

## Introduction

On the Feast of Pentecost, May 25, 1645, twelve friars of the Franciscan Capuchin mendicant order reached the mouth of the Congo River.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Their foothold would be short-lived, and the Iberians would oust them in 1648.<sup>3</sup> 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



*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 Capuchin artist, *King Garcia II of Kongo and His Attendants*, ca. 1652–63. Ink on paper, 73 × 40 cm (full panel). Detail from *Of the People, Victuals, Customs, Animals, and Fruits of the Kingdoms of Africa*, Franciscan Museum of the Capuchin Historical Institute, Rome, MF 1370. Photo courtesy of the Museo Francescano di Roma.

been to see the material manifestations of their attachment to Catholicism.

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).<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>



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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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 Years' 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 Francese 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

## 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.<sup>22</sup> Others have been published as curiosities.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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 interpretation.

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."<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.

## The Pages Ahead

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.