



NKISI
Power and Magic

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THE *NKISI*

The study of magico-religious beliefs and practices is of paramount importance in understanding the multiple functions of classical African objects. Hailing from another era, these works of art are spiritual mediums, representations of invisible forces, emblems of political power, and symbols of initiation rites and ancestral cults. The belief in witchcraft (black magic) is responsible for the many *minkisi* charms that the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo once used to counter this kind of evil.

The objects that have the generic name *nkisi* (plural: *minkisi*) are among the best-known creations of Central African art and today can be found in various private and museum collections.

The complexity of the term *nkisi* makes it impossible to translate precisely. However, it could be related to the term “container” and denotes a ferocious power enclosed in a physical medium, such as a carved wooden statue. The notion of *nkisi* thus refers not only to an object as such, but also to the spiritual force it once embodied.

These figures of power take the form of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic statuette and each one has its own name, a specific function and a ritual to activate them. By adding elements from the animal, plant, mineral and/or metallurgical world, these objects would be “magically” charged. These ingredients or medicines allowed the *minkisi* to perform their ritual function of divination and communicating with spirits and the spirit world. Very few objects carried no charge.

A *nkisi* becomes a “medium of spiritual communication” through the action of a diviner, *nganga*. The role of the *nganga*, who is both a witness and a worship leader, is fundamental because the effectiveness of the *nkisi* depends on it. The *nganga* was consulted by “patients” to solve specific problems affecting a community or an individual. *Nkisi* is used in times of illness, sterility, economic instability, political conflict or in taking revenge. The *nkisi* is ambivalent, as it can both cause evil and contain it. It can heal as well as attack.

The size of these statues varies and differs according to their ethnic origin. Among the Kongo, they measure less than 20 cm while those of the Songye can reach 120 cm. The larger ones had a community function, while the smaller ones were intended for personal use.

These "objects-power" were discovered just when Europeans were present in the Lower Congo region in the late 15th century. At that time, Westerners judged and viewed the *minkisi* with distrust, fear, rejection, repulsion and sometimes all the above mixed with fascination. Europeans once considered the *nkisi* to bear witness to the primitive barbarism and uncivilised nature of Africans. Identified as "images of the devil" and considered as "fetishes" (from the Portuguese word "feitiço" = spell, enchantment), many *minkisi* were destroyed in the 15th century by King Afonso I, a fervent defender of Christianity, with the aim of eradicating "the roots of evil". The terms "fetish" and "fetishism" were associated with idolatry, devil worship and witchcraft, as part of the negative image of "Black Africa".

A few Westerners, however, have had the audacity to bring back a *nkisi* in their luggage. They therefore had the opportunity to carry out more in-depth research on this esoteric object which is evidence of an established art and an undeniable aesthetic power.

THE KONGO

01. **Anthropomorphic figure**

Democratic Republic of Congo

Wood, plant fibers, pigments, mirror, glass, metal
H. 29 cm

Provenances

- Collected in situ by Dr. Albert Collart, between 1926-1929 (Laboratory Director of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences)
- Pierre Darteville, Brussels, 1988
- Vittorio & Marina Mangio, Monza
- James Willis, San Francisco, 2000
- Lucien Van de Velde, Antwerp
- Bernard de Grunne, Brussels, 2007
- Philippe Laeremans, Brussels, 2011

Auction

Sotheby's, « Important Tribal Art », London, 11.07.1988, lot 88

Publications

« Bakongo », Philippe & Lisa Laeremans, Brussels, 2011, cover, pg. 14-15

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 46-47, 285, fig. 9

price : 130.000 €



Carved in wood, this magical *nkisi* statue is distinguished by the sculptural quality of the head, combining a dynamic pose and taut lines. The top of the forehead reveals a skull cut out in the shape of a cone, on which were placed pieces of animal skins or a magical charge enclosed in a ball of resin. The rest of the body disappears behind a “circular ventral receptacle” shielded by a mirror and storing a set of magical ingredients, the *bilongo*. These are made up of mineral, plant and/or animal elements, including seeds, nuts, teeth, snakeskin, shells, powder, kaolin, hair, bones, and more. The very strength of the invoked *nkisi* lie in these medicines. As such, these empowered figures have a specific role to play in the Kongo esoteric world. They fulfil their function in the context of divination, therapeutic rites, protection and revenge. A red dye dominates with a few strokes of kaolin, recalling the magical but dangerous side of the *nkisi* spirit that the figure embodies.



