

Creative Mediations

The Figurative Ceramics of Voania (from) Muba

Carlee S. Forbes

Boldly emblazoning his signature VOANIA MUBA across the sides of his works, the potter Voania,¹ from the small town of Muba in the west of present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, clearly claims his ceramics. The style of his pots, with their naturalistic figures perched upon almost spherical chambers, is immediately recognizable. The figures' faces are impressively uniform in style, with a plump, round shape and almond-shaped eyes empty of any delineation of an iris or pupil. Almost all of Voania's works fit into five iconographic themes: equestrians, seated figures, standing figures, couples, and heads—each categorized by the type of figure situated atop the spherical base. More than 100 of his ceramics, dating from the late nineteenth century until his death in 1928, can be found in museums and private collections across Europe and the United States. Such a corpus of signed historical works by a single artist is rare in the study of African art, and to date, Voania's body of works has yet to be fully described or analyzed. I seek to document Voania's ceramics, search for trends that elucidate his oeuvre, and illuminate the artist's creative mediations between multiple stylistic influences.

Voania's prominent signature sets his works apart from the corpus of figurative ceramics made in western Congo at the turn of the twentieth century. Variations in his signatures separate his works into three style groups (Figs. 1–3), suggesting a rough timeline for their creation that illuminates Voania's innovations, which he may have used to appeal to foreign clients. The slim but suggestive archival evidence highlights Voania's innovations and elucidates the impact of his interactions with Dr. Élie-Joseph Étienne, a Belgian official working in Congo. In 1910, Dr. Étienne sent three shipments of ethnographic objects to the Musée du Congo Belge in Tervuren, including a total of ten works by Voania, although only

nine were registered.² He also promoted Voania's work to European and American collectors. While I will use a close reading of the objects to speculate on Voania's innovations and his engagement with European patrons, my analysis reveals how Voania's works are also connected to regional Congolese visual systems. By considering the artist's innovations and his interaction with Étienne, these ceramic vessels illustrate the artist's mediation of his own experience and European influence.

ART OF DISTINCTION: SITUATING PAST SCHOLARSHIP

Voania's productivity is apparent in the sheer number of objects now in museum collections. The earliest accessioned objects include Étienne's nine objects, sent to the Musée du Congo Belge in 1910, and purchase of a work at auction in October 1913 by the Henry Wellcome Collection in London.³ In 1915, the American Museum of Natural History accessioned six sculptures collected by Herbert Lang during the museum's Congo Mission. The Swedish Ethnographic Museum purchased a piece in 1916.⁴ Henri Pareyn donated seven objects to the Musée du Congo Belge in 1917. The Vleeshuis Museum, now known as the Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp, purchased five more ceramics in 1920. Collections have steadily continued to accession Voania's works.

Early archival records and analyses focus largely on the artist's distinct style, masterful techniques, and creation of works for European clients. For instance, a 1917 Musée du Congo Belge accession report describes one of Voania's ceramics as of "modern manufacture bearing the engraved mark of the native potter, piece is very interesting because of the art of the craftsman."⁵ These notes laud Voania's skillful artistry and, as I will discuss later, complement European attitudes regarding other figurative ceramics from western Congo produced in the early twentieth century. For example, in a 1939 article published by the Comité Provinciale des Amis de l'Art Indigène, the authors regret that the distinguished artist had died before the Comité's projects in Congo began.⁶ In an attempt to revive the creation of figurative ceramics, the Comité

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1a, b, c Voania from Muba
 Standing female and details
 Ceramic; H: 44.3 cm
 Collected by Dr. Étienne, 1910
 EO.0.0.1690-1, collection RMCA Tervuren
 Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

Group A signature group one: two-sided surrounded by horizontal lines.

organized workshops and made images of Voania's works available to artists in Congo. In 1951, Albert Maesen, curator of ethnography at the Musée du Congo Belge, published a short article on Voania's ceramics. Maesen studied about a dozen figures and refuted arguments which seem to have started with Henri Schouteden, director of the Musée du Congo Belge from 1927 to 1946 (Olbrechts 1939/1959: pl. 19). Schouteden claimed the volume of works produced indicated that Voania must have been working with a workshop. Maesen asserts, "The letters [of the signature] are always drawn with the same and firm meticulousness, without any fantasy," and therefore could not be attributed to an apprentice (1951: 8). These early observations and analyses focused on the artistry, style, and uniqueness of Voania's works.

Zdenka Volavka's 1977 *African Arts* article provides the most comprehensive analysis of Voania's biography and oeuvre. Volavka conducted fieldwork from 1972 to 1975 in Muba, near the DRC border with Cabinda. She drew from both her fieldwork, including interviews with several elders in Muba, as well as archival research

to compile the artist's biography. As Volavka states (and Mandela Kaumba's recent fieldwork supports), although there were other male potters in the region and clay was readily available, Muba was never a center of pottery production and relied upon women in villages to the northeast of Muba for utilitarian pottery (Volavka 1977: 61).⁷ Volavka's research indicates that Voania was Muba's chief and that he turned to pottery as an adult. Volavka also spoke with Dumu Dioko, who identified himself as Voania's youngest nephew, successor as Muba's chief, and his only assistant. Although Dumu Dioko mixed clay and prepared materials, he never created his own works. Volavka's emphasis on Voania's lack of apprentices and distinct style produces an image of the artist as exceptional and distinct from any artists preceding or following him. To reconcile the notion that cultural significance correlates to the volume of Voania works in museum collections, Volavka cautions, "The quantity of his preserved pottery does not reflect a predominant position within the history of Kongo art, nor does it qualify him as the most prolific Kongo sculptor" (1977: 62). For Volavka, the objects are still to be considered as an anomaly of artistic production, not of any ethnographic value for understanding life in Congo nor to be used in comparison with other Congo visual systems.

