The Taste of Others: Finery, the Slave Trade, and Africa’s Place in the Traffic in Early Modern Things

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“Andris Macaye Mafouque le Juste de Cabinde.” This inscription appears within a flowing ribbon engraved on a large silver ceremonial sword produced, according to its hallmarks, in France’s port city of La Rochelle between 1775 and 1777. (Figure 1) These words are not the only unexpected feature for museum-goers facing the luxurious object centrally displayed in the city’s Musée du Nouveau Monde. While its gadrooned handle and flower garland decorations fit well within France’s late eighteenth century silversmithing style, its broad blade, cut out orthogonally at its top and enhanced with thin geometric elements welded to its edge makes it at odds with European templates of functional, ceremonial, or even decorative weaponry.¹ In fact, the blade’s features are typical of ceremonial knives known as bimpada (sing. kimpada), used as emblems of status since at least the eighteenth century in west central Africa – the region recorded on the inscription by the place name Cabinde or Cabinda.² Artists from this area around the Congo River’s estuary created bimpada locally in wood or various metals. (Figure 2) Oral history, inscriptions, or formal attributes also indicate that other examples came to central Africa from Europe as diplomatic or commercial gifts. The sword from La Rochelle is the oldest, most intricate, and best contextualized among them.³

² Transliteration of the name for this category of objects vary according to authors and local variations of the term in Kikongo, the language of the different Bakongo people. I use in this article the spelling recorded in Cabinda, by Portuguese Spiritan Father Martins in the 1940s and 1950s: kimpada, pl bimpada. See Joaquim Martins, Cabindas: História, Crença, Usos E Costumos (Comissão de Turismo da Câmara Municipal de Cabinda, 1972).
If the identification of the Musée du Nouveau Monde kimpada may not be difficult for those familiar with central African visual culture, its form, inscription, and itineraries are riddles for most of its twenty-first century European viewers. Each aspect challenge preconceptions about Africa and its material and aesthetic interactions with Europe in the early modern period, an era in large part defined in the Atlantic world by the transoceanic traffic in enslaved men and women from its shores to the Americas. Instead of presenting Europe and Africa as two distant worlds at odds with each other, linked merely by the economic transactions of the slave trade, the sword positions the two regions as linked poles of a closely interconnected space within which objects, motifs, and the ideas they materialized flowed lithely. It shows how European artisans emulated examples brought from overseas to their workshops either in kind or in image to craft objects inspired by African forms and fit to please African patrons. Related examples made at the mouth of the Congo River and including elements of European decorative arts, in turn, demonstrate the ways in which African artists translated the designs and motifs that goldsmiths from France or Portugal once articulated in their exported creations into new forms of their own. What unfolded in the process was a sophisticated, cumulative, cross-Atlantic back-and-forth of elite material goods and aesthetic conceptions.

Pleasing the Mafouque

Inscription, form, and date point to the intended recipient of the kimpada from La Rochelle. They refer to Andres Pukuta who held concurrently the functions of mkaya (Macaye) and mafuka (Mafouque) on the west central African Loango coast, positions that made him one of the highest dignitaries north of the Congo River’s estuary. As mafuka, Andres oversaw the
activities of Europeans engaged in commerce in the region. This role made him the recipient of lavish gifts through which merchants hailing from different ports in Europe competed for his good graces. It was him, indeed, who set the price of European commodities, settled trade disputes, and collected taxes on behalf of the local king. Travelers’ memoirs and merchants’ inventories recorded the “coral, silver ware, carpets and other furniture, more of less precious,”5 “very fine silverware, including two large silver fountains with four taps each,”6 “luxury […] toile, calico, silk, cloth, even velvet,”7 that flowed from overseas into the hands of Andres and other members of the west central African elite.

The spectacular rituals surrounding Andres’ passing from the world of the living to the world of the dead bore witness to the material wealth he accumulated during a lifetime of dealings with traders and clients from near and far. One of the merchants, Frenchman Louis Ohier de Grandpré, active on the coast of central Africa in 1786-1787, witnessed the lavish funeral of Andres and illustrated it with two engravings in his 1801 publication *Voyage à la Côte d’Angole.*8 The first image describes the mourning ceremonies preceding the burial of the great man.9 The second shows the monumental funerary bundle surrounding the body of Andres, a bundle made in part of imported cloth and proportional in size and splendor to the wealth and prestige the *mafuka* had accumulated during his lifetime.10 (Figure 3) Later visual documentation

