Eternal Ancestors

The Art of the Central African Reliquary



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Eternal Ancestors



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EDITED BY ALISA LAGAMMA

With contributions by Barbara Boehm, Elias K. Bongmba,
Kairn Klieman, Alisa LaGamma, Denise Patry Leidy, and Louis Perrois

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Contents

Director's Foreword *Philippe de Montebello* vii

Acknowledgments *Alisa LaGamma* ix

Lenders to the Exhibition xi

Map: Cultural Regions Represented by Works in the Catalogue xii

Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary 3
Alisa LaGamma

Of Ancestors and Earth Spirits: New Approaches for Interpreting Central African Politics, Religion, and Art 33
Kairn Klieman

The Western Historiography of African Reliquary Sculpture 63
Louis Perrois

Ancestor Veneration in Central Africa 79
Elias K. Bongmba

"To learned people this may seem to be full of superstition": Reliquary Sculpture in the Medieval Christian Tradition 87
Barbara Boehm

The Body Eternal: The Aesthetics of Equatorial African Reliquary Sculpture 97
Alisa LaGamma

CATALOGUE

Central African Reliquaries 122
Alisa LaGamma

Other Works 325

Bibliography 327

Index 343

Photograph Credits 355

Director's Foreword

Throughout history and in many world cultures, artists have played a pivotal role in securing a place in posterity for the departed. The especially inspired ones have created celebrated masterpieces that guaranteed their subjects a vital place in our collective imagination for eternity. Among the most remarkable of these works are the funerary markers that continue to keep alive the memory of individuals from distant periods and cultures who would otherwise have been forgotten. Such is the case of the young sovereign of ancient Egypt during the Eighteenth Dynasty, Tutankhamun, whose reign was fleeting but whose place in history is secured through the opulence and beauty of the objects discovered in his tomb near Luxor. Similarly, two otherwise rather minor Medici princes, Duke Lorenzo of Urbino and Duke Guiliano of Nemours, are forever immortalized by Michelangelo in heroic tomb sculptures, depicting them seated, respectively, between Dawn and Dusk and Day and Night in their commemorative chapel at San Lorenzo in Florence. Yet another wonder, at Agra, pays permanent tribute to the lives of the seventeenth-century Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and his beloved, Mumtaz Mahal, through one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, the Taj Mahal. The awe-inspiring power of such artistic achievements has assured a kind of perpetual life to the individuals whom they commemorate.

The works of African art that are the subject of "Eternal Ancestors" were not conceived of as larger-than-life funerary monuments, nor have they remained in their original cultural landscapes. These sculptures sprang from a desire to fortify ties between influential deceased forebears and their families, so that the ancestors would continue to be actively engaged in the affairs of the living. It is well known that in Christianity the bodies of notable individuals were preserved, and their relics kept, not merely to serve as memorials but also to act as catalysts possessed of miraculous powers. As in the West, veneration of the ancestors in equatorial Africa privileged precious relics. Artists throughout the region reflected upon the significance of such sacred matter and responded by developing a diverse repertory of sculptural representations. In this exhibition, the finest of those creations are brought together, many of them being shown for the first time along with related examples of the same genre. These remarkable, highly inventive sculptures, spanning various distinct cultures and types, all clearly demonstrate the importance of ancestral veneration in equatorial societies.

This exhibition confronts us—as Picasso, Derain, and Matisse were confronted a century ago—with a powerful non-Western imagination that led to a break with the aesthetic traditions of the past. It is a tribute to the vision, ingenuity, and virtuosity of their anonymous African creators that these works, far removed from their villages of origin, so fiercely ignited the imaginations of the avant-garde in Paris, Berlin, and New York. Like all truly great works of art, these sculptures not only express a high creativity characteristic of their particular milieu but also exert an appeal that transcends their time and place. Ideally, our understanding of such complex works should be ever expanding, and that is the aspiration at the heart of this exhibition. In 1984 the Museum of Modern Art in New York acknowledged the tremendous debt modernism owed to the stimulus of non-Western art through the exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art." That project was highly influential in raising awareness of the nature of the relationship between African art and the Western avant-garde. Organized, however, by an institution focused on the legacy of modernism, it largely ignored the original significance of the African works featured.

In the present exhibition, Alisa LaGamma, Curator in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum, seeks to move

beyond that project of a generation ago and examine the African sources of inspiration for a corpus of work situated at the very core of the art history canon. As part of this effort, the Museum has seized the opportunity to draw upon our institutional breadth in the areas of medieval and Asian art, aided by curators Barbara Boehm and Denise Patry Leidy in those departments. "Eternal Ancestors" thus brings together celebrated works in the Metropolitan's permanent collection—including the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing's Great Bieri and Seated Female Figure, carved by Fang masters in the nineteenth or early twentieth century; the reliquary head of Saint Yrieix and the Auvergne Madonna, centerpieces of the Medieval collection; and a portrait of a Zen master from the Asian Art department—in order that they may be considered from a fresh perspective in terms of their shared purpose: to amplify the power of ancestral relics. This exhibition is an especially exciting opportunity to view those works together with the masterpieces of African art that have been made accessible to us through extraordinary loans from institutions and private collections, both in America and Europe. We extend our appreciation to all those lenders for their great generosity.

We also gratefully recognize the William Randolph Hearst Foundation for its generous support of the exhibition, as well as The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Doris Duke Fund for Publications for their support of this catalogue.

Philippe de Montebello
Director
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Acknowledgments

A project such as "Eternal Ancestors" is a journey of many stages that realizes its full potential through the invaluable contributions of countless individuals. It originated in the encouragement of André Fourquet, the late connoisseur and collector, who frequently urged me to develop an exhibition devoted to the great masterpieces from Gabon that were of special interest to both of us. I regret that he is not able to see this idea come to fruition, but engagement with the subject has kept his memory very much alive. I am indebted to Daniel Marchesseau for his generous and collegial support, which allowed the project to be carried out in its original spirit.

The subsequent development of this exhibition has benefited immeasurably from conversations with many esteemed authorities. Louis Perrois shared his expertise, derived from a career devoted to researching Gabon's artistic heritage, by reviewing the selection of works, discussing the framework for their presentation, and contributing to the catalogue. Jean-Louis Paudrat was ever responsive to questions relating to the reception of equatorial African art in the West. As the selection of works was refined, Guy Van Rijn's database of African art was frequently consulted. Historian Kairn Klieman carefully examined the materials prepared for this project and developed a highly original scholarly approach for coming to terms with the common heritage of the many distinct cultures represented. At the Metropolitan, dialogue with Barbara Drake Boehm and Denise Patry Leidy afforded invaluable insights into the broader relevance of this topic. I thank them all for so willingly contributing their knowledge and enriching this presentation.

A desire to discuss this project with Fang scholars and elders in equatorial Africa, and to incorporate their perspectives on their forebears' heritage, led me to travel to southern Cameroon in May 2006. John Cinnamon and Christopher Fumunyo were most generous in advising me as I planned that sojourn. I am especially grateful to Daniel Whitman, Rachel Okani, and many others in the Ministry of Culture of Cameroon for all they did to make my visit a productive and enlightening one. I extend my deepest appreciation for the wisdom and erudition of the many Fang and Betsi authorities, including Séverin Cécile Abéga, who agreed to discuss their traditions with me during my stay.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, an extraordinary amount of time, resources, and in-house expertise has been devoted to this project. I want to express appreciation to Philippe de Montebello for his support of an ambitious initiative designed to present great works of African art at one of the world's foremost cultural institutions. I also want to express my gratitude to Julie Jones, Curator in Charge of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, for her direction and wise counsel at every stage of this endeavor. Upon numerous occasions, Martha Deese and Linda Sylling were critical advisers in the direction of this effort, and I am profoundly appreciative of their unfailing professionalism. I am also grateful for the sustained assistance and invaluable contributions provided by Laura Melnyczenko and Yaëlle Biro in implementing the wide range of curatorial responsibilities required by such a challenging project, as well as for the assistance of Felicity Tsikiwa as intern.

It has been a privilege to collaborate with the Metropolitan's Editorial Department on this publication, which will remain the enduring record of the exhibition. Under the direction of John P. O'Neill and Peter Antony, its development has been a highly rewarding professional experience. Its content has been ideally presented, given the myriad painstaking efforts of its indefatigable editor, Margaret Donovan, and its unrivaled designer, Bruce Campbell. Production Manager Paula Torres and bibliographer Penny Jones also performed important tasks in this respect. From the outset, the talents, patience, and

resourcefulness of the Metropolitan's Photograph Studio have been critical in effectively capturing the power and dynamism of the works at the heart of this exhibition. Barbara Bridgers did much to facilitate Peter Zeray's eloquent photographic record.

Exhibition designer Michael Batista helped greatly in translating the exhibition into an engaging and meaningful experience for the public. His highly original approach was developed in thoughtful partnership with Connie Norkin. As ever, the installation benefited from the tireless efforts of Christopher Noey, Jessica Glass, Kate Karrell, Merantine Hens, Taylor Miller, Alexandra Walcott, and Pam Barr. Finally, the expertise of conservators Ellen Howe and Christine Giuntini was critical in the care, handling, and treatment of the works presented.

Colleagues at many institutions generously gave their time and effort in preparing their loans to the exhibition. I am grateful to my seasoned and capable colleague in the Metropolitan's Office of the Registrar, Aileen Chuk, for overseeing this task. I want to thank Peter Junge at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin not only for facilitating loans of pivotal importance from that collection but also for providing access to related archival records. There is no finer collection of equatorial African art in the world than that of the Musée Dapper, Paris, and Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau's contribution of so many outstanding works from that collection is greatly appreciated. The other extraordinary lenders who have been essential partners are Jean-Paul and Monique Barbier-Mueller. I wish to thank them for their generosity in sharing such extraordinary works through their gracious intermediary, Laurence Mattet. Appreciation is also extended to the following colleagues for essential loans from their institutions: Germain Viatte, Stéphane Martin, Hélène Joubert, and Aurélien Gaborit, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris; Roland Kaehr, Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel; Bernard Gardi, Museum der Kulturen, Basel; Marc Coulibaly, Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva; Lars-Erik Barkman, Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm; Anna Mighetto and Jette Sandahl, Museum of World Culture, Göteberg; Guido Gryseels, Musée Royal d'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren; Julie Brown, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University; Anne d'Harnoncourt, Philadelphia Museum of Art; William Siegmann, Brooklyn Museum; Roslyn Walker, Dallas Museum of Art; Brigitte Templen, Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck; Véronique Merlin Anglade, Ville de Périgueux–Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie du Périgord; and Suzanne Page, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

Without the generosity of the Ziff Family, this exhibition would be merely a shadow of what it has become. I want to thank them and their staff for the copious access they provided to so many of the exceptional works featured. All the following collectors have been critical partners in helping to illuminate the subject of this exhibition through their loans: Daniel Marchesseau, Laura and James J. Ross, Marian and Daniel Malcolm, Sidney and Bernice Clyman, Bob Wall and Margaret Rinkovitch, Steven Kossak, Ed and Cheri Silver, Sheldon Solow and Rosalie Wolff, Hélène and Philippe Leloup, Udo and Wally Horstmann, Holly and David Ross, Saretta Barnet, Georg Baselitz, Jean Willy Mestach, Thomas Hill, Robert Rubin, Murray Frum, Adam Lindemann, Richard Perez, Jeff Soref, Patrick and Bernice Caput, Maureen and Harold Zarember, Pierre Amrouche (who most generously shared images as well), and Pierre Dartevelle. Additionally, colleagues in numerous departments at the Metropolitan have made works from their collections available: Peter Barnet, Medieval; James Watts, Asian; Malcolm Daniel, Photographs; Ken Moore, Musical Instruments; George Goldner and Samantha Rippner, Prints and Drawings; and Virginia-Lee Webb and Nicole Cuenot, AAOA Photograph Study Collection.

Finally, I am eternally indebted to RRL, AVL, and ATB for their wisdom and forbearance.

Alisa LaGamma
Curator
Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Lenders to the Exhibition

Listed here are the institutions and individuals that lent central African reliquary sculptures to the exhibition. The numbers are those assigned to their works in the Catalogue section. Lenders of additional works are given on pages 325–26.

BELGIUM
Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren 120

FRANCE
Musée Dapper, Paris 22, 30, 33, 43, 50, 88–91, 105, 115

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 85

Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 72, 75, 87, 95, 102, 108

Ville de Périgueux–Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie du Périgord 79

GERMANY
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1, 2, 4, 6, 51, 80, 82

Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck 18

SWEDEN
Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm 117, 118

Museum of World Culture, Göteborg 121

SWITZERLAND
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 12, 56, 66, 93, 99, 100, 103, 106, 107

Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva 38, 112

Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel 42

Museum der Kulturen, Basel 114

UNITED STATES
Brooklyn Museum, New York 27

Dallas Museum of Art 25

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 23, 45, 92

Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 9

Philadelphia Museum of Art 7, 41

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS
Patrick and Beatrice Caput 58

Frum Collection, Toronto 86

Mr. and Mrs. J. Tomlinson Hill 35

W. and U. Horstmann Collection 8, 54, 101

The Kronos Collections 13, 67

Adam Lindemann 37

Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm 14, 78, 98

Jean Willy Mestach 122

Laura and James J. Ross 3, 26, 69, 81

Jeff Soref 46

Robert T. Wall Family 11, 36, 113

Maureen and Harold Zarember 29

Formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris 19, 21, 39, 52, 94, 96, 97

Other private collections 5, 10, 15–17, 20, 24, 28, 31, 32, 34, 40, 44, 47–49, 53, 55, 57, 59–65, 68, 70, 71, 73, 74, 76, 77, 83, 84, 104, 109–111, 116, 119



Map 1. Cultural regions represented by works in the catalogue

Eternal Ancestors



Eternal Ancestors

The Art of the Central African Reliquary

ALISA LAGAMMA

Out of the rainforests at the center of Africa, at some indeterminate moment centuries ago, an artistic movement arose that is considered to occupy the very summit of African creativity. That tradition, the subject of "Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary," linked reverence for the ancestors of the peoples of the region to the creation of sculpture of surpassing beauty and ingenuity. Sacred relics have also been the source of inspiration for other great artistic traditions in Europe and Asia. This exhibition seeks to explore the genesis of a range of seminal sculptural forms in the fabric of religious beliefs and cultures of the people who gave life to them. The exhibition also traces the impact of this art, born in the villages of equatorial Africa, on European artists of the twentieth century and examines its aesthetic contribution to the world's heritage.

The "discovery" of African art by the West took place at two moments. The first occurred in the late nineteenth century, when explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials came upon what they fancied as exotic objects in African villages. The second moment of discovery occurred early in the next century, when the vanguard of European artists and critics came upon these objects in Europe and recognized their aesthetic qualities. Dispersed in European flea markets and world fairs as the residue of colonial interventions, they were appropriated by the avant-garde. Cast as muses for a revolution in the history of art following their dislocation from the communities that had infused them with meaning, they were resurrected. Today their intersection with the lives of the renowned European modernists—beginning with André Derain (fig. 1), Maurice de Vlaminck, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Jacob Epstein—continues to eclipse the original meaning given to these works by their creators.

The primary challenge of this exhibition is to advance comprehension of the role that the works in question played as elements of reliquaries in their original communities. If we fail to consider the social and religious contexts in which they were conceived, we will be deprived of a full appreciation of this art form. Given the abruptness of their displacement, however, we can never hope to completely understand the nuanced significance of individual works. In assessing their larger import, we will explore the meaning given to those works by equatorial African societies and cultures in an effort to establish a more expansive appreciation of this art form and its place in the history of art. By interpreting the physical works themselves as primary sources, we will also seek to glean further insight into the ideas and aspirations that underlie the transcendent beauty and spirituality they were designed to project.

The French doyenne of the African art world, Hélène Leloup, recently reflected on how contemporary appreciation of African sculpture differs from what she was exposed to in Paris in the late 1950s. She noted how pivotal works from equatorial Africa have been in defining the outside world's relationship to non-Western art: "One has only to look at the publications. Besides the Fangs collected very early by Paul Guillaume and the Cameroonian objects by the Germans, the masterpieces came out after

Opposite: Figure from a Fang Reliquary Ensemble (cat. no. 23, detail)



Fig. 1. Interior of André Derain's studio, Paris, ca. 1912–13. Archives Geneviève Taillade, Paris

Derain was among the earliest Western artists to collect African art objects. At a desk in a corner stands the famous Fang female figure from a reliquary now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (cat. no. 23). On the wall above it hangs the Fang mask (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris) sold to Derain by Maurice de Vlaminck probably as early as 1906.

the war. . . . Before the war only an *art nègre,* which I would qualify as classic, was admired: with realistic elements and a brilliant patina. After the war, the arrival of thousands of objects created another world."[1]

These works of African art that have been in the West the longest—and were so famously admired and praised—were, however, only superficially understood. Interpretive efforts have relied on cursory observations made by early explorers or missionaries, schemes of morphological classification based on formal features, and studies emphasizing the perspectives of contemporary peoples that reflect a century of change. These previous commentaries will be drawn upon here, but exclusive reliance upon them is inadequate. This exhibition seeks to situate many of the most widely known masterpieces of African art within a broader regional, historical, and conceptual framework to better appreciate their significance. Further, by examining a diverse spectrum of distinct reliquary genres through a series of the most outstanding examples, the exhibition will reveal the wide range of artistic interpretations that equatorial African artists have brought to a given form.

During the final decade of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth, conditions were ripe for avant-garde artistic circles to be receptive to the art of Africa. In *The Banquet Years,* Roger Shattuck describes the Belle Époque in Paris as an interlude characterized by peace, prosperity, progress, and vigorous intellectual ferment. He notes that the cultural climate was one of tremendous enthusiasm for rupture with nineteenth-century conventions in favor of bold experimentation: "The atmosphere of permanent explosion in artistic activity is evidence not only of anarchistic tendencies but also of the fierceness of its experiments. . . . The *Salon des Indépendants* outgrew one building after another with more and more work from young painters, while ethnological museums were being filled with astounding art from Africa, the Pacific, and Egypt."[2]

In their quest for "a new canon of thought and a new structure of expression," members of the avant-garde considered these innovative forms of representation as confirmation that established tradition could be overthrown.[3] In this context the literary figure Guillaume Apollinaire was a leading proponent of receptivity to the new. He did so not only through his own poetry but also through writings that embraced the "primitivism" of both Henri Rousseau and African sculpture and extolled the achievements of his close circle of friends, who included Vlaminck, Derain, and Picasso.

Throughout its early history, the Museum of Modern Art in New York was a pivotal institution in raising awareness of the importance of non-Western art as a source of inspiration for modernism. In fact many of the works featured in "Eternal Ancestors" were among the approximately six hundred shown at the museum in 1935 in "African Negro Art," the first blockbuster exhibition of African art. The significance of this convergence was most recently treated extensively by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe in their epic 1984 exhibition,

"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art." In the seminal catalogue, Rubin proposed that, beginning in 1906, "a fundamental shift" within the vanguard—from an approach invested in visual perception to one based on conceptualization—was the catalyst that drew artists' interest in such traditions.[4] He emphasized, however, that this profound realignment was already in place within artistic consciousness and that awareness of non-Western artifacts merely served as a means of fueling those interests. Although Rubin claimed that these influential models did not in themselves instigate change, he did acknowledge that Picasso himself advanced the "notion of the affinity of modern and tribal art as paralleling, in certain respects, the relationship between the arts of the Renaissance and Classical Greece."[5]

This notion reflects the perspective of critics of the period such as André Warnod, the authoritative French commentator for the journal *Comoedia* and *Le Figaro,* who proposed in 1912 that *l'art nègre* might one day replace Greek art in the formation of young artists. Warnod further suggested that "for the generations that will come after ours, a work from the ancient Soudan will be considered an indisputable masterwork; somewhat as the Venus de Milo, the Victory of Samothrace or the poor Joconde [*Mona Lisa*] are for us."[6] One of the three major African sculptural icons he cited as worthy candidates for consideration was the head from a Fang reliquary, then in the Joseph Brummer collection and now in the Musée Dapper, Paris (cat. no. 43). Among the important paradigm shifts espoused by Warnod and intellectuals of his generation was introducing the language of aesthetic criticism to African sculpture:

> Being almost nauseated by the vulgarity and the conventionality of so many works of art, one welcomes a very different conception of art, and that is why one is tempted to attentively consider these primitive and frankly executed works. This might be compared to a need one might have, after overindulging in candy and sweets, to taste something sharp, brutal, and especially simple. It is in seeking this sensation that, maybe, people will finally admire in the most absolute way the real character of these Negro statues, for their qualities of reality, originality and intensity that provide a respite from the usual vulgarity. Perhaps some artists will use them as a new point of departure. It is acknowledged that negro art has already inspired many works of our time.[7]

The earliest modernists to embrace African sculpture did so three decades after it began arriving in European capitals.[8] More than any other scholar, the French art historian Jean-Louis Paudrat has chronicled its arrival and reception in the West. Artifacts from equatorial Africa began appearing in a series of international expositions held in Paris in 1878, 1889, and 1900 that sought to popularize France's imperial ambitions and strengthen support for its acquisition of African territories. They were first prominently featured in two 1878 displays of material culture from Gabon arranged by E. T. Hamy at the Palais de l'Industrie on the Champs-Élysées.[9] Among these artifacts, collected by the explorer Alfred Marche on his second expedition to the Ogooué River (1875–78), was a Kota reliquary guardian figure. A drawing by P. Sellier that was reproduced the same year in the journal *Tour du monde* along with Marche's account of his journey to Gabon appears to document one of those two displays (see fig. 27). At the center of this highly decorative symmetrical arrangement of what are identified as "Obamba" and "Adziana" objects is the Kota reliquary sculpture engulfed in a fanlike array of menacing weapons that include long narrow lances and broad-bladed knives. These artifacts were subsequently transferred to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, which opened to the public in 1878 (this was to become the Musée de l'Homme, whose ethnographic installations have since been dismantled and whose collection was integrated within the Musée du Quai Branly).[10]

A photograph of a decade later, reproduced in 1888 in *Tour du monde* with Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's account of his travels to equatorial Africa, documents an installation of the works he contributed to the Trocadéro (fig. 2). That dense and eclectic trophylike display of assorted artifacts is highly reminiscent of the earlier arrangement of Marche's mementos. At the center is a long narrow vertical drum, framed directly above and on either side by a semicircle of seven Kota reliquary sculptures. At the upper edge of the image is a series of pipes. Flanking the drum, as parallel vertical elements, are six rattles. The second rattle from the left partially obscures one of the earliest and most formally distinctive of the Kota and Mahongwe reliquary figures featured in this exhibition (cat. no. 72).

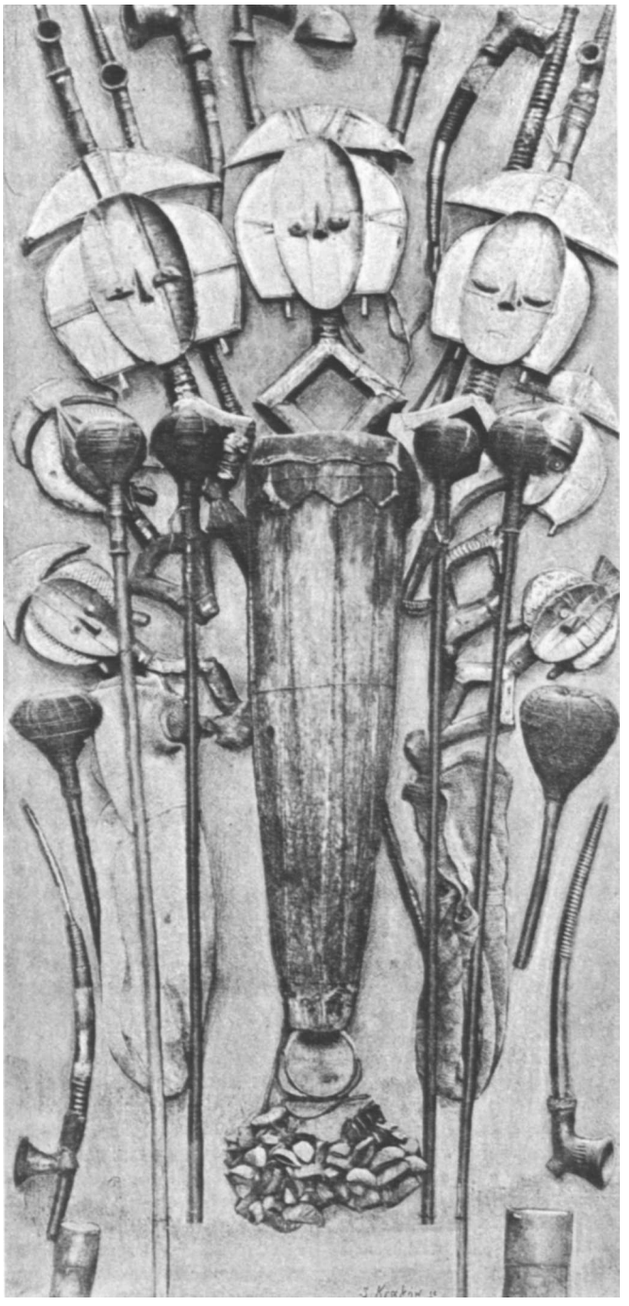


Fig. 2. Display of Gabonese artifacts, Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1888. From Brazza 1888, pt. 19, p. 39

First published in Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's account of his trip to West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, this photograph was identified as "Drums, masks, etc., of the Ondoumbos—After an assortment exhibited at the Trocadéro." Quite ordinary percussive instruments are exhibited here along with more spiritually important and technically complex figurative Kota reliquary sculptures, including catalogue number 72. The casual manner in which they were combined reflects how superficially the significance of the works had been considered.

These stylized presentations of material culture gathered in equatorial Africa by French explorers consistently mix artifacts that range from the profane to the sacred. Quite ordinary percussive instruments, such as the drums and rattles that accompanied festivities and rites in regional communities, are juxtaposed with the more religiously significant and technically demanding figurative creations composed of precious applied metals and intended to amplify the power of ancestral relics. The casual lack of differentiation evident in this seemingly ordered yet chaotic amalgamation of genres reflects the arbitrary nature and superficiality of the artifacts' decorative arrangement.

During the same period, Germany's annexation of the Cameroons in 1884 led officials in that new protectorate to begin sending back artifacts to Berlin for its Museum für Völkerkunde, which would open to the public in 1886. Among these were the Ngumba and Bangwa works collected by Georg Zenker (cat. nos. 4–6, 8) and Gustav Conrau (cat. nos. 1, 2). Günter Tessmann, the German ethnographer and author of an influential study of Fang society, deposited in his remote hometown museum of Lübeck the material culture he gathered during his 1909 stay in southern Cameroon (cat. no. 18).

According to the most widely disseminated account of the awakening of European avant-garde interest in the aesthetic qualities of African artifacts, Henri Matisse noticed an African figurine in Émile Heymann's shop of exotic curiosities on his way to pay a visit to Gertrude Stein in 1906.[11] After acquiring the artifact inexpensively, Matisse recalled showing it to an enthusiastic Picasso.[12] Picasso himself underscored to André Malraux that he did not appreciate the significance of such works until a year later, during a visit to the Trocadéro museum: "He felt that something was happening [to him] . . . that was very important." Picasso suddenly realized "why he was a painter."[13] Paudrat suggests that unlike his fellow artists, whose engagement with African art was limited to its novel formal qualities, Picasso had been deeply moved by the realization that this art was a spiritual catalyst, one that was an effective vehicle that transcended physical realism.[14] This is corroborated by a statement that Picasso made about 1917 on the subject: "My

greatest artistic emotions were aroused when the sublime beauty of the sculptures created by the anonymous artists of Africa was suddenly revealed to me. These works of religious art, which are both impassioned and rigorously logical, are the most beautiful of all the products of the human imagination."[15]

Be that as it may, the appeal such works held for artists lay essentially in their formal appearance, and there is virtually no record of any curiosity on their part concerning the original significance and function of these objects. Rubin notes that artists were generally indifferent to such aspects of the non-Western artifacts they collected until the 1920s, when certain Surrealists became *amateurs* of ethnology.[16] Instead, modernists responded to African sculpture's lucid distillation of the figure to elemental forms and its ability to represent subject matter with an immediacy that obviated illusionism. Picasso's breakthrough in embracing such elemental formal solutions and bold directness is most powerfully evident beginning with *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; Museum of Modern Art, New York).[17] Rubin emphasizes that it is often not possible to discern literal quotations of African sources of inspiration through analysis of one-to-one visual transcriptions because non-Western art forms were mined for ideas that were digested in the artist's consciousness and might resurface less overtly.[18]

Once the avant-garde adopted African sculpture, a series of highly influential dealers emerged who took on the role of further disseminating interest in African art beyond those circles. They did so by making its relationship to contemporary art explicit. The pioneer among these entrepreneurs was Joseph Brummer. Of Hungarian descent, Brummer came to Paris to pursue studies as a sculptor. Informal forays into selling his fellow artists African artifacts, which he came across in secondhand shops and flea markets, gradually led to a career as one of the most influential art dealers active before World War I.[19] Among the major clients to whom Brummer sold African artifacts, as well as paintings by Derain and Picasso, were Alphonse Kann, Charles Vignier, and Frank Burty Haviland.[20]



Fig. 3. Installation view of exhibition of paintings by André Derain organized by Paul Guillaume, Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, February–March 1933. From Kellermann 1992, pl. 22 (top)

At the time of this exhibition, Guillaume had already presented Derain's works several times in his Paris gallery. The artist's and dealer's shared interest in Fang sculpture is evident in this installation view, but curiously there was no mention in the invitation to the exhibition of the thirty Fang works featured, and only a brief sentence in the catalogue acknowledged their presence. The third sculpture from the right can be identified as the Fang head from the Sainsbury Collection, University of East Anglia, Norwich. It was acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Guillaume's widow in 1935, a year after his death.



Fig. 4. Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946), Installation view of "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art," 291 gallery, New York, November 3–December 8, 1914. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, by exchange, 1953 (53.701.49)

Stieglitz sent the Mexican illustrator Marius de Zayas to France to build relationships with Parisian dealers on his behalf. When the war disrupted the art business in Europe, Paul Guillaume agreed to provide de Zayas with contemporary art and eighteen African sculptures to be shown in the 1914 New York exhibition. The selection emphasizes Guillaume's taste for works from Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon, which he considered the classics of African art. In this view, a figure from a Fang reliquary (private collection, Paris) is centrally positioned.

In addition to actively encouraging interest in African art as an essential source of modern art, Brummer sponsored and supplied many illustrations to the first influential art historical treatise on the subject, Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (1915). He also became an internationally renowned dealer of medieval art, from whom The Metropolitan Museum of Art made significant acquisitions for its collection at The Cloisters. Brummer was most active in dealing African art during 1912–13; once he settled in New York, in the 1920s, he gradually limited his involvement to acquiring such works for his own collection.[21]

In 1910 Brummer identified what was to be one of the most significant sources for many of the influential works from equatorial Africa featured in this exhibition. Paudrat recounts that Brummer, alerted to an African artifact in the window of an automobile appliance store, negotiated its purchase from a young clerk, Paul Guillaume.[22] The earliest acquisition from Guillaume recorded in the Brummer gallery archive is dated June 27, 1912, and described as "2 carved Negro statues." Thus began Brummer's brief collaboration with Guillaume, who as the employee of a tire firm received sculptures from Gabon and Congo through colonial suppliers of rubber in those regions. Guillaume went on to become the most prestigious collector and dealer of African art in the period between the world wars. Brummer introduced him to Apollinaire, who served as his mentor, and through this connection Guillaume came to represent the contemporary artists in Apollinaire's circle. He opened his first gallery in 1914 and by 1917 had organized successful exhibitions of Giorgio de Chirico, Francis Picabia, and Derain (fig. 3). As one of the most dynamic centers of artistic and literary life in Paris, Guillaume's gallery ultimately became the principal supplier of both modern and African art to the American collector Albert C. Barnes.

Guillaume played a critical role in the earliest exposure of American audiences to African art. In 1914, even before he had organized a show in Paris, eighteen works from Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire in his collection were featured in one of the experimental exhibitions presented at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art," which was coordinated by Marius de Zayas. Stieglitz envisioned and promoted this installation as a radical departure from the prevailing ethnographic displays in that it reflected "the point of view of art."[23] At the center of an image of the installation captured by Stieglitz is a Fang figure from a reliquary positioned on a pedestal

(fig. 4). The spacious gallery presentation, affording unobstructed views of the works from various angles, set the tone for the manner in which African reliquary sculptures have been displayed in Western art installations ever since.

The next exhibition at 291, held in 1915, featured recent works by Picasso and Braque. A photograph by Stieglitz often identified as a record of that installation features the sculptural element from a Kota reliquary at its visual epicenter, flanked with works by Picasso and Braque (fig. 5). While the Kota is affixed to the background wall, a brass bowl and a wasp's nest are staggered at varying heights and depths of field. Helen Shannon has suggested that the image was not a straightforward record of the display but rather a formal still-life exercise constructed by Stieglitz, who added the reliquary figure, bowl, and nest to create visual resonances.[24] The eclectic nature of such formal modernist juxtapositions favored the contemporary artistic sensibility, which gave primacy to the isolated exotic artifact. Sarah Greenough notes that this appropriation of the Kota both echoed the assimilation of diverse materials by artists such as Picasso and Braque and provoked comparisons between Western and African conceptions of beauty.[25] Volume 12 of the journal *291* (February 1916), edited by de Zayas and supported by Stieglitz, featured a photograph of another example of a Kota reliquary sculpture as an independent work on its front cover as well as a text by de Zayas on the significance of African art to modernism. We shall see, however, that this privileging of the solitary representation reverses the priority intended by its original African patrons. Instead of giving primacy to the sculptural elements, they considered the ancestral relics accompanying them to be of transcendent importance. In their indigenous context, the relics were the exalted sacra, while the relatively profane sculpture was accessible to the eyes of the uninitiated members of the community.

This dynamic is underscored by Tessmann's report that in some parts of equatorial Africa the sculptural elements of Fang reliquary ensembles were actively offered for sale to Europeans, whereas the containers with the relics could not be easily acquired.[26] Another early visitor to the region, Mary Kingsley, also recognized that



Fig. 5. Alfred Stieglitz, Photograph based on the "Picasso-Braque" exhibition, 291 gallery, New York, 1915. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.55.36)

Stieglitz has strikingly juxtaposed a prominent Kota reliquary figure and works by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque on the wall with a wasp's nest and a brass bowl in the middle of the room. This combination, apparently a still life carefully composed by the photographer, assembles seemingly eclectic forms in order to reveal their formal affinities.

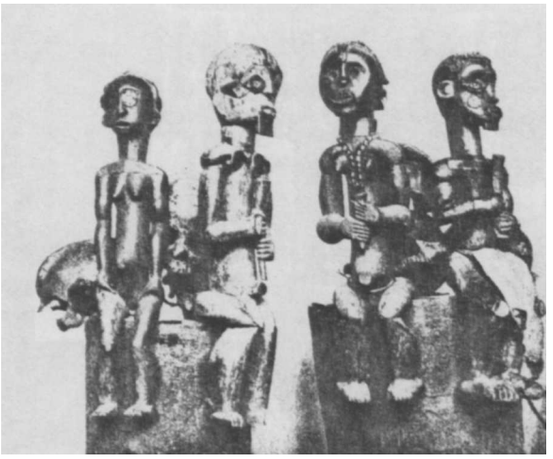


Fig. 6. Georg Zenker, Two Fang-Ngumba bark relic vessels and their carved sculptural elements, early 20th century. From Luschan 1918, fig. 62

These works were collected by the naturalist and botanist Zenker in southern Cameroon. One of them, the third from the left, has survived in the West without its original sacra (see cat. no. 5 and fig. 7).

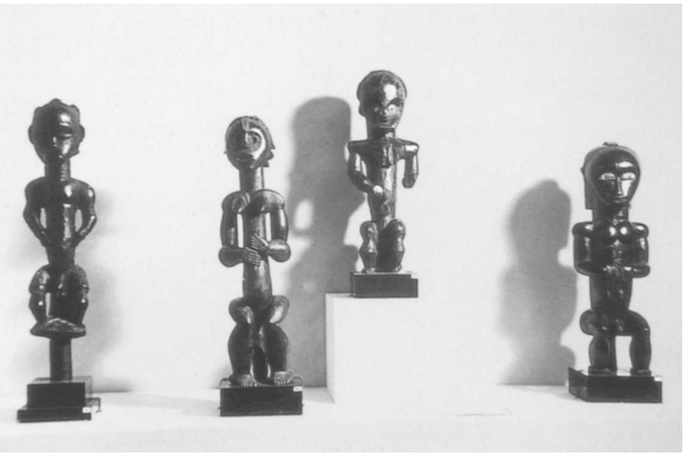


Fig. 7. Installation view of "African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," Brooklyn Museum, 1937

The collection of *Vanity Fair* editor Crowninshield, which was put together by the connoisseur and artist John Graham, included at least nine Fang figures. This installation shows the formal diversity of four of them (for the second from the left, see also fig. 6 and cat. no. 5).

