IMAGES ON A MISSION IN EARLY MODERN KONGO AND ANGOLA

by

Jason Waguespack
Synopsis

Early modern central Africa comes to life in an extraordinary atlas of vivid watercolors and drawings that Italian Capuchin Franciscans, veterans of Kongo and Angola missions, composed between 1650 and 1750 for the training of future missionaries. These “practical guides” present the intricacies of the natural, social, and religious environment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century west-central Africa and outline the primarily visual catechization methods the friars devised for the region. Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola brings this overlooked visual corpus to public and scholarly attention. This beautifully illustrated book includes full-color reproductions of all the images in the atlas, in conjunction with rarely seen related material gathered from collections and archives around the world. Taking a bold new approach to the study of early modern global interactions, art historian Cécile Fromont demonstrates how visual creations such as the Capuchin vignettes, though European in form and craftmanship, emerged not from a single perspective but rather from cross-cultural interaction. Fromont models a fresh way to think about images created across cultures, highlighting the formative role that cultural encounter itself played in their conception, execution, and modes of operation. Centering Africa and Africans, and with ramifications on four continents, Fromont's decolonial history profoundly transforms our understanding of the early modern world. It will be of substantial interest to specialists in early modern studies, art history, and religion.

Sort review

"Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola promises to help reorient this particular corner of the early modern world, and will be enlightening to those interested in the paintings for their own merits, or as documentation of aspects of social life and material culture than were outside the scope of the Capuchins’ own intentions."—John Thornton, author of The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706

"Fromont's attention to the archive's materiality and her vibrantly close reading of a large, unique body of sources are compelling. Images on a Mission in Early Modern Kongo and Angola reveals a much broader Capuchin visual genre than previously known, one that contains a distinctive approach to Africans (borne out of Capuchins’ experiences in central Africa) and to representing missionary experiences, and it significantly extends the visual archive for early modern European-African interactions.”—Surekha Davies, author of Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters--This text refers to the hardcover edition.

About the Author
Cécile Fromont is Professor in the History of Art department at Yale University. She is the author of the award-winning book The Art of Conversion and the editor of Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas, the latter also published by Penn State University Press. --This text refers to the hardcover edition.

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Pescemugler (manatee), late seventeenth century

Unknown Capuchin artist, "Pesce Muglere... sunbathing," late seventeenth century

Paolo da Lorena (attr.), "Pesce Donna (manatee)"

Fortunato Alamandini, Pesce Donna (manatee)

Unknown artist, "River Pesce Donna (manatee)"

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, "How the Missionary administers Holy Communion in the Open Air," ca. 1750

Unknown artist, medal of the Immaculate Conception and Blessed Sacrament from tomb 12 in the Kindoki cemetery, Kongo, seventeenth century

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, Sangamento, ca. 1750

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, Sangamento, ca. 1750 (fig. 60), detail

Statuette of Saint Anthony of Padua, central Africa, eighteenth to nineteenth century

Unknown Capuchin artist, "Missionary Father who baptizes," late seventeenth century

Fortunato Alamandini, Figure and Devotee (fig. 18 detail)

Paolo da Lorena (attr.), Ritual Enclosure

Unknown Kongo artist, seated male figure, Kakongo group, mid to late nineteenth century

Unknown Kongo artist, scepter, Lower Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, nineteenth century

Unknown artist, seated figure of a chieftainess, Zaire or Congo Republic (Y ombe), late nineteenth to early twentieth century

Unknown Capuchin artist, "Many and infinite are the Idols of these deserts," late seventeenth century

Excavation photograph of an axe blade and iron pins, tomb 7, Kamilamba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 800–1000 CE

Unknown central-African artist, basketry-decorated gourd, before 1659

Unknown Capuchin artist, "Missionary Father who burns the temple of the Idols," late seventeenth century

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, "The Missionary burns the House of a Witch," ca. 1750

Unknown Kongo artist, power figure (nkisi lumweno), Republic of Congo, Congo River, Vili (Bawili) people, nineteenth century

Unknown Capuchin artist, "Portuguese aristocrat[s] traveling in nets," late seventeenth century

Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, "Sacrifice among the Jagas"

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, "The Missionary, before entering a locality, is welcomed by the Ruler accompanied by his entourage," ca. 1750

Bernardino Ignazio da Vezza d'Asti, "Meeting and Reception I was given by the Prince of Soyo," ca. 1750

Léonard Gaultier, frontispiece to Claude d'Abbeville, Histoire de la Mission des Pères Capucins en l'Isle de Maragnan (1614)

Jasper Isaac, frontispiece to Gabriel Sagard, Le grand voyage du pays des Hurons (1632)

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Paolo da Lorena (attr.), frontispiece to Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi and Fortunato Alamandini, Istorica descrizione de' tre' regni Congo, Matamba, et Angola (1687)

Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, frontispiece to Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, "Missione Evangelica al Regno del Congo" (the Araldi manuscript), vol. C, 1665–68

Paolo da Lorena, plate in Ignacio Carnago, Città di Rifugio (1655)

Unknown artist, frontispiece to Antonio da Gaeta and Francesco Maria Gioia, La maravigliosa conversione alla santa fede di Cristo della regina Singa (1669)

Unknown artist, frontispiece to Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento and Angelo Piccardo, Breve, e succinta relatione del viaggio nel Regno di Congo (1692)

