

Since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, as he was being brutally arrested by police, a legitimate and necessary protest movement has arisen, first in America, and then around the world. Demonstrations have been denouncing the discrimination and violence that members of the communities of African descent have long endured. However, this has quickly transformed into iconoclastic movements that decried and attacked any and all symbolic representations, most often artistic, of historical figures deemed guilty of racist or colonial acts—or even thought.

As in all revolutions, denunciations are enough to make heads roll without trial or due process. From Christopher Columbus to Winston Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi, by way of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Robert Baden-Powell, Victor Schoelcher,

Often the most visible ally of power, art is sometimes a complicit and sometimes resistant witness to the ideas and mores of its time, and frequently it is the first victim of reactionary revisionists. Consequently, and unfortunately only one example among many, it was in an atmosphere of general indifference that another iconoclastic movement propagated itself with impunity in the halls and galleries of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, near Brussels, in the name of “decolonizing” them.

The official website dedicated to the Belgian patrimony states: “In the course of the major renovations of the museum that were completed in December 2018, all controversial colonial statues were removed from the exhibition spaces and moved to the cellar. Only those in the niches of the rotunda, which cannot be removed due to

## What Place for Our Statues?

By Yves-Bernard Debie

and King Leopold II of Belgium, dozens of statues all over the world were vandalized before being toppled from their pedestals, when they were not, like the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, actually trampled upon and thrown into the sea by demonstrators.

More often than not, these senseless acts that usually betrayed a lack of historical knowledge, were condemned by other groups, certainly less vocal and demonstrative but generally better informed. It was time for the resistance to organize, because the same destructive folly was already starting to generate new self-proclaimed “political figures” who were proposing, after they had dealt with statuary, to purge all art forms, including literature, theater, and even film. All would be just gone with the wind . . . .

These acts of violence perpetrated against the arts under the eyes of the media are, in fact, only the visible tip of a preexisting iceberg, since for the last decade or so we have been observing a more muted but also deeper movement that calls for a revisiting of our history in order to “repair” it.

their legally protected status, were left in place. An explanatory plaque was installed in the exhibition hall.”

The “controversial colonial statues,” with the exception of those protected by a providential historical designation, were thus removed to storage in an “off-limits” area as part of the decolonization policy that the museum’s leadership was now espousing. This “off-limits” area, this chamber of shame, became home for the four monumental patinated plaster works by African explorer and English artist Herbert Ward, which have had the honor since the 1950s of being shown in the Great Rotunda, the entryway to the world’s most important museum dedicated to the arts of Central Africa. The ten-year-old student I was about forty years ago clearly remembers the powerful impression these statues made at the museum’s entrance and how gigantic they seemed. We had to prepare for a school field trip we were to be on for a week, and what we were going to learn was going to keep us busy for another two. Our teacher, Mrs. Colson, had given us each sheets of paper with illustrations of







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Ward’s statues, often referred to as *The Chief of the Tribe*, *The Congo Artist*, *The Idol Maker*, and *The Fire Maker*, that would allow us to connect with the museum’s African collection, which was still densely installed at the time. The moment we entered the museum the first day, I discovered Africa and the power of its peoples, whom I had already learned something about in the context of the great prehistoric migrations from which we are all descended. I laid eyes for the first time on an art that would become a passion for me later in life.

LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM  
**FIG. 1:** Herbert Ward (1863–1919), *The Congo Artist*, 1910.  
 © MRAC, Tervuren.

**FIG. 2:** Herbert Ward (1863–1919), *The Idol Maker*, 1906.  
 © MRAC, Tervuren.

**FIG. 3:** Herbert Ward (1863–1919), *The Chief of the Tribe*, 1908.  
 © MRAC, Tervuren.

**FIG. 4:** Herbert Ward (1863–1919), *The Fire Maker*, 1908.  
 © MRAC, Tervuren.

**FIG. 5 (above):** View of the rotunda at the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale, with installations by the RE/STORE project, 2019  
 © MRAC, Tervuren.

So why all this contempt for the works of Hebert Ward? There is little in this talented artist’s biography that the petty judges who have decided to impose the penalty of relegation—which has long been absent from our judicial arsenals—would have found to justify their condemnation. Born in London in 1863, Ward left school at the age of fifteen and embarked for New Zealand and Australia. He worked as a gold miner, cowhand, circus artist, and an employee of the British North Borneo Company before contracting malaria and having to return to England. In 1884, he met Henry Morton Stanley in London and was appointed to a post as a colonial officer in the Congo, where he spent two years exploring both the upper and lower reaches of the Congo River. When he was replaced by a Belgian officer, Ward joined the Sanford Exploring Company and remained with it until March 1887. Upon his return to England, Stanley, who was busy preparing the famous rescue expedition for Eduard Schnitzer (better known as Emin Pacha), appointed Ward lieutenant of the expedition. He would spend the next fourteen months, instead of the four that had been

planned, awaiting Stanley's return at Yambuya on the shores of the Aruwimi River.