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7 Ibid., vol 1 p 71.
8 Notter noted the reference in her notice on the sword, see Notter, "Un Témoignage De La Traite Rochelaise Sur La" Côte D’ Angole" À La Fin Du Xviii Siècle."
9 de Grandpré, *Voyage À La Côte Occidentale D'afrique.* P 142-43
of the areas around Loango, for instance in twentieth century ethnographic photographs, testify to the lasting, deep significance of worldly collections of objects as insignia as well as funerary furnishing on the tombs of the elite.\footnote{Martins, *Cabindas: História, Crença, Usos E Costumes*.}

The items merchants brought to the African Atlantic coast encompassed things of exotic flair as well as custom-made creations such as the kimpada or more modest imitations of local finery. The cargo of French ship La Manette which traded around the mouth of the Congo River in 1790 for instance, included some “cat skins” its crew bestowed to their central African interlocutors. This unusual cargo responded to the use of similar feline furs in central Africa where they served as insignia as seen on some of the men in the foreground of the print depicting Andres’ burial.\footnote{Cahier manuscrit de 12 feuillets inséré dans le Livre des comptes d’armement et désarmement de Pierre Castaing. 1782-1802. Registre manuscrit sur papier. The register does have page numbers but the manbouque and mafouque appear as recipients of « peaux de chat » on view 84 of 87 of the digitized version \url{http://archives.bordeaux-metropole.fr/archive/fonds/FRAC033063_trait/view:14265}} (figure 3) Having brought the proper combination of fine things thanks to appropriate knowledge and preparation, European traders would gain the assent of the mafuka and of those holding his position elsewhere on the African Atlantic coast to conduct commerce on their shores. The seafarers would then see the principal commodity they sought flow in return into their ships’ cargo holds: men and women destined to enslaved labor principally in the Americas.

This attentive, reciprocal engagement between Europeans and Africans around the Atlantic, through the exchange of fine things, an engagement entangled with the slave trade, was not merely the hallmark of the later decades of the early modern period. On the contrary, the circulation of elite objects and the parallel traffic in enslaved people emerged as cornerstones of the Atlantic system since its inception. Focusing on the central African context, this chapter

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11 Martins, *Cabindas: História, Crença, Usos E Costumes*.
12 Cahier manuscrit de 12 feuillets inséré dans le Livre des comptes d’armement et désarmement de Pierre Castaing. 1782-1802. Registre manuscrit sur papier. The register does have page numbers but the manbouque and mafouque appear as recipients of « peaux de chat » on view 84 of 87 of the digitized version \url{http://archives.bordeaux-metropole.fr/archive/fonds/FRAC033063_trait/view:14265}
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outlines how the entrance of the region’s elite into the commercial, political, and religious networks of the Atlantic world circa 1500 immediately lead to its participation into the two interrelated, global realms of luxury exchange and human trafficking. On the one hand, the great men and women of central Africa joined the early modern culture of collecting at its highest levels, sending and receiving prized and rare items. On the other hand, bestowing and accepting fine and curious things, the same leaders dove into the crosscurrents of commercial and geopolitical flows in which the movement in finery participated in and in many regards sustained the abject cross-Atlantic trade in human chattel.

Shedding light on Africa and Africans’ little studied role in the early modern global networks of luxury exchange and collecting, within the context of the slave trade, this chapter aims to counter some enduring misconceptions. It challenges the idea that commerce on the African coast relied only on trifles (items of little values in the eyes of Europeans) and occasionally on slightly more sophisticated gifts that easily swayed unsophisticated local elites. It argues in contrast that the establishment and practice of trade involved carefully chosen, rare, and at times goods custom-made for individuals, circulating in and out of Africa in sophisticated exchanges that made the elite of the continent full participants in the global early modern culture of collecting and networks of taste and design.

**An Invisible Exchange**

The transcontinental flow in curiosities, fineries, and artistic forms as well as its material traces have remained largely invisible in studies of and approaches to the history of Africa and the Atlantic world in the early modern period. Scholarship on Africa’s participation in long distance commerce during that era has focused instead on the slave trade through quantitative descriptions of commodity transfers considered at a macro level for their monetary or exchange-
value. The main goal of these important studies has been to explore the impact of the slave trade on the economic development or underdevelopment of the continent.

