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Source: *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011), pp. 139-181

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Bard Graduate Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662515>

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Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I

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This article is the first of a two-part study. Part I identifies Belgian art nouveau as a specifically Congo style and as “imperial modernism,” created from Congo raw materials and inspired by Congo motifs—the lash, the vine, and the elephantine. Focusing closely on works by Victor Horta, Henry van de Velde, and Philippe Wolfers, Part I suggests how stylistic forms of modernism expressed a displaced encounter with a distant but encroaching imperial violence—the return of the repressor in visual form. Part II, which will appear in the next issue of West 86th, focuses on the history, visual culture, and ongoing renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (originally opened in 1910), highlighting new research on expressive forms of violence, past and present, within Belgium and outside it.

Rêve qui veut ou qui peut.

—Paul Gauguin

Vouloir c'est pouvoir.

—King Leopold II

Introduction: Totalities, Global and Social

In the spring of 1885, just months before the symbolists proclaimed their replacement of contingent reality with the expansive indeterminacy of the dream, Leopold II, King of the Belgians, achieved an astonishing and improbable goal: he claimed a vast new realm of his own devising, a conjury on a map called L'État indépendant du Congo, “The Congo Free State.” A complaisant Parliament authorized the king to become the sovereign of this distant African realm and proceeded to fund it as an arena of investment and extraction.¹ Thus was born what historians have called an anomalous colony without a metropole, a fictional state of about twenty million people owned by the king, ruled by

decree, and run from Brussels between 1885 and 1908.² An initially indifferent public soon hailed Leopold as a “visionary,” a “clairvoyant,” a “poet” and a “dreamer [*rêveur*]” who had broken through the torpor of his nation’s limited horizons and brought the whole world into accord with his inner vision, undeterred by the constraints of a tawdry realism.³

Enthralled citizens of Belgium and their king, who never set foot in this African domain, followed the progress of their empire at a distance through a constant stream of maps and books that showed the Free State boundaries constantly changing, pushed ever forward with each new expedition along the twists and turns of the Congo River.⁴ By 1895, a decade after King Leopold had marked a wall map with a discrete rectangular box, the frontiers of the Congo Free State had swollen to ten times its original size, forming a shape-shifting and massive entity of one million square miles (fig. 1).⁵ Its borders remained, until 1908, as pliable, indeterminate, and fluid as the curve of the Congo River that afforded its unending expansion.

In 1830, Belgium, a new nation, was itself an artificial country, a fragile entity crafted by the whim and will of the European powers that set its borders, chose its ruler, and dictated its status of perpetual neutrality. By 1905, two decades of contact with the Congo Free State had remade Belgium as a global hub, vitalized by a tentacular economy, technological prowess, and architectural grandiosity. Steamer ships loaded to bursting disgorged precious cargoes at Antwerp harbor: ivory tusks and exotic fruits, colossal and colored hardwoods. Most unusual were the cakes, disks, and coils of latex extracted from reportedly infinite supplies of wild rubber vines draping the Congo forests, described by gleeful contemporaries as a resource that fell like “manna from heaven” into the laps of the lucky Belgians and their generous and audacious king. Explorers and state agents began in 1885 to record their amazement at the profusion of tangled, flowerless vines that swooped relentlessly up, down, and across the forests (fig. 2). And they expressed their astonishment that insouciant and indolent natives harvested the pitted fruits—coarse-skinned orange gourds—for succulent snacking (fig. 3). The same natives were uninterested, the reports continued—except when making an occasional musical instrument requiring a drum skin—in the “precious gums” of latex that flowed inside each and every one of these bulky, engorged vines.⁶

Henry Morton Stanley sent back this enthusiastic recommendation to King Leopold, his royal employer, just after the Congo Free State was established in 1885: if every native collected a third of a pound of rubber each day, the whole enterprise would pay for itself within one year.⁷ Stanley was confident that “the natives will be easily induced to collect the rubber [once] one sensible European has succeeded in teaching them what the countless vines, creepers and tendrils of their forest can produce.”⁸ Instead, as we now know—and as was known through mounting evidence published in the press in Belgium and internationally by 1896—the frenzy for rubber unleashed, in a world that Joseph Conrad wrote searingly about, a wild, indiscriminate, and “monstrous” “outburst of reckless cruelty and greed” by “modern Conquistadors.”⁹ Other critical observers, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, E. D. Morel,

Fig. 1

Map of the Congo Free State, 1897, with a portrayal of the "comparative grandeur of the Congo and Belgium" in the lower left-hand corner. From Lieutenant Th. Masui, *Guide de l'État indépendant du Congo à l'Exposition de Bruxelles-Tervuren en 1897* (Brussels, 1897).

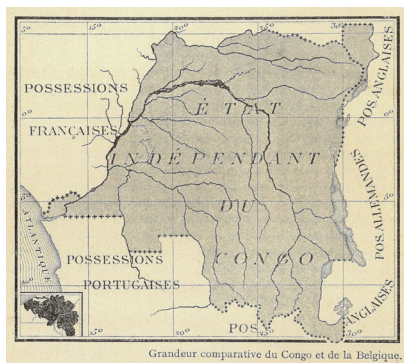


Fig. 2

Natives collecting latex from rubber vines. Photograph by F. Michel, 1897. Collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium.



Fig. 3

New types of wild rubber vines: "Landolphia owariensis." From E. De Wildeman and L. Gentil, *Lianes caoutchoutifères de l'État indépendant du Congo* (Brussels, 1904).



Fig. 4 (left)
Linley Sambourne, "In the Rubber Coils. Scene—The Congo 'Free' State." *Punch* 131 (1906): 389.



Fig. 5
Severed hands in the Congo. Photograph from Edmund D. Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in the Congo* (London, 1904).

and Belgians Jules Destrée and A.-J. Wauters, noted that the brazen hypocrisy of the modern conquistadors made them even more repellent than their predecessors Cortés and Pizarro, for King Leopold and his officers shrouded their marauding plunder with appeals to civilization and the philanthropic benefits for Africa. Twain considered this odious mixture of pillage and piety as "money lust irradiated by high principle."¹⁰ By 1908, after eight years of acrimonious debate in the Belgian Parliament, the nation was forced to annex King Leopold's realm, finally acknowledging the devastation wrought by a "red rubber" regime of forced labor, invasion terror, hostage taking, and hand severing, the last the product of a vicious accounting system which required that native troops, whose ammunition was carefully rationed, present Belgian post commanders with a severed hand for every villager killed as proof that they had not wasted bullets (figs. 4–5). Contemporary evidence pointed to widespread death and destruction during the two and a half decades of the Leopoldian regime in the Congo Free State; more recent historians estimate that between four and eight million Congolese natives died in this short period.¹¹

The year the photographs of Congo atrocities began circulating in the international press, Belgium was celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of its national independence amidst the euphoria of a soaring economy and laissez-faire expansionism at home and abroad. Observing the bustle and bulk of priceless

stuffs at Antwerp port, a writer of 1905 noted that the nation of Belgium had become a real *pays de Cockagne*, or Land of Plenty.¹² But the state of profusion that Peter Brueghel the Elder had imagined as a compensatory fantasy amidst sixteenth-century peasant deprivation now materialized as a dazzling merchantable deluge. And Baudelaire would have been astonished to find that his “Pays de Cockagne,” the dreamland of paradisiacal fullness, conformed most closely to the site of his utmost derision, that “Pauvre Belgique.”¹³ Baudelaire’s 1864 prose poem “L’invitation au voyage” casts a vision of the infinite in the concrete images of enormous ships crammed with treasures—plants, textiles, metals, comestibles—hailed from remote places across the seas and flowing into home port. The poet laments, then ends his tale angrily as he realizes that he luxuriates only in a dream. But the vast treasures and rich stuffs of the Baudelairian voyage were, by 1900, a dream made real in the Belgian imperium; they arrived biweekly from the Congo and were unloaded from the carriers of the Matadi–Antwerp line.

As products of the world poured into Belgium, the staggering profits they yielded enabled the king to rebuild Brussels as an architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the stage set of a global empire. Leopold II harbored lifelong ambitions to embellish the capital, and he coveted the monumental grandeur of Napoleon III’s Paris. Until 1900 his architectural projects were thwarted by municipal rules and lack of funds; with his personal treasury flush with Congo revenue, Leopold had free rein to construct lavish buildings, parkways, and palaces for Belgium.¹⁴

As master builder—“le Roi Bâtitteur,” as he was and still is affectionately called by some—King Leopold assembled in a short period a startling array of monumental structures whose styles spanned the cultures and empires of the world and permanently marked the built environment in Belgium. At his Brussels estate at Laeken, Leopold planned renovations explicitly designed to outdo Louis XIV’s Versailles. Enormous greenhouses contained flora from every corner of the globe; a separate, soaring structure was built specifically for the colossal palms of the Congo jungles. Young Victor Horta spent his apprenticeship working in the office of Alphonse Balat, the architect in charge of creating the king’s iron-and-glass towers for the astonishing specimens from his new African domain.¹⁵ The surrounding parkland was not neglected: Leopold imported teams of artisans to reconstruct a large-scale disassembled Japanese tower and a Chinese pavilion that he purchased at the Paris Exhibition of 1900.¹⁶ And Leopold’s massive Congo profits subsidized the completion of his pet project for Belgium: a triumphal arch, conceived to triple a Constantinian precedent in size and to exceed the scale of Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate.¹⁷ The massive middle arch created an imposing architectural link between the city of Brussels and the king’s property at Tervuren. Its central columns framed a dramatic sightline that terminated at another colossal structure under way in 1905 to celebrate the ravenous reach of the new Belgian imperialism: the Royal Congo Museum, now known as the Royal Museum for Central Africa.

The Royal Congo Museum forms a site of vital and unexplored connections between the modernist artists of art nouveau and their distinctive national culture of imperial Belgium. Bold experiments in artistic synthesis flourished

in the Belgian art nouveau movement that sought a new unity of art and craft, architecture and design, liberated from history and tradition. The unprecedented economic prosperity and overseas expansionism of fin-de-siècle Belgium provided progressive artists such as Victor Horta, Henry van de Velde, and Paul Hankar with elite patrons and some budgets awash in Congo dividends. But these artists' creative consciousnesses were also vitalized by the sudden and successful Congo venture, and they shared the exhilaration of their contemporaries, as well as some of the collective derangement, over the fact that their small, new, and neutral nation had "acquired" one-thirteenth of the African continent and had been summoned as the headquarters of what the first museum director called in 1910 an "invasive civilizationism" powered by financial combines, railroad tracks, and grateful natives.¹⁸

In 2005 the Tervuren museum mounted an exhibition, *La mémoire du Congo, le temps colonial*, that attempted to confront for the very first time the brutal history of Belgium in the Congo, long suppressed in what had become the pivotal institution of official national denial and the most visible and provocative embodiment of "the great forgetting":¹⁹ King Leopold II's museum, opened in 1910 and never renovated. The exhibit, which will be discussed in Part II of this article as flawed and evasive, nonetheless provided an opportunity to see some of the rarely visible collections and to refocus attention on the history of the museum, art nouveau, and the imperial culture of fin-de-siècle Belgium during the period of the Congo Free State. The new context of the 2005 exhibition provoked me to notice, and begin to study in depth, the profound and inextricable ties, long unexamined, between the Belgian arts and artists of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the patrons, policies, violence, and even the expressive forms of Congo imperialism.

The Belgian case requires that we look anew at the impulses to totality in fin-de-siècle modernism and modernity. Here, two registers coexist: the Wagnerian legacy of art and revolution and the Leopoldian spectacle of art and empire. Belgian art nouveau artists, responding to both legacy and spectacle, mobilized expressive forms of totality in two simultaneous directions: toward capacious inclusiveness, idealism, and utopian harmony, to be realized in a new community, and toward voracious entitlement to earthly bounty, to be fulfilled through a universalizing reliance on technological hubris and "armored cosmopolitanism."²⁰ It is this complex and fascinating interaction of an avant-garde quest for unity and a national drive for global incorporation and imperial domination that shaped the founding of the Royal Congo Museum and inspired the art nouveau artists drawn to it. The 2005 exhibition allowed this untold story to come into focus after a "great forgetting" in both Belgian and art history.

The Elephant in the Room: Art Nouveau, Style Congo, "Free State" Empire at a Distance

Some of the important and rarely displayed art nouveau objects—ivory sculptures and Congo wood furnishings personally commissioned by King Leopold II—were showcased in Brussels in 2005 for the 175th anniversary of Belgian independence. These objects exemplify a complex and understudied mix of



Fig. 6

Philippe Wolfers,
*Civilization and
Barbarism*, 1897. Ivory
and silver with onyx
base, 46 x 67 x 26.5 cm.
Collection of the King
Baudouin Foundation,
Royal Museums of
Art and History,
Brussels. Photograph
© Hugues Dubois.



Fig. 7

The opposite side
of fig. 6. Photograph
© Hugues Dubois



Fig. 8

Detail of fig.
6 showing
interior bolts.
Photograph
by author.

artistic innovation, political radicalism, and imperial enthrallment shared by members of the Belgian avant-garde, and they constitute part of a distinctively Belgian modernism made from imperial raw materials. Contemporaries at the time called it Style Congo.²¹ One example in particular embodies in its form and technical handling how I came to characterize Belgian art nouveau as an art of darkness.

Out of the royal vault and into the limelight in 2005 came *Civilization and Barbarism* by Philippe Wolfers, who is sometimes referred to as the Lalique of Belgium (figs. 6–7).²² The piece was created on the occasion of the 1897 Brussels World's Fair, when the king sponsored a large-scale exhibition of the Congo Free State on the grounds of his Tervuren estate. An entry Hall of Honor greeted visitors with a display of a group of more than eighty chryselephantine sculptures. This new genre of sculpture, which featured a mix of ivory and precious metals, aimed to revitalize the lost Flemish art of ivory carving by going back to classical precedents; its practitioners rejected early modern miniaturism for the heft and solemnity of the ivory and gold figures that had guarded the temples of imperial Rome. King Leopold gave the artists free ivory for the 1897 works, and he provided free Congo hardwoods to the group of art nouveau designers who created the display cases and interior installations in the pavilion. Dispersed and confined to storerooms, some of these objects have begun to resurface.²³

The Wolfers sculpture, hailed in 2005 as a treasure of national design, symbolizes a ferocious battle between barbarism, in the form of a snake-headed dragon, and civilization, represented by a swan—a creature familiar from the fin-de-siècle repertoire of world-weary languor but unfamiliar in the attitude shown here: Wolfers gives us a militant swan, with mighty wings in full swell and a lethal open beak ready to snap and crack. The double set of metallic wings envelops Africa, embodied by a lily-carved elephant tusk open at one end for a practical purpose: it was originally designed to hold a scroll bearing hundreds of signatures of Flemish and Walloon elites from the worlds of business, manufacturing, politics, and the military honoring the secretary of state of the Congo Free State, Edmond Van Eetvelde.²⁴ Profits from imports of Congo ivory, wild rubber, and palm oil traded by Belgian companies had soared to astonishing heights between 1888 and 1897 (stock dividends returned, *on average*, more than 220 percent from 1892 to 1897), and the sculpture was presented as a tribute to King Leopold's talented and loyal associate.²⁵ With the scroll packed into the open tusk, it formed a reverse cornucopia.

Commentators of 1897 praised the interaction of the delicate ivory and the rigid silver wrapping in which it nestled. But a close view of the object, looking inside the hollow, shows that the ivory is secured by other means—it is punctured, clamped and bolted in place (fig. 8). The violent handling of the artist's materials corresponds to the theme of combat depicted in the sculpture and evokes some of the brutality of its origins. Reclaimed to public view in 2005, the Wolfers sculpture captures, with unwitting clarity, the thanatal history of Belgium in the Congo: civilizers in the process of becoming the barbarians they were summoned to destroy.



Fig. 9

Charles Van der Stappen,
Mysterious Sphinx, 1897.
Ivory and alloy of copper and
silver with onyx base, 56.5
x 46 x 31.3 cm. Collection
of the King Baudouin
Foundation, Royal Museums
of Art and History, Brussels.
Photograph © King Baudouin
Foundation.