Volavka records Muba oral tradition about the nature of Voania's work. She recalls, "Voanya made his pottery solely for the *mundele*, the white man, and not for the African clientele" (1977: 62). She then cites this presumed *mundele* audience to distinguish between Voania's style and the other figurative art produced in the region,



2a, b Voania from Muba
Couple, and detail
Ceramic; H: 53 cm
AE.0590; Unknown purchase, 1940, Collectie
MAS, Antwerp (Belgium)
Photo: Michel Wuyts; © Collectie MAS, Antwerp
(Belgium)

Group B signature: one side, surrounded by horizontal lines or minimal décor.

noting: “Every Kwakongo and Kongo figurative terracotta sculpture conveys a distinct message that is understandable to everyone by a set of certain compositional, postural, gestural, and iconographic features” (1977: 64–65). Volavka asserts the region’s figurative art is characterized by frontal compositions, static postures, and “an economy of gesture” (1982: 228). To illustrate Voania’s distinctiveness, Volavka showed photographs of his ceramics to local people and asked them to comment on or interpret the works. Participants described the objects as foreign or “not ours” (1977: 65). The inability to read the object, Volavka argues, stems from Voania’s subtle modifications to the figures’ posture and gesture. He created figures with slightly more dynamic poses, especially evident in composition of the couples (Fig. 2). He also added anecdotal details, such as the objects held by some figures (Figs. 1, 3, 8b). Volavka asserts these modifications reflect how “the absence of symbolic structure seems to ensue from a mind concerned with the incompatibility of the Kongo symbolic value system and the European consumer” and demonstrate that Voania made works to

appeal to the tastes of a European audience (1977: 66). In addition, none of the objects in museum or private collections show any evidence of having served as a container. By stressing local reception, modification of forms, and lack of proverbial meaning, Volavka emphasizes Voania’s ability to appeal to his European clients.

While clearly distinguishing his ceramics from other local objects, Volavka seems to ultimately appreciate Voania’s works as successful creations for his new audience. She concludes her arguments stating,

He seems to have chosen to elaborate his own visual, nonsymbolic vocabulary. Voania therefore did not make any effort to reach clients of his own culture and concentrated during his entire artistic career on the production of secular objects, which proved to be quite efficient in the cross-cultural visual dialogue to which he committed himself (Volavka 1977: 66).

Since the publication of Volavka’s article, her arguments have been cited and reused in several catalog entries and other published references to Voania’s works. From Stössel (1984), to Darish (1990), to Walker (2009), to Volper (2010), and Vanhee (2014a), scholars have repeated Volavka’s assertions regarding the artist’s biography and his distance from regional visual culture (see Darish 1990; Stössel 1984: 343–44; Vanhee 2014: 232–33; Volper 2010: 192; Walker 2009: 268–88). Forkl, too, emphasizes the artist’s innovation: “After all, by no means did Voania profane the traditional symbolic systems, but actually created its own new aesthetics through his work for foreign customers” (2004: 117). Barley notes that Voania’s figures do not seem to indicate any coded proverbial meaning, like those found on Woyo-style potlids, declaring:

The multiplicity of images cannot be reduced to a few well-known verbal formulae. [Voania’s ceramics] are like proverbial images to which no proverb is attached ... In his catering for a foreign market, his avoidance of local cultural allusions and his stress on individual innovation and authorship, we can indeed assimilate Voania to the notion of “airport artist” (1994: 146–47).

These scholars recognize Voania’s innovations and present the works as interesting cases of creative expression. However, by highlighting the presumed intended foreign audience, scholars have obscured the connection between Voania’s ceramics and other local products produced in early twentieth century Congo.



3a, b, c Voania from Muba
Seated male, and details
Ceramic; H: 48.7 cm
AE.1942.0001.0003; purchased from Jacobs, 1942.
Collectie MAS, Antwerp (Belgium)
Photo: Michel Wuyts; © Collectie MAS, Antwerp
(Belgium)

Group C signature: one side, great amount of added décor.

I seek to reexamine the artist's biography, his ceramics, his interaction with Étienne, and his reception in European collections in order to both emphasize his innovations and to assert the relationship between his ceramics and other regional forms of visual expression. My first goal is to analyze Étienne's promotion, preferences, and objectives in collecting Voania's works. I argue that Dr. Étienne played a critical role to encourage Voania's ceramic practice. Étienne's promotion of Voania cannot be separated from the larger role collections served to support colonial efforts. In the Congo Free State and later the Belgian Congo, collecting was integral to the support and perpetuation of colonialism (Van Beurden 2015: 25–40; Wastiau 2000b: 6). As Schildkrout and Keim assert, objects “were a tangible means of showing penetration, conquest, and domination,” and “accurate descriptions of the landscape and people were seen as prerequisites to an array of colonial programs

including the extraction of resources, the spread of civilization and political control, and the salvation of souls” (1998: 21–22). And as Van Beurden argues, we must contextualize the individual collectors' motivations as “they become subsumed into increasingly comprehensive systems of knowledge that organized the collections and its displays” (2015: 31). As I will describe, Étienne's collection of Voania's ceramics is integrally tied to his job as a colonial official. And, no matter Étienne's motivation for promoting Voania's ceramics, the objects acquired new meaning when accessioned into museum collections.

