



ANGELO TURCONI

Interview by Alex R. Arthur

A Passion for the Congo

FIG. 1 (above): Among the Salampasu, Lualaba, 1987.
Photo © J.-A. Cornet.

FIG. 2 (right): Piazza del Duomo, Milan: Ready for departure with the Land Rover *Corriere della Sera*, 27 December 1967.

FIG. 3 (below):
In the bush, 1980.
Photo © A. Ménager.



I'd like to introduce you to photographer, publisher, and explorer Angelo Turconi, a passionate and enthusiastic man whom I've known for a long time through his books on the Congo. I met with him at his family home in Damme, Belgium, located in the beautiful Flemish countryside.

Angelo talked to me about his life, which began in 1938 in a village near Milan. He told me how he began working in a Milanese typography firm at the age of fourteen, before answering to a call for



FIG. 4 (below left): Part of Angelo Turconi's impressive editorial contribution.
Photo: *Tribal Art* magazine.

FIG. 5 (right):
Lele dancer, Kasai, 1988.

FIG. 6 (below):
Tshokwe dance, Kasai, 2021.
Photo © Angela Fischer.

FIG. 7 (bottom): Among the
Tshokwe, Tshikapa, Kasai,
2019.



travel and adventure. After driving across North Africa, he continued on to Iran, then India, and finally Afghanistan. In 1967, he set off for Africa again, this time with a friend and with the intention of crossing the continent from north to south and back again. But the trip came to an end in the Congo, after a year's travel, and the journey was interrupted by events that could have been the perfect material for an adventure book. In Kinshasa, he met Anne, his future wife, who was also from Belgium. Without having planned to do so, they remained in the Congo for more than twenty years.

Thanks to his professional experience at several printing and publishing houses, which stimulated Angelo's keen interest in photography, he quickly obtained contracts with various institutions of the Congolese Republic, including government agencies, private companies, banks, and various industrial enterprises. He also made documentary films on a variety of subjects, such as agriculture, forestry, the Pygmies, transportation projects, and the construction of the Inga dams. It wasn't until



FIG. 8 (above left):
Appearance of Woyo masks either
for the induction of a leader or for a
mourning ceremony, Kongo-Central,
1987.

FIG. 9 (above): Teke noble, Kinshasa,
1985.

FIG. 10 (left): Kinshasa–Matadi road
and the Kwilu River, Kongo-Central,
1975.



FIG. 11 (below left):
Appearance of the Kuba King Kot
a-Mbweeky III wearing his royal
regalia, *bwaantshy*, which weighs 80
kilos, Mushenge, Kasai, 1980.

FIG. 12 (below):
Wives of the Kuba king,
Mushenge, Kasai, 1980.





FIG. 13 (left):
The Mbelo chief Boloki
Ekeya, with his traditional
adornment consisting of a
brass disk symbolizing the
sun and Venetian paste-glass
beads, Mai-Ndombe, 1986.



FIG. 14 (right):
Yaka dancer, Kasongo-
Lunda, Kwango, 1987.



FIG. 15 (left): "Red women" of
the Ekonda, Wale: Women who
have given birth for the first time
cover their bodies and clothing
with *ngula*, a powder made of
red wood, Équateur, 2014.

FIG. 16 (below left): Lele
sculptor, Kasai, 1988.

FIG. 17 (below): Mangbetu court
building in Niangara, built in
1903, Haut-Uélé, 1985.



the early 1970s that he discovered the country's traditional arts and cultures.

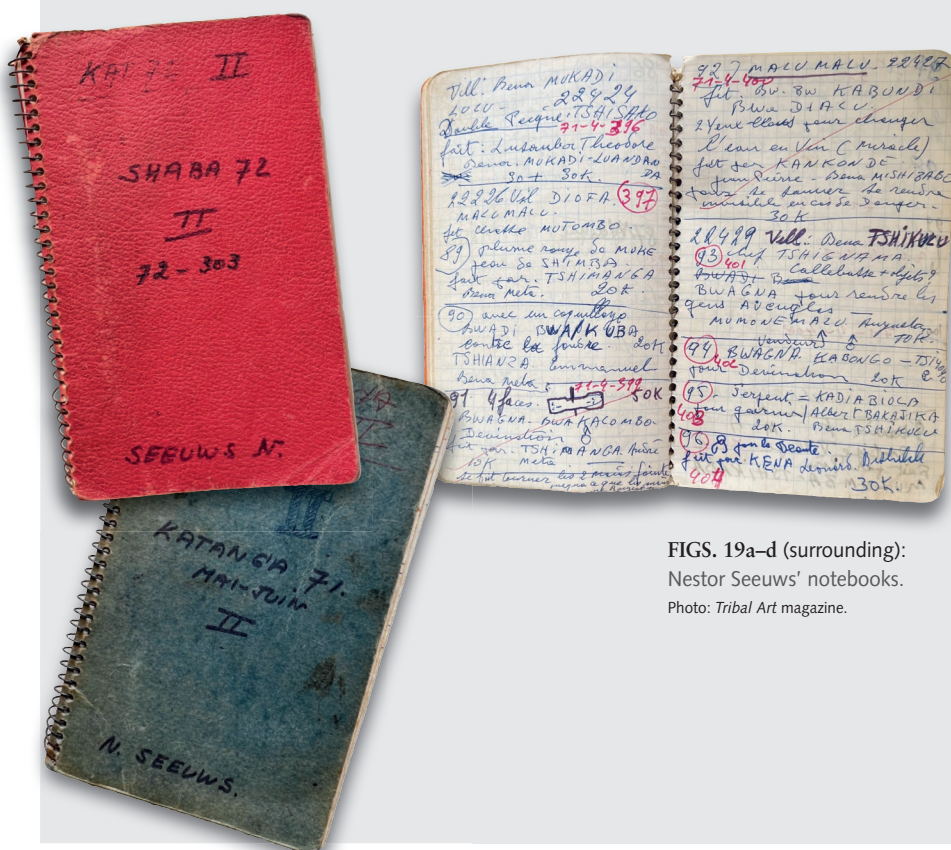
Alex Arthur: *You worked with the Musées Nationaux du Congo for several years. How did this collaboration get started?*