Fig. 10

Gustave Klimt, *Pallas
Athena*, 1898. Oil on canvas,
75 x 75 cm. Wien Museum
Karlsplatz, Vienna. Photo
credit: Erich Lessing / Art
Resource, NY.



Fig. 11
A. Joseph Strijmans, *The Snake Charmer*, 1897. Ivory and silver; height 46 cm, diameter 11.5 cm; bilanga (Nauclea) base. Collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Photograph by author.



Fig. 12
Philippe Wolfers, *Spring*, 1913, with detail of plugs in small of back. Ivory. Collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Photographs by author.



Militant figures and violent technical procedures characterize other chryselephantines created for the 1897 Congo exhibition. The most spectacular is Charles Van der Stappen's *Mysterious Sphinx*, also called *The Secret*, now displayed in a renovated Brussels museum gallery for the fin-de-siècle ivories, the Wolfers piece among them (fig. 9).²⁶ At first glance, the Athena-inspired figure appears to be a variant of the "femme fatale." It is reminiscent of another venerated goddess transformed by distinctively modern dilemmas: Gustave Klimt's *Pallas Athena* of 1898 (fig. 10). The locked gaze and reflecting glare of Klimt's forbidding Secessionist figure disrupts classical precedent with confrontation and provocation. In one hand she grasps a spear, and with the other she holds up to the viewer a conspicuously naked "nuda veritas" with an empty mirror, emblems of the rebellion—both oedipal and sexual—that marked the crisis of Viennese liberalism.²⁷

Van der Stappen's *Mysterious Sphinx* is not a sexual warrior exposing the truth but an imperial warrior guarding a secret. Chased silver breastplate and helmet encase an ivory body; ferocious companions—a devouring serpent below and a voracious bird above—redouble the defenses. Van der Stappen's *Sphinx* departs from the convention of the three-quarter sculpture portrait, forming a figure curiously cut through the bust, just below the shoulder. Two and a half points, the rounded tips of three separate elephant tusks, were shaped into component parts for the woman's face, hair, and upper body: the sculpture is an unusually large composition in the medium.²⁸

Critics in 1897 applauded the sculptor's ingenuity in devising the fitted silver armor to disguise the splits and joins of the composite but divided assemblage inside. A distinctive challenge of the medium of ivory is that even small-scale figure carving requires multiple tusk pieces. The contiguous parts are visible on the surface of the bodies, especially the arms, as gaps and slits; one example of these can be seen along the arms in *The Snake Charmer*, exhibited in the 1897 Hall of Honor and now in the new Brussels museum gallery (fig. 11). The quality of the chryselephantine genre, writers explained, lay in the artist's skill in concealing the joins and cuts on the ivory surfaces with the metal overlay. In the case of the *Mysterious Sphinx*, Van der Stappen had discovered an unusual and dramatic solution, as Fernand Khnopff commented at the time: the silver wraparound from head to bust combined "the armor and the head-piece" "in such a way that the metal and the ivory are united without a join being seen in any part."²⁹ Octave Maus, another admirer, concluded his tribute by noting that the dextrous handling of the materials afforded the creation of a larger-than-usual figural form, with large ivory pieces secured by the silver chasing, and that by using this technique Van der Stappen had managed to "evade" or "avoid" altogether ("esquiva") the problem of joins that bedeviled artists in the delicate and difficult medium of ivory sculpture.³⁰

The art nouveau ivory Sphinx beckons, fingers to lips, and elicits complicity in silence. In 1897 she was positioned in the chryselephantine Hall of Honor near a large bust of King Leopold and set on a plinth of Congo wood designed by Henry van de Velde.³¹ Yet her secret was already out in two ways. Writers of the period highlighted the interaction of violence and disguise in the composition;



Fig. 13
Victor Horta, Van Eetvelde House, 1895–97. Period photograph of interior iron-and-glass octagonal court also known as the Winter Garden, with Wolfers's *Civilization and Barbarism* on the back table. Photograph courtesy of the Horta Museum, Saint Gilles. © Bequest Victor Horta, SOFAM Belgium.

they understood that the Sphinx was an aggressor—feral guards and all—with an injured body. Artists working their materials and critics exploring the genre confronted how the form functioned by hiding the split-apart component parts of tusks in the fitted casing of metal armor. Her larger secret—rule by force and unbounded extraction in the Congo Free State that had supplied the artist's materials—was also out in the open in 1897; news of mutinies by native soldiers, trials of officers' atrocities, and evidence of severed hands had been publicized in Belgium and the international press for more than two years.³²

With the return of the ivories to public view since 2005, new awareness of the long-suppressed imperial history and colonial memory of Belgium and the Congo compels us to attend to the way the art nouveau objects embody violence and disguise, breaking and breaking through. In the opulent and dazzlingly lit new galleries in the Brussels museum, Wolfers's *Civilization and Barbarism* appears with its ferocious battlers and punctured skin and bolts; the *Mysterious Sphinx* looms with imperfections and injuries, showing a face and neck riddled with cracks, slitted gaps between helmet and head, and a bust line curiously cut; and figures like *The Snake Charmer*, *Saint John the Baptist*, and *Surprise* engage us with exposed seams where limbs, like puzzle pieces, attach. Wolfers's *Spring*, in the form of a nubile and milky-white female nude, summons viewers' eyes to a series of visible ivory plugs, like circles of caulking, on the legs, back, and

Fig. 14
 Victor Horta, Tassel House,
 1893–95. Main floor landing
 and foot of staircase.
 Photograph by Christine
 Bastin and Jacques Evrard.
 © Bequest Victor Horta,
 SOFAM Belgium.



haunches of the bending figure (fig. 12). These plugs are the sites, we are told, where the nerves of the elephant's tooth had left their marring marks—gaping holes that needed cover.

The reappearance of the ivories offers us the space for a new historical understanding—the space to explore how artists of the 1890s and their public came to glorify a new visual form as an apotheosis of imperial triumph and the wonders and profusion of Africa. The return of the objects also provides an opportunity for contemporary history and criticism—an occasion to suggest how the ivories in their materiality compose a gallery of wounded objects, reminding us of the violence of their origins and the psychic costs of repressing them. Belgian art nouveau now looks very different to me than it did before 2005, and the specifically Congo style of the 1890s and its coherence as a distinctively imperial form of modernism can now be identified.

Wolfers's *Civilization and Barbarism* tribute ivory made its original home in the lavish iron-and-glass Brussels mansion that Victor Horta built in 1895–97 for the Congo secretary of state. Horta's house for Van Eetvelde, with its scooped-out interior court, lit from above through an airy stained-glass cupola, and his Tassel House of 1893 (with some furnishings by Henry van de Velde) are considered the pinnacle of Belgian art nouveau's technological innovation



Fig. 15 (left)
Octave van Rysselberghe and Henry van de Velde, Otlet House, 1894. Elephantine stained-glass window in the stairwell. Photograph by Christine Bastin and Jacques Evrard. © SOFAM Belgium.

Fig. 16 (right)
Elephant ear fern:
"Platycerium elephantotis."
Illustration from Georg
August Schweinfurth and
Ellen E. Frewer, *The Heart of
Africa* (Leipzig, 1874).



(figs. 13–14). But they are also the culmination of a distinctly Belgian style of imperial exploration and domination. Research materials abound, albeit in dispersed areas, that reveal visual sources, social circles, and networks of communication connecting Horta and Van de Velde to the heart of a wide-ranging culture of the Congo in Belgium for at least a decade before and after King Leopold's 1897 Tervuren exhibition, to which both contributed. By assembling scattered evidence and reclaiming these materials for the interpretive field, facts, stylistic motifs, and expressive forms come together to create a previously unseen picture of Belgian art nouveau as Style Congo.

Henry van de Velde, for example, was a proud citizen of Antwerp, a frequenter of the port with its crush of steamer traffic, and an enthusiast of imperial exploration. His older brother, Willy, left Antwerp for Africa, accompanying Henry Morton Stanley on his second round of reconnaissance along the strenuous course of the Congo River on behalf of his royal employer, Leopold II. Willy hoped Henry would join him in an adventure far from what he called the "mousetrap" constraints of Belgium. It is possible that had Willy not died during his second volunteer recruitment to Central Africa, Henry van de Velde might have ended up, not as a Nikolaus Pevsner "pioneer of modern design," set midway between William Morris and Walter Gropius, but as one of the early "pioneers of the Congo Free State" and an entry in the *Biographie coloniale belge*.³³ More important was Van de Velde's encounter in Belgium with a wealth of imperial images, books, magazines, photographs, exhibitions, and travel literature about the Congo from 1885 to 1900, which left formative traces in his creative consciousness and shaped an unacknowledged African presence in his interior designs and decorative arts.



Fig. 17
Ivory stockpiles in Antwerp, 1902. Illustration from *Congo-Noël: Publié au profit de la Villa coloniale "Sanatorium de Watermael"* (Brussels, 1902).



Fig. 18
Ivory Trophy mount in the Royal Congo Museum, Tervuren, 1910. Photograph on a postcard.

One element of an unsuspected Congo lexicon in Van de Velde's visual style unifies all phases of his artistic career and reveals an imperial coherence to Belgian art nouveau: elephantine shapes and motifs. From his first major commission in the Brussels Otlet House to his projects in Paris, Berlin, Chemnitz, and Weimar, elephants are anywhere and everywhere in the rooms he designed, and in every medium of expression (fig. 15). Hidden in plain sight, they form a peculiarly Belgian imperial synecdoche—reducing to a stylized and aesthetic pattern the jungle animal familiar to Belgians and to Van de Velde only through the tusks, body bones, and crania shipped out to Antwerp as precious commodities and for museum and exhibition display.

As a resident of Antwerp and a constant visitor to the port beginning in the 1870s, Van de Velde inhabited the city just as it was emerging as an imperial hub, and he was surrounded by the sudden profusion of products from Africa that swelled the giant cargo ships sailing to its shores.³⁴ The explorer literature that propelled his brother Willy to leave Belgium and join Stanley in Central Africa surely also filled Henry van de Velde's imagination, as it did that of many of his contemporaries. The widely read books by Georg August Schweinfurth and by Stanley, for example, recorded their writers' astonishment not only at the massive tangles of wild rubber vines but also at the colossal palms and other "luxuriant" gigantic plants, like the elephant ear fern, *Platycerium elephantotis* (fig. 16).³⁵ Even more impressive were what appeared to Stanley and explorers from Belgium to be the seemingly infinite supply of elephant herds and their "most valuable product": ivory. Stanley's book on the new Congo Free State ruled by King Leopold included a final chapter in which he provided product forecasts, with this comment about one region, the Upper Congo:

It may be presumed that there are about 200,000 elephants in about 15,000 herds in the Congo basin, each carrying, let us say, on an average of 50 lbs. weight of ivory in his head, which would represent, when collected and sold in Europe, 5,000,000 [pounds sterling]. . . . As the Congo basin is a large area, and considering the tons upon tons drawn for the last eighty years from the eastern half of Africa it may be that I have under-estimated the number of elephants still living in the unexploited and virgin western half of the continent.³⁶

Van de Velde's Antwerp was certainly inundated by enough tusks to support Stanley's exorbitant claims about the faraway jungles of the Congo. Period photographs show stacks of ivory stockpiled in large sheds, and by the time of the Antwerp World's Fair of 1894, statistics and photographs celebrated how Antwerp was overtaking Liverpool as the global hub of the tusk trade (fig. 17).³⁷ In the year before the exhibition, when King Leopold and Secretary Van Eetvelde were offering ivory to artists in an effort to renew the Flemish chryselephantine tradition, artists throughout Belgium traveled to the harbor to choose pieces to use. A photograph of Phillipe Wolfers in his studio shows a tusk laid along the floor while the artist prepares a work in progress. Van de Velde and his colleagues in 1890s Belgium were encountering elephants galore in the form of extracted parts from giant heads.

Van de Velde's particular world of ivory tusk glut gave rise to two evident habits. First, the tusks were treated both with great casualness and as trophies of voracious acquisition. At the Antwerp World's Fair the curving tusks could be seen strewn about display tables; they held table covers in place and jutted out haphazardly from one room to the next. At the Tervuren Congo exhibition of 1897, the tusks acted as banister posts in some areas and substitute doorposts in others, while some of the most massive were displayed, to dramatic effect, as attractions in their own right.³⁸

The abundance of ivory from the giant beasts subdued to supply it also gave shape to a flamboyant genre, the elephant tusk trophy mount. In 1890, Stanley visited Brussels to receive a hero's welcome after rescuing Emin Pasha, the governor of Equatoria. At the banquet in his honor, held at the Stock Exchange, Congolese spears decorated the walls, and an enormous centerpiece of foliage sprouted four hundred elephant tusks.³⁹ The centerpiece format, with excess trimmed and tusk sizes staggered to create a rounded V shape, reappeared in a Royal Congo Museum gallery; one room and its arrangement, seen in photographs through the 1930s, was called the Ivory Trophy. The mount resembles a macabre headdress, evocative of both the jungle animal and the chiefs who submitted to King Leopold's dominion (fig. 18).

The profusion of tusks competed with a second type of extraction that filled Van de Velde's world. A robust trade in the giant skulls of elephants, with tusks attached, expanded to a niche market with the Congo Free State and continued for decades; skulls were exhibited in trade fairs, world's fairs, and museums.⁴⁰ In 1910, in the inaugural galleries of the Royal Congo Museum, for example, the Hall of Mammals contained an open mount of two outsized crania, with

Fig. 19

Henry van de Velde, ivory
letter openers, n.d. Fonds
Henry van de Velde,
Bibliothèque royale de
Belgique.

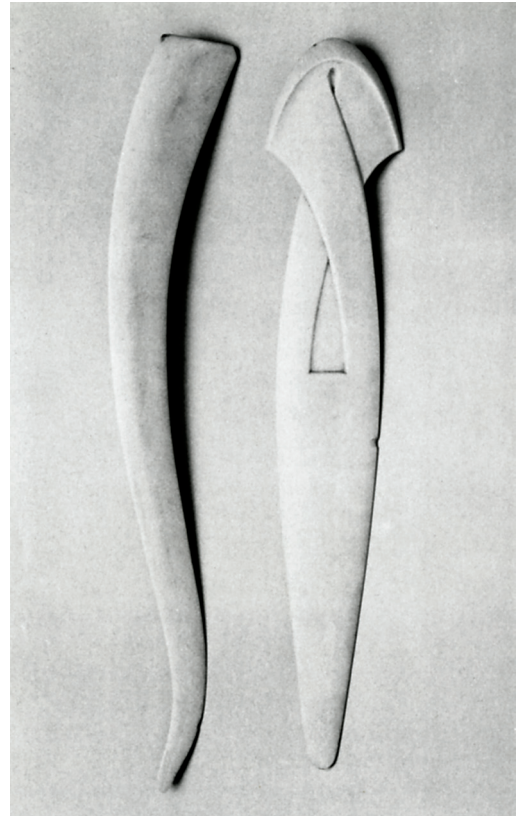


Fig. 20

Henry van de Velde,
ceramic tile and glass
fireplace, c. 1896. Fonds
Henry van de Velde,
Bibliothèque royale de
Belgique.



Fig. 21

Henry van de Velde,
desk with stained-
glass backing, 1899.
Fonds Henry van de
Velde, Bibliothèque
royale de Belgique.





Fig. 22
Henry van de Velde, front panel of leather bookbinding from the Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition of Bookbinding, c. 1897. Antiquariat Bibernmühle, Ramsen, Switzerland.



Fig. 23
Henry van de Velde, signature stamp from advertisement for Henry van de Velde Uccle workshops, 1898. Fonds Henry van de Velde, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique.

tusks protruding, and around it full-size taxidermic creatures from the jungle—a giraffe, a rhinoceros, an okapi, among others—marched along.⁴¹ An intact baby elephant was positioned with trunk aloft, mouth open, and ears aswoop just two stations behind the adult cranial elephant set. The habit of pairing a stuffed baby body and a giant, stripped-to-the-bone head and tusks appeared again in the Ghent World's Fair of 1913. Through 2005 the Tervuren museum extended part of this early imperial legacy of exultant exhibitionism; on display, unencased, were a gargantuan elephant cranium with teeth, as well as cases of huge tusks, resembling those “fifty pounds” of weight described by Stanley, with their inventory labels marked along their base.