02. **Anthropomorphic figure**

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, mirror, pigments
H. 25 cm

Provenance
- Philippe Laeremans, Brussels

Publications
« Bakongo. 'Les fétiches' mi-nkondi, mi-nkisi », Alain Lecomte, Éditions A. Lecomte, Paris, 2016, pg. 212

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 62-63, 286, fig. 13

price : 60.000 €



03. Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, mirror, metal, pigments
H. 29 cm

Provenances

- Collected in situ Alexis-Joseph Laurent (1843-1910) Administrator of the Congo Railway Company from 1902-1910
- Alexis van Opstal (1874-1936), Brussels, between 1910-1930, Administrator of the International Maritime Agency of Congo
- Valuet/Ferrandin, Paris, 2006

Auction

Auction Servarts, « Art Africain - Afrikaanse Kunst », Brussels, 11.05.2000, lot 71

Publications & Exhibitions

« Catalogue de la collection d'objets provenant du Congo Belge et appartenant à Alex van Opstal », Joseph Maes, Rhode-Saint-Genèse, 1930, pg. 7, fig. 8

Exhibited: International Exhibition, Palais de Chaillot, Paris, 25.05.1937 – 25.11.1937

« Tentoonstelling van Kongo-Kunst », Frans M. Olbrechts, Antwerpse Propagandaweken, pg. 34, fig.366 / Exhibited : Stadsfeestzaal, Meir 78, Antwerp, 24.12.1937-16.01.1938

Exhibited : KAOS-Parcours des Mondes, Paris, 13-17.09.2006

« Bakongo. 'Les fétiches' mi-nkondi, mi-nkisi », Alain Lecomte, Éditions A. Lecomte, Paris, 2016, pg. 292

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 58-59, 286, fig. 12

price : 150.000 €



This effigy of a chief in standing posture is wearing a mitral headdress to assert his authority. On the abdomen, a large circular mark shows that the statue originally had a charge, *bilongo*. This has either broken off or been removed from the figure, the surface of which was probably scraped off when it arrived in the West in order to remove signs of ritual use. Chewing a *munkwisa* therapeutic root with its right hand, the *nkisi* statue holds a symbol of status (probably a sceptre of investiture) in its other hand. The act of chewing a plant with hallucinogenic properties is supposed to help trigger clairvoyant powers represented by the mirror gaze, and to access the spirit world. The collector, Alexis van Opstal, was a pioneer of the Belgian shipping company and provided the service between Antwerp and the independent state of Congo in around 1890. He collected several objects brought back by Major Laurent, a long-time friend. Joseph Maes, ethnography curator at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, catalogued his collection which numbered 883 pieces in 1930.



04.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo

Wood, glass, vegetable fibers, fruits, metal, resin, pigments, fabrics
H. 22 cm

Provenance

- Philippe Laeremans, Brussels

Publications & Exhibition

« Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 17-18-19, 233, fig. 1 et cover

« Uzuri wa Dunia, Belgian Treasures », Bruneaf, pg. 65/ Exposée : Ancienne Nonciature, Brussels, 10-14.06.2015

« Bakongo. 'Les fétiches' mi-nkondi, mi-nkisi », Alain Lecomte, A. Lecomte, Paris, 2016, pg. 197

price : 120.000 €



The delicately modelled features of the face sits in a raised head, whose length is accentuated by the resin cranial load. The embossed eyebrows, decorated with a double row of small rectangles, demonstrate the importance of the open glass eyes. The dual nature of the white eye and the black pupil emphasises an imploring expression directed towards the sky and the spirits. The upturned iris seems to suggest a trance-like state. Underneath the flat nose, a wide mouth with finely hemmed fleshy lips reveals prominent teeth. The figure's magical powers consist of various pots and gourds. A long rope clasps the neck and holds a powder box, usually used for hunters. The dried fruits hanging at the front of the figure act as a counterbalance. All indications are that this *nkisi* is directly intended to protect the hunter.