Western assumptions concerning the primacy of the artifacts misrepresented indigenous priorities: "It is not, on the contrary, Africans who worship material objects but ourselves. The African's mind works along the line that things happen because of the action of spirit upon spirit."[27] It thus appears that the less precious aspects of the ensembles drawn upon for ancestral veneration were more readily traded to Westerners by the Fang, while the accompanying relics were retained by their owners. An early-twentieth-century photograph taken by Zenker documents a group of Fang-Ngumba reliquary figures positioned at the summit of their respective relic vessels (fig. 6). Among them is a work in this exhibition that gradually came to be separated from its original ensemble and took on the identity of an independent work of art (cat. no. 5). This transition is apparent in a 1937 installation photograph of the same figure displayed with a series of other Fang sculptures in an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of the collection of American publisher Frank Crowninshield (fig. 7).

The European colonials and missionaries who returned home with these artifacts played a considerable role in generating the social turmoil that disrupted and led to the demise of the traditions to which these artifacts were bound. As equatorial territories were conquered, colonial agents and missionaries were actively engaged in dismantling indigenous practices of government and worship. When they encountered resistance, their retaliation was often brutal. Historian Jan Vansina has noted that not only were villages routinely burned down, leaving their inhabitants homeless and displaced, but mortality rates were also raised by the combined effects of malnutrition, forced labor, and newly introduced diseases.[28] At the very moment that the European avant-garde was embracing the works of African sculpture featured in this exhibition, the religious practices that led their African patrons to commission them were in crisis, mainly as a result of the impact of European colonialism (figs. 8, 9).

According to the French historian Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, the efficacy of a given form of devotion was paramount in Fang-Beti society.[29] He underscores that a rite was abandoned as a treatment, cure, and medicine whenever a better one was identified and that the priority was always immediate results. In the face of a heightened onslaught on their communities' way of life, equatorial Africans appear to have viewed their traditional means of seeking ancestral intervention as ineffectual and eventually obsolete. Laburthe-Tolra suggests that the frequent purification rites witnessed by early

explorers were symptoms of great social anxiety. In attempting to combat the antisocial forces they held accountable for the difficulties they were experiencing, equatorial Africans sought to strengthen contact with their ancestors and petitioned them for protection and sustenance through whatever means possible.[30] Their pragmatic attitude toward religious practice led them to gradually discard traditional rites of ancestral veneration in favor of new means of spiritual redress, including foreign rites adopted from neighboring groups as well as conversion to Christianity. It is ironic that there were significant parallels between the regional religious practices that were abandoned and the external forms of devotion promoted by the missionaries. The characterization of the works featured in this exhibition as pagan idols, given their role in relic veneration, is evocative of the criticism that Protestant iconoclasts directed toward comparable forms of Roman Catholic devotion during the Reformation.

The equatorial African artifacts examined in this exhibition constitute concrete evidence attesting to devotional practices that were the focus of the spiritual life of communities across the region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We will examine this surviving corpus of primary documents closely, for the traditions they relate to have undergone considerable change over the last century. These striking forms of expression were developed by distinct cultures, concentrated in the heart of the continent, for the purpose of amplifying the power of preciously guarded ancestral relics. Chief among them are the full-length figures, half figures, and freestanding heads carved from wood by Fang masters and placed on the lids of cylindrical bark relic containers; the flat two-dimensional schematic representations consisting of a wood understructure covered with various metals by Kota and Mahongwe artists and positioned in relic baskets; the figurative busts enhanced with brilliant pigments by Tsogho, Sangu, and Punu sculptors and integrated into relic bundles at their base; the standing male and female figurative vessels designed with hollowed torsos by Mbete (Ambete) sculptors to accommodate relic chambers within; and the Bwende and Bembe creations that enshrine relics at the core of a soft sculpture composed of costly textiles (for the aesthetics of these various genres, see my essay "The Body Eternal" in this volume).

In discussing various forms of "reliquary" art, it is important to define the term, and useful to consider some comparative contexts. In the present consideration of reliquaries, the term *relic* is defined as a fragment of considerable age that is imbued with heightened meaning. Such particles of matter are often valued and preserved for their connection to an esteemed individual, whose memory they keep alive. A relic's intimate association with and tangible relationship to some aspect of that past life render the deceased immediately manifest in the present. In the West, certain vestiges of the Roman ancestor cult echo into Early Christianity. Saints and martyrs were conceived of by communities as family heads, as intermediaries and exemplars whom a given religious community invoked for protection and intercession. It was presumed that the corporeal remains of saints as well as matter physically associated with them were endowed with spiritual power and were thus worthy of honor. These sacred relics were enshrined in receptacles composed of costly materials to emphasize their preciousness. An integral part of Christian ceremony, such reliquaries were set on altars, carried in processions, and venerated during important feast days.

The historian Gary Wills has reflected on the powerful hold relics had on Europe throughout the Middle Ages. In his history of the Venetian Republic, Wills observes that the city's major landmark, San Marco, was conceived of as a monument to house and glorify the relics of Saint Mark:

> It is hard for a modern tourist to understand the devotion to relics. Of all the superstitions we find registered in history, politics, and art of the Middle Ages, relics can seem the most unconvincing, even the most absurd. It takes some historical imagination to re-enter the value system that structured communities around these sacred items. To us, the artworks celebrating Mark's body are far more precious than the relic itself . . . [but] people made long and arduous pilgrimages to come within [the relic's] force field . . . wars were fought to retain or acquire relics. The True Cross, wetted by Jesus' blood was such a precious relic that in Jerusalem deacons stood guard to prevent the pilgrims who came to kiss the holy wood from biting off a sliver. Saint Francis of Assisi's companions had to mount a guard over his body as soon as he died, to

save it from raiders desperate to acquire some part of the holy commodity. The relic was a physical link with the spirit world—in the saint's case, a bodily stuff that would be reintegrated with its soul at the end of time.[31]

The earliest reliquaries to have survived in the Christian tradition date from the fourth century and draw upon forms of Late Antique rectangular coffers and sarcophagi in order to represent the tombs of saints (see fig. 50). In 393 the Sixth Synod of Carthage first declared that every altar must have a relic. The Eucharist, the central rite of Christianity, took place before an altar that either was placed directly over the tomb of a martyr or housed relics within. The pivotal connection between the Eucharist and the veneration of relics is exemplified by the Golden Altar of Saint Ambrogio, a masterpiece of Carolingian goldsmiths' work created about 840 for Archbishop Angilbert II of Milan, which served both as the principal altar of the basilica and as a reliquary in the form of a sarcophagus. A door in the back wall of the altar provided access to the relics of the patron saints of the church, who included the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius and Saint Ambrose (Ambrogio), bishop of Milan.



Fig. 8. Cache of Mahongwe reliquaries at the French military post of Kemboma Matote, Liboumba River, Ogooué-Ivindo, Gabon, 1929–31

In this abandoned sanctuary, the reliquaries are surrounded by fallen tree trunks and high grass. The shelter houses a series of Mahongwe figures along with their relics. Just as the European avant-garde was "discovering" these works, the religious practices they were tied to were in crisis, mainly as a result of the impact of European colonialism.

Beginning in the fifth century, other reliquary forms were developed to harness sacred matter, brought back by pilgrims from the Holy Land, that was considered to have protective powers. Among the most celebrated of these is the Crux Vaticana, a gift from the Roman emperor Justin II (r. 565–78) and his wife, Sophia, to the pope, in which a receptacle in the form of the True Cross was designed to preserve one of its particles. By the late ninth century, a distinctive reliquary genre in France preserved relics identified with individual saints within costly vessels designed to evoke the original form of their contents. This practice, which appears to have originated in the East, is evident in relic receptacles that range from full-length figures to busts and "head reliquaries" (see the essay by Barbara Boehm in this volume).

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Latin Father of the Church and one of its most eminent theologians, was influential in promoting the veneration of relics. Born in Tagaste, a Roman community forty miles from the African coast, situated in present-day Algeria, Augustine left for Rome as a young man. He taught rhetoric for several years in Milan, the intellectual capital of the Western Roman Empire. There he came under the influence of Neoplatonism and met the most distinguished ecclesiastic of his day, Bishop Ambrose of Milan. Following his baptism by Ambrose in 387, Augustine returned to Africa, was ordained four years later, and served as bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430. His writings were widely read throughout the Mediterranean world.

Augustine initially expressed reservations about the practice of relic veneration, cautioning, "Let us not treat the saints as gods, we do not wish to imitate those pagans who adore the dead."[32] He nonetheless did reflect on the nature of the powerful bond that exists between the living and the corporeal remains of especially influential ancestors: "The bodies of the dead should not on this account be despised and cast away, particularly not those of the righteous and faithful of which the Spirit has made sanctified use as instruments and vessels for all good works. For if a parent's garment or ring, or any object of this kind, be dear to his children in proportion to the love they bore him, their actual bodies should not be despised in any way,

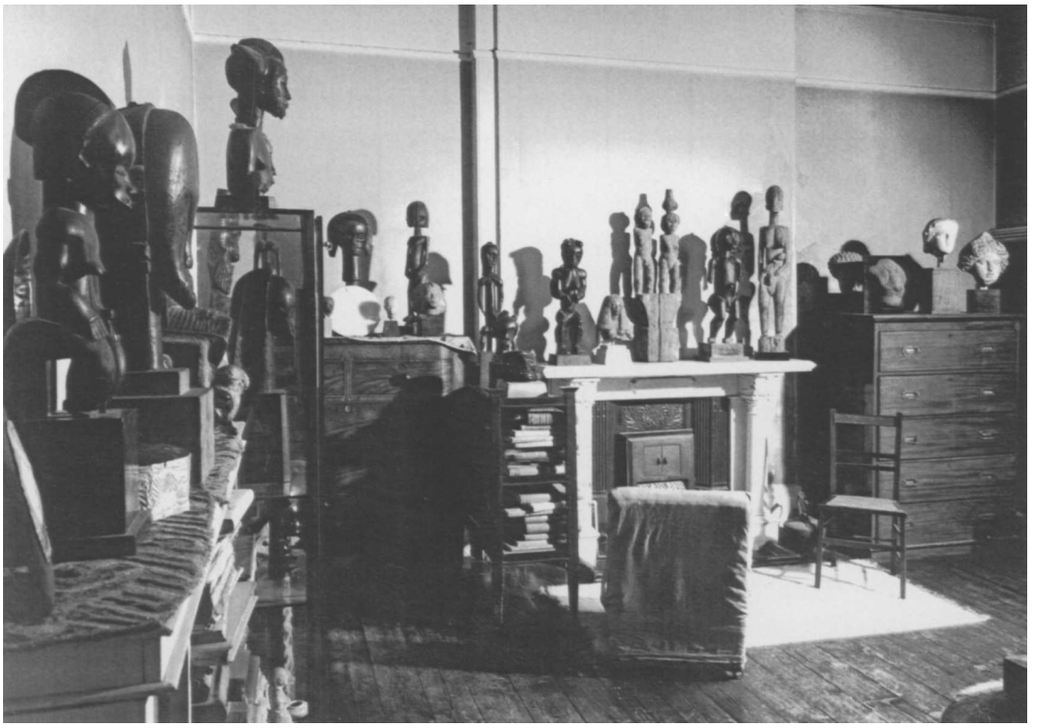


Fig. 9. African art displayed in the bedroom of Jacob Epstein's London house, shortly before his death, ca. 1959

Epstein's extensive collection of antiquities also included Oceanic, Pre-Columbian, Asian, Greek and Roman, medieval, and Egyptian art. The African section was the strongest, however, with more than four hundred works. At its heart were sixteen reliquary sculptures, five heads, and eleven figures created by Fang masters (cat. nos. 15, 22, 23, 33, 43, 45). It was one of the most inclusive private collections of "primitive art" ever formed—perhaps even the greatest.

bodies that we certainly wear much more intimately and closely than we wear any garments whatever."[33] Augustine came to advocate the position that the remains of a saint's physical being were to be treasured because the Holy Spirit affected both body and soul. When the relics of the protomartyr Stephen arrived in Hippo from Palestine, Augustine had a shrine built to house them, and on the occasion of Stephen's feast day he reflected: "A little dust has brought together such a crowd. The ash lies hidden, the benefits from it are well known. Think, dear ones, what things god holds for us in the land of the living, who has given us such great things from the dust of the dead."[34]

Augustine's writings relate the miraculous vision that led Ambrose to discover the physical vestiges of the saints that came to be venerated in his church and also document the miraculous curative effects their relics conferred upon the faithful:

> At this same time you [God] revealed in a vision to the aforementioned Ambrose, your bishop, where the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius were hidden. You had for many years treasured them, incorrupt and concealed in a secret place of your own, until the right moment came when you could bring them out into the open. . . . When they had been exposed to the light of day and dug up, and were being transported with due honor to the Ambrosian basilica, some people hitherto tormented by unclean spirits were restored to health as confession was wrung from these same demons. But that was not all. A certain citizen of Milan, very well known in the city, who had been blind for several years, became aware of the riotous joy of the people and inquired the reason for it; on hearing what was happening he leapt up and asked his guide to take him there. He was led to the basilica and begged to be admitted, so that he might touch with his handkerchief the funeral bier of your holy ones, whose death was precious in your sight. He did so, and applied the handkerchief to his eyes: they were immediately opened.[35]

It was generally believed that the relics of deceased apostles and saints could perform miracles to benefit the living, and they were appealed to for needs ranging from assistance in childbirth to help in alleviating chronic ailments.[36] Wills has noted that "a saint's relic was thought to be so closely associated with the soul of the saint, from which it was only temporarily separated, that the relic was considered an active agent, as if sending out a benign radioactivity."[37]

Reliquaries have also occupied a prominent place in other major world religions, including Asian Buddhism, as discussed in the following text by Denise Patry Leidy.

Asian Reliquaries

Denise Patry Leidy

Canonical sources indicate that after his death, the ashes of Siddhartha Gautama—now revered as the Historical Buddha Shakyamuni (died ca. 400 B.C.E.)—were distributed among the eight major clans ruling in northern India and buried under stupas in their territories so that they would have access to the charisma of the founder of the tradition. Derived from pre-Buddhist structures, stupas, such as the monument at Sanchi (fig. 10) are semicircular stone burial mounds covering the remains of a great leader or teacher. Sanchi is one of the monuments in India thought to mark some of the remains of the Historical Buddha, which were removed and reburied by Ashoka (r. 269–232 B.C.E.), the third emperor of the powerful Mauryan dynasty. Ashoka is credited with the first imperial sponsorship of Buddhism and with attempts to disseminate its practices throughout India, into Southeast Asia, and to regions farther west.

*As is the case at Sanchi, the most famous Indian monument of this type, the stupa is generally encircled by a railing and has a towering gateway marking the four cardinal directions. Worship at the stupa, which focuses on the relics buried beneath it, consists of walking around the structure in a clockwise direction. Stupas in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (*dagoba*), as well as in Tibet (*chorten*), follow the Indian model, while pagodas, their counterparts in China, Korea, and Japan, are made of wood and derive their shape from watchtowers.*

In addition to Siddhartha Gautama's remains, stupas also mark the location of the relics of other enlightened practitioners. These can include corporal remains, objects such as clothing or begging bowls, and other articles symbolizing the individuals and their spiritual powers. Buddhist texts and other historical sources indicate that objects such as begging bowls were not only buried but also sometimes publicly displayed and venerated.

Along with architectural monuments, Asian Buddhism made use of smaller reliquaries, some made of stone, others of more precious materials. Examples have been found in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. A small Pakistani reliquary now in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 11) is typical of those dating from about the first century. It is made of schist that was turned on a wheel, then carved and incised with abstract leaflike designs. This is a rare instance of a



Fig. 10. Stupa One (The Great Stupa). India, Madhya Pradesh, Sanchi. Shunga period, 1st century B.C.E.–1st century C.E.

reliquary that still contains at least some of its symbolic contents, including a small gold box, copper coins, a crystal bead, a pearl, and a piece of turquoise.

The veneration of Buddhist relics, often sponsored by members of the imperial Yang family, was particularly important in China in the seventh and eighth centuries. Yang Jian, who ruled as Emperor Wendi (r. 581–604) of the Sui dynasty (581–617), distributed relics throughout China in the period from 601 to 604 as an act of devotion intended both to propagate Buddhism and to further unify the nation. Oracles, omens, and the finding and viewing of relics were also important during the reign of the infamous Wu Zetian (r. 690–705), a woman who gained control of the Tang empire (618–906) and often used Buddhism to legitimize and bolster her rule.[38] *Wu Zetian was related to Emperor Wendi through her mother. A set of reliquaries (figs. 12, 13), reburied at the Great Cloud Monastery (Dayunsi) in Gansu Province about 694, is thought to contain relics first distributed by Wendi in the early seventh century and reburied during the reign of Empress Wu.*

As is typical of seventh- and eighth-century Chinese examples, the Dayunsi reliquaries are nested. The relics (or the pieces of grain or rice symbolic of relics) are first placed in a small glass bottle and next in a gold container (usually in the shape of a sarcophagus). That container is set in a silver holder, and the silver in a bronze receptacle. Finally, the entire group is protected in a stone box. The inscription on the stone container states that a monk named Chufu noticed rays of light emanating from the foundation of a ruined pagoda near Dayunsi. He suspected, without any evidence, that the beams marked the site of one of the 84,000 relics believed to have been buried by Ashoka. Chufu enlisted the help of Meng Shen (ca. 621–ca. 713), vice prefect of the region, and more than sixty workers to excavate beneath the pagoda. They discovered a stone coffer and a glass vase that contained fourteen grains symbolizing the relics. The glass bottle was wrapped in a piece of silk and placed in the three metal containers for the reburial, with great ceremony, under the base of the Buddha Hall at the monastery.

A comparable set of nested reliquaries, excavated in 1987 in an underground chamber of the Famensi temple in Xi'an,[39] *the Tang capital, contained a human finger bone thought to be that of Siddhartha Gautama, which has been shown in Hong Kong and at other Buddhist centers. Historical records indicate that the bone and other relics stored at the monastery were displayed at least seven times during the Tang dynasty in order to bolster the rule of various emperors and to bring good luck to the nation.*

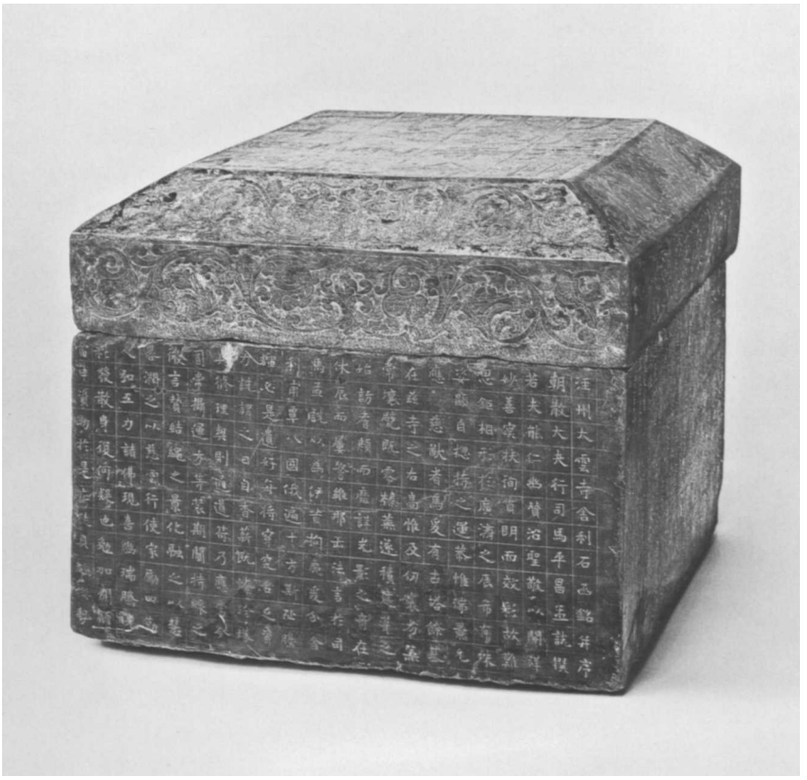


Fig. 11. Reliquary with contents. Pakistan, Kushan period, late 1st century. Schist with gold, copper, crystal, pearl, turquoise objects, Diam. 2½ in. (6.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1987 (1987.142.44a–m)

The Historical Buddha is not portrayed in human form among the myriad themes and motifs that decorate the railings and gateways of the earliest stupas. In fact, figural representation of the Buddha is rare before the second century C.E. A few of the early freestanding sculptures of the Buddha, particularly those from Pakistan and China, have small holes at the top of the head, which has led to the controversial suggestion that they were reliquaries.[40] *If this is correct, the sculptures were intended to serve both as reminders of the historical existence of the Buddha and as containers for his charisma.*

Belief that the physical remains of enlightened persons contain the spiritual knowledge they have attained also affected the development of religious portraiture, particularly in East Asia and the Himalayas. At least as early as the fourth century, attempts were made to preserve the corpses, or some other aspect, of the physical being of deceased masters. For example, a wonderful portrait sculpture of the monk Hong Bian in Mogao Cave 17 in Dunhuang, Gansu Province (fig. 14), is thought to have





Figs. 12, 13. Set of nested reliquaries. China, Tang dynasty (618–906), dated 694. Outer chest: stone, 11⅛ x 19⅞ in. (28.3 x 50.5 cm); innermost reliquary: gold, 1¾ x 1⅜ in. (4.6 x 3.5 cm). Excavated at Dayunsi, Jingchuan, Gansu Province, 1964. Gansu Provincial Museum



Fig. 14. *Portrait of the Monk Hong Bian*. China, Gansu Province. Tang dynasty (618–906), 9th century. Clay with ashes and pigment, 37 in. (94 cm). Mogao Cave 17, Dunhuang. From *Tonkō Bakukōkutsu* 1982, pl. 126



Fig. 15. Zude (surname unknown), *Portrait of an Old Lady*. China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), cyclical date either 1561 or 1621. Hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, 61¾ x 37⅞ in. (156.8 x 96.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Seymour Fund, 1959 (59.49.2)

been made using clay mixed with his ashes.[41] *In both China and Tibet, the corpses of clerics and other enlightened beings were covered with lacquer in order to prevent physical deterioration; related practices are known in Japan. Underlying such actions is the widespread belief that a master who has reached a certain degree of spiritual development has an incorruptible body.*[42] *The most famous examples of this practice are the corpses of the Dalai Lamas preserved in Tibet as reminders of the various rebirths of this master, who is also understood as a manifestation of the extraordinary compassion of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. In addition, most monasteries contain sculpted and painted portraits of abbots and other high-ranking and spiritually advanced monks that are thought to reflect in some way the charisma and advanced understanding of their subjects.*

In China, and in Korea to a certain extent, portraits of family ancestors from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries are preserved as embodiments of some aspect of the deceased. A number of the earliest records concerning the display and veneration of imperial portraits indicate that they were first shown in Buddhist centers,[43] *which suggests that the importance of religious portraits, especially as symbolic reliquaries, helped spur the development of imperial portraiture in China. Like the portraits of famous monks, those of the elite not only illustrated their physical appearance but also preserved their achievements. After the seventeenth century, such portraits, originally a prerogative of the imperial family and the elite, were widely made in China (fig. 15); more recently, photographs have become common. Portraits of ancestors are displayed on the family altar at the New Year and upon other auspicious occasions. Unlike those of religious masters, however, such portraits may be venerated only by descendants, usually male, of a specific family or lineage.*

While the practice of relic veneration is not officially sanctioned by Islam, a series of relics revered by followers of the Muslim faith have been preserved for centuries in a chamber within the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Sultan Selim I brought many of these back from Egypt following its conquest in the early sixteenth century. Walter Denny has noted that possession of these relics reflected the sultan's dual role as Ottoman sovereign and Commander of the Faithful.[44] The Topkapi's reliquary chamber, known as the Pavilion of the Blessed Mantle, was the most sacred section of the palace complex and figured importantly in each sultan's tenure. As a new leader he prayed within this shrine immediately upon his accession; at the time of his death he was laid there on a bier to receive his final tribute.[45]

When the palace complex was opened to the public as a museum in 1962, a notice was placed at the entrance of the Pavilion cautioning visitors to comport themselves appropriately in light of the structure's religious significance.[46] The relics displayed in a vitrine at its center include keys to the Kaaba and several sacred articles associated with the Prophet Muhammad: hairs from his beard and a piece of his tooth in gold covers, a mold of his footprint, his seal, a gold case with earth from his grave, and a letter written by him. The most sacred of the relics obtained by Selim, however, is the Prophet's mantle. Hidden from the eyes of the profane, it is encased in a gold box guarded within a latticed, domed canopy decorated in gold and silver and draped with heavy black curtains. The Prophet conferred this treasured relic upon the poet Kaᶜb bin Zuhayr, who had initially opposed him before becoming a follower.[47] As an expression of his devotion and a plea for forgiveness, the poet read the Prophet one of his odes. So delighted was Muhammad at the verse "The world receives abundance from the light of our Prophet," that he placed his own cloak upon Kaᶜb's shoulders. At the Pavilion of the Blessed Mantle, therefore, a series of relics intimately identified with the person of the Prophet provides the followers of an entire faith with concrete points of connection.

As in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, practices developed in Africa for preserving sacred matter within structures that made its importance apparent. In equatorial Africa such efforts were lavished on relics from exceptional individuals who were selected as advocates to the divine on behalf of their extended families. Despite the great formal diversity of the artistic idioms developed to house and to celebrate the importance of these relics, the belief systems they relate to exhibit a fundamental unity reflective of a shared regional tradition. Although art historical scholarship has not yet addressed the underlying similarities of these art forms, Vansina has written an account that paints with broad strokes a picture of the region's common heritage.[48] He asserts that the hundreds of ethnic groups and societies that inhabit this vast territory of rainforests, covering all of southern Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Congo, and half of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are "the heirs to a single ancestral society and culture whose carriers expanded in the area four to five millennia ago: the equatorial African tradition."[49] The communities are differentiated from those of their neighbors by their small-scale decentralized social and political institutions situated in villages and by the fact that they speak western Bantu languages.[50] (For the nature of the shared heritage and spiritual practices underlying the works in this exhibition, see the essay by Kairn Klieman in this volume.)

Present-day Cameroon is at once a major cultural crossroads and the site where savanna and forest meet. Centralized chiefdoms began developing in the Grassfields region of western Cameroon during the sixteenth century. Each of these is led by a *fon,* the patrilineal heir of the chiefdom's founder, whose power is derived directly from his ancestors.[51] Possessing a relic bag and a cranium identified with each of his lineage predecessors is thus essential to a *fon*'s legitimacy.[52] As the seat of thought, the head is seen as the corporeal site within which an ancestor's essence and soul reside.[53] Prepared three years after a *fon*'s death, the bag contains corporeal matter (fingernail parings, teeth, hair, and finger bones) and regalia worn during his enthronement (double bell, bracelets, necklaces, and staffs). Such relics are preciously preserved and guarded within the palace in a state sanctuary or reliquary structure referred to as the "house of the land."[54] Some of the *fon*'s older wives charged with guarding it are posted in a chamber adjacent to the one in which the sacra are kept.

As the recipient of the protection and blessing of all his ancestors, the *fon* in turn presides over rites that seek to assure the fertility of both his territory and its female population. The largest of the Grassfields states is the kingdom of Bamum, whose sixteenth *fon,* Njoya (ca. 1870–1933), compiled a text concerning the history and customs of his people. The passages in this work devoted to succession rites emphasize the importance of holding the cranium of the most recent *fon*.[55] Njoya's own reign further provides a revealing case study in how critical the ability to handle and physically control one's ancestral relics was to a leader's sense of well-being.

According to Njoya's official history, when he was only a child, his father, Nsangu, was killed in battle against the neighboring chiefdom of Nso. Because Nsangu's skull was preserved as a war trophy in the Nso's palace at Kumbo, Njoya was deprived at his installation of the relic critical to the legitimization of his reign.[56] In August 1906 a German military campaign against the Nso recovered Nsangu's skull and transferred it to Njoya. The German officer von Wenckesten described the heightened emotional impact of Njoya's union with his father's relic:

> One could read a great mistrust on the expressions of Njoya and his officials. When I took the head out of the basket, they advanced forward in a tight circle around Njoya. It was with a unique and singular expression that Njoya looked at the cranium that I extended to him. And so this great and strong man burst into tears like an infant. He then asked me to give him the head. He caressed it and held it against himself in tears. Packed in cloths, the cranium was placed in a basket that he had brought. The cloths were the remains of the clothing that Nsangu had worn during his campaign against the Nso.[57]

At the outer edge of the Grassfields, nine independent chiefdoms of the Bangwa people are the westernmost Bamileke centers.[58] The largest of these is called Fontem. In keeping with Bamileke tradition, Bangwa inherit property and titles patrilineally, so that a man's heir becomes the custodian of his skull.[59] Entry of the deceased into the ancestral realm is celebrated five or six years after his death. At that time the cranium is detached from the body and placed in a terracotta receptacle that is then buried in the heir's home with those of other past members of the lineage. The leader of each individual family compound has his own enclosure in which his heirlooms and ancestral relics are kept. In a rite that cultivates ancestral goodwill, relics are anointed with libations,[60] and the family leader invokes the cranium of each influential ancestor to intercede for him with the Supreme God Ndem.

At both the center and summit of Bamum and Bangwa chiefdoms is the *fon,* who performs sacred rites essential to the well-being and fertility of his land and subjects.[61] Especially striking in the Bangwa veneration of a chief's ancestors is the correlation of royal relics with figurative portraits of each *fon* in the royal sanctuary (fig. 16). As his death draws near, a chief prepares for that transition by commissioning his own memorial portrait. This sculpture, depicting its subject wearing royal regalia and in a dynamic stance, will be placed next to those of his ancestors and their relics (cat. no. 1). One of the *fon*'s final acts is to confide the name of his successor to a special council of officials who are responsible for overseeing the rites that celebrate his becoming an ancestor as well as the anointment of his successor.[62] A year after his accession, the new chief detaches the crania of his deceased parents, coats them with palm oil and kaolin, and buries them in receptacles that are added to those within the state ancestral enclosure or treasury.[63] The late chief's portrait figure marks the position where his relic will be placed. Also strewn in this chamber are the memorialized chief's intimate possessions, such as prestige caps or pipes. A Bangwa chief's ancestors are celebrated each week by libations directed toward their relics[64] and by the sounding of a carved ivory trumpet stored next to each relic. In effect, the relics themselves are the shrines through which a Bangwa chief maintains direct contact with his ancestors.

The related figurative portraits are intended to evoke a chief's presence during his lifetime and to commemorate him after his death. They serve not only as markers of a family's history but also as a means of aesthetically enhancing the cult of the ancestors. Such works are displayed publicly only upon a chief's death or coronation or, during times of misfortune, at a performance overseen by a society of nobles and subchiefs.[65] Among the most compelling examples of the genre are the two works that introduce this exhibition, which were

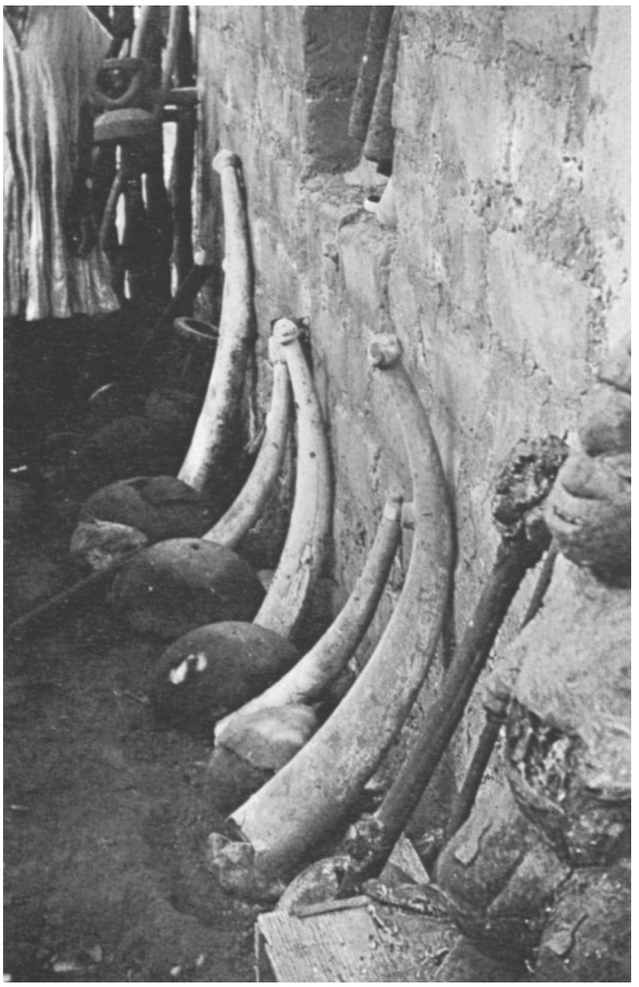


Fig. 16. Royal shrine. Bangwa chiefdom, northwestern Cameroon, ca. 1960. From Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 69, pl. 8

The relics of past Bangwa leaders are themselves the shrines through which a chief is in direct contact with his ancestors. This photograph documents a Bangwa skull-house during a chief's funeral ceremony. In this royal enclosure, eight clay pots facing downward on the floor cover the crania of seven patrilineal ancestors and that of the late chief's mother. Positioned next to each skull is a carved ivory trumpet that is blown by a royal retainer when formal sacrifices are made to the royal ancestors. At the front, a new portrait-figure of the late chief has been placed where his relic will be buried.

collected in 1897 by Gustav Conrau, the earliest Western visitor to the region (cat. nos. 1, 2). At that time Conrau was a German colonial agent seeking trading contacts and laborers for plantations in southern Cameroon. Through either gift or sale he acquired a collection of Bangwa sculpture that was sent down to the coast with plantation laborers and then to German museums. After Conrau died two years later under suspicious circumstances, German reprisals led to the destruction of Bangwa palaces and ritual art.[66] Fontem nonetheless continued to be a thriving artistic center, as Robert Brain and Adam Pollock make clear in their 1965 study of Bangwa funerary sculpture.[67]

With their dense populations and hierarchical centralized political structures, the Grassfields chiefdoms differ significantly from the equatorial communities situated to the east. Yet, in both, the leaders have historically drawn upon ancestral relics—the core of religious practice—in order to establish legitimacy and retain power. In the decentralized societies the lineage, or *mvong,* is the basic unit of social organization. Each lineage was identified with a "house" headed by a leader, or "big man." A lineage's well-being and prosperity were measured by how many dependents its leader had: wealth was conceived of in terms of human lives. Households varied greatly in size and usually comprised from ten to forty members, although they might include hundreds.[68] House leaders formed the ruling council of a given village, but each house leader and his dependents always had the right to abandon one village for another.

In such relatively ephemeral communities, house leaders competed with one another to expand their following and accumulate the means to attract as many new members as possible. This was critical in the forest environment, which demanded a high degree of collaboration in performing essential labor-intensive activities such as clearing the primary forest for village sites and plantations.[69] Given that these communities within the rainforest were fundamentally agrarian, the soil adjacent to a village gradually became leached, making it necessary for its inhabitants to shift their farming sites farther away. Over time the distance between a settlement and its fields grew to such an extent that it made sense for the entire village to relocate. These regular, periodic migrations, unlike later ones, thus arose from a natural impetus.[70]

According to Laburthe-Tolra, "the wealthy [big man] was he who had the largest number of people in his service and under his authority."[71] Vansina notes that the term for an admired leader shares an etymology with those denoting "fame," "honor," and "to become rich."[72] These were also attributes that identified the

individuals who were ultimately invoked through the ancestral cult. It was believed that those charismatic individuals who succeeded in greatly expanding their houses relied on mystical powers obtained through witchcraft.[73] While the ancestor cult was essential in instilling a sense of cohesion within a lineage, membership in ritual associations such as those that initiated boys into manhood fostered a sense of unity between various lineages of a given community and region.[74] However, as Vansina points out, the perennial tension that underlay the delicate alliance of houses was inimical to the development of large-scale kingdoms or states.[75]

By 1482 Portuguese caravels had anchored in the estuary of the Congo River and had begun recruiting coastal peoples to serve as middlemen in trade with the interior. The impact of trade with Europe, which began along the coast, irrevocably altered life throughout the region. Vansina emphasizes that regional societies were shaped by two distinct kinds of change: continual interaction with one another and the impact of global Atlantic trading systems.[76] As the Atlantic trading frontier advanced into the interior of central Africa over the course of the next four centuries, it brought turmoil to populations farther inland.[77] By the nineteenth century its effect was dramatically manifested in an acceleration of population migrations. Before that time, equatorial communities, impelled by the need for arable land, had gradually moved once a generation. Now, massive numbers of migrants actively vied to reposition themselves at sites along lucrative trade routes. Ultimately, trade networks established from the coast into the interior were responsible for the dissemination of religious practices as well as for increased access to the highly valued materials, including metals and textiles, that were exploited in the creation of the many distinct sculptural genres developed to enhance ancestral relics.