Van de Velde's design oeuvre includes some objects in the medium of ivory, although they are scattered in disparate places and collections and have received little attention. They include tea set handles, napkin rings, and a set of letter openers: elegant and diminutive articles with graceful art nouveau curves and lines (fig. 19). The opener on the right, with the rounded crossover, exemplifies Van de Velde's structural ornament with design carved into the skin, fusing shape and material in an integral surface.

More interesting than these objects of overt imperial origin—objects that Van de Velde carved out of elephant-ivory-as-medium—is the expressive form of the elephant itself, which colonized Van de Velde's creative consciousness. An unexplored key to his artistic practice is the way Van de Velde transposes into

Fig. 24

Henry van de Velde, gilded pendant, 1897. Fonds Henry van de Velde, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique.



Fig. 26

Henry van de Velde, book illustration in *Die künstlerische Hebung der Frauentracht* (Krefeld, 1900).

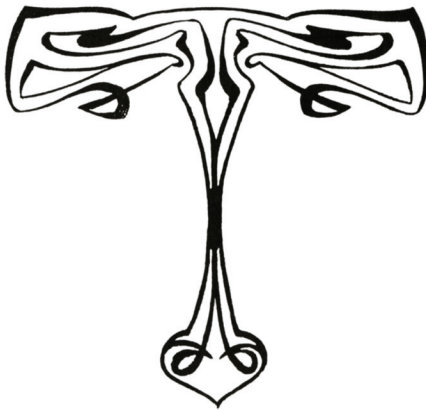


Fig. 25

Henry van de Velde, design for women's clothing, c. 1900. Fonds Henry van de Velde, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique.



an abstract but unmistakable design pattern the fragments of elephants that brought the distant Congo near to his experience in fin-de-siècle Belgium: the elephant as head, ears, trunk, and tusks.

The large space for Van de Velde's stained-glass window in the 1894 Otlet House is filled with a pair of oversized upswept ears around a middle panel, where head, tusks, and elongated trunk come into focus (see fig. 15). Colored rose and deep red wood from the Congo form the luxuriant surfaces of the Otlet mansion. A second early interior design by Van de Velde shows a ceramic tile and glass mosaic fireplace set in with a pair of tusks along the front (fig. 20). Another work, a large desk, is framed on each side by carved wood arcs like ivory horns that mark the shape of some of Van de Velde's chairs as well (fig. 21). The desk bears a stained-glass backing that again suggests a dual swoop of ears, protruding tusks, and a center trunk.

The same types of elephant reductions migrate to the surfaces of Van de Velde's early work in all media, from graphic designs and leather bookbindings to rugs, jewelry, and the yokes and bodices of embroidered women's clothing. On the colorful leather skin of a book cover, for example, tusklike forms and a splayed pair of stretched-out earlike forms frame the middle section (fig. 22). Another book cover, produced for a volume to honor Edmond Van Eetvelde in 1897 (just as the Wolfers ivory sculpture was produced to honor him), presents wavy tusks with a flap wing surround that is reminiscent of bulky ears.⁴² When Van de Velde created a signature stamp for his early furniture and design studio near Brussels, the letters of his name, HVDV, mutated into a simple curving shape resembling the ears, head, and flexible trunk of the elephant (fig. 23).⁴³ A petite gilded pendant of 1897 has shiny red eyes peeking out near flanking curves of ears and the slender lines of tusks (fig. 24). And in Van de Velde's women's clothing—designed to relieve the body of cumbersome ornament—linear arabesques drape the wearer's back in the shape of the double ears and trunk of a stylized elephant (fig. 25). The printed illustration that Van de Velde created for a 1900 manifesto he wrote with his wife for this type of modern fashion, *Die künstlerische Hebung der Frauenracht*, may appear to represent the hourglass shape of a woman's body, but it takes its place and form in a consistent repertoire of elephantine motifs, with canopied ear flaps and slenderized proboscises (fig. 26).

When Van de Velde worked outside Belgium, and in his later years, the elephant followed. In the 1901 Paris shop of La Maison moderne, curving V-shaped wood slats resembling ivory horns jut out from the walls and table displays while an overdoor frame in arcing wood creates a canopy of outsized ears with head between, a looming elephant entry to the next room.⁴⁴ In Berlin, the booths in an elite men's barbershop have wood-framed canopies like large ear flaps; repeating pairs of upturned white tusks decorate the upper walls.⁴⁵ At the Villa Esche in Chemnitz, Van de Velde's major commission in 1906, an open-plan entry hall is lit from above by an expansive skylight whose leaded glass takes the shape of the double ears, head, and elongated trunk of an elephant, reduced to elemental form (fig. 27).

Finally, elephants are lurking and visible in the rooms that Van de Velde created for one of his heroes, Friedrich Nietzsche, at Weimar. A book cover for Nietzsche's

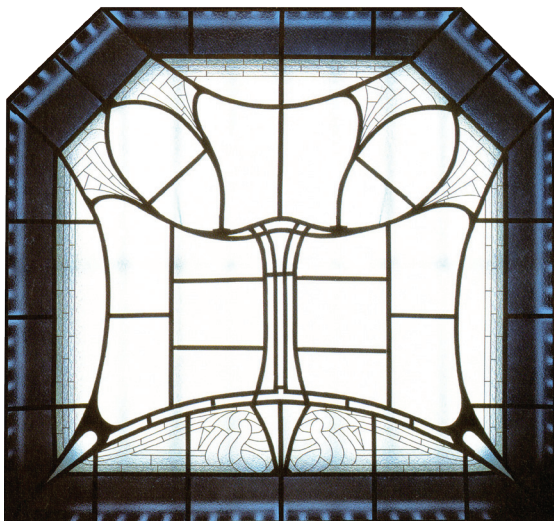


Fig. 27
Henry van de Velde,
elephantine skylight, 1906.
Villa Esche, Chemnitz,
Germany.

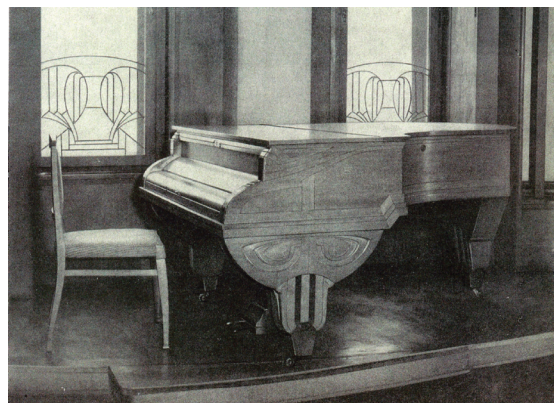


Fig. 28
Henry van de Velde, piano
and stained glass, 1904.
Nietzsche-Archiv, Weimar.
Fonds Henry van de Velde,
Bibliothèque royale de
Belgique.

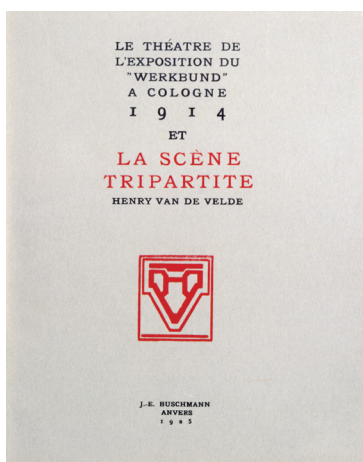


Fig. 29
Henry van de Velde, title
page of *Le Théâtre de
l'exposition du "Werkbund"
à Cologne 1914 et la Scène
tripartite* (Antwerp: 1925).

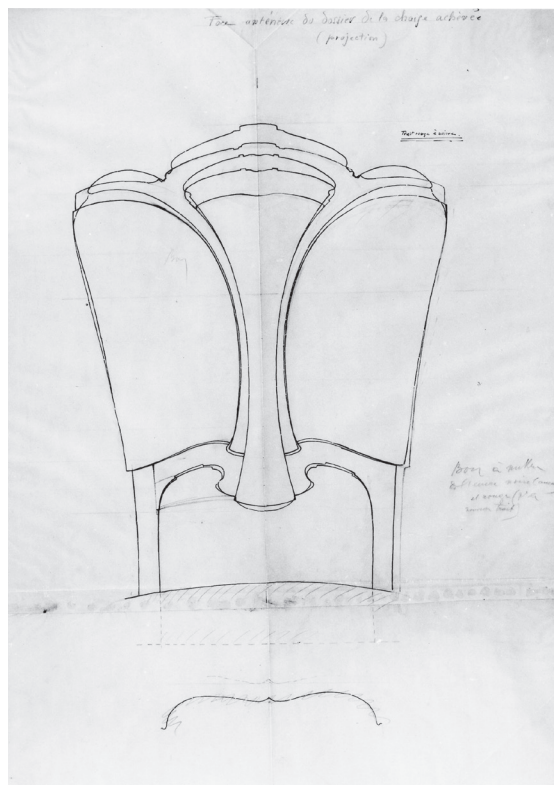


Fig. 30
Victor Horta, chair
design, n.d. Photograph
courtesy of the Horta
Museum, Saint Gilles.
© Bequest Victor Horta,
SOFAM Belgium.

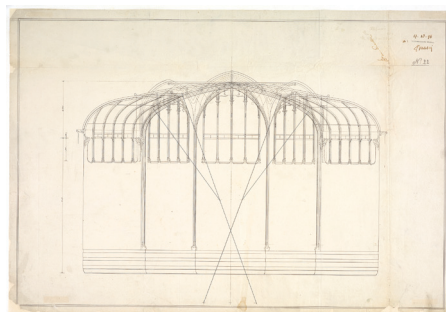


Fig. 31 (left)
Victor Horta, Horta House,
1898. Bedframe. Photograph
by Christine Bastin and
Jacques Evrard. © Bequest
Victor Horta, SOFAM
Belgium.

Fig. 32
Victor Horta, Horta House.
1898. Dining room. Photograph
by Christine Bastin and
Jacques Evrard. © Bequest
Victor Horta, SOFAM Belgium.



Fig. 33
Victor Horta, drawing of a
Congo pavilion made in 1898
for the Paris World's Fair of
1900. Photograph courtesy
of the Horta Museum, Saint
Gilles. © Bequest Victor
Horta, SOFAM Belgium.



Dionysus Dithyramben etches again a three-part rounded structure evoking the head, ears, and trunk of an elephant. In the Nietzsche House itself the windows around a small platform, like the piano on the platform, show deft and clear elephantine motifs. The windows compose three areas of leaded glass whose compartments neatly fit the form of an elephant head. And the carved wood of the front of the piano displays two matching pendular shapes like ears, while a piano leg, as it tapers, assumes the shape of a slim descendant trunk (fig. 28).

Even when Van de Velde reaches the circles of the German Werkbund and edges toward the Bauhaus, he remains tied to his ways of seeing and configuring the elephant. His title page for a 1925 publication about his Werkbund Exhibition Theater shows a simple motif that distills in rectilinear form the pattern of Van de Velde's distinctively Belgian imperial synecdoche—an elephant head, ears, and trunk detached from the body (fig. 29). Whether using curves, arabesques, or straight lines, Van de Velde never forgets his elephants, which he encountered in his culture in the dismembered profusion of Congo merchantables.

The elephant type appears in Victor Horta's visual language as well, and it forms an almost irresistible topos of Leopoldian fin-de-siècle Belgium. An abstracted elephant head, tusks projecting, appears in the walls of the Van Eetvelde dining room, along with trellis-like forms of Congo flora.⁴⁶ Horta's chair designs make up the double ears and trunk of the elephant, and the bedframe in his own residence shows a similar structure and repetitive motif (figs. 30–31). At his house and studio of 1898, now the Horta Museum, the bold and open plan includes a capacious dining room, composed with white enameled bricks, colored wood, and the exposed flourishes of iron pillars. The spacious stretch of the room draws the viewer back to garden views through open frames, accented by sweeping overdoor canopies: on each side pressed and colored wood, set off from the bright whiteness of the enameled brick, hangs in billowed shapes like huge kidney beans—or elephant ears (fig. 32). The hollow airiness of the dining room, its expansive hulk of space, and its lure to the eye to move through the open frame with its pendulous posts evoke an imaginary crossing into the cavity of an elephant's body.

Such an idea was not so far off from Horta's world and experience, or from Van de Velde's, since both were set in the peculiar space of Belgium's empire of extraction and projection. Horta, for example, had lobbied Secretary Van Eetvelde unsuccessfully to hire him to build the pavilion for the Tervuren Congo exhibition of 1897; it could be disassembled after the fair, Horta suggested, and sent off to be used as a Congo Free State government edifice in Africa.⁴⁷ In 1898, Horta did receive the commission to build a Congo pavilion for the Paris World's Fair of 1900. His drawings show an iron-and-glass frame over a broad, tiered set of multiple and interconnecting structures. But before the fair, King Leopold canceled the plan, alarmed that the pavilion's size and scale would attract too much attention and "arouse the jealousy of other nations" amidst the growing Congo scandals.⁴⁸ In Horta's drawings the pavilion partly resembles Balat's greenhouses, the formative works of his early mentor.⁴⁹ One of them a drawing of the facade and orthographic projection reveals that the shape of an elephant is the pivot of the plan; the shape looms through and can be seen

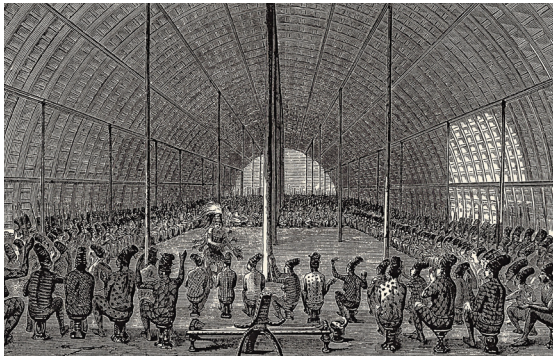


Fig. 34a (top left)
 “The Great Hall in the Palace of King Munza.” Illustration in
 Schweinfurth, *Heart of Africa*, 1874.



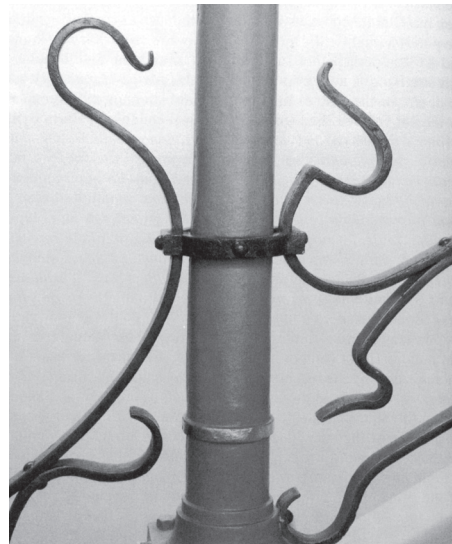
Fig. 34b (center left)
 Victor Contamin and Charles Dutert, Galerie des Machines,
 Paris Exhibition, 1889.



Fig. 35 (bottom left)
 Victor Horta, Tassel House, 1893–95. Detail of stair mural, 1893.
 Photograph by Christine Bastin and Jacques Evrard. © Bequest
 Victor Horta, SOFAM Belgium.

Fig. 36 (top right)
 Victor Horta, Tassel House. Detail of wrought iron banister.
 Photograph courtesy of the Horta Museum, Saint Gilles.
 © Bequest Victor Horta, SOFAM Belgium.

Fig. 37 (bottom right)
 Henry van de Velde, *Decoratieve plantencompositie*, c. 1892–93.
 Pastel on paper, 47.8 x 50.5 cm. Collection of the Kröller-Müller
 Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.



clearly on the page. The elephant here was not *in* the room; it *was* the room, and it gave a fitting spatial form to the fictional state and empire at a distance that swelled Belgium and sustained its art nouveau (fig. 33).

