of copying are a just some of the strategies the artist uses to illustrate his universe. Together, they allow us to reflect on his hybrid identity, on the intertwining of local and global histories, and on the strategies that are likely to increase religious conviction among individuals.

This exhibition, which continues on the second floor, was mainly inspired by the Medieval Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy, along with works from the Musée d'art de Joliette's sacred art collection. This is first time Kitenge Banza incorporates artworks from a museum collection into one of his *in situ* installations. As the originating impulse behind this work, they lend themselves well to the idea and become part of his creative process. Selected for their relationship with iconographic representations of Christ and the personal universe they evoke, these pieces are now consumed into the artist's vast rewriting of History. But this building process, with its wide-ranging temporal and conceptual frameworks, is far from complete.

Catholicism is still practiced by nearly half of the Congolese population and deeply rooted in its culture. Conversely, it also symbolizes the replacement and marginalization of local traditions. European expansion throughout the world was the stuff of dreams; settlers believed they would find their Eden, an Earthly paradise inhabited by humans living in communion with God. What these colonizers never imagined was the impact this vast operation would have on so-called "uncivilized" populations. Treated as outsiders in this boundless territorial enterprise with priceless resources to be gained, colonized peoples became exiled in their own land. Today, many have opted to go into exile, forced to live far away from their home countries, where Eden continues to feed other people's fantasies.

1. JACOPO DA VALENZA

Italy, active 1478–1509

Madone, Enfant et adoreteur, between 1485–1509

[Madonna and Child with Adorer]

Oil on panel, 45.2 x 35.2 x 10 cm

Collection of Wilfrid Corbeil. Gift of the Clercs de Saint-Viateur du Canada

2012.163

While researching the MAJ's collection of sacred art, Moridja Kitenge Banza immediately took interest in the figure of the Virgin Mary. *Madonna and Child with Adorer* evokes the artist's childhood, raised in a Catholic environment where the Virgin Mary was ubiquitous. The painting is displayed against a blue background scattered with fleurs-de-lys. The colour and the motif on the gallery wall reference the veil from another Virgin Mary work in the collection, an 18th century sculpture not included in this exhibition.

Set in context with the other five works from the collection, *Madonna and Child with Adorer* foregrounds the Christ Child, a representation of Jesus that differs from the rest of the exhibition's iconography, which mainly depicts the final moments before his death, and his resurrection. This painting was purchased in Rome in March 1974 by Father Wilfrid Corbeil, CSV, the founder of the current MAJ. It is the earliest signed work in the collection.

2. MORIDJA KITENGE BANZA

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1980

Stultitia, 2024 ***Prudentia***, 2024

Inconstantia, 2024 ***Fortitudo***, 2024

Ira, 2024 ***Temperantia***, 2024

Iniustitia, 2024 ***Iustitia***, 2024

Infidelitas, 2024 ***Fides***, 2024

Invidia, 2024 ***Karitas***, 2024

Desperatio, 2024 ***Spes***, 2024

Ink jet prints on vinyl, 142.2 x 81.3 cm each
Property of the artist

This section takes us to the famous Scrovegni Chapel, built between 1303 and 1305. Commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni, an affluent banker from Padua, Italy, it is best known for its legendary frescoes by Giotto di Bondone (1266 or 1267-1337), known as the pioneer of perspective. Moridja Kitenge Banza was inspired by the sequence in the lower part of the nave that depicts groups of people on a spiritual path toward their final destinies, in either Heaven or Hell.

Inside the Scrovegni Chapel, depictions of vices and virtues face each other. In Kitenge Banza's version, vicious European colonizers loom over virtuous Congolese. At the end of the series of vices is an image of Tippo Tip, an influential Afro-Arab merchant who controlled much of the ivory and slave trades in eastern Central Africa. In 1877, he and his men facilitated the crossing of Henry Morton Stanley, a British explorer linked to the conquest of Congo and the violent exploitation of its population.

Further down, an image of a young girl with mutilated hands brings to mind the abusive exploitation of Congolese slave workers in rubber plantations under the regime of the Belgian king Leopold II. In the 19th century, Congo was the world's largest manufacturer of natural rubber. Forced labour was key to producing surplus value, which was so prized by the increasingly rich king-owner that he would punish underproductive workers by torturing their wives and children.