The British set up naval stations and mission posts at Clarence early in the nineteenth century, as did the French at Libreville. In the 1850s European traders and hunters began to move inland from the Gabon coast.[78] Among the Westerners venturing into the interior was Paul Du Chaillu, an explorer and author of French heritage who came to reside in America. Du Chaillu's narratives of his explorations in Gabon's interior during the 1850s and 1860s were widely published in Europe and America. Given his extended stays in the region and repeated visits, his are the earliest commentaries about practices of ancestral veneration. Du Chaillu witnessed and chronicled many of the cataclysmic developments of a world in flux, such as the decimation of communities by smallpox epidemics. As his expedition prepared to depart from Goumbi, he documented the blessing invoked by Quengueza, the leader of this Orungu village. Du Chaillu's account attests to the centrality of the ancestor cult in promoting well-being and suggests that the family members called upon to do so at the beginning and end of every day were those especially valued for their achievements:

> It was scarcely day-light, on the 28th October, when I was awoke by the beating of the Kendo (royal bell) and the voice of the old chief invoking, in loud tones, the spirits of his ancestors to protect us on our journey. The roll of his ancestors was a formidable one, Igoumbai, Wombi, Rebouka, Ngouva, Ricati, Olenga Yombi; but they were rather the deceased relations whose heads he had preserved in his mondah or alumbi house. Quengueza was prouder than any chief I knew of the prowess of his deceased relatives, and there were, I believe, men of great bravery and ability amongst them. Quengueza himself was a bold and courageous warrior in his younger days.[79]

Du Chaillu's observations also reveal that these exceedingly intimate sacred rites were inaccessible to outsiders, for he notes that the special structures in which relics were conserved were off-limits to anyone but their owner. It was only as a result of Du Chaillu's especially close friendship with Quengueza that before the explorer's return to America the chief afforded him access to his own shrine:

> I was permitted, on my return from the interior, to examine his *alumbi*-house. . . . [Inside are] a few boxes containing chalk or ochre, and upon a kind of little table a cake of the same, with which the owner rubs his body every time he goes on a fishing, hunting, or trading expedition. The chalk is considered sacred, and to be smeared with it serves as a protection from danger. If you are a great friend, the chalk of the alumbi will be marked upon you on your departure from the residence of your host. But the boxes generally contain the skulls of the ancestors of the owner, at least those relatives who were alive during his own life-time.[80]

That the shrine he describes does not include any form of figurative representation indicates that these did not

invariably accompany the potent relics that were the focus of regional devotion.

These traditions are best understood by examining two distinct cultural groups that have been extensively studied: the Kwele and the Fang. Leon Siroto has noted that in Kwele communities the leader of a *baaz,* a familial grouping of father and sons, represented that constituency in village affairs.[81] This leader also held the jointly owned family relics in trust until they were transferred to his successor. Some of these were kept in a private chamber, while others were incorporated into medicines formulated to address specific needs. Siroto observed that while families recited the names of their lineal ancestors going back as far as eight generations, only those of the previous three were remembered for their individual qualities. A family's preservation of ancestral skulls and bones was limited to its most accomplished family members.[82] The abilities that set such individuals apart from their peers were attributed to mystical powers acquired during their lifetimes. Those heightened powers enabled them to be especially effective as ancestors in responding to appeals their offspring directed to their relics. Since their efficacy faded gradually over time, the contents of a family reliquary were periodically altered, with new additions displacing those that had diminished in power. Preserved within a large basket together with materials having medicinal properties, including camwood, white earth, and leaves, the relics were considered catalysts that galvanized the potency of the other elements.[83] The reliquary's contents radiated force that was imparted to the ritual artifacts, such as masks, stored near them.[84]

When a *baaz* experienced a crisis, its leader offered the ancestors libations and petitioned them through their relics.[85] In situations that threatened the physical welfare of the entire community, relics owned by all of its *baaz* were deployed in a purification rite known as *beete*. In this way, all of a community's most formidable ancestors were called upon to renew their descendants' sense of well-being and harmony. Disturbances that warranted this course of action included epidemics, famine, and multiple deaths. Siroto noted that, beyond this simple appeal for elimination of an overt problem, *beete* rites were used by Kwele leaders to anticipate and counter divisiveness and to avert the untimely fragmentation of their community.[86]

The rites were presided over by a specialist, the *gaa beete,* who had acquired the necessary knowledge and expertise through an apprenticeship. The needs of each situation were initially assessed. If the *gaa beete* determined that ancestral power greater than that afforded by locally available relics was required, he would identify the owner of a desirable relic that might be borrowed from a neighboring village. This entailed negotiation with the owner to establish the requirements that would govern its loan.[87] Once the necessary combination of relics was in place, these were drawn upon to make a stock for a medicinal brew. Preparing the brew required searches for additional ingredients and extraordinary masquerade performances, both of which instilled a sense of solidarity in members of the afflicted community. At the culmination of the rite, liquid from the medicine ingested and sprinkled on participants was thought to inoculate them from harm.

According to Siroto, the Kwele organized *beete* rites every several years. On those occasions, the *gaa beete* initiated new male members as well as important menopausal women judged worthy of being introduced to fundamental secrets. As part of the proceedings, candidates were cleansed and fed a substance that enhanced their comprehension and appreciation of the nature of the relics at *beete*'s core and of the masks that engaged the collective attention of the community. Following these revelations, an initiate was taught the role of the mask (*kuk*) that most inspired him.[88] As reflected in this exhibition, the *beete* mask forms are immensely varied (cat. nos. 103–108), which contributed greatly in enhancing the wonder of the *beete* experience. (For more on this subject, see my essay "The Body Eternal" in this volume.) This dimension of *beete*—the evidence of especially appealing mask genres carved to be worn in the performance of ritual dances—offered a rare opportunity for highlighting the ingenuity and creative talents of a community's members.

The Fang term for accounts of the past is *nkande*. The many different *nkande* related to the origins of the Fang consistently recall their life in a savanna in the northeast, from which they journeyed forth and entered the forest; their crossing of a giant tributary with the



Fig. 17. Fang-Beti family posing on the tomb of a family member, June 2006

In communities in southern Cameroon, families that have long ago converted to Christianity have retained proximity to their ancestors by burying family members near the entrance to a home, often directly in front of the main door.

assistance of a mystical monster; and their encounter in the equatorial rainforest with a giant *adzap* tree that impeded their progress. Fang patrilineal genealogies traditionally listed ancestors going back fifteen generations to the founder and often reached back into these mythical times. James Fernandez has emphasized the great value placed on this knowledge as the centerpiece of traditional education; male members of a given lineage imparted it early on to youth within the *aba,* the classroom of ancestral education.[89] Those responsible for addressing the ancestors on behalf of their family invoked members from the recent past whose contributions and achievements were most vividly remembered.

Laburthe-Tolra suggests that despite the premium placed on keeping alive ancestral memories, Fang attitudes toward the dead were somewhat conflicted. He notes that the deceased were at once feared and mourned, chased away, revered, and invoked, yet they were lived with on such close terms that their tombs were physically central within domestic life.[90] Séverin Abéga explains that this sense of ambiguity derives from the fact that although an ancestor belongs to the lineage, he is at the same time largely beyond its control, outside the realm of the living.[91] In order to elicit ancestral benevolence, family members cultivated a positive, even joking, relationship with them. When members of a community inevitably broke the social rules of comportment, the group was rendered vulnerable, and the village had to be periodically purified. To achieve this, its youth submitted to an initiation known as *so,* in which they allied themselves with the ancestors. The ritual death and rebirth they underwent was animated by the same songs and funerary music accompanying *esana,* the funerary rite for accomplished individuals.

Esana was historically danced to mark the passing of an exceptional person who was both associated with the founding of a community and greatly respected for his strength, courage, intelligence, industriousness, and exploits as a warrior or hunter.[92] It served to integrate the deceased into the ancestral realm.[93] Several weeks after the death, the findings of an inquest relating the cause of the death were summarized before a general assembly of the lineage. This was followed by a performance by a dancer to honor the exploits of the deceased and to proclaim the lineage's triumph in battling harmful forces.[94] *Esana* culminated with the relatives sharing a final feast, half of which was placed on an altar near the tomb of the departed.

While transferring the deceased beyond the village was one aim of Fang funerary rites, the dead nonetheless remained a pervasive presence among the living.

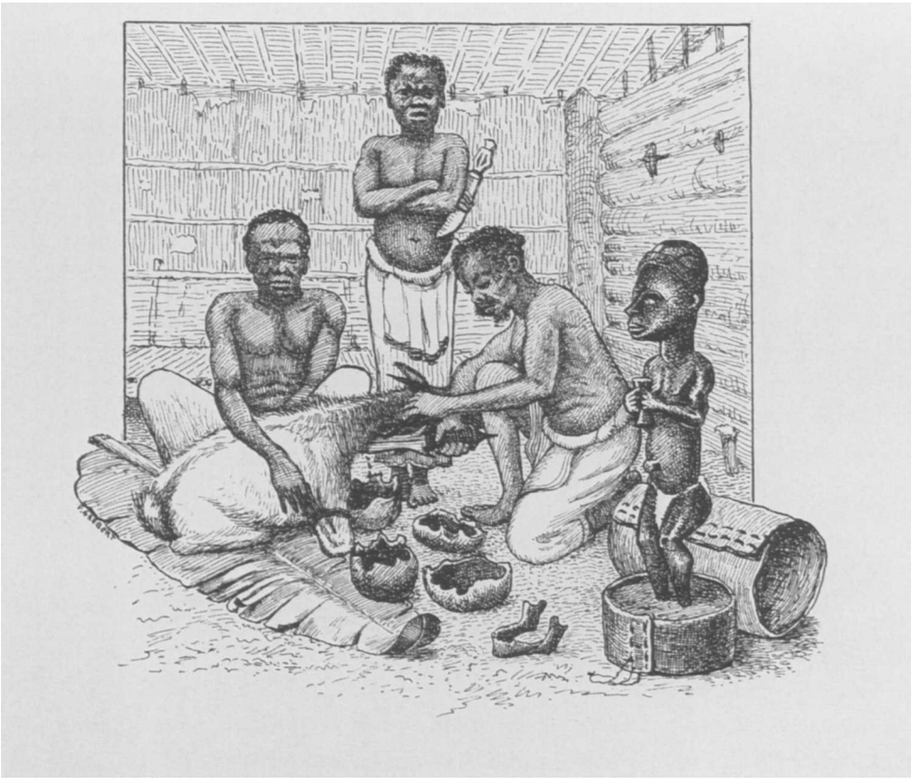


Fig. 18. Page from Fernand Grébert's notebook, 1913–17. Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva, Grébert Collection

Grébert, a Swiss missionary, worked in Gabon from 1913 to 1932. He documented the life of the Fang with poetic precision in his notebooks, which are filled with drawings and watercolors. This drawing, featuring a "bloody sacrifice on the crania of the ancestors," shows the reliquary (cat. no. 38) with its receptacle open and the relics exposed so that libations may be poured on them.

Their continued residency among their offspring is evoked through the phrase "they are among us" and through gestures such as making a token offering in deference to the ancestors before something is consumed.[95] An especially striking manifestation of this is the fact that in Fang-Beti communities of southern Cameroon, families that have long since converted to Christianity bury family members close to the entrance of their dwellings, often directly in front of the main door (fig. 17). Laburthe-Tolra comments on the degree of intimacy between the living and their ancestors reflected in this practice: "The traditional Beti lives among the tombs of his own, buried in front of his door and sometimes even in the floor of the interior of his house; he thinks of frequenting the same world as they in his dreams and in doing so to have already experienced it; he dialogues with them, feeds them, and receives gifts from them through *melan* rites."[96] When a biological feature or other character trait of a deceased individual is shared with one of his descendants, that is interpreted as evidence that some aspect of his being has been reincarnated. The burial site of an especially close relative served as a shrine upon which offerings of food and other personal items were placed until the deceased's name was given to a newborn. Laburthe-Tolra emphasizes that when an ancestor was dearly loved this was done without delay.[97] The transfer of names of deceased elders to a family's newest members underscores the strong association between infancy and ancestry that Fernandez has identified in the physiognomy of Fang reliquary sculptures.[98] The spiritual essence of the ancestors, conceived of as their shadow (*nsimim*), remains present through the physical substance of their bones.[99]

Throughout equatorial Africa, a concept of cosmic energy, referred to as *evus* by the Fang, is credited with fueling extraordinary achievement. *Evus* is invariably described as an organism that is awakened within an individual over the course of an initiation. Its carrier is imbued with heightened powers of perception and an enhanced ability to succeed in pursuits that range from accumulating wealth, wives, and children to acquiring the talent necessary to perform epic poetry.[100] A mystical agreement is thought to afford this dispensation in exchange for sacrificing the well-being of others, an action that is welcomed when it yields protection to the

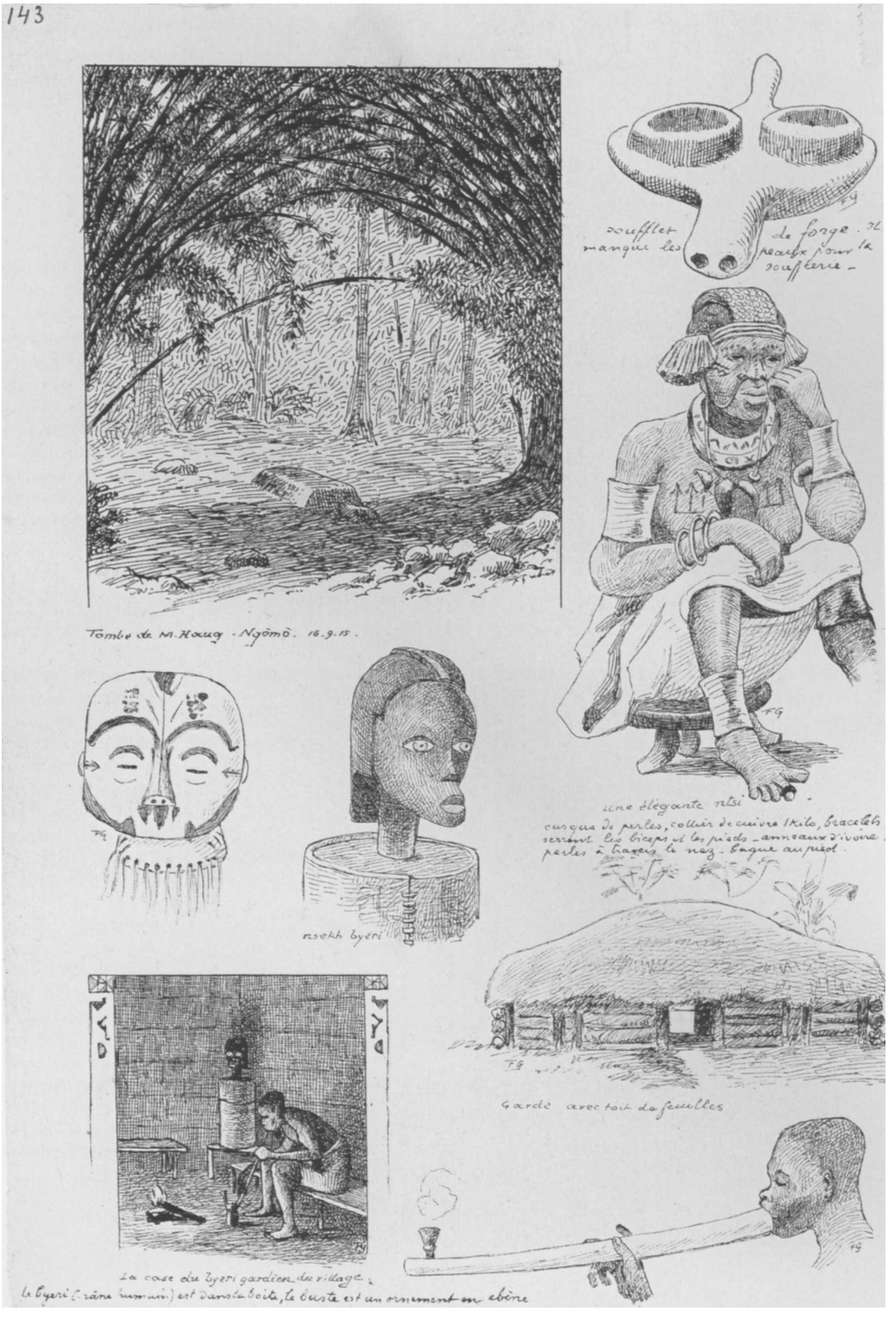
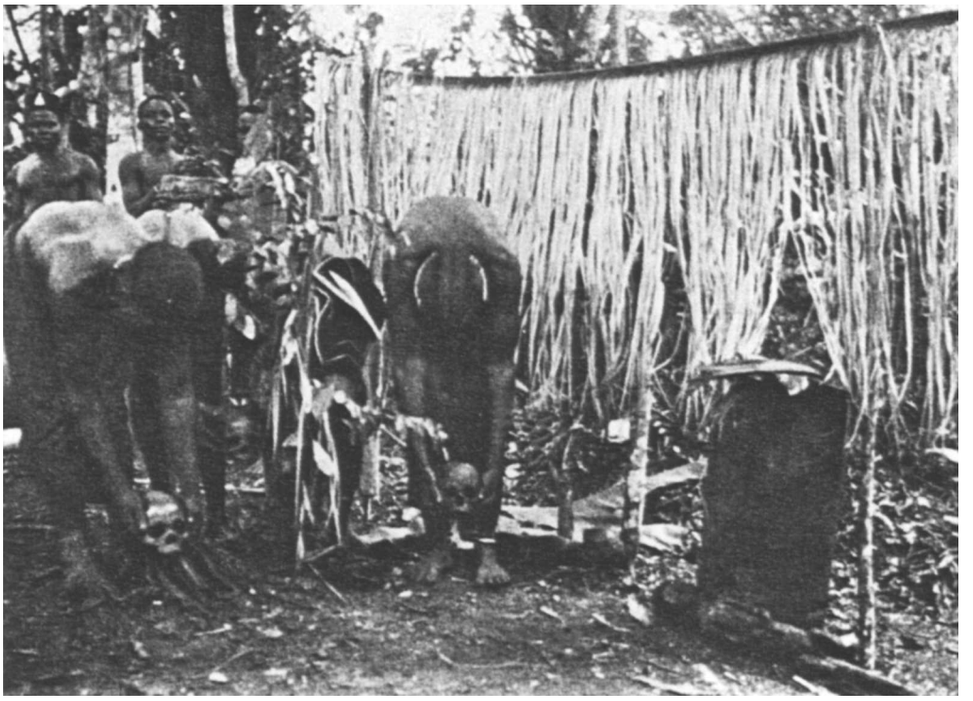


Fig. 19. Page from Fernand Grébert's notebook, 1913–17. Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva, Grébert Collection

This series of sketches includes two depictions of Fang *byeri* heads, in the center and at the lower left. The latter shows the head positioned at the summit of its receptacle in a private chamber.



20

Figs. 20, 21. Günter Tessmann, Ancestor cult rites, Ebäangon, southern Cameroon, 1907–9. From Tessmann 1913, vol. 2, p. 125, fig. 48; p. 123, fig. 47

Tessmann's 1913 monograph remains one of the few eyewitness accounts of a Fang *malan* (*melan*) initiation rite. This photograph, one of three he entitled *Veneration of the Ancestors*, was taken in the forest enclosure where the ritual was staged. The crania, removed from their container, are cradled like children in the arms of the participants and moved around magical matter, close to the ground. They are sung lullaby-like songs, which reflect the metaphorical association between states of being at the inception and the conclusion of life.



21

During the "presentation of the skulls," the crania of the ancestors are taken out of the bark vessel and displayed in a row on a high bench. Here, the two figures have been removed from the top of the reliquary vessel; one lies on the ground, the other rests next to the crania.

Christraud Geary has suggested that Tessmann's images were staged because his action shots would not have been possible in the short time during which the actual rite unfolded (C. Geary 1995, pp. 107–8). Although some specific moments of the ceremony appear to have been recreated, the images nonetheless remain important for their documentary value.

community at large. Acquiring the *evus* for entirely selfish ends, however, was viewed as socially unacceptable. During the early twentieth century, the most effective defense that the Fang possessed against those who wielded such powers to the detriment of others, among them "witches," was the *ngi* society.[101] The *nnom ngi,* its leader, had acquired the power of *evus* in order to police the community and was assisted in pursuing and eliminating witches by a group of prominent individuals that included heads of families. When *ngi* was engaged in surveying a village to identify a guilty party, it did so through the appearance of a masked member who intimidated and instilled fear in the community (cat. no. 110).

Invoking the cult of the ancestors was sanctioned if it would secure the welfare of the entire lineage.[102] Ancestors were called upon, for example, to redress the destructive imbalances created by the *evus* that led to sickness and death. Among their chief responsibilities was generating new life by granting fertility to their descendants.[103] At the same time, their anger over the transgression of established rules of behavior manifested itself in problems such as infertility, famine, and sickness. Ultimately, the foremost, overarching concern of ancestral rites was to honor ancestors in order to achieve reconciliation and encourage their protective benevolence toward the lineage.[104]

The ancestor cult, *byeri* (also known as *malan* or *melan*), sought to bind together living and deceased members of a lineage through the learning and recitation of its genealogy.[105] In explaining its role, contemporary elders have likened *byeri* to a highly sophisticated communications system that afforded them direct access to the ancestral realm. Powerful and celebrated ancestors to whom the living remained meaningfully connected were addressed through the medium of their crania. A Fang-Ntumu chief, Oyono Nkulu, emphasized that the criteria for selecting such worthy candidates was that they be considered exemplary role models—the most generous, powerful, or handsome, or the best warrior.[106] A Fang *byeri* reliquary contained eight to ten skulls assembled by several generations of a family in a cylindrical bark receptacle (*nsuk byeri*) (fig. 18). Since each relic's efficacy as a vehicle to reach the ancestors diminished over time, it was eventually reburied and replaced with a relic identified with an individual thought of as potentially more responsive.[107] The mysteries of the ancestors and their relics were revealed to initiates, or *ngomalan,* who presided over their veneration. The figurative representation associated with each reliquary served as its simulacrum to the community at large. Referred to as a "child of medicine," the reliquary figure served as the focus of periodic offerings and also warned women and children away from the sacra (fig. 19).[108]

Byeri rites strengthened a village by reigniting the ancestors' interest in the community and thus obtaining their protection and blessing.[109] Initiation of a new member often occurred after the death of an influential personage when his cranium was added to the reliquary. Tessmann witnessed two *byeri* rites during the first decade of the twentieth century, one in Equatorial Guinea, the other in southern Cameroon. He documented the rite celebrated by the Esseng family in Cameroon with three photographs that were published in 1913 in his ethnography of the Fang.[110] These images illustrate the chapter entitled "Veneration of the Ancestors."[111] Fernandez draws on Tessmann's accounts, among those of others, to provide an overview of *byeri* initiation.[112] He notes that as part of the preparations the reliquary was taken to a forest enclosure, where the ancestral crania were lined up for display. The initiate had already consumed the hallucinatory *alan* root in the village, while the rest of the community danced around him, singing funerary songs accompanied by drums, xylophones, and harps (see figs. 22, 23). His subsequent collapse was characterized as a journey to the realm of the dead. This experience "opened the head" of the initiate to that which is not accessible to the senses, so that he might serve as an intermediary with the ancestors.[113]

While the initiate recovered in the forest enclosure, members refortified the relics with a potent libation and paid tribute to them with a dance. They circled around the crania, cradled them in their arms, and held them close to the ground, tenderly handling the relics of cherished relatives as a parent would lull a newborn to sleep.[114] This choreography is documented in a caption to one of Tessmann's photographs, which relates that the members let the ancestor skulls dance around a "medicine" composed of different plants (fig. 20).[115]

The revived initiate was then cleansed thoroughly, and his body anointed with red padouk powder on the left side, as an expression of joy at his recovery, and with raffia palm oil on the right, as a symbol of his state of purity. When the members and initiate returned to the village, the reliquary of the initiate's family was placed at the head of his bed, where the figurative representation on its lid gazed down at him. That night, as he slept near the relics, the ancestors sent him signs in his dreams. The next day, back in the forest, the relics were placed behind a raffia screen, while over its summit the figures confronted the initiate with questions concerning his genealogy and the content of his dreams.

The other two Tessmann photographs document ritual sequences involving the resuscitation of the spirit of the dead and the presentation of the relics. A barrier used to conceal the relics was abruptly pulled away to heighten the dramatic impact of the initiate's exposure to "the miracle of the crania."[116] Christraud Geary notes that in one of Tessmann's photographs two sculpted guardian figures have been set aside, one lying next to the bark container, the other leaning against a bench upon which the skulls were positioned in front of the raffia partition (fig. 21). The initiate was then given instruction concerning the identity of the various relics, his relationship to them, and his ritual obligations. These directives emphasized the need for the initiate to work closely with the ancestors and periodically refortify their relics. He was directed to request their blessing before departing on a journey and to share with them any bounty he might be afforded. The rite was then animated by a theatrical performance before the entire community in which the ancestor figures were manipulated by the initiates in what Tessmann characterized as a bawdy "puppet show" that elicited great amusement from the audience.[117] He notes that the figures danced, frolicked, embraced one another, and engaged in mock intercourse. This display appears to have parodied antisocial behavior through ridiculing incest, an aspect of uncontrolled sexuality that the Fang sought to prevent.[118] At *byeri*'s conclusion, the reliquaries were returned to their respective council houses, where anything in need of blessing was laid before them.[119] (For more on the aesthetic dimension of *byeri* sculpture, see my essay "The Body Eternal" in this volume.)

While the Bamileke and related Grassfields groups have preserved their ancestral cult into the present day, the Kwele and Fang have not. Local institutions such as *beete* and *byeri* were outlawed and suppressed by colonial administrators.[120] These vulnerable communities, when confronted with grave threats to their survival, lacked the means to protect themselves and experienced tremendous social anxiety. In this context, local leaders, preoccupied with their efforts to restore social harmony, either developed new religious practices or adapted traditional ones. The artifacts that had accompanied the earlier rituals, such as the works in this exhibition, were relinquished. Laburthe-Tolra has noted that while the Fang-Beti people abandoned certain of the outward expressions of their fundamental beliefs and values, they nevertheless carried others over into new forms of devotion such as Christianity. Principles ranging from interdictions against killing, stealing, lying, and adultery to showing respect for one's parents were completely consonant with both worldviews.[121] Yet, despite the parallels and commonalities between Christianity and indigenous devotion, Fang elders still consider it difficult to fully embrace and master the mystical practices of Christianity. The continuing close reliance of Fang Christians on their ancestors, for example, is apparent in the distinctive practice of burying their deceased directly in front of their family home (see fig. 17).

Although the ritual practices and artifacts relating to *byeri* have been absent for several generations and are now familiar only to knowledgeable elders, their absence instills in those individuals a keen sense of loss. In recent years, the Fang have begun to express a sense that they have been denied a valuable aspect of their heritage that has been excised from their experience. In 2006, on a visit to southern Cameroon, I found that contemporary elders were pleased to be asked to discuss their past and made it clear that they would like to revive interest in it.[122] At the same time, they expressed surprise at the number of *byeri* artifacts that have survived in the West, since the missionaries who collected them had insisted the artifacts were worthless and were to be destroyed. Others were convinced that the missionaries had exploited the knowledge imparted by the artifacts.

Anointed by the avant-garde and preserved by Western collectors, who have celebrated their sculptural qualities for more than a century, the remnants of this tradition continue to resonate profoundly with the desire of people in the region to connect to their past. That these works are considered masterpieces in the West elicits both pride and frustration in the heirs apparent of this tradition, given how devoid their own lives are of concrete evidence of their heritage. While their great-grandparents held on to the relics that were then conceived of as the most sacred aspect of ancestral veneration, today that is no longer a source of solace to their descendants.

The desire for a substantive bridge to one's past is fundamental to the human condition. In the West this has been most recently manifested in attempts to draw upon DNA analysis to chart and decipher our genetic makeup. The quest to discover one's distant ancestors, a major concern today in the United States, is not unlike the need of equatorial Africans to connect with the ancestors embodied in the works featured in this exhibition. The promise of science has led DNA testing companies to embrace the enterprise of assisting in searches to identify ancestors who predate surviving records.[123] The same historical currents and social turmoil that have left the contemporary Fang bereft of their material culture have brought other equatorial Africans to the West. Dislocated by the slave trade, many of their descendants in the diaspora seek evidence of their full identity and may eventually trace it to the equatorial region.

The approach of this exhibition and its accompanying publication differs significantly in a number of ways from that of previous treatments of these works. It considers the inextricably intertwined aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of creations that instilled wonder and awe in their original patrons and engaged the purely aesthetic interest of the first generations of African art enthusiasts in the West. While past studies featuring these works have ranged from general surveys, to monographs devoted to single ethnic groups, to examinations of art produced within the boundaries of a postcolonial nation-state, the approach embraced in this instance is at once thematic and regionally oriented. In his groundbreaking *Paths in the Rainforests,* Vansina set forth the meaningful framework of an "equatorial tradition" for appreciating the cultural heritage of the many distinct but closely related peoples whose artistic expression is the focus of this exhibition. Their shared emphasis on elaborate rites of ancestral veneration is expressed in many ways through related forms of figurative representation that are considered here for the first time as a coherent body of artistic creation.

Finally, our approach is an interdisciplinary one in which the contributing authors comment from the perspectives of art history, history (Kairn Klieman), ethnography (Louis Perrois), and religion (Elias Bongmba). As a study of African art developed within one of the world's great fine-arts institutions, this survey afforded a unique opportunity to consider meaningful resonances with parallel traditions better known in the East and West: of the Asian reliquaries discussed by Denise Leidy in this essay and the Christian reliquary developed in medieval times (see the essay by Barbara Boehm in this volume). One of the historical ironies that becomes evident is that the more we consider the ritual contexts of the equatorial African and European reliquary traditions and their role within their respective societies, the more it becomes apparent that the belief systems they complemented were not as incompatible as Western missionaries contended in the nineteenth century.

Equatorial Africa's magnificent sculptural legacy is among the highlights of encyclopedic collections such as that of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although now recognized as one of the greatest artistic movements developed in Africa, this tradition was primarily appreciated a century ago for its pivotal role in the renaissance of creative consciousness that unfolded with the launch of modernism in Europe and the United States. Such was the aesthetic power and charisma of independent sculptural elements like the Pahouin or Black Venus and the Great Bieri (cat. nos. 33, 45) on an entirely formal level that they attained international renown and iconic status. They were prized by Western collectors, most notably Nelson Rockefeller, whose passion for African art was responsible for several of the most celebrated examples of this tradition finding a permanent home in the Metropolitan. In equatorial Africa, such works were inspired by a desire to affirm a vital connection to ancestral lineage originating in a founding

progenitor. When they began turning up in cities such as Paris and Berlin during the late nineteenth century as so much flotsam and jetsam, they were irreparably severed from the world that gave them meaning.

Denise Patry Leidy, Curator of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum, kindly contributed the text on relics in Buddhist Asia for this essay (see pp. 14–17).

1. Leloup 2006, p. 107. Unless otherwise indicated in the Bibliography, all translations are my own.
2. Shattuck 1968, p. 23.
3. Ibid., p. 38.
4. New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 11.
5. Ibid., p. 73.
6. Warnod 1912.
7. Ibid.
8. This delayed response underpins Rubin's argument that non-Western art came to be recognized for its congruence with interests that had already begun to take shape.
9. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 126.
10. Dias 1991, pp. 168–74.
11. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 139.
12. A photograph published by Paudrat (1984–85, p. 142) documents a series of African sculptures in the Paris home of Matisse's grandson Claude Duthuit, including several reliquary figures from equatorial Africa (one Fang and two Tsogho). It is difficult to determine, however, which of these were among the some twenty pieces owned by Matisse himself. Alessandra Carnielli and Claude Duthuit have noted that while some of the works were given by Matisse to his daughter, Marguerite, others were collected by Marguerite's husband, Georges (personal communication, 2006).
13. Ibid., p. 141.
14. Ibid. Recent research by Peter Stepan has revealed that the reliquary traditions featured in this exhibition were well represented in Picasso's personal collection. Among the African sculptures the artist acquired were several Kotas, a Punu/Lumbu, a Tsogho, and three Teke figures (Stepan 2006).
15. Quoted in Flam 2003, p. 419.
16. New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 1.
17. Ibid., p. 53.
18. Rubin illustrates this principle through an account that Picasso provided him of his conceptual appropriation of a Grebo mask that was ultimately unrecognizable in *Guitar,* the work he created in response (ibid., pp. 18–19).
19. I want to thank Yaëlle Biro, Curatorial Intern in African Art at the Metropolitan Museum, for her careful review of the Brummer Archive at The Cloisters, which provided many details of these transactions.
20. Although Brummer may have been the dealer who originally handled many of the works in this exhibition, the descriptions he uses in his records of sales and acquisitions are so generic (*tête nègre, statue nègre, masque africain*) that it is difficult to identify specific works; his records relied on the numbers he assigned to each work of art. Kann, Vignier, and Haviland were all highly cosmopolitan art collectors as well as art dealers. Kann not only had a world-class collection of modern art but also owned major antiquities, including Greek, Roman, and Chinese art. Vignier, a Symbolist poet, specialized in Chinese, Indian, and Pre-Columbian antiquities along with Islamic art and medieval goldsmithwork and illuminated manuscripts. The exhibition of the Vignier collection organized at the Galerie Levesque, Paris, in May–June 1913 was the first time African art was presented from an aesthetic perspective in a French private gallery. Haviland, a painter, was close to Gertrude Stein and her circle of avant-garde artists.
21. In an unpublished work in progress, *Joseph Brummer: Figure-clef du primitivisme, 1883–1947,* Krisztina Passuth suggests that Brummer left Paris in 1914 and organized an African art exhibition in his New York gallery in 1922.
22. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 152.
23. Shannon 2001, p. 169.
24. Ibid., p. 178.
25. Sarah Greenough in Paris and Madrid 2004–5, p. 77.
26. Tessmann 1960, p. 117.
27. Fernandez 1982, p. 40.
28. Vansina 1990, pp. 239, 244.
29. Laburthe-Tolra 1970, p. 377.
30. Ibid., p. 374.
31. Wills 2001, p. 235.
32. O'Donnell 2005, p. 175; *Augnet* 2006, p. 349.
33. Augustine *City of God* (trans. McCracken) 1957, 1.13.
34. O'Donnell 2005, p. 177.
35. Augustine *Confessions* (trans. Boulding) 1998, 9.7.
36. Paula L. Gerson in Kibler and Zinn 1995, p. 790.
37. Wills 2001, p. 238.
38. See Chen 2002.
39. *Fa men si* 1994.
40. Rhi 2005.
41. Huntington 1986.
42. Sharf 1992.
43. Stuart 2005.
44. Washington, D.C., San Diego, and Fort Lauderdale 2000–2001, p. 19.
45. Davis 1970, p. 154.
46. Ibid., p. 142.
47. Ibid., pp. 145, 146.
48. Vansina 1990.
49. Ibid., p. 6.
50. Ibid., p. 5; Birmingham and Martin 1983, p. 1.
51. Malaquais 2002, p. 110.
52. Harter 1986, p. 15.
53. Malaquais 2002, p. 110.
54. Tardits 1980, p. 855.
55. Ibid., p. 710.
56. C. Geary 1983, p. 67.
57. Tardits 1980, p. 222.
58. The term *Bamileke* is an administrative one first used by the Germans to describe a group of independent chiefdoms scattered over a vast fertile plateau. The cluster of Bangwa chiefdoms were the only Bamileke centers to have been administered by the British after the defeat of the Germans during World War I. They were grouped together as a unit of local government by the British colonial administration in 1921.
59. Brain and Pollock 1971, pp. 5, 19.
60. Malaquais 2002, p. 111.
61. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 13.
62. Ibid., p. 65.
63. At the time of their study, Brain and Pollock documented an average of seven crania of patrilineal ancestors in the Bangwa chiefdoms they visited. They noted, however, that none of the nine paramount chiefs had a full set of figures corresponding to the skulls—a deficit blamed on the destruction of Bangwa palaces by the Germans in the early 1900s (ibid., p. 118). Sadly, most of the works that had remained in Bangwa chiefdoms, and were reproduced in the field photographs in Brain and Pollock's monograph, have since been removed from the region and have entered Western collections.
64. Ibid., p. 20.
65. Ibid., pp. 118, 117.
66. Ibid., p. 1.