Paolo da Lorena (attr.), Reception of Capuchin Friars by the King of Kongo

Unknown Kongo artist, cushion cover, sixteenth to seventeenth century

Frontispiece to Antonio Zucchelli, Merckwürdige Missions- und Reise-Beschreibung
Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, the Krannert Art Museum in Urbana-Champaign, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, and the Capuchin Provincial Archives in Florence, Genoa, and L'Aquila. I am especially thankful to Padres Giacomo Carlini and Romano Mantovi, who generously and perceptively led me to the Parma Watercolors. Fathers Servus Gieben†, Johannes Bache, and Luigi Martignani welcomed me to the Capuchin Central Archives in Bravetta with unfaltering kindness over the years. I also acknowledge with gratitude the Virgili and Giovanelli families as well as Dr. and Mrs. Araldi for their support of my investigations of the manuscripts in their collections over the years. To Anne and Louis-Carl Vignon, Antonella Grassi, and Alberto Savoia, my thanks. A project that developed and grew over a decade and a half, this book has grown and changed thanks to the comments, insights, and encouragements of Suzanne P. Blier, Thomas B. F. Cummins, Esther Chadwick, Pierre de Maret, Steven Nelson, Kristina Van Dyke, Claudia Brittenham, John Thornton, Linda Heywood, Carlo Tosso, Surekha Davies, Nadine Zimmerli, and the anonymous reviewers at Penn State University Press. My colleagues in the departments of art history at the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, and Yale University; the 2014 fellows at Yale's Institute for Sacred Music and the 2017–18 fellows of the American Academy in Rome; the senior and junior members of the Michigan Society of Fellows in 2008–2010; and the patient audiences at events where I presented material from these pages—all have made the book's argument exponentially better. Veronica Copello, Sophia Kitlinski, Nathalie Miraval, Giacomo Berchi, Francesco Giorgi, and Lolade Siyonbola have helped push the manuscript forward in key ways. Ellie Goodman, Maddie Caso, and the Penn State University Press staff, including the agile PSU Press editorial assistants, have lent their patient and generous support to this project over many years. Any coherent sentence in the book is due to Keith Monley's discerning copyediting. Emily Floyd and Sally Promey's inspired and inspiring MAVCOR online platform has allowed for a broader, richer, more ambitious project thanks to the articulation of online and print media. Research for this volume was made possible by financial support from a Renaissance Society of America Paul Oskar Kristeller Fellowship, a Center for the Advanced Study of Visual Arts predoctoral fellowship, a Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, a yearlong Yale Institute of Sacred Music Fellowship, and a Michigan Society of Fellows Postdoctoral Fellowship. The Frederick W. Hilles Publication Fund and the Department of the History of Art at Yale University, as well as a Millard Meiss publication grant from the College Art Association, have contributed financially to the production of the book.“Do not ask questions you can't answer”—Tom Cummins. “Is there another way to think about it?”—Suzanne Blier. It took me fifteen years to hear, really, these two pieces of advice my graduate-school advisers once gave me. The phrases stayed with me over the decades, but only in the final writing of this book did I grasp their meaning and realize the convoluted path I had taken to answer their call to action. With this realization came another lesson, this time in pedagogy: learning needs time, teaching needs patience. So let me acknowledge and thank Suzanne and Tom again for their teachings and for their patience. And I will put it in print: you were right. Though this project started long before
2020, this is a pandemic book. Large parts of the manuscript were written while in confinement, while inventing physical and mental space for a family of five, including an infant, a school-age child, and a tween, while creating whole new curricula for suddenly online classes, while making attempts at remote schooling, while supporting undergraduate and graduate students in an unprecedented crisis, while bracing, along with my communities, against illness and death and joining them in fighting against some of the injustices we inherited from history's long shadow.

This book is a far cry from what it would have been under different circumstances, but I celebrate it, shortcomings and all, as a testament to the support and inspiration I have drawn from the grit, passion, and resilience of my family, children, students, colleagues, and communities. Nou la, nou douaout. Finally, and above all, thank you to my family in this world and in the realm of the ancestors. Grant, Louis, Héloïse, and Quitterie: this is for you.

Introduction

On the Feast of Pentecost, May 25, 1645, twelve friars of the Franciscan Capuchin mendicant order reached the mouth of the Congo River. They had sailed from Europe to central Africa to start a new mission under the auspices of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, the papal institution charged with evangelization, better known as the Propaganda Fide. The ship on which they traveled, led by Genoese captain Giovanni Bernardo Falconi, set anchor for the night off the coast of Pinda, on the river's southern shore. The next morning, a vessel from the Dutch East India Company accosted the Italian crew, demanding to see a Holland-issued travel authorization to sail in these waters. The United Provinces had seized control of the Portuguese central-African conquista of Angola in 1641 and subsequently attempted to exercise command over the region and its coast. Their foothold would be short-lived, and the Iberians would oust them in 1648. But in 1645, for the nascent Catholic mission attempting to reach central-African shores, the encounter with Protestant authorities threatened disaster.

In the following days of tense negotiation, Captain Falconi reminded the Dutchmen, to no avail, that Pinda was not under their authority but that of the Catholic king of Kongo, who ruled independently over a large realm, situated to the north of what was then Dutch Angola. As the negotiations stalled, the seaman took action. He stealthily reached the shore, accompanied by two of the missionaries, to seek the help of the local ruler and vassal of the king of Kongo, Dom Daniel da Silva, who, they hoped, could save them from the heretics. As soon as they landed, one of the friars, Bonaventura d'Alessano, spotted a large cross, a bell suspended on a frame, and a church. Entering the church, he saw on its altar statues of the Immaculate Conception and Saint Anthony and an old painting of Saint Francis embracing a cross. Speechless, ecstatic, and grateful to divine providence, he could barely tear himself from contemplating the arresting sight of the African Catholic complex. He finally stepped out of the building, only to be embraced by a crowd that had gathered to welcome him to the Kongo, as elated to see him as he had been to see the material manifestations of their attachment to Catholicism.

Figure 1

Albert Eckhout, Portrait of a Kongo Ambassador to Recife, Brazil, ca. 1637–44. Oil on paper, 30 × 50 cm. Jagiellonian Library, Krakow, Libri Picturati A 34, fol. 3. Photo courtesy of the Jagiellonian Library Photographic Services.