Victor Horta's active social life with the Brussels Freemasons in the lodge Les Amis philanthropes after 1888 is often identified as a source of left-leaning liberal camaraderie and commissions for the young and ambitious architect. But the lodge also included some of the most important administrators, public figures, engineers, and investors working for the king's Congo Free State after 1885, such as Lieutenant Colonel Charles Liebrechts and A.-J. Wauters; imperial elites have never been mentioned as being among Horta's lodge members.⁵⁰

Wauters, for example, was one of the premier art historians of the new Belgium as well as an astonishingly prolific writer, geographer, lecturer, cartographer, and publicist of the new Congo state. An exuberant laissez-faire idealist, Wauters founded and then edited for two decades the primary magazines of the imperial period, *Le Mouvement géographique* and *Le Congo illustré*, and he discovered and mapped the confluence of the Uele and Ubangi tributaries with the Congo River without ever leaving his Brussels office.⁵¹

In one of his many books celebrating the abundance of the Congo and its potential for Belgian economic benefit and cultural progress (this one from 1890), Wauters paid tribute to the ingenuity, "versatility," and "artistic faculty" evident in the architecture of the Monbuttoo people identified, discussed, and illustrated by the German explorer Dr. Georg August Schweinfurth, whose two-volume book *The Heart of Africa*, published in 1874, was widely known in Belgium.⁵² Wauters singled out for discussion the wondrous great hall in the palace of King Munza: a hollowed-out open building "a hundred feet long, fifty feet wide, and forty feet high," whose vaulted roof and vast span, "supported by rows of polished wood pillars," was "not unlike the central portion of a large railway station" (fig. 34a).⁵³ The palace, which is illustrated in Schweinfurth's book and described by Wauters, does indeed show striking affinities not only with the architecture of European railway stations but with the foundational structures of modernist structural innovation in architecture—the Galerie des Machines and Horta's own Maison du Peuple of 1895–96 (fig. 34b). The interaction of Horta and Wauters in their Freemason lodge, as well as their common immersion in the Congo subculture of empire at a distance in fin-de-siècle Belgium, suggests that making sense of Horta's stylistic development requires that we make room for King Munza on the roster of his better-known inspirations, Gustave Eiffel and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, and that there is an early, and unrecognized, African lineage of international modernism in architecture.⁵⁴

Putting the Whip Back in "Whiplash Style"

Van de Velde and Horta defined the distinctive linear dynamism of their version of art nouveau in two ways. First, they employed a linear thrust of nature conceived as a structural form. Divested of the organic fragility, foliation, or ornamentation typical of other national variants of emerging modern design styles,

their style was famously captured in Horta's statement that he sought "the stalk [*la tige*]," not the bud or "the flower [*la fleur*]" (fig. 35).⁵⁵ Second, they characterized the art nouveau line as mobile and directional, "a line of force" with the physics of a whip, what was called a "*coup de fouet*" or "whiplash style" (fig. 36; see figs. 13, 14, 39).⁵⁶ But why was it called that, and why then? Art historians have long applauded Van de Velde and Horta as "pioneers of modern design," but they all agree that the specific timing and exact sources of this uniquely Belgian structural variant of stylistic innovation remain "a mystery" and a puzzle.⁵⁷

Bringing Belgian imperialism back to the center of the story solves part of the mystery. My research shows that the whiplash style provides visual equivalents of two foundational elements of the regime in the Congo Free State: the rugged, relentless, and sinuous coils of the Congo's wild rubber vines, hailed as "vegetable boas" with "veins of gold," and the imperial *chicotte*, the long flogging whip at the center of Leopold's rule.⁵⁸

The *lianes* were the essence of nature as structural, described in 1892, for example, as bearing a "primary stalk [*la tige principale*]" of formidable thickness ("12–15 centimeters in diameter") and a myriad of smaller vines and creepers "dividing and subdividing" as they propelled up, ramped across, and swooped down, attaching to nearby trees and hooking around branches with the "fixity" and pliancy of "tendons" and with "extraordinary tenacity" (see fig. 2).⁵⁹ It was through the *lianes* that the rubber gum flowed. Flowers were rare, and the large leaves grew sparsely; the "succulent" fruit they offered up, as noted earlier, took the form of stemmed and bulbous orange gourds that nestled among the tangled cables (see fig. 3).⁶⁰

I can see Van de Velde's enigmatic pastel, the so-called *Decoratieve plantencompositie* of 1893, only as an evocative rubber vine (fig. 37). This large-scale image in the Kröller-Müller Museum was a last attempt by Van de Velde at canvas representation as he wrestled with the end of figurative language and turned definitively to the applied arts. It is often seen as a crucial breakthrough to abstraction, along with Paul Gauguin's *Vision of the Sermon* and some landscapes by Vincent van Gogh, who, together with Georges Seurat, was a hero of Van de Velde's.⁶¹ The Van de Velde pastel has perplexed art historians and others because of its curious shapes and colored composition and lack of a definitive top and bottom—it can be turned in a number of directions and still appear upright. The bulky orange fruit of the image has been compared to an engorged breast; I see it as part of a rubber vine swollen with milky latex. The visible stem and gourd resemble closely those with coarse skin and "savory pulp" that writers said the Congo natives enjoyed. And the sinuous cord and adhering wrap-around, "dividing and subdividing," echo the "tendon"-like firmness and multiple, and multiplying, curves of the Congo forests that contemporaries noted were draped with the vines that were the source of the wondrous "caoutchouc."

The rubber vines, indeed, offered a fitting object by which to explore the mysterious world that Van de Velde and his symbolist contemporaries aimed to capture. For Europeans, nature in the Congo transcended quotidian reality: it was a realm of the "non-natural" and the supernatural; it was wild, rampant,

indeterminate, and infinite. It had, in other words, some of the very qualities sought by those yearning to set sail, in Gauguin's words, for the phantom ship of the dream, released from contingent reality.⁶² But this dream, as has been emphasized, was made real in the unique and historically specific environment of the Leopoldian imperium in Belgium.

The rubber vines of the distant jungle, brought near, embodied a quintessential quality of symbolist abstraction: the *liane* interiorized its own essence and value, hid its treasure beyond the surface of appearances. Unlike verdant trees or plants with charming flora, the Congo vine, according to an early imperial botanist, "does not exteriorize its life"; it keeps its core away from view.⁶³ "Externalizing the Idea" rather than seeing nature "through the eyes of a temperament" was the common quest of all artists in the circles of avant-garde symbolism, including Van de Velde.⁶⁴ In the caoutchouc of the Congo, Van de Velde discovered a type of nature—with arabesque curves, limitless forms, and secret, fluid purity—that corresponded closely to his artistic experiments beyond realism, and he formalized it, a *liane* and an orange gourd, in the structural and structuring lines and shapes of his 1893 pastel.

The distinctive features of Congo nature also infuse Horta's stylistic innovations. In the Tassel House of 1893, for example, architectural interiors are vitalized by evocative forms of the Congo *lianes* (see fig. 14). Aerial tendrils and creepers like the *lianes aériennes* wind, project, and clamber along the walls, stairs, iron pillars, and banisters; a rugged, upended trunk appears in the mural's corner, with lacing "tendons" wrapping around and moving through the thicker core (see fig. 35). In the octagonal court, or Winter Garden, of the Van Eetvelde House—which period photographs show with coiling iron lamps, now missing—the inner space is activated by the curving and propulsive iron columns, which echo a sinuous movement of the tangling and scandent vines (see fig. 13).⁶⁵

Like the Congo *lianes*, Horta's flowerless stalks are pliable but forceful. In every medium of expression, from mosaic to stone or carved wood to painted mural, we see a coherent pattern of aggressive movement and tenacious fix, of a linear form that laps over and latches on (figs. 38–40). This is not the "slip and slide" of art nouveau's aqueous life forms, fragile floral sweeps, and liquefying waves derided as *Style nouille* (noodle style), but a design language of cleave, wrap, and grip. And at the edge of Horta's curves and branched spirals is what has been called his distinctive architectural signature: a "crochet," the visible hook in arrested motion.⁶⁶ The "fork-branched" splay and hook were also the identifying characteristics of the Congo *lianes*.⁶⁷

If Van de Velde's and Horta's Style Congo transposes the elephant and the rubber vine into the new key of art nouveau, the whiplash courses through Belgian modernism with another unexplored set of meanings and resonance: the *coup de fouet* forms a visual equivalent of the lacing drive of the imperial *chicotte*, the flogging whip. Corporal punishment in the form of flogging, with a raw "sun-dried hippopotamus hide, cut into a long sharp-edged corkscrew strip," was a regularized form of "military discipline" applied in the Congo Free State from its inception. Up to one hundred lashes to prone and bare-bottomed victims

Fig. 39

Victor Horta, Frison House,
1894. Detail of handrail.
Photograph by Christine
Bastin and Jacques Evrard.
© Bequest Victor Horta,
SOFAM Belgium.



Fig. 38

Victor Horta, Solvay House,
1896. 1895–97. Detail of wall
mural in mezzanine between
the third and fourth floors.
© Bequest Victor Horta,
SOFAM Belgium.



Fig. 40

Victor Horta, Van Eetvelde
House. Detail of wood
cabinet. Photograph by
Christine Bastin and Jacques
Evrard. © Bequest Victor
Horta, SOFAM Belgium.

was stipulated, and the penalties were recorded in a special officer's book and enacted in a public ritual, intended to inspire terror in the communities forced to watch them.⁶⁸ The sound of the whip was particularly memorable. In 1922 a senator in the Belgian Parliament, M. Fraiture, demanded an end to what he described as this "veritable torture." Recalling the power of the *chicotte* whose use he had witnessed, Fraiture told his colleagues that the whip's release "splits the air and one can hear from two hundred and fifty meters away the crack of leather cutting the flesh" (fig. 41).⁶⁹

King Leopold, Lieutenant Colonel Liebrechts, and Secretary of State Van Eetvelde all affirmed the necessity for "force"—"the supreme sanction of law"—in civilizing a region marred by centuries of barbarism and "sanguinary customs."⁷⁰ Though not eager to have the *chicotte* publicized in the press (in 1893, Van Eetvelde reprimanded an officer who discussed this punishment in the Brussels newspaper *La Réforme*), the secretary remained resolute in his belief that unusual tactics of discipline and punishment were required to rule a country that lacked a tax or prison system.⁷¹ In 1904, at the height of the revelations of atrocities and national and international criticism of Congo policies, Van Eetvelde wrote to Leopold that "those who criticize the taking of hostages do not know what they are talking about: one should simply call it an imprisonment of people who do not pay their taxes and the whole matter no longer sounds extraordinary. I have never ceased to recommend the necessity of the measure."⁷²

While many assume that the floggings in the Congo were not openly known in fin-de-siècle Belgium, whip and whiplash were topics of contemporary debate and representation, part of a cultural system of empire at a distance that came rippling back from Africa. In the work of Van de Velde and Horta, those ripples generated creative transformations of elephants and wild *lianes*, but they also left traces of specific forms of violence that accompanied the founding and governance of the Congo Free State. In June 1885, for example, the cover of a short-lived Brussels journal critical of King Leopold's new African empire, *Le Moniteur du Congo*, showed an engraving of a painting by a former officer-explorer, Lieutenant Édouard Manduau, entitled *Civilization in the Congo*. The inscription and the image display unequivocally what constituted civilization: a justice of the peace is seen writing in a punishment book while a native officer wields a *chicotte*, the "lash made out of twisted hippopotamus skin," onto the bloodied back of a restrained prisoner (fig. 42).⁷³

Contemporary discussions of the *chicotte* and the Congo circulated in books and articles and informed public events. For example, Victor Arnoud, a liberal politician and writer, openly addressed in 1891 the problems and the ultimate merits of the hippo-hide *fouet*. He echoed some shared assumptions for justifying it—that without a prison system or a way to exact and collect fines in the form of money, natives had to be taught discipline and obedience in the civilizing process. Even Europeans, Arnoud concluded, were themselves barely fifty years away from using the lash to beat their own children.⁷⁴

Closer to Van de Velde's and Horta's experience—since both were actively linked to radical Worker Party politics and social circles—was a three-week,



Fig. 41
Johann Braakensiek,
cartoon of King Leopold's
lash, 1906. Leopold explains
to Czar Nicholas the
deficiencies of the Russian
"knout" and "nagiaika"
flogging whips compared to
the *chicotte* in his African
kingdom. *Weekblad voor
Nederland*, June 24, 1906.

Fig. 42
Édouard Mandau,
Civilization in the Congo,
1884. Oil on canvas, 45 x 60.5
cm. Collection of the Royal
Museum for Central Africa,
Tervuren. Photograph
© RMCA, Tervuren, Belgium.



Fig. 44
Victor Horta, Van Eetvelde
House, 1895–97. Detail
of gate. © Bequest Victor
Horta, SOFAM Belgium.
Photograph by author.

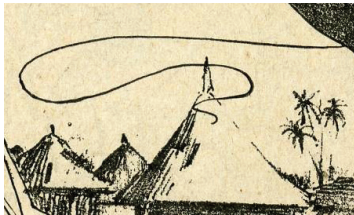
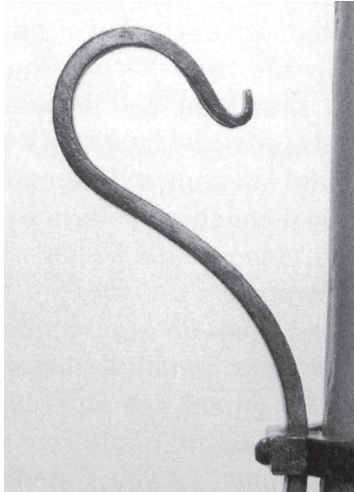


Fig. 43
Details of figs. 36 and 41.



six-session set of debates about the Congo Free State hosted by the Brussels Maison du peuple in 1892. A Dr. Charbonnier presented a trenchant critique and indictment, discussing with clear evidence the cruel practice of punishment by flogging in the Congo as well as what he characterized as the reduction of the natives to the status of slaves in their own country, forced to turn over to the king as an onerous “tax” the products of the land and their labor. The other side of the debate was contributed by the ubiquitous A.-J. Wauters, who mounted spirited counterarguments but did not disprove the evidence of corporal punishment.⁷⁵ The use of the *chicotte* in the Congo continued to be considered past the turn of the twentieth century, with three eminent citizens—Edmond Picard in 1896, Charles Buls in 1898, and Léopold Courouble in 1902—com-

menting on its use in Belgian publications after returning from travel in the Congo Free State.⁷⁶

Van de Velde's and Horta's line of force, with its twisting aerial curves, integrally links the architectural whiplash style to the imperial culture in which it flourished. Horta's Van Eetvelde House configures the *lianes* and the lash in the very center of Leopold's regime—in "the Congo State House" of Brussels, residence of its chief administrator. Horta's impressive design for Van Eetvelde sets him *in* the rubber coils; Horta discovers spatial forms to express both the astonishing richness of the Congo jungle and the tools required to extract it (see fig. 4). Here the modernist's signature *crochet*, the hook with its lacerating tip, registers, not audacity and energy, but aggression and conquest (fig. 43). The curling and propulsive iron columns of the octagonal court simulate the rugged and relentless intertwining of the Congo *lianes* while the convulsive rhythms of the whiplash forms reveal the release, crack, and snap of the imperial whip, returning to sender (see figs. 13 and 44).

Decorative arts and architecture, then—the visibly bolted and conspicuous gaps on the bodies of the Congo ivories and the spatial designs of *coup de fouet*—suggest that stylistic forms of modernism in Belgium expressed a displaced encounter with a distant, but encroaching, imperial violence—the return of the repressor in visual form.