My second argument concerns the ways in which Voania balanced Congolese innovation and European patronage to produce ceramics that drew from early twentieth century Congolese visual culture to both carry local meaning and cater to European audiences. Numerous scholars have defined, discussed, and complicated views concerning tourist art (e.g., Ben-Amos 1977: 128–39; Richter 1980; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Kasfir 2007). For this project, I draw specifically from Ruth Phillips and Nichole Bridges's scholarship on souvenir arts. Phillips asserts that a key characteristic of souvenir art is the communicative mode that she terms “dual signification” (1998: 20). This dual significance, she argues, favors the use of visual elements that are accessible to all consumers. Likewise, Bridges argues that artists innovate to meet “souvenir standards” by creating objects capable of, as Paula Ben-Amos describes, “bridging that gap [between buyers and sellers] and



4 Chief Nemlao receiving a visit from Dr. Étienne. AP.0.0.54 collection RMCA Tervuren. Photo: H.A. Shanu, s.d.; © MRAC Tervuren

Étienne was affiliated with the Association Belge de Photographie. Herzekiah Andrew Shanu, a Nigerian photographer living in Boma, was also a participating member of the Association and appears to have had a connection with Dr. Étienne. The two often provided images for the Association's exhibitions. Shanu photographed Étienne seated in conversation with the chief of Nemalo.

creating shared meanings” (Bridges 2009; Ben-Amos 1977: 129). These souvenir standards include the expansion of motifs to include more outsider references, the standardization of motifs and subject matter, and the reduction in semantic-level of classical forms. As Bridges demonstrates, nineteenth century Loango ivories retain aspects of Kongophone aesthetics such as spiral composition, as well as some semantic significance via the depiction of proverbs. Phillips and Bridges’s methods inform my interpretations of the composition, form, and iconography of Voania’s works and consider how each element may have different significance depending on the context. I seek to identify subtle characteristics that hint at the transcultural complexities of the ceramics.

COLLECTING AND CLASSIFYING

Dr. Étienne seems to have served as Voania’s first promoter and facilitated the movement of Voania’s ceramics into European and American collections of African material culture. As noted earlier, Étienne sent ten ceramics to the Musée du Congo Belge in 1910. The nine ceramics registered at the museum were the first of Voania’s works accessioned in Europe. In 1915, Étienne also helped Lang procure another six objects for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. As I will demonstrate, this promotion seemed to play a role in shaping Voania’s innovations.

Dr. Étienne spent almost the entirety of his adult life in Congo. Born in Ligny, Belgium in 1855, he trained at the Université de Louvain and received his diploma to practice medicine in 1880.⁸ In

many ways, Étienne’s career is typical of early colonial administrators in Congo (Fig. 4). He traveled to Congo seven times throughout his career, usually staying only a few brief months in Belgium before returning to Congo; indeed, he died in the coastal port town of Banana in January 1920. While in Congo, he served as both a doctor and administrator and helped develop infrastructure to expand colonial influence over local populations. As part of their duties, colonial officials were also tasked with documenting and describing the colony, as well as collecting material to send back to Belgium. These collections were part of efforts to build Belgian support for colonial efforts and promote further actions (Van Beurden 2015: 25–40; Wastiau 2000a: 24–25, 2000b: 6).

Étienne devoted much effort to documenting the west of Congo. He made meticulous recordings of the weather patterns, including rain measurements, barometric pressure, temperature, and wind speeds (see Étienne 1892). He traveled around the region east of Banana, recorded geographic notes, locations, descriptions, and demographic information for several towns between Boma and Banana.⁹ His cipher-like notes, such as “industry = creation of baskets and mats for houses,” indicate where products were being made.¹⁰ Étienne also created visual representations of the colony through photography. His photographs depict railway construction, colonial towns, and students and missionaries at the Moanda and Nemlao missions—visually representing progress towards the building of colonial infrastructure in Congo.¹¹ With each of type of documentation, Étienne contributed to a growing body of information recording all aspects of the landscape and people of the colony.

Étienne also collected ethnographic items and scientific specimens to send to Belgium. In addition to several cartons of insects, Étienne sent three shipments of ethnographic material to the Musée du Congo Belge. The ethnographic items included several baskets, raffia mats, raffia caps, raw raffia material, farming implements, figurative clay pipes, several ceramic pots, and objects needed for pottery creation. Étienne recorded each object’s local name and each tool’s use. These notes demonstrated that he had some contact with locals, but he did not describe the nature of their interactions. Étienne did not celebrate the items he collected as innovative or particularly beautiful, nor did he describe them as art. Rather, the collection as a whole appears to have been part of Étienne’s documentation of Congolese weather, land, and people.

The Musée du Congo Belge accessioned their first ceramics by Voania thanks to Étienne’s ethnographic collection. Étienne’s description of Voania’s works provides more information than notes accompanying other objects, suggesting his interest in



5 a, b, c Artist unrecorded

a Male equestrian

Ceramic; H: 36 cm

RV-1032-1

b Head with stopper

Ceramic; H: 33.5 cm

RV-1032-2

c Vessel with incised cross

Ceramic; H: 31 cm

RV-1032-7

Gift from the Congo Free State Government, 1984

Photo: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

them. His first delivery, in February 1910, only contained Voania's pottery. In his accompanying letter to Vice Gouverneur General Fuchs (who then sent the shipment to the Musée du Congo Belge), Étienne wrote:

I have the honor of informing you that I have put on board the *Wall* [a steamer ship] four indigenous ceramics from Muba, a village located to the north and east of Cabinda. The [chief] named Voania and his son make ceramics. These here carry his signature. In some days I will receive other various forms [...] ¹²

Although Volavka has clarified the relationship between Voania and his nephew, this note is a change from the mere lists Étienne sent with his other shipments. He took the time to record the location of Muba and provide a short description. Étienne further demonstrates his interest by promising subsequent shipments. The first letter is the only time Étienne specifically mentions the artist and his signature. His second and third letters simply describe the





6 Artist unrecorded
 Figurative ceramics from the RMCA Tervuren collection
 (above)
a Standing male with rectangular object and star-shaped stopper; H: 32.1 cm
 Banana, collected before 1896, EO.0.0.5175
b Female equestrian carrying child; H: 30.2 cm
 Banana, collected before 1896, EO.0.0.5180



(below)
c Seated male; H: 30.4 cm
 Banana, collected before 1897, EO.0.0.5181
d Head; H: 28.2 cm
 Banana, collected before 1897, EO.0.0.5182
 Photos: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren





7a, b Artist unrecorded
Male reading book, and detail
Ceramic; H: 25.6 cm
Before 1919; purchased from Francois
Leopold Michel, EO.0.0.23054, collection
RMCA Tervuren
Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