05.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, glass, metal, pigments, beads, fabrics
H. 52 cm

Provenances

- Ernst et Ruth Anspach, New York
- Johann Levy, Paris

Auction

Sotheby's, « Important Art d'Afrique et d'Océanie », Paris, 11.06.2008, lot 157

Publications & Exhibition

« African Tribal Sculpture from the Collection of Ernst and Ruth Anspach », The Museum of Primitive Art, pg.16/ Exhibited : The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 15.11.1967-04.02.1968

« Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 12-15-16-21-23, 234, fig. 2

« Bakongo. 'Les fétiches' mi-nkondi, mi-nkisi », Alain Lecomte, A. Lecomte, Paris, 2016, pg. 352

price : 250.000 €

The most impressive and fearsome of the *minkisi* is undoubtedly the *nkisi nkondi*, a statue covered with ventral and/or dorsal receptacles but also a multitude of blades, nails and other hardware. The term *nkondi* (*minkondi* in the plural) comes from the verb *konda* which means to hunt. It is in this sense that we must understand the primary function of the *nkondi* figure: to drive away evil spells and spirits. The gesture of the raised arm, once holding a sword or a knife, characterises the threatening appearance of this statue which has a duty to identify, track down and punish wrongdoers. Driving in a nail or other metal object activated the *nkisi* figure's powers and symbolised the pain it would cause its victim. *Minkondi* were ambivalent and multifunctional. They could cure and cause diseases, protect or kill an individual, defeat or provide wealth, and settle or cause conflicts. The "wounds" were meant to arouse its anger and power. By accumulating metal parts the *nkisi nkondi* indicated success in its task, while heightening its frightening reputation.



06. Zoomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, mirror, plant fibers, pigments, fabrics
H.16 x l.36 cm

Provenance

- Collected in situ by the Scheutist fathers (Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary) during the Scheut Mission of Kangu in Mayombe between 1930-1970

Auction

Sotheby's, « Art d'Afrique et d'Océanie », Paris, 03.12.2009, lot 96

Publications & Exhibition

« Empreintes d'Afrique. L'art tribal au fil des fleuves », Bettina von Lintig, 5 Continents, Milan, 2011, pg.105, fig. 40

« Arts d'Afrique. Voir l'Invisible », Hazan, pg. 192, fig. 221/ Exhibited: Aquitaine Museum, Bordeaux, 21.03-21.08.2011

« Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 17, 56 < 59, 238, fig. 16

« Bakongo. 'Les fétiches' mi-nkondi, mi-nkisi », Alain Lecomte, A. Lecomte, Paris, 2016, pg. 427

price : 65.000 €

The zoomorphic *nkisi* form is essentially represented by a dog, the *kozo*. The importance given to this animal derives from the correlation between the object that it evokes (a dog), its dominant instinct (hunting) and the spirit that it embodies. Carrying a magical charge on its back, it used its nose to track down evil spirits. These *nkisi* figures were sometimes embellished with sound accessories (wooden bell, bells made of seed or dried fruit, metallic bell, etc.) to warn of danger. In its mouth of sharp fangs, a hallucinogenic root helps to see and feel invisible realities and thus protect one's family and clan. This zoomorphic statue was made by a Vili sculptor and was kept for a long time in the Museum of Fetishes of the Scheut Mission of Kangu in Mayombe (1935-1971).





07. Anthropomorphic figure
Democratic Republic of Congo
wood, glass
H. 25 cm

Provenances

- Collection André Gide, Paris
- Collection Catherine Gide, Olten

Auction

Piguet, « Collection Catherine Gide », 22.09.2021, Geneva, lot 122

Filmography & Photography

Appearance in the documentary «With André Gide», Marc Allégret, Fims du Panthéon, Paris, 1952