Ward left the Congo in 1889 and would never return, but his biography, published in London in 1927, summarizes his years in the Congo: "An enchantment with Africa took hold of him forever, controlled his future, and gave color and form to his entire life's work. The mark those five years made was indelible."

The motivation for the museum's sanction certainly was not the quality of his works, which plead their case without any help. Major museums, including the Musée d'Orsay, acquired works by Ward that were presented to the public most notably at the 2019 exhibition *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse (The Black Model from Géricault to Matisse)*.

It is the attributes of Ward's statues that constituted the faults necessitating expiation. These realistic representations of Africans in traditional yet academic postures are seen by the censors that mete out sentences at the former "Royal Museum for Central Africa" at Tervuren as solemn declarations of colonial intent—although they might have trouble explaining why and how they differ from representations of Belgian workers like Constantin Meunier's *Le Débardeur du Port d'Anvers (Stevedore at the Port of Antwerp)* or *Mineur à la Hache (Miner with Axe)*. It is important to note here that Ward's works are not colonial allegories, nor even ethnographic documents, but are rather part of the Africanist literary and artistic trend that took hold in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century and has much in common with the Orientalist movement that preceded it. As British art historian and essayist Lynne Thornton reminds us: "What distinguishes Africanism in particular is the way in which the traveling painters freed themselves of politically or socially inspired stereotypical images [...]." Her Beninese colleague, Didier Houénou, wrote in his 2007 doctoral thesis that "one must nonetheless recognize that the Africanists' motivations were noble and that they certainly played an important part in the evolution of a positive image of the black body."

Nothing can thus justify the affront made to Herbert Ward and his work. Unfortunately, the destiny reserved for Arthur Dupagne and Arsène



IN THE RUBBER COILS.

From *Punch*, 28 November 1906.

FIG. 6 (above): "In The Rubber Coils. Scene - The Congo 'Free' State," Linley Sambourne, 1906.

From *Punch*, 28 November 1906.

FIG. 7 (near right top): Arthur Dupagne (1895–1961), *La lutte avec le serpent*.

© MRAC, Tervuren.

FIGS. 8 and 9 (far right): Jean Pierre Müller, *La lutte avec le serpent*, 2019.

© MRAC, Tervuren.

Matton's sculptures is really no more enviable. Forced to retain the historically protected works in situ in the niches of the rotunda, and seeing them to be no more than colonialist propaganda, the censors the museum engaged have, under the pretext of "decolonization," heavy-handedly substituted some propaganda of their own.

The paroxysm of disinformation undoubtedly reaches its apogee in the museum's "Diaspora gallery," in which one of its researchers has, in her capacity as the curator of the space, had a panel installed that cites an ethnic, not to say racial, statistic that I personally find especially revolting and that derives from a complete misinterpretation of other studies. It reads: "The newcomers [implied: Africans arriving in Belgium] display an average level of education superior to that of White Belgians and of immigrant workers and their descendants from the Mediterranean countries, but are the most often discriminated against."

But let us get back to our poor statues and to the *RE/STORE* artistic project that the missionaries of this new Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide are pursuing, which consists of putting semitransparent panels over them featuring printed contemporary drawings that are supposed to create tension with the statues, the whole enhanced with an explanatory label in English. Asked about this, one of the artists, Jean-Pierre Müller, explained that "the visitor has work to do here. The objective is to create a shock of imagery to promote reflection."

Alright then, challenge accepted. Let's work and think together, for instance about one of the sixteen veiled statues commented upon by the *RE/STORE* project artists, the figure of an African man fighting a serpent. In order to "decolonize" this statue, the artists superimposed a 1906 caricature of Leopold II onto it, taken from an English newspaper, which, given colonial

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competition, is not especially kind to the Belgian sovereign, who is depicted as a dangerous snake.

Upon reflection, and above and beyond the fact that this statue now covered with its veil of repentance, is part of the Africanist artistic movement that in no way needs to be decolonized, it is inspired, as Dr. Julien Volper regularly reminds us, by a bronze statue after François-Joseph Bosio, now in the Louvre, of Hercules fighting Achelous, who has been transformed into a serpent. So it is the powerful son of Zeus with the proud features of a Congolese man that the ignorance of the pallid inquisitors has covered with a sad political caricature.

Despite their best efforts, the heart of the Africa envisioned by Livingstone, Stanley, and Ward continues to beat beneath the sculptures' metal hides and their bronze patina.

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