Figure 2

Unknown
The locality he had reached, Pinda, served as the port for the town of Soyo, the namesake capital of a prosperous and powerful province of the Kongo Kingdom (map). It was so wealthy and mighty, in fact, that its leader, or mani, Dom Daniel da Silva, was at the time in open conflict with the Kongo Crown because of his increasing assertion of independence from the central authority of the king, who ruled over his large domains through the provincial governors he appointed from his inland capital city of Mbanza Kongo, also known by its Portuguese-language Christian name of São Salvador. The mani Soyo, who defiantly called himself prince, soon granted an audience to Friar Bonaventura, his cloth brother, and the captain. He received them in his palace, dressed and surrounded with the sophisticated mix of imported and local items of clothing and insignia through which the aristocracy of the Kongo signified its political and religious standing as a central-African, Christian elite. He sat on a European-style chair set on a carpet, wore a European hat, and surrounded himself with attendants holding horsetail fly whisks and his ceremonial sword. Portraits of the ambassadors Dom Daniel had sent to Dutch Brazil a couple of years earlier and a drawing of the court of King Garcia II of Kongo, whom the prince without a doubt sought to emulate, bring to life the elegant spectacle his court and courtiers offered (figs. 1, 2). The magnificent African Catholic ruler listened to the visitors' plea and magnanimously granted them his protection against the Dutch, saving them and the nascent Capuchin mission. Setting off for central-African shores, the friars from the inaugural group of Capuchin envoys to the region had expected to reach a distant and overwhelmingly foreign land whose souls awaited their providential arrival for their salvation. But landing in Pinda, they hardly found themselves in the position of daring apostles spearheading conversion of strange, heathen parts, following the paradigmatic—and often chimerical—narrative of Christian missions in the early modern era. Rather, the circumstances of their arrival soon reminded them that they had come to central Africa at the demand of the elite of the Kingdom of Kongo, whose independently professed Catholicism dated back more than a century and a half. They would conduct their apostolate among the inhabitants of the realm, but also among those of the neighboring Kingdoms of Matamba and Ndongo, of polities such as the Dembos, or Ndembu, and of the Portuguese (and, between 1641 and 1648, Dutch) conquista of Angola. These populations had for at least several decades all engaged with the commercial, religious, and diplomatic networks of the Atlantic world and with the material and immaterial novelties these networks brought to their shores. The apostolic twelve thus not only found themselves caught, at the mouth of the Congo River, in the ripples of the Thirty Years' War and in the crosscurrents of European competition for overseas control. They also stepped into a region whose worldly rulers—whether Catholics (like Dom Daniel da Silva), practitioners of local religions, or apostates (like the legendary warrior queen Njinga of Matamba, whom they would soon encounter)—selectively adopted and redeployed
elements of European material, religious, and political culture and exerted independent powers on both locals and visitors from overseas. The challenges this environment posed to the European friars' expectations and the ambivalent responses it would elicit from them already began to appear in their reports on these eventful first days in central Africa. While they clung to whatever aspect of their journey could form an exalted, heroic apostolic tale, they also quickly recalibrated their stories. On the one hand, they turned to the lexical and intellectual field of wonder as a way to make sense, both politically and theologically, of the events they experienced. Wonder, religiously linked to devout admiration for God's works and intellectually connected to the early modern European culture of curiosity, offered them a way to make sense of tribulations, interpret unexpected encounters, and process overwhelming sights. On the other hand, the early reports reveal the friars' rapid realization of the crucial role that cooperation with local people and their elite, even if often fraught, would play in the trajectory of their mission. The Capuchin central-African visual corpus that is the subject of this book emerged at the intersection of these two trends. Its images were profoundly religious in form as well as content, bringing their providential, wondrous discoveries about local nature and culture as well as missionary praxis from central Africa to the eyes of the Church hierarchy and future missionaries back in Europe. They also pictured apostolic work in Kongo and Angola as embedded in the local fabric of power, their mission willed and supported by local authorities. Anxiety and exultation at the possibilities and risks of their endeavors ran through the corpus. Their images presented violence and peace, martyrdom and mass sacraments, predators and foodstuff, working in close concert as the warp and the weft of the mission's fabric. Throughout the decades of their apostolate in central Africa, the friars sent to the region consistently reported similar experiences upon their arrival. Kongo and Angola challenged their preconceptions about Africa and Africans and spurred them to put pen and brush to paper to correct, with didactic images and texts, the presumptions of their hierarchy and the expectations of those who would follow in their wake. The result of their efforts was the creation of a highly idiosyncratic visual corpus. Although inspired and shaped by the intellectual and visual context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe in general and Italy in particular, the images the friars created in and about central Africa do not fit squarely into European templates of representation and interpretation of distant lands and people in the early modern period. The Capuchin vignettes about flora and fauna emulated the format of natural histories yet left ample room for other European and central-African forms of knowledge about the environment and nonhuman subjects. Their portrayal of central Africans called upon the imagery of best-selling travel literature but did not follow that genre's formulaic sensationalism or exoticism. They pictured catechization and the giving of sacraments among their African flock, but the ceremonies they described followed typically local rituals and customs rather than unfold as European-controlled and -staged events. Unsurprisingly, the intended European readers of their works met their atypical compendia with skepticism and at times even censorship. But above all, they received them with indifference. This cold reception has kept the Capuchin central-African corpus out of
public and scholarly eyes, in its own time as well as ours, in spite of its extraordinary
significance. It is an unparalleled documentary source about the African continent in the early
modern period. Its numerous images, derived from eyewitness experience, greatly enriches our
knowledge of early modern Kongo and Angola and literally multiplies the known European-
format visual record about the African continent before 1850. It also sheds light on the Capuchin
missionary project, a significant facet of Christian missionary history, which has not received as
much attention as the endeavors of the Jesuits or other branches of the Franciscan
family. Further, it brings to the fore a moment of sustained cross-cultural spiritual, intellectual, and
material interaction between Africans and Europeans that unfolded within a sociopolitical
context with few parallels in the early modern era.6 The friars arrived and worked within
populations that did not live under colonial rule but had engaged for many decades
independently and in deep and transformative ways, albeit to different extents depending on the
region, with Europe and the Atlantic world at large. Their activities took place in a social and
political environment defined by fraught cooperation and a delicate balance of power between
the friars and local populations on whom they depended in every aspect of their life, from food to
security, to the ability to exercise their apostolate. The visual corpus they created in the wake of
these interactions both echoed this situation and reflected on its implications. Neither
projections of colonial ambitions similar to their colleagues' works about Latin America, nor tales
of exalted inculturation other missionary orders retold about their Asian missions, nor exotic
fantasies commonplace in travel literature, their images and writings followed a pattern of their
own. Attention to the Capuchin corpus and the circumstances of its creation thus sheds light on
largely overlooked dimensions to the cross-cultural transactions that shaped the early modern
world.