3. MORIDJA KITENGE BANZA

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1980

Yoka, 2024

Print on plexiglass, 203 x 100 x 0.5 cm

Property of the artist

4. ATTRIBUTED TO JUAN REXACH

Valencia, Spain, active 1431-1484

Christ de douleur avec saint Jérôme et sainte Marie-Madeleine, about 1450

[Christ of the Sorrows with Saint Jerome and Saint Mary Magdalene]

Oil and gold leaf on wood panel; likely egg tempera for some colours

70 x 53 cm

Gift of M. Nandor Loewenheim

1985.026

This painting represents the meeting of Italian and Flemish styles, two major artistic influences in 15th century Europe. Moridja Kitenge Banza includes it here for, among other reasons, its Byzantine aspect, the iconography of Christ, the formal links he makes with its icons, and the use of gold leaf.

Juan Rexach, to whom this International Gothic style painting is attributed, was one of the most important painters in Valencia, Spain. The upper portion of the painting depicts Jesus between the moment of his death and his resurrection. The tortured Christ figure appears before Saint Jerome and Saint Mary Magdalene, the two figures in the lower half of the painting. Likely used for private devotion or as part of a small, dismantled altar, this type of object was very popular in Europe in the latter part of the Middle Ages.

5. UNKNOWN

Vitrail, probably 19th century

[Stained glass]

Glass and lead, 134.5 x 122.5 x 4.5 cm

Glass and lead, 134 x 123 x 4.5 cm

Gift of Lucie Vary

1987.034 and 1987.035

Moridja Kitege Banza chose these two stained glass windows from the MAJ collection to recreate the effect of a chapel with windows. Their colours, motifs, and composition form the basis of a stained glass work titled *Yoka*, presented earlier in the exhibition.

The MAJ has almost no information about these stained glass windows. A note in the object file indicates they originated from the old church in Lachenaie, now part of the city of Terrebonne, in the Lanaudière region. However, it appears that the church was entirely destroyed by fire in 1964 and that no sacred or decorative objects were saved.

That fire occurred during the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II (1962-1965). In the wake of this council, bishops in Québec, now drawn into this ecumenical reform, modernized the image of the clergy and its religious practices in an attempt to maintain their influence on a region long under the yoke of Catholicism, but which was now dwindling. Part of this involved modernizing the churches by eliminating many of their sacred furnishing and usual architectural features. Father Corbeil, the founder of the MAJ, scoured the region for these objects in the interest of saving them from being destroyed or disappearing altogether. Although the reasons justifying the disappearance of cultural goods in Québec are vastly different from those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, links can be made between these two realities, where issues of power are never far away.

Christian icons are visual representations through which believers establish contact with the Divine. Since 2017, icons of Christ Pantocrator have become part of Moridja Kitenge Banza's iconographic repertoire. This representation usually symbolizes Christ's total dominion over the Universe, confirming his authority over Heaven and Earth. He is often depicted as a judge who, at the end times, will determine the fate of each individual based on acts they committed during their earthly passage.

In a subversive gesture, Kitenge Banza superimposes, over the same reproduction of Christ, an image of a different African mask retrieved from private and museum collections, and whose removal from the African continent is now widely contested. These masks, from private collections in Québec, are carved in series, a strategy that mimics the rules of the art market and highlights the differentiated and associated values of the original, the edition, and the copy.

The recent history of the Democratic Republic of Congo describes the displacement of a collection of traditional objects owned by president Mobutu Sese Seko (1930-1997). Following his departure in the aftermath of a civil and international rebellion between 1996 and 1997, these cultural objects, from various African origins, were dispersed across the globe. Some are now found in Québec.

