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Casting a Sliver of Light on the Heart of Darkness

EXHIBITION REVIEW | 'BRAZZA IN CONGO' March 30, 2009

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There are many treacherous paths leading toward history's realms of darkness, but when it comes to routes hacked out by imperialist powers in the Congo, we really do seem near darkness's heart. First arrived the explorers, whose readiness to confront disease and starvation, crashing rapids and warring tribes, can seem on the edge of madness. Signs of what was to unfold can be sensed in glints of cruel grandiosity or punishments meted out to mutinous native servants.



The explorer Pietro Savorgnan di Brazza is the subject of a show at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò.

And then came others, possessing weaponry and a sophisticated support before which tribes in dense jungles had no recourse: European concessionaires and feckless traders, brutish exploiters and enslavers. During the 20 years after 1890 millions of Africans met their deaths through the acts of these imperial adventurers.

The consequences of these deeds were so great, Western reflection so intense, and blame, defensiveness and guilt so widespread that we have settled into a familiar formula for understanding what happened. Imperialism is widely seen as the original sin of the modern West, whose ramifications can still be felt in the aftershocks of warfare and corruption that continue to plague so much of the African continent.

There is, though, much more that needs to be understood about this history beyond this sweeping formula, and while the new exhibition at [New York University](#)'s Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, "Brazza in Congo: A Life and Legacy," does not alter the fundamental premises, the show's three rooms, in which photographs, chronologies, maps and text are modestly displayed, shed so much novel light for an American visitor that the past seems open to even further inspection. It is a counterhistory, a celebration of an explorer scarcely known in the United States, an Italian-born, French-educated aristocrat, Pietro Savorgnan di Brazza.



The explorer Pietro Savorgnan di Brazza by Felix Nadar 1882.

In 1875, at the age of 23, he sold one of his family's estates, obtained a contribution from his sister's dowry, and set off on an expedition into equatorial Africa, just a few years after the Welsh explorer Henry Stanley had discovered the whereabouts of Dr. Livingstone there, on the shores of what is now Lake Tanganyika.

And Brazza, in this loving tribute, is the counterexplorer, the very opposite of Stanley. "In the 1880s," the exhibition tells us, "there were two paths for the heart of Africa: Pietro di Brazza's and Henry M. Stanley's. Alas, today Stanley's path of violence, raw greed and power has triumphed and become the modus operandi of governments in the Congo region."

Stanley, the show argues, was the militant conqueror, Brazza the empathetic visitor; Stanley, the “breaker of stones,” Brazza, the pacifist. Stanley was the agent for the imperialist project of King Leopold II of Belgium, who used the Congo to enrich his coffers; Brazza, the bearer of the French tricolor, heralding protection, liberty and equality for the natives of this benighted land, “rejecting the racism of his age.”



Images from the Congo region during Brazza's era.

Stanley’s pursuits led to the brutal oppression of a Belgian colony that developed into the nation called Congo; Brazza’s efforts led to the French colony (now the [Congo Republic](#)) whose capital was called, in tribute, Brazzaville. The city became the capital of Free France during the Second World War, where [Charles de Gaulle](#) set up residence.

And in magnificent photographs from the 1880s by Nadar (whose celebrity subjects also included Hugo, Proust and Rodin), Brazza appears here not as a conqueror of untamed climes, but as a sensitive celebrant of the exotic. He is intense, introspective, bearded, willowy, dark-eyed, wrapped in the alien garments of another world. In one photograph he is posed with frayed cloth trousers, disarranged shirt, a walking stick and a casually draped kaffiyeh, looking more like a desert wanderer from Arabia than one who has braved the heat of jungles. Parisian women swore their devotion; soap and cigarettes bore his name.

If the exhibition seems at times more a homage than an appraisal, that is partly because its creators, Idanna Pucci and her husband, Terence Ward, mean it so. As Ms. Pucci’s new book, “Brazza in Congo” (Umbrage), explains, that trailblazer is her ancestor: his niece was her grandmother. Ms. Pucci has also

prepared another show, “Brazza: A Symbol for Humanity,” opening on Tuesday at the [National Arts Club](#). In that show an enormous work by the Poto-Poto painters from Brazzaville will be displayed celebrating the amicable meeting of Brazza and Makoko Iloo I, king of the Batéké, the region’s largest population group. The treaty from that meeting became the foundation for a French colony, and embodies, the exhibition suggests, an ideal of cultural interaction.



Idanna Pucci, a creator of the Brazza show.

The painting is also part of another battle for her ancestor’s reputation that Ms. Pucci details in her book. In it she suggests that the current government of the Congo Republic may have engaged in fraud and worse to move the graves of Brazza and his family from Algiers and house them in an enormous white marble mausoleum in Brazzaville, thus conferring legitimacy on what Ms. Pucci considers a corrupt regime and violating the ideals Brazza represented.

In the Casa Italiana show Brazza becomes the embodiment of a countercultural counterhistory, reflecting an idea of what might have been had his methods been followed then — as they should, Ms. Pucci argues, be implemented now.

In a way, though, this image of Brazza is as schematic a romance as the one of Stanley-esque villainy it is meant to counterpoise. We have very little sense of Brazza as a human being, either from the book or the exhibition. Instead he takes on saintly characteristics. Yet we know that he traveled with multiple French flags to stake national claims; that when he met Stanley in Africa, he did not reveal that he had

any ability to claim land for France; and that he hid other aspects of his enterprise. And for a supposed pacifist he knew enough to keep an outpost stocked with Winchester rifles.

“I do not travel in African countries like a warrior,” he once said, but he certainly knew how to think like one. There is a faux naïf quality to some of his pronouncements as when, in one village, he sees skulls hanging on a tree outside the hut he has been given but claims surprise “because the only cannibals that have threatened me thus far are mosquitoes, flies and wasps.”

Meanwhile we should know that this is more than a two-player tragedy in which explorers confront each other over a pastoral landscape; cannibals feasted on the spoils of war, and the Arab slave trade played a central role. Tim Jeal’s recent biography, “Stanley,” shows just how complicated that man also was, how often Stanley’s sympathies and sense of justice were in play, and how skewed his reputation became.

Stanley’s image suffered partly because of efforts by Brazza and other critics to fuel European rivalries and partly because these drastically different characters — Brazza an aristocratic populist, Stanley an ambitious and abandoned workhouse child — had drastically different ideologies. The path to the heart of darkness is far more intricate than it first seems.

But Brazza was a charismatic figure of unusual powers, and his proclamations show a rare sensitivity. This homage has merit. He warned against unregulated commercial enterprise in the colonies. The future, he said, depended on “rich indigenous culture and trade.”

“If we want to impose our ways of seeing and behaving with arrogance and rigidity,” he said, “the Africans will suffer tremendously.” The imperial project, he suggested, should be seen as an enterprise that would be “mutually acceptable” as “a work needing time and patience.”

But it was not to be. Brazza, having served France as commissioner-general of Congo and Gabon for 12 years, is summarily dismissed in 1898. Then the French government divides control of millions of acres among 44 private concessionary companies.

There are reports of atrocities, and in 1905 Brazza offers to return to conduct an official inquiry. He meets constant opposition, but persists. Then, during the last days of his trip, he suddenly falls ill. He dies — poisoned, his wife believes. She forbids the proffered honor of burying him in the Pantheon in Paris. The French government suppresses his report. And darkness, with its many origins, remains.

“Brazza in Congo: A Life and Legacy” runs through April 17 at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò, New York University, 24 West 12th Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 998-8739. “Brazza: A Symbol for Humanity” opens on Tuesday and runs through April 19 at the National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, Manhattan; (212) 475-3424.