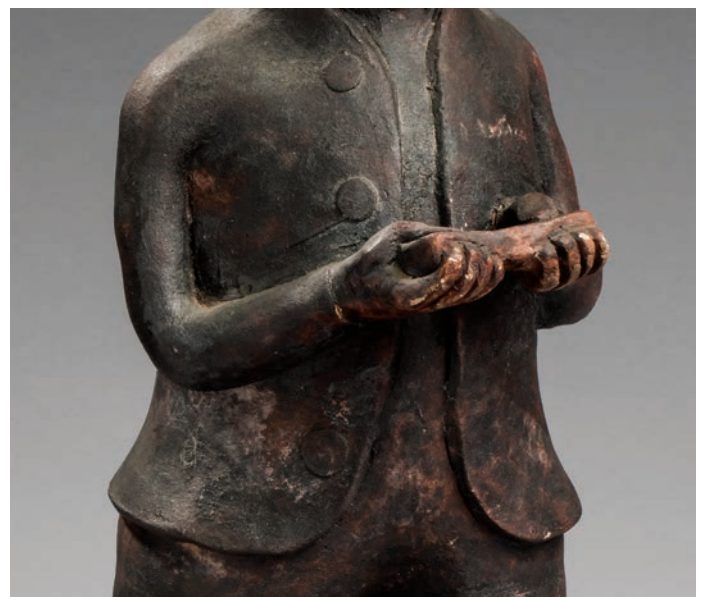
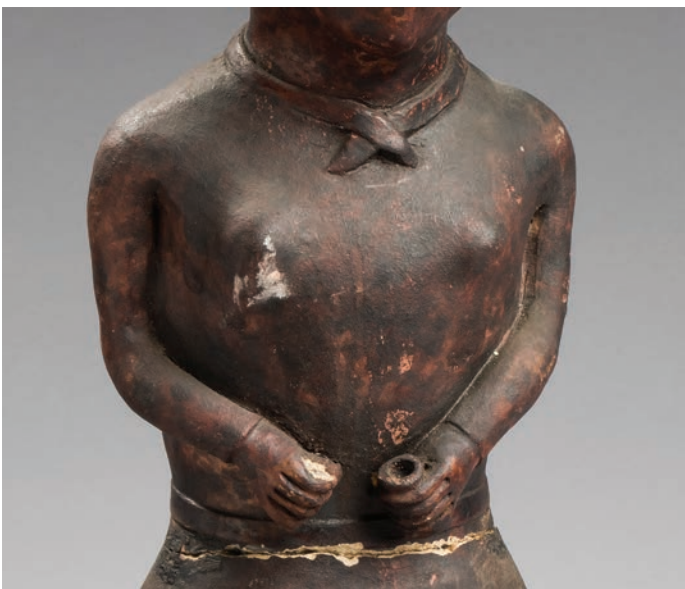
figures: “a woman carrying a bottle,” “two equestrian figures,” or “a man holding a small book.”¹³ As I will describe, Étienne could have favored Voania’s ceramics over works by other artists. Yet it is also possible Étienne may have seen the ceramics merely as another avenue to document the colony. After 1910, Étienne’s shipments to the Musée du Congo Belge focused largely on insects and contained no more ceramics.

Dr. Étienne might have encountered figurative ceramics by artists other than Voania. In the late nineteenth century, many examples of figurative ceramics were sold in Banana, the coastal port town that was Étienne’s home. Some of the earliest figurative ceramics from western Congo recorded in Europe appeared in 1894 at the National Ethnographic Museum in Leiden as part of a large donation from the Congo Free State Government.¹⁴ One work depicts a male equestrian figure, the second a head, and a third is a vessel adorned with an incised cross (Fig. 5). Further examples published in 1896 and 1899 include an equestrian female figure seated side-saddle and carrying a child, both perched on top of a

spherical chamber; a standing male carrying a rectangular object with a star-shaped stopper at the top; a head; and a seated male (“L’art congolais” 1896; Masui 1899: 23, pl. IV) (Fig. 6). Another figure of a mustached man seated on a long bench with his legs tucked up as he reads a book was registered at the Musée du Congo Belge in 1919 (Fig. 7).¹⁵ These ceramics are all very similar in form and style. They feature figures with exaggerated proportions, elongated necks, and disproportionately short legs surmounted on a spherical base and made of red clay with white, black, or blue pigments added post-firing. The faces and clothing are decorated only with simple engravings to denote edges of jackets or the outline of hair. None are signed, although some incorporate occasional additions, such as an engraved cross (Fig. 5c) or an ambiguous shape painted in black (Fig. 6d). Voania’s inclusion of his prominent signature sets his works apart from these other examples.

The objects with recorded provenances were all acquired in Banana. Étienne’s official reports and personal letters indicate he was involved in the life of the city and may have had opportunities to view many figurative ceramics.¹⁶ In his 1910 letter, Étienne mentioned the signature as a key element of Voania’s ceramics. It is possible that the signature is what drove Étienne to select these objects. Whatever the reason for his preference, Étienne’s partiality for Voania’s ceramics is further demonstrated through his promotion of Voania’s objects to Lang.