Historical Background
The Capuchin mission to central Africa originated in a long-brewing
conflict between the Kingdom of Kongo and Portugal that intensified in the late sixteenth and
early seventeenth centuries. The African realm, which emerged as a centralized, powerful
kingdom south of the Congo River in the thirteenth century, converted of its own accord to
Catholicism around 1500, upon its encounter with Portugal. Explorers and clerics from the
Iberian kingdom had reached Kongo shores in the 1480s in the course of their exploration of the
Atlantic African coast in search of a maritime passage to India and of new allies for Christendom.
At first cordial and mutually beneficial, the relationship between the two realms unraveled during
the sixteenth century as a consequence of Portuguese participation in the transatlantic slave
trade and ambitions to claim parts of central Africa as their territorial conquests. Taking
advantage of a weakened Kongo recovering from the aftermaths of invasions from a bellicose
group known in the historical documents as the Jaga, the Portuguese laid the foundation of their
conquista of Angola in the city of Luanda, which they founded in 1575 at the southern edge of
the African kingdom.7 From that moment the relationship between the two realms deteriorated,
with Portugal eventually attacking the Kongo's southern borders in 1622. In 1624 it recalled the
bishop of Kongo, whom it controlled by rights of patronage, from São Salvador to Luanda.8

As a response to these multivalent assaults, the Kongo maneuvered to assert broader independence
from Portugal in the conduct of its spiritual affairs. It welcomed Jesuits, who did not respond to
the Portuguese Crown, starting in 1619.9 The kings of Kongo also asked the papacy to dispatch
clerics who did not hail from Portugal. The pope answered positively, designating Spanish friars
of the Capuchin order for the task in 1618. However, the geopolitical situation resulting from the
union of the Crowns of Portugal and Spain between 1580 and 1640 and the Thirty Y ears' War
delayed the departure of the missionaries until 1645. From this moment Capuchins, first from
Spain, then almost exclusively from Italy, maintained a thin but nearly constant presence in
Kongo and neighboring polities until the departure of the last brother from Luanda in 1834.10 In
central Africa the friars acted as parish priests in regions already practicing Catholicism within
the Kingdom of Kongo and Portuguese Angola and as missionaries in other areas. The Capuchin
apostolate in Kongo and Angola and the friars' relationship with their local interlocutors followed
a pattern that was sharply different from that of other missionary endeavors of the early modern
period. In particular, it did not fit the templates for overseas catechization that mendicants had
honed since the sixteenth century in the colonial contexts of Iberian America. With the exception
of a small population in Luanda, the central town of the Portuguese conquista of Angola, and a
handful of other settlements, the Capuchins worked among peoples living in regions that
remained independent from direct European control. Far from acting in concert with a colonial
army and administration, they operated under the auspices of central-African rulers. They also
often found themselves caught in the crossfire of European and local political and commercial
interests. The situation created many occasions for clashes and conflict as the clerics
endeavored to establish spiritual authority and assert their social standing as men of the Church
in an environment they did not fully understand and among populations against which they held
profound negative preconceptions.11 Soon the friars learned that they could not proceed in their
activities "without the consent of the people, and the secular arm of the Prince."12 Among the
polities Capuchins visited in their central-African apostolate, the Kingdom of Kongo, whose
rulers first invited them to the region, held a special place because of its declared attachment to
the Catholic faith, heralded in its elite regalia and performed at all levels of its political, social,
and religious organization.13 The friars also worked in Ndongo and Matamba, the realms of the
powerful Queen Njinga, whose eventful life and rule ended in a spectacular reconversion to
Christianity in 1663 under the guidance of one of the friars.14 The Capuchins were quick to
claim and publicize the momentous event, which reflected positively on their missionary zeal
and success, as well as on the overseas reach of the papacy, which sponsored their endeavors
through the Propaganda Fide.15 Their activities also unfolded in polities neighboring Kongo and
Angola ruled by leaders with varying levels of involvement with the religious, material, and
political networks of the Atlantic world, such as the Ndembu region and Kisama.16 Forays
further to the east and northeast of Kongo and Ndongo-Matamba also found them in what they
deemed heathen lands, such as the realm of Makoko, around today's Pool Malebo, whose
people held only remote connections to long-distance Atlantic routes.17 This complex and
singular sociopolitical situation as missionaries under the purview of African overlords, Christian,
heathen, or somewhere in between, weighed heavily on the Capuchin endeavors in central Africa and, as I argue in this book, on the mission's visual and textual production. The Corpus Under Consideration