Qualitative studies of the same sources have remained coarse-grained in their analysis of the material characteristics of the items traded on the African coast against human cargo. At the core of this scholarship are explicit or implicit attempts to elucidate the paradoxes of a commerce based on asymmetric or incommensurate systems of valuation. European writings of the slave trade era routinely evoked the seafaring merchants’ baffling, wondrous even, ability to buy things they considered of great economic value from Africans in exchange for trifles or trinkets. Contemporary interpreters ascribed the cause of this mismatch to an inability on the part of Africans to think and act rationally. Such considerations would play a central role in the


15 This has been noted for instance by Aka Kouamé, "Les Cargaisons De Traite Nantaises Au Xviiie Siècle: Une Contribution À L'étude De La Traite Négrière Française" (Nantes, 2005).

construction and enduring impact of early modern European discourses about Africa and Africans as other, irrational, and eventually ripe for exploitation.\textsuperscript{17} The concept of the fetish for instance emerged in this context, as a term to describe objects Africans held in great esteem but Europeans considered materially, economically, and spiritually trivial. The descriptive idiom that soon grew into an analytical term and has cast a long shadow over outside perception of the continent emerged precisely from reckonings with this issue of incommensurability of value in the realms of commerce, religious, but also, I would add, aesthetics.\textsuperscript{18}

Diplomatic historians have been the ones interrogating the bestowal of fine items to African elite, which they considered through the lens of courtly gifting.\textsuperscript{19} They listed and identified some of the luxury goods that arrived on the continent to explore the role these objects played as vectors of power relations as well as sites of frequent cross-cultural misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{20} Much concerned with the reception of foreign pieces in different areas of the African continent, they paid less attention to the shaping role of African taste and its impact on the choice or conception of the objects brought to the continent’s shores.\textsuperscript{21}

Scholars of African material and visual cultures, in turn, moved by an imperative to correct misconceptions of the continent as a-historical and unrefined, have focused their attention on the description and analysis of objects and practices that testify to the depth and sophistication

\textsuperscript{17} Marisa Soares observes a similar blindspot in the historiography: that of the trade in ivory. Mariza de Carvalho Soares, ""Por Conto E Peso": O Comércio De Marfim No Congo E Loango, Séculos Xv Xvii," Anais do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material 25 (2017). P 60-61
\textsuperscript{21} Brauner’s essay steps slightly in this direction ibid. p 423-424
of artistic traditions wholly indigenous to the continent. This agenda has left at the far margins of the canon of African art history creations visibly shaped by cross-cultural exchange, such as the ones considered in this chapter. Since the 2010s, however, new scholarship has emerged exploring cross-cultural interactions within the continent, as well as beyond its shores.\textsuperscript{22} In earlier decades, studies on Afro-Portuguese ivories African artists created between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century for the cabinets of curiosity and treasure rooms of elite European patrons had also been a relevant exception pertaining to early modern studies. Multiple exhibitions, books, and articles have reflected on their provenance, uses, and status in European early modern and contemporary contexts.\textsuperscript{23} Yet, as art historian Ingrid Greenfield underlines in her scholarship, these works have paid but too little attention to the multivalent connections of these artworks with the slave trade.\textsuperscript{24}

These historiographical trends have made even as spectacular an object as the kimpada from La Rochelle an enigmatic curiosity that has remained unstudied. And bimpada are only one category among a broad, and heretofore largely under-examined corpus of similarly conceived metalwork, textiles, and luxury goods created in the context of the commercial and human ebbs and flows that linked the Atlantic coast of Africa to Europe and the Americas all along the early modern period. They exemplify the extravagantly luxurious, intricately designed, and often personalized items that European traders bestowed to their African interlocutors during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. These precious goods came alongside carefully composed bundles that


\textsuperscript{24} Ingrid Greenfield “Crocodile Tears: Collecting and Colonial Expansion in the Renaissance” Unpublished lecture.
merchants put together to buy enslaved men and women along the African coast. They calibrated the contents of these packets to maximize profit, but with a keen eye on the discerning and rapidly changing tastes of African interlocutors such as Andres and the local traders over whom he held authority. The bundles’ contents varied from port to port according to local tastes, needs, and preferences. They included a dazzling array of items from the four corners of the world. Archeological investigations have uncovered for instance many traces of Chinese porcelain use in seventeenth century West Africa. The Chevalier des Marchais, a French merchant reporting from the West African kingdom of Hueda in the early eighteenth century, mentioned the fine silverware, which he implied was European-made, that the local king used. The same ruler also enjoyed Japanese red silk robes, listed as imports to his court in a 1698 document. At the turn of the nineteenth century, King Adandozan of neighboring Dahomey, upon negotiating an alliance with the Luso-Brazilian crown, demanded from his Portuguese interlocutors transfers of technology, specifically specialists in gun and canon making, as well as “30 big hats in different colours with great plumes and 20 pieces of silk.”