Photographed in the background of the portrait of André Gide in his apartment, rue Vanneau Paris 7th, Marc Allégret, Ministry of Culture-RMN Grand Palais, Paris, 1950-1955

price : /



This commemorative effigy of Kongo chiefs isn't directly linked to the category of *minkisi*, but furthers our understanding of the aesthetics of the statuary used to embody the *nkisi*. Contrary to the sitting posture in this type of figure, there are many similarities with "objects of power": glass eyes, upward gaze, shaped eyebrows, scrolled ears, an aquiline nose with dilated wings and a half-open mouth with visible pointed teeth. The wide-open eyes, set with "mirrors of clairvoyance", contrast with the beautiful dark patina that reflects the spiritual powers of the work. Wealthy families would sometimes have this style of statuette to honour one of their outstanding members, such as the "portrait" of a very important chief, to whom the families paid homage and asked to intercede on his behalf.



THE TEKE

08.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, plant fibers, pigments, fabrics
H. 43,5 cm

Provenances

- André Schoeller, Paris
- Alain de Monbrison, Paris
- Alberto Costa Romero de Tejada, Barcelona
- Javier Lentini, Barcelona, 1996
- David Serra, Barcelona, 2013

Publications & Exhibition

« Les Arts Bateke », R. Lehuard, Arnouville, Arts d'Afrique Noire, 1996, pg. 269, fig. 8.4.2

« Formes rituelles », David Serra Art Tribal/ Exhibited : Parcours des Monde, Paris, 11-16.09.2013

« Batéke, les fétiches », A. Lecomte; R. Lehuard, Lecomte, Paris, 2014, pg. 213

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 98-99, 290, fig. 25

price : 80.000 €



09.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo

Wood, buttons, pigments

H. 53 cm

Provenance

- Jean-Pierre Laprugne, Paris

price : 35.000 €

The Teke kingdom was built with principalities on the western plateaus overlooking the Malébo Pool, just downstream from the two capitals Brazzaville and Kinshasa. This kingdom emerged at the same time as the Kongo. In terms of worship, the people used "objects-power" that are similar to the Kongo *minkisi*. A few sculptural characteristics diverge, however: the frontal posture, the arms bent at right angles, facial scarification and a sagittal crested headdress. Their magic-religious statuary is called *butti* and honours ancestors through iconographic representation. As with the Kongo, a magical charge made up of sacrificial material was to occupy the abdominal cavity and give the *butti* figure its power. Unlike their neighbour's *nkisi*, sometimes an earthy load of magical ingredients enveloped a figure's entire body. They were then all fitted in a fabric up to the knees. This kind of *butti* statue, whose body is an amalgam of relics, was honoured as part of a family cult on the first day of the month or on the full moon.



10. **Janus anthropomorphic figure**

Democratic Republic of Congo

Wood, pigments

H. 29 cm

Provenances

- Mark Eglinton, New York

- Andrew J. Berz, New York

Publication

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 96-97,
289, fig. 24

price : 55.000 €



THE SONGYE

11.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, horn, feathers, metal, fabrics
H. 91 cm

Provenances

- Armand Fernandez, Arman, Paris/ New York
- Henri Kamer, Paris/ New York
- Marianne & Kurt Westerberg, Malmö
- Anita & Jan Lundberg, Malmö
- Sanne Nies, Anvers/ Eindhoven, 2016-2017
- Guilhem Montagut, Barcelona, 2017-2018

Auctions

- Sotheby's, London, 30.04.1982, lot 115
- Sotheby's, « Important Tribal Art », London, 21.06.1993, lot 182