The voice of Van de Velde needs to be heard in this regard. Recalling the eruption of modern line and the breakthrough to art nouveau in the 1890s, he writes: "During the fin-de-siècle, Horta, . . . Serrurier and I . . . revitalized line, at almost the same time, in nearly the same place. We seized line like one seizes a whip. A whip whose sonorous cracks accompanied our adventurous course, and whose blows lashed the skin of an indolent public."⁷⁷ The intensity and graphic specificity of Van de Velde's ideas of linear force carry a uniquely and irreducibly imperial meaning and resonance.

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I am grateful to the Institute for Advanced Study's School of Historical Studies, where I was able to begin this project during a yearlong fellowship, and the Office of the President, Provost, and Dean of Social Sciences, University of California, Los Angeles, which provided essential research support to develop it. Seminars and presentations at the University of Southern California's "Visual Culture" group, the College Art Association's "The Ethical Museum?" panel, Harvard University's Center for European Studies, Wesleyan University's "Gesamtkunstwerk," and Yale University's "The Long Nineteenth Century" offered particularly stimulating occasions and responses to the work. UCLA's Charles E. Young Research Library collections continue to astonish me with the depth of the

materials on nineteenth-century history and culture, and the exceptional services of the Circulation and Interlibrary Loan Departments sustained the research throughout, with special thanks to Bonnie Beason, Reynoir I, and Valerie Rom-Hawkins. Archivists, curators, and staff at the Royal Library of Belgium, the Horta Museum, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, the Freemasonry Archives, and the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels helped with sources and objects; my thanks to Werner Adriaenssens, Françoise Aubry, Sabine Cornelis, Catherine Daems, Anne Kennes, Frank Langenaken, Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, and Nancy Vanderlinden. This article could not have reached its final form without the assistance of Philip Donovan Jenkins and Colette Kennedy-Wanetick. I am indebted to the following colleagues, friends, and family who have read drafts, given comments, or made important suggestions: Perry Anderson, Joyce Appleby, Carol Armstrong, Tim Barringer, Edward Berenson, Ruth Bloch, Yves-Alain Bois, Glen Bowersock, Caroline Walker Bynum, Cathleen Chaffee, Natalie Zemon Davis, André Dombrowski, Jesse Deutsch, Elizabeth Everton, Saul Friedländer, Carlo Ginzburg, Nile Green, Jacquelyn Greenberg, Kurt Guldentops, Adam Hochschild, Janet Hoskins, Temma Kaplan, Colette Kennedy-Wanetick, Gail Kligman, Katherine Kuenzli, Naomi Lamoreaux, Marion Lefebvre, John Lithgow, Saloni Mathur, Sarah Maza, Sarah McPhee, David Myers, Amy Ogata, Emily Ooms, Herman Ooms, Gabriel Piterberg, Judy Pollner, Alex Potts, Daniel Prager, Robert Pynoos, Katya Rice, Larissa Rodriguez, Susan Rosenfeld, Peter Scholliers, Vanessa Schwartz, Jerrold Seigel, Gabrielle Spiegel, David W. Silverman, Eve Silverman, Tziona Silverman, Sarah Abrevaya Stein, Joshua Sternfeld, Charles Taylor, Alan Tobin, Nancy Troy, Alan Wallach, Joan Waugh, and Mary Yeager.

The Bard Graduate Center, a dynamic and scholarly haven for design history, material culture, and the decorative arts, spurred the work early in my career on French art nouveau. It has now provided a welcoming, rigorous, and collegial home for this new project on modernism and its imperial context in Belgium. I thank the readers for the journal and especially Paul Stirton for his wide-ranging knowledge and commitment to scholarship. Daniel Lee showed keen intelligence and expert professionalism throughout; and Mary Pasti's skills and wisdom improved the final product. Jeffrey Prager's presence informs every page.

Epigraphs Paul Gauguin, in Douglas Cooper, *Paul Gauguin: 45 Lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh* (Lausanne, 1983), 279; Georges-H. Dumont, *Léopold II: Pensées et réflexions, recueillies par Georges-H. Dumont* (Liège, 1948), 38.

1 Only one deputy voted against permitting the king to become the absolute ruler of a foreign realm while remaining a limited constitutional monarch in Belgium under the ambiguous legal terms of a "personal union" (*union personnelle*). The new state, according to the deputy, M. Neujean, would needlessly embroil Belgium in remote areas, and with a state that would exist "more in theory than in fact." Cited in Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold the Second and the Congo* (London, 1963), 144.

2 Essential characterizations of this unusual imperial structure, which studiously avoided the word "colony," are in "Congo Free State," in *The New Volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica Constituting, in Combination with the Existing Volumes of the Ninth Edition [1879–89], the Tenth Edition of That Work* (London, 1902), 3:200–207, reprinted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong, Norton Critical Editions (New York, 2006), 99–113; Jean Stengers, "King Leopold's Congo, 1886–1908," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 6, *From 1870 to 1905*, ed. Roland Olivier and G. N. Sanderson (Cambridge, UK, 1985), 315–58; E. H. Kossmann, *A History of the Low Countries, Belgium and the Netherlands* (Oxford, 1999), 361–97; A.-J. Wauters, *Histoire politique du Congo belge* (Brussels, 1911), 55–58; Wauters, *L'État indépendant du Congo* (Brussels, 1899), 34–38; Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 128–203; Barbara Emerson, *Leopold II of the Belgians: King of Colonialism* (New York, 1979), 101–55; David Van Reybrouck, *Congo, een geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 2010), 70–114; and Federation of the Free States of Africa (FFSA), "Histoire de la colonisation belge, 1876–1910," http://www.africafederation.net/Histoire_colonisation_belge.htm.

3 Edmond Picard, *En Congolie, 1896*, 3rd ed. (Brussels, 1909) (*Notre Congo en 1909*), 258–59; James Vandrunen, *Heures africaines: L'Atlantique, le Congo* (Brussels, 1899), 201–2; Charles Buls, *Croquis congolais* (Brussels, 1899), 216–17; Baron Édouard Descamps, "La nation et l'institution monarchique," in *Notre pays, 1905*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1909), 1:29–30.

4 Two Brussels-based journals, both edited and published by A.-J. Wauters for more than two decades, followed the changing form and activities of the Congo Free State with extensive maps, photographs, and illustrations: *Le Mouvement géographique: Journal populaire des sciences géographiques, organe des intérêts belges au Congo*, and *Le Congo illustré: Voyages et travaux des belges dans l'État indépendant du Congo*. Some of the important books by explorers and administrators between 1878 and 1895 that I have consulted, all with extensive maps, are Henry M. Stanley, *À travers le continent mystérieux: Découverte des sources méridionales du Nil, circumnavigation du Lac Victoria et du Lac Tanganyika, descente du fleuve Livingstone ou Congo jusqu'à l'Atlantique*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1879); Stanley, *the Congo and the Founding of Its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885); Édouard Dupont, *Lettres sur le Congo: Récit d'un voyage scientifique entre l'embouchure du fleuve et le confluent du Kassai* (Paris, 1889); Alexandre Delcommune, *Vingt années de vie africaine: Récits de voyages, d'aventures et d'exploration du*

Congo belge, 1874–1922, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1922); and Camille Coquilhat, *Sur le Haut-Congo* (Paris, 1888).

5 Emile Vandervelde, *La Belgique et le Congo: Le passé, le présent, l'avenir* (Brussels, 1911), 22–23. The area drawn up by King Leopold and ratified by the Conference of Berlin in 1884 was arbitrary and realized by accident. Henry Morton Stanley noted that the king hastily marked “some bold lines” (*lignes audacieuses*) “through almost unexplored regions,” while the historian Jean Stengers called the king’s map a “coup de crayon.” Bismarck initially regarded Leopold’s plan as a “schwindel,” and the map was approved over the strong objections of the British only because of the egregious error of a clerk in the Foreign Office in 1885, who unwittingly sent it along while his superior was away on vacation. Jean Stengers, *Congo: Mythes et réalités, 100 ans d'histoire* (Paris, 1989), 67–69.

6 I rely on the vivid contemporary descriptions of the “formidable,” “miraculous,” and “ubiquitous” “caoutchouc” in the following texts: Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding*, 2:4–9, 353–77; A.-J. Wauters, *Le Congo au point de vue économique* (Brussels, 1885), 67–69; L. P. Merlon, “Les productions végétales: La liane-caoutchouc,” in *Le Congo producteur*, 2nd ed. (Brussels, 1888), 87–94; A.-J. Wauters, “La liane à caoutchouc,” *Le Congo illustré*, 1892: 112; Wauters, *Stanley’s Emin Pasha Expedition* (New York, 1890), 122–55; Henry M. Stanley, *In Darkest Africa: On the Quest, Rescue and Retreat of Emin, Governor of Equatoria*, 2 vols. (New York, 1891), 2:75–111; Stanley, *À travers le continent mystérieux*, esp. 2:229–30, fig. (“Trainage dans la forêt”); Lieutenant Charles Lemaire, *Congo et Belgique: À propos de l’Exposition d’Anvers* (Brussels, 1894), 34–48; Alfred Dewèvre, *Les plantes utiles du Congo*, 2nd ed. (Brussels, 1894); Lieutenant Th. Masui, *Guide de l’État indépendant du Congo à l’Exposition de Bruxelles-Tervueren en 1897* (Brussels, 1897), 397–412; Picard, *En Congolie*, 210, 245; Buls, *Croquis congolais*, 87–218 (and the term “precious gums” is his, on p. 205); and E. De Wildeman and L. Gentil, *Lianes caoutchoutifères de l’État indépendant du Congo* (Brussels, 1904).

7 Stanley, *The Congo and the Founding*, 2:352–55. Unlike tree tapping, extracting latex from the coiling vines necessitated a laborious process of incising the outer husk and waiting for the milky substance to drip, and often required climbing to great heights along twisting aerial cables that had shot up above the ground. The enterprise to which Stanley refers, the Congo Railway, was to provide the crucial link for the flow of all trade and transport.

8 Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, 2:111. Stanley’s confidence and presumption were shared eagerly in Belgium by supporters of expansionism in the Congo Free State, such as Wauters, *Le Congo*, 68–69, and Lemaire, *Congo et Belgique*; see also Ferdinand Goffart, *L’oeuvre coloniale du roi en Afrique* (Brussels, 1898), 65–72, discussing how Europeans in the Congo would help develop the natives’ work ethic and “esprit du lucre.”

9 Joseph Conrad, “Selected Letters from Africa and After,” Letters of December 17, 21, and 26, 1903, in *Heart of Darkness*, 269–73. The year 1896 was when a newspaper in Belgium, *La Réforme*, addressed directly the mounting evidence of atrocities in the Congo Free State in articles by the Liberal deputy Georges Lorand, an early critic of the king’s regime, who restated for the national public eyewitness testimony about Congo cruelties circulating in the British, German, and Swedish press, such as the fall 1895 interview published in the London *Times* by John Murphy, a British missionary who gave a detailed description of what he called the “horrors perpetrated in the Congo” in the service of the rubber trade. (See Georges Lorand, “Mains coupées,” the front-page column in *La Réforme*, September 22, 1896.) The year 1896 also brought new attention to the workings and brutality of the remote Free State administration after a decorated Belgian army officer working in the Congo as a district manager, Captain Hubert Lothaire, executed a British citizen and employee of a German trading company, Charles Stokes, for encroaching on ivory trading “legally” reserved exclusively for the king’s domain. Lothaire became the first state functionary to be investigated and put on trial for his actions, although he was acquitted with alacrity both in Boma and in Brussels, and he was even lauded for his loyal and conscientious application of Congo Free State policy against “trespassers.” One result of the Lothaire/Stokes affair was an increase in press coverage of and attention to the Congo abuses, although a formidable counteroffensive in the form of King Leopold’s “Press Bureau” managed to deflect and deny criticism for almost a decade by bribing journalists outright and by repeatedly suggesting that evidence of Free State violence was exaggerated and that it consisted of self-serving myths created by covetous British traders and slanderous Protestant missionaries or the aberrant acts of a few individuals deranged by jungle fever and isolation. The phaseology of the growing national and international awareness of the Congo regime after 1895, as well as a discussion of the critical role of the press, can be found in Jules Marchal, *L’État libre du Congo: Paradis perdu, l’histoire du Congo, 1876–1900*, 2 vols. (Borgloon, 1996), vol. 2, esp. chap. 22; FFSA, “Histoire de la colonisation belge,” esp. the section “Le domaine royal,” which includes archival letters of July 1892 about paying “subsidies” to various newspapers for favorable treatment; Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 241–49; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York, 1999), esp. 150–252; Mark Twain, *King Leopold’s Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (1905; New York, 1999); Edmund D. Morel, *King Leopold’s Rule in Africa* (London, 1904); Morel, *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906* (Honolulu, 2005); Wauters, *Histoire politique*, 87–365, esp. 165–224, 241–47, and 261–64; and Félix Cattier, *Étude sur la situation de l’État indépendant du Congo*, 2nd ed. (Brussels, 1906), 241–45.

10 All these contemporaries, with different political affiliations, nonetheless offered a similar

trenchant critique of the particular form of imperial liberalism and laissez-faire extremism unleashed in the Congo Free State and the international context of complicity and accommodation that sustained it; they are well worth rereading. Jules Destrée, a socialist deputy in Parliament, discussed Cortés and Pizarro and called the Congo lust for gold “odious” “brigandage” disguised as philanthropy (“se déguise sous des déclarations philanthropiques”), in “La question coloniale,” parliamentary sessions of July 1908, in Jules Destrée, *Oeuvres complètes* (Brussels, n.d.), 405–36, 416–17 (quotation). See also A. Conan Doyle, *The Crime of the Congo* (New York, 1909); Twain, *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*; Morel, *King Leopold’s Rule*; Morel, *Red Rubber*; and Wauters, *Histoire politique*, 243: “il n’est pire despotisme . . . que celui qui revêt les apparences de la liberté.”

11 Émile Vandervelde, a socialist politician who joined Georges Lorand as critic and champion of Congo reform after 1900, called the period of bitter debate of 1901–8 “our Dreyfus Affair.” See Émile Vandervelde, *Souvenirs d’un militant socialiste* (Brussels, 1939), 68–93; see also Vandervelde, *La Belgique et le Congo*; and Vandervelde, *Les derniers jours de l’État du Congo* (Mons, 1911), on depopulation and the rubber terror. Partial transcripts of some of the parliamentary debates are included in E. D. Morel, *Affairs of West Africa* (London, 1902), 312–71. One of the first uses of the term “red rubber” (*caoutchouc rouge*) was in 1898 by an artist-traveler from Belgium, Louis Moorels, according to Sabine Cornelis in her article “Croquis congolais: De Buis à Vaucleroy, quelques regards d’artistes belges sur le Congo (1898–1930),” in *Images de l’Afrique et du Congo/Zaire dans les lettres françaises de Belgique et alentour*, ed. Pierre Halen and Janos Riesz (Brussels, 1993), 113–27. For the Congo Free State regime and the rubber terror, see Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Du sang sur les lianes: Léopold II et son Congo* (Brussels, 1986); Vangroenweghe, “La Société anversoise du commerce au Congo et la violence structurelle dans l’État indépendant du Congo,” *International Colloquium: Colonial Violence in Congo*, Belgian Association of Africanists and Royal Museum for Central Africa, May 12–13, 2005, http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/violence/dvg_viol.htm; Jan Vansina, introduction to Vangroenweghe, *Du sang*; Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest* (Madison, WI, 1990); Vansina, *Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960* (Madison, WI, 2010); Emerson, *Leopold II*, 142–264; Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, esp. 115–283; Peter Bates, *Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*, BBC4 film, first shown February 24, 2004; Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 195–289; Van Reybrouck, *Congo*, 71–114, esp. 104–10; Wauters, *Histoire politique*, 87–365, esp. 241–45 on the “rubber system”; FFSA, “Histoire de la colonisation belge,” esp. the sections “Le caoutchouc” and “La mortalité”; and Marchal, *L’État libre*, vol. 2.

12 Edmond de Bruyn, “Anvers,” in *Notre pays, 1905*, 1:245–76, 260 (quotation). The Brueghel print of *The Land of Cockayne* was also on display at the Brussels World Exposition of 1910.

