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The Telephone Call by Ian Mwesiga



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Ian Mwesiga (Rukungiri, Uganda, 1988)

The Telephone Call

2018

Oil on canvas

149 x 130 cm

FGA-ACAD-MWESI-0001

Provenance

Piasa, Paris, 14 November 2018, lot no. 124



It was on church pews and during his childhood that painter Ian Mwesiga acquired a keen eye for visual details. “I was drawn to picking what I saw there from an early age,” he explains in an interview. “I was fascinated with the process of transforming the second dimension to the third.”¹ Indeed, the painter was not only aware of this increased sense of observation that he continues to nourish today, canvas after canvas, but he has also developed his own sense of spatial distribution, as well as cultivating an interest in the liturgy, rites, and gestures that accompany it.

In the work *The Telephone Call*, a well-kept interior may be seen, including features like a table, television, and carpet, as well as the clothes of the main character, tapestries and wall decorations, all of which transport the viewer to the 1970s. A woman, represented in the left section of the painting, sits on a sofa. While her left arm rests nonchalantly on one of the armrests, her right arm supports the light-blue phone held to her ear. All around her, a series of images informs the viewer of the social and political context. In the centre of the wall are two photographs. The first evokes the studio portraits that once spread across Western and Central Africa, of which Malick Sidibé has become one of the emblematic figures: the background with the alternating vertical black-and-white lines undisputedly recalls some of his images and highlights the body of the young girl seated on a chair represented there. Is this a youthful image of the woman now seated in her living room opposite the viewer? Or is it one of her daughter, or maybe her niece?



Figure 2. Malick Sidibé, untitled, undated © Malick Sidibé Estate



Figure 1. Ian Mwesiga, *The Telephone Call*, detail, 2018, oil on canvas, 149 x 130cm, FGA-ACAD-MWESI-0001

The other photograph, located to the right of the painting, seems to be a baptism or communion portrait. A young girl wearing a white dress, with a high collar, and her hair drawn back into a white veil, can be seen. Finally, on the right section of the wall, we have a representation of the Virgin Mary, which completes the series of paintings hanging on

¹ “I was drawn to picking what I saw there from a very early age (...). I was fascinated with the process of transforming the second dimension to the third.” Cited in: Ong, Jyni, “A chat with the Kampala-based artist Ian Mwesiga and the imagining of his complex painterly worlds”, *It's Nice That* [online], 7 January 2021, available at: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/ian-mwesiga-art-070121>



the wall. While the Virgin's gaze seems to rest on the two photographs, the white Madonna, in turn, directs the gaze of the observer towards the centre of the composition, in an interior featuring almost only women. On the living room table and around the telephone after which the painting is titled, an oil lamp and a television set complete the composition. The television is frozen upon the image of "President for Life" Idi Amin Dada. The television may be a clue as to the reason for the phone call or at least to a more precise context for

this scene. There may have been a coup d'état—perhaps the one that allowed either the accession to power or the dismissal of a statesman whose methods proved to be extremely violent. Tens of thousands of people were massacred during his eight years of rule.² Today however, he is considered one of the leading figures of anti-imperialism in Uganda, who strategically navigated the country's independence policies. Illiterate and without even a basic



Figure 3. Ian Mwesiga, *The Telephone Call*, detail, 2018, oil on canvas, 149 x 130cm, FGA-ACAD-MWESI-0001

education, the dictator rose to a prime position within a regiment of the British colonial army, which subsequently enabled his promotion by reinforcing his violent excesses. However, the viewer may wonder what he is doing in this peaceful interior scene.

Spatial and temporal limits: representation, memory, and ambiguity

"We have to learn from history and accept all of it," declares Ian Mwesiga. "Idi Amin brings to mind a dark past, he was a bad man, but he is a part of history and in this work, he *situates* the scene".³ Although the artist has the soldier appear on the television screen, hinting at certain events unfolding in Uganda, the other elements in the image are deliberately there to cloud the issue. "These are objects that can be found in all sorts of interiors, from North to South Africa", he adds, particularly with regards to the representations of the Virgin Mary, or embroideries like the one depicted resting on the sofa. Both objects are relatively common throughout the continent. The painter does not

² Vokes, Richard, "In and Out of Sight: The Afterlife of Official Photography from Idi Amin's Uganda", *Kronos*, 2020, no. 46, p. 53

³ Interview with the artist conducted 10 August 2022



usually work from a model, or when reproducing existing interiors. Rather, he involves his own memory in the process of creating his works. “These are collages”, he says, juxtapositions of elements that he reconstructs according to his memories and which prevent him from controlling everything. The creation of the artworks thus becomes more intriguing for the artist. The scene presented by Ian Mwesiga reconstructs an atmosphere, a setting, and a story which serve as witnesses of the past. In this work, and to borrow the words of sociologist Stuart Hall, “the past continues to speak to us. But this is no longer a simple, ‘factual’ past, since our relation to it is, like the child’s relation to the mother, always born ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth.”⁴

Representing, acting, and re-presenting

What some critics have referred to as the “realism”⁵ at work in this painting allows for a broader questioning of the meaning of *representation*. The painter partially employs the rules of perspective, creating effects of depth and respecting the proportions between the different elements seen on the canvas. Thus, the concept of *representation* is activated in several respects.

To *represent* means that both an image, a photograph or, as in the present case, a painting “presents, imitates, depicts” different subjects or objects, but also that it “presents something that was already there”, it re-presents. Representation also refers to a political mechanism linked to governance: to represent someone means to act in their name and if possible, in the interest of the person who has appointed them their representative. In the work of Ian Mwesiga, all these definitions are at work. The painting *The Telephone Call* depicts both an upper-middle-class interior in the 1970s, with the young woman on the telephone as the main protagonist, and at the same time, re-presents the shapes and objects accumulated in the artist’s memory—and which are sufficiently common to be easily recognized—on the canvas observed by the viewer. Finally, it is a head of state, the “Ugandan President” as we can read at the bottom of the television screen, a person whose responsibility it is to act in the interest of a people, who appears on the screen portrayed. His presence in this salon creates a direct link between public and private space, the intimate and the political, between the governed and governor. Nevertheless, can we consider Idi Amin Dada to be a *representative*? The changes afoot in independence movements from the 1950s onwards, a moment pregnant with hope and the promise of emancipation, often took a tumultuous path, as was the case in Uganda. There is therefore

⁴ Hall, Stuart, “Cultural identity and cinematic representation”, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 1989, no. 36, p. 72.

⁵ Ong, Jyni, “A chat with the Kampala-based artist Ian Mwesiga and the imagining of his complex painterly worlds”, op. cit.



a persisting ambiguity of a situation between alienation and emancipation. The presence of Idi Amin Dada embodies this ambivalence, which can be experienced even today in the country in question. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, “access to representation, however imperfect it may be, can be emancipatory for those who are deprived of it, whether it is a matter of cultural or political representation”⁶. In the creation of this painting, one can imagine that it is indeed these two dimensions that are at work: the cultural representation through the elements and signs gathered on the canvas, which inform us about a past always present, of Uganda in its broader relation to Africa; but also a tension with the political representation (or lack thereof) embodied by the image-within-an-image of a person whom we would probably be wrong in calling a perfect *representative*.

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⁶ Hall, Stuart, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity”, in Anthony D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*. London: Macmillan, 1991, p. 19-40, including p. 34. Cited in Dutoya, Virginie, Hayat, Samuel, “Prétendre représenter: la construction sociale de la représentation politique” in *Revue française de science politique*, February 2016, Vol. 66, No. 1, p. 7-25