Subsequently, the imported items became key features of local visual and material culture along the African coast. Modest objects and consumer goods participated in changing local habits and practices of everyday life, first among which sartorial customs. Tobacco and imported

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smoking pipes for example became ubiquitous features of central Africa by the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{29} Other key items, either rare or striking to local aesthetic or religious sensibilities, became central parts of the fabric of power and prestige as regalia, religious paraphernalia, or markers of social rank. I have demonstrated elsewhere how relatively cheap and otherwise unremarkable blue and white checkered cloth for instance became in west central Africa a key emblem of status used alongside the most refined and well-considered local regalia.\textsuperscript{30} Other types of imported elements and motifs also found their way into local artistic productions and ritual practices, such as the imported mirrors, nails, chains, and padlocks enhancing power figures in nineteenth-century Kongo.\textsuperscript{31}

To use the words of Adandozan, he sought to collect these rare and exotic things “because [he] want[ed] to have all these things to cause admiration in [his] people, for them to say to themselves: my King does not know how to read and write, but how does he own so many beautiful things of the white?”\textsuperscript{32} His formulation makes clear that his interest in imported items was not mimicry, or a conscious or unconscious desire to imitate “the white.”\textsuperscript{33} It was not either the stand of a creolized ruler seeking objects that would participate seamlessly into a novel,

\textsuperscript{29} Clist Bernard Clist, "From America to Africa: How Kongo Nobility Made Smoking Pipes Their Own," \textit{The Kongo Kingdom: The Origins, Dynamics and Cosmopolitan Culture of an African Polity} (2018).
\textsuperscript{31} See also "Europia Mania: Contextualizing the European Other in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century Dahomey Art." p 250
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro}: Lata 137, Pasta 62, Doc. 2, f. 3, 9 October 1810, f 5v cited in Araujo, "Dahomey, Portugal and Bahia: King Adandozan and the Atlantic Slave Trade." p 12
\textsuperscript{33} African rulers’ interest in foreign objects has been mocked in the colonial period by European commentators as a comical attempt at imitation, see Valentin Y Mudimbe, "The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge," (1988). p. 122
outward looking, visual, political, and material environment. Adandozan’s impulse, instead, is strikingly similar to that behind the making of early modern cabinets of curiosities, gathering remarkable and visibly foreign things as statements of a ruler’s power, sophistication, and worldly reach. In fact, Adandozan is only one of a long, centuries-old list of African rulers with deep interest and active involvement in global networks of luxury exchange.

Contact, Exchange, and Traffic: Luxury, Aesthetics, and the Slave Trade

The flow of rare and precious objects in and out of central Africa goes back to the first moments of interaction between the region’s elite and the long distance commercial, material, and religious networks of the Atlantic world. The circulation across the globe of wondrous, rare things bought or exchanged as curiosity or exotica has received much attention in scholarship on the early modern period. Although less has been written on the topic, the African elite too received and bestowed rare artefacts across long distances. In the early modern period as in the deeper past, traffic in finery played a central role in the establishment and sustaining of relationships between African polities and faraway interlocutors.

A sixteenth century print helps us visualize the onset of such a relationship between an African court – that of the Kongo – and newly arrived visitors from overseas, eager to establish themselves as privileged trade partners. (Figure 4) The etching is a fanciful European image

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created a century after the period of early encounters in the 1490s it supposedly describes. It was made wholly in Europe as an illustration for the 1598 Latin edition of Portuguese merchant Duarte Lopes’ chronicles of his travels to Kongo in the 1570s. With the benefit of hindsight, the print synthesises in a single frame events, objects, and interactions that had become by the mid-sixteenth century emblematic of the story of the kingdom of Kongo’s encounter with Portugal and its visual, material, and religious cultures, a story central Africans formulated for their own purposes and that Lopes retold in the publication.

It thus not only helps us visualize the spectacle that the novelties brought about by the arrival of the Portuguese created on central African shores circa 1500 but to some extent also gives us a Kongo version of the happenings, albeit mediated through multiple Europeans retellings. Large ships, the image tells us, brought to the Kongo myriad new objects, from shiny metal shields to helmets, weapons, and colourful textiles. Catholic artworks, vestments, paraphernalia and architecture particularly capture the attention of the members of the Kongo elite depicted here, somewhat anachronistically, wearing what had become by the time of Lopes’ visit their typical mix of local and imported pieces of clothing. The African man to the far right of the image observes and directs carpenters building the central church’s pitched roof. Another Kongo man in front of him wearing a raffia wrapper plants a pillar to advance the construction, illustrating a well-known episode in the famous conversion story of the Kongo to Catholicism in which the nobility themselves set off to build Christian temples with their own bare hands.37

Behind the Portuguese soldiers pictured at the bottom left, a group of Kongo men receive

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instruction from a friar using the typically Franciscan visual method of catechization the friars honed for their overseas missions. Their relaxed pose makes them look less like awed, humble catechumens and more like curious viewers, confidently observing and assessing the altarpieces and liturgical paraphernalia that the foreign ritual practitioners brought with them.