67. Brain and Pollock's study has also been essential in establishing the correct attribution for the works in German museums that had been erroneously identified with the eastern Bamileke chiefdom also called Bangwa (ibid., p. 2).
68. Vansina 1990, p. 75.
69. Vansina 1983, p. 83.
70. Vansina 1990, p. 85.
71. Laburthe-Tolra 1970, p. 8.
72. Vansina 1990, p. 74.
73. Ibid., p. 97.
74. Vansina 1983, pp. 86, 91.
75. Ibid., p. 100.
76. Ibid., p. 77.
77. Ibid., p. 105.
78. Ibid.
79. Du Chaillu 1867, p. 78.
80. Ibid., p. 200.
81. Siroto 1969, p. 85.
82. Ibid., pp. 167, 83, 166.
83. Ibid., p. 168.
84. Ibid., pp. 173, 167.
85. Ibid., p. 168.
86. Ibid., pp. 176, 205.
87. Ibid., p. 214.
88. Ibid., p. 235.
89. Fernandez 1982, p. 76.
90. Laburthe-Tolra 1970, pp. 211–12.
91. Abéga 1987, pp. 336–37.
92. Ibid., p. 40.
93. Laburthe-Tolra 1970, p. 204.
94. Abéga 1987, pp. 335–36.
95. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 45.
96. Ibid., p. 185.
97. Ibid., p. 46.
98. Fernandez 1982, p. 254.
99. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 53.
100. Fernandez 1982, p. 209.
101. Ibid., p. 222.
102. Ibid., p. 266.
103. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, pp. 9–10.
104. Ibid., p. 53; Fernandez 1982, p. 254.
105. Fernandez 1982, p. 181.
106. Oyono Nkulu, Chef de Canton Nkumu, at Ambam, Cameroon, personal communication, May 2006.
107. Fernandez 1982, p. 256.
108. Ibid., pp. 258, 256.
109. Ibid., p. 266.
110. C. Geary 1995.
111. Tessmann 1960, pp. 115–25.
112. Fernandez 1982, p. 262.
113. Ibid., pp. 261, 262.
114. Ibid., p. 254.
115. Tessmann in C. Geary 1995, pp. 107–8. Based on the manner in which the Tessmann photographs are composed, Geary suggests that important sequences of the ritual were staged for him.
116. Tessmann 1960, p. 263.
117. Ibid., p. 265.
118. Fernandez 1982, p. 253; Laburthe-Tolra 1970, p. 343.
119. Fernandez 1982, p. 266.
120. Vansina 1990, p. 246.
121. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 379.
122. In May 2006 a grant from the Ford Foundation allowed me to spend several weeks in Ebolowa, Cameroon, in order to interview Fang elders in the region concerning this exhibition project.
123. African Ancestry Co., Oxford Ancestors, and DNA Heritage are several of the companies that offer such services, which were featured in a segment of the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* aired on PBS on July 20, 2006.



Of Ancestors and Earth Spirits

New Approaches for Interpreting Central African Politics, Religion, and Art

KAIRN KLIEMAN

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in presenting this masterfully organized exhibition of central African reliquary figures, has afforded us an opportunity to cast a fresh look at objects long considered classics of African art. The exhibition is timely as well, for it follows upon nearly two decades of ground breaking scholarship regarding the peoples, cultures, and histories of central Africa. Beginning with Jan Vansina's seminal *Paths in the Rainforest* (1990) and rooted in a variety of disciplines and methodologies (archaeology, comparative historical linguistics, oral traditions, and ethnography), this new corpus of scholarly works allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the social, political, and religious contexts in which the reliquary figures were originally produced. This essay will draw upon such scholarship to present a brief historical background of the peoples who made the artifacts, highlight their commonalities in the social, political, and religious spheres, and provide a number of new interpretations regarding the meanings and uses of the reliquary figures.

On the "Obscurity" of the Central African Past

In defining specific artifacts as "classic," art historians refer not only to the fine workmanship and enduring beauty of the objects, but also to the fact that, in many cases, they have taken on an "iconic" status in the West. Indeed, when presented in popular contexts, these objects may come to serve as "symbols" of Africa itself. Such has been the case for a number of the reliquary sculptures presented here, especially those of the Kota and Fang. It is paradoxical, then, that these sculptures—among the earliest collected, best known, and most admired by Westerners—were produced by communities whose actual histories have remained among the most obscure of all the world's peoples.

There are a number of reasons why central Africa remained terra incognita to historians for so long.[1] Key among these is a lack of traditional forms of historical data, that is, archaeological and documentary sources. Documentation pertaining to central African societies first appeared only with the arrival of Europeans in the late fifteenth century; until the mid-nineteenth century, when European "explorers" began to traverse the rainforest, most of these records pertained to coastal societies and a few centralized kingdoms of the savannas to the south (Kongo, Tio, Ndongo). Systematic archaeological excavations were not carried out until the 1980s, partly because of the difficulty of the terrain, but also because the acidity of central African soils (which causes rapid deterioration of organic materials) discouraged archaeologists seeking "treasure troves" of precious artifacts. As a result, the archaeological record remained very limited, consisting primarily of stone tools and pottery shards found in haphazard ways—in soil upturned for road construction or in caves and river gullies, for instance.

Equally important in explaining our lack of knowledge is the deep-seated assumption that central Africa simply has no history to reconstruct. This bias was

Opposite: Half Figure from a Tsogho Reliquary Ensemble (cat. no. 96, detail)

rooted in nineteenth-century beliefs about environment, progress, and race, all of which viewed central Africans as the lowest "rung" on an imagined ladder of human evolution. Since the earliest days of exploration, the central African rainforest loomed large in the Western imagination as a veritable "green hell" where life was precarious, disease ran rampant, and societal growth was stunted by a never-ending struggle to survive. Such beliefs were reinforced by the presence of both noncentralized lineage-based societies among Bantu agriculturalists and hundreds of Batwa, or "pygmy," communities that were perceived as primordial remnants of the earliest humans.[2] As Vansina has noted, such biases led to a legacy of scholarly dismissal based on the notions that "environment determines history" and that the "unlucky" peoples of central Africa have no history because they have never changed.[3]

It is important to understand the degree to which such thinking has affected our perceptions of the central African peoples and their customs, contributing to a "Heart of Darkness" mentality that impedes cultural analyses rooted in the acknowledgment of common human traits. The practice of utilizing human remains such as skulls and bones in religious ritual—especially the remains of individuals considered to possess superior spiritual skills—provides a case in point. As Barbara Boehm illustrates so clearly in her essay in this volume, European societies have long employed this custom, deeming it essential to the religious functions of the Christian church. In the African context, however, the practice is viewed as strange and exotic at best or, more commonly in the past, as evidence of the "savagery," "witchcraft," and cannibalism associated with the supposedly "primitive" societies of the African continent.

At work in the construction of such false categorizations has been the Western need to create extreme "others." These imagined communities, when posed as a foil to European and American societies, provided grounds for expressing difference, reflecting upon our own cultures, and justifying claims of "evolutionary" and racial superiority. As Curtis Keim has aptly pointed out, Westerners have long "used Africa to think with"; indeed, we often seek to know Africa so that we can better know ourselves.[4] Nowhere has this tendency been more exaggerated than in our attitudes toward central Africa, where it continues to affect policies regarding contemporary social and political problems. Thus, it must be acknowledged that the intellectual habit of "otherizing" central Africans has been critical in curtailing the motivation to reconstruct the past.

Vansina's *Paths in the Rainforest* broke new ground precisely because it rejected such Social Darwinist notions, arguing for the intrinsic merit, complexity, and historicity of central African cultural and political systems. The author's vast knowledge of central African societies, combined with innovative methods of comparative historical linguistics, allowed him not only to elucidate the internal logic that underlay the foundation of both noncentralized and centralized political organizations, but also to document the transformations that occurred in these systems during the "watershed" events of the central African past: the Bantu migration, the introduction of bananas and iron, the development of centralized polities on the borders of the rainforest, and the advent of the Atlantic slave trade.

The historical conclusions presented in this essay have been formulated through a similar approach, namely, the use of comparative historical linguistics and a broad variety of archaeological, ethnographic, oral, documentary, and linguistic evidence from west central African societies.[5] While one important goal of the essay is to provide a cultural and historical background for the peoples whose artworks are presented in the exhibition, another is to illustrate the cultural commonalities of these seemingly disparate communities. To accomplish these goals, we must look at three key elements of central African life through a historical lens: environment, religious beliefs, and political systems. For central Africans these three facets of life are intimately and organically linked, so much so, in fact, that the intellectual foundations upon which such linkages were originally made have long been forgotten. They can be discerned, however, through the multidisciplinary types of comparative analyses mentioned above. An understanding of these fundamental conceptual linkages proves fascinating, for it sheds light not only on the motivation behind the production of the reliquary figures presented here, but also on central Africans' answers to the most common of all human questions, "Where do we come from?"

Historical Perspectives: The Land and Its Peoples

This exhibition presents artifacts from fourteen distinct societies living in five different African nations: Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Republic of Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see map 1, p. xii). All the languages spoken in these societies are classified as either "narrow" Bantu or Bantoid, both of which belong to the broader family of Bantu languages; as such, and despite their widespread locations, they share important cultural and linguistic traits. The "narrow" Bantu language group began to be formed roughly five thousand years ago, as the ancestors of the early proto-Bantu community began to move south from their original location in the northwestern Cameroon/eastern Nigeria borderlands. Behind them they left "sister" speech communities that became ancestral to the Bantoid branch, today spoken primarily in the Grassfields regions of northwestern Cameroon. The southward movement of groups speaking proto-Bantu, which led eventually to the spread of Bantu languages into the equatorial rainforest and across the southern half of the continent, is referred to as the Bantu expansion. It is considered the first watershed event of central African history and—although it took place over a period of more than four thousand years—one of the most expansive "migration" episodes in human history.

The origins of the Bantu expansion can be found in a broader set of events instigated by climate shifts in West Africa, namely, a dramatic increase in rainfall that occurred between 11,000 and 8000 B.C.E.[6] Because of these changes, peoples inhabiting the woodland savannas of West Africa began to shift away from hunting and gathering and to invent a system of agriculture based on the cultivation of yams, oil and raffia palms, okra, and a number of other indigenous crops. The peoples who undertook this transformation are referred to by historians as the ancient Niger-Congo society, for it was their descendants who eventually spread into the regions between these two mighty rivers, carrying their languages, cultures, and agricultural techniques with them. By the late sixth or early fifth millennium, for example, the Benue-Kwa speech community, an offshoot of the more ancient Niger-Congo, began to move eastward toward central Africa, settling into the varied environments (forest and savanna) of northwestern Cameroon and the western Central African Republic. Archaeologically speaking, the arrival of these populations can be discerned by the appearance of pottery and polished stone axes, which autochthonous inhabitants had not yet begun to use. The polished stone ax was a critical element of the agriculturalists' success, for it allowed them to more effectively cut down trees and eventually to move into forested regions by clearing lands for cultivation.

By the beginning of the fourth millennium B.C.E., the proto-Bantu speech community had formed among the southernmost of these agriculturalist populations, most likely along the forest fringes around the Sanaga and Nyong Rivers in southern Cameroon.[7] From there they began to move farther south along the coast and into the rainforest. In these earlier phases of the Bantu expansion, populations settled along rivers and streams, allowing for a relatively rapid movement across vast expanses of land. Over time, and especially as communities moved into locations increasingly distant from one another, new dialects, languages, and societies developed, each retaining important linguistic and cultural traits from the proto-Bantu speech community and from the more ancient Niger-Congo culture as well.[8]

From an environmental perspective, the region we focus on consists of a vast expanse of equatorial rainforest delimited by savanna-forest mosaics in the north and the south (central Cameroon and southwestern Gabon/Congo Republic, respectively) and the marsh forests of the middle Congo River (western Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the east (map 2). In Cameroon the transitional savanna-forest mosaic zones are located along the Sanaga River, separating the equatorial rainforests from the "Grassfields" (savanna) regions of the Adamawa Plateau to the northeast and the Mbam rainforests to the northwest (Nigeria/Cameroon border). Savanna-forest mosaics also predominate along the southwestern edges of the rainforest, particularly in the valleys of the Ngounié, Nyanga, and Kouilou rivers (Gabon and Congo Republic). To the east is the Bateke Plateau, where the Ogooué River finds its source. This region is characterized by savannas proper, which extend south into the central Congo Republic, across the Congo River into western Angola, and



Map 2. Environmental map of Africa; detail of west-central Africa with towns, rivers, and mountains identified in this volume. Detail map adapted from Klieman 2003, p. 37



Map 3. Major cultural regions discussed in this volume. Adapted from Barreteau 1978, map appendix, n.p.; regions of Batwa settlement adapted from Lewis 2002, p. 48, and Mayer 1987, p. 124

across the southern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The majority of peoples represented in this exhibition live in the rainforest. These include the various Fang groups (A75; the Fang proper, Bane, Betsi, Mabea, Mvai, Ngumba, Ntumu, Nzaman, and Okak); the Bulu (A74); the Kota and closely related Mahongwe (B25); the Kwele, or Bekwil (A85b); the Tsogho (B31); the Sangu (B42); the Punu (B43); the Mbete, or Ambete (B62); the Bembe (H11); and the Ngata (C61b). Except for the Ngata, who live in the marsh forests of the western Congo Basin, all these societies occupy a vast rainforest plateau that extends from southern Cameroon into Equatorial Guinea, across northern, central, and eastern Gabon, and into the western portions of the Congo Republic (map 3). This plateau is unique for its high rainfall and low relief. Rainfall averages between 1,600 to 2,200 millimeters (63–87 inches) per year across the plateau and reaches as much as 2,800 to 3,000 millimeters (110–118 inches) along the northern coasts.[9] Mountains are rare, with the exception of the Crystal Mountains in northwestern Gabon and the Chaillu and Ikoundou Massifs in the south of Gabon and the Congo Republic. These reach as high as 1,000 meters (3,280 feet); otherwise, the altitudes of the plateau range between 200 and 500 meters (656–1,649 feet), except in the valleys of major rivers, where 0 to 100 meters (0–328 feet) is common.

Contrary to the Western image of the rainforest as a primeval, monotonous "green mass," central African rainforests are actually comprised of a variety of forest types, including inundated, dryland, evergreen, deciduous, and semideciduous. These varied ecologies, along with other factors such as soil type, altitude, plant composition, and past or present human usage, have created a diversity of microenvironments. Central Africans recognize these unique environmental niches; the Fang, for example, have eight separate terms for forest types, these being differentiated by both ecological characteristics and the activities that can be carried out within them.[10]

Archaeological evidence indicates that humans have been living in and altering central African rainforests since as early as 40,000–35,000 B.C.E.[11] Indeed, the rainforest itself has a history, as it has undergone vast expansions and retreats due to climatic shifts over the past 100,000 years. Throughout the millennia certain regions remained forested, allowing for the creation of "refuge" forests renowned today for a profusion of biological diversity. The rainforests of southern Cameroon, for instance, support "probably the richest flora in continental tropical Africa," and Gabon is estimated to harbor as many as eight thousand plant species.[12] Countering the nineteenth-century images of a forbidding "jungle," Western biologists today laud the "supreme luxuriance" of the rainforest environment, describing it as "the apex of creation."[13] Bantu-speaking Africans have long articulated a similar sense of awe regarding this unique environment. For them, the rainforest is a sacred place, one that houses ancestral and territorial spirits that serve as intercessors to **-yambé,* the "first spirit" and "first creator" of all things.[14]

The savanna-forest mosaics that border the edges of the equatorial rainforest are characterized by tall trees and perennial grasses, with remnant forests penetrating deep into the savanna and gallery forests along riverbanks. The wide variety of plant and animal resources in these regions made them a preferred location for human settlement in earlier times. Indeed, biologists consider the savanna formations in the north (Sanaga River valley) and the southwest (Nyanga, Kouilou, and Niari River valleys) to be the result of both ancient and recent human action upon the land, as forests were cleared for fuel wood or for agriculture. The Punu, whose artifacts are included in this exhibition, live primarily in this type of savanna-forest environment. They are currently dispersed across a wide swath of land that includes both forests and savanna-forest mosaics in the Nyanga River valley (southwestern Gabon/Congo Republic border).

The Bwende (H16d) and Teke (B70) inhabit savanna environments proper. The Bwende were formerly part of the Kongo Kingdom, established as a centralized polity around the mouth of the Congo River (map 4). The Teke, likewise, were part of the Tio Kingdom, which developed farther inland around Malebo Pool (on the right bank of the Lower Congo River). A third major kingdom in west-central Africa was Loango, which grew up along the coast north of the Congo River. All three kingdoms began to be formed out of preexisting districts and principalities during the fourteenth century C.E.



Map 4. Major kingdoms of west-central Africa, 17th century. Adapted from Vansina 1992, p. 560

Although historians have rightly discarded the notion that "environment determines history," it remains important to acknowledge the role that the environment played in the formation of these three central African kingdoms. All arose in ecotone regions (transitional zones between two distinct environments) and around major waterways and bodies of water or both. The great variety and abundance of natural resources found in such regions historically encouraged human settlement, while access to major waterways or the ocean facilitated the development of trade. As population densities grew and trade became increasingly long-distance, the accumulation of surplus wealth was made possible. Centralized polities thus developed as a means of regulating wide-ranging and increasingly complicated social, political, and economic affairs.

In the rainforest, by contrast, noncentralized political systems tended to prevail. Although a great variety of ethnic/linguistic groups exist there, political systems were commonly organized around lineages and clans, the largest political unit was generally the village, and the inhabitants favored egalitarian systems of political rule. Historians attribute the development of such systems to the more isolated nature of settlements and villages (which tended to be along rivers or carved out of the rainforest through human labor), less diverse natural resources, and the greater difficulty of overland travel and trade. Thus, until the advent of the Atlantic trade,

there were fewer opportunities for the mass accumulation of material wealth.

Contrary to Social Darwinist views, neither of these political systems can be considered more "advanced" or complex than the other, nor should they be seen as entirely distinct. Indeed, as Vansina has illustrated, the political structures underpinning the central African kingdoms were essentially enhanced versions of the lineage-based model, and centralized polities did develop in the rainforest, usually at key junctures in the long-distance system of riverine trade. It is also important to recognize that patterns of settlement, land use, intersocietal contact, and even the ideologies that legitimized political rule have changed over time. For example, although the lifestyles and belief systems of the earliest Bantu settlers in the rainforest served as a foundation upon which later societies were built, they differed greatly from those that prevailed both before and after the tumultuous era of the Atlantic slave trade (ca. 1480–1880).

This leads to another essential factor: the dramatic impact that the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent imposition of colonial rule (1884–1960) had on the human landscape of central Africa. Not only did economies and communities reorient toward the coast, but as guns fell into the hands of societies allied with Europeans, a "frontier" of slaving violence penetrated the continent.[15] Beginning at the coast in the mid-fifteenth century, this process reached the innermost regions of the continent by the end of the nineteenth. Each time the wave of violence "crested" in a new region, thousands of individuals were captured, exiled, or forced to flee. As Joseph Miller has explained, the slaving frontier "moved sufficiently rapidly over the centuries to restrict its maximum violence in any single region to little more than a generation or two."[16] In its wake, however, entire communities and ethnic groups were forced to relocate, new ethic identities were created, and a general "hardening" of what were previously much more fluid "ethnic lines" came to prevail.

The Bangwa peoples, whose ancestor memorial sculptures open this exhibition (cat. nos. 1, 2), are one of the ethnic/linguistic groups that came to be formed as a result of the Atlantic slave trade. They live in the damp valleys of volcanic foothills leading up to the Bamileke-Bamum Plateau in northwestern Cameroon, a region situated between the dense equatorial rainforests of the Mamfe Depression to the west and south and the open plateau Grassfields to the east.[17] Theirs is not an easy terrain to master; the topography is characterized by steep escarpments, rainfall is heavy, and rather than living in villages, the Bangwa are forced to carve out individual compounds on the hillsides, locating them several hundred yards apart. Despite these difficulties, the Bangwa chose to move into this region roughly two hundred years ago, and thus became important "middlemen" in the expanding system of Atlantic trade.[18]

Whether the Bangwa entered these foothills as a refuge from violence or for purely economic motives is unknown. Their ultimate origins are similarly difficult to discern. Their language (of the Bantoid family) and political structure (centralized chiefdoms) make them a part of the broader Bamileke Grassfields culture to the east, yet they embrace a number of religious beliefs and rituals, especially concerning witchcraft, that are common to the Ekoi forest cultures found to their west (in southeastern Nigeria).[19] Whatever their origins, the Bangwa became key suppliers of oil, wine, salt, meat, fish, and slaves in a wide-ranging network that extended east to Bamum and west to the Nigeria-Calabar and Cross River regions.[20] Their success as "middleman" enabled them to create a community that straddles both cultural and environmental zones.

The various Fang groups, whose *byeri* sculptures comprise the majority of artifacts in this exhibition, are another linguistic/ethnic community formed during the Atlantic slave trade era. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the ancestors of the Fang, that is, members of the original "proto-Fang" speech community, undertook a migration through the rainforests of southern Cameroon into the regions of modern-day Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon. Scholars suggest that their movements took place upon a northeast-southwest route, for as intrepid traders, they sought to gain direct access to European merchants on the coast.[21] Within the rainforest, Fang peoples carried out a very mobile lifestyle, changing settlements every two to three years and focusing their economic activities on hunting and collecting forest products important to the Atlantic trade, such as ivory and ebony.[22]

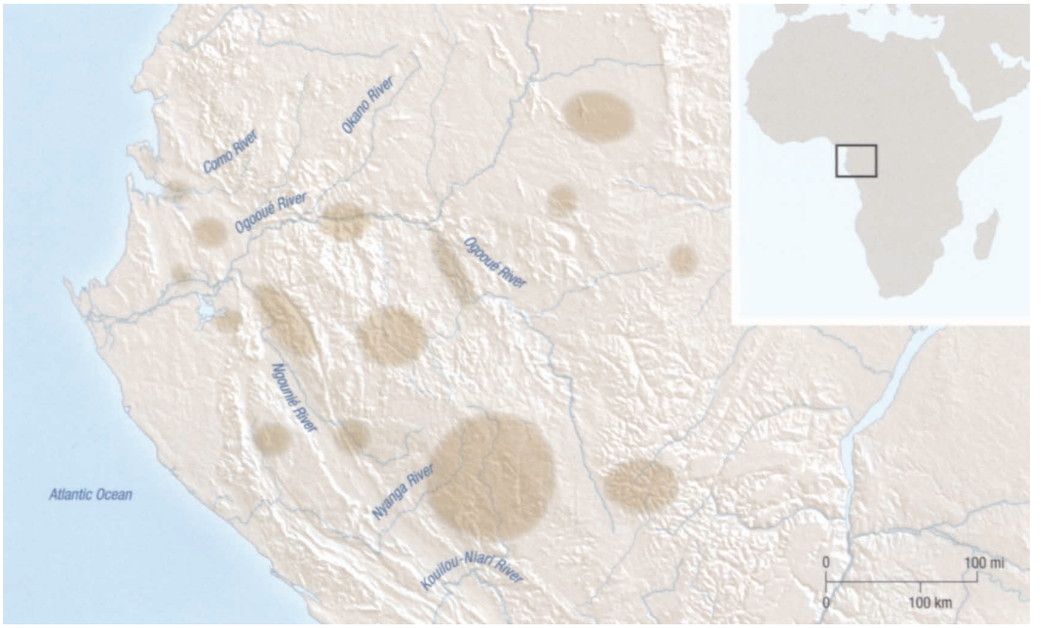
Despite the Fang's reputation as fierce warriors, their occupation of new territory was achieved with a degree of flexibility, including numerous episodes of geographical "backtracking" and the assimilation of peoples already present on the land.[23] Especially in the coastal hinterlands and along the Ogooué River, the Fang were attempting to impose themselves on trade networks that, although expanded since the advent of Atlantic trade, had been in existence since the last millennium B.C.E.[24] As such, they moved forward in "leapfrog" fashion, insinuating themselves between peoples who had long since lost the degree of cultural and linguistic cohesion that so emboldened the Fang.

James Fernandez has noted that the Fang did not rely on overt military techniques to establish themselves in new lands, but rather utilized "ambushes, trade blockades and extortion, night assaults and bluffs, and vocal skirmishes."[25] Histories for regions to the south of the Ogooué indicate that such tactics were often used to inaugurate a series of "palavers" through which aggressor communities were able to establish permanent alliances and systems of matrimonial exchange.[26] These in turn allowed for control over a complex chain of trade and kin networks across vast expanses of land, ensuring greater profitability and security for trading activities. It is likely that the Fang also employed these techniques and that the integration of "local" women into Fang clans, as well as the eventual dissemination of Fang-speaking women into neighboring (non-Fang-speaking) clans, facilitated the spread of the Fang language and culture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Fang was being spoken across the entire region from the Sanaga River in southern Cameroon to the Ogooué River in Gabon.

The wide-ranging nature of the Fang migration, along with their assimilation of communities already in place, led to the formation of numerous dialectically and geographically distinct communities. Among these are the Bulu, Betsi, Nzaman, Ntumu, Mvai, Okak, Mabea, and Ngumba, all of whom are represented in this exhibition. Although each of these communities developed its own lineage and settlement histories, the accounts all share a number of themes regarding the initial migration south. For example, they all relate that their ancestors originally inhabited a grassland environment to the northeast, that they were invaded by "red-skinned" men who rode horses, that they crossed a great river with the aid of a chthonian creature referred to as Ombure, and that Batwa populations aided their entry into the rainforest by chopping down a giant *adzap* tree that blocked their way. Given the consistency of these motifs, as well as the dating of the Fang migration, Fernandez has suggested that southward expansion of Fulani pastoralists from the Sudanic regions during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries introduced a "shock" of violence in the northeastern regions of Cameroon.[27] This led to warfare and slave-raiding in the Grassfields regions of the Adamawa Plateau, which in turn forced proto-Fang-speaking peoples to move south.

The Fang migration had a dramatic impact on peoples living farther to the south. Before the arrival of the Fang, the regions north of the Ogooué were likely to have been inhabited by peoples speaking languages of the B-20 branch of Bantu, especially those ancestral to the Sekiani (B21) and Kele/Ngom (B22a/B22b) speech communities that appear in scattered locations across the region today. Although many of these people were probably integrated into Fang societies, the work of François Ngolet suggests that not all chose to assimilate.[28] Instead significant numbers of Kele-speakers developed a lifestyle much like that of the Fang, becoming specialist suppliers of ivory and other forest products and moving aggressively into trade networks south of the Ogooué.

In the mid-nineteenth century Kele-speaking populations were established as important traders along the Rembo Nkomi River, at the confluence of the Ngounié and Ogooué, and down the left bank of the Ngounié (map 5). They also controlled a major trading district called Samkita on the middle reaches of the Ogooué. By the late 1890s they had developed overland trade routes from Samkita through the rainforest south to the Chaillu Massif, where they sought to obtain forest products from previously untapped terrain. In doing so, they entered into conflict with Tsogho-speaking peoples. As Chris Gray has pointed out, the intensity of this conflict was unprecedented in Tsogho history.[29] Unsettled by these events, the Tsogho developed a new religious society (*kono*) in order to gain otherworldly support in their battles against the Kele. The reenactment of these



Map 5. Distribution of Kele-speaking clans, ca. 1900. Adapted from Ngolet 1994, published in Gray 2002, p. 53

battles also became a central part of ceremonies performed by members of *bwiti*, the foremost religious society among Tsogho men.

The effects of the Fang migration were equally dramatic in northeastern Gabon. During the mid-nineteenth century the Bulu (Fang-speaking peoples of southeastern Cameroon) gained access to arms and began raiding the neighboring Nzem, capturing women and children and forcing them into trade and kin alliances.[30] As the Nzem became clients of the Bulu, they too obtained guns and began raiding the Kwele, who lived to the southwest at the headwaters of the Ivindo River. Attempting to flee such incursions, the Kwele moved south into lands occupied by the various Kele-speaking peoples (the Ngwyes and Ngom, specifically) as well as by the Kota. Although the Ngwyes chose to ally with and integrate into Kwele communities, the Ngom and Kota began their own movements south. The Kwele continued to pursue them, eventually forcing them into the same types of hegemonic trade and kin alliances that the Nzem had imposed on the Kwele. This "domino effect" of violence, mass migration, the establishment of alliances, and introduction of arms affected nearly all the societies of eastern Gabon and western Republic of Congo. In the process, new alliances were made across ethnic/linguistic lines and many important politico-religious institutions came to be shared.

The last phases of the Fang migration along the Ogooué were halted by the French colonial conquest of Gabon in the late nineteenth century. What followed was by no means a more peaceful era, for the establishment of European trading factories in the interior and the subsequent system of concessionary rule led to more intense commercial competition, the imposition of brutal forms of forced labor (by Europeans and Africans alike), and the introduction of epidemic diseases among previously unexposed populations. The final blow to precolonial systems of land use and settlement came in the 1910s, as the French instituted a policy of "regroupment," whereby entire populations were forced to relocate along major rivers and roads in order that they might be more easily taxed and controlled.

As the preceding account makes clear, the transformations engendered by the Atlantic trade and colonial rule were unprecedented in the history of Africa. Although central Africans continued to rely on the political and religious precepts they had inherited from their ancestors in order to give meaning to their lives, they were forced to question the efficacy of older systems in the face of such extreme social upheaval and personal suffering. New notions of wealth, power, and political legitimacy had come to exist, new techniques of uniting lineages and clans across ethnic/linguistic lines were required, and new institutions for dealing with the

effects of what was considered to be an excess of evil (that is, "witchcraft") in society needed to be developed. Thus, older institutions were altered, adjusted, built upon, and at times even rejected. As trade networks and kin alliances linked increasingly diverse and widespread peoples into the Atlantic trade system, the especially effective religious and political innovations were passed from lineage to lineage and clan to clan, spreading across linguistic and geographical boundaries.

This history is essential to an understanding of the reliquary figures on view in the present exhibition, for they constitute the physical remnants of much broader cognitive systems, namely, the politico-religious institutions that were developed and disseminated in efforts to maintain a sense of communal well-being during the tumultuous centuries of the Atlantic trade era. The following analysis of the ancient roots and more modern manifestations of these broader cognitive systems aims to provide insight as to the uses and meanings of the sculptures exhibited.

The Niger-Congo Roots of Central African Religious and Political Life

Any explanation of the politico-religious institutions that have guided central African Bantu-speaking societies over the centuries must begin with an overview of the ancient Niger-Congo systems of thought. The proto-Niger-Congo speech community developed in the woodland savannas of West Africa between 16,000 and 9000 B.C.E.[31] As mentioned above, a dramatic increase in rainfall from about 11,000 to 8000 B.C.E. caused the inhabitants of this region to invent new systems of agriculture. Through the subsequent spread of peoples speaking languages descended from this group, and practicing agriculture, Niger-Congo linguistic and cultural traits were carried into West Africa, central Africa, the Great Lakes and East Africa, and even southern Africa. It is in these ancient roots that we find the origins of the great many cultural similarities that Africans south of the Sahara share.

The social groupings of Niger-Congo-speaking peoples were organized by lines of lineages and clans, with the clan being the widest political and social unit recognized. It is likely that these groups were originally matrilineal, meaning that inheritance and lineage affiliation were passed through one's mother or the brother of one's mother.[32] Every lineage had a leader or "chief," whose responsibilities were both religious and secular. Chiefs were expected to serve as ritual specialists for community members, interceding on their behalf with the spirits of the otherworld. They were also charged with adjudicating disputes, allocating lands to newcomers, and serving as spokesmen in relations with other communities. The dual nature of this chiefly role is an important precept that was passed down through time; historically, leaders were not considered effective, and indeed could not serve as such, unless their actions demonstrated that they had access to supernatural powers. Thus, chiefs were called upon to utilize all the means at their disposal—both political and religious—in order to ensure the well-being of their communities. Likewise, the institutions they led combined both aspects. It is for this reason that the term *politico-religious* is used to refer to the equatorial African ritual societies discussed in this essay. More commonly used terms, such as *secret society*, *initiation society*, or *cult*, do not sufficiently relay the important political roles they played.

In terms of cosmology, ancient Niger-Congo peoples recognized three "levels" of spirits. The foremost was God as a distant figure, conceived of as the "First Cause or Creator." Christopher Ehret has posited that this notion can be traced back to at least the sixth millennium B.C.E. and was probably extant among Niger-Congo populations long before.[33] A second level of spirits was associated with the land and considered to have sway over the events that took place on it. These are generally termed "territorial" spirits in academic circles, but, for reasons explained below, equatorial Africans often refer to them as ancestor spirits as well. Finally, there is the category of spirits that comprises named ancestors, that is, members of one's lineage or clan who have died and passed into the otherworld. In religious practice the last two types of spirits are predominant, for as inhabitants of the otherworld, they are considered to be closer to the ultimate source of creation/transformation and thus able to affect change on earth. Religious ceremonies are therefore designed to appease these spirits, as well as to access the supernatural powers they possess.

Niger-Congo thought systems attribute evil acts and personal or communal misfortune to one of two sources. The first is the neglect of ancestors or territorial spirits or, equally, the violation of precepts they have laid down. An individual ancestor who was particularly wicked while living may also be considered a source of misfortune once passed into the afterlife. The other source is the envy or malice of other human beings. This latter category is perceived of by Westerners as "witchcraft," and Africans, upon adopting European languages and religions, often use the same word to refer to actions based in such sentiments. It is not an especially apt term, however, for it masks African conceptualizations of the dual nature of supernatural powers, which can be employed for both benevolent and malevolent means.

According to Niger-Congo thought, it is an individual's intention that determines to what use supernatural powers will be put. A chief, for example, is expected to draw upon such powers to better the lives of his followers. If he begins to exhibit patterns of selfishness or greed, however, his followers will believe that he has chosen to use his religious skills for evil purposes, that is, for his own self-interest. The fact that peoples from all walks of life can become specialists in accessing these powers has a kind of "leveling" effect in African societies. A chief might curb his tendencies toward greed for fear of the malediction of one of his followers, whose religious skills might be more powerful than his own. At the core of such logic is the primacy of communal rather than individual interests, a fundamental precept that was, before the era of Atlantic trade, prominent in all African cultures.

Another important tenet of the Niger-Congo culture is "the principle of precedence," especially as applied to the occupation of lands and the role that "first-comers" play in the politico-religious order. This precept accords great respect and prestige to individuals or peoples considered to have been the first to inhabit a specific tract of land. These might be entire groups or categories of peoples that are deemed autochthonous, such as the Batwa of central Africa, commonly referred to as the "original owners of the land." In other cases first-comers might be the descendants of an individual who struck out on his own to establish a new village, thus, members of a founding lineage or clan. In either situation, first-comer prestige is derived from the fact that it was their ancestors who were originally buried in the land and from the firm belief that the spirits of those ancestors affect the fertility and fecundity of both people and land.

As direct descendants of the original inhabitants, first-comer communities are considered the most capable of accessing and influencing such spirits. They often take on the role of religious specialists to "late-comer" societies, especially with regard to the spirits of the land. In the precolonial African context, where economies were agrarian and wealth determined largely by the number of "followers" a leader could attract (and thus put to work), survival and success hinged on the issues of abundance and fertility. Thus, first-comer ritual specialists performed rites to bring rain, produce bountiful crops, ensure the fertility of women, and guarantee the general health and well-being of the community. Their role was pivotal, for without the blessings of the spirits of the land, the entire community would wither and die.

African history is replete with examples of societies that were formed through the arrival of late-comers who intermarried with locals and eventually established hegemony over a specific territory or land. In such contexts, late-comers faced a common dilemma: how to appropriately and effectively appease ancestors who were not their own, an act that was essential if they were to survive and thrive in new lands. A plethora of institutions and ideologies developed to deal with this problem; because of the common Niger-Congo heritage, most exhibit a degree of similarity regardless of where they are found. This essay focuses on examples from the Grassfields of Cameroon and the equatorial rainforests, especially as they pertain to the institutions that produced the artifacts on view. The Grassfields societies will be considered first, because they provide particularly lucid examples of the principle of precedence at work. Furthermore, they exhibit traits that help to understand the construction of Fang culture in regions farther south. Through a comparison of both Grassfields and rainforest societies, we are able to better comprehend the ideologies and institutions that render equatorial Africans so similar—in other words, to see the region as a coherent cultural whole.

The Grassfields Societies of Central Cameroon

The Grassfields societies of Cameroon, among which are found the Tikar, Bamileke, Bangwa, Bamum, and Bafut, are closely related and share a number of fundamental cultural traits. For example, they all speak Bantoid languages and reckon inheritance along patrilineal lines, they all rely on highly centralized systems of political rule that have a chief or king (*fon*) as head, and they all direct their religious activities toward veneration of both ancestral and territorial spirits. Although the position of chief or king is inherited, such individuals themselves are not considered divine. It is believed that both the royal ancestors and the spirits of the land confer the requisite supernatural skills upon the ruler during investiture ceremonies.

