

**MORE THAN  
MEETS THE EYE**  
**A Tale of Modern  
and Contemporary  
Art from Africa**

**MUSÉE RATH  
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND**  
**OCTOBER 16–  
NOVEMBER 23, 2025**

A series of dimly lit rooms unfolds across the two levels of Geneva's Musée Rath a two-hundred-year-old purpose-built building that, from its windowless exterior, resembles a mausoleum more than it does a site of contemporary art. Upholstered from floor to ceiling in lu-

minous, velvety finishes, burnt orange, maroon, and Dijon tones appear and reappear throughout the interior galleries.

Walls are lined in tawny peach and dusty rose. The effect is one of gentle gradation, as if the entire space has been lightly toasted. Many of the artworks are mounted in bespoke, recessed alcoves or integrated wall panels that arc outward, creating moments of quiet revelation. Lit with diffused light—often from behind—the works seem to glow.

This atmosphere mirrors the conceptual stance of *More Than Meets the Eye*, an exhibition of contemporary African art that resists simplification and invites viewers to linger within gradations of tone and meaning. Curated by Ousseynou Wade, a Senegalese expert in contemporary African art, and Jean-Yves Marin, a Swiss archaeologist and heritage scholar, the exhibition comes from the private collection of the

Geneva-based Bank Compagnie Bancaire Helvétique (CBH).

From its opening line, the exhibition defines itself through negation—first stating what it does *not* aim to do: generalize, canonize, or didactically codify African art. This declarative restraint indicates an increased curatorial self-awareness and a recognition of the historical weight of Western institutions that have consistently done precisely this. The exhibition does not quite position itself as a gesture of decolonial representation but instead as a celebration of transnational exchange, a break from the colonial gaze, and an opportunity to celebrate the serenity of neutrality.

"Geneva doesn't have the same relationship with Africa as France or Belgium," Wade notes. "It was never a colonial power."<sup>1</sup> This neutrality, both geographical and symbolic, shapes the way contemporary African art is re-



Installation view of *More Than Meets the Eye: A Tale of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa*, Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland, 2025.  
Photo: Camille Moreno

ceived here: not as a gesture of repair but as an act of encounter. Yet the notion of Switzerland having absolute neutrality is not entirely accurate. Just last year, the Swiss National Museum in Basel hosted the exhibition *Colonial: Switzerland's Global Entanglements*, its Genevèse counterpart, *Remembering: Geneva in the Colonial World* staged at the city's Ethnography Museum.

In this way, *More Than Meets the Eye* engages a curatorial version of having your cake and eating it too: it shows the independence and value of contemporary African art while keeping its political and historical charge within a palatable aesthetic, ironically highlighting—though not visibly—the sordid intersection of patronage, authority, and institutional representation. Belonging to a corporate collection foregrounds the aforementioned intersection. In the gleam of its alcoves and the hush of its lighting, the exhibition

enacts visibility through mechanisms of containment, performing a paradoxical rhetoric of neutrality that defines Switzerland's self-image. It affirms decolonial aspiration while ever remaining deeply enmeshed in structures of privilege and capital. Beyond that, its self-consciousness cannot resolve the paradoxes it names. The very conditions of its existence—including corporate ownership and display in a European museum—already complicate its claim.

The exquisite scenography by French architect and designer Pierre Yovanovitch makes this paradox clear. Yovanovitch's nuanced modern and contemporary spaces ostensibly function as the architectural equivalent of haute couture: lavish, precise, and carefully restrained. Soft lighting, arched alcoves, and built-in display panels elevate the artworks while simultaneously regulating their visibility, producing a controlled, almost sanctified environment.

The exhibition's design avoids chronology and geography, instead favoring constellations of spirituality, intimacy, and the everyday. The curators emphasize "dialogues between artists who address similar questions differently,"<sup>2</sup> a method that yields visual harmony and tonal coherence. This reflects the architectural design well, yet conceptually the work remains somewhat unclear in its meaning.

Universalist framing, which draws on shared human experiences, has long been employed to integrate non-Western art into Western institutions. The uniqueness of African modernities is translated into affective or emotional registers more intelligible to Western audiences. While this method can make works more accessible, it also risks erasure. A sculpture by Gonçalo Mabunda is labeled as being made from welded metal and weapons, but neither the label nor the passage in the two hundred



Installation view of *More Than Meets the Eye: A Tale of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa*, Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland, 2025.

