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Congo style: from Belgian Art Nouveau to Zaïre's Authenticité

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2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24464

Sacks, Ruth (2017) Congo style: from Belgian Art Nouveau to Zaïre's Authenticité, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24464>

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Abstract:

This thesis analyzes how the Congo has been represented in modernist design situations, from colonial depictions to variegated forms of Congolese self representation. Architecture and art exhibitions in Euro-America and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are approached as points of contestation and intersection. The aim is to look at mutual dependencies and interrelations in modernist forms and spatial practices that migrate and mutate across huge distances and time spans. Links and recurring tropes are located in Art Nouveau total artworks in Belgium (circa 1890 -1905), Congolese objects in 20th century gallery space (from MOMA in the 1930s to 1970s Kinshasa), imperial remains from the early 1900s (in present day Mbanza Ngungu and Kinshasa) and the Africanist aesthetics of Mobutu Sese Seko's era of *retour a l'authenticité* (1970s). In revisiting historic representations of the Congo, certain forms and spatial practices emerge, whose meanings are revealed according to how they engage with and are acted upon by their different contexts and temporalities.

Keywords:

Congo, Zaïre, Art Nouveau, modernism, theory from the Global South, postcolonial studies, design practices in Africa, independence era aesthetics, colonial architecture, decolonizing the museum.