

The Creativity of the Congo

Read about the conditions of the Congolese people under Belgian Colonial rule and the creativity that originated from this country during that time.

Belgian colonial rule over what is today known as the Democratic Republic of Congo began under the regime of King Leopold II in the late 19th century. Leopold persuaded the Belgian government to allow him to rule over this land that was foreign to them, but rich with trade rubber, ivory and minerals. However, under Leopold's rule, the Congolese people suffered great atrocities and exploitation and it is estimated that around 10 000 000 Congolese died as a result. Leopold's regime was terminated in the 20th century due to intense diplomatic pressure on the Belgian government to take official control of the country. It did so in 1908 when the Belgian Congo was created as a Belgian colony until its official independence in 1960.

Despite the violence and suffering that occurred for much of the Congo's history as a colony, especially during the rule of Leopold II, Congolese villages were home to many creative and cultural objects and initiatives during the country's time as a colony. These works are especially insightful as their purpose often combined both the artistic and the useful. We'll make mention of three now.

- Masks

Masks created by the Congolese people (usually wooden) were, first and foremost, designed to hide the face and identity of the wearers. Yet, the way in which the masks were designed was also meant to reveal parts of the wearer's personality. Therefore, many of the masks created resembled the different functions that the wearers possessed or sought to emulate: witch hunters, protectors of harvests and villages, teachers during initiation rites, guardians of political power, promoters of fertility, representatives of the supernatural, guides for the

deceased souls, avengers, comedians, etc. The contexts in which Congolese masks were used were various. On certain occasions they were used to conjure up supernatural beings, such as ancient spirits and ancestors. Yet, masks have also been used to entertain the public, such as for dance performances.

Discussion

Look at the four mask examples. When do you think these masks would have been used and what did they want to convey with the way they've been designed?

- Chokwe combs

The Chokwe people exist in many African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo. The designs of the combs that they created shed light on how this object for hygiene and cosmetics can also be an element of cultural and creative significance. For the Chokwe people, their combs have a dual purpose. This object is used in the first place to untangle the hair of men and women. However, each of their combs was designed with a figurine carved above the teeth of a comb which carried different symbolism (depicting fertility, dignity, bravery, ancestors, etc.). The user of the comb could then also apply the comb as a way to style and decorate their hair and headdress.

Discussion

Look at the four comb examples and read about what they symbolize for their wearers. If you could create your own comb as the Chokwe people have done, which kind of figurine would you want to carve out as a decoration?

- Pot lids

It might be difficult to recognise the cultural and creative significance of an item such as a pot lid which seems like its only use would be for the kitchen. However, people inhabiting the lower Congo region wanted to convey another purpose with the design of their pot lids. They were

carved with sculptured images illustrating the various sayings known in this region. This is why the pot lids are known as 'proverb pot lids'. The lids would, therefore, express a thought, a reproach or a piece of advice. The lids had a use even outside the kitchen as they were exchanged between the Congolese to settle disputes within a household. Reading the proverb pot lids today is not an easy task and the meaning can vary depending on how the carved symbol is interpreted by the observer.

Discussion

Look at the four proverb pot lid examples and read about some interpretations of what they could symbolize. Can you think of your own interpretations of what the figures on the pot lids symbolize?