Photo: Camille Moreno



**Gonçalo Mabunda**, *The Coerced of the Ideal*, 2022. Metal and welded weapons, 120 x 116 x 33 cm. Photo: Camille Moreno



**Roméo Mivekannin**, *Portrait of Madeleine, d'après Marie-Guillemine Benoist*, 2024. Acrylic and elixirs on loose canvas, 295 x 228 cm. © ProLitteris, Zurich, 2025

sixty-four-page catalog references the mark that the sixteen-year civil war in Mozambique left on the artist's youth, how he collects the deactivated weapons, or that some of these ordnances could have been used to kill his relatives, only the "brutal materiality of war and the sculptural narrative transcended by art."<sup>3</sup> Universalism here functions as both connector and containment.

CBH, the owner of the collection, is a private Geneva-based financial institution catering to high-net-worth clients. Like most Swiss banks, it has cultivated a reputation for stability, secrecy, and discretion, which are all qualities that, in the context of art patronage, translate into a particular flavor of cultural capital. Corporate collections like the one belonging to CBH operate at the intersection of finance, aesthetics, and soft power. Their pieces serve not only as art acquisitions but also as investments. These investments are not only fiscal but also instruments for improved image management. By projecting sophistication and global

awareness, the corporation reaffirms its place within elite networks of taste and legitimacy double or even triplefold.

The curators' collaboration with a private bank, therefore, adds a complex layer of mediation between the art and the people who (get to) see it. Encountering decolonial rhetoric within a framework sustained by the accumulation of capital and exclusivity begs a thorough interrogation, but when private wealth spills into the public sector, the audience is almost left in the diminutive position of requisite gratitude. Here, when a corporate entity owns, operates, and even curates the means of representation, what else could the exhibition look like but exquisite, despite any tension authored by the artists themselves? Questions of authorship and power collapse into one another.

This approach is similar to mid-century European exhibitions of African art such as Rolf Italiaander's *Hedendaagse Negerkunst uit Centraal Afrika* (1957) and *Hedendaagse Schilders uit Zuid-Afri-*

*ka* (1958).<sup>4</sup> Those shows framed African art as evidence of cultural awakening under European tutelage, describing the artists as "évolués" (evolved). This kind of language positioned African creativity as derivative, a late bloom of Western influence. *More Than Meets the Eye* pointedly seeks to distance itself from this lineage, but it cannot because of the institutional logics that see non-European art as a way for Europeans to see themselves.

*More Than Meets the Eye* evades ethnographic spectacle but in doing so creates subtler forms of containment. Its universal themes explored throughout the exhibition and its catalog—including spirituality, intimacy, emergence, between two worlds, timeless, affirmation, and the everyday—enable Western audiences to empathize without unease. The political charge of the works, as well as their connection to certain social and historical contexts, is softened into a universal aesthetic.

The African subject becomes relatable but only to the extent that she is



Installation view of *More Than Meets the Eye: A Tale of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa*, Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland, 2025.  
Photo: Camille Moreno

depoliticized, or, in the case of Hilary Balu's *Illusion identitaire*, decapitalized. While the catalog references the confrontation with political and colonial transformation in Balu's work, it does not mention how he highlights the effects of globalization, consumerism, and transformation of African society under the influence of a capitalist agenda.

To its credit, *More Than Meets the Eye* does a good job of including artists who complicate this dynamic through material and conceptual rigor. Abdoulaye Konaté's monumental textile composition, woven from dyed Malian cotton, vibrates with color, symbolism, and ritual resonance, evoking both the chromatic language of Bamana spirituality and the codes of political commentary.<sup>5</sup> Omar Ba's layered surfaces, which combine oil, gouache, and pencil, convey sedimented time where intimacy and history coexist. A towering canvas by Roméo Mivekannin reads like the seminal reimagining of Vermeer's *Girl with Pearl Earring* but disrupts the ho-

mogeneity of the canon through deft substitution.

Each of these works resists neutralization; they insist on their histories. But Yovanovitch's scenography, with its holy alcoves and softly glowing lights, puts them back into a framework of reverence that makes sure their trauma looks beautiful. This dynamic echoes Carol Duncan's notion of the museum as a "civilizing ritual."<sup>6</sup> The hushed polish of the design suggests not only reverence but also regulation: beauty becomes a disciplinary tool. The political potency of the works is diffused into ambience, blended into the lush carpets and scalloped edges.

