



## **Brazzà & the Poto Poto School of Painters**

Francesca Di Folco & Simona Florio (April 04, 2009)

At Gramercy Park's National Arts Club, 60-foot panels by the School of Painters of Poto Poto, Congo and presentation of the book *Brazzà in Congo: A Life and Legacy*. Interview with author Idanna Pucci.

The 19th-century Italian explorer Pietro di Brazzà's daring acts created a form of humanism so distinctive that Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo, still proudly bears his name.

Pietro di Brazzà's legacy was honored in New York with concurrent exhibitions entitled *Brazzà: A Symbol for Humanity* at NYU's [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [1] and the National Arts Club.

The image of this remarkable explorer was revisited in three multi-colored panels created by students at the School of Painters of Poto Poto in Brazzaville. The panels are saturated in vibrant color and warmly greet guests at [National Arts Club](#) [2]. Life in the Congo is depicted in technicolor and captured in pulsating visual movement.

Individual canvases possess their own expressiveness, but are also part of a larger project and when shown together they achieve a sense of harmony.

Giancarlo Cammerini, one of the show's curators told us: "I have been to the Congo with the other curators, Idanna Pucci and Terence Ward, several times. I saw the school and its artists; it's an extraordinary place. The institute was created thanks to the French painter Pierre Lods with the objective of interpreting simple themes without any western influences. From there a modern art form was born, and it is one that the Congo is still proud of today."

The exhibit was also shown in Rome in 2006 at the Auditorium Parco della Musica where an entire wall was covered with the painted panels. It was a huge success. "The work is singular, but it had to be divided due to space constraints," Cammerini said. "The panels were shipped 15 days ago and then they were mounted here."

Overflowing with imagination and fantasy, the canvases banish any thoughts of poverty or desperation.



Writer Idanna Pucci provided the materials for the realization of the paintings in this exhibit, but she specifically did not want any contact with the young artists so as not to influence their work.

The presentation of her book *Brazzà in Congo: A Life and Legacy* (Umbrage Editions, April 2009) was the evening's highlight. According to the author, we see that the privileged class continues to seek wealth and material possessions, while everyday people are left to fend for themselves. The devastation of natural resources gives us an idea of what Africa is like today. Western and Asian interests have replaced the objectives of colonial campaigns.

"I believe, however, that in this depressing situation the phoenix of art and culture rises from the ashes of suffering. For this reason, Brazzà's legacy is inseparable from the ancient soul of the Congo, and his memory enriches artistic expression despite the extreme poverty," she told us when we spoke with her for a brief interview. "Five of the nine main artists are Bate'ke'. The director of the EPPP (École de Peinture de Poto Poto), Pierre Claver Ngampio, is the King of Makoko's nephew. Unfortunately the EPPP does not receive any government funding because of the lack of value attributed to art and culture. Thanks to Kofi Annan, UNESCO has recognized the EPPP as a cultural center. Today the artists have created a cooperative to ensure its survival, even if they unfortunately have few opportunities to exhibit their work abroad and gain international recognition."

What do the panels on display represent?

"A Symbol for Humanity" conveys the artists' interpretations of Brazzà. The canvases combine movement, color, and form which are all important symbols of the larger ethnic group and other historic figures that fuel the artists' inspiration. One can see the portraits of three important spiritual guides in the panels.

Who are these spiritual guides?

Pietro di Brazzà, King Makoko Iloo I, and Pierre Lods, the founder of the École de Peinture de Poto Poto. The Italian explorer represents humanism and solidarity, the African king represents spirituality and tradition, and the French artist represents art and culture. The power of art creates a bridge of communication between different nations and cultures.

What is the message of this exhibit?

I think that the significance lies in Brazzà's extraordinary relevance. His philosophy has been discredited today, but this was certainly not the case in the mid-1800s. Congo-Brazzaville is one of the world's largest oil producers; it is full of natural resources along with precious rainforests. The compulsive exploitation of this land is still a deep-seated reality. Brazzà fought hard to combat this and his memory has been kept alive in large part because of the people of the Congo who consider him to be a benevolent 'ancestor.'

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)



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