From their first arrival in central Africa, in 1645, to the slow disintegration of their so-called Missio antiqua between the late eighteenth century and 1834, Capuchin missionaries assiduously wrote and commented on their activities in Kongo and Angola, leaving behind a dauntingly large documentary corpus. As sons and brothers, the friars wrote letters to their families. As members of a Capuchin province, they sent news of their apostolic work to their home convents. As envoys of the Propaganda Fide, they composed yearly relations for the mission's prefect, based in Luanda, who in turn summarized and transmitted them to Rome. As men on an extraordinary voyage, they also kept diaries of their journeys and ventures and often shaped these memoirs into manuscripts they hoped to see published. Thousands of the pages they wrote have survived to this day in private and public archives around Europe, Africa, and beyond. The variety of their styles, purposes, and intended audiences and the geographic dispersion of the archives and collections in which they now reside make them a challenging corpus to study. They are also, because of the same characteristics, a rich source, offering a vivid and multidimensional portrait of central Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In addition to writing thousands of pages, the friars created numerous images presenting the intricacies of the natural, social, and religious landscape that members of their order encountered in central Africa. They pictured scenes and individual elements they saw in the Christian Kingdom of Kongo, in the Kingdoms of Matamba and Ndongo, in Portuguese Angola, and in several other locations in the broader region. Their paintings and drawings, and the prints eventually produced after them, featured detailed everyday scenes, examples of flora or fauna isolated and labeled, and thorough views of missionary life, all captioned with words of advice and admonition. Most of the images belonged to a coherent set of primarily visual manuscripts that were, as I demonstrate in this book, intended as practical guides for the edification of future missionaries. The group consists of four distinct but related works: a large panel now in the Museo Francescano in Rome that I date to the 1650s (plate 1); a once-bound set of sixty-seven paintings likely created in the 1670s that I call the Parma Watercolors (plates 2–68); and two versions of the same practical guide composed around 1750, Friar Bernardino d'Asti's "Missione in prattica," held in Turin and the Vatican (plates 69–72, figs. 19, 44, 58, 60, 73, 77, 78, 92–96). This book reproduces much of this largely unpublished corpus, including the totality of the extant Parma Watercolors and of the plates in the Vatican "Missione in prattica." A large number of the Turin paintings appear in these pages; the full manuscript is available as an online gallery on the Turin Civic Library website. I have created an image collection paired with an essay and translation of the Parma Watercolors texts on the Material and Visual Culture of Religion website to complement this book's documentary and illustration program.

Puzzlement and Poesis

For centuries these illustrated manuscripts, as well as related material also considered in this volume, lingered untouched in public and private repositories. Interest in central Africa's Catholic past that arose in the twentieth century, in the wake of
renewed missionary and then scholarly inquiries on the region, only brought faint attention to a small number of them. Some have appeared since then as illustrations or cover designs for historical scholarship, without direct analysis. Others have been published as curiosities. Overall, the heterogeneous set has left modern scholars as perplexed and indifferent as its own contemporaries, and it has been the object of little scholarship. Curiosity and perplexity also marked my own initial encounter with the images of the Turin “Missione in prattica” as a graduate student interested in the visual and material culture of Africa and the early modern Atlantic world. I first approached the vignettes with enthusiasm and eagerly planned to make them the focus of my doctoral dissertation. Excitement soon faded into frustration. The images of the “Missione in prattica” were rich, exceedingly rare documents in need of scholarly attention but proved opaque to my attempts at analysis informed by a training in African and colonial Latin American art history. I found that their European format left little to no room to investigate African voices. The relationship they illustrated between locals and foreigners did not depict consistent power asymmetries or situations of oppression and resistance that would lend themselves to an analysis of subaltern agency. Their few depictions of African material culture did not open the door either to a sustained study of central-African expressive culture. So I, too, put them to the side and turned my attention to other sources. A few years later, in Italy, as I conducted research on the Christian arts of the Kongo, the friars with whom I worked in the archives led me to an unknown set of paintings that I would call the Parma Watercolors. This encounter and the promise it held of new avenues to approach the Capuchin images renewed my interest. After studying the watercolors in person, I realized that I had come across the central opus of a distinctive body of work. A majority among the extant Capuchin vignettes from central Africa produced between 1650 and 1750 formed, I now understood, a coherent group of didactic images, with shared format, subject matter, and goals. Complementary paintings, drawings, and prints from the same circles fell into place as related but peripheral productions. I wrote about these findings and derived key insights from the analysis of the corpus in my dissertation and several later publications. Yet much about this group of closely related images continued to baffle. Borrowing and elaborating from one another over the course of nearly a century, the images’ many entanglements eluded linear interpretations. Notions of prototype and copy, drafts and corrections, did little to illuminate the extant set of paintings and related prints. In fact, in spite of years of research, of ever accumulating evidence, and of studious reckoning with an ever-growing array of hints, I could not name the friars who painted the images and wrote the texts of the Parma Watercolors, and I could only approximate the date when they may have been painted, then glossed. What is more, the images stubbornly continued to defy the templates of analysis and the modes of interpretation on which I had trained to rely as a student of early modern visual culture. They did not fit within the categories or respond to the analytical tools scholars usually brought to bear on early modern European approaches to and representations of non-European locales and peoples. Savagery, exoticism, hybridity, subaltern resistance, and colonial projections played little to no role in a visual corpus that persisted in eluding...
Years later still, instead of putting the documents to the side once more, I chose, in writing this book, no longer to see these unanswered questions, this categorical and interpretative resistance of the corpus, as obstacles to analysis or causes for puzzlement but to take them as points of departure. I realized that rising to the many challenges the corpus posed required me to move, as art historian Suzanne Blier once suggested, “beyond, through, behind, and under both customary and new theoretical frames.”

Leaving behind the search for individual authors and turning my attention beyond narrow dates, I sought alternate ways to discern the corpus’s sources and map the course of its coming into being. Eventually, it was the Capuchin vignettes themselves that set my path. I took my cue from the permeability they demonstrated between pictured and real worlds at the time of their reception as Franciscan images. Following the order’s precepts of emulation of saintly examples in imitation of Christ, the Capuchin visual works invited their intended viewers to immerse themselves in the world within the images through iconographic, compositional, and narrative elements. Breaking through and looking under the familiar frames that led to frustration and puzzlement, I found new direction in exploring the parallel permeability between real and pictured worlds at the time of the vignettes’ inception. Poesis, I realized, the process through which the set of images took its form, could be interpreted as holding authorial agency. The European painters and etchers responsible for the lines and washes of the images put their art at the service of a narrative voice that preceded the image’s visual texts and determined their form.