13 Baudelaire lived in Belgium from 1864 to 1866, and his notes and comments were published posthumously under the title *Pauvre Belgique*. See Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris, 1976), 2:819–979.

14 King Leopold’s architectural expansionism is most tellingly described in the contemporary account of Gustave Stinglhamber and Paul Dresse, “Léopold II, le roi bâtisseur,” in *Léopold II au travail* (Brussels, 1945), 239–59; see also Liane Rainieri, “Léopold II: Ses conceptions urbanistiques, ses constructions monumentales,” in *La dynastie et la culture en Belgique*, ed. Herman Balthazar and Jean Stengers (Brussels, 1990), 173–92; Rainieri, *Léopold II urbaniste* (Brussels, 1973); Georges-Henri Dumont, *La vie quotidienne en Belgique sous le règne de Léopold II, 1865–1909* (Brussels, 1999), 18–28; and Piet Lombaerde, *Léopold II, roi-bâtisseur* (Ostend/Ghent, 1995). On tracking the Congo revenues in the Fondation de la Couronne that funded monumental national architecture and private real-estate ventures, see Wauters, *Histoire politique*, 248–51, where they are described as “a veritable debauch”; Félix Cattier’s itemization in *Étude sur la situation*, 219–40; Jean Stengers, *Combien le Congo a-t-il coûté à la Belgique?* (Brussels, 1957), 150–51, 144–294; Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 273–78; and Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 165–70, 255–59.

15 Leopold’s vying with Versailles in his plans for his palace at Laeken is discussed in Stinglhamber and Dresse, “Léopold II,” 251–56; architects’ drawings for vast reception halls are included in Rainieri, “Léopold II,” and Lombaerde, *Léopold II*. On the greenhouses see Irene Smets, *The Royal Greenhouses, Laeken* (Ghent, 2001). These enormous structures are open to the public once a year in May. Victor Horta began as a draftsman for Balat in 1884 and worked in his office “for close to ten years.” François Loyer and Jean Delahaye, *Victor Horta: Hôtel Tassel, 1893–1895* (Brussels, 1996), 7–8; see also Françoise Aubry, *Victor Horta à Bruxelles* (Brussels, 1996), 8–14.

16 Thierry Demey, *Le domaine royal de Laeken* (Brussels, 2005); Chantal Kozyreff, *La tour japonaise de Laeken* (Brussels, 1989).

17 The arch at the Cinquentaenaire had been a source of particular frustration for Leopold II. Built for the 1880 celebrations of Belgium’s fiftieth anniversary, it was left unfinished, a hulking fragment in a ceremonial urban zone and a constant reminder that in Belgium, the king’s wish could not command: despite relentless hectoring, Leopold was unable to impose his will on the governing municipal bodies that directed all of Brussels’s architectural plans and projects, and they refused for more than two decades to fund the completion of the arch. For the 1905 jubilee, Leopold assembled a shadow group of benefactors who offered the city the “gift” of the massive arch, surreptitiously funneling to them monies from his Congo treasury, the Fondation de la Couronne. This incident, an open secret and delicious victory for Leopold at the time of the arch’s inauguration, is recounted in Stinglhamber and Dresse, “Léopold II,” 241–44, and Cattier, *Étude sur la situation*, 240–41; see also

Stengers, *Combien le Congo a-t-il coûté?* 194–99; and Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 275. On the structure, plans, and building of the new gargantuan arch, see Rainieri, “Léopold II,” and Rainieri, *Léopold II urbaniste*; the latter includes a rare photograph of the 1880 incomplete arch with missing middle that was the dismembered gateway to Brussels for twenty-five years.

18 Le Baron A. De Hauville, “Le musée du Congo belge à Tervuren,” *La Revue congolaise* 1 (1910): 208–22. A phrase on p. 216, “l’action envahissante de la civilisation,” comments on the “commercial movement” of textiles and the moral progress attendant upon clothing the natives. Typical of this vision was a print of “The Past” and “The Future” in the Congo that showed tracks and a moving railway dividing a barbarous past from the civilized future. One side depicted violent natives; the other, industrious ones tilling the soil and waving to the train as it approached, with the flag of the Congo Free State raised in the distance. The print is included in A.-J. Wauters, *Voyages en Afrique: De Bruxelles à Karéma, le royaume des éléphants* (Brussels, n.d.), 80. The edition I consulted has a school certificate bound with it, indicating that the book was used in an elementary school in Schaerbeek in 1901.

19 Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 292–306.

20 The term “armored cosmopolitanism” is used to discuss liberal imperialism by Paul Gilroy in his *Postcolonial Melancholia: The Wellek Lectures* (New York, 2005), 60; see also 47–83. The first register of totality—communitarian ideals, activism on behalf of workers, and political radicalism of the Belgian avant-garde—is well known. See, for example, Jane Block, *Les XX and Belgian Avant-Gardism, 1884–1894* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984); Paul Aron, *Les écrivains belges et le socialisme, 1880–1913* (Brussels, 1985); Stephen H. Goddard, *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde: Prints, Drawings, and Books ca. 1890* (Lawrence, KS, 1992); and Debora Silverman, “Modernité sans frontières? Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of the Belgian Avant-Garde, 1880–1900,” *American Imago*, Winter 2011, forthcoming.

21 H. Fierens-Gevaert, *Nouveaux essais sur l’art contemporain* (Paris, 1903), 60. This term was first identified in M. Luwel and M. Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervueren*, 1897 (Tervuren, 1967), 52; Tom Flynn discusses it in his early and important article “Taming the Tusk: The Revival of Chryselephantine Sculpture in Belgium during the 1890s,” in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material and the Museum*, ed. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (London, 1998), 188–204, 197 (quotation). The term “Style Congo” is also mentioned by Werner Adriaenssens, in *Philippe Wolfers: L’album congolais, un royal cadeau commémorant l’exposition coloniale de Tervuren en 1897* (Brussels, 2002), 7.

22 The object was one of four by Wolfers displayed in a glass-encased art nouveau Congo bilingua wood cabinet by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy in a section of an exhibition, *Art nouveau & design: Les arts décoratifs de 1830 à l’Expo 58*, at the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History, May 25–December 31, 2005, organized to celebrate Belgium’s 175th anniversary. Wolfers’s *Civilization and Barbarism* was acquired in 2002 by the King Baudouin Foundation after the director of the Horta Museum, Françoise Aubry, discovered that the object was coveted by a Japanese collector, and she worked to assure it a “Belgian future.” See Françoise Aubry and Werner Adriaenssens, *Philippe Wolfers: Civilisation et barbarie* (Brussels, 2002), 6–7.

23 King Leopold had begun, with the cooperation of his Congo secretary of state, Edmond Van Eetvelde, to distribute ivory tusks to modern artists, including Wolfers, in 1893, to showcase the possibilities of materials from the Congo for the Antwerp exhibition in 1894. Philippe Wolfers’s son Marcel wrote in a letter of June 12, 1962, that by offering the tusks to artists like his father, “His Majesty Leopold II” “became the sponsor/godfather [*le parrain*] of ‘Style Art Nouveau.’” He said the king’s commissions initiated, from 1894 on, the first steps of the “Modern Style in Belgium.” (Handwritten letter in the Royal Museum for Central Africa archives.) Details on the distribution of raw materials to artists and the full list of the chryselephantine sculptures and art nouveau Congo bilingua wood furniture shown in 1897 may be found in Masui, *Guide*, 9–16. Some of the furniture and fittings remained in the collections of the Tervuren museum until 1967, when they were transferred to the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History. Undated postcard collections in the Tervuren archives document the history of the museum’s galleries and the use of the art nouveau furnishings as display cases and tables over time. One postcard shows the 1897 bilingua wood cases of Serrurier-Bovy exhibiting native objects and surrounded by spears and shields arrayed on the gallery walls. Another postcard, c. 1930, shows the 1897 Congo wood tables by Georges Van Tuyn as the display tables for a series of long glass jars with specimens of dead snakes and fish preserved in formaldehyde. A postcard of 1910 shows the 1897 Congo wood tables by Georges Hobé in the installation for products in the museum’s Rubber Room (*Salle du caoutchouc*); the display is replete with a simulated forest and a statue of two natives patiently tapping a tree for latex, and a leafy winding vine frames the gallery entry. The full complement of the 1897 furnishings made for the Tervuren exhibition and maintained in the museum collections and storerooms until 1967 appear in a list, along with some of the only published photographs of them, in M. Luwel and Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervueren, 1897*; see also Thérèse Destrée Heymans, “Le mobilier Paul Hankar et l’exposition de Tervuren 1897, conservés aux Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire,” *Bulletin des Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire* 64 (1993): 101–12. The Serrurier-Bovy art nouveau display cabinet of 1897, exhibited for the brief period in 2005 (see note 22), has not been installed in any galleries; instead, it has been residing for some time in the makeshift storerooms of the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History together with some other transfers from those early Tervuren collections.

Earlier scholars have discussed the 1897 Tervuren Congo exhibition; see Jacques-Gregoire Watelet,

"Léopold II surpris par l'art nouveau—Tervueren 1897," in Balthazar and Stengers, *La dynastie et la culture en Belgique*, 149–60; Maurits Wynants, *Des ducs de Brabant aux villages congolais: Tervuren et l'exposition coloniale, 1897* (Tervuren, 1997); and Amy Ogata, *Art Nouveau and the Social Vision of Modern Living: Belgian Artists in a European Context* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. 46–58.

An indispensable inventory of the group of the ivories and chryselephantine sculptures from the 1897 exhibition and just afterward that formed the core collections of the Tervuren Royal Congo Museum is published in Jacqueline Guisset, ed., *Le Congo et l'art belge, 1880–1960* (Tournai, 2003), 152–55; see also Maurits Wynants, "Les statues chryselephantines au musée de Tervuren," in *ibid.*, 138–51; and Alfred Maskell, *Ivories* (1905; Rutland, VT, 1966), 504–10. A rare contemporary article, with extensive early photographs of these early ivory figures, is H. Van Meerbeeck, "L'art chryselephantine," *Congo-Noël, publié au profit de la Villa Coloniale "Sanatorium de Watermael"* (Brussels, 1902), 72–77. On the classical tradition of imperial ivory monuments, see the important work of Kenneth Lapatin, *Chryselephantine Statuary in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford, 2001), especially chapters 2, 5, and 6.

Like the furniture, most of the Congo ivories were transferred to the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History in 1967. Some of those not included in the transfer, such as *Léopold II*, the large ivory bust by Thomas Vincotte, c. 1900, and Eugène De Bremaecker's ivory *Slave*, c. 1900, were stored in the Tervuren museum's basement or in cupboards when I visited there in 2005; I thank Sabine Cornelis and Nancy Vanderlinden for letting me study them there.

The chryselephantine sculptures and their Tervuren "colonial" context of 1897 are discussed in Flynn, "Taming the Tusk." The Free University of Brussels (ULB) professor Sébastien Clerbois organized a small exhibition, the first of its kind, that focused on ivory and colonialism: *Heart of Darkness: Ivory Carving and Belgian Colonialism*, Leeds Henry Moore Institute, April 5–June 29, 2008. After long neglect, the art nouveau chryselephantine and ivory collections at the Brussels Royal Museums of Art and History are now receiving expert care, as well as scholarly scrutiny, owing to the efforts of its curator of modern decorative arts, Werner Adriaenssens. A new permanent gallery, opened in 2006, now houses a large group of these objects, including *Civilization and Barbarism*, which are displayed in opulent and brightly lit period cases. Adriaenssens has worked tirelessly to build the collection and to provide it with a scrupulously empirical history and provenance. While my own perspective and interpretation differ from his, I rely for my discussion of Wolfers on the following of Adriaenssens's works: "Philippe Wolfers en de renaissance van de ivoorsnijkunst in België," *Bulletin des Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire* 71 (2000): 88–186; *Philippe Wolfers: L'album congolais*; "Wit goud uit Congo, of de kortstondige opleving van de ivoorsculptuur in België rond 1900," *Science Connection*, December 9, 2005, 4–7, with photographs unavailable elsewhere; Aubry and Adriaenssens, *Civilisation et barbarie*; and Adriaenssens and Raf Steel, *La dynastie Wolfers de l'art nouveau à l'art deco*, catalogue raisonné (Antwerp, 2006).

24 A model of the Wolfers sculpture and a speech celebrating Van Eetvelde that was also printed on a parchment scroll with the signatories were presented to Van Eetvelde at a lavish banquet at the end of the 1897 Tervuren Congo exhibition attended by close to eight hundred guests. The banquet program cover was illustrated with the Wolfers piece, which was shown surrounded by African objects, with the date of the event inscribed along the curving surface of a large elephant tusk in the foreground. The artist, who signed as A. Heins, had provided illustrations for the first important book about the Congo published in Belgium, in 1887, by an early explorer and officer of the Free State, Lieutenant Jerome Becker; among Heins's many drawings for the two-volume work were one of an African elephant and one of natives transporting tusks from ship to shore with a large tusk set down in the foreground that closely resembles the one depicted on the 1897 banquet cover. (See Lieutenant Jerome Becker, *La vie en Afrique: Trois ans dans l'Afrique centrale*, 2 vols. [Brussels, 1887], 1:249, 2:269, and *passim*.) The Van Eetvelde banquet included a musical concert by an orchestra as well as an organ recital of "The March of the Pilgrims" from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. The cover illustration, banquet program, and full list of participants are included in *Manifestation de reconnaissance organisée par le commerce et l'industrie belges en l'honneur de l'État indépendant du Congo: Banquet offert à Mr. Van Eetvelde, secrétaire d'état, 29 septembre 1897* (Brussels, 1897), 1–30, listed as 70.9. 27–29 in the MRAC archives; see also Aubry and Adriaenssens, *Civilisation et barbarie*, 33–44. Heins's work for the 1887 Becker book and the 1897 banquet have not, to my knowledge, ever been studied.

Edmond Van Eetvelde, the brilliantly devious and loyal administrator of King Leopold's "red rubber" regime, is the pivotal and understudied figure who operationalized the king's vision of a distant empire as a commercial enterprise. Called back from Calcutta as a young diplomat after catching the king's eye with a prescient report on extending Belgium's railway matériel and investments into the Far East, Van Eetvelde directed his formidable skills and implacable manner toward negotiating favorable terms for Free State frontiers at the Conference of Berlin in 1884. He worked tirelessly to secure numerous loans from Parliament in 1887, 1890, and later, despite the conditions set by the 1885 "union personnelle," which stipulated no national funding. (And he colluded in backdating King Leopold's will to bequeath the Congo to Belgium in 1890 to prevent its being read as a *quid pro quo* in exchange for the valuable and no-interest loans of that year, which it was.)

As the king's closest and most steadfast advocate, Van Eetvelde helped devise, enforce, and defend the two critical elements of the Congo Free State as an empire of extraction: the bonus system, in

which state agents were paid low salaries augmented by cash commissions in proportion to the quantity and low cost of production, especially the quantity and cost of collecting and exporting rubber; and the domainal system, in which all open and unclaimed land, or “terres vacantes,” was declared the property of the state, that is, the king’s property. The decree of 1885 enabled Leopold to maintain that the state was owed tax on all such land in the form of labor or products; here he relied on a feudal or domainal definition of royal entitlement to “harvest” resource-rich areas, deprive the natives of their own territory, and force them to work and turn over all yield. Leopold had proclaimed this domainal system by fiat in 1885, although he had not applied or enforced it. But in 1891–92, with the promise of wild rubber and the dextrous assistance of Van Eetvelde, he began to do so. Van Eetvelde helped provide the king with a crucial legal legitimation for his claims of domainal status by soliciting the advice of a group of eminent national jurists. He circulated a questionnaire (with highly leading questions), and the experts, including Félix Cattier and Edmond Picard, responded by approving the sound legal basis for the definition of the domainal “terres vacantes,” by asserting that the king’s property rights superseded requirements for free trade, and by endorsing the king’s right to harvest and tax through products or labor. (On the surveying of the juridical community and the Van Eetvelde questionnaire, which has not received enough attention, see Vandervelde, *La Belgique et le Congo*, 37–48; and Marchal, *L’État libre*, 1:255–57. Van Eetvelde’s highly partial queries are listed in *État indépendant du Congo, Consultation délibérée par M. Edmond Picard, avec la collaboration de M. F. Cattier* [Brussels, 1892], 9–10 and *passim*.)

