



One-day excursion to Villa Borg and Völklingen, Saarland, Germany: Saturday 9 August 2025



Despite the forecast of sizzling summer temperatures, 20 intrepid art history enthusiasts set out from the Bouillon Park&Ride at 09:15 am towards Germany to discover two significant sites showcasing ancient and modern history in the neighbouring Saarland region, including a groundbreaking art exhibition on African art. At 10:15 am, we arrived at Villa Borg, a reconstructed Roman agricultural estate located near the villages of Borg and Oberleuken in the municipality of Perl. Stumbled upon by a local school teacher at the end of the 19th century, the site was excavated in the late 1980s. Reconstruction work, which began in the mid-1990s, was virtually completed in late 2008, although further excavation work is still continuing.

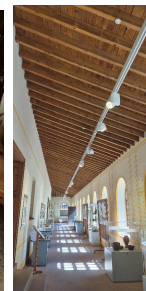
Having arrived in good time and delighted that the atmosphere outside of the bus was still relatively cool, the group took the opportunity to enter through the main gate and stroll across the gardens, with flower beds and water features based on Roman models, to the buildings of the open-air museum. Some of our members enjoyed a coffee at the welcoming Roman-style tavern and we noted that a wedding party was already in full swing in one wing of the building reserved specifically for such events.



Our charming guide began her one-hour tour at 11:00 am with an overview of the reconstruction timeline and a description of the use and layout of the original site, featuring a large agricultural section (beyond the main gate) which would have been originally surrounded by the houses of workers and slaves. We learnt that the decision to reconstruct the villa was motivated by the desire to protect the site and to create an authentic representation of the buildings as they originally stood so that visitors could better appreciate antiquity by being immersed in the daily life of the privileged classes of the Roman empire.



The guide took us through a large reception hall with a fountain and an adjacent gallery and rooms where the most



important finds from the site are displayed, including replicas of some gold jewellery.

To our surprise, we were also treated to a collection of Roman scenes constructed from “Playmobil” figures, part of a special summer exhibition for children.



We were then able to admire the sumptuous, fully functional marble baths, consisting of a *frigidarium* (cold bath) and *caldarium* (hot bath), latrines, a dressing room and a relaxation area, with a reconstructed *lectus*, a couch for eating in a reclined position. The guide passed around replicas of utensils that would have been used in the baths, including a mirror, razor, a perfume container and last but not least a sponge on stick for cleaning after using the latrine.



We examined the recently completed Roman kitchen and storage rooms, before heading through the gardens where the guide rounded off her tour with a glimpse of the current excavations and sheds containing fully functional glass-making and pottery workshops and a blacksmith's forge. At this point the group noted a marked increase in the outside temperature and we were happy to make our way to the tavern, which did not part of the original villa but serves meals based on ancient recipes, for refreshments and a hearty Roman-style lunch.

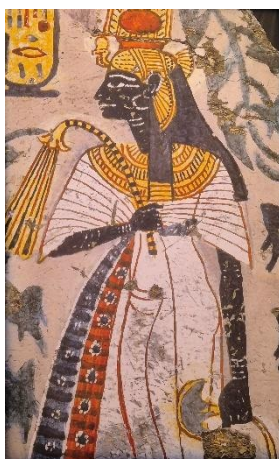


Following lunch and a short drive, we arrived at 2:45 pm at the Völklinger-Hütte ironworks, the first monument from the industrial era to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List and now a museum and the setting for groundbreaking exhibitions. On disembarking from the bus, we were immediately impressed by the scorching outside temperature and the vast and imposing rust-coloured factory structures.

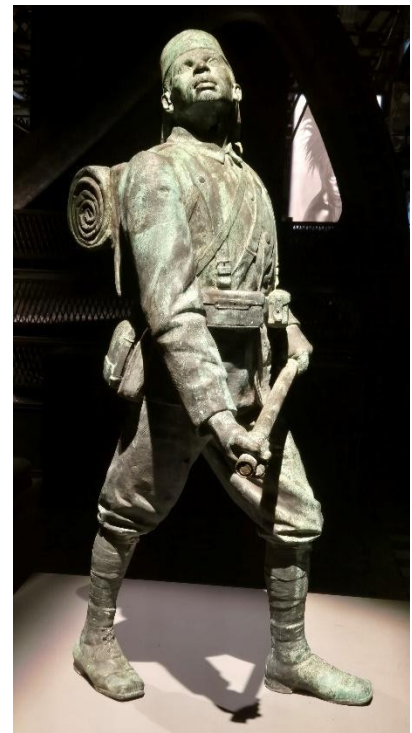
Our guide joined us promptly and we began our tour of the current “The True Size of Africa” exhibition, which aims to explore approaches that retrace and uncover traditions of thought, biases, and stereotypes, offering new perspectives through a combination of cultural history, contemporary art, constantly shifting viewpoints, and a diversity of artistic voices.