When accessioned into museum collections, Voania’s works were often categorized with other figurative ceramics. Contemporaneous Belgian commentaries discuss figurative



8 a–d Voania from Muba
a–b Standing female with neck kerchief (above), and detail (below)
 Ceramic; H: 51.7 cm
 Collected by Dr. Étienne, 1910, collection RMCA Tervuren
c–d Standing male holding book (above), and detail (below)
 Ceramic; H: 50.2 cm
 Collected by Dr. Étienne, 1910, collection RMCA Tervuren
 Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

Minimal décor of kerchiefs and simple buttons added to figures in group A.

ceramics from Banana and reveal how the objects were received in museum collections: figurative ceramics are interpreted as separate, not connected to any local practice. An 1896 article in *La Belgique Coloniale* opens with two images of the figurative ceramics (Figs. 6a–b) and describes general concerns regarding the perceived loss of artistic heritage and connection to nature due to the changing world (“L’art congolais” 1896: 306). The author lauds the technique and style of Congolese ceramics but is dismissive of the figurative



8e-f Voania from Muba
 Couple with child and dog; detail of cross necklace
 Ceramic; H: 46.2 cm
 AE.0588; Purchased from Henri Pareyn, 1920,
 Collectie MAS, Antwerp (Belgium)
 Photo: Michel Wuyts; ; © Collectie MAS, Antwerp
 (Belgium)

Minimal décor of a cross-necklace added to a figure in group A.



imagery, since they “represent whites, horses, and things formerly unknown to these peoples ...” and claims Europeans introduced Congo artists to figurative ceramics (“L’art congolais” 1896: 307). The *Annales du Congo Belge*, a publication cataloging the Musée du Congo Belge’s ethnographic collections, later describes the fantastical ceramics from Banana, “These objects are hardly of ethnographic interest” because they are curious specimens that show skilled labor and the maker’s “spirit of observation” (Masui 1899: 23, pl. 4). Other museum accession entries describe the objects’ shape or method of production. But because of their perceived lack

of ethnographic importance, the figurative pots receive no further discussion and are distinguished from locally made, nonfigurative ceramics.¹⁷ (It is worth noting that Voania did create two nonfigurative vessels, which I describe later.)

These efforts to differentiate between figurative and nonfigurative ceramics and the assertion that figurative works illustrate a loss of artistic heritage demonstrates the impact of colonial ideas on collecting. As Van Beurden describes, colonial collecting policies sought to assign meaning to objects and to construct “Congolesse cultural authenticity as endangered” (2015: 24). The author of the 1896 article in *La Belgique Coloniale* predicts it will only take a few short years “to make them forget the precious heritage of their fathers” (“L’art congolais” 1896: 306). Such assertions show that certain practices were perceived to be in danger of disappearing, and so museums justified further collecting missions and other colonial efforts to protect and guard Congo. According to the rhetoric of the day, although acknowledging the makers’ skill, figurative ceramics were denigrated as a kind of infection, one that threatened to taint objects considered more culturally authentic. And thus, figurative ceramics were detached from any discussions of regional practice.

However, while dismissed for their supposed lack of ethnographic value, figurative ceramics were displayed in many colonial exhibitions, featured as representatives of the colony’s cultural products. The colonial section of the 1897 Brussels-Tervuren Exposition Internationale included several of the figurative ceramics already listed. The first evidence of Voania’s ceramics being exhibited and discussed is in 1913 in the Salon d’honneur of the colonial pavilion in the Exposition Universelle et Internationale, held in Ghent. At least two of his works were displayed behind a bust of the Belgian queen Elisabeth by Charles Samuel, in a room filled with chryselephantine sculptures, ethnographic busts, and works by Belgian artists. Voania’s ceramics were displayed with nonfigurative ceramic vessels. As explained in the exhibition guide, the objects in the salon were chosen from the Musée du Congo Belge collections because they were beautiful specimens (*beaux specimens*) (Catalogue-Guide 1913: 18). Here, the objects’ ethnographic interest appears to have been subsumed by the imperative to present aesthetic objects and used in promotion of colonial successes.

No matter how the objects were received or used in museum collections, Dr. Étienne’s descriptions of Voania’s works, as well as his promotion of the works to other collectors, seems to demonstrate his preference for the artist’s ceramics. And as I will demonstrate, Étienne’s preferences and promotion played a role in shaping Voania’s oeuvre.

9 Voania from Muba

a–b Male equestrian with line at edge of jacket (above), and detail (below)
Ceramic; H: 44 cm

Collected by Herbert Lang, 1915; 90.1/5081

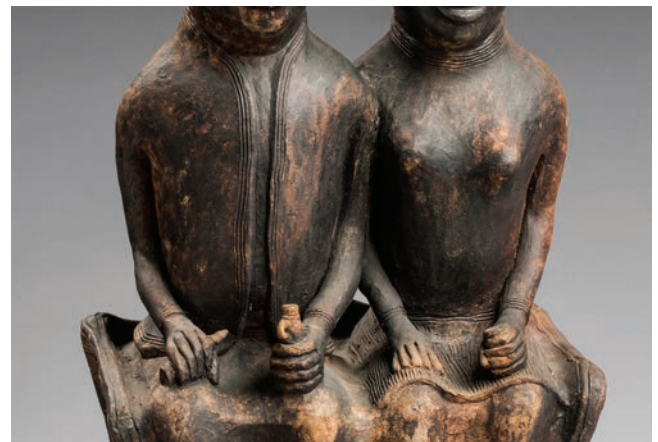
Photo: by permission and © American Museum of Natural History

c–d Couple with lines at hem of female's skirt (above), and detail (below)
Ceramic; H: 51.9 CM

Donated by Nicolas Arnold via Henry Pareyn, 1917 ; EO.0.0.20241-3, collection RMCA Tervuren

Photo: © J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

Figurative ceramics with details characteristic of group B.



VOANIA'S INNOVATIONS

The clear signature visible on each vessel is a hallmark of Voania's work. I have identified three variations in signature types (groups A, B, and C) which serve as a starting point to discuss further innovations. In all variations, Voania inscribed his name in capital letters, with "Voania" appearing smaller than "Muba." In a narrative that has become more fable than fact, Étienne may have suggested that Voania sign his work and taught him to write his name. Henri Schouteden, former director of the Musée du Congo Belge, seems to be the origin of this claim, now accepted by the scholarship.¹⁸ Yet even if Étienne provided the impetus to begin signing the works, it appears Voania continued to refine and innovate the style of his signature. The objects in group A have signatures split in two parts that appear on opposing sides of the vessel's otherwise unadorned chamber. Several horizontal lines frame each element (Fig. 1). In groups B and C, the text is condensed to just one side, and the signatures fall into groups based on the amount of elaboration around



them. Group B surrounds the name with horizontal lines or frames it with vertical boxes on either side (Fig. 2). Group C includes the most elaborate signatures, adorned with chevrons, wavy lines, and patterns that extend around the spherical chamber (Fig. 3).

