

Opening
2 May 2024

Group show
GÉNÉRATION CHÉRI – Chéri Benga, Chéri Chérin, Chéri Samba
3 May to 15 June 2024

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Opening on Thursday 2 May from 6 to 9pm

The three Chéris of Congolese popular painting were born between 1955 and 1957, and all started their art careers at the beginning of the 1970s. They have continued working as artists until the present day. 2024 is both Chéri Chérin's and Chéri Benga's 50th career anniversary, an event that Angalia Gallery simply had to celebrate.

The shared journey and characteristics of the creative output of these three elder statesmen tell the tale of the birth and the very essence of so-called "popular" painting, a pictorial movement that has pride of place in Congo's art history.

At the outset, they joined the Kinshasa studios of painters tasked with creating wall paintings and advertising on the fronts of shops, bars, hair salons, etc. However, they very quickly all set themselves the goal of establishing themselves as artists with their own studios.

This was how a narrative realist painting developed from the 1970s, alongside a more conventional style taught by the School of Fine Arts. Advertising painting, along with cartoons, provides the genre with some of its formal characteristics. Chéri Benga's hallmark bears the imprint of these early days: "a character giving the thumbs up that I created for advertising, indicating that my work will have a bright future."

Everyday scenes provide the subjects. With strong roots in the urban environment, this genre represents the life of the people and focuses on conveying a message rather than pure aesthetics. This explains the very frequent addition of text. Chéri Samba says that he wants to "challenge" and even "educate". The paintings address a wide range of issues: public health, religion, romantic mores and male-female relationships, social deprivation, police harassment, the world of politics, mythology (particularly with the key figure of Mami Wata), and so on.

Branded "naïve" art by many art critics and compared with pictorial styles characterised by the depiction of scenes from everyday life in other countries, such as Haiti, this genre differs due to its educational dimension, humorousness, its deliberately ironic and even caustic tone, and its sometimes-moralising aim.

The artists really dislike the epithet "naïve". "At that time, the term 'popular painting' simply didn't exist. The art was classed as naïve, a genre for people who had not studied a great deal (...). We brought about a revolution, we changed a lot in painting", explains Chéri Chérin, who, along with Chéri Samba, helped lay the foundations of "popular" painting, a genre that comes from the people and is aimed at the people. "A painter reflects society", Chéri Chérin likes to reiterate. "We see everything that is going on in our environment (...) and we put it all in our artworks." "When I have a title, I start chatting to the people around me and they each tell me their views of the subject. I gather together all these arguments and I depict them on the sketch."

Congolese popular painting, whose other best-known exponents from this generation are Moke, Pierre Bodo, Maître Syms and Sim Simaro, was formally recognised for the first time by the *Art partout* exhibition in Kinshasa in 1978. The popular painters mainly aimed their creative output at their compatriots until the 1980s. However, the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris thrust Chéri Samba onto the international art scene. Other international exhibitions were historical milestones and helped raise the profile of popular painting: *Kin Moto na Bruxelles* in Belgium in 2003, *100% Africa* at the Guggenheim in Spain in 2006, *Africa Remix* in six cities worldwide over the 2004-2007 period, and *Beauté Congo* in Paris in 2015, to name but a few. The retrospective *Chéri Samba in the Jean Pigozzi Collection* has just closed at the Musée Maillol in Paris, an exhibition that confirms the international standing of the most famous of the popular painters.

While their painting does have a shared style, the aesthetic is not uniform. Each artist has their own personality, style, palette and key themes. The dozen artworks showcased in the exhibition were created over the 1997-2023 period, and provide a good illustration of the styles and content, even if it is impossible to show all the idiosyncrasies in an exhibition of this scale.

Although the main source of inspiration is the city of Kinshasa, Congolese mores and myths, the popular painters have broadened their range to include other topics, notably international news. International news is depicted, particularly by Chéri Chérin, with the same relish as national political issues. There is no shortage of personal topics either. Chéri Samba and Chéri Chérin make frequent appearances in their own works; this is less the case for Chéri Benga. The exhibition offers an insight with Samba's *Nègre à petite parcelle de pouvoir* and Chérin's *L'immortel*.

Mermaids are one of the most frequently depicted subjects by the artists. Mami Wata (Mother Water) is one of the classic recurring themes borrowed from African popular mythical heritage. She embodies a magnificent woman who is often the source of wealth, but also symbolises temptation that will bring about man's downfall. More broadly, male-female relationships, particularly their erotic and sexual dimensions, are a major theme of popular painting.

Religion is another source of inspiration, fuelled by the lively evangelical churches. Many artists speak out against these churches' corruption by depicting the immorality of some ministers. Above and beyond biblical precepts, morals are ever-present in popular painting. This is particularly the case in Chéri Samba's work. His many allegorical artworks, such as *L'arbre*, convey a moral message.

AAPPO (Congo Association of Popular Style Artists) brings together around 20 popular artists. Chéri Samba was the association's first president, while Chéri Benga currently holds the post. However, popular painting is losing momentum. Despite the Pygmalion role played by Chéri Chérin, whose studio is always open to young artists, generally the younger generation has a yen for greater modernity. The fact remains that we are indebted to this group for an unparalleled wealth of creative output and the immense value of their sociological depictions. This will one day be viewed as maybe the sole example in the world of an artistic account covering at least half a century of a country's life.



AAPPO meeting in Chéri Samba's studio, Kinshasa, Dec. 2008 © P. Daubert

Artists featured in the exhibition

Chéri BENGA (1957, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Chéri CHÉRIN (1955, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

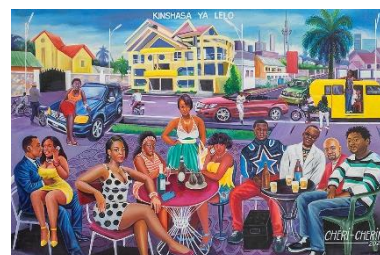
Chéri SAMBA (1956, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.



1. Chéri Benga, *J'aime les miroirs* (2017)
Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 127 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Benga & Angalia



2. Chéri Benga, *KO debout* (2008)
Oil on canvas, 44 x 59 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Benga & Angalia



3. Chéri Chérin, *Kinshasa ya lelo* (2023)
Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 180 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Chérin & Angalia



4. Chéri Chérin, *L'immortel* (2019)
Acrylic on canvas, 127 x 196 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Chérin & Angalia



5. Chéri Samba, *L'arbre* (1999)
Acrylic on canvas, 81 x 100 cm
Courtesy C. Samba & Coll. Coppens



6. Chéri Samba, *Pomme et bière* (1997)
Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 150 cm
Courtesy C. Samba & Coll. Coppens

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