We firstly entered an industrial hall and were greeted with a sound installation by the Nigerian artist Emeka Ogboh “The Land Remembers” emitting the distinctive voices and rhythms of an African choir. We learnt that the song, by reimagining a traditional German mining hymn, reflects on the exploitation of African lands and people, so that an element of German heritage becomes an African song, evoking a shared past.

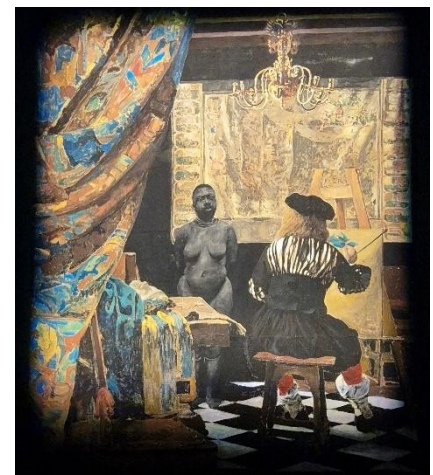


The first part of the exhibition, a “Museum of Memorability”, looked at Africa’s past and present from the perspective of colonial Europe. Video installations and charts revealed how standard world maps distort the size of land masses leading to the false impression that Africa is smaller than it actually is. Antique objects and maps stressed the presence and significance of Africans in early history.



We also find one of the first colonial monuments to be brought down: that of Hermann von Wissmann, the imperial commissioner for German East Africa, toppled at Hamburg university in 1968, signalling revolt against previous power structures. An old photograph of the monument is also displayed. Later in the exhibition, we find the statue of the African servant standing separately, tall and proud.

We were then shown some of the highlights of the main art exhibition featuring work and installations from 26 contemporary artists, the exhibition route emphasising the vastness of the subject and the illuminating African culture in the dark industrial halls creating a reversal of perspective.



An installation by Roméo Mivekannin of 69 portraits of prominent black individuals superimposed over a silkscreen print of a page from W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal 1903 book "For the Souls of Black Folk" aroused considerable interest amongst the group as we attempted to recognise the faces, only to realise that many were unknown to us as their significance was perhaps not sufficiently underlined in our culture.

In his work “The painter in his studio after Jan Vermeer”, Mivekannin transforms the model into a naked female form in black and white, putting the spotlight on subjects previously relegated to the shadows. Standing naked between rich fabrics, his own face gazes out at the audience, inviting criticism of the scene: the colonial background of Dutch wealth.



We also admired the beauty and luminosity of the series of works by Omar Victor Diop presenting an African perspective on a collective global

history challenging the Western-centric view. “Diaspora” references portraits from the 15th to 19th centuries, depicting black individuals who achieved prominence but were largely ignored due to racism.

A sculpture in chocolate “White Cube Lusanga” by Jean Kawata and Ced’art Tamasala, depicting other sacred sculptures looted during the colonial era and held in museums, was a hit amongst those of us with a sweet tooth. By using this raw material, the artists feel that the pains of plantation labour are transformed into tools for repair.



Another favourite was Yinka Shonibar’s installation “Woman Moving Up” which deals with the Great Migration of six million Black Americans from the rural South to the cities from 1916 to 1970. An adult female figure carries luggage up a grand staircase that ties white employers’ wealth to British colonialism. It captures the courage of the Black Americans who came to cities to work and helped shape the current American cultural and socioeconomic landscape.

At 5.15 pm, the tour came to an end and the participants agreed it had been a fascinating, eye-opening visit. However, there was some frustration expressed at the lack of labelling and written information near the exhibits, as the organisers used a system of handheld electronic guides for visitors, which were not available to us.

After a rather warm bus journey to Luxembourg, we arrived back at the P+R Bouillon at around 7:00 pm and the 20 weary travellers dispersed happily with many new impressions and ideas to mull over.