The enhancements of the signatures with flourishes and decorative elements also corresponds to elaboration of the figures. Vessels from group A, with two-sided signatures, feature figures with relatively little adornment or added decorative elements (Fig. 8). The male figures' jackets have either no embellishment or only simple buttons. The female figures wear unadorned wrapper skirts and shirts. The only added elements are kerchiefs, or, as in one example, a cross necklace. Works from group B, with the simple one-sided signatures, have slightly more elaborate details and decorative elements (Fig. 9). The jackets have not only buttons,

10 Voania from Muba

a–b Seated female with elaborate necklace (above), and detail (below)
Ceramic; H: 49.6 cm

Donated by J. de Porre, 1958 ; EO.1958.8.23, collection RMCA Tervuren
Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

c–d Seated male with incised epaulets (above), and detail (below)
Ceramic; H: 48.7 cm

AE.1942.0001.0003, Purchased from Jacobs, 1942 Collectie MAS, Antwerp (Belgium)

Photo: Michel Wuyts; © Collectie MAS, Antwerp (Belgium)

Figurative ceramics with details characteristic of group C.



11a, b, c Voania from Muba
Nonfigurative vase
Ceramic; H: 45 cm
Congo Basin Research Center, FX990584
Photo: by permission and © Congo Basin Research Center

but also button holes and incised lines around the jacket's edges. Female figures' clothing also is decorated further, with incised lines at the hems of shirts or skirts. The figures with elaborate one-sided signatures are the most detailed (Fig. 10). The men's jackets include incised lines and even military epaulets on the shoulders. Female figures in group C wear ornamented necklaces, bracelets, and patterned skirts.

Records of the dates when the works were accessioned into museum collections reflect the same groupings, thus suggesting a chronology by which we might tentatively organize Voania's oeuvre. Although records provide no information about dates of production, collection dates seem to align with gradual elaboration of Voania's works. Group A objects are the earliest objects to enter collections, suggesting group A ceramics were the first Voania produced. The ten objects accessioned earliest—including the 1910 group at the Musée du Congo Belge and the 1913 purchase for Sir Henry Wellcome's collection—all feature relatively unadorned figures with one-sided signatures characteristic of group A. From

1915 to 1920, nineteen more works entered collections, including a mixture of objects from groups A and B. The first sculpture in group C does not appear until 1923, when it was added to the Swedish Ethnographic Museum's collection. After 1923, works from all three groups appeared in collections. The dominance of groups A and B in early collections seems to indicate that those objects were created first. It may be that, as Voania began to export more objects, changes in the signatures and the addition of details might be read as indications of Voania's response to his interactions with European collectors.

SYNTHESIZING STYLES

I mobilize my chronology to highlight Voania's innovations and identify how he appears to have adapted his style for export. His oeuvre of naturalistic figures includes a mixture of regional and European-derived iconography. Such an amalgamation appears to demonstrate Voania's attempt to participate in the changing visual systems used to represent status in Congo. Phillips's conception of dual signification and Bridges's notion of souvenir standards help elucidate the various influences manifested in Voania's ceramics. Both argue that arts created for markets outside of the maker's community contain elements that are recognizable to both local and European audiences. For Volavka, any departure from regional representational modes "makes the sculpture meaningless and illegible in the customary context" (1982: 228). I argue that, while an object as a whole may have been unintelligible to Volavka's informants in the 1970s and seem to never have been



(top, l-r)
12 Voania from Muba
a Hair indicated by checkerboard pattern with punctuated dots
 Collected by Dr. Étienne, 1910; EO.0.0.1724-1 (detail), collection RMCA Tervuren
b Hair indicated by incised lines
 EO.0.0.20241-3 (detail), collection RMCA Tervuren
 Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren

(bottom, l-r)
13a-b Voania from Muba
 Standing man holding book, with detail
 Ceramic; H: 47.2 cm
 Donated by Nicolas Arnold via Henry Pareyn, 1917; EO.0.0.1690-2,
 collection RMCA Tervuren
 Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren





14a–b Voania from Muba
Atypical figurative ceramic and detail
Ceramic; H: 37.5 cm
Collected by Herbert Lang, 1915; 90.1/5083,
American Museum of Natural History
Photo: by permission and © American Museum of
Natural History

consumed by local markets, distinctive regional influences are still present in Voania's works. However, no simple dichotomy between distinctly local and nonlocal visual elements is possible, especially considering the region's long history of transcultural exchange. In speaking of wooden sculptures that depict Europeans made by Kongo artists, Mirzoeff cautions, "At this distance, we should not be drawn into the game of trying to determine their 'real' ethnographic type. Rather [these figures] attest to the transcultural complexities of the colonial Congo" (2009: 145.)

Considered as a whole, Voania's ceramics fit within the broad local genre of art used to display authority. In all three groups, Voania represents seated and standing figures holding bottles. This style of representation was common on Kongo grave sculptures and seems to be indicative of shifting iconographies. Although interactions with Europeans had long influenced local politics, the radical shifts in trade structures and the imposition of colonial rule at the turn of the twentieth century resulted in drastic

changes to Congolese leadership structures (Martin 1972; Schrag 1985; Vos and Vanhee 2013: 78–87; Vos 2015). Some chiefs collaborated—to varying degrees—with Belgian officials, while in other areas, new chiefs were installed (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2003: 35–36; Gondola 2002: 78–80). Leaders drew on both old and new status symbols to redefine leadership for the new colonial context. These negotiations of evolving power systems predate the colonial era. For instance, art historian Cécile Fromont explores the important use of dress to define Kongo Christianity and assert elite status in the sixteenth century. She states, "Kongo Christian elite creatively mixed and seamlessly merged in their sartorial practices and insignia both local and foreign elements and transfigured them into the new outfits and regalia of Kongo Christianity" (2014: 111). Whether reinterpreting dances, myth, material status symbols, or dress, western Congo has a long history of negotiating status symbols to fit new historical realities.