Lineages remain central to the reckoning of identity among Grassfields societies, despite the fact that centralized polities exist. This can be seen in the practice of ancestor veneration, which is carried out through rituals that involve the use of deceased ancestors' skulls. These are kept by individual patrilineages, under the care of the lineage head, and also by the royal court. Many central African societies view the head as the seat of personal power and/or of the "soul"; it is likely that Grassfields societies work from similar notions, for they consider the skulls to be infused with the supernatural powers the individuals possessed while alive. Accordingly, only the skulls of people considered to have superior supernatural skills are maintained for ritual purposes. Such individuals could include, in the case of the patrilineage, former lineage heads, "earth priests," and women who had been especially abundant in childbearing or had borne "children of the gods" (see below).

The skulls maintained in royal courts are those of former chiefs or kings and their more important wives. They are often housed in a special "skull house" located in a sacred copse, where portrait sculptures of deceased rulers are also kept (such as the Bangwa example included in this exhibition; cat. no. 1) and where investiture ceremonies take place. Presiding over these ceremonies, and also serving as the official keeper of the skulls and portrait sculptures, is a high-ranking "earth priest." This individual is the chief religious adviser to the *fon* and, among other duties, is charged with the task of translating messages sent by the deceased ancestors and territorial spirits.

Among Grassfields societies a certain distinction exists between the function of the lineage ancestors and that of the territorial spirits in affecting the well-being of the chiefdom. This distinction is rather nuanced, however, and defies a Western predilection for dichotomizing the two. For example, Robert Brain has emphasized the fact that among the Bangwa, the skull cult relates to royal ancestor veneration, an essential element in strengthening that lineage's kinship ties and alliances.[34] Those devotional practices are considered to be separate from the annual fertility rites overseen by chiefs that invoke "the country's ancestors,"[35] which appear to be conceived of as territorial spirits. While Brain's categorization accurately reflects the central African notion that territorial/fertility spirits are the most capable of ensuring communal well-being, the situation is not so clear-cut when it comes to the ancestors of the royal lineage. The work of Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg among the Bamileke illustrates that in at least some Grassfields societies, the health and well-being of the royal family are perceived to be indications of the state of the chiefdom at large.[36] When royal wives are thought to be lacking a sufficient number of children, for instance, commoners consider the chiefdom to be in decline. Furthermore, local women suffering from infertility attribute their problems to the chief's inability to perform (and/or sponsor) effective rites. Given these perceptions, the chief's skills in appeasing both lineage ancestors and territorial spirits can be considered an essential element of successful political and religious rule.

Regarding the role of first-comers as religious experts, a particularly cogent example can be found among the Tikar, who inhabit the Grassfields regions farthest to the east. Small communities of Batwa peoples live on the fringes of Tikar society; they are recognized as first-comers and referred to as Medza (pl., Ndza).[37] In some instances they supply products gathered from the remnant patches of forest on the Tikar plains; in others, they work for the Tikar as manual laborers. Commoners generally fear and disdain the Ndza, for they are purported to have dangerous supernatural powers. Within the royal court, however, they serve a critical function. Their most important task is to ensure the fertility of the royal lineage. When the chief's wife becomes pregnant, they are called to the royal

compound, where they perform a weeklong series of rituals and ceremonies designed to guarantee her good health. Throughout the pregnancy they monitor the wife, taking remedial actions (both ritual and medicinal) when necessary, and upon the birth, they return for another week. During these visits they are allowed free access to the royal wives' quarters, a privilege otherwise accorded only the chief. Commoners state that the Ndza are "the chief's sorcery," and their supernatural skills have traditionally been thought to enable them to warn the chief of imminent enemy attacks.

At work in the Tikar's reliance on Ndza as fertility experts is a classic response to the dilemma of the late-comers: how to properly appease first-comer ancestors in order to guarantee their own well-being in lands not their own. As in many central African societies, the Tikar deal with this dilemma by incorporating first-comers into politico-religious institutions and rituals. This achieves three goals: it appeases first-comers who have lost power by according them a position of prestige within late-comer society; it ensures the proper veneration of spirits associated with the land; and it legitimizes the ruling lineage in the eyes of its own followers.

Another common tactic for overcoming the late-comer dilemma is to posit first-comers as one's own ancestors, thereby legitimizing claims to ownership of previously occupied lands. The Bangwa, for instance, recount that upon their arrival in the volcanic highlands they now occupy, they encountered an autochthonous "little people" called the Beketshe.[38] The founding Bangwa ancestors fought battles with these peoples, then intermarried with them, producing a powerful new population of hunter-chiefs. According to the Bangwa, each of their eight chiefdoms was created in this way, and the founder of the largest one, Fontem, was himself Beketshe. Like the Tikar, the Bangwa also rely on the technique of incorporating peoples deemed autochthonous. There exist among them small and scattered communities considered to be Beketshe, but not differing physically from the Bangwa. A number of men from these groups serve as officers to the royal courts, especially practitioners of fertility rites.

A more abstract solution to the dilemma of the late-comers is to create a "mythologized" version of the first-comers' ancestors to whom late-comers can appeal without the intervention of first-comers at all. This phenomenon might shed light on the small protective figurines produced by the Bangwa and Bamileke, which I suggest represent mythical first-comers and/or territorial spirits that affect the well-being of the community and its land. Such figures are referred to as *lekat* among the Bangwa and *mu'po* among the Bamileke.[39] In both societies they are anthropomorphic in form, although often exhibiting unusual bodily characteristics such as swollen stomachs, sharply bent legs and arms, and cheeks or lips positioned as if blowing out air. Many have openings in the front or back for depositing spiritually charged "medicines."[40] The figures are placed within family compounds to ward off epidemics, infertility, sorcerers, and thieves. They are also used to cure infertility in rituals; directed by members of the prestigious male association *kungang,* which is "intimately linked to chiefly power and its impact on fecundity."[41]

The Bangwa appear to have borrowed *lekat* figures, along with the *kungang* society, from the Bamileke.[42] Dedicated to the veneration of Si, the Supreme Earth Spirit, *kungang* is presided over by "earth priests" referred to as *tanyi* (*tagne* in Bamileke).[43] In addition to their previously mentioned role as religious specialists to the *fon,* these individuals perform annual agricultural rites, rainmaking ceremonies, and "fattening" rituals to prepare young girls for marriage. Although earth priests are drawn from among commoners, a man cannot serve as one unless he has fathered twins.

The reference to twins leads us to a complex set of metaphorical associations that are central to understanding *lekat* and *mu'po* figures, as well as many of the reliquary sculptures presented here. In many parts of central Africa, twins and other "anomalous" children are considered living representations of territorial spirits. They, and oftentimes their parents, are thus accorded a special place in the politico-religious sphere. Numerous origin stories recount that the first beings on earth, or alternatively the beings who first populated the earth, were twins. In some instances such twins are reported to be Batwa, thereby extending the first-comer model of autochthonous peoples to cosmological explanations of the origins of humankind. Conceptually speaking, twins fall into a category of social "others" that includes children born under

unusual circumstances (breech birth, umbilical cord wrapped around the neck, caul) or marked by physical deformities. Among Grassfields societies such children are referred to as "children of the gods" and given special treatment throughout life.[44] Their parents, both male and female, act as fertility specialists, although only men may serve as earth priests at the royal court.[45]

The physical appearance of the *mu'po* and *lekat* protective figures likely reflects this ideology as well, for their bodies are often shaped like those of human dwarfs or newborns.[46] Dwarfs are regarded as exceptionally spiritual by many Bantu-speaking peoples, perhaps because of their ambiguous appearance, which seems to embody youth and old age at the same time.[47] Central Africans appear to have focused especially on the youthful aspects of this ideology, making explicit comparisons between the bodies of dwarfs, newborns, and primordial first-comers to the earth. For example, the medical conditions achondroplasia and hypochondroplasia, which produce the body types associated with dwarfism, are associated with small facial bones, a depressed nasal bridge, shortened limbs, bowed legs, a pronounced pelvic tilt, and (in the case of achondroplasia alone) an overly large cranium. Because individuals affected by these conditions tend to have normal-sized trunks, their backs appear exceptionally long. Several of these bodily traits, including the large head, depressed nasal bridge, long back, and bowed legs, correspond to those found in infants. This is an important analogy to note, because among many peoples of the broader Niger-Congo language family, newborns are considered to have just arrived from the land of the dead. Having recently been in contact with ancestral/territorial spirits, they are believed to retain an otherworld identity and "occupy a liminal cultural space."[48] The presence of this phenomenon among the Beng of Côte d'Ivoire has been aptly illustrated by Alma Gottlieb, who notes, "Beng adults maintain that infants lead profoundly spiritual lives. In fact, the younger they are, the more thoroughly spiritual their existence is said to be."[49]

The exceptional spirituality of infants-cum-dwarfs is also tied to the act of birth itself. Perhaps because the process of human gestation and childbirth evokes the power of creation in its most sublime form, central Africans have used it as metaphor to construct genesis accounts and migration stories as well as to carry out transformative rituals—even to explain the technological processes of smelting iron. Seen as the ultimate act of creation, birth is associated with the Supreme Creator, who in many central African societies (Bangwa and Bamileke included) is fused with the notion of a Supreme Earth/Nature spirit as well. It is through this set of cosmological associations that infants, dwarfs, and short-statured first-comers are all linked with territorial spirits; they are conceived of as the foremost "messengers" of the Supreme and Creator God who, as such, are primarily beneficent in nature.[50] Given this, the distended stomachs common to many *lekat* and *mu'po* figures are likely designed to bring forth associations between the spiritually charged state of pregnancy, the bodies of newborns and infants, and the original creation itself.

The Grassfields "earth priests" and "children of the gods" represent yet another example of how late-comers have dealt with the dilemma of appeasing ancestors not their own. In instituting these roles and beliefs, they have essentially replaced first-comers with members of their own communities as ritual experts regarding the spirits of the land. Because of their more "direct" link to the ultimate source of creation, such individuals are accorded a symbolic power that supersedes that of the *fon*. This is illustrated by the function of the "earth priest" as official "translator" of spirit messages, the keeper of ancestor skulls and memorial statues, and the officer who invests chiefs and kings. Further illustrating the power of "earth priests" is the fact that an incumbent *fon* is referred to as *tanyi* until he has proved his fecundity by begetting both a male and female child; only after this can he officially claim the title *fon*.[51]

As Brain and Pollock have pointed out, important "earth priests" were in former times memorialized through the carving of portrait sculptures similar to those produced upon the death of a *fon*. One such work, presented in this exhibition (cat. no. 2), represents an "earth priest" accompanied by twins. Female fertility specialists—those who had given birth to a "child of god"—were memorialized in sculpture as well. Although Westerners have generally considered these figures to be representations of royal women,

Brain and Pollock note that Bangwa peoples often distinguished them by referring to them simply as "women of god."[52] They assert that both types of sculptures tend to be more stylized than the portrait sculptures carved in memory of deceased chiefs and kings.

The preceding examples drawn from peoples of the Grassfields region of Cameroon illustrate how an understanding of the "principle of precedence" can aid in elucidating the intellectual and cosmological foundations of central African political systems, ritual institutions, and works of art. Through such knowledge, we can also begin to understand the unique ways in which central Africans have melded three essential facets of their lives—environment, politics, and religion—into a coherent cosmological whole.

Rainforest Societies of West-Central Africa

The inhabitants of the equatorial rainforest recognize two distinct categories of peoples: first-comer Batwa societies, who have historically served as "forest-specialists," and late-comer agriculturalists, who have over the centuries come to enjoy political and economic hegemony over central African lands.[53] Linguistic evidence suggests that the ancestors of certain modern-day Batwa groups were in contact with Bantu agriculturalists from as early as 1000–500 B.C.E.[54] During that time, relations between various Batwa and Bantu groups were so intimate that languages, cultures, and genes came to be shared. It is likely that the precepts of the ancient Niger-Congo society guided political and religious activities, especially those concerning the veneration of ancestors and the role of first-comers in attempts to appease the spirits of the land.

Bantu hegemony within the rainforest was achieved as a result of the second "watershed" event of central African history, namely, the introduction of bananas and iron. Archaeological evidence indicates that iron-working had been carried out in the Great Lakes of central Africa as early as the tenth century B.C.E., but the techniques did not become widespread in the rainforests until the last few centuries B.C.E. Iron tools made agriculture, hunting, and the clearing of new lands more efficient; regional production centers were established, and currencies began to be used. During the same era, the banana, so well suited to the rainforest environment, became a staple, which greatly increased the quantity of available food. These two innovations, combined with the technological "know-how" that Bantu-speaking peoples brought with them, allowed agriculturalist communities to expand and thrive. More and larger villages were established, economic specializations arose, long-distance trade was expanded, and contacts between distant communities began to increase.[55]

Within the rainforest these changes did not lead to political centralization but rather to new and expanded kinds of village alliances that facilitated trade, encouraged matrimonial exchange, and allowed for mutual defense. Thus, while the village remained the primary unit of political organization, groupings of villages, or "districts," as Vansina has termed them, came to exist on a more conceptual level.[56] Although these were not actual polities, since there were no district "leaders" to guide them, the relations that existed between them were the stuff of which regional politics was made. Alliances were formalized through the use of kinship ideology: clans seeking to establish permanent alliances invented lineage histories that posited each as descended from a common ancestor. In this way constituent clans and/or villages viewed each other as equal "siblings" in a relationship of mutual benefit.[57] As has been documented for later eras,[58] these alliances were made across what were probably very "fluid" ethnic/linguistic lines. Through these types of contacts, ideas and institutions came to be shared across large expanses of land.

In the rainforest regions of west-central Africa one of the most important of such institutions was *bwiti*, a politico-religious organization dedicated to the veneration of first-comer ancestors or the spirits of the land. The history of this institution is both fascinating and instructive, for it illustrates the manner in which ancient Niger-Congo precepts have been built upon and altered over the centuries, producing a variety of ritual associations that, although rooted in a common ideology, were adjusted to meet historically contingent religious, economic, and political needs. An understanding of this history also illuminates the meanings and functions of most of the reliquary sculptures on view, namely, those produced by the Tsogho, Sangu, Fang, Kota, Mahongwe, and Mbete peoples.

The History of *Bwiti* as a Rainforest Institution

The reconstruction of this history necessarily begins with an etymological analysis of the word *bwiti,* which appears to have been created from a proto-Bantu root [*-*yiti*] with the Class 14 prefix [**bu*-] attached (thus *bu-yiti* becomes *bwiti*).[59] There are two possible meanings that might be associated with the early form of this word. The first derives from the standard reconstruction of [*-*yìtí*] as a proto-Bantu noun meaning "tree" or "medicine."[60] These seemingly disparate definitions are linked by the fact that indigenous medicines are often prepared as infusions made from the bark of trees or shrubs. However, among Bantu societies *medicine* refers not only to curative agents but also to any object, process, or being that contains or elicits an otherworldly "charge" that can affect change among the living or in the physical world. Modern-day *bwiti* rituals offer an apt example of this phenomenon, for they rely on the psychoactive properties of a certain tree bark to produce an altered psychological state. The ingestion of this drug allows participants to contact the spirits of the otherworld and obtain information from them to remedy individual and/or communal crises. Because the Bantu Class 14 prefix [**bu*-] is generally used for abstract concepts, the earliest practitioners of *bwiti* may very well have intellectually amalgamated these three meanings (tree/medicine/otherworldly "charge") to produce a term with deeper cosmological associations than the general word for *tree*.

It is also possible that the original term was [*-*yítɟ*],[61] and that it referred to the territorial spirits or mythical beings that are often addressed in *bwiti* rituals (see below). If such were the case, the term *bwiti* would have been derived from the proto-Bantu verb [*-*yít*-], meaning "to call."[62] With the addition of a high [-*ɟ*-] suffix the word is transformed into an agentive noun, that is, "the being/entity who calls." In this sense it would convey the idea of an intercessor that "called" on spirits from the otherworld. Again, the application of the Class 14 prefix [**bu*-] suggests that such beings were conceived of in rather abstract ways. It is likely that they were considered to be supernaturally "charged" as well. Given the current state of this research, it is not yet possible to posit which of the two proposed early meanings is more apt.[63]

Comparative analysis of linguistic data, ethnographic data, and oral tradition does allow us, however, to propose three distinct phases, or "layers," of *bwiti* history. The earliest layer is discerned through the identification of languages in which the term derives directly from the original [*-*yiti*] form. Such data imply that *bwiti* originated among Bantu-speaking peoples living to the north and south of the Middle Ogooué, that is, among societies linguistically ancestral to the B20 or B30 branches of the Bantu languages, which include the Kele, Ngom, Kota, and Tsogho. From these regions *bwiti* ideologies appear to have undergone an early spread, for borrowed forms of the original word appear in Gabon, among the Coastlands (B10) communities as *ombwiri* and among the Vili (H12) as *mwiri,* and to the south of the western rainforest as *mbwidi-mbodila* among the Kongo (H16) and *bambwiiti* among the Yaka (H11).[64]

The Coastlands borrowing of *bwiti* provides the crux of the second historical "layer," for these peoples reinterpreted and added new associations to the original ideas. Most notably, the addition of the Class 1 prefix [*om*-] generally used for human beings, "personified" the conceptualization of *bwiti,* and the spirit it signified came to be seen as primarily an inhabitant of water (ocean, rivers, lakes, ponds, and streams). Through this process of ideological "rejuvenation," the politico-religious *ombwiri/mwiri* association developed. This organization subsequently spread back into the rainforest along Atlantic trade routes, becoming a critical force in establishing linkages across linguistic/ethnic boundaries and greatly facilitating the flow of trade.

The third "layer" of history is provided by the development of Fang *byeri* rituals. Linguistic evidence derives the Fang term from the original [**bu-yiti*] shape of the root and indicates that the associated ideas reached the Fang by way of the Ngom-speaking communities they encountered as they migrated south in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The origins of this unique form of the word can be traced to Ngom, for it is the only language group in the region to exhibit the particular combination of sound changes that would have produced the term *byeri*.[65] The Fang, however, altered the foundational ideologies of the earlier *bwiti* complex to meet their specific needs, namely, those of a society in great social, economic, and political flux.

These three "layers" of history provide an introduction to the role that *bwiti* and its derivative institutions have played in the equatorial African past. Only analyses focused on specific peoples over the *longue durée* will reveal the true complexity and importance of this phenomenon, since variant "layerings" of this history can be seen in individual speech communities. In modern times, for example, the Tsogho are renowned as the originators and foremost practitioners of *bwiti*. Yet the Tsogho have also adopted *ombudi* and *ya-mwei,* two Coastlands politico-religious associations derived from the original *bwiti* complex. Likewise, although Fang *byeri* practices died out in the early twentieth century, the Fang adopted modern versions of both the Tsogho *bwiti* and the Coastlands *ombwiri* (renamed *mbiri* by the Fang) during the interwar years. Through innovative processes of syncretization with Christian ideologies, *bwiti* and *mbiri* continue to occupy a central place in Fang political and religious life today. These histories highlight the very dynamic nature of equatorial African politico-religious institutions. As the history of *bwiti* will show, the peoples of this region have been especially adept at transforming such institutions to meet the unique psychological, political, and economic needs of vastly different historical eras.

Bwiti *as an Ancient Ideology*

In reconstructing the ideas and practices of the earliest stages of *bwiti* history, we are likely to find the most salient evidence in the modern-day speech communities whose ancestors originated the word. There are a number of speech communities in which terms directly stemming from the original root [*-*yiti*] appear.[66] The Tsogho, whose foremost men's association is named *bwiti* or *bwete,* are the most obvious.[67] Other versions appear among the Sekiani and Kele of northwestern Gabon, where *mwetyi* and *bwetyi* are both employed.[68] However, the fact that these speech communities use *mwetyi/bwetyi* interchangeably with terms influenced by or derived from Coastlands- and Vili-speaking peoples (*omwetsi/mweli*) indicates that Coastlands ideologies probably superseded earlier forms of *mwetyi/bwetyi*.[69] Likewise the Kota and Mahongwe (B25) use the term *bwete,* their version of the original term, for reliquary figures, but do so in the context of the later-derived *mungala-mwili* politico-religious association (see below). Finally, as we have seen, the term *byeri* in Fang derives from the Ngom language, showing the former presence of *bwiti* among the Ngom as well.

If we filter out the features and practices that spread inland during recent centuries, the Tsogho appear to have best preserved key elements of the original complex associated with *bwiti*. Among the Tsogho, the men's *bwiti* association provides the focus for social and religious life.[70] Rituals revolve around the use of the hallucinogenic substance *iboga* (*Tabernanthe iboga* Baillon): by inducing an altered state, *iboga* enables participants to "die," enter into contact with otherworldly spirits, and thus be "reborn" as *bwiti* specialists.

The birth process provides a central metaphor in *bwiti* rituals and is designed to evoke aspects of the original creation as well. For example, *bwiti* initiates are seated in the center of the village *ebandza* (men's gathering house/*bwiti* temple), administered *iboga*, and instructed to stare outward toward a pole erected in front of the temple, as they wait for their ancestors to "arrive."[71] The pole is symbolically linked to the original peopling of the earth, for in Tsogho genesis myths, God pierced the sky with such a pole to allow the first humans (a Batwa man and wife) to descend to earth.[72] Red and white lines (in ocher and kaolin) are drawn from the pole to the center of the *ebandza*; these represent an umbilical cord that will be ruptured when the initiates are "reborn" into the world of the dead.[73] Likewise, during *bwiti* ceremonies, special harplike instruments, including the *ngombi* and pluriarc, are played (figs. 22, 23). The sounds emanating from these are associated with the original animating force, that is, the breath (or "wind") of God.

The origin of *bwiti* itself is associated with the Batwa, for they are said to have discovered the rituals and "given" them to the Tsogho. Thus, the Batwa are posed as ritual experts, the original intercessors between humans and the spirits of the dead. Through the preceding examples, we see that the Tsogho are working from much the same cosmology as that identified among the Grassfields societies to the north. For both, mythical Batwa ancestors have been presented as primordial humans with special links to the Supreme Creator/Spirit of the Earth. Andersson has noted that among the

Tsogho "bwiti is a spirit near to god that intercedes for men" and is "represented by a human form made of wood or dry clay."[74] Such figures, as described by Andersson, varied in size, were painted red and white, and were often placed on the skull of a dead chief; the entirety of these paraphernalia were kept in the *ebandza*.[75] Among the Sangu-speaking peoples, who live to the east of the Tsogho and also practice *bwiti,* this spirit appears to have taken on a feminine aspect. In the mid-nineteenth century the explorer Paul Du Chaillu noted that *bwiti* was "the *sainte patronne* of the country" and described a carved figure he viewed as "a monstrous and indecent figure of wood of the feminine sex."[76] Among both the Sangu and the Tsogho these small protective figures are referred to as *mbumba-bwiti,* a composite term of undetermined etymology.[77]

Although Du Chaillu did not describe the bodily characteristics of the figures he observed, the half-body reliquary figures in this exhibition suggest that the Tsogho envision these primordial beings/territorial spirits as dwarflike. Catalogue numbers 96, 97, and especially 98 suggest infant-cum-dwarf bodily traits. Interestingly, these figures, like the *mu'po* and *lekat* figures of the Grassfields societies, have large bellies and faces configured to represent the blowing out of air. While the former trait may be associated with the state of infancy and/or pregnancy, the latter is likely linked to associations between breath (wind, air) and the original creation, for many central African genesis accounts consider human life to have been engendered through the sacred breath, or "wind," of God.

In the early spread of *bwiti* to the Kongo and Yaka to the south of the Lower Congo River, the key feature to be retained was the focus on first-comers. Among the peoples of the Kongo cultural sphere, miniature earth spirits are referred to as *nkisi nsi* or *simbi,* the former usually associated with the earth, the latter with water. However, the oral traditions regarding the origins of the kingdom relate that when Ntinu Lukene, the founding king, crossed over the Congo River, he encountered short, red-skinned, large-headed autochthons who walked with a waddling gait.[78] These first-comers are referred to by a number of sobriquets, one of which is *mbwidi-mbodila*. This term appears to be a compound of an altered form of *bwiti* and the Kongo noun *mbodila,* which refers to decomposed objects, detritus, or rot.[79] In the context of central African beliefs, *mbwidi-mbodila* may allude to the rotted remains or imagined cadavers of first-comers, whose purported graves or resting places are associated with sacred locations on the land.

Not surprisingly, *mbwidi-mbodila* is also a name given to human dwarfs among Kongo-speaking peoples. Much like the Grassfields societies of Cameroon, they have created a class of social "others" who serve as ritual experts in relation to the spirits of the land. Among these are dwarfs, albinos, twins, infants born with missing limbs, and children born under unusual circumstances (in a breech position or with a caul, for instance). These individuals are considered to be living representations of the *nkisi nsi* or *simbi,* their bodies themselves thought to be *nkisi,* the general term for spiritually charged objects. These beliefs appear to have been widespread in the region, for the seventeenth-century Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper noted that both dwarfs and albinos served as attendants at the royal court of Loango.[80] Ethnographic data collected since then indicate that peoples of the Kongo cultural sphere believed that dwarfs were related to territorial spirits, whereas the "whiteness" of albinos was seen as evidence that they were manifestations of water spirits made present in this world.

The Yaka, who live to the southeast of the Kongo-speaking peoples, have a complex set of traditions related to mythical first-comer spirits whom they call *bambwiiti*.[81] Twentieth-century Yaka indicated that the *bambwiiti* were pygmies, or "dwarfs,"[82] and that they were the ancestors "from the beginning of time."[83] Yaka territorial chiefs constructed shrines within their compounds to venerate these spirits and often claimed descent from them in order to legitimize their rule.

In light of these ethnographic data, it seems reasonable to assert that in its earliest stages of development the term *bwiti* was associated with mythical first-comer populations who were envisioned as short-statured (human dwarfs and/or the ancestors of the Batwa) and was applied in particular to the spirits of the land. Like the Coastlands societies, the Kongo and Yaka appear to have moved away from abstract visions of these spirits and to have personified them, for they applied to the

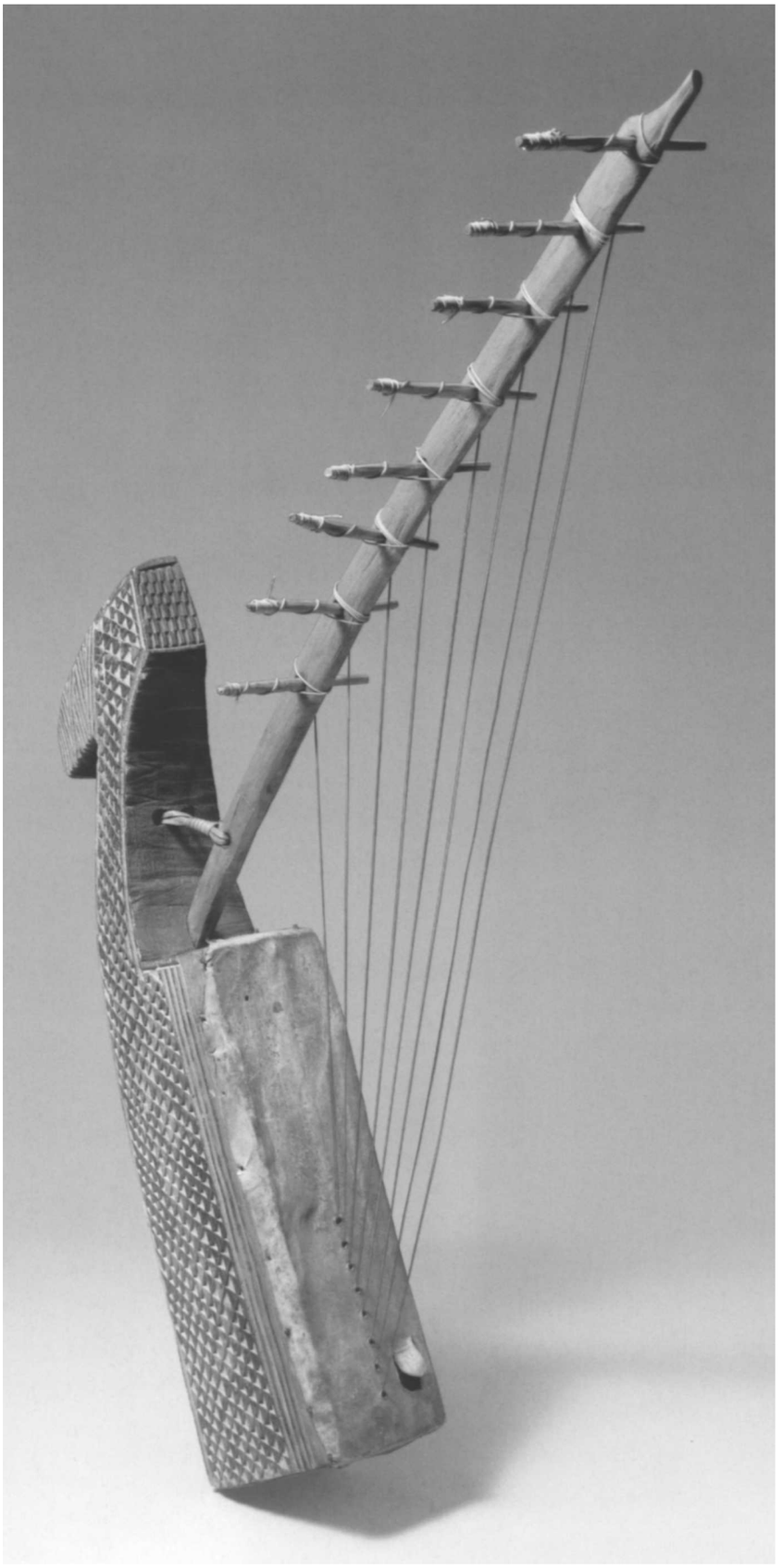


Fig. 22. *Ngombi* harp. Kele peoples, Gabon, 19th century. Wood, skin, vegetal fiber, 18½ x 3 x 4¾ in. (47 x 7.5 cm x 12 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.3527)

From his research among the Tsogho, ethnomusicologist Pierre Sallée has found that oral traditions credit the Kele with the invention of the *ngombi* harp. Neighboring groups throughout the region adopted the instrument as part of the *bwiti* cult. The harp is a focal point of *bwiti* rituals, in which its vibration is considered to evoke the "vital energy" (Sallée 1989, p. 42), or transformative power, that is among *bwiti*'s cardinal principles. The design of the instrument draws upon an account of *bwiti*'s origins in which the wife of its founding member is sacrificed (Norborg 1989, p. 311). The resonator is said to represent the woman's body, the soundboard the skin of her belly, the lower sound hole her sexual organ, the neck her spinal column, the strings her intestines or sinews, and the sound of the harp her voice.

Given its delicate tones, the *ngombi* is performed in *bwiti* ceremonies as a solo instrument, inviting the initiates to gather around as they sway in time to its intimate melodies. The music emanating from the harp is compared to the action of the wind on a pirogue. In initiation rites, the instrument is often identified with "the pirogue of life," a representation of which is carved on the end of the main beam supporting the roof of the *bwiti* ceremonial structure. *Bwiti* traditions recount that human beings arrived at "the landing stage of the World" in this vessel. This belief draws on broader central African symbolism, which associates the shape of the pirogue with the female sexual organs, and the wind with the original animating force, or "breath of God." Thus, genesis accounts often relate that humans were "delivered" to earth in a pirogue, usually traveling on a current of water (amniotic fluids) and shepherded by a sacred wind (breath being the source of life).

The melody of the Kele harp impressed the explorer Paul Du Chaillu during his travels through Gabon in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1861 account of his journeys, he included

an illustration of a *ngombi* harp (Du Chaillu 1861, chap. 16, p. 294), and a few years later, he wrote:

> They love the music of certain instruments . . . a sort of guitar, and a harp with eight strings, an ingenious instrument which some of the men play with great skill. Several of their airs are really charming, although sad and monotonous. The *ombi*, as they call it, is a source of extreme pleasure for them. (Du Chaillu 1863, p. 440)

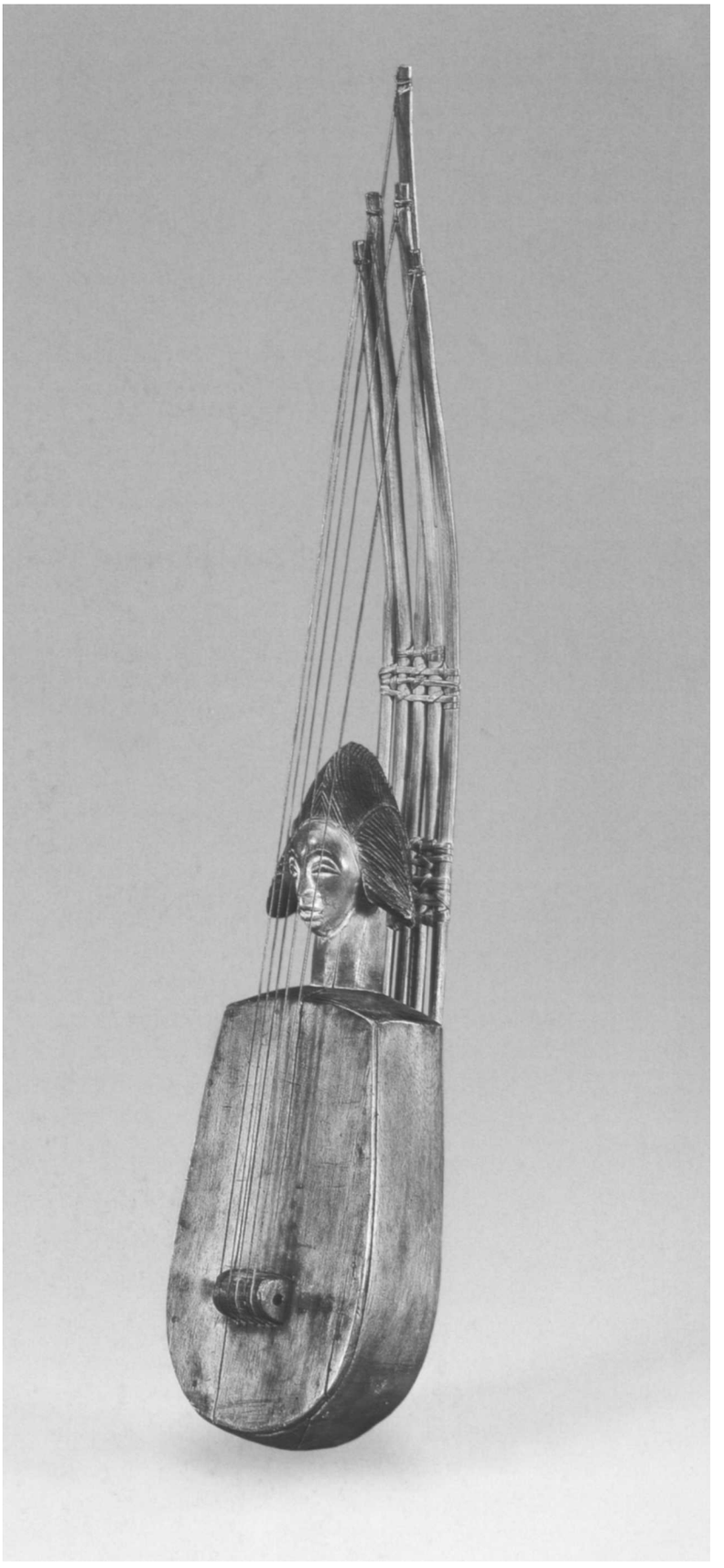


Fig. 23. *Ntsambi* pluriarc. Lumbu or Punu peoples, Gabon, 19th–20th century. Wood, vegetal fiber, pigment, H. 26 3/16 in. (66.6 cm). Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington (77.34.3)

This type of stringed instrument was first mentioned in Michael Praetorius's *Syntagma musicum,* published in Germany in 1619. Praetorius's early encyclopedia of musical instruments refers to and illustrates two types of stringed instruments that could have been collected only on the coast of Gabon: a seven-stringed harp and two pluriarcs closely related to this example, which are described as "Amerindian instruments in sound like the harp." The pluriarc was used north and south of the Ogooué River in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As the *bwiti* cult has spread, the instrument has been gradually displaced in the north by the *ngombi* harp (fig. 22).

This pluriarc consists of five musical bows and a single resonator. Each of the five plant-fiber strings is tied to the tip of its own flexible carrier, bound at the other end to the lower half of the soundboard, and secured with small wooden studs underneath. A bridge is placed just above the string holes. The light-wood body is carved as a hollow vertical channel, while the soundboard is rectangular in form. When played, the resonator is held against the stomach as the strings are plucked.