Angelo Turconi: The idea of a national museum was born following an official visit to the Congo in 1969 by former Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor. President Mobutu understood the importance and value that a museum of this kind would represent for the Congo, and so, on March 11, 1970, the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo (IMNC) was created. Brother Joseph-Aurélien Cornet was asked to take charge of it. As the first director of the IMNC, one of his main tasks was to collect and preserve both traditional and more recent works of art. Accustomed as I was to traveling throughout the country as a photographer for Congolese institutions, I accompanied Brother Cornet on several photographic missions between the 1970s and 1987.

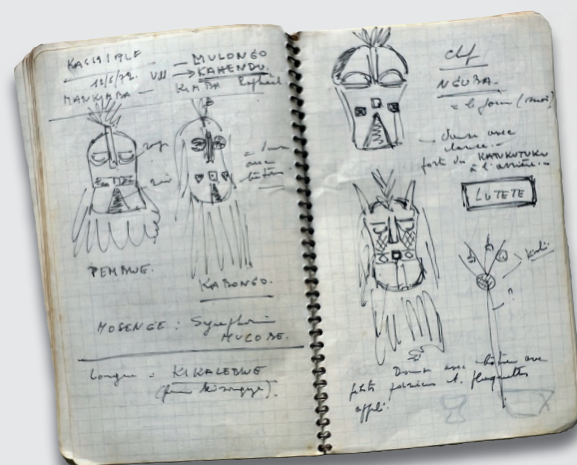
A.A.: *Was collecting old and traditional artworks "in the bush" still possible at the time?*



FIG. 18 (above): Female mask. Lele; DR Congo. Wood, pigment, hair, fiber. H: 27 cm. Private collection.



FIGS. 19a-d (surrounding): Nestor Seeuws' notebooks. Photo: Tribal Art magazine.

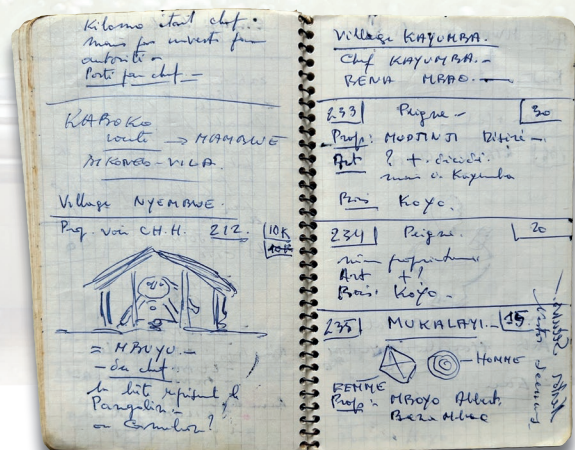


A.T.: Yes, absolutely! Even though the Tervuren museum, to which Mobutu had initially turned, had told him that he “wouldn’t find anything there anymore anyway,” the incredible odyssey in search of works across the country proved the contrary to be true. To facilitate the collection of objects in situ, the museum hired curators, including Charles Hénault, a connoisseur of Congolese art and culture; Nestor Seeuws; and anthropologist Lema Ngwete. Between 1970 and 1980, the IMNC teams were able to bring more than 40,000 objects to Kinshasa, only a tiny fraction of which are now on display at the museum. Many of these objects have subsequently been exhibited in the USA, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan.

A.A.: How did these collecting and documentation activities for these pieces take place? What were the reactions of the local peoples?

A.T.: Everything went smoothly, as the villagers were happy to meet us and appreciated the interest we showed for their material culture. Some even asked us why we hadn’t come sooner. Their welcome was so warm that it was sometimes difficult to leave. What extraordinary memories I have of these events! My primary job was to accompany Brother Cornet on his missions to document art and cultures. Each piece that we acquired was listed in our notebooks, and the information recorded included any complementary observations we made, along with drawings and the date and price of purchase.

A.A.: Did you also keep some “souvenirs” of these expeditions?



A.T.: I was there to take pictures. I am not a collector; my photographs are my “souvenirs.”

A.A.: The number of books you have published is remarkable. Your two first works, which are accompanied by texts by Brother Cornet (Art Royal Kuba, 1982, and Zaire: Peoples, Art, Culture, 1989), have become must-have reference works. You also published books about the Congo after you left the country in 1987, right?

A.T.: Yes—I’ve continued to photograph the Congo and travel around it to this day. In 2010, I published *Infini Congo* in collaboration with Professor François Neyt. It can be described as a kind of “pictorial summary” of more than forty years of exploring the Congo. Other publications followed: *Sur les pistes du Congo* in 2014, *Les Lunda* in 2017, and *Au cœur du Congo* in 2019. My latest book, *Les Tshokwe*, came out in 2021.

A.A.: Are you currently working on a new book?

A.T.: Of course! My next book will highlight the collection of the National Museum of Kinshasa and its history. Having photographed the objects collected in the 1970s, I’d like to set them together with the photographs taken of them in situ at the time. I’ve maintained a close relationship with the IMNC, and my large-format photos have been on permanent display since the new museum opened in 2019.

FIG. 20 (below):
Vine bridge, Inkisi River,
Central-Kongo, 1984.