This paradox is augmented by Geneva's cultural identity as a city defined by diplomacy, discretion, and finance. Switzerland's well-known neutrality, usually framed as moral virtue, conceals a history of colonial entanglement. Swiss companies invested heavily in plantation economies, colonial infrastructure, and the financial side of the slave trade.<sup>7</sup> This legacy lived

on through indirect means, including insurance, trade mediation, and banking secrecy. Switzerland now acts as a kind of judge of global ethics because of its neutrality but only because its profits were masked and its activities indirect.

In this light, CBH's sponsorship of an exhibition on African modernities is both continuation and correction. It is a continuation of financial entanglement with global extraction and a correction in the form of aesthetic diplomacy. The gesture is generous yet strategic. It is ethical, yet self-serving. It creates what could be called an aesthetic of expiation, which is the transformation of guilt into cultural refinement. Andrea Fraser calls this the "new patronage paradigm," where corporations utilize the language of progressivism to reinforce their legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Like the philanthrocapitalism criticized by Okwui Enwezor, this way of doing things converts gestures of critique into mechanisms of validation.<sup>9</sup>

The paradox continues to intensify when we consider the language



Hilary Balu, *Illusion identitaire 1*, 2021. Acrylic, oil, and scraping on canvas, 188 x 188 cm. Photo: Camille Moreno

of the exhibition text, which declares that African art is claiming its “rightful place on the world stage.”<sup>10</sup> The phrase presupposes the hierarchies it aims to dismantle: the “world stage” remains defined by Western institutional recognition. This logic of arrival, of finally being seen, echoes what Enwezor describes as the “politics of inclusion,” where successful representation is addressed through expansion rather than structural transformation.<sup>11</sup> The invitation to the stage does not change its shape, it just makes the proscenium bigger.

In *More Than Meets the Eye*, this notion of global visibility manifests as an exhibitionary grammar that emphasizes legibility, coherence, and refine-

ment—attributes traditionally in step with Western museology. Immaculate lighting, carefully spaced walls, and soft wall palettes all signal that the artworks are “museum grade” and deserve to be gazed at accordingly. The glowing feels less like a miracle and more like a precondition.

And so, these same traits end up reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy. The aesthetic of control, common in Western museums, shows that African art has indeed “arrived” precisely because it fits into the Western syntax of display. This does not mean that the works themselves do not have power. The most compelling pieces shake up, disregard, or simply outdo the framework that contains them. Alioune Di-

agne’s *L’Attente de sauvetage* draws the viewer in so near to its detailed and complex system of embedded mark-making that any surroundings become virtually irrelevant. Drawing inspiration from calligraphy and philosophy, he reframes an image of exiled Senegalese men waiting to be rescued on a pirogue, a part of his *Seede* project that focuses on journeys of migrants crossing the Mediterranean. Here, history appears as endurance rather than submission. Yet, the catalog text glides over this subject, citing instead Diagne’s participation in the 2024 Venice Biennale, Parisian representation, and his dividing of his time between France and Senegal. In effect, the exhibition drifts into a kind of ideological neutrality, as if the people in the paintings are neither representative nor tethered to the existence of living subjects, let alone artists.

In contrast, Géraldine Tobe’s smoky silhouettes, conjured through the residue of soot and flame, hover between presence and erasure. Their bodies flicker against a ground of institutional neutrality. Both works insist on the materiality of African existence but are staged within a curatorial frame that translates their resistance into aesthetic harmony. This time, the catalog goes deeper, revealing a traumatic childhood exorcism and mentioning not only European but African exhibitions, including the Dak’Art Biennale as well as Tobe’s involvement in the restitution projects *Restitution Box* and *Esprit des Ancêtres*.

*More Than Meets the Eye* also engages with the ongoing discourse on restitution and postcolonial museology. The Sarr–Savoy report called for the repatriation of African cultural heritage items from European collections, pointing out the historical imbalance of power.<sup>12</sup> The Musée Rath does not directly engage in restitution through this exhibition, but it does facilitate a symbolic space of acknowledgment. Its elegantly curated scenography and thematic framing attempt to reconcile African independence with European display, which reflects a broader tension between recognition and structural complicity.