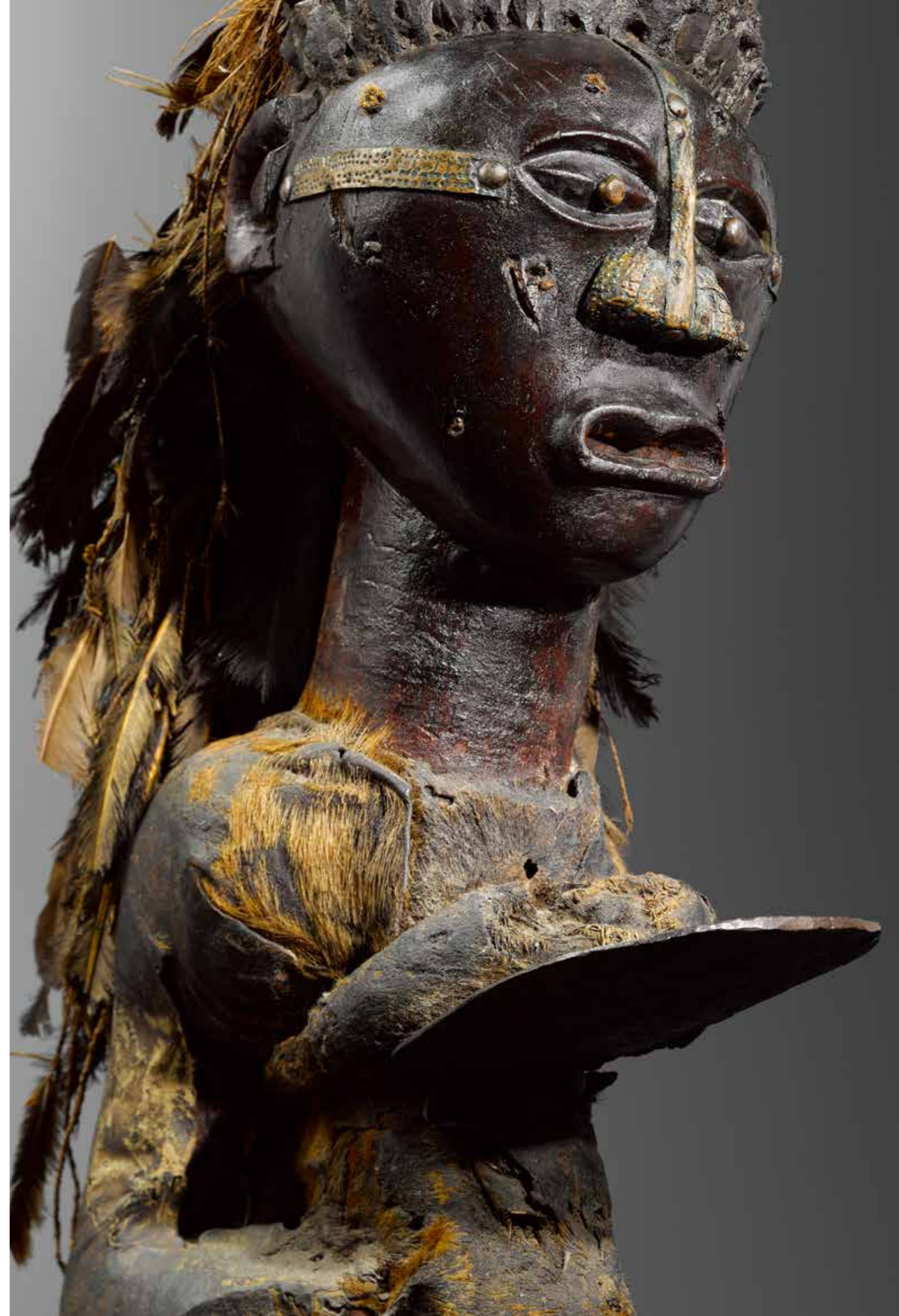
Publication & Exhibition

« Afrikanskt : inspirationskälla för den moderna konsten / African Art - A Source of Inspiration for Modern Art », Ingvar Claesson, Georg Oddner, pg. 151, fig. 182/
Exhibited : Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, 22.03-19.05.1986

price : 300.000 €



The Songye peoples used numerous *minkisi* fetishes. The frontal position, the hands placed on the belly and the top bovine horn are characteristic elements of this statuary into which a *nganga* has incorporated a combination of ingredients, *bishimba* (like the *bilongo*), in charms and various bodily cavities. The Songye statuary is covered with signs evoking cosmic and earthly energies both positive and negative. The head and the belly are the two fundamental points of consciousness represented by the horn and the umbilicus. Pointing towards the sky or the earth, the horns are filled with magical ingredients and capture the energies of growth and power. The bulging umbilical area evokes the transmission of life, the birth of a clan for which the chief is responsible. Metaphors related to authority appeared through the use of metal (screws, nails and metal rods) and bird headdresses of feathers. The Songye *minkisi* were kept in a special shrine, usually located in the centre of the village and entrusted to a custodian, an elderly woman or man. The powers of these statues were revived by a ritual at each new moon. They were taken out of the sanctuary and placed on a chief's seat and carried in procession through the village.