Moving into the twentieth century, historian Phyllis M. Martin explores the important role clothing played to assert power: "Porters, traders, hunters, farmers and artisans go about their business dressed in imported *pagnes* and such ready-made items as shirts, hats and jackets ... military caps or top hats were especially popular among chiefs, interpreters and successful traders" (Martin 1994: 404; see also Martin 1995: 155–65). In what historian Jelmer Vos describes as a "democratization of conspicuous consumption," access to formerly elite items of clothing and dress became more accessible to "ambitious sons, nephews, and other male upstarts" (2018: 247). The struggle to convey one's authority through dress and other status symbols also played out in the



15 Luba ceramic “noted as being from Katanga”
RMCA EO.0.0.18331
Photo: Coart 1907

16 Voania from Muba (?)
Atypical figurative ceramic
Ceramic; H: 47.1 cm
Donated by Nicolas Arnold via Henry Pareyn, 1917; EO.0.0.20246, collection
RMCA Tervuren
Photo: J. Van de Vyver; © MRAC Tervuren



funerary arts. Naturalistic wooden and stone funerary sculptures represent deceased chiefs and allude to the many ways Congo chiefs vied for power. Figures wear *mpu* raffia caps, hold coins, wear new European-style clothing, and reference literacy (Vanhee 2014b: 205). Recall that Voania himself was a chief and thus was likely familiar with these modes of self-presentation. It appears that throughout his career, Voania tried to balance local and European influences in his work. As I will demonstrate, changes to vessel shapes and modifications to specific details may indicate a gradual shift in Voania’s efforts to appeal largely to European buyers.

Over time, Voania seems to have removed some of the most distinctly local features from his works, changes that may have helped the works appeal more to his European patrons but distanced them from other regionally produced ceramics. For example, Voania appears to have modified the vessels’ shape. His ceramics seem to never have served a functional purpose. Yet, objects in group A (Figs. 1, 8) show him sometimes gesturing to the visual roots of functional ceramics by adding a small extension at the top of each vessel. As illustrated in the *Annales du Congo Belge*, functional ceramics from the twentieth century often included a flared lip or spout. The ceramics from group A, with the exception of two objects in the group of about forty vessels, all include a spout or a spout disguised as a hat. In theory, these objects could have acted as actual containers. For ceramics in groups B (Figs. 2, 9) and C (Figs. 3, 10), Voania removed the spout and left only a small circular opening at the top of the head. Such a design is necessary to facilitate the release of heat and protect the ceramic from cracking during the firing process. Without the spout, the vessels in groups

B and C could never function as useful containers and are further separated from other regional ceramics. Voania’s decision to remove the spout helps the figures appear more naturalistic.

Voania also created nonfigurative vessels, represented by just two known works, one held at the Congo River Basin Research Center in Brussels (Fig. 11) and the other at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art. The stirrup-spout vessels are clearly more functional than their figurative counterparts, and the design is similar other local utilitarian vessels. These works seem to indicate that Voania was experimenting with forms that might have appealed more to local audiences. Both pieces are signed with a group A-style signature, possibly indicating Voania created these works earlier in his career. He adorned the signature with etched foliage extending in a V around the text. Like the figurative works, these objects show no sign of use. These two examples seem to be Voania’s attempt to bridge local utilitarian forms with his own decorative style.

In addition to changing the vessel’s shapes, Voania also appears to have nuanced the style of his figures. In one example, he shifted his style for depicting hair. For many of the works in group A, Voania may have employed geometric patterns that are historically ubiquitous across artworks from the Kongo Kingdom. He used a gridlike, checkerboard pattern with punctuated dots that clearly references a complex geometric interwoven design (Fig. 12a). These same patterns appear on *mpu* raffia caps, a longstanding sign of prestige among Kongo nobles, ivories, and baskets among other mediums. Voania reworked this style for objects in groups B and C. Instead of the textile pattern, he adopts either incised straight

or wavy lines to depict hair (Fig. 12b). Thus, it appears that Voania removed the local textile reference for his later figures.

Voania also modified the box-like object held by many of the standing men (Figs. 8b, 13). Dr. Étienne described these figures as a “man holding in his hand a small book.”¹⁹ Yet, on at least three of Voania’s works, the figure carries an object engraved with interlocking geometric-patterns.²⁰ The pattern may indicate that the objects are actually baskets or boxes. Baskets decorated with ubiquitous Kongo patterns are a common theme within historic depictions of the Kongo court, and the creation of patterned baskets persisted into the twentieth century. Perhaps not surprisingly, the two figures carrying patterned boxes belong to group A. In groups B and C, the figures hold unadorned objects, which may be intended as the books described by Étienne.

I interpret the increased prominence of the signature, added decorative elements, removal of the spout, and shift towards more European iconography as Voania’s response to his potential markets. These changes all appear to correspond to the period of Voania’s most extensive interaction with Étienne. The consistent refinement and added ornamentation to the signature may indicate the artist’s success selling works for export.

Two objects fail to fit into any of the three style groups and may further illustrate Voania’s attempts to appeal to European audiences. The first example was collected by Herbert Lang during the 1909–1915 Congo Mission (Fig. 14). Although Lang did not include Voania’s name, he did note that all the ceramics he collected were by the same artist, recording “Eight decorative pots from Banana made by an *asonongo*, procured through the kind offices of Dr. Étienne.”²¹ The figure’s face includes Voania’s characteristic almond-shaped eyes, full lips, and plump chin. However, the shape of the chamber and the pattern for depicting the hair are completely different from all of Voania’s other works. Additionally, he added a rectangular design on the chamber’s side and a pattern on the woman’s back. The object matches almost exactly—from the chamber, to the rectangular decorations, to the bust form of the figure—with a Luba-style ceramic in the RMCA’s collection (Fig. 15). Voania appears to have been testing a different style, matching the compositional elements of the Luba-style object, but adding distinct details, such as the crossed scarification on the

back, a reference to western Congo scarification patterns, to distinguish his own style. The second object has no resemblance to any other works in the corpus, does not have a bottom chamber, and is not signed (Fig. 16). Yet the softness of the face, the eyes, and the finish all seem to suggest that this is a work by Voania. It appears to depict a balding bearded man who wears some kind of military jacket. Although the arms are disproportionately small, the three-quarters view is European. A close reading of these objects offers tantalizing hints about the nature of one Congolese artist’s innovations in response to dramatically changing society.