Historically, European museums employed similar strategies when exhibiting African art under the guise of human universality. Nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century exhibitions often

emphasized commonality to neutralize difference, presenting African artists as proof of European tutelage or moral progress.<sup>13</sup> In these instances, purported inclusivity reinforced asymmetry: the “civilizing gaze” masked inequities and normalized Western authority. *More Than Meets the Eye* consciously distances itself from this approach, yet it operates within the inherited institutional and aesthetic grammar of Western museology. The risk of subtle containment remains: political critique is tempered by ambience and reverence, and the radical potential of the works is partially domesticated.

If the exhibition sees itself as an act of freedom, it does so not only through the language of visibility but also of containment. Being seen does not mean being free. Being neutral does not mean being inconspicuous. Neutrality becomes a balm—an instrument of reconciliation that soothes rather than unsettles. The exhibition acknowledges

the violence of past representations but translates that violence into form, empathy, and atmosphere. Light becomes both revelation and containment. Promises of freedom remain visual rather than structural.

Ultimately, *More Than Meets the Eye* illuminates the tension between aspiration and structure. The exhibition’s ever so brief six-week lifespan gives the whole affair a kind of ephemeral fragility. It opens, impresses, and vanishes like a temporary correction to a longer history of omission. Its corporate patronage, thematic universalism, and devotional scenography operate as both critique and continuation of the colonial museum’s legacy. Sincerity and structural complicity coexist: the exhibition critiques historical inequities while simultaneously reproducing the forms of validation long denied to the artists themselves. Its critical charge resides precisely in this tension.

A truly postcolonial exhibition

would demand more than inclusion; it would require transformation of institutional frameworks. It would be open for half a year. Ownership, authorship, and access would need at least this much time for reconfiguration. The museum would function as a space of negotiation, and histories of violence would be made both visible and contestable. While *More Than Meets the Eye* does not fully achieve this radical restructuring, it stages a compelling meditation on the limits and possibilities of decolonial museology. Its luminous rooms, glowing alcoves, and gestures of care testify to a desire for repair, yet the very glow that illuminates the works still does contain them.

For now, *More Than Meets the Eye* reveals that what lies beyond sight may not be freedom but the subtle elegance of containment. Progressive in rhetoric but conservative in structure, it mediates between African artistic autonomy and Western institutional authority. Its



Installation view of *More Than Meets the Eye: A Tale of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa*, Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland, 2025.

Photo: Camille Moreno



Abdoulaye Konaté, *Composition: No. 15 (Bleu-Jaune)*, 2014. Textile, 206 x 134 cm. Photo: Camille Moreno

corporate patronage, scenographic refinement, and thematic universalism render it at once a site of visibility, a locus of contemplation, and a controlled arena of aesthetic judgment. The exhibition reveals the depth of historical entanglement while offering moments of critical reflection, illustrating that decolonial aspiration in Western museology is inevitably provisional, contested, and mediated by structures of power that cannot simply be wished away.

**Camille Moreno** is a Costa Rican American writer and curator based in London and Berlin.

#### Notes

- 1 Ousseynou Wade, interview by author, October 15, 2025.
- 2 Wade, interview by author, October 15, 2025.

- 3 Jean-Yves Marin, ed., *More Than Meets the Eye: A Tale of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa*, exhibition catalog (Five Continents Editions, 2025), 96, 106, 114.

- 4 Rolf Italiaander, *Hedendaagse Negerkunst uit Centraal Afrika*, exhibition catalog (Stedelijk Museum, 1957).

- 5 Observation from curatorial notes, *More Than Meets the Eye*, Rath Museum, Geneva, 2025.

- 6 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 1995).

- 7 Andreas Zangger, "Patriotic Bonds and the Danger of Estrangement: Swiss Networks in Colonial Southeast Asia (1850–1930)," in *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, ed. Patricia Purtschert, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Barbara Lüthi (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 91–109.

- 8 Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum International* 43, no. 1 (2005): 278–83.

- 9 Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11\_Platform5*: exhibition catalog (Hatje Cantz, 2002), 42–55.

- 10 Compagnie Bancaire Helvétique, "A Journey Through African Artistic Expression," *More Than Meets the Eye*, media kit, September 25, 2025, 1, <https://cbhbank.com/wp-content/uploads/Media-release-CBH-Compagnie-Bancaire-Helvetique-More-than-Meets-the-Eye-25.09.2025.pdf>.

- 11 Enwezor, "The Black Box," 42–55.

- 12 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Éditions du Seuil, 2018).

- 13 Melanie Ulz, "Staging and Displaying Colonialism: Art, Artifacts and Consumerism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *RIHA Journal* 0309 (2024): paras. 5–8.