The great landscape print that serves as a guide through most of the book (fig. 41), and the many other vignettes picturing dialogue between friars and central Africans, functioned as self-aware images, pointing back to their poesis. The encounters and dialogues between friars and central Africans they represented appeared within their frames as both subjects of their narratives and the actual sources of the discourses they documented and participated in shaping. This take on the images considers authorship expansively, as characterized by the sources and course of the corpus’s creation and thus by the explicit and implicit, featured and disavowed, entanglements of the immediate and deep-rooted social, intellectual, and visual interactions that led to its construction. Though images of European format and made by European hands, the Capuchin central-African vignettes, I argue in this book, were products of the encounters between the friars and central Africans and as such were cross-cultural creations that were not images of but images from central Africa and created by central Africans in dialogue with the European friars. The disconnect between the Capuchin central-African images’ European form and their cross-cultural dimension begs for deeper investigation of the barely visible or outright invisible heterogeneity of other early modern European images of non-European topics. That visual productions such as the ones under consideration in these pages did not appear to their original European viewers or to later European scholars as mixed points to two moments when the role of Others—in this case, Africans—in their construction was overlooked. The first belongs to the early modern period, when the construction and reception of the documents consciously or unconsciously ignored or silenced their non-European sources. The second lies in our
contemporary moment of interpretation, when modes of reading of the images remain blind to their cross-cultural dimension if not visible at the level of form or traceable to the identity of their makers. In response, I adopt in this book a methodology that recognizes the Capuchin images, though drawn by European hands and European in style, as creations molded in a cross-cultural inception, or poesis. This methodology identifies and analyzes the first moment of disavowal and corrects the shortsightedness of later interpretative apparatuses.

This book's argument weaves three interrelated threads. First, it presents for the first time to scholarly and public attention a set of images about Kongo and Angola in the early modern period and locates them in relation to the extant documentary record about central Africa between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. It defines the corpus of Capuchin didactic images from central Africa as a singular project rooted in the veteran friars' experiences in the mission field and puts it in conversation with a wide array of contemporaneous natural-historical publications, missionary reports, and volumes of travel literature. Second, it analyzes the stories these images tell about the fraught but generative encounters and negotiations that took place between central Africans and the Italian Capuchins they hosted in their lands. It describes the emergence and analyzes the character of a novel discourse about nature, culture, and faith. A discourse that grew at the nexus of cultures in the meeting between Capuchin Reformation-era ideologies and central-African Christian and non-Christian religious thought; Italian Franciscan baroque artistic sensitivities and the predominantly conceptual, often abstract visual modes of expressions of image- and object-makers in Kongo and Angola; the European classical-infused culture of curiosity and central-African ecological, technological, and philosophical systems of knowledge and experimentation of deep local roots and broad horizons. Finally, the book makes an intervention at the level of methods in the study of early modern, apparently European images of non-European topics. Challenging approaches that consider these documents as testaments of exclusively European views and knowledge, it charts instead a method to analyze them as cross-cultural constructions.

Weaving together these three threads, this book sheds new light on the early modern Catholic missionary project, the nature of cross-cultural encounters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the entangled histories of central Africa, Europe, and the world. More broadly, it rehearses a nuanced approach to the encounters between people, objects, and ideas that shaped the early modern world and continue to cast their long shadow into the twenty-first century.

Figure 3

CHAPTER 1
“Nonsense” Capuchin Images of Kongo and Angola Against Italian Preconceptions
A modest friar considered of poor talent and little promise by his superiors, seventeenth-century Capuchin Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi da Montecuccolo left a monumental opus that remains to this day the
Active for decades in west central Africa, he authored several massive manuscripts chronicling his experience as a missionary and recording the histories of several of the region's polities. He pictured himself doe-eyed, long faced, squat, and bearded in the Capuchin style on two occasions in his opus. One self-portrait shows him among a motley crew of shipwreck survivors huddled in an overpopulated canoe (fig. 4).1 In the other, he has painted himself in liturgical garb, following three attendants dressed in white in a sequence of vignettes concerned with the funeral rites of the legendary warrior Queen Njinga of the Mbundu people of Angola, an apostate who had eventually passed away a good Christian thanks to his apostolic zeal (fig. 3). Cavazzi chose the event as the setting for a self-portrait he proudly labeled with his full name and credentials in large looping cursive: “The Father Giovanni Antonio da Montecuc[olo] from the Province of Bologna, Apostolic Missionary.” He likely considered this moment the apex of his career and, in spite of the modesty the rules of his religious order dictated, was eager to present the accomplishment to the readers of a manuscript he tirelessly worked and reworked in view of publication.

His wishes to see his pages in print would only partially come true. In 1687, nearly a decade after his death in 1678, a volume derived from his writings, the Istorica descrizione de’ tre’ regni Congo, Matamba et Angola sitvati nell’ Etiopia inferiore occidentale e delle missioni apostoliche esercitateui da religiosi Capuccini appeared in Bologna. The book, however, was a heavily edited version of the long work he had first submitted for publication more than fifteen years earlier. In between stood years of arguments between the veteran of central Africa and Italy-based editors, Church leaders, and censors. At the core of the dispute was a chasm between the two sides about the goals and format of the book and, beyond it, about the proper nature, role, and presentation of knowledge about Kongo and Angola for a European audience.

At a superficial level, the disagreement concerned the length of the work and Cavazzi’s inclination toward verbose minutiae as well as his great penchant for miracles. The Holy Office under Pope Urban VIII had specifically forbidden in decrees of 1625 then 1634 the publication of writings or images presenting the lives or actions of individuals as holy or miraculous.2 Friar Antonio Zucchelli da Gradisca, who wrote about central Africa a few decades after Cavazzi, specifically addressed the issue in the preface of his book, solemnly declaring that it was not his intent to suggest “holiness of life, praise, miracles, or similar things.”3 But the rift between Cavazzi and his hierarchy, I argue in this chapter, was deeper. Not only did the Italian editors and Church leaders show little interest in the ethnographic reports on central Africa or the exalted tales of wondrous missionary undertakings contained in the book. They also did not welcome the challenge that the manuscript offered to their misunderstandings and preconceptions about Africa, calling its contents “nonsense,” opposed to “the universal taste of people.”4 Cavazzi, like the other Capuchin authors who had traveled to Kongo and Angola, used his manuscript as a space within which to reckon in word and image with the confounding religious and social fabric of central Africa. The friars found that the inhabitants and kingdoms of the region escaped established European templates for the apprehension and description of
non-European peoples and locales not only because of exotic, strange traits but also because of very familiar ones. Their mores were, in the words of one of Cavazzi's like-minded brothers, "totally opposite to our customs." Yet the same friars also admitted, with much disconcertion, that central Africans' ways also reflected their decades- or centuries-long engagement with the visual, material, and religious cultures of Europe. This paradoxical impression of central Africa and central Africans is the core conundrum and formative tension at the heart of the Capuchin central-African corpus.