CONCLUSION

Voania’s large oeuvre is a testament to the brief flourishing of figurative ceramics in west-central Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century. From their earliest reception in museum collections, Voania’s works have been placed on the edge of art historical discussions. Past scholarship focuses on Voania’s innovations and his craftsmanship but separates his works from other aspects of Congolese visual expression. Contextualizing Voania’s work within the history of the twentieth century collecting appears to indicate how Dr. Étienne encouraged and promoted Voania’s works as part of his colonial collecting agenda. He may have chosen to work with Voania on his inclusion of a signature and included Voania’s ceramics among his shipments of other ethnographic items. Grouping Voania’s works according to signature type reveals his ability to vary his style and may suggest a rough timeline for the development of his oeuvre. My reading of his work points to Voania’s creative mediations between local and nonlocal materials, techniques, and iconographies to produce works for to a European audience. Although little documentation survives surrounding context in which the objects were made, analysis of the ceramics’ changing style and commentaries regarding their reception helps us to situate the works within the context of the early twentieth century collecting and colonial systems. Understanding these figurative ceramics as reflections of a process through which the artist adapts local art forms and appeals to European audiences both highlights the artists’ innovations and provides new insight for interpreting cultural exchange and creative autonomy this period in Congo.

Notes

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1 Also spelled “Voanya.” Because the works are all signed “VOANIA” I have chosen to retain this spelling for ease in connecting works to their artist. I have chosen to remove “Muba” from mentions of the artist in an effort to thwart conceptions of “Muba” as a family name.

2 Royal Museum for Central Africa, Dossier Ethnographique 114, 115, 123; Although, only nine are registered in the museum’s collection today: EO.0.0.1690-1,

EO.0.0.1690-2, EO.0.0.1690-3, EO.0.0.1724-1, EO.0.0.1724-2, EO.0.0.1724-3, EO.0.0.1724-4, EO.0.0.1991-1, and EO.0.0.1991-2.

3 Sir Henry Wellcome became extremely wealthy through his work as a pharmaceutical entrepreneur. He and his agents collected well over 1 million objects. Since Wellcome’s death in 1936, many of the ethnographic objects have been transferred to other collections, while the medical history materials remain at the Wellcome collection today. A large portion of Wellcome’s ethnographic material, including nine pieces by Voania, was later donated to the British Museum.

4 Naturhistoriska riksmuseet, etnografisk avdelning (National Museum of Natural History, ethnographic department), became Statens etnografiska museum (National Ethnographic Museum) in 1935, now Statens museum för världskultur: Etnografiska museet (State Museums for World Culture: Ethnographic Museum).

5 Royal Museum for Central Africa, Dossier Ethnographique 379, see entry number 20241.

6 “Coup de loeil rétrospectif sur l’activité du Comité en 1939.” *Arts et métiers indigènes dans la Province de Léopoldville*, January 1939, pp. 1–3. Frans Olbrechts’s exhibition of Congo art in Antwerp in 1938 uses a more cautious approach and seems to present the first mention of Voania possibly working with a workshop and a

wariness of attributing his works.

7 I thank Mandela Kaumba for generously sharing her fieldwork experience with me. See her synthesized results in Kaumba 2018.

8 State Archives of Belgium. Dr. Étienne personnel files: SPA (44387) 27456; SPA 9195 K(1609); SPA 16033 (K 2621).

9 Notes and report in State Archives of Belgium CART 426 (4082).

10 State Archives of Belgium CART 426 (4082). These notes were eventually included in Droogman’s (1901) large survey and map of Bas-Congo.

11 Étienne published many photographs in *Congo Illustré* and *Le Mouvement Géographique*. His photographs were also reproduced in the Congo section of the 1897 Exposition Universelle in Tervuren. Both journals were tied to efforts promoting colonial efforts to Belgian audiences. For more see Brugailiere 1993: 23–35; Henry 2008.

12 Dr. Elie Joseph Étienne. Letter to the Governor General. February 26, 1910. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, Dossier Ethnographique 115.

13 Royal Museum for Central Africa. Dossier Ethnographique 114, 115, and 123.

14 Now the Museum Volkenkunde, part of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. RV-1032-1,

RV-1032-2, RV-103207

15 Further examples appear in European collections, but often with little or no information regarding the purchase date or provenance.

16 State Archives of Belgium files: SPA 16033 (K2621); SPA (K4387) 27456; SPA 9195 K(1609)

17 The *Annales* do make a connection between Congo figurative ceramics and Peruvian pottery; see Masui 1899: 23.

18 No sources provide actual documentation that Étienne taught Voania to write his name. The idea seems to come from Henri Schouteden, former museum director who provided notes for Frans Olbrechts (1959), and is also cited in Volavka 1977: fn. 1, 5, and in Volavka archives 2009-063, Box 22, File 21-1-74, held in Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University. I thank the tireless efforts of many librarians and archivists at the RMCA and York University for all their help in the many attempts to locate this letter.

19 Royal Museum for Central Africa. Dossier Ethnographique 123

20 RMCA EO.0.0.1690-2 and EO.0.0.1991-1

21 Herbert Lang. Field Notes. Congo Mission. American Museum of Natural History. Field No. 3740- 3747, Figures 90.1/ 5076 – 90.1/5083

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