The sanctioning by law of the Congo as royal domainal property, in flagrant violation of the international free trade agreements of 1884, led to the creation of monopoly concessions for a small number of companies (*Domaines privés*), as well as a zone reserved exclusively for the king (*Domaine de la couronne*). This legal deformation of 1892, along with the bonus system, incentivized by cash, set in motion the frenzy of economic voracity that marked, and marred, the Free State regime, and Van Eetvelde was indispensable in creating both systems, although his role is often overlooked.

In 1897, when Van Eetvelde received the tribute of the model Wolfers sculpture and the gratitude of Belgian elites at the Tervuren Congo exhibition, he was at the pinnacle of his power and career. But he was also beset by daunting and unremitting challenges. Mounting evidence of atrocities in the Congo continued to accumulate after 1895, and the public exposure of “severed hands” had reached the Belgian press in 1896. Van Eetvelde was also embroiled in the sensitive diplomatic predicament after the German government demanded indemnity for the death of Charles Stokes (see note 9) as well as repayment for the loss of his ivory cache. Correspondence shows that German diplomats confronted Van Eetvelde with information about the bonus system, which he indignantly denied existed.

As chief officer and public face of the Congo Free State, Van Eetvelde mounted vigorous and pugilistic defenses of policy there, and in 1897, at the start of the exhibition, he gave an extensive interview to the press that revealed his gifts as a cunning and supple practitioner of public relations. Maneuvering in multiple directions to defuse criticism, Van Eetvelde pursued what Jean Stengers has identified as a dual strategy, with remarkably effective results. On the high ground, he acknowledged that the Congo Free State would respond with alacrity to any charges of abuses by state agents, and individuals would be punished. But Van Eetvelde also fiercely attacked the critics—he deflected the intensity of their criticism by maligning them and declaring their motives to be self-interested. Some he charged with being unpatriotic Belgians hostile to the institution of the monarchy; others, for being covetous British “calumniators” eager to claim Congo riches as their own by slurring a rival.

Evidence about Van Eetvelde’s career and policies is scattered through contemporary accounts and secondary literature, and his archives have still not received systematic scrutiny. There is no biography of him that I know of. Jules Marchal’s two books have many examples of Van Eetvelde’s activities and correspondence, while FFSA, “Histoire de la colonisation belge,” cites archival correspondence from Van Eetvelde of 1889 and 1892 (in the sections “Le domaine royal” and “Le recrutement”) concerning bonus cash payments to agents for delivering natives to the Force publique, the state’s native army, as well as “subsidies” to journalists for favorable articles. Adam Hochschild’s book documents Van Eetvelde’s letters to the king as they planned “children’s colonies”—with kidnapped children—as crucial sources of labor for the Force publique. Jean Stengers’s article on Van Eetvelde remains a foundational analysis, especially about the phases of his extraordinary career and the publicity he marshaled that kept the Free State protected at crucial junctures: Stengers, “Edmond Van Eetvelde,” in *Biographie coloniale belge*, vol. 2 (Brussels, 1951), 327–53. Van Eetvelde was a complex, talented, ruthless, and overwrought man whose unwavering devotion to fulfilling the king’s demands eventually broke his spirit, and he was rewarded for more than twenty years of service with a sudden dismissal in 1906, although he did go on in the decades following to become the financial wizard of railway expansion in Africa and China, ending his career where he began it as a young man, eager to export Belgian technological prowess across the globe.

25 Dramatic statistics in charts and graphs can be found in these contemporary works: De Wildeman and Gentil, *Lianes*, vi–xi; “Congo Free State,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 111; Masui, *Guide*, 263–468; Wauters, *Histoire politique*, 241–45; Morel, *Affairs of West Africa*, 312–53, with charts on 346–47. Secondary accounts of the Congo imports can be found in Emerson, *Leopold II*, 153–55; and Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, esp. 159–61, noting that the stock of one company, the A.B.I.R.,

was, in 1898, “nearly thirty times what it had been” in 1892 and that “between 1890 and 1904, total Congo rubber earnings increased ninety-six times over.” Wauters and Morel remind us, though, that all statistics in contemporary sources were unreliable, for they were *underreported* in the purported official record of the Congo Free State, the *Bulletin officiel*, published in Brussels; with Van Eetvelde’s collusion, the king was committed to hiding—or, at the very minimum, confusing the source of—the revenues that flowed to a number of different treasuries in Belgium where funds from Congo profits were deposited, but not recorded for public review, despite the fiction of a regular official state reporting venue.

26 See note 23 on the new ivories gallery in the Royal Museums of Art and History.

27 On Klimt’s *Pallas Athena*, see Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1980), 221–23; and Jane Kallir, *Gustav Klimt: 25 Masterworks* (New York, 1995), 14.

28 Luwel and Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervueren, 1897*, 70–76; Maskell, *Ivories*, 507.

29 Fernand Khnopff, “Studio-Talk,” *The Studio*, June 1897, 202.

30 Octave O. Maus, “La sculpture en ivoire à l’Exposition de Bruxelles,” *Art et décoration*, November 1897, 132.

31 While Van de Velde’s creation of the Belgium to Congo “Export Room” for the 1897 Tervuren exhibition is well known, there is little discussion of his plinth for the Van der Stappen *Sphinx*, which is listed as his work in Masui’s *Guide*, 10. Photographs of the 1897 Hall of Honor show a bust of Leopold and the *Sphinx* nearby. In the temporary Congo museum halls from 1898 to 1909 the *Sphinx* was positioned even closer to, and directly behind, a large-scale ivory bust of King Leopold by T. Vincotte, as seen in a rare photograph included in Guisset, *Le Congo et l’art belge*, 146. Later postcards and photographs through the 1930s show the ivory bust of Leopold moved to the midpoint of the lavish central rotunda that served as the entry hall to the new Tervuren Royal Congo Museum opened in 1910; the Van der Stappen *Sphinx* can be seen here placed directly across from and facing the Leopold statue.

32 See notes 9–11.

33 Henry van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie*, vol. 1, 1863–1900 (Brussels, 1992), 56–58, with a photograph of Willy with Stanley and a quotation on p. 58: “Calmpthout [where Henry van de Velde was living] n’est qu’une infecte souricière en comparaison de l’Afrique.” Willy wrote Henry in February 1883 that he was waiting for him in Leopoldville. The originals of these letters from Africa, housed at the Musée et archives de la littérature in the Royal Library in Brussels, have been misplaced, and I was unable to see them on a number of visits there. My thanks to Catherine Daems and Fabrice Van De Kerckhove at the Royal Library archive for their help in trying to locate them.

34 Van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie*, 62–67; see also the article on Van de Velde’s other friend and Antwerp avant-garde compatriot, Georges Eckhoud: “Capitale et métropole” (on Brussels and Antwerp), *La Revue encyclopédique*, July 24, 1897, 599–603, with this discussion about the Antwerp harbor on p. 601: “Combien de fois avons-nous admiré ces dockers, réunissant leurs forces pour mouvoir quelque géant, de la famille des cèdres ou des baobabs, expédié de l’Afrique?” Eckhoud’s novel *La nouvelle Carthage* (1888; 1893) also features the surging energy and vitality of the port of Antwerp, the embarkations for distant “eldorados,” the trafficking in ivory and in human recruits for the seas, and the speculative fever of the Stock Exchange.

35 Georg August Schweinfurth and Ellen E. Frewer, *The Heart of Africa: Three Years of Travels and Adventures in the Unexplored Regions of Central Africa*, 2 vols. (New York, 1874), 1:538; see also Stanley, *À travers le continent mystérieux*; and Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*. In addition to the explorer books, a rich and unexamined subculture of imperial botany and horticulture flourished in Belgium after 1885 in lectures, magazines, exhibitions, and clubs. I have traced some of these activities in the columns of *Le Mouvement géographique* (1885), *Le Congo illustré* (1891–93), and *La Belgique coloniale* (1897–99), which feature announcements and news of such events in Antwerp, Ghent, and Brussels.

36 Stanley, *Congo Free State*, 2:354–55. The “most valuable product, ivory,” is included here, p. 354.

37 Masui, *Guide*, 330–31.

38 See the photographs in Lemaire, *Congo et Belgique*, 11; “À Tervueren, l’ivoire,” *La Belgique coloniale*, August 27, 1897, 413, 410–11.

39 Ascherson, *King Incorporated*, 166.

40 A photograph of a stack of elephant crania with tusks attached ready for export from the Congo to the Tervuren museum was included in a recent exhibition and is reproduced in Carl De Keyser and John Lagae, *Congo belge en images* (Tielt, 2010), 186, 191.

41 The Hall of Mammals installation with these views can be seen in the early series of postcards of the Royal Congo Museum, c. 1910. I am grateful to Cathleen A. Chaffee, assistant curator of modern art, Yale University Art Gallery, for generously sharing her collection of these postcards with me.

42 Van Eetvelde was an early patron of Van de Velde’s and bought some of his furniture at an exhibition of “La libre esthétique” in 1896. He also enlisted Van de Velde to design the Export Room of the 1897 Tervuren Congo exhibition, and Van de Velde admired him as a patron of modernism as well as a “decider”—a state official who took initiative and followed an idea rather than becoming bogged down in bureaucracy and consultation. (See Van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie*, 291–93; and Van de Velde, “Die kolonial Ausstellung Tervueren,” *Dekorative Kunst* 1 [October 1898]: 38–41.) Illustrations of Van de Velde’s 1897 “liber memorialis” for Van Eetvelde can be found in Georges Bernard, *La*

Reliure en Belgique aux XIXe et XXe siècles (Brussels, 1985), 140–43. The serpent heads that meet at the middle of the book cover shown on p. 140 match a similar set of curving snake heads that form the doorway to Van de Velde's 1897 Export Room. A photograph of the Export Room with doorpost serpent heads can be found in Luwel and Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervueren, 1897*, plate 12. A recent exhibition included the rarely seen Van de Velde works honoring Van Eetvelde: *Bibliotheca Wittockiana, Henry van de Velde: Art Nouveau Bookbinding in Belgium, 1893–1900*, Brussels, 2010, pp. 130–143.

43 My thanks to Colette Kennedy-Wanetick for first suggesting this.

44 A rare photograph of the interior of the 1901 Paris shop of La Maison moderne may be found in Anne Pinget and Robert Hoozee, *Paris-Bruxelles, Bruxelles-Paris: Réalisme, impressionisme, symbolisme, art nouveau, Les relations artistiques entre la France et la Belgique, 1848–1914* (Paris, 1997), 393.

45 The Berlin barbershop with booths and tusklike printed wall decorations can be seen in *Die Kunst* 4 (1901): 490.

46 Reiner Lautwein, "Houses Tassel, Van Eetvelde, and Horta," in *Horta: Art Nouveau to Modernism*, ed. Françoise Aubry and Jos Vandenbreeden, with Reiner Lautwein, photography (Ghent, 1996), 84–85.

47 Horta's request is reported in the archival letters of 1895 between Van Eetvelde and his associate, A. Baerts, according to Luwel and Bruneel-Hye De Crom, *Tervueren, 1897*, 56–57. The two ridiculed Horta both for his brazenness in suggesting the plan and requiring a very large fee and for his assumption that there was a government to need buildings in the Congo, which they knew was run from the rue Brederode in Brussels.

48 Maurice Culot, "Art Nouveau Architecture in Belgium: Red Steel and Blue Aesthetic," in *Art Nouveau, Belgium, France*, by Yvonne Brunhammer et al. (Houston, 1976), 356–57; see Horta's discussion of the episode with the drawings in *Victor Horta: Mémoires*, ed. Cécile Dulière (Brussels, n.d.), 81–83; and Françoise Aubry, "Le pavillon du Congo," in *Art nouveau en projet* (Brussels), 24–25.

49 Suggested by Françoise Aubry in "Le pavillon du Congo," 24.

50 Horta discusses his entry to the lodge Les Amis philanthropes and his overlapping friendship and professional circles in his memoirs, in Dulière, *Victor Horta: Mémoires*, 19–24. See also Loyer and Delahaye, *Victor Horta: Hôtel Tassel*, 4–25, which includes, without comment, the only published image of the medal struck for the lodge in a later period—on one side, a crowned classical emperor with scepter, facing front and astride an elephant with conspicuously long tusks. In the lodge Horta was nicknamed "Vitruvius," after the architect of the early Roman Empire. For a fine article on the Freemason world and Masonic symbolism in Horta's early Autrique House, though without mention of links with imperialism and African liberal expansionism, see David Hanser, "Victor Horta, Art Nouveau and Freemasonry," in *Belgium: The Golden Decades*, ed. Jane Block (New York, 1997), 11–40. One comprehensive account of Horta's clients and their social and professional status is Valerie Montens, "Victor Horta's Clients," in Aubry and Vandenbreeden, *Horta: Art Nouveau to Modernism*, 117–38, which discusses Freemasonry in passing, but not imperialism, though many of the clients treated—engineers, railway investors, lawyers, and bankers—had Congo connections and interests that have not been studied.

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Liebrechts preceded Horta in the lodge Les Amis philanthropes by two years, entering as an *apprenti* in 1886. An early army recruit to the Congo, Liebrechts worked alongside Stanley before the Free State was founded, and was then appointed, and served throughout his career in various capacities as a Congo Free State administrator. He was one of the only Congo Free State officials to have ever traveled to Africa and was second only to the unflappable and assiduous Van Eetvelde in his loyalty and capacity for inexhaustible work for King Leopold. Liebrechts served as secretary of the interior of the Congo Free State and was central to the creation and management of its "propaganda department" in Brussels, the Press Bureau (see note 9).

In the lodge, Liebrechts's fraternal groups consisted of progressive, technocratic, and monied elites, especially engineers, industrialists, and bankers, whom he endeavored to persuade to invest and work in the Congo. Documents show that he gave lectures on the Congo for lodge members and could vivify the talks with reports of his own travels, the progress of the Congo railroad, and the courage of recruits from Belgium. Horta and Liebrechts overlapped in the lodge, but this connection, along with the imperial layer of Freemasonry so palpable in the lodge's medal of an emperor riding an ivory-weighted elephant, has never been recognized.

On Liebrechts and King Leopold, see G. Moulaert, "Charles-Adolphe Marie Liebrechts," in *Biographie coloniale belge*, vol. 3 (Brussels, 1952), 556–60; and Liebrechts, *Léopold II, fondateur d'empire* (Brussels, 1932). Liebrechts's membership in the Brussels lodge Les Amis philanthropes was brought to my attention by L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884–1914* (Princeton, NJ, 1979), chap. 3, 86–87, as was the term "propaganda department" for the Press Bureau. Crucial information about Liebrechts's presence and lectures in the lodge are included in n.a., *Historie d'une loge: Les Amis philanthropes de 1876 à 1998* (Brussels, 1999), esp. 300–318. I am grateful to Frank Langenaken, director of the Brussels Centre de documentation Maçonnique/Maconniek Documentatie Centrum for his generous assistance in guiding me to documents about Horta's lodge in the 1880s and thereafter.