6. MORIDJA KITENGE BANZA

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1980

***Christ Pantocrator no. 46 to no. 57*, 2024**

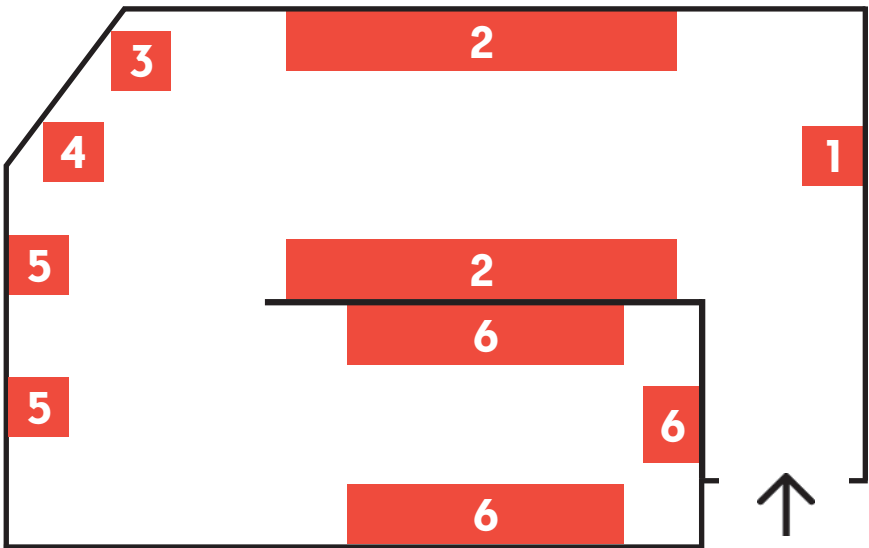
Acrylic and gold leaf on wood, 41 x 31 cm each

Property of the artist

FLOOR PLAN

1st floor

Salle EBI



The exhibition continues on the 2nd floor in the Salle Harnois Énergies.

This final section of Moridja Kitenge Banza's chapel draws from the final moments of Jesus' life, before his death on the summit of Golgotha.

The crucifixes and image of Christ on the cross are part of Kitenge Banza's universe, having grown up with this imagery at home, at school, and at church.

The choral song *Mystère du calvaire* [Mystery of the Calvary], sung by the artist, addresses the ignorance and senselessness at the origin of the death of Jesus, who was a victim of other people's poor judgement. In the context of this exhibition, however, the song becomes an allegory for the ordeal suffered by Kitenge Banza's fellow Congolese and ancestors. The hymn's lyrics become a mirror aimed at those who are unaware of the real-life calvary experienced by victims of colonization and abusive exploitation.

7. UNKNOWN

Ecce Homo, 1510

Oil on panel, 73.5 x 50.2 cm

Gift of the Clercs de Saint-Viateur du Canada

2022.195

This piece was selected by Moridja Kitenge Banza for its iconographic portrayal of the final moments of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, before his crucifixion. Standing on a platform before a mocking crowd, he dons the attributes of a farcical king: a crown of thorns, a purple robe, and a sceptre made of a reed.

This work is titled *Ecce homo*, a Latin phrase meaning "behold the man."

This theme is common in 15th century art and depicts the moment after the torture and flagellation of Christ, before his crucifixion. *Ecce homo* are the words Pontius Pilate pronounced when he presented Jesus to the crowd of people who had determined his fate.

In 1973, after visiting the Dominion Gallery in Montréal, which held both historical art and contemporary works, Father Corbeil made a proposal to renowned gallerist, Max Stern, asking him to donate this particular piece to the future museum he was in the process of establishing, in order to enhance its collection. Although this painting was long attributed to the Italian artist Defendente Ferrari (1490-1535), research in the last decade suggests it is actually of Spanish origin.

8. UNKNOWN

Cadre, 16th or 17th century

[Frame]

Wood, cardboard, fabric, 32.3 x 24.2 x 2.5 cm

Gift of the Clercs de Saint-Viateur du Canada

2022.333.2

Moridja Kitenge Banza has chosen to present only the frame that usually displays an ivory crucifix. Now empty without its corpus, the frame becomes an ironic allegory of what contemporary art represents: a void to fill with discourse. Religion and art share many commonalities as complex, largely cryptic systems with their own terminology—languages that must be mastered to grasp their every subtlety.

This void also refers to the artist's previous projects in which he explored the absence of museum objects in Africa as a way to reflect on the reverse effects of colonization on pillaged countries, emptied of their culture for the benefit of settler nations. The ivory crucifix associated with this frame depicts Christ on the cross, and was likely sculpted during the 17th century. A prestigious material, ivory was once prized for its ability to make extremely refined sacred objects. Sourced from the tusks of elephants, among other animals, this material is honoured in the sacred objects gallery on the third floor of the Musée. Now an alarmingly rare material whose trade is strictly prohibited, it casts a dark shadow on the history of an African resource that has been widely exploited by European forces.

9. MORIDJA KITENGE BANZA

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1980

Mystère du calvaire, 2024

[Mystery of the Calvary]

Four-channel video, sound, 2 min 30 s

Property of the artist

FLOOR PLAN

2nd floor

Salle Harnois Énergies