Goods of luxurious material and spectacular workmanship travelled with Iberian explorers and missionaries as gifts from their kings aimed at dazzling newly encountered people and at demonstrating the power and munificence of the European monarchs. Cost was always a concern in these expeditions, but so was the need to demonstrate one’s rulers might by showcasing through luxury goods and profuse generosity his access to and excess of exquisite goods. A striking example from 1561, for instance, documents how Portuguese Jesuits brought to the Southern African kingdom of Mutapa or Monomotapa an Ecce Homo feather painting, almost certainly made in Mexico. The object has not survived or has not been identified but likely resembled the Mass of Saint Gregory panel created in 1539 by Mexican artists working in the Franciscan convent of San José de los Naturales in Mexico City for Pope Paul III. (Figure 5) The visual and the material, kings and clerics alike understood, were key to long distance, cross-cultural dialogue.

A set of instructions Portuguese monarch Dom Manuel gave in 1512 to his envoy to the king of Kongo, a noble from his own household named Simão da Silva, detailed exactly the

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38 Cécile Fromont, Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola (Under review).
40 Relacao da viagem que fizerem os padres de la Companhia de Jesus com Francisco Barreto na conquista do Monomotapa no anno 1569, feita pelo padre Monclayo. In Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris MS portugais 8, fol.241v. The Portuguese entered into direct contact with the Mwene or King of Mutapa in the 1560s see Roland Anthony Oliver and Anthony Atmore, Medieval Africa, 1250-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)., 203. About Mexican feather paintings see Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf, and Diana Fane, Images Take Flight : Feather Art in Mexico and Europe, 1400-1700 (Munich: Hirmer, 2015).
attention given in these early encounters to gifts and gift giving as well as their expected results. The documents, kept in Lisbon’s National archives, outline the strategic use of words and objects in the establishment of propitious relations between the two faraway kings. The process not only relied on the display and bestowal of fine items, but also hinged on their choreographed presentation aimed at impressing and, at least in this case, at threatening overseas interlocutors. Dom Simão had directives, upon encountering the African king, first to give him the letter and greetings that his Iberian counterpart sent to him as a fellow Christian king. “After you have given him our letters,” Dom Manuel continued, “right away time permitting, and if not the very next day, you shall present and give all the things that we sent for him, which Álvaro Lopes brings, who shall be there with you along with his secretary while you give them, to open the coffers in which they are.”

The gifts to be presented to the African monarch thus travelled in several trunks, which opening required the presence of three Portuguese envoys. Reading through the lines of the instructions, it is easy to imagine the three men simultaneously opening the three coffers or taking turns to present them one by one in a choreographed display of abundance and munificence. The directions to the diplomats also demanded that they talked during that encounter with the Kongo king about the great deeds of the Portuguese monarch in India. The objects presented to the court of São Salvador thus arrived framed in profuse lore, embedding them within the broadest global horizons. The pieces that came in the coffers did not enter the Kongo court as mysterious cyphers without provenance or attribution. On the contrary,

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41 Instructions to Simão da Silva, 1512, in Brásio, Monumenta. Vol I, p 231. In reality, Simão da Silva died en route from the coast to São Salvador, and Álvaro Lopes was the one who met the Kongo monarch.
information about their artistic and economic value as well as origins in Europe, the Americas, India, or elsewhere, travelled closely attached to them.

We do not need to guess the contents of coffers. Documents from 1512 list the items Manuel of Portugal ordered to accompany his diplomatic – as well as, we shall see, commercial – mission to the Kongo. The trunks held “many church ornaments and vestments like chalices, crosses, cruets, thuribles of white and gilded silver, brass, and copper, painted altarpieces and bells.”42 A subsequent itemized inventory in preparation for the trip specifies even further the number and type of artworks. It mentioned “5 altarpieces 5 palms wide and 7 palms high”43 i.e. paintings on wood panels about 110 cm large and 154 cm high; 6 antependia or frontals for altars made of painted “Indian cloth” among which “3 of our Lord crucified with the Virgin and Saint John on them. Two of Our Lady carrying a child, and one of Santiago or Saint James with his shells.”44 It also recorded the procurement of “altar cloths, 3 silk vestments with albs, 3 linen vestments with their albs, 3 chalices, 6 altar stones, candleholders, lamps, bells, basins, brass incensories, well-made painted wooden crosses, with crucifixes painted on them.”45 If a large part of the precious goods sent had a liturgical function, the fineries also included lay objects, with an emphasis on clothing, personal accessories, and items of political regalia such as a gilded sword, flags for battle, and seals to authenticate documents.

None of the objects sent to central Africa in the early years of contact between Portugal and the Kongo have been identified. Historical archeology may one day uncover some of these early items, but it is also possible that none survived. Yet, bringing together multiple types of

42 Ibid. vol I p 223
43 Ibid. vol I p 247
44 Ibid. vol I p 252
45 Ibid. vol I p 253
sources through archival and museum research, and mobilizing a range of methodologies, it is possible, as this chapter illustrates, to draw an adequate picture of the objects and artworks sent from Lisbon to the Kongo.46

The reign of Manuel I of Portugal (r. 1495-1521) was a moment of great artistic efflorescence in the country, a dynamism connected in many regards to the kingdom’s overseas activities. At a pragmatic level, the administrations of the Casa da Mina, the department in charge of the country’s overseas endeavors, and that of the royal works, in charge of artistic commissions, operated in close concert. The former, of course, also played a key role in the financing of the latter. Royal patronage of artworks, and royal plans for the overseas involved a relatively small number of people who interacted with each other in their administrative activities as well as at court. Lisbon at the time was a vibrantly cosmopolitan city, with Africans making up a sizeable portion of the population and holding social positions ranging from prominent courtiers to enslaved laborers.47

The great painters of the Manueine era lived in that world. Artist Jorge Afonso for instance bought his elegant house from free Africans, and saw one of his son leave for India. He and his fellow painters also witnessed during their work at court people and luxury goods flowing in and out of Lisbon from and to Africa. And the artworks they produced amply demonstrated that such presence held significance for them and their patrons. African men and object appear in their paintings for example as the expected magus, as in Jorge Afonso’s circa

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1515 altarpiece for the Madre Deus Church in which the African kingly figure holds what may be an Afro-Portuguese ivory saltcellar. (figure 6)

Underlining the connections between African people and motifs in Manueline art underlines the reciprocal impact of the encounter between Portugal and Kongo, in which both sides welcomed each other’s artistic novelties. It also highlight how the realm of art and the realm of overseas endeavors were far from distinct and how painters such as Jorge Afonso operated at their crossroads. In fact, the same 1512 five-ship cargo Manuel I dispatched to the Kongo included a painting of the coat of arms of the King of Kongo that had been designed at the African monarch’s request in Portugal. The design is known to us through written descriptions the African king penned later that year as well as visually through its inclusion in a 1548 Portuguese armorial. At the time, in 1512, Jorge Afonso worked for King Manuel I as one of nine heralds in charge of keeping and designing coat of arms. His title of Arauto Malacca, indicates a specialization in the overseas, and he may well have been involved in the design of the Kongo’s heraldic emblem. It seems at a minimum likely that he would have been at least aware of it. Royally sponsored workshops such as that of Jorge Afonso had thus many connections with the overseas projects and their visual dimensions. It is in their midst that the altarpieces sent to the Kongo would have been painted. The iconography and the listed panel sizes in the 1512 checklist (110 by 150cm) fit with the type of works known from Jorge Afonso’s and other related ateliers. Considering their production thus give a good sense of the artworks that arrived in the Kongo around 1500.

49 Caetano Joaquim Oliveira Caetano, "Jorge Afonso: Uma Interrogação Essencial Na Pintura Primitiva Portuguesa" (Universidade de Évora, 2013). p 78
Once in central Africa, the liturgical objects and artworks would find their place within an emerging Kongo Christian visual culture. From that moment circa 1500 and for nearly four hundred years, churches using local construction techniques or European inspired brick and mortar rose over the landscape of the newly converted land, marking it as Christian. 50 Their interiors mixed imported paintings and paraphernalia with locally made objects, such as copper alloy crucifixes and saint figures. Access to and possession of Christian objects, in particular those worn around the body became in the kingdom a mark of social status and political legitimacy. Rows upon rows of rosaries around the neck, medals, crucifixes, and staffs with crosses combined with great length of imported textiles wrapped about their bodies, formed personal, moveable collections of finery through which members of the elite demonstrated their prestige. 51 Emblems of Kongo royalty included a similar, albeit more rarefied combination of locally grounded and once foreign items. The crown also kept a collection of exotic treasures, from which it drew in the conduct of diplomacy. To accompany the embassy he sent to seek alliance with the governor of Dutch Brazil in 1642, for instance, King Garcia II of Kongo chose in his royal treasury a gold necklace, precious stones, and “a large silver plate” made in Potosí around 1586. 52 The precious metal dish would continue its travels around the Atlantic world and become, as a gift from the governor of Dutch Brazil, a baptismal font in a church in Siegen, in today’s Germany.

52 Garcia II’s letter to Johan Maurits van Nassau, May 12, 1642, is in inv. 171 Z 4306, Hauptstaatsarchiv Hessen, Wiesbaden, Germany. About the still extent plate see Friedrich Muthmann, "Die Silberne Tauhschale Zu Siegen," Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse. 1 (1956).
The Manuelien era Portuguese visits to central Africa marked an early moment in the emergence of the Kongo’s engagement with worldly goods, as well as the simultaneously rise in interest from outsiders in trade in central African goods. The instructions of King Manuel I show that the Portuguese expected to acquire much from central Africa. The Iberian monarch explicitly ordered his envoys not to bother the king of Kongo with personal requests for gifts, as he knew it had been an issue with Iberian visitors in the past.\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, delicate raffia fiber textiles and intricately carved ivories travelled back from central Africa to Europe where they were prized items, admired and sought after among the elite. One of the very first visitors from the Kongo to Portugal, Kasuta, also known by his baptismal name of João da Silva, brought to Lisbon in 1489, on behalf of his king, presents that caused a sensation. He presented to the court “elephant teeth and objects of worked ivory and many well woven palm textiles with fine colors,” chroniclers Rui de Pina and Garcia de Resende, who were both present at the time of the reception later reported.\textsuperscript{54} These early gifts from the Kongo to Portugal have not survived to this day or have not yet been located, but it is known that they captivated Portuguese viewers who paid close attention to their design and mode of manufacture. “In this kingdom of Kongo,” traveler and chronicler Duarte Pacheco Perreira wrote in his 1505-1508 \textit{Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis} “they make palm cloth with velvet-like pile, and with designs as velvet satin which are so beautiful that better workmanship is not found in Italy.”\textsuperscript{55}

A carpet reminiscent of central African textiles features in the 1515 \textit{Annunciation} panel painting attributed to Jorge Afonso, hailed as one of the masterworks of Portuguese art. This

\textsuperscript{53} Brásio, Monumenta. vol I 238-239
\textsuperscript{55} Duarte Pacheco Pereira and Raphael Eduardo de Azevedo Basto, \textit{Esmeraldo De Situ Orbis}, Edição commemorativa da descoberta da America por Christovão Colombo no seu quarto centenario / ed. (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1892). p. 84.
inclusion testifies, beyond words of praise, to the high consideration that Kongo textiles commanded. (figure 7) Pictured in an elaborate architectural space, the archangel Gabriel and the Virgin kneel on a large carpet which yellow and brown hues and geometric designs recall those of central African textiles and basketry. Because of its large dimensions, the carpet would be a combination of individual squares of Kongo cloth, which maximum size depended on the length of raffia fibers, i.e. around two feet at most. Larger central African cloths consisted in a combination of individual panels, as seen for instance in an example now in the Ulmer Museum. The band of darker patterns in the painting’s carpet accurately reflects polychrome decorations found in some central African cloth, a polychromy obtained by the integration of colored fibers in the woven structure or by applying dyes to the finished product.

Notably, artisans in Lisbon also produced mats made of vegetal materials at the time, and it is possible that the carpet in the painting depicted such a local production, inspired, perhaps, in its designs by the imported luxury cloths from central Africa that made such an impression at court. In the late seventeenth century still, a Frenchman who travelled to both Kongo and Portugal noted the resemblance between the two types of objects, finding that central African “fine mats […] much admired [by] those interested in curios […] closely resemble the straw tapestries in Lisbon, and I do not know whether the blacks learnt from the Portuguese how to produce this kind of woven material from straw or reeds or whether the Portuguese learnt it from the blacks.” There is no doubt that Kongo textile-making was an indigenous technology. What the painting and the traveler’s comments intuitively and evocatively capture are the flows in

56 Kunst- und Wunderkammer des Christoph Weickmann, Ulmer Museum, Ulm, Germany, inv. AV D. 48.
aesthetic sensibilities and designs that linked the two shores of the Atlantic from the outset of contact.

“Things of very little price”

Not half a step behind this exchange of finery and aristocratic pomp, the traffic in enslaved men and women already began to cast its long shadow. Going back to the instructions to Simão da Silva, the true motivations behind the king of Portugal’s munificence are spelled out at length, unabashedly. Besides repeated and flippant claims that his “intent and concern is not profit but the growth of the Faith alone”\(^\text{59}\) the instructions outlined the strategies to implement in order to obtain the most slaves and merchandise from the Kongo. Simão should, literally while pointing to the gifts he would have just taken out of the coffers, remind the central African king of the great expense Manuel I entailed in sending the presents, clerics, artisans, and other merchandise from Portugal. Should the king of Kongo wish for more ships to come to his shores, the ambassador was instructed to make clear, in a thinly veiled threat, he would have to load them in equal measure for their return voyage.\(^\text{60}\) Specifically, the cargo with which Manuel I expected to fill his ships was one made of “slaves as well as copper and ivory.”\(^\text{61}\) “Slaves,” “slaves,” the instructions repeatedly mentioned were to be the focus of the return journey. And thus, within decades of the establishment of contact between the two realms, the entanglements between the exchange in finery and the commerce in enslaved Africans wrote itself into the historical record.

A decade before these letters and the dispatch of the fine cargo from Portugal to the Kongo with Dom Simão in 1512 with the thinly veiled goal of procuring slaves, another

\(^{59}\) Brásio, Monumenta. Vol I p 240 also repeated in p 241
\(^{60}\) Ibid. vol I p 240
\(^{61}\) Ibid. vol I p 239
document recorded a strikingly different take in the Portuguese royal conception of the Atlantic traffic in slave. The 1502 Cantino Map, a planisphere splendidly describing the world as viewed from Lisbon couched the export of the enslaved from central Africa in terms that would endure for centuries, couching commerce in Atlantic Africa as an exchange of trifle for treasure, to the bewildering advantage of Europe. The map’s legend described how the Kongo traded “slaves” with Portuguese merchants based on the island of São Tomé “for things of very little price.”

Explanations for this statement may come from the discrepancies in exchange value rates of merchandise between different regions or from a self-awed Portuguese pride in the potential of the many worlds they just encountered and hoped to place under their exclusive political and commercial purview. Proudly inscribed on a grand visual demonstration of Portuguese global power, it engraved in the written historical record what would become a preeminent topos in European discourse about trade with Atlantic Africa. Yet, the finer grained, carefully planned instructions given to Simão da Silva a mere decade later shows that a more pragmatic and factually correct understanding of the nature of the traffic and its mechanics also existed at the Portuguese court. In the document meant for a few eyes only, the Portuguese crown shows a vastly different take on the transatlantic trade. Instead of mere “things of very little price,” procuring slaves from the Kongo demanded the establishment of relationships of trade and diplomacy that required the dispatch of lavish, fine goods, in order to gain favor from the central African king and establish the Portuguese monarch as a enviable partner of great worldly reach, power, and resources.

62 Cantino Planisphere, ca. 1502. Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Modena, Italy.
Conclusion

Although centuries apart, Dom Simão’s embassy and the commissioning and bestowing of the La Rochelle kimpada are two moments of material exchange between central African elite and European commercial interests that have much in common. The kimpada as the royal cargo are lavish finery chosen and conceived to fit the sophisticated, discriminating taste of central African rulers. Instead of a trade based on trifles and misunderstanding, they outline a traffic in things ruled by a common understanding of the value of materials, of artistic achievement, and of refined workmanship. In both cases, the evidence of intense engagement and exchange between Europeans and central Africans not only in the realm of commerce and power, but also in terms of aesthetics and design counters contemporaneous discourses of trifle exchange dismissing African elites as unsophisticated, unable to discern quality and gauge value, and overall easily deceived.

The same evidence also illustrates that central African rulers of the early modern period participated in curiosity and collecting culture, not only as providers of specimens showcasing local artistic production that would become exotica in Europe, but also as collectors and users of rare and curious things in their own rights. The routes these rare and precious things followed to the Kongo however, were entangled with those mapped by the traffic in the enslaved. The debate over the causes, consequence, ethics, and morals of the early modern slave trade in Atlantic Africa will continue to rage among scholars and on the public sphere. The intent of this chapter is to underline in the context of this conversation how slave commerce wove deep, lasting, and sophisticated ties between the two continents’ shores not only in the realms of trade and politics, but also in those of design and aesthetic. At stakes in highlighting this aspect of the relationship
is the writing of a more complete history of the early modern world and its global networks, in which Africa and Africans feature as full, sophisticated participants and not mere providers, willing or unwilling, of labour and raw material.
Anon. (artist from New Spain), Mass of Saint Gregory (1539). Feather mosaic, 68 × 56 cm. Auch, Musée des Jacobins (inv. no. 986.1.1). Image © Musée des Jacobins, AUCH; PHOTO: PHILIPPE FUZEAU.