This especially elaborate pluriarc from southern Gabon features a finely carved head at the summit of the resonator. Stylistically the figurative element is characteristic of idealized female portraits created by Punu and Lumbu sculptors. This representation—with its arching eyebrows, narrowed horizontal eyes, and elaborate coiffure with prominent sagittal and lateral lobes—underscores classic features and uses white kaolin to elevate its subject to a state of transcendent otherworldly beauty.

word the Class 1 and 2 prefixes [**mu-/*ba*] that are generally used to designate human beings. The Tsogho and Yaka examples also provide evidence for broader cosmological associations, because their traditions pose Batwa individuals as first-comers not only in the rainforest but also on the earth. This posing of Batwa figures as "ancestors" to all humankind offers a convenient solution to the late-comer dilemmas of how to appease ancestral spirits in new lands and also assert authority over territories that are not one's own.

Although we cannot discern precisely when the *bwiti* complex of ideas came into existence, the spread of terms derived from the original [**-yiti*] root form is in what linguists refer to as relict distribution, suggesting that the term is quite old and was in former times likely to have been more widespread across the intervening areas. The original area of its use, however, appears to have been the westernmost regions of the equatorial rainforest. It was therefore not a proto-Bantu word and does not reflect a proto-Bantu set of practices.

Given the usefulness of *bwiti* ideologies in solving the late-comer problem, we can posit that the complex arose as a local version of a more widespread political charter that was developed by Bantu agriculturalists during their rise to hegemony within the rainforest. This charter, originally described by Vansina, legitimized the role of a new, more powerful kind of political ruler referred to as the *nkani,* or "judge."[84] It included new types of titled heads, new courts of justice, new systems of tribute, and the creation of emblems and objects associated specifically with chiefly rule. The *nkani* were considered to have a special relationship with the spirits of the land; indeed, they were referred to as "owners of the land" and in effect usurped the ritual role as intercessors to nature spirits that Batwa populations had previously held. I have argued elsewhere that these changes, and the political charter that developed to legitimize them, are the likely source of the great many myths and rituals honoring the Batwa as first-comers, yet at the same time relegating them to a secondary place in politico-religious practices important to the Bantu.[85] Broadly speaking, the development of this kind of charter took place in the era of the introduction and spread of bananas and iron—from about 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.

While this dating schema is necessarily tentative, we can state with certitude that the *bwiti* complex had spread to the coastal regions before the seventeenth century. By that time, the Coastlands- and Vili-speaking peoples had already transformed the original *bwiti* into the set of practices and ideas associated with *ombwiri/mwiri*. This is made evident by the travel accounts of the English trader Andrew Battell, who mentioned the *mwiri* rituals he observed among coastal societies in the early seventeenth century. Among these were observances involving a spirit that spoke from underground and the applications of scarifications on the upper arm in order to identify adepts of the *mwiri* society.[86]

Ombwiri/Mwiri *as a Tool of the Atlantic Trade*

An examination of the *ombwiri/mwiri* association provides us with the second "layer" of *bwiti* history. Battell's reference to the *mwiri* association reflects his experiences while residing at the Loango royal court, for *mwiri* is the Vili version of the term *ombwiri,* which was borrowed from people living in coastal regions to their north.[87] Oral traditions from these more northern speech communities, namely, the B10 group of Coastlands Bantu languages (Mpongwe, Orungu, Galwa, and Nkomi), indicate that they first learned about *ombwiri* through contact with Tsogho slaves brought to the coast.[88] Linguistic analyses confirm the direction of this borrowing. The subsequent addition of the Class 1 prefix [*-om-*] led to the development of a more "personified" conceptualization. Among the Mpongwe and Nkomi, for example, *ombwiri* was viewed as a powerful nature spirit, a culture hero, and "the prince of the earth, who presides over the earth the way *Anyambe* [God] is in charge of the sky."[89] The American missionary R. H. Nassau noted the linkage between *ombwiri* spirits and first-comers, stating that the former are similar to ancestors in that they are "often the abandoned ancestor spirits of peoples who once occupied the land another people now occupies."[90]

Among Coastlands-speaking populations, *ombwiri* also referred to a male association that occupied a central place in political, economic, and judicial affairs. It was charged with the tasks of performing rituals when twins were born, administering poison ordeals (to judge the guilt of individuals accused of crimes or

transgressions), and carrying out autopsies in order to determine cause of death (to identify the source of a curse or "witchcraft"). Each clan had its own branch of *ombwiri*; through rituals, these organizations addressed the specific territorial spirits associated with their lands. The *ombwiri* spirit was portrayed by these populations as a founding ancestress of participating clans and was considered to inhabit local bodies of water. Andersson indicates that among the Nkomi, men entered *ombwiri* in order to ensure good fortune, obtain wealth, and establish relations with other members of the association.[91]

As the Atlantic trade progressed, coastal peoples came to enjoy a privileged position as middlemen of the "first rank" in the trade networks that reached into the interior. Among central African peoples, their wealth and power were perceived to be not simply results of their strategic location or superior trading techniques but also indications of exceptional supernatural skills. Phyllis Martin has described this phenomenon among the *mubiri,* Vili leaders of trading caravans that penetrated deep into the interior to obtain slaves and other items for trade. Titles associated with the royal clans of Loango were adopted by peoples along the northern coast and as far east as frontier areas.[92] The adoption of such titles also established kinship relations, providing lasting links between peoples of various linguistic/ethnic groups. It is through such practices that the *ombwiri/mwiri* association is likely to have spread.

In the more northern regions, Fang adherence to *byeri* appears to have limited the spread of *ombwiri* ideologies and rituals in earlier times. As noted above, modern forms of Tsogho *bwiti* and Coastlands *mbiri* (as the Fang call it) were first adopted during the interwar years. There is a small piece of evidence, however, to suggest that *ombwiri* institutions did have an earlier impact on Fang peoples. This can be found in the Fang origin myth, which recounts that as they attempted to cross a river in their migrations south, they encountered a frightening chthonian being called Ombure, variously represented as a snake, crocodile, or hippopotamus. According to some versions, Ombure demanded a tribute of slaves in order to allow passage across the waters. After the Fang agreed to "make wars" (obtain slaves), Ombure aided them in their passage. Fernandez suggests that, in these versions of the myth, Ombure is seen by the Fang as both a "culture hero" and a protector—a role that approximates that of *ombwiri* as articulated among the Nkomi, Mpongwe, and other Coastlands-speaking peoples. Accordingly, it is possible that the Fang conceptualization of Ombure was derived from coastal peoples or, alternatively, from members of Kele/Kota speech communities that had adopted the word.[93] If such were the case, it would suggest that Fang peoples constructed their origin stories through the appropriation of autochthonous peoples' ancestral/territorial spirits, an act that would solve the late-comer dilemma of appeasing first-comer spirits that are not one's own.[94]

Because of the "patchwork" quality of linguistic/ethnic communities south of the Ogooué, a great deal of ethnographic and linguistic data exists to illustrate the workings of *ombwiri/mwiri* associations in the southern regions of Gabon. The Vili version of the word appears to have spread to the Punu, Lumbu, Nzebi, and the Kele of Mimongo, for they all use the term *mwiri*. Other phonological variations are *omweli/mwele* among the Apindji, *mwei* or *ya-mwei* among the Tsogho, *mweri* among certain populations of Sindara, and *mungala-mwili* among peoples located farther to the east (such as the Ndassa, Wumbu, Obamba, and Mbete). The Teke seem to have adopted the society as well; in their case, however, it is referred to as *mungala* alone.[95]

It is likely that many of these peoples adopted *ombwiri/mwiri* practices through contacts made along Vili trade routes, since the latter extended precisely into the regions where these variant attestations of the *ombwiri* term are found. The spread of the association might also be connected with the rise to power of the Bumwele clan, which controlled key trading points between Loango and the Chaillu Massif in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[96] This clan, though based among lineages of the Punu-speaking peoples, also had branches among the Gesira (who referred to it as the Bumwedi clan), the Lumbu, and the Nzebi. Deriving much of its prestige and power through kinship links with the ruling clans of Loango, it was a key supplier of slaves from the Chaillu Massif from the eighteenth century on. Lineages belonging to the Bumwele clan all traced their ancestry to a founder called Mueli-Ngeli. Oral traditions recount that he, along with a

number of Batwa "assistants," took a northwest trek away from the Loango regions and established his own settlement in the savanna regions on the left bank of the Upper Ngounié River.[97]

Ethnographic data collected among these more southern peoples reveals just how important the *mwiri* association was to the workings of the Atlantic trade. As Chris Gray has detailed, entry into the association involved periods of isolation in the forest, trying episodes of physical hardship and abuse, and ultimately revelation of highly guarded secrets as to the identities of the men who enacted the *mwiri* spirit by donning its mask in village ceremonies.[98] During these rituals, initiates underwent scarification, whereby *mwiri* "marks" (commonly referred to as *mangongo*) were incised on the left arm just above the elbow and on the left wrist. These marks were then used to perform the *mwiri* "oath," whereby initiates would tap the mark on the upper left arm with the fingers of their right hand and pronounce words swearing their allegiance to the *mwiri* spirit. Such oaths were integral to the workings of the Atlantic trade, as the American missionary J. Leighton Wilson noted in 1840 (using the Sekiani/Kele form of the word, *mwetyi*):

> When a covenant is about to be formed among the different tribes, *Mwetyi* is always invoked as a witness, and is commissioned with the duty of visiting vengeance upon the party who shall violate the engagement. Without this their national treaties would have little or no force. When a law is passed which the people wish to be especially binding, they invoke the vengeance of *Mwetyi* upon every transgressor, and this, as a general thing, is ample guarantee for its observance.[99]

In these southern regions *mwiri* associations were also instrumental in controlling and maintaining important trade routes.[100] Within the village, they also determined which hunting, fishing, and gathering grounds were being depleted. Once recognized, these areas were delineated through the placements of charms and were pronounced off-limits to villagers until their stocks were replenished. Another important task of the *mwiri* association was the surveillance of villagers, particularly women whose husbands were away from home as traders. It is in such "policing" contexts that *mwiri* masks were especially important, for their appearance in villages was often designed to menace and threaten women or children who were behaving inappropriately.

The *mungala-mwili* societies of more eastern peoples, such as the Obamba, Mbete, Kota, Ndassa, and Wumbu, serve a nearly identical function. Andersson has described similar initiation practices and scarification techniques among these societies, highlighting especially their "policing" and judicial roles.[101] These eastern versions of the association are also clearly rooted in ideologies tied to primordial territorial spirits. The Obamba, for example, state that *mwili* is another name for *mungala,* that the practices originated when God created humans, and that they were taught to the "first woman," who was a mother of twins.[102] Among the Kota of Okondja *mungala* is said to be the guardian of the village or of particular sections of rivers and helps in guarding against adultery on the part of women.

Many of these eastern societies, including the Kota, Mbete, and Obamba, also observe rituals involving the skulls, bones, or personal effects of powerful ancestors. Surmounted over the baskets or bags in which such items are contained are reliquary sculptures referred to variously as *bwete* or *mbulu-ngulu,* or among the Obamba as *mboy*;[103] an array of such reliquary sculpture forms is presented in this exhibition (see, for example, cat. nos. 66, 68, 75, 89). Given the commonalities of ideology, terminology, and ritual that *mungala-mwili* shares with the Tsogho and Sangu *bwiti* practices and sculptures (*mbumba-bwiti* figures), it seems reasonable to suggest that the highly stylized reliquary figures of these more eastern societies are also representations of protective and primordial first-comer spirits that dwell in rivers and/or the land.

Bwiti *as a Source of Fang* Byeri

The linguistic data presented above illustrated the manner in which the term *byeri* was likely to have developed from the original root [*-*yiti*].We have argued that it was originally produced among peoples ancestral to modern-day Ngom speakers and that the Fang borrowed the term through interaction with and assimilation of such peoples as they moved into the rainforest regions of northern Gabon. This hypothesis has important implications for understanding the history and nature of the Fang migration: if correct, it offers further evidence that the Fang appropriated the rituals of first-comer societies in order to properly appease the ancestors and/or spirits

associated with the land. A study of actual Fang *byeri* practices is fascinating when viewed through the lens of the principle of precedence, for it illustrates just how much this ancient precept could be adjusted to fit the specific needs of late-comer groups in different historical eras.

In general, the term *byeri* is associated with what Westerners have called the "cult of the dead" or the "cult of the ancestors" among the Fang. Much like the peoples of the central Cameroon Grassfields, each Fang lineage (*ndebot*) retained the skulls of their most illustrious ancestors, considering them to contain the supernatural powers that had allowed for their success while alive.[104] These skulls were placed in a bark container and were maintained at the house of each lineage head. Inserted into each receptacle were the carved-wood figures called *byeri,* a considerable corpus of which has been gathered on the occasion of this exhibition (cat. nos. 3–49). Conceived of as "protective" figurines, these figures were not considered sacred in and of themselves. *Byeri* rituals, like those of the modern-day *bwiti,* involved the ingestion of a psychoactive drug; for the Fang it was the bark of a tree called *malan* (*Alchornea floribunda*), which induced an altered state and allowed adepts to contact the realm of the dead. These rituals were carried out by men alone and, according to Fernandez, were performed in only two contexts: initiation ceremonies (referred to as *adzi malan,* "eating malan") and rituals geared toward the "re-establishment of ancestral benevolence in village affairs" (referred to as *akom adzal* or *akom bieri,* "preparation or strengthening of the village, or of *bieri*").[105]

Although the majority of *bwiti*-derived institutions focus on ancestors associated with the land, Fang versions of *byeri* appear to have taken a slightly new direction. Most ethnographic data concerning Fang *byeri* present it as largely lineage-based, that is, focused on appeasing and accessing the spirits of deceased ancestors alone. Fernandez, for example, states that the ancestor cult "was very much a domestic cult," despite his brief description of *akom bieri* rituals.[106] Ambiguity regarding this issue may derive from the fact that *byeri* practices had died out among the Fang by the 1920s; it was through the remembrances of elders, rather than direct observation, that information regarding these practices was obtained. Likewise, by the 1930s Christianity and a new, imported version of *bwiti* practices had penetrated Fang societies. In this context the older *byeri* practices were increasingly viewed as "witchcraft" and discouraged by members of the new cults. Interestingly, it is this shift in Fang perceptions that accounts for so many *byeri* figures being relinquished to Western collectors.

While sufficient data regarding *byeri* rituals may be lacking, it is also possible that the historical circumstances surrounding the Fang migration provoked certain adjustments to the principle of precedence. In this way the veneration of territorial spirits may have been "backgrounded" so that a focus on lineage ancestors, and thus the welfare of individual lineages, could prevail. Such a phenomenon would be logical given that Fang villages were small (sometimes comprising only two *ndebot*) and their lifestyle quite mobile. Furthermore, new lineages (both real and fictive) were constantly being created, and as the Fang moved toward the Ogooué River in the nineteenth century, they participated in a commercial culture defined by fierce competition and societal dislocation. The impact of this competition on *byeri* practices is reflected in comments made by Fang informants to Fernandez, who recounts that the "Fang said that every council house has its own reliquary. One never took the skull of one who had not sat in one's council house and with whom one was not in good relation. Such a cranium would be untrustworthy and self-interested (*alet*)."[107] Since each *ndebot* had its own council house (similar to the *ebandza* of peoples farther south), this statement can be interpreted as a comment upon the intense sense of competition Fang lineages felt during the period in which *byeri* rituals were practiced.[108]

While it would be remiss to assert that the Fang completely abandoned territorial spirits, the lineage and its concomitant genealogies clearly served as the focus of Fang religious and political life. As Fernandez has noted, clan genealogies were the foundation of traditional religion, as well as the "centerpiece of traditional education, a template of instruction, and a mnemonic device whose recitation brought forth the associated information relevant to past experiences of the group."[109] The Fang believed that the very acts of learning and reciting clan genealogies

brought forth *mvamayong*, which Fernandez describes as the "providential benevolence of the clan."[110] The ability to recite genealogies was also vital for survival and success in trade as well, for "strangers could examine genealogies at depth to arrive at common ancestry," and "evidence of blood relationship guaranteed hospitality and good treatment at times when, in the highly unstable and acephalous condition of Fang political life, there were few means of guaranteeing the security of strangers."[111] Where common ancestry was not discernible, it was often created. John Cinnamon has detailed cases in which, along the Upper Ivindo River, Fang lineages invented genealogies that linked them to Nzem-speaking (A84) clans, thereby establishing permanent alliances and facilitating the flow of trade.[112]

Despite the focus on lineage ancestors and genealogies, the Fang practice of placing *byeri* figures as "protectors" of crania indicates that certain elements common to the original *bwiti* ideology were at work. This can be seen in the Fang's term for these figures, *mwan biang* (child of medicine), which invoked the widespread association between infants or children and exceptional spirituality. Yet Fernandez notes that the crania rather than the *byeri* figures were the primary focus of attention. Gentle admonitions were directed to the crania, in the way one would address children, and they were "cradled" and sung lullaby-like songs when carried to and from their normal resting places.[113] These descriptions of *byeri* ritual suggest that the metaphorical associations between infants and ancestors, which in most societies were applied to conceptions of primordial dwarflike beings, were focused more heavily on lineage ancestors among the Fang.

Fernandez and his coauthor Renate Fernandez did, however, identify the metaphors behind the bodily forms of the *byeri* figures, that is, the infant-cum-dwarf physiognomies and their associations with "pygmies," or Batwa. As the authors state, "The Fang ancestor figures are 'little people' who mediate between the material and spiritual world, and 'little people'—pygmees, dwarfs, trolls—who combine in themselves the qualities of infancy and old age (a dwarf, for example, combines a child's body and an adult's head) are widespread mediators between this world and the other in Africa and elsewhere."[114]

Missing from this analysis, through no fault of the authors, is an understanding of the broader Niger-Congo logic by which such "little people" came to be associated with first-comers and to serve as protectors of lineages established in new lands. Given the totality of evidence presented so far, especially as pertains to the importance of cosmologies involving primordial Batwa or dwarfs, it seems reasonable to consider that the bodily characteristics of Fang reliquary sculptures—long backs, bowed legs, big heads, and so on—reflect the same beliefs that informed the production of many of the reliquary sculptures here on view. Despite the great variety in sculptural forms, I suggest that most were carved as representations of first-comer ancestors/territorial spirits. These spirits were believed to be protective because of their closer proximity (vis-à-vis lineage ancestors) to the ultimate Creator God. (Such an assertion does not, of course, apply to sculptures that were deliberately carved as portraits of important personages such as chiefs, kings, and queens.)

The widespread use of crania as relics for ancestor veneration among the societies of Cameroon, including the Grassfields societies and those of the A80, such as the Kwele,[115] most likely indicates that the Fang carried this institution with them as they moved into southern lands. In terms of territorial spirits, however, it appears that, like all late-comers, they appropriated elements of the rituals practiced by the populations they met. Although these were adjusted to meet the historical contingencies of the time, they should still be considered examples of the great variety of *bwiti*-derived institutions that equatorial Africans have created.

Conclusion

The ideologies of the ancient *bwiti* complex have proved to be amazingly enduring, especially among the peoples of the rainforests of Gabon. This is largely because such ideologies, regardless of historical era or geographical space, have been able to reinforce the fundamental cosmologies and values of central African societies. At the same time, the institutions and rituals associated with this complex, which probably always involved seeking access to the powers derived from a supreme Creator God, provided individuals and communities with a sense of control over their lives. Most

important, through their focus on territorial rather than lineage ancestors, *bwiti*-derived institutions have allowed African societies to reinforce the ethics of communal cohesion, be it at the level of the lineage or directed at much broader entities such as villages and clans. Considering the extreme forms of social, economic, and political transformations Africans have undergone since the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, it is easy to understand why such a great variety of *bwiti*-derived institutions came to exist. In an age of fundamental and irreversible transformations (which were not always for the good), equatorial Africans were attempting to maintain the values they associated with their ancestors' world. Although there is not enough space to detail them here, Fernandez and Gray have cogently illustrated the ways in which *bwiti*-derived institutions continued to be adjusted during the twentieth century, especially to meet the needs of equatorial Africans under the alienating conditions of colonial rule.[116]

This essay has attempted to highlight the extremely dynamic nature of equatorial African history, while offering new insights regarding the cosmologies and intellectual traditions that have guided such societies for centuries on end. It has also sought to illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary methods, which can shed fresh light not only on history but also on the meanings and usages of artifacts. Central to the equatorial African worldview is the concept that religion, politics, and the environment are intimately and organically intertwined, a notion somewhat difficult for the Western mind to grasp. This is perhaps another reason why equatorial African history has remained "obscure" for so long. Without an understanding of this fundamental belief, and in the absence of centralized political institutions, it can be difficult to discern exactly "where" history took place. By building on the work of previous scholars, this essay has tried to illustrate that it is in the dynamics of cross-cutting politico-religious institutions that much of equatorial African history can be found.

1. This turn of phrase is borrowed from Vansina 1990, p. 3.
2. Because the term *pygmy* is not African and often carries a derogatory connotation, I use the Bantu term *Twa* (pl., *Batwa*) as a generic referent to communities regarded as "first-comers" within the rainforest. For the etymology of this alternative term, see Klieman 2003, p. xix.
3. Vansina 1990, p. 3.
4. Keim 1999, pp. 10–12.
5. The broader background and theoretical approaches that inform this essay are presented in Klieman 2003.
6. Information regarding the motivating factors of the Bantu expansion is drawn from Ehret 2002, pp. 88–89, 111–14.
7. For more detail regarding the Bantu expansion within the rainforest proper, see Vansina 1990, pp. 35–56, and Klieman 2003, chap. 2.
8. This essay focuses primarily on the peoples/language communities classified as the "northwestern" branches of the Bantu family (namely, the A, B, and C Bantu language groups). These categories, which were applied in the twentieth century, will be noted parenthetically (after language names) throughout the essay. For example, the various Fang dialects are part of the A75 group. These dialects, along with closely related languages such as Bulu (A74), Gbigbil (A73), Ewondo (A72), and Eton (A71), constitute the Yaounde-Fang (A70) branch of the Bantu language family.
9. Sautter 1966, vol. 1, pp. 128–33.
10. Cinnamon 1998, p. 58.
11. Clist 1999, p. 84.
12. Myers 1996, p. 359.
13. Whitmore 1990, p. 9.
14. The proto-Bantu term **-yambé* is generally translated as "God." The definition presented here derives from Vansina's reconstructed meaning of the term ("first spirit") as well as Ehret's ("first Cause, first Creator"). See Vansina 1990, p. 298, and Ehret 2002, p. 50.
15. Joseph Miller (1983) is the source of this apt description of a "frontier" of slaving violence.
16. Ibid., p. 150.
17. Brain 1972, p. 3.
18. Ibid., p. 8.
19. Ibid., p. 7. These beliefs were adopted through interactions with the Banyang, a forest-dwelling people who live in non-centralized societies immediately to their east.
20. Ibid., p. 3
21. Fernandez 1982, p. 51.
22. Marseille 1992a, p. 31.
23. Fernandez 1982, p. 85.
24. Oslisly 1996, p. 326. Such trade is suggested by the distribution of a distinct style of pottery (referred to as Epona-ware) over an area of 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) along the Middle Ogooué. There is also evidence of Late Stone Age trade networks at the coast. See Clist 1995, pp. 120, 137–38.
25. Fernandez 1982, p. 52.
26. Gray 2002, p. 59.
27. Fernandez 1982, p. 51.
28. Ngolet 1994, as cited in Gray 2002, pp. 52–53.
29. Gray 2002, p. 84.
30. The history of these various conflicts and their results is drawn from Siroto 1969, pp. 65–70.
31. Information regarding proto-Niger-Congo cultural traits (except for that related to the dual nature of supernatural powers and the "principle of precedence") can be found in Ehret 2002, pp. 44–50.
32. Patrilineal systems of inheritance were later developed among many descendant communities in the Bantu-speaking world.
33. Ehret 2002, p. 50.

34. Brain 1972, p. 111.
35. Ibid.
36. Feldman-Savelsberg 1999, pp. 7–10.
37. All information regarding the Ndza of Tikar is drawn from Price 1985.
38. Information regarding the Bangwa and Beketshe is drawn from Bowie 2000, p. 76.
39. For the Bangwa *lekat* figures, see Brain and Pollock 1971, pp. 127–31, pls. 12, 61, and figs. 7, 8, 28. Brain also refers to some of these as *kungang* figures, since they were used in *kungang* society rituals practiced by the Bangwa.
40. Brain and Pollock refer to *lekat* figures as "fetishes" and state that, owing to fear of misfortune or evil befalling a family, such statues were (in the 1960s) very rarely sold to outsiders. They can be contrasted with the ancestral carved memorial figures owned by chiefly families, which are thought to hold supernatural spirits only during festivities. The latter are commonly allowed to deteriorate, can be "lent" out to a neighboring *fon* if he lacks sufficient sculptures of his own, and are more frequently offered for sale. See ibid., p. 131.
41. This turn of phrase is borrowed from Dominique Malaquais; personal communication, September 25, 2006.
42. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 127.
43. For information on *tanyi* among the Bangwa, see ibid., p. 90; for the *tagne* among the Bamileke, see Marseille 1993–94, p. 154.
44. Regarding "children of the gods," see Brain 1970. Although Brain discusses the Bangwa in this article, he notes that the category of "children of the gods" also occurs among other societies of the Bamileke highlands.
45. The Bangwa refer to such women as *anye,* the Bamileke as *magne*.
46. For dwarflike representations among the Bamileke, see Lecoq 1998, fig. 139, and Brain and Pollock 1971, pls. 12, 60. The less "dwarflike" figures shown in Brain and Pollock (fig. 18, pl. 61) most probably represent infants, for the bent arms and legs, both held close to the body, are designed to mimic the common body position of newborns.
47. This explanation is borrowed from Dassen 1988, p. 258.
48. Gottlieb 2004, p. 103.
49. Ibid., p. 79.
50. The association between dwarfs, supernatural skills, and fertility may be a very ancient African (perhaps Sudanic) idea, for Egyptians also considered dwarfs to be supernaturally "charged" beings and associated them with fertility and the creator God Re. These notions are encoded in the worship of the dwarf gods Ptah and Bes, whose cults spread widely in the Mediterranean during the first millennium B.C.E. See Klieman 2003, pp. 4–6.
51. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 90.
52. Ibid., p. 124.
53. The term *forest-specialist* is applied to communities that have historically participated in regional trade networks by serving as procurers of forest products. Such is the case for the Batwa, who are not self-sufficient and rely heavily on food products obtained from agriculturalist neighbors to meet their subsistence needs. Such groups can be contrasted with hunting and gathering communities, which are usually self-sufficient and do not focus their activities on participating in regional systems of trade. See Klieman 2003, chap. 4, for more details.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid. (for a full accounting of archaeological data to substantiate this fact).
56. Vansina 1990, pp. 81–83.
57. Ibid., p. 82.
58. Most notably in Gray 2002.
59. Many of the hypotheses presented in this section require the presentation of linguistic data to substantiate their validity. Since the majority of readers are not familiar with linguistic methods of historical reconstruction, much of this data and the accompanying explanations will be presented in these notes.
60. As reconstructed by Guthrie 1967–70, vol. 4, p. 170.
61. Differentiated from the previous by a high [*i*] final vowel.
62. Guthrie 1967–70, vol. 4, p. 169.
63. As a consequence, the remainder of this essay will rely on a simplified reconstruction of the term [**-yiti*].
64. The directions of borrowing are indicated by the fact that each of these communities adopted the term *bwiti* intact but added their own Class 1 or 2 [**mu-/*ba-*] prefixes. This created a new stem **-bwiti,* in which was embedded the original Class 14 prefix. The Coastlands versions of the word contain a sound change of the proto-Bantu [**t*] to [*r*], which indicates the borrowing of the term is very old in that group. The term subsequently spread south from the Coastlands group to the Vili of Loango, in a modified shape, *mwiri*. Because the Vili language did not change the [**t*] to [*r*], the presence of the [*r*] in *mwiri* reveals that the term came directly from the Coastlands peoples after the Coastlands sound change. The shape *m-bwiti* (in which the [**t*] was preserved) spread farther south to the Kongo, where it was used in the compound *mbwidi-mbodila* (pl., *mbwudi-mbodila*) and to the Yaka, where it appears in the plural form *bambwiiti*. The maintenance of the original [**t*] in these languages shows either that the term reached them before the sound change of [**t*] to [*r*] in the Coastlands or that it diffused to them more directly from other peoples of the western rainforest.
65. In the Ngom language, the Class 14 prefix [**bu-*] shifted to [*bi-*]. When the latter is prefixed to what appears to be the root of the presumed common B20 form of *bwiti* (that is, [*-yete*] or [*-yeti*]), the result is *bi-yeti* or *byeti*. A sound shift common to all B20 languages caused the final consonant [*t*] to become a lateral flap [*ɾ*]. The presence of this phoneme helps explain the variations in pronunciation among the various Fang and Fang-related groups who borrowed it; some interpreted it as a [*t*] (as in the Bulu *bieti*) and others as an [*r*] (as in the Fang proper *bieri* or *byeri*). These variant pronunciations are noted in Alexandre 1965, p. 522. Although we do not yet have the data to show that the word *byeri* exists/existed in the Ngom language, we can see the same sound changes at work in the production of the Ngom word *gyere* from the proto-Bantu word [**-yiti*]; in this case the Class 7 prefix [*gy-*] has been applied (thus *gy-yiti* becomes *gyeti* becomes [*gyeɽe*]. See Guthrie 1967–70, vol. 4, p. 170.
66. In this section, the linguistic data for terms related to or derived from *bwiti* are drawn from Andersson 1953; Gray 2002, pp. 83–84; and, in the case of the Tsogho, Otto Gollnhofer and Roger Sillans (1978a and 1997).
67. There is an irregularity in Tsogho literature regarding the exact pronunciation of the term. See, for example, Gollnhofer and Sillans 1978a, where *bwete* is used. Their 1997 publication, however, uses *bwiti*. These variant pronunciations may appear among Tsogho-speakers themselves or may be caused by the difficulties Western-language speakers have in discriminating between vowels in a language such as Tsogho, which has seven of them.
68. The Sekiani and Kele languages both have a regular sound change rule that causes the palatalization of the final [*t*] if followed by [*i*](the high *i*). Thus, [*t*] becomes [*ty*] in *mwetyi* and *bwetyi*. This suggests that the earliest form of the word was in fact [**-yíti*] (the one who calls) and that the peoples speaking the B20 languages were among the early practitioners of *bwiti*-derived cults.

69. Andersson provides two further pieces of evidence that suggest the Sekiani and Kele were early practitioners of *bwiti*-derived cults. He cites four German sources, including Wilson 1856 and Nassau 1904, which mention that the Mpongwe (who speak a Coastlands language) sought out the Sekiani "Grand Mwetyi" in order to "give sanctity and authority to their laws"; see Andersson 1953, p. 232. The Mpongwe may thus have regarded the Sekiani as specialists of the cult, an attribute generally associated with the earliest or first practitioners of an institution. Andersson also notes that both the Sekiani and Kele considered *mwetyi* to be an earth spirit; see Andersson 1953, p. 53. This is in contrast to the Coastlands *ombwiri/mwiri* spirit, which was associated with water. Since the latter was an ideological innovation unique to the Coastlands and Vili societies, we might assume that Sekiani and Kele retained the core characteristics of the earlier *mwetyi/bwetyi* beliefs.
70. Information regarding *bwiti* and genesis myths among the Tsogho is drawn from Gollnhofer and Sillans 1997.
71. Fernandez 1972, p. 256.
72. Gollnhofer and Sillans 1997, p. 127.
73. Ibid., p. 124.
74. Andersson 1953, p. 236.
75. Ibid.
76. Du Chaillu 1868, p. 258, as cited in Andersson 1953, p. 313.
77. Andersson, however, makes a number of interesting suppositions regarding the underlying meaning of *mbumba*. Noting its use as a referent to "earth" or "sky" among a number of central African peoples, including the Kuba, Ntomba-Bolia, Kundu, Mongo, and Ngata, he states that it may have originally referred to a creator God. Andersson 1953, pp. 283–84.
78. MacGaffey 1986, pp. 193–94. While these beings are clearly conceptualized as mythical, each element describing them evokes symbolic associations common to central African cultures. The large head connotes a superior spirituality, red is associated with transition or a liminal cosmological state, the waddling gait refers to the manner in which individuals affected by achondroplasia (dwarfism) often walk.
79. Swartenbroeckx 1973, p. 322. The plural of this term is *bambwuudi-mbodila*. The Kongolese appear to have borrowed the term with the original [**bu-*] prefix intact and "personified" it by adding the Class 1 and 2 prefixes used to designate human beings [**mu-/*ba-*].
80. Dapper 1668. Trans. from Flemish to French, Dapper 1686, p. 332.
81. Van Roy 1973.
82. Beir 1975, pp. 182–83.
83. "origines premières" (my translation). Van Roy 1973, p. 847.
84. Vansina 1990, p. 147.
85. Klieman 2003, pp. 153–55.
86. Ravenstein 1901.
87. The linguistic evidence related to variant forms of the *bwiti* term is drawn from Andersson 1953 and also Gray 2002.
88. In this text the capitalized term *Coastlands* refers specifically to the B10 family of Bantu languages spoken along the coast and in the coastal hinterlands of Gabon. When the term *coastal* is used, it makes no reference to specific language communities but rather to geographical location alone.
89. Andersson 1953, pp. 275–77.
90. Nassau 1904, pp. 67–68, as cited in Fernandez 1982, p. 660.
91. Andersson 1953, p. 277.
92. Gray 2002, p. 28.
93. The source of *ombure,* with its internal sound change of [**-wi-*] to [**-u-*], has not yet been identified. However, the addition of the Class 1 prefix [**om-*] to the underlying word, as described above, was a specific development of the Coastlands group. This added prefix indicates that the particular idea of *ombure* among the Fang derived, at least indirectly, from the coast. Also of note is the fact that Tsogho women have a healing cult they refer to as *ombudi* whose principal spirits are called *mighesi* (the Tsogho form of the Kongolese term *nkisi*). Chris Gray indicates that the *ombudi* spread among southern Gabonese peoples during the 1930s. See Gray 2002, p. 215.
94. Evidence exists to suggest that B20 speakers of northern Gabon had similar conceptualizations of chthonian beings: drawing on ethnographic evidence from André Even, Andersson notes that among the "Kota of the north" (that is, northeast of the Middle Ogooué regions), Even heard tales of a "fantastic animal that inhabits the water," referred to as both *mungala* and *mwili*; Even also indicated that "the same thing carries the name *Omwiri* among the Mpongwe, Vili, and Besex (Sekiani)" and is regarded as a "genie of water." Andersson 1953, p. 274, citing Even 1937, p. 34, no. 23.
95. Andersson 1953, p. 189.
96. See Gray 2002, pp. 29–33, 74–75, which draws on Koumba-Manfoumbi 1987.
97. Gray 2002, p. 29.
98. Ibid., p. 84.
99. Wilson 1856, p. 392, as cited in Gray 2002, p. 85. Gray also states that many early European travelers to the region noted the importance of these oaths, which were "used in a solemn fashion to demonstrate sincerity in trade or other kinds of palavers" (ibid.). Some foreign traders even joined the *mwiri* association in order to facilitate economic endeavors in the region; one such individual was Aloysius Smith, better known as Trader Horne.
100. On the basis of François Gaulme's observations, Gray has noted that the role of *mwiri* in such endeavors was similar to "the institutions that maintained the physical and sacred character of roads leading out of the Loango capital of Bwali in the seventeenth and eighteenth century." Gray 2002, p. 87.
101. Andersson 1953, pp. 188–209.
102. Ibid., p. 189.
103. The use of the term *mboy* is particularly interesting, for it is also associated with mythical Batwa first-comers among the Bakuba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
104. Unless otherwise indicated, information on Fang *byeri* rituals is derived from Fernandez 1982, pp. 253–67.
105. Ibid., p. 256. Fernandez uses an alternative spelling from the one employed in this text (i.e., *bieri* instead of *byeri*); both are common, and the pronunciation is the same. We have chosen *byeri* because the internal *y* makes clearer reference to the original root word ([**-yiti*] or [**-yeti*]).
106. Ibid., p. 239.
107. Ibid., p. 256.
108. A similar phenomena, albeit much more extreme, can be seen among the Imbangala or Jaga of Angola. During the late sixteenth century, and as a result of the dislocations associated with the Atlantic slave trade, the Imbangala adopted a very mobile lifestyle as warriors, establishing a reputation for brutality and cannibalism as they raided new lands for slaves. In making these changes, according to John Thornton, they "abandoned the cult of territorial deities in favor of strict propitiation of their own ancestors who were [represented as] wicked like themselves." Thornton 2002, p. 83.
109. Fernandez 1982, p. 76.
110. Ibid., p. 181.
111. Fernandez 1982, p. 76.
112. Cinnamon 1998, pp. 121–37.
113. Fernandez 1982, pp. 254–55.
114. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 743.
115. Siroto 1969, pp. 166–68.
116. See Fernandez 1982, pt. 3, and Gray 2002, pp. 213–18.