51 A.-J. Wauters, *Le dernier grand blanc de la carte de l'Afrique, la rivière d'Oubangi, le problème de l'Ouellé* (Brussels, 1885). Wauters's extraordinary range of activities included writing the first texts on the

art history of the new Belgium, as well as the catalogues of the collections of the Brussels Musée des beaux-arts; he was also a critical figure in rediscovering the Flemish Primitives and wrote important scholarly works on Jan Gossart and Roger van der Weyden. His voluminous and continually updated maps, travel books, and geographical studies of Africa—among them the 1881 *Royaume des éléphants* and a 1911 school textbook, *Une excursion au Congo belge*—form an enormous oeuvre, giving him the title “armchair geographer” but one with remarkable influence and impact. As a directing member of a number of Congo Free State investment companies in the first decade after exploration, Wauters interviewed Joseph Conrad for a job on one of the Congo steamers, *Le roi des belges* (Conrad’s aunt knew Wauters and set up the Brussels interview). An idealist, enthusiast, and *animateur* of King Leopold’s African enterprise, Wauters was profoundly disillusioned by the emergence, after 1892, of the domainal and monopolist practices that replaced the free trade philanthropic vision of 1885, and he recorded his bitter indictment of the king in his important book, *Histoire politique du Congo belge*, of 1911. Some of his other important works are Wauters, *Stanley’s Emin Pasha Expedition*; and Wauters, *Bibliographie du Congo: Catalogue méthodique de 3800 ouvrages, brochures, notices et cartes relatifs à l’histoire, la géographie et la colonisation du Congo, un volume de 356 pages* (Brussels, 1895). Studies of Wauters are sparse, and I focus on him in a larger project. I have relied here on Lucien Solvay, “Notice sur Alphonse-Joseph Wauters,” *Annuaire de l’Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique* 1926: 169–200; “Le mémorial A.-J. Wauters,” *Le Mouvement géographique* 1922: 345, 361–64; and R. Cambier, “A.-J. Wauters,” in *Biographie coloniale belge*, 2:969–72.

Wauters’s membership and some of his activities as a member of Horta’s lodge Les Amis philanthropes can be found in *Histoire d’une loge*, 300–318. Like Liebrechts, Wauters, who lectured constantly in Brussels about the Congo, usually using maps and lantern slides, gave presentations to his lodge community and acted to enlist members’ participation in the empire. Horta and Wauters would also have met as well at the home of Henri Van Cutsem, a wealthy art collector and impresario whose homes Horta built or redesigned. Van Cutsem’s list of Sunday lunch guests includes Wauters and Horta, in addition to other luminaries of the arts. See Sander Pierron, *Portraits d’artistes* (Brussels, 1905), 5–11.

52 Wauters, *Stanley’s Emin Pasha Expedition*, 53; On Schweinfurth’s books and his importance in Belgium for encouraging Congo exploration and the king’s early plans, see W. Robyns, “Georges-Auguste Schweinfurth,” in *Biographie coloniale belge*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 1948), 837–41. Emile Banning, the diplomat and political leader who helped spur support for the king’s efforts in Africa in the 1880s, quoted passages from Schweinfurth’s books in his 1876 articles in *L’Echo du Parlement* as he exhorted citizens in Belgium to join the humanitarian cause of bringing progress and civilization to the Congo.

53 Wauters, *Stanley’s Emin Pasha Expedition*, 53.

54 Traces of Horta’s fervent interest in geography, and in Africa in particular, have never been studied but are evident in the inventory of his library and in archival materials housed in the Brussels Horta Museum; Horta’s personal library included atlases and many tomes on geography, including Elisée Reclus’s multivolume work *L’homme et la terre* and Reclus’s important series *Nouvelle géographie universelle*. (See, in the museum’s archives, “Inventaire Bibliothèque V. Horta.”) Exiled from France to Switzerland after his participation in the Paris Commune, Reclus (1830–1905) moved to Brussels and was appointed to the science faculty at the Free University in 1892. In 1895 he taught courses along with Henry van de Velde at the Institut des hautes études of the Brussels New University. Reclus added a volume on the Congo to his sprawling geographies in 1888, and his texts were featured in Wauters’s books on the Congo Free State. The Horta Museum archives have one unusual record of the architect’s unexplored fascination with Africa: an undated handwritten copy of the Elisée Reclus volume on Africa from the *Nouvelle géographie universelle*. Horta carefully copied out, by hand, the entire Reclus volume, in ink pen on sheafs of paper. This large manuscript copy is catalogued as XVI.29. Résumé d’Elisée Reclus: “Nouvelles [*sic*] Géographie universelle (résumé complet, dactylographié et manuscrit).” Horta also pursued a long-term interest in Egypt and the course of the Nile River, and he traveled to Africa in 1909.

55 Horta as quoted and discussed in Victor Champier, “Interview de Hector Guimard,” *Revue des art décoratifs* 19 (1899): 8–10; sections are reprinted in Dulière, *Victor Horta: Mémoires*, 286–87. Van de Velde derided what he considered the hyperaestheticism and demasculinized indulgence of French interiority and design in his “Déblaiement d’art,” *Société nouvelle* 12 (April 1894): 444–56.

56 Van de Velde’s “line of force,” “line as a force” and line as “violence” appear in his notes and writings from 1891 to 1925, but references and remarks have not been systematically collected. I rely on the discussion and the sections assembled and quoted in A. M. Hammacher, *Le monde de Henry Van de Velde* (Paris, 1965), 126–28, as well as Henry van de Velde, *Kunstgewerbliche Laienpredigten* (Leipzig, 1902), 188–190; and “Die Linie,” in *Essays* (Leipzig, 1910), 41–74. The whiplash (*coup de fouet*) style that “splits the air” and propels with “mad exuberance” across all materials and surfaces is best articulated in Robert-L. Delevoy, *Pionniers du XXe siècle: Guimard, Horta, Van de Velde* (Brussels, 1971), 21–22; see also Culot, “Art Nouveau Architecture,” 345–48; and Louis Meers, *Promenades art nouveau à Bruxelles* (Brussels, 1995), 31–41.

57 Horta’s exact sources and timing are called a “mystery” in Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “The Art Nouveau—Victor Horta,” in *Pelican History of Art: Architecture, the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 4th ed. (New York, 1977), 389; see also Delevoy, *Pionniers du XXe siècle*, 22, stating that Horta’s art nouveau

line was “born in the ambience of a period,” but that it is difficult to isolate how that ambience operated; and Françoise Aubry, “Victor Horta and Brussels,” in *Art Nouveau, 1890–1914*, ed. Paul Greenhalgh (London, 2000), 279, discussing the breakthrough Tassel House: “It was in 1893 that Horta found his inner freedom. . . . To this day we do not know what triggered this.”

58. The quoted terms are used in Merlon, *Le Congo producteur*, 87, 93. See also Stanley’s vivid description of the vines as “endless anacondas”: *In Darkest Africa*, 2:76–77.

59 Wauters, “La liane à caoutchouc,” 112. For similar descriptions of this type by contemporaries, see the writers listed in note 6 above. See also Daniel D. Olivier, *Flora of Central Africa*, vol. 4, section 1, *Oleaceae to Gentianeae* (Kent, UK, 1904), 30–89, 593–601, with inventories and characteristics of the Congo lianas of Belgium’s domain, such as “Liana Eetveldeana,” “Owarensis,” and “Droogmans.” Note the Congo vine type named after Secretary Van Eetvelde.

60 Wauters, “La liane à caoutchouc,” 112; Lemaire, *Congo et Belgique*, 35; Merlon, *Le Congo producteur*, 88.

61 Gauguin’s *Vision* of 1888, suggesting what he called the movement from “the natural to the non-natural,” is still more immediately legible, however, with its Breton peasants in regional costume, than what one writer called Van de Velde’s ornamental “fruit” and “linear arabesque.” See Delevoy, *Pionniers du XXe siècle*, 80. The pastel is reproduced in Delevoy’s book as well as in Susan Canning, *Henry Van de Velde: Paintings and Drawings* (Antwerp, 1987), 225. The title was added later and varies in different catalogues. On Van de Velde’s crisis, and the move through Seurat and Van Gogh to the applied arts, see Hammacher, *Le monde de Henry Van de Velde*, 11–89.

62 On the characteristics of symbolism, idealism, and the dream, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley, CA, 1989), 75–79; and Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York, 2000), chap. 3, esp. 132–33.

63 Merlon, *Le Congo producteur*, 88: “chez le caoutchouc, . . . ce n’est pas un arbre de verdure, . . . il ne s’extériorise pas sa vie.”

64 These are the words of Gustave Kahn, from his symbolist manifesto of 1886, quoted in John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, 3rd ed. (Garden City, NJ, 1979), 148; see also Robert Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism* (New York, 1988), 74.

65 An avid botanist, Horta was exposed early on to the wonders of the Congo plant world by his work in the Balat offices during the time of the construction of King Leopold’s Congo greenhouses, as noted earlier. Architectural ingenuity in the form of rugged and flexible bridges constructed with *lianes* was regularly featured and commented on, and photographs were reproduced, in the journal *Le Congo illustré*, published by Wauters, whom Horta knew. The Horta archives include the handwritten notes that Horta took as he read certain books and articles. In one of these, a book called *La Belgique, institutions, industries et commerce* (n.d.), Horta’s handwritten notes refer to the vegetation “caoutchoucs” and to iron conservatories (n.p.). (See XVI.7 Résumé d’un livre: “La Belgique, institutions, industries et commerce,” Horta Museum archives.)

66 Paolo Portoghesi, cited in Archives d’architecture moderne, *Les mots de Victor Horta: Photographies contemporaines de Jacques Evrard* (Brussels, 1996), 56. Portoghesi does not discuss any origins of this singular type of curve and hook.

67 Olivier, *Flora of Central Africa*, 4.1:30–89, 593–601; Stanley, *In Darkest Africa*, 2:76–85.

68 Historians have tracked the documentary traces of this punishment from 1888, although some evidence appears as early as 1883. Jules Marchal lists the findings and the chronology of the use of the *chicotte* in his *L’État libre*, 2:113–15; see also the section “La chicotte,” in FFSA, “Histoire de la colonisation belge”; and Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 120–21, with the cited description of the whip.

69 The full quotation reads: “Le fouet fend l’air et l’on entend à deux cent cinquante mètres de distance le bruit du cuir coupant la chair.” “Le Congo au Parlement, séance du Sénat du 27 juin,” *Le Mouvement géographique* 1922: 364. The use of the *chicotte* was finally abolished in 1959, six months before Congo achieved independence.

70 Speech by King Leopold, 1897, in Liebrechts, *Léopold II*, 212–16.

71 Marchal, *L’État libre*, 2:42.

72 Van Eetvelde Papers, General State Archives, cited in Paul Belien, *A Throne in Brussels: Britain, the Saxe-Coburgs and the Belginisation of Europe* (Exeter, UK, 2005), 112–13.

73 In 1885 in Brussels, Manduau organized the first art exhibition of works created on-site in the Congo. His art, career, and subversive painting and engraving of 1884–85 were discovered by Sabine Cornelis, director of the history section of the Tervuren museum, who wrote a pathbreaking dissertation with a chapter on Manduau as well as other artists and writers in the Congo from 1880 to 1914. The Manduau painting *Civilization in the Congo* is in the collection of the Tervuren museum, and it was reproduced in the 2003 catalogue, *Le Congo et l’art belge*, with an important essay by Cornelis, “Capteurs d’images: Dessinateurs, peintres et aquarellistes amateurs au Congo (1880–1908),” 76–88. I also rely on the article by Sabine Cornelis, “Édouard Manduau et son tableau ‘La civilisation au Congo 1884–1885,’” in *Congo-Meuse: Figures et paradoxes de l’histoire au Burundi, au Congo et au Rwanda* (Brussels, 2002), 11–37, which includes Manduau’s inscription.

74 Victor Arnoud, *L’œuvre africaine* (Brussels, 1891), 33–35.

75 A.-J. Wauters, *Le Congo: Conclusions de six conférences contradictoires données à la Maison du peuple*

(Brussels, 1892); some of the conference transcripts were published in *Le Mouvement géographique*, February 1892.

76 Picard, *En Congolie*; Buls, *Croquis congolais*; and Léopold Courouble, *Profil blanc et frimousses noires: Impressions congolaises* (Brussels, 1902), 188–90, on “la chicotte.”

77 Van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie*, 249: “À la fin du siècle passé, sa [la ligne] vigueur s’était complètement éteinte. Horta, dans le domaine de l’architecture, Serrurier et moi, dans celui des arts industriels, nous l’avons réveillée presque à la même heure, presque dans un même lieu. Nous saisismes la ligne comme on saisit un fouet. Un fouet dont les claquements sonores accompagneraient notre course aventureuse, dont les coups cingleraient l’épiderme d’un public indolent.”

In addition to the very graphic description of lash on skin, Van de Velde’s use of the terms “adventurous course” (“notre course aventureuse”) reverberates with distinctively Belgian imperial connotations. At the beginning of Leopold’s efforts for overseas explorations in Africa from 1878 to 1885, for example, volunteer recruits were denigrated as “hotheads” (“cerveaux brûlés”) and “adventurers” (“aventuriers”). The latter term was used pejoratively, according to Belgian military historian General Émile Wanty, by small-minded, passive, and placid bourgeois contemporaries too prudent to endorse the uncertainties of expansionism. But a few years after the Congo Free State’s founding in 1885, the term *aventurier* took a positive turn, associated by segments of public opinion with the admirable qualities of Belgian audacity, “energy,” “initiative,” and intrepidity; the “adventurer” as reckless “hothead” gave way to the adventurer as glorious hero of empire. (See Émile Wanty, *Le milieu militaire belge de 1831 à 1914* (Brussels, 1957), 156–233.)

Significantly, writers in Van de Velde’s close circle of avant-garde friends and colleagues lauded the uniquely Belgian, and imperial, “aventurier” in the fin de siècle. Émile Verhaeren’s poem “Vers le futur” in *Les villes tentaculaires* (1895), for example, celebrated the “savant,” “artiste,” and “aventurier” as types of “new beings” who press the world forward and embrace the “universe entire.” Novelist and writer Georges Eekhoud (see note 34) worked in the 1890s and afterward to invest the history of Belgium, and especially Antwerp, with the special legacies of what he called the “adventurism” and “contumacy” that marked a pre-nineteenth-century citizenry unconstrained by social rules or territorial boundaries. In a series of remarkable works, Eekhoud reconstituted the chronicles and legends of Antwerp to glorify, for example, the predatory daring and bellicosity of the seafaring “corsaires” of the port city; in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Eekhoud writes, these unbridled “adventurers” left the shores of the Escaut River for the ends of the earth, seeking conquest and profit all the way to the coasts of Africa and Syria (Georges Eekhoud, “Les origines fabuleuses d’Anvers,” *La Belgique artistique et littéraire* 20 [1910]: 43–46). Other writers in 1900 echoed this distinctive history of premodern Belgium by identifying its episodes of “adventurism” across the seas and territories, in contrast to its nineteenth-century confinement to limited horizons before King Leopold’s imperial enterprise, as in Henry Crittenden Morris, *The History of Colonization from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 2 vols. (New York, 1900), 1:302–4 and vol. 2, passim. These examples indicate how packed with particular and uniquely Belgian imperial history Van de Velde’s comments are, linking as they do an “adventurous course” of line let loose and line as a cracking whip that lashes the skin of an “indolent public.”

In the quotation above, Van de Velde imagined a weakened European line reactivated in a fantasy of domination—a *coup de fouet* splitting the backs of an “indolent public.” In his critique of debilitated European ornament, Van de Velde’s imaginative resources again turned to the Congo, but in a more positive and constructive direction: he defined the ornamental body arts of scarification as a model for design revitalization. Here the native shifted from victim to artist and provided Van de Velde not with a fantasy of domination but with an object of admiration and identification. In Part II of this article, which will appear in the next issue of *West 86th*, I will demonstrate how Van de Velde’s radical theory of structural ornament, defined as an integral union of shape and material, is rooted in his fascination with Congo scarification, which suggests an unexpected origin of the international modernist canon of “form and function” in the abstract linear patterns of ornamental body scars that Van de Velde encountered in imperial magazines, photographs, exhibitions, lectures, and travel literature from 1885 to 1900. Officials of King Leopold’s Congo Free State discussed Congo skin scars as a grammar of ornament, as a visual language, and as a convenient form of tribal identification, which they expected would wane with the progress of civilization. King Leopold and his civilizers did not foment a waning of this culture, but they acted to destroy it, along with countless native communities as well. But the heart of Africa gave life to the Art of Darkness that was Belgian art nouveau, and from it international modernism flowed with the lash, the vine, the elephant, and the skin scar.