12.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, horn, pigments, pearls
H. 35 cm

Provenances

- Jean Willy Mestach, Brussels
- Marc Felix, Brussels, Brussels
- Robert T. Wall, San Francisco
- Adrian Schlag, Brussels

Publications

« Etudes Songye. Formes et symbolique essai d'analyse », Jean Willy Mestach, Galerie Jahn, Munich, 1985, pg. 117, fig. 30

« Tribal Art Classics IX », Adrian Schlag, Brussels, 2013, pg. 26-27

« Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 177, 200-201, 254, fig. 62

price : 125.000 €



13.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, horn, metal, pigments, beads, snakeskin, bell
H. 81 cm

Provenances

- Collected in situ circa 1900
- Armand Pierre Fernandez, Arman, Paris/ New York

Auction

Sotheby's, Paris, 15.06.2004, lot 180

Publications & Exhibition

« Fétiches et objets Ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 172, 176, 190-191, 253, fig. 58

« Le Rendez-Vous », Galerie Monbrison, pg.11 / Exhibited : Paris, 10-24.09.2016

price : 225.000 €



Coming from the former collection of the sculptor Arman, as mentioned by the inventory label under to the base, this large male ancestral effigy is decorated with well preserved charges: pearls necklaces, a snakeskin, a horn summit containing medicines and a bell. The sculptor wanted to highlight the wisdom (goatee), the aggressive aspect (mouth with threatening teeth) and protection (umbilical hernia in metal) of this *nkisi*.



THE ZOMBO

14.

Cephalomorph drum

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, tooth, metal, strings, shells, pigments, fabrics
H.27 cm

Provenance
- Elliot Picket, New York, 1929

Auction
Sotheby's, London, 12-13.07.1976, lot 149

Publications
Arts d'Afrique Noire, Winter, n°20, 1976, pg. 47

« Fétiches et objets ancestraux d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2013, pg. 72, 100-101, 105, 243, fig. 31

price : 45.000 €



The Zombo people are known for their production of cephalomorphic drums consisting of a trunk-shaped body split in the centre. Originally musical instruments, these small drums could be filled and covered with magical charges playing the same role as the *nkisi* ritual statuary. This figure used for divinatory and therapeutic purposes supports a set of signs linked to magic. The shape of the double knot recalls the union of people. Among the Zombo people, this relationship is also established with the universe. A kind of carved horn contains white powder, *mpemba*, linked to the genies of nature and to ancestors.



THE LUBA

15.

Anthropomorphic figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, metal, horns, pigments
H.16 cm

Provenance
- Belgian Collection

Publication
« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 174-175, 298, fig. 51

price : 22.000 €



Fetishes called *kakudji* exist among both the Luba and the Kusu people. They consist of various magical charges around the head and umbilicus. The headdress, decorated with numerous small rectangles, houses several animal horns that contained magical ingredients. The face impresses with the brass eyes to help the ancestor's spirit keep watch. As with the Songye people, the points of consciousness are the head and the belly. The latter is bulging and has an umbilical hernia also marked with a metallic element. According to Marc Leo Felix, these statuettes are actually called *munsinju* and generally kept in a basket by fetishists.

THE BEMBE

16.

Janiform figure

Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood, pigments, vegetable fibers
H. 11 cm

Provenance

- Hans van Witteloostuijn, Delft, 1993

Publication

« Sculptures et formes d'Afrique », François Neyt, 5 Continents, Milan, 2018, pg. 191,
299, fig. 57

price : 14.000 €



The Bembe people protect themselves with small objects such as cult statuettes and amulets. The double vision is represented by the two heads joined by the nape of the neck helping to warn of danger on any side. This type of figure is not strictly speaking a *nkisi* but nevertheless plays a protective role and corresponds to a charm. Called *ase'a*, this statuette used in the *nguwe* rites of the *bwami* association also conveyed the profound wisdom and keen sense of justice of a high initiate.

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