The Western Historiography of African Reliquary Sculpture

LOUIS PERROIS

Accounts by the first Westerners to reach equatorial Africa, in the mid-nineteenth century, reveal their fascination with the sculptural traditions associated with ancestral veneration in the region. The following brief overview, covering the period from the 1850s to the 1930s, examines these sources, the earliest written records available that address the works, which were described as "idols" or "fetishes." In doing so, it relates the activities of the European colonial explorers as well as those of later adventurers and missionaries; the channels whereby the ancestor figures began to arrive in the West; and the documentary accounts that have served as the basis for information concerning their original contexts. The essay also touches upon the pioneering dealers, collectors, and institutions, both European and American, that immediately recognized the value and appeal of central African reliquary sculptures, including those featured in this exhibition.

Western Travelers and Explorers: "Discovery"

In 1855 the French-American traveler Paul Du Chaillu (1837–1903; figs. 24, 25) was the first Westerner to venture into the Gabon hinterland. Proceeding from the Fernan Vaz Lagoon all the way to the mountains of the Sangu territory, some 400 kilometers (250 miles) to the east, Du Chaillu came across examples of ritual sculptures depicting ancestors, first among the Mpongwe, then among the Orungu and Nkomi. "On my way to the palace [of the Orungu king], between Banoko and Mayombay, I passed by three small huts which I had been told contained five idols, considered the most powerful on all the coast."[1] Later, among the Nkomi of Aniambia: "The next day, I went to see two huts with fetishes; for Aniambia is favored by the protection of two highly powerful spirits, Abambou and Mbuirri."[2] Although Du Chaillu saw "idols" on several occasions, in nearly every important village, and despite his repeated requests, he was able to acquire only one such object. In the village of Damagondai on Lake Anengue, the local "king" let him have "for a reasonable price" a statue he himself had stolen from his own slaves. (They were conveniently out working in the plantations, and the king planned to tell them he had seen their fetish "run off into the woods.")[3] Apparently this artifact was sent soon afterward to a learned society in Boston or Philadelphia, but unfortunately all evidence of it has long since disappeared.

Twenty years later, the Ogooué River, said to lead into the very heart of Africa, was explored by several expeditions, the most notable being those under the command of Oskar Lenz (1848–1925), an Austrian geologist sent there by the Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Äquatorialafrikas. Between 1874 and 1876 Lenz prospected the estuary region of the Muni and Gabon rivers, then the area around the Ogooué up to the Sébé. Through his contacts with the Aduma, and especially with the people called the "Oschebo," he collected a reliquary figure with an ogival face set with narrow brass strips. Long known as the Ossyeba or

Opposite: Element from a Mahongwe Reliquary Ensemble (cat. no. 52, detail)

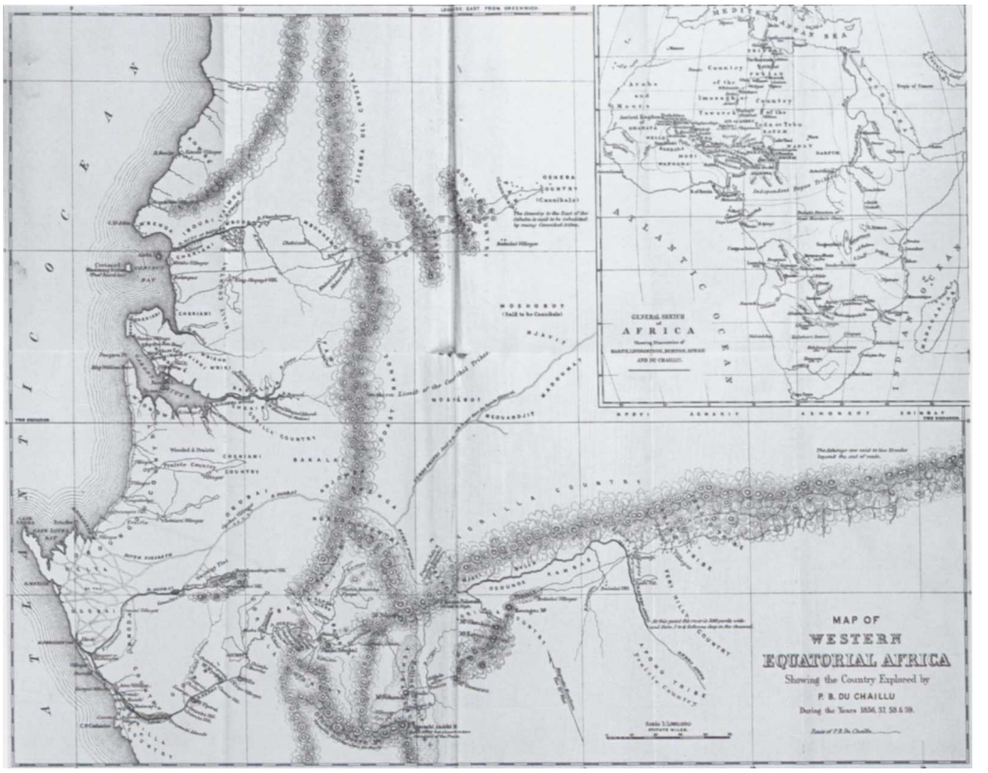


Fig. 24. ***Map of Western Equatorial Africa Showing the Country Explored by P. B. Du Chaillu during the Years 1856, 57, 58, & 59.*** **Published 1861. From Du Chaillu 1861, p. 480**

In 1855 the French-American adventurer Du Chaillu became the first Western traveler to venture into the hinterland of Gabon. This is the earliest detailed map of the region.

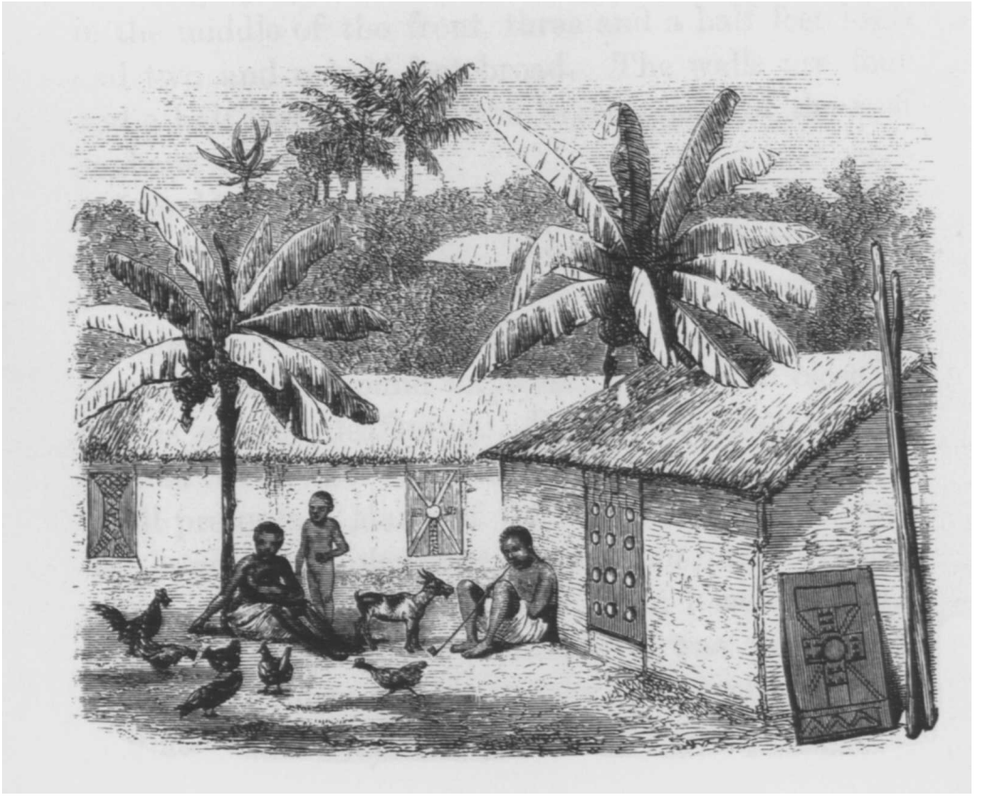


Fig. 25. Ishogo dwellings with decorative doors in Igoumbié village. From Du Chaillu 1867, p. 264

Du Chaillu published an account of his adventures, *A Journey to Ashogo-Land*, with prints illustrating the life of the peoples he met as well as the fauna and vegetation of the region.

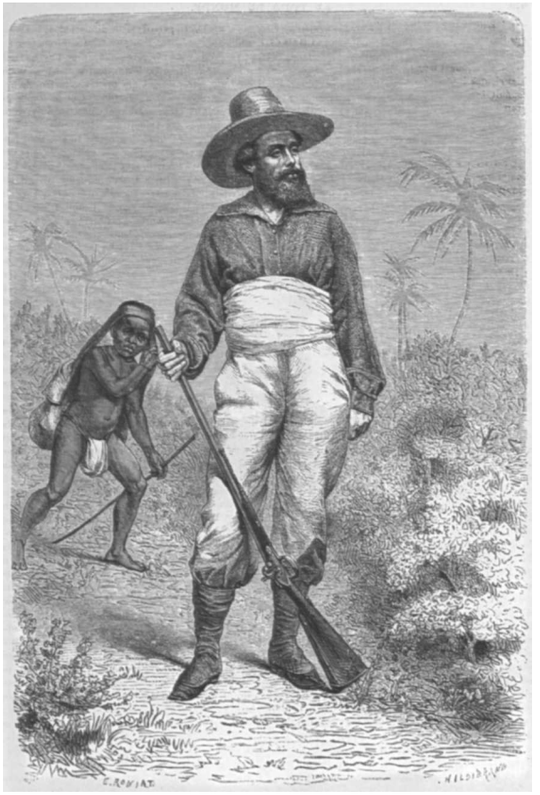


Fig. 26. Alfred Marche. After a drawing made in the field by Émile Ronjat. From Marche 1878, p. 409

Accompanied by the Marquis Victor de Compiègne, the naturalist Marche traveled through the Middle Ogooué region in 1873–74.

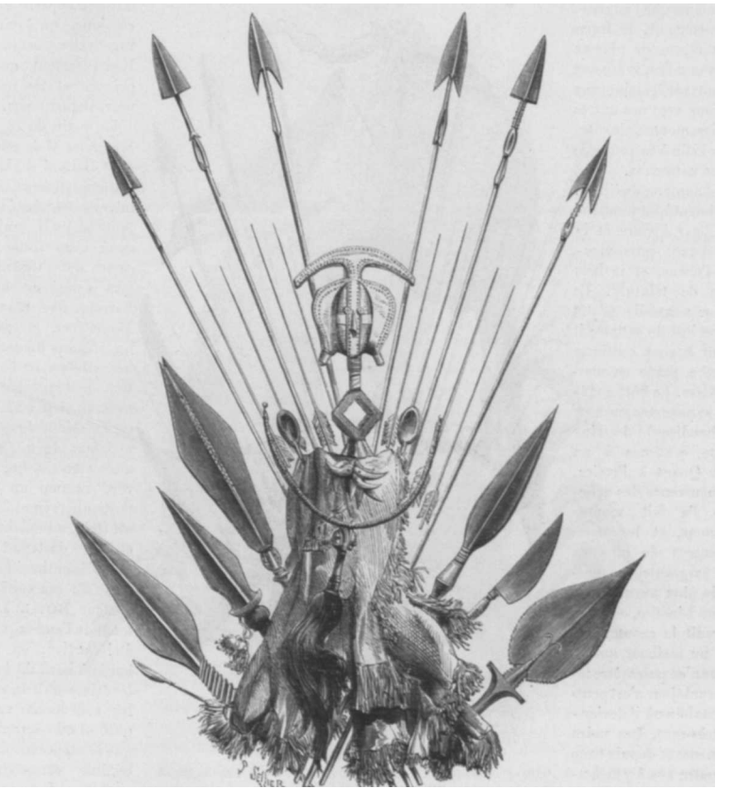


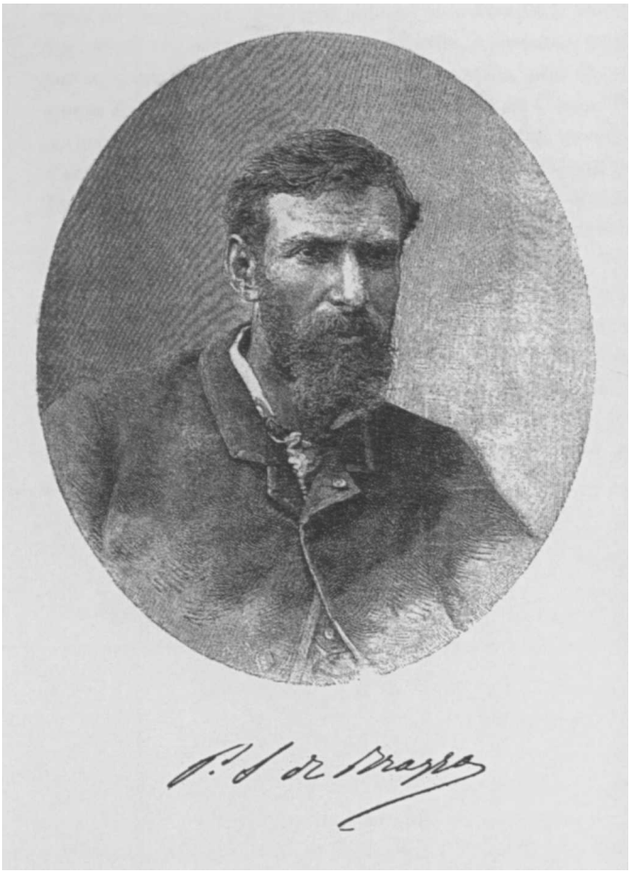
Fig. 27. Weapons, tools, and other objects collected by Alfred Marche. After a drawing by P. Sellier. From Marche 1878, p. 415

Displayed in a stylized arrangement without an ethnographic context, the objects illustrated here were identified in a caption as "Fetishes of the Obamba—Assegai—loincloths—knives of the Osseyba, the Obamba and the Adziana." They were given by Marche to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris.

Shiwa, the Oschebo were in fact the Make, a branch of the Fang whose traditions suggest close contacts with the Kwele and whose language is very similar to that of the Ngumba of southern Cameroon. Nonetheless, the effigy they helped Lenz acquire shows undeniable traces of the Kota-Mahongwe style, whose identifying characteristics were established only long afterward. This first extant African reliquary sculpture collected by a Westerner is now in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin (cat. no. 51).

Meanwhile, two French travelers, the Marquis Victor de Compiègne (1846–1878) and the naturalist Alfred Marche (1844–1898; fig. 26), venturing through the Middle Ogooué region, also acquired a group of sculptures, including several "idols" or "fetishes." These objects are known today through engravings that appeared in books published by both men (fig. 27).[4] Buried in various collections for decades, certain of these works—hardly masterpieces, regardless of their undeniable historical value—came to light not long ago, in particular, the Pahouin Goddess from the former Pilastre Collection[5] and an effigy from the former Bouvier Collection.[6]

From 1874 to 1885 Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (1852–1905; fig. 28), a young Italian naval officer who later became a naturalized French citizen, continued the exploration of the region. After several voyages, each taking him farther from the Atlantic coast, he managed to reach the Congo. During one sojourn, known as the West African Mission (1883–85), his companions included his younger brother Jacques (1859–1888; fig. 29), who held a degree in the natural sciences, and a naval doctor, Noël Ballay (1847–1902). On this





Figs. 28, 29. Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (*left*) and Jacques de Brazza (*right*). From Brazza 1887a, pp. 265, 296

Between 1874 and 1885 Pietro Savorgnan de Brazza, who changed his name to Pierre after he became a French citizen, organized three expeditions that traveled from the Ogooué to the Congo. He was accompanied on the last of these by his brother Giacomo, who later similarly renamed himself Jacques.

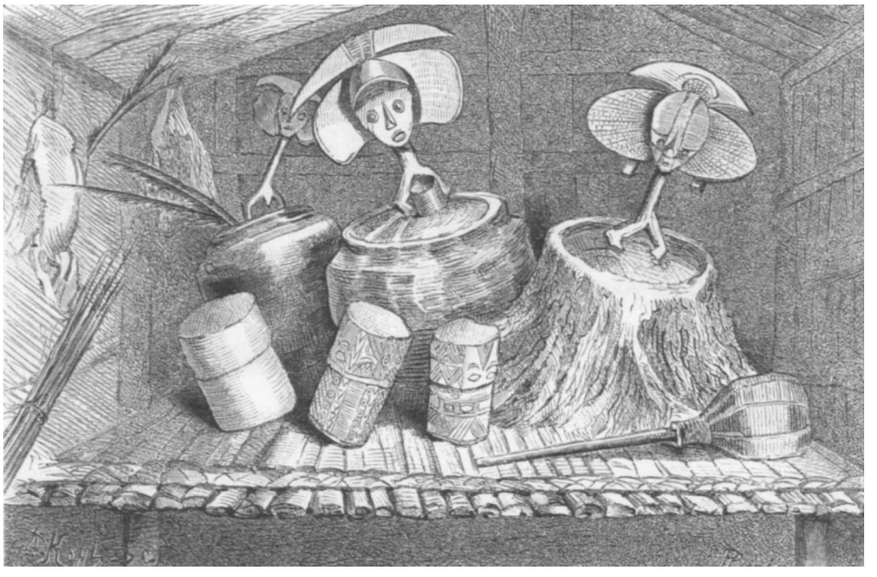


Fig. 30. Alfred Pâris, *Fetishes from Pongo*. From Brazza 1888, pt. 21, p. 50

Made after a sketch by Jacques de Brazza, this drawing shows Kota reliquary figures housed in a shelter and placed atop baskets containing ancestral relics.

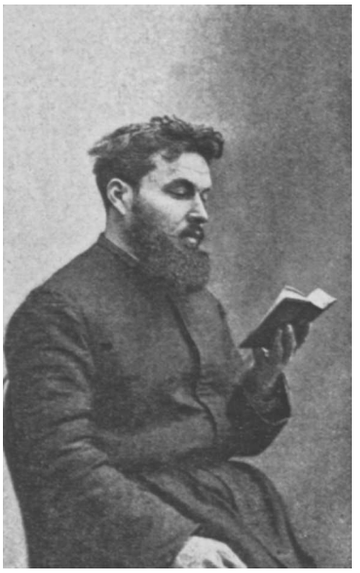


Fig. 31. Henri Trilles, ca. 1910. From Trilles 1912a, p. 6

This portrait of the French missionary served as the frontispiece of the preface to his account of his years among the Fang.



Fig. 32. Attributed to Monsignor Augouard, A Sangu *nganga* (healer), early 20th century. Postcard, 3 7/16 x 5 1/2 in. (8.7 x 14 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

This postcard was made from an extraordinary colonial photograph that was perhaps taken by a member of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit. It depicts the healer with various reliquaries in the form of boxes made of bark or baskets covered with strips of hide. When it was reproduced in 1912 in a book by Henri Trilles, the photograph was made less "offensive" to its audience by painting a collared white shirt on the healer.

occasion, Brazza saw many ritual objects in Kota, Aduma, Chiwa, Obamba, and Teke villages. Two meticulously rendered engravings accompanying the accounts he published in *Le tour du monde* after his excursion offer a glimpse of the communal wealth of certain villages.[7] These were based on sketches that Jacques de Brazza made on site, especially in a hamlet in the valley of the Mpassa River (a tributary of the Ogooué, near present-day Franceville) and in another village that he named Pongo, after the chief who was its elder, where the expedition was able to set up camp. In these drawings, Kota-style ancestor figures of various types (which were later classified) are shown set into reliquary baskets. The 1887 drawing depicts narrow-faced Sangu and Aduma figures from the region around Lastoursville; that from 1888 illustrates typically Obamba and Mindumu effigies with concave faces and overhanging foreheads (fig. 30). Some of these pieces, bought for glass beads and gunpowder, were given several years later to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris.[8] The expedition's engineer, Joseph Michaud, was fortunate enough—as was Lenz, along the same stretch of the Ivindo—to find an *ossyeba* (Kota-Mahongwe) figure, which in 1886 was also donated to the Trocadéro museum.[9]

Whether Brazza and his companions recognized any beauty in these artifacts is not known. At the time, such objects were collected simply as part of the hunt for "ethnographic" samples needed to fill natural-science museums, which then displayed these "exotic" curiosities to their Western audiences. It would therefore be anachronistic to assume that these reliquaries were classified from the outset as art. At most, they were regarded as decorated effigies that displayed various levels of skill.

A Missionary Grappling with Fang Ancestors

A few years later, Henri Trilles (1866–1949; fig. 31), a French missionary of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, had roughly the same reaction to these figures. In his book *Chez les Fang ou quinze années de séjour au Congo Français,* published in 1912 (fig. 32)—precisely as avant-garde artists in Paris, Prague, and Berlin were "discovering" African art—Trilles wrote of *byeri* reliquary guardian statues: "Above this box [the tree bark

reliquary case], they often put a vulgar and hideous statue, crudely carved by hatchet from a shapeless trunk of black wood."[10] Somewhat surprisingly, it was the same Father Trilles who in 1902 had procured for the Musée d'Ethnographie in Neuchâtel the famous head with oozing patina that is now recognized as a major work of Fang sculpture (cat. no. 42). Trilles may, of course, have simply been consciously adopting the tone of contemporary travel writing, which often employed well-meaning hyperbole to underscore the "primitiveness" of non-Western cultures—and thereby to justify the "civilizing mission" of European colonial conquests. Nevertheless, if he really found these ritual sculptures so hideous, why did he bother convincing the villagers to part with several of them, and why did he gather so much information about them? What was the point of devoting such efforts to the "barbarous" emblematic artifacts of a resolutely "primitive" and "pagan" civilization?

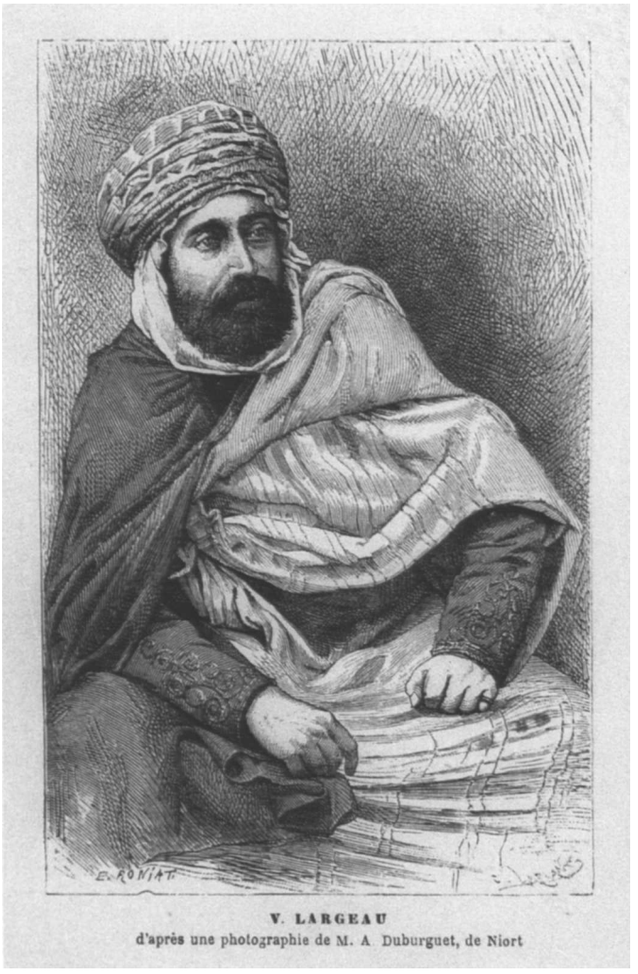


Fig. 33. Victor Largeau. Engraving after a photograph by A. Duburguet. Musée d'Agesci, Niort, France

Largeau was a passionate traveler and a sympathetic observer of the various peoples he encountered in the "Algerian Sahara" and "Black Africa."

Sent in 1892 to the French Congo, specifically to Gabon, Trilles began by learning the local languages, Myene and especially Fang. In 1893 the curious and adventurous young missionary began a long series of evangelizing voyages by canoe and on foot through the backcountry of Libreville, an estuary region populated mainly by Fang-Betsi (on the Remboué), Fang-Fang (on the Mondah), and Fang-Mekeny (known as the Fang-Make in the area around the Crystal Mountains). On these excursions, made half a century after Du Chaillu's, Trilles observed many remarkable aspects of Fang daily life and acquired numerous carved or decorated objects. In 1899, at the behest of the French colonial authorities, his superior Monsignor Le Roy appointed him the chronicler and geographer of an official expedition intended to shed light on the "Franco-Spanish dispute," a conflict regarding colonial boundaries. In that capacity, between August 1899 and April 1901, Trilles traversed a large portion of what was then the southern Fang territory, crossing Rio Muni, northern Gabon, and southern Cameroon, and returning via the tributaries on the right bank of the Ogooué (the Abanga and Como). In 1902 and 1903 he published a serialized chronicle of this journey in *Les missions catholiques* (Lyon).[11]

Trilles's activities as an explorer are worth considering because his interest in Fang culture and objects arose, as we have seen, not out of personal taste but out of a strictly professional curiosity. These "fetishes" were, after all, the primary obstacles to his pastoral goals. A handwritten note he sent to the Neuchâtel museum in 1902 along with a shipment of objects contains numerous firsthand ethnographic and linguistic observations, which at the time constituted rare information indeed. These comments remain extremely valuable since the rites and customs Trilles described are no longer extant.

"Colonials" and Their "Mementos"

A treaty signed at the Berlin Conference in February 1885 had divided equatorial Africa into several spheres



Fig. 34. Georg Zenker, 1898. From Chamier-Glisczinski 1925, p. 48, fig. 2

The naturalist is shown here at the German botanical and zoological station in Bipindi.

of influence: German in the north, Spanish in a small enclave on the coast (Rio Muni), and French. The borders changed considerably in 1900, when the German portion expanded to the detriment of the others; the map was redrawn in 1916 with the current boundaries which have become those of the independent nations of Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of Congo. In 1905 Captain Augustin Cottes was sent on a geographic and political reconnaissance mission to the boundaries of the Spanish, German, and French territorial possessions north of Gabon. Along the way, a member of his party took numerous photographs of Fang villages in the Ntem River valley (see figs. 61, 62); Cottes himself collected several objects, including a very old, undoubtedly Ntumu, *byeri* ancestor figure.[12] Such activities illustrate the fact that some of the most noteworthy archival sources relating to African art were gathered by individuals whose primary mission had an entirely different focus.

Slightly earlier, a former teacher and travel aficionado from Niort, Victor Largeau (1842–1897; fig. 33), made several trips to Africa, first to the Algerian Sahara in 1874–79 and then, having joined the French colonial administration, to Senegal, Guinea, and Loango in 1894 and to Gabon in 1896. Keenly interested in ethnography, linguistics, and collecting, Largeau studied the peoples he encountered, learned their languages, and sometimes acquired objects from them. His extensive *Encyclopédie pahouine*, written in 1896–97 during his stay among the Fang-Betsi in Ndjolé and published by his heirs in 1901, met with critical acclaim, although some expressed regret that the author had died before finishing it. Largeau was quite open-minded for his time, a period in which the "civilizing" zeal of administrators and activist missionaries was more readily accepted than sympathetic attitudes toward rites and customs generally considered primitive and cruel. In 1887 he wrote to his son, "We must understand that the black inhabitants of the Sudan (or of Gabon) have their own mentality and that their civilization will never be like ours: this will be a difficult lesson to learn, and the evolution of these peoples will be held back because of it. We are lacking in finesse."[13]

At the same time, other "adventurers" were active in German South Cameroon, between what is now Yaoundé and Ebolowa. In the Pangwe region to the north, military conquest and colonial development were proceeding at full speed. A naturalist and botanist from Leipzig, Georg Zenker (1855–1922; fig. 34) enthusiastically devoted himself to the cause: in 1895 he almost single-handedly "founded" and organized the post of Yaoundé in Yaunde (Ewondo) territory. Retiring from the administration in 1896, Zenker moved to the German botanical and zoological station in Bipindi, on the banks of the Lokoundje River, to develop plantations. He also transformed his house into a veritable museum, filled with masks, traditional objects, and ancestor figures from the region. Living in the heart of



Fig. 35. Günter Tessmann, 1907–9. Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck

This photograph of the ethnographer was taken at his camp in Nkolentangan.

Ngumba and Bane territories, Zenker established close relations with the local populations, marrying or taking as mistresses the daughters of several influential chiefs. Although the other European colonists looked askance at his rather peculiar situation, it did set him up to act as titular supplier for several German museums from 1896 to the early 1900s. Notable among these was the one in Berlin, to which he sent many crates of natural-history and ethnographic samples, all duly documented with information such as the vernacular name of each plant and object and comments on its use. There are descendants of Zenker still living in Cameroon today.

The present-day archives of the Berlin museum contain data cards with the information that Zenker provided. Regarding a pair of ancestor figures identified as Ngumba,[14] for example, he commented: "'*Ngule Malang*' fetish: recipient made of tree bark. Two wooden figures are seated on the rim. In the recipient are five skulls—those of the chiefs' ancestors—and among them 'medicines' including two copper boxes and one box of tree bark, filled with red wood rolled in sheets, two

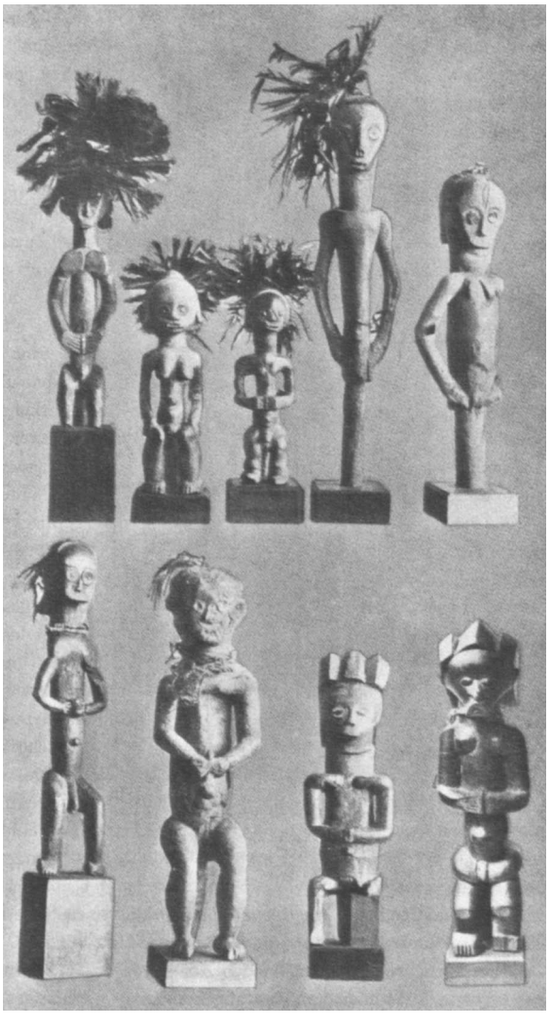


Fig. 36. Ancestor figures of the Ntumu, Fang, and Mvai regions. From Tessmann 1913, vol. 2, p. 119, fig. 44

Tessmann collected these objects in the field between 1907 and 1909. They were subsequently published in his highly influential study, *Die Pangwe* (1913).

arrowheads, and several pieces of wood and bark." His notations accompanying works such as this (cat. no. 4) indicate that Zenker, a naturalist and botanist rather than a professional ethnographer, was nonetheless uniquely placed to observe and participate in events "in the field" and to document some of the earliest works collected for German museums (cat. nos. 4–6, 8).

An Ethnographer at Work: Rites and Their Objects

Shortly after 1900, Günter Tessmann (1884–1969; fig. 35), another young German with a passion for the natural sciences, also left for southern Cameroon. He initially tried his hand at various business ventures for companies based in Hamburg and Lübeck, his hometown, working in several parts of the colony, first at the foot of Mount Cameroon, later in Ewondo-speaking areas. Then, Dr. Richard Karutz, the director of the Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt in Lübeck, and a society established "to promote public-interest activities" in that city jointly sent him on an exploratory mission to enrich the museum's ethnographic collections. As a result, Tessmann conducted extensive research into the material culture and customs of the southern Fang region, which was less known than the area in which Zenker lived and less supervised by the German, French, and Spanish colonial authorities. His meticulous observations concerning the Ntumu, Fang-Fang, and Mvai around Rio Muni and the middle valley of the Ntem were collected in a groundbreaking study, published in Berlin in 1913 (fig. 36). This highly detailed illustrated monograph is still an authoritative source, despite the author's somewhat dubious interpretations of certain rites.[15] On the other hand, the collection of Fang objects Tessmann brought back for the Lübeck museum remains little known (cat. no. 18).

The First Collectors of Ancestor Figures: The Passion for "Exotic" Art Forms

Beginning in the 1880s, Fang, Aduma, and Kota ritual artifacts entered the collections of most of the great European ethnographic museums, especially those in France (as a result of Brazza's expeditions) and Germany, where they were classified as ethnographic samples. Since such artifacts were then widely available in regional villages, vast quantities of these statues, masks, decorated objects, and headdresses were readily acquired in exchange for glass beads, cowrie shells, or perhaps rifles and gunpowder—all the more so since, before the 1920s, the villagers could easily make more. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were already relatively organized channels through which businessmen, administrators, or missionaries could send "colonial souvenirs" back to Paris, Stockholm, Berlin, or Hamburg. The time for an aesthetic appreciation of "Pahouin idols" and the Kota's ancestral sculptures (*mbulu ngulu*) had arrived.

Shortly before World War I, about the time he met Guillaume Apollinaire, the young Paul Guillaume

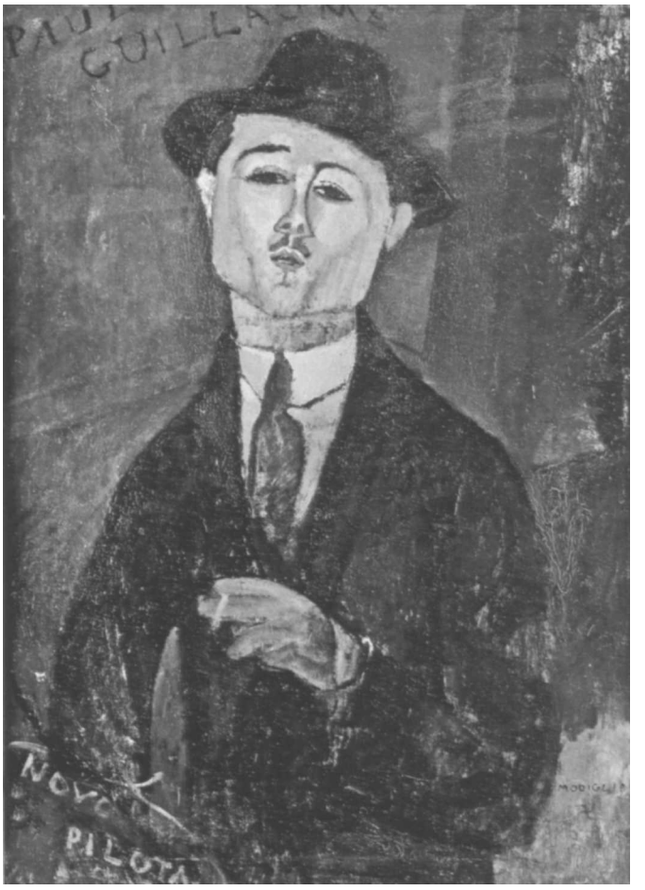


Fig. 37. Amadeo Modigliani (Italian, 1884–1920), *Paul Guillaume, Novo Pilota,* 1915. Oil on cardboard mounted on wood, 41⅜ x 29½ in. (105 x 75 cm). Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

Roughly translated as "new leader," the title given to this painting indicates that, as early as 1915, Guillaume was instrumental in developing the taste for new directions in art.



Fig. 38. Paul Guillaume's apartment, 22, avenue du Bois (now avenue Foch), Paris, ca. 1930. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris

In Guillaume's collection, African art—including the famous Great Bieri (cat. no. 45) as well as figures and masks from Côte d'Ivoire—was juxtaposed with modernist paintings by artists such as Picasso and Modigliani.

(1891–1934; fig. 37) began to seek out sculpted statues and masks from the French Congo through wildcat rubber prospectors who, along with missionaries and colonial agents, had been operating in the equatorial region since the 1890s. At the time, the Fang still enjoyed a fearsome reputation; the Kota were considered much more benign. When they first came to light, the ancestor statuary of these two peoples—the Fang's made of dark wood slathered in oils and lotions, the Kota's covered with shining brass and copper plates—was viewed in Parisian artistic and literary circles as portals to secret, forbidden things. The shudder provoked by this descent into a "primitive" and "savage" universe, so completely alien to the values of bourgeois Belle Époque Europe, delighted those who were hungry for alternate forms of expression.

For the remainder of his career, Guillaume devoted himself to promoting the "Negro arts," both in Paris and New York, through numerous exhibitions, catalogues, and books.[16] His activities as a fashionable antiques dealer and avant-garde collector (fig. 38) peaked in the 1920s—most particularly in his association with the Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania—and were cut short by his untimely death in 1934.