The Making of the Istorica descrizione
Cavazzi was an early member of the Capuchin central-African mission and a prolific author. Much of his palimpsestic writings and paintings have survived, spread across private and public archives in Italy and Portugal, awaiting critical edition. In addition to the Istorica descrizione, his works include several unpublished opera. A manuscript titled "Vite de' Frati Minori Capuccini dell'Ordine del Serafico Padre San Francesco morti nelle Missioni d'Etiopia dall'anno 1654 sino all'anno 1677" is in the public library of Évora in Portugal.6 Another, massive, three-volume codex, the "Missione Evangelica al Regno del Congo," also known as the Araldi manuscript, is in the Biblioteca Estense di Modena.7 Some of its contents formed an early draft of what would eventually become the Istorica descrizione. It is also well documented that Cavazzi lost some of his writings during his travels. In addition, he authored at least one other, now-lost or not-yet-located, seven-hundred-page draft for the 1687 book, a draft that he finished in 1671 and titled "Descrizione de' tre' grandi Regni situati nell'Etiopia inferiore, parte dell'Affrica meridionale [ . . ."] data in luce da P . F . Gio: Antonio da Montecuccolo."8 A copy of the table of contents of this missing work indicates that it was an intermediary version between the Araldi manuscript and the Istorica descrizione.9

Around 1669, having heard, perhaps, of his efforts to write an account of the missions while in Luanda, the Propaganda Fide, the papal institution that oversaw the Capuchin apostolate in central Africa, commissioned Cavazzi to compose a history of his order's endeavors in central Africa. The friar, who recently had returned to Italy after fourteen years in Kongo and Angola, eagerly set to work on the commission. After two years of intense effort, in 1671 he presented the "Descrizione de' tre' grandi Regni" to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, who decided later in the same year not to publish it, perhaps because of the prohibitive production cost of a volume nearly seven hundred pages long, but more likely because the contents and tone of the work had begun to raise eyebrows among the Church's establishment, as it would continue to do for another decade. Cavazzi's countryman, collaborator, and ardent supporter Bonaventura da Montecuccolo, in swift and resourceful response to the negative news, secured private funding in Bologna for the printing and in 1673 sought the Propaganda's authorization to proceed with the publication. A long negotiation ensued between Friar Bonaventura, the Propaganda, and the papal legate in Bologna, Cardinal Buonaccorsi, under whose purview the printing would take place. Finally, in 1678 the ecclesiastical hierarchy authorized the publication, with the specification that the text had to be shortened and rid of its numerous mentions of miracles. The task of editing the manuscript fell, by order of Capuchin minister general Esteban de Cesena, to Fortunato Alamandini da Bologna,
a prominent member of the order who, notably, did not have direct experience of the African missions. Several rounds of revisions and approvals delayed the production until 1684, and after three years in press, the volume, retitled *Istorica descrizione*, finally appeared in 1687.10 The decades-long dispute over Cavazzi's book project unfolded at many levels, with points of contention ranging from the purpose of the book to specifics of its contents. In commissioning the work, the Propaganda envisioned a publication that would provide a celebratory history of the missions they sponsored. It deemed Cavazzi's draft generally too long and, like Cardinal Buonaccorsi, specifically objected to its inclusion of what were in their view superfluous details about African rites and customs. They also frowned upon the attention it gave to wonder and miracles. In contrast, Cavazzi and Bonaventura da Montecuccolo placed high value on both minutiae and miracles as essential to the volume's didactic role in instructing missionaries destined to central Africa. Although not an outright practical guide like other Capuchin handbooks about the region, the volume was similar in its conception, intended use, and insistence on the particularities of the central-African mission. In a letter defending the manuscript against the attempts of the Propaganda to further edit and shorten it, Friar Bonaventura pleads that “details,” or “minutiae,” on local mores that the ecclesiastical hierarchy judged trivial are in fact essential to the book. These details, he explains, “are included so that we understand their customs, however different they may be from ours of Italy; and if [the editors] took them out, it would falsify the title of the book,11 and it should not say either that it describes their rites and customs as it does, and the missionaries that would be newly designated for [the mission] would not in reading this book be able to know anything about them either, and this is one of the principal reasons why [this book] is written.”12 This insistence on the role of the publication as a didactic text and the implicit description of its purpose as a salutary corrective to future missionaries’ preconceptions about Kongo and Angola were two key aspects that connected the original manuscript to the Capuchin corpus of practical guides. In fact, as discussed further below, the prints Cavazzi commissioned for the book were closely related in format and style to the visual programs of these guides. Friar Bonaventura also defends with equal passion the miracles reported in the volume as the proof of God's approval of and direct involvement in the central-African mission. Editing out these signs of divine intervention would, he passionately writes, take away the “soul [l’anima]” of the book, belittling the divinely sanctioned work of the missionaries. For Bonaventura, the aims and modi operandi of Cavazzi’s project were clear. The volume’s purpose was to convey knowledge of and from central Africa to European readers, particularly future missionaries. Detailed descriptions in words as well as images were the instruments through which to achieve this goal. Alamandini doubly disagreed. He did not think that the purpose of the book should be didactic or that a book offered the proper medium for missionary training. He concurred, however, that new missionaries destined to the Kongo needed more preparation. “Missionaries,” he lamented, “leave Italy and make their way to the Congo without any knowledge of the missions, of the way to catechize, of the doubts that can occur daily in their ministry.” The solution, in his view, did not
lie in the circulation of printed or manuscript practical guides but rather in the opening of a
seminary in Rome to train friars for the missions following the Carmelite and, above all, Jesuit
models.13Caught in the middle of the debate was the visual program Cavazzi had planned for
his book, a program that would only in part come to the printing press, remaining a vestige of the
friar's first intent. Alamandini's preface to the Istorica descrizione explains that Cavazzi had
commissioned numerous copper plates in the early 1670s in spite of the delays he experienced
in securing authorization to print his volume.14 In 1673, shortly after Bonaventura da
Montecuccolo secured financing in Bologna, Cavazzi, when he was about to leave for his
second trip to central Africa, chose Capuchin artist Paolo da Lorena to produce the prints. Friar
Paolo reported in a letter dated January 31, 1674, that he had completed eight of the engravings
and planned to have finished the rest by Easter of the same year, although he did not indicate
how many remained to be fashioned.15 By then Cavazzi had already left for his second trip to
Angola, and Friar Bonaventura remained in charge of the dealings with the artist. There is little
doubt that he undertook this task with the same respect and dedication for the author's original
vision that he demonstrated in defense of the text. And images, indeed, were key to Cavazzi's
plans.