The 1920s and 1930s: "In the Field," Curious Missionaries and Administrators of Enlightened Taste

The Protestant missionary Fernand Grébert (1886–1956) was a scholar, artist, researcher, and collector all at once. Albert Schweitzer in Lambaréné, Grébert's exact contemporary, was a similar figure—a doctor, philosopher, organist, and collector. Grébert preached in Gabon from 1913 to 1932, and in 1934 he contributed an article on the endangered arts of Gabon to the magazine *Africa*.[17] His legacy, however, is primarily documentary. In 1914 he began illustrating his letters with drawings and watercolor sketches made from life, some of which were reprinted as notes or articles in the *Journal des missions evangéliques*, published in Paris.[18] Demonstrating a talent not only for drawing but also for writing in a pleasant, readable style, which was much less anecdotal than Trilles's, Grébert gathered copious information, sketches, and "scientific" notes on the daily life of the Fang-Betsi of the Ogooué valley while touring the villages of his parishioners. In 1915 he was sent to Talagouga, a missionary post near Ndjolé, midway down the Ogooué and upstream from Lambaréné and Samkita; until 1932 he did most of his work there.

In 1922, in the first edition of his book *Au Gabon,* the pastor related his impressions of Africa after several years in the depths of the equatorial forest, where he had witnessed many aspects of daily life among the Ndjolé Fang.

As early as 1917, Grébert began sending objects representative of the material and artistic culture of the Ogooué Fang to museums in Switzerland. Between 1917 and 1940, over the course of several shipments, he contributed 285 specimens, including *byeri* statues and dance masks, to the Musée d'Ethnographie in Geneva (cat. no. 38). In 1924 he gave the Neuchâtel museum ninety-two ethnographic objects acquired during his rounds, a collection that he completed after his return to Europe.

Much farther to the south, other clergymen also took an interest in local ways of life. These pastors, of Swedish origin but assigned to the French Congo, worked in the heart of Kota territory, in the Upper Ogooué, Zanaga, and Sibiti regions (figs. 39, 40). Karl Laman (1867–1944), posted in Kingoyi in the Lower Congo, was passionate about languages, but he would also occasionally collect copper-plated ancestor effigies. When sent back to Scandinavia, these works attracted the attention of the art historian Carl Kjersmeier. The Reverend Efraim Andersson (d. 1990), who was active in the same region in the 1930s, drew upon long sojourns among the "Kuta" to complete a remarkable monograph on the Mindumu, Ndassa, and Wumbu peoples, creators of

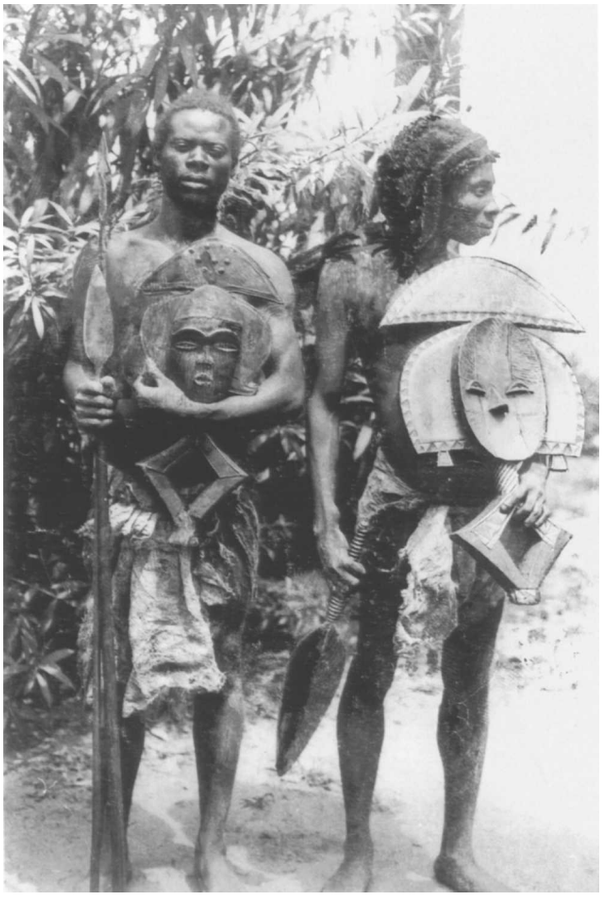


Fig. 39. Rev. G. A. Jacobsson, Two men holding reliquary guardian figures (*mbulu-viti* and *mbulu-ngulu*), 1917. Svenska Missionskyrkan Archives, Stockholm

This colonial photograph was taken in 1917 among the Obamba/Wumbu peoples while Jacobsson and his fellow Swedish missionary Teofil Ceder were residing in the French Congo.

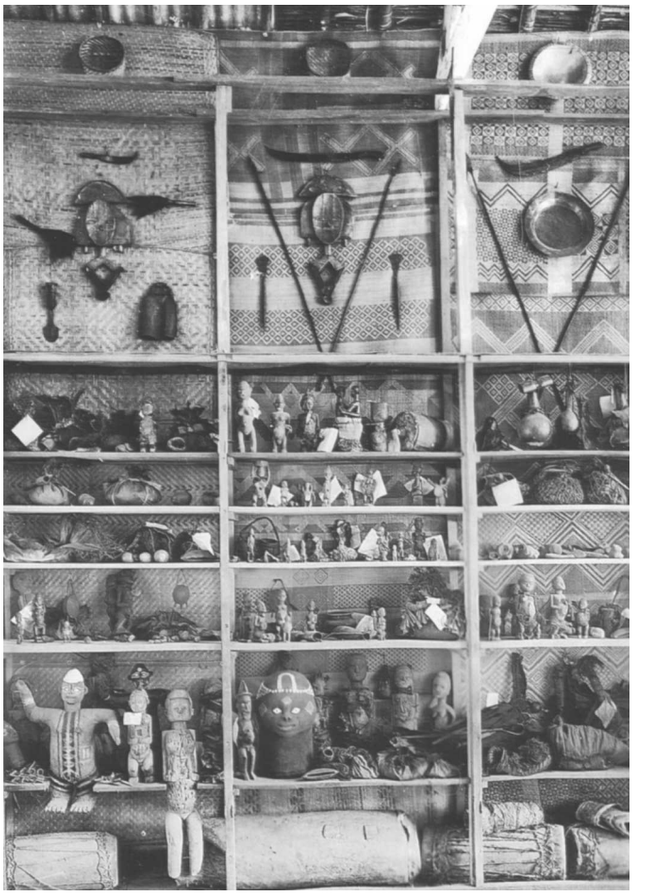


Fig. 40. Edvard Karlman, Collections of the museum located at the Swedish missionary station, Kingoyi (Bwende, Lower Zaïre), 1927–28. Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm

On the wall are two Kota ancestor figures (*mbulu-ngulu*). The shelves at the lower left and center contain several cloth reliquary sculptures of the Bwende (*niombo*) and Bembe (*muzidi*).

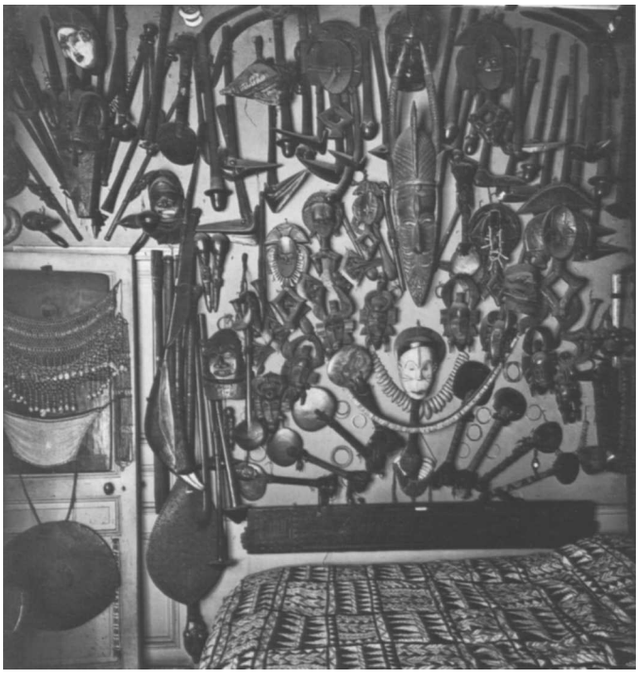


Fig. 41. Interior of Père Moris's curiosity shop, Paris, 1939. Archives Guy Ladrière, Paris

Many Kota and Fang reliquaries were represented among Moris's "curiosities."

many astounding objects. His *Contributions à l'ethnographie des Kuta* (2 vols., 1953, 1974) and *Ethnologie religieuse des Kuta: Mythologie et folklore* (2 vols., 1987, 1990) remain highly authoritative regarding not only the social organization, myths, and beliefs of the former Kuta but also, indirectly, their sculptures.

As for the colonial administrators, isolated in remote outposts in the interior, some used their visits to villages—after fulfilling their census and tax appropriation duties—to study the languages, environment, and customs of the local populations. As early as the 1920s, one such administrator, the amateur botanist and ethnographer Georges Le Testu, learned much about the region and societies (Punu, Wandji) of southern Gabon.[19] Another, André Even (1918–1996), undertook research on the traditional history and the most secret rites of the Obamba and Ndassa in the Okondja area. He also brought sculpted objects back to France that he offered to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.[20] Finally, Jean Eckendorff also deserves mention as one of the first Westerners to become interested in the Kota and Mahongwe peoples of eastern Gabon.[21]

Dealers, Artists, and Junk-Mongers: The Period of "Negro Arts"

The remainder of the story of how ancestor effigies from equatorial Africa were collected belongs as much to the intellectual and artistic adventure of "Negro art" as it does to the ethnographic holdings of the great European museums. Indeed, as of the years 1910–20, the exotic objects flowing in from Africa might land as often in the shops of Parisian art and antiques dealers (fig. 41), including Émile Heymann, Joseph Brummer, and Paul Guillaume, as in museum storage rooms, which were already filled with objects sent back from the nineteenth-century expeditions. The story has often been told of how Picasso, curious about these works from distant lands, went to see them for himself in 1907 at the Trocadéro museum. Though at first repulsed by the spectacle of these tribal pieces, caked with the remains of sacrifices, covered with dust, and crowded together in dark, dusky rooms, he forced himself to stay and study them more closely. Picasso ultimately left the museum feeling both comforted and "changed."[22] During this decade and for the next twenty years, many of these "disturbing" creations were to appear on the walls of artists' studios rather than in museum display cases.

The saga of the great collectors involves both Europeans and Americans. Among the former are Picasso, Georges Braque, Maurice de Vlaminck, André Derain, Georges de Miré, André Lefèvre, Félix Fénéon, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara, Dr. Paul Chadourne, Charles Ratton, Jacob Epstein, Helena Rubinstein, René Gaffé, Dr. Maurice Girardin, Pierre and Claude Vérité, René Mendès-France, Roland Tual, Alberto Magnelli, Louis Carré, Bela Hein, and Madeleine Rousseau; the latter include Dr. Albert C. Barnes (figs. 42, 43), Frank Crowninshield, John Graham, Laura Harden, Frank Burty Haviland (fig. 44), Alfred Stieglitz, and James Johnson Sweeney. The details of the saga are now familiar, largely because of pioneering research conducted in the 1960s through the 1980s by art historians such as Jean Laude in France and William Rubin in the United States.[23] Less well known are the provincial French collections, which, though less comprehensive, are significant in number, for it was not only the intellectuals of Paris, New York, and Berlin who were enthusiastic about "Negro arts" during this period.

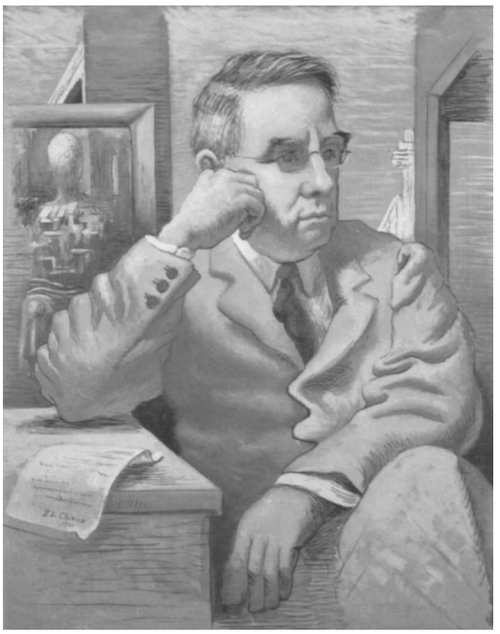


Fig. 42. Giorgio de Chirico (Italian, 1888–1978), *Dr. Albert C. Barnes,* 1926. Oil on canvas, 36½ x 29 in. (92.7 x 73.7 cm). The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania

Barnes established his foundation in 1922 "to promote the advancement of education and the appreciation of the fine arts." The collection, for which Paul Guillaume was the principal adviser, included Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and early modernist paintings as well as important examples of African sculpture.



Fig. 43. South wall, Gallery XXII, The Barnes Foundation, 2006

Here, paintings by Modigliani and Picasso are presented in a balanced setting along with African sculptures and masks. The central piece on the top shelf of African works is a Fang head from a reliquary *byeri* ensemble.



Fig. 44. Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973), Frank Burty Haviland in Picasso's studio, 1910. Musée National Picasso, Paris

A painter and dealer in modernist and African art, Haviland came from a wealthy American family and belonged to Gertrude Stein's influential circle. Haviland counted Picasso and other Montmartre artists among his friends.

Far from Bohemian Paris: Collectors in the French Provinces in the 1930s

The multitalented Dr. Stéphen-Chauvet (1885–1950) had many interests aside from medicine: archaeology, prehistory, French ethnography, physical anthropology, musicology, telepathy, and even boxing (in 1921 he wrote an article explaining the scientific principles behind the knockout). He was also a great connoisseur of "native arts" from the French colonies, which he studied extensively and about which he began writing in 1923 (cat. no. 114). From the 1930s until his death, Stéphen-Chauvet made various gifts to the Muséum Lafaille (now the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle) in La Rochelle. Several specimens from Gabon were among the most important of these: a magnificent bellows with anthropomorphic decorations made by the Kwele, which Brazza had brought back from his second expedition in 1880; Loango statues; and pygmy objects collected by Trilles about 1900. Stéphen-Chauvet owned several Fang and Kota effigies of exceptional quality that he valued highly, some of which were reproduced in his 1933 study on the funerary arts of Gabon.[24]

In Marseille, the collection of Léonce Guerre and his son Pierre (fig. 45), begun by Léonce just after World War I, was completed by Pierre in the 1930s. A hospital administrator in Marseille, the elder Guerre was considered by Ratton to be a pioneer among collectors of African art. According to Alain Nicolas, "The determining event in the formation of the collection was surely the Exposition Coloniale Nationale in Marseille in April 1922."[25] Indeed, father and son (the latter, born in 1910, was still young at the time; he later became a lawyer and occasional poet) worked together to conduct intensive research that led to the discovery of many masterworks. Some of these were owned by "colonials"—military men or doctors returning from Africa whom Léonce met during their near-obligatory passage through Marseille, the main port for most overseas arrivals. He and Pierre also traveled throughout the south of France to visit many of these men and to view the "mementos" they had almost always brought back from the banks of the Niger or Ogooué. It was in Avignon, for example, at the home of a Dr. Bergier, that they discovered one of their most celebrated Fang statues (cat. no. 28). This exceptional, very old piece, which measures 40 centimeters (15¾ inches) in height, had reportedly been brought back to France by a sailor in 1842.[26] Despite the dubious provenance—the Fang then lived a long way from the coast—the account still makes for a good story.

In 1930, during an exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels (curated by J. Maës and H. Lavachery), the Guerre Collection was singled out for the quality of its objects, several of which were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935. Although largely complete as of the 1930s, particularly with the addition of ancestor figures from equatorial Africa, the collection continued to grow slowly in later years, mainly as objects from West Africa were acquired. Léonce Guerre died in 1948, Pierre in 1978. Most of their treasures were



Fig. 45. Pierre Guerre, ca. 1965. From Cape Town 1997, p. 168

The collector appears in this photograph with two of his Fang reliquary sculptures.

bequeathed to the Musée des Arts Africains, Océaniens et Amérindiens in Marseille, but part of the collection was sold at auction in Paris in 1996.

Our brief account reveals that the importance of ancestor figures from equatorial Africa and their appeal to collectors did not diminish after the works were first discovered by Westerners. The wonder that the "idols" and "fetishes" of the Fang, Punu, Ossyeba, and Kota inspired in Du Chaillu and Brazza was echoed by an immediate, spontaneous infatuation on the part of artists and intellectuals, first in the early twentieth century, then between the two world wars. Afterward, it was furthered by a passionate and insistent quest led by both collectors and researchers in the anthropology of art. Having first admired these diverse artistic expressions, such individuals then wanted to understand them, both as the culmination of a long cultural process and as a sculptural achievement that reaches out to us through the mists of time.

1. Du Chaillu 1863, p. 51. Unless otherwise indicated in the Bibliography, all translations are my own.
2. Ibid., p. 227.
3. Ibid., pp. 267–68.
4. Compiègne 1875; Marche 1879.
5. Drouot 1989, lot 393; H. 11 3/8 in. (29 cm).
6. Now private collection; H. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm).
7. Brazza 1887b, p. 328; Brazza 1888, p. 50.
8. Bordeaux 1997–98, pp. 211–20.
9. Now in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (inv. no. 71-1886-77-2; H. 22 3/8 in. [56.7cm]).
10. Trilles 1912a, p. 246.
11. Reprinted in book form as *Mille lieues dans l'inconnu: En pleine forêt équatoriale chez les Fang anthropophages* (Trilles 1935).
12. The photographs are now at the Musée du Quai Branly (Musée de l'Homme photo archives), as is the statue (inv. no. 08.9.1; H. 22 in. [56 cm]).
13. Angoulême 1985–87, p. 46.
14. Inv. no. III C 6689 a,b; H., male figure, 24 7/16 in. (62 cm), female figure, 22 13/16 in. (58 cm).
15. Tessmann 1913; English trans., Tessmann 1959, Tessmann 1960.
16. See, for example, New York 1914, Apollinaire and Guillaume 1917, Paris 1919, and Guillaume and Munro 1926.
17. Grébert 1934.
18. See Kaehr 1997–98.
19. Le Testu 1920.
20. Even 1937.
21. Eckendorff 1945.
22. In New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 255.
23. Writing specifically about the Africanists' collections, Jean-Louis Paudrat made a notable contribution to Rubin's catalogue for the exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," organized in 1984 by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See Paudrat 1984–85.
24. Stéphen-Chauvet 1933a; reprinted by Librairie Maloine, Paris (Stéphen-Chauvet 1933b).
25. In Marseille 1992b, p. 52.
26. Perrois 2006, pl. 40 and p. 136.



Ancestor Veneration in Central Africa

ELIAS K. BONGMBA

This exhibition of works relating to ancestor veneration in equatorial Africa serves as a window on the religious thought and social praxis of the region's people. It invites us to consider not only the rites and artistic traditions associated with the works, but also the ancestors' place in these societies. In this essay, the term *ancestors* is used to denote those who have died but continue to maintain a presence among or a relationship with their living relatives.[1] The term is clearly inadequate, however, because the concept of "ancestor" in equatorial Africa is a complex and expansive one. The religious beliefs and practices of the Kongo peoples, for example, have been the subject of more research and substantive literature than those of any other central African culture. The Bwende and Bembe groups, whose creations are included in this exhibition, relate to that tradition. As Anita Jacobson-Widding observes, these groups classify ancestors according to three categories: "the recently deceased, who are remembered as persons . . . , the more distant ancestors, who constitute a mythical category and are referred to either as *bakulu* or as *bisimbi,* and finally . . . the remote ancestral spirits, who are still older (the *nkisi* spirits)."[2] In this belief system those in the first category, who may be good or evil spirits, are considered members of one's extended family. The second group includes the deceased who have a positive connection with the entire clan, whether as its founders, as members who established different lineages, or as nature spirits. The third group consists of more ephemeral manifestations. Although Jacobson-Widding describes the *nkisi* as remote, they are actively engaged with power, performance, and healing in Kongo society.[3]

I use the term *religion* to describe human efforts to identify, establish a connection with, and depend on a power outside the material world. Activities connected to this enterprise often draw upon myths and are conceptualized, coordinated, and regularized through a variety of rituals. The religious lives of central Africans involve devotion to a Supreme Being, whom the Kongo refer to as *nzambi*. This higher power resides in a different realm, the same one that is the destination of departed relatives. Over time, specific myths, rituals, and practices have been devised in order to nurture the people's relationship with the Supreme Being as well as with other spiritual and material forces that affect their lives. Various experts act as mediators in these activities. Although the specific forms and methods of religious practice differ among the various peoples of the region, they all provide the means whereby individuals and the community are linked with divinity and ancestors. Examples include a variety of rituals performed at the graves of influential family members and the shrines of dead leaders (chiefs and clan heads).[4]

The religious faith of many of the communities represented in this exhibition has been studied and analyzed for many years by scholars who were outsiders. James Fernandez, for instance, has examined the *bwiti* movement in Gabon, demonstrating that that religious tradition is grounded in systematic thought.[5] Most of the traditions that have been considered have articulated their spiritual lives through oral narratives and codified

Opposite: Element from a Kota Reliquary Ensemble (cat. no. 63, detail)

them in ceremonies that were not always documented. As a result, researchers have often had to rely on somewhat ephemeral data. Jan Vansina has observed that "to participate in a common ritual mattered more in a community than any divergence of belief about this ritual. Nevertheless, basic concepts were shared and formed a coherent if open-ended whole, so that a consistent account of them can be given."[6] When Christian missionaries prescribed their "superior" alternative—a moral code based on the Ten Commandments—these communities were faced with an entirely different perspective on relating to the divine. In their regional traditions, morality was not transcribed in a text but rather was reflected across a holistic approach to life. Fernandez has argued that the Fang acknowledged social sins, but that "the crucial moralities are bound up in the nature of the cosmos and these rights and wrongs are adhered to as they are achieved over and over again by ritual celebration."[7]

General Beliefs concerning Ancestors

With some exceptions, African communities basically consider ancestors to be essential intermediaries between living relatives and the divine. This connection with ancestors is an established spiritual practice that involves beliefs, rituals, political organization, and the moral ethos of the community.[8] The ancestors watch over their relatives and assist them so they may live a good life. In return, the grateful members of the community serve their ancestors through acts of veneration. This relationship begins when surviving relatives bury the deceased in accordance with traditional customs and practices. They are expected to visit and take offerings to the grave or shrine of the dead who have become ancestors. Among the related rituals and cult activities are regular communications with ancestors to appeal for their blessing. Heads of households, chiefs, and ritual experts consult ancestors on behalf of the community before they make important decisions and also ask them to intervene in times of crisis.

An ethical life is a condition for becoming an ancestor. People honor good ancestors, referred to by inhabitants of the Lower Congo region as *banzambi bampungu* (creatures of God).[9] This title is applied only to individuals who have died of natural causes.[10] According to Jacobson-Widding, it implies that the ancestors are like God because they will not die. The good ancestors reside in *kutiwa zingila* (roughly, "where we shall live").[11] They are not subject to magic and witchcraft, as their living relatives are. Therefore, they are regarded as powerful beings, ones that their relatives on earth can depend on in difficult times. However, some early studies of ancestors in Kongo society claimed that the ancestors were not superior morally because they continue to act with the same intentions as when they were on earth.[12] This position is questionable because living a moral life is a prerequisite for becoming an ancestor. Other Kongo communities did not stress death from natural causes as a requirement for ancestorship, as the people of the Lower Congo did, but simply believed that "a man who has lived honestly according to the laws and customs of his forebears, whether he dies because witches have eaten him or is called by *Nzambi*, becomes a *nkulu* (good ancestor). As a snake changes its skin, so he sheds his mortal envelope (*ukibunini kigagala*) and leaves it in the grave. He goes whither the ancestors have preceded him, under the earth, near the water."[13]

In the past, scholars have debated which term to use in describing the activities that Africans engage in when they pay homage to ancestors. Do they worship ancestors or venerate them? One reasonable conclusion holds that Africans do not worship ancestors because this is reserved for divinity; instead, they recognize ancestors as powerful beings and venerate them. There is a general consensus among scholars that Africans distinguish between divine beings, who should receive worship, and ancestors, who are to be honored and venerated—although given the influence these entities have over one another, the distinction often gets glossed over.[14]

In equatorial Africa, people honor ancestors with offerings and sacrifices. These are presented during sacrificial rites, which may range from simple to elaborate events. The offerings are generally conceived of as an aspect of the give-and-take between the people and their ancestors, a mutual sharing in which the living express their appreciation to the deceased who have favored them. Sacrifices are given to honor these benevolent ancestors, as well as to appease and ward off departed evil spirits. When individuals or even leaders

of the community commit offenses against others and the ancestors, they are required to offer sacrifices as propitiation for their wrongdoing. Sacrifices are also made in order to ask the ancestors to respond to specific petitions by individuals and the community. Some individuals may pray for success in farming or business or for protection from danger; others to be blessed with children. The community's petitions may address interpersonal relationships and issues relating to their environment. Heads of households say prayers to the immediate ancestors, while specialists preside over the rituals for ancestors who had had jurisdiction over an entire village or clan. The activities of ancestral cults provide an occasion for members of a family or community to channel all their prayers to divinity through their ancestors.

Individuals honor their immediate ancestors in their homes, but as members of lineage groups, clans, and villages, they also participate in celebrations organized by clan elders or ritual specialists.[15] These public celebrations may include dances and other performances that invoke and praise ancestors.[16] Other ceremonies are closed to the community at large. For instance, divination ceremonies seeking the help of the ancestors to diagnose the underlying causes of a misfortune are often limited to those who are directly affected. Such a session involves a search for knowledge and insight that will enable the individuals and their families to carry out their obligations and thus eliminate the source of the problem. Still other ceremonies are limited to those who have undergone initiations to become members of specific cult groups. These initiates are also ranked according to a system that is tied to their contributions to the society, which are prerequisites for their becoming future ancestors. In Fang society, for instance, the initiation ceremonies include images of death in order to call attention to the ancestors and to provide illumination to the initiate concerning the ancestors' identity and present state.[17]

Ancestors and Reliquary Art

In equatorial Africa, ancestral veneration has led to the creation of a ubiquitous form of devotional expression: the reliquary. In contributing to the construction of these ensembles, regional artists have drawn upon a wide range of media and formal approaches. These artifacts are invariably seen as containers for ancestral power or as sites whereby contact with ancestral spirits may be effected. The family members who commission reliquaries do so in order to keep their ancestors present in their midst.

Reliquary art is an important aspect of religious practice for several reasons. First, it represents an active effort to preserve the memory of ancestors. Second, it is also used in initiation ceremonies in which ties are established among the past and future generations of an extended family. Members of the society represent their ancestors because they are convinced that ancestors are concerned about and can affect their well-being. During some initiations, ritual experts rub palm oil on the initiate's body in order to link it to the sculptural representation of the ancestor and thus to establish ties with the ancestor. Older members of the group pray that the young people being initiated may be granted a vision that will afford them greater insight into life.[18] Finally, in some communities, reliquary art is expected to evoke the ancestor's personality, to remind the people who commission these sculptures of someone close to them.[19] Such an object does not merely depict an individual; it is a representation of his soul. For that reason, some of the sculptures are treated as if they are persons.

Ancestors, Political Authority, and Power

Ancestors are not only powerful in themselves, but are also actually linked to political power in the community.[20] In the family household, the most intimate unit of a community, daily life and activities are regulated by the ancestors through the head of the family, who derives his or her authority from them. Likewise, political leaders owe their offices to the ancestors, who must bless and anoint them to legitimate their authority.[21] Many African communities hold that the chief who occupies a seat of office is "tied by mystical links with his predecessors in office, 'ancestors.'"[22] Chiefs and elders often consult with ancestors before they make important decisions affecting the entire community. People often interpret political misconduct first as an insult to the ancestors before they consider it as moral infringement, abuse of power, or oppression. Simon

Bockie has pointed out that, among the Kongo, "the chief of a *kanda* [a small community that is part of a clan] can be defined as the embodiment of an ancestral power."[23] In many villages, the chief shows respect to the ancestors by entering the ancestral shrine to offer sacrifices to them and seek their wisdom.

In Kota society, reliquary baskets contain figures that make reference to political hierarchies: large reliquary sculptures depict the founding ancestor of the clan, while the small ones represent lineage leaders. Among the Bembe, cloth reliquary figurines are kept in an enclosure by the head of the clan (fig. 46).[24] Members of the community bring their offerings to this house to ask for the health, well-being, and prosperity of the community.[25] The ancestral symbols of other peoples are kept in a *corbeille des ancêtres* (basket of ancestral relics). Eugenia Herbert notes that in the past, when eastern Kongo villagers installed a new chief, the bracelets he wore included one, taken from the *corbeille des ancêtres,* that had belonged to the former chief. The new chief also assumed the name of the former chief. Toward the end of his installation ceremony, the chief recited the "names of the ancestral *bisimbi bi nsi* (distant ancestors of the clan) and all the rivers that the ancestors had to cross before reaching the present locality."[26] Herbert also states that the investiture of the chief resembled "the ritual followed to create a charm, establishing communion between the living and dead as the source of power that could then be 'constrained to produce extraordinary effects, good or bad.'"[27] Societies that have *corbeille des ancêtres* guard them closely, and the leaders ensure that they are not sold to outsiders because they are the inalienable property of the clan. The chief's connection to the ancestors also involves matters of defense. During installation ceremonies, the weapons of the former rulers are given to the new chief, who is expected to protect the community from enemies and provide leadership in case of armed conflict.

Ancestral Cult as a Life of Dialogue

Ancestral spirituality is also a dialogue between the living and the ancestors. Like any kind of communication between human and supernatural beings, dialogue with ancestors is an activity of faith. Making objects, constructing shrines, offering sacrifices—everything that goes along with ancestor veneration—is an attempt to stay in touch with the ultimate source of power. Ancestors communicate with their relatives through dreams, visions, or even misfortune and catastrophic events. Ritual experts facilitate this dialogue with ancestors when they preside over important sacrifices. They interpret the will of ancestors to the community, using their festivities to pass on messages from the ancestors. Communication takes place at various levels, since it involves dialogue with spirits ranging from those of individuals intimately known during their lives to those, such as the *nkisi*, who are at a far remove.[28] This communication with ancestors is not always a quiet, reflective engagement: it may take the form of a debate or negotiation, or individuals may even chide ancestors for neglecting their people.

Life, Health, and Death

Both the discourse and the practice of ancestor veneration are directly concerned with matters of life and death. Ancestors are independent of the shackles that once held them, because death has freed them from the limitations of this earthly world. In this emancipated state—celebrated by the transcendent beauty of the reliquary figures—they nonetheless maintain their connection with the living members of their families. The freedom from mortal limitations has also given them power, which they use to help their relatives in the journey through a world filled with disease and other dangers. Bockie has remarked on the Manianga claim that, as beings liberated from the evils of the world, "the ancestors have power and authority, for they are now full human beings. Aware of their ancestor's complete humanness, Manianga take the opportunity to surrender to them their day-to-day troubles because they (the ancestors) now possess authority to overcome human oppression."[29] When the Kota people, for example, visit the graves of the dead and offer prayers, they also seek redress for their misfortunes here on earth.[30] All questions concerning life and death can be directed to the ancestors because they have now progressed beyond the forces that could curtail their power. Death therefore is not the end of life but an important passage and the beginning of a new kind of existence.



Fig. 46. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure (*Muzidi*). Kongo peoples, Bembe group, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19th–first half of 20th century (see cat. no. 118)

Ancestral rites thus express an eschatology. Survivors who celebrate ancestors assert that there is a world beyond this one and that they will someday join their ancestors in that world. The theologian John Mbiti was therefore mistaken when he argued that many Africans do not have a well-developed concept of a life after death.[31] Their rich narratives speaking of burial traditions and the place of departed leaders in a world beyond this earth affirm that ancestors who have gone ahead are vanguards of a future community. Bockie has powerfully expressed this idea of a future world:

> Belief in the existence of the invisible, the immortal *kini* [invisible body] and *nwela* [soul] provides the basis for the belief in the continuum of the *kanda* in the world beyond death. Beginning with the individual, the total community, like a series of concentric waves, spreads first into the members of the living community; then outward to the recent dead, who are in the process of becoming revered ancestors and finally to those who have achieved the status of ancestors or little gods, who watch over, guide, and protect the community of the living.[32]

Christopher Vecsey has also argued that in many African societies ancestors are thought to have reached apotheosis, either as glorified or deified beings, because they live on after death and are in communion with God.[33]

The Future of Ancestral Thought and Rituals

The ancestor veneration given expression in equatorial Africa's artistic representations will endure because its spirituality is linked to political authority, social hierarchy, and well-being. Although changes have occurred—Wyatt MacGaffey notes, for example, that legal authorities rather than ancestors are consulted to seek redress for every social problem—people still call on the ancestors to intervene and assist them in many areas of their lives.

Some African theologians have worked to revive ancestral spirituality by incorporating it into church life and theological discourse. Charles Nyamiti has emphasized Christ's ancestral connection to Adam, while Bénézét Bujo has downplayed that aspect, although he maintains that Christ, as the second Adam, is a proto-ancestor.[34] Bujo has pointed out that Saint John presents Jesus in his Gospel and letters as creator, shepherd, giver of life, and the bread of life, all themes that speak to survival of the community. According to Bujo, having Christ as an ancestor gives people a full life, renews them, and accompanies them as they seek to express their new identity.[35] Such a Christian appropriation need not replace ancestral traditions, nor does it indicate that ancestral connections are frozen in traditions removed from present realities.

Bujo has also argued that if Christ is an ancestor, the Christian community should be exemplars of the spirit of *diakonia* (service), since their founder was a servant. All who look up to Christ as an ancestor ought to adopt an ethic of service and not use their office for self-promotion.[36] Bujo decries the clericalism, episcopalism, and sacredotalism that have transformed religious offices into a "pyramid of administrative authority," minimized the role of the laity, and "choke[d] life and vitality in the church community."[37]

While this theological appropriation should open up an interfaith dialogue between the Christian tradition and African indigenous religions, in reality the traditions of the ancestors have been ignored and abused in the contemporary world. The socioeconomic crisis in Africa has created a society in which many people, including chiefs and elders who call on ancestors, are also engaged in destroying the ethics of that tradition. Contemporary politicians have invented new ways to legitimize their power, but they do not exercise that power benevolently, as the ancestors would expect. On the contrary, some equatorial African leaders have promoted corruption and hoarded resources to such an extent that the ancestors must surely be grievously offended. That these corrupt leaders and their immediate families continue to prosper leads observers to wonder what has happened to the ancestors' disciplinary powers. In light of these developments, ancestral veneration may face new challenges in the future as these new elders fail to serve as role models for communities and therefore as worthy future ancestors.[38] In the meantime, many communities in the region continue to honor ancestors through rituals and the performing arts.

I thank Alisa LaGamma, Jeff Kripal, and Allen Roberts for their comments on this essay. I also thank Margaret Donovan for her insightful editing.

1. Some scholars have described ancestors as the "living dead" because they still have a relationship with their communities. See Bujo 1998, p. 73.
2. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 94.
3. Ibid.; Allen F. Roberts, personal communication.
4. Bockie 1993, pp. 18–19.
5. Fernandez 1982.
6. Vansina 1990, p. 95.
7. Fernandez 1982, p. 295.
8. See MacGaffey 1986, p. 75; MacGaffey 1993–94.
9. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 96.
10. The Wimbum people of the Northwest Province in Cameroon call this type of death *rkwi nyuu* (literally, "God's death"); ibid. See also Laman 1962, p. 22.
11. Laman 1962, p. 22.
12. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 98.
13. See Wing 1959, p. 309. The citation here is taken from MacGaffey 1986, p. 66.
14. Andersson 1974, p. 165.
15. Perrois and Sierra Delage 1990, p. 28. The authors use the discredited term *witch doctor* to refer to an expert in worship and ritual.
16. See Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 285.
17. Fernandez 1982, p. 262.
18. Gollnhofer, Sallée, and Sillans 1975, p. 82.
19. Allen F. Roberts (personal communication) points out that icons are "beautiful and evocative, and the ideas they instigate—a great phrase from Turner: symbols instigate action—are very engaging."
20. For a detailed study of art and power in the Kongo, see New York and Washington, D.C. 1996–97.
21. MacGaffey has argued that ancestral cults in the Kongo "show a close association with various forms of chiefship and therefore with the corporate organization of Kongo society and its government." MacGaffey 1986, p. 65.
22. Herbert 1993, p. 139.
23. Bockie 1993, p. 16.
24. Volavka 1998, p. 51