The Araldi Manuscript

That Cavazzi's project for the Istorica descrizione included a visual
dimension is no surprise. The prolific author also created numerous paintings, leaving behind a
complex, palimpsestic, and often puzzling oeuvre. All of the images known today to be in his
hand are in the three-volume Araldi manuscript, except for the drawing of a shipwreck he
appended to a letter sent to the Propaganda Fide in 1674 (fig. 4).16 The missive reported the
incident the friar experienced in November 1673 as he was on his way to Angola for his second
mission. The ink drawing depicts the small boat on which he escaped the sinking ship with
twenty-one other passengers, drifting at sea for twenty days before reaching the shores of
Benguela, a Portuguese port south of Luanda. In a simple style, the friar has represented the
crowded vessel, detailing the makeshift construction of the masts and sail with a mix of lines and
washes. Among the passengers, Cavazzi is recognizable as the hooded friar in the center of the
boat, with features similar to those of the other, earlier self-portrait in the Araldi manuscript (fig.
3). Using another type of ink, he later added lettered glosses in his easily recognized
handwriting to explicate further the details of his picture. The explanatory text, the self-portrait,
and the recourse to an image to make sense of and communicate extraordinary circumstances
all echo corresponding features in Cavazzi's Araldi manuscript as well as the Istorica
descrizione. Some scholars have questioned whether Cavazzi created the paintings in the
Araldi; however, these parallels, as well as the close association between text and images on the
pages, the multiple versions of vignettes, and the rearrangement of the images within the codex,
demonstrate that the friar was indeed the painter of the watercolors.
images in the Araldi manuscript with a short critical text. While an in-depth study of this important set of images is beyond the scope of this chapter, I can, from a direct study of the volumes, make some observations that shed light on the images in general and on their links with the Istorica descrizione's prints in particular. The manuscript consists of three codices Giuseppe Pistoni, who rediscovered them in 1969, labeled volumes A, B, and C. They include thirty-four images: thirty-two watercolors and two black-and-white ink drawings (see table 1). All but one image are in volume A, which measures 22.5 × 17.5 centimeters. Eighteen of these images appear in the volume's front matter—including a monochrome ink drawing—one is in book 1, twelve in book 2, and two in book 3. Few authors have noted the presence of the second black-and-white ink drawing, a decorated frontispiece that opens volume C (fig. 83). Previous studies have correctly, if vaguely, noted that some of the images gathered in volume A came from one or more earlier drafts, as indicated by page titles and text fragments surrounding some of the pictures in the front matter. No one, however, to my knowledge, has remarked on the presence of hidden images. In fact, I observed in my study of the codex not only that several of the images were cut from previous pages and pasted into the new volume but also that some of these glued pieces were painted on both sides recto-verso, the new arrangement obscuring one of the two sides. Backlighting the pages, I could partially decipher the hidden compositions, as outlined in table 1. This close study of the manuscript also revealed two distinct groups of images based on the paper used. The laid lines of the paper in the main part of volume A, including, logically, all the pages in the front matter on which images were directly painted, are horizontal. The same laid wire marks left in the sheets from the paper-manufacture process are vertical in the cut-and-pasted vignettes. Images 2, 11, and 15 are three exceptions, being cut and pasted yet with horizontal lines; they also have no images on their versos. The glued-on paintings in the front matter with vertical laid lines, some of which also bear hidden images on their backs, thus likely originate from an earlier work. Their compositions preceded and inspired the more polished vignettes in the body of volume A. Cavazzi thus created, recomposed, and reordered images over time. The current state of the manuscript is that of an unfinished draft. He executed visible versions of all but one of the hidden scenes but did not finish placing his vignettes in the body of the text; they remain today gathered in the front matter. Visual analysis nonetheless points to Cavazzi's conception of the Araldi visual program in three thematically defined groups. The first comprises full-page images in which a handful of figures appear in stark yellow-and-light-green landscapes, with short glosses within the painting itself commenting on the elements represented (1, 3, 6, 7, 10, 18, 19, 32, 33). Images 2, 11, and 15 are a second group, presenting ritual practitioners in similar yellow-and-green settings but in vignettes of a smaller scale. The third set gathers scenes that Cavazzi described, for those not cut and pasted, with texts outside of the picture frame. These vignettes depict episodes of the origins and life of Queen Njinga, setting individual characters and crowds in grassy lands under brilliant blue skies (4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20–31). Image 8, glossed "Lungua military instrument of the Jagas," is an outlier (fig. 5). It is not only conspicuously black and white, in contrast to the vivid colors of the rest of the
paintings, but the figure it features is much larger in scale than most other characters elsewhere in the manuscript. In fact, the Portuguese text in blue ink at the back of the image indicates that this vignette does not come from one of Cavazzi's Italian drafts but from another type of document. A tantalizing possibility may be that of an exchange with António de Oliveira de Cadornega, whose images (discussed in chapter 2 below) bear some stylistic resemblance to the Lungua drawing. In any case, the borrowed image shows that the friar's practice of freely compiling text from a number of sources, cited or uncited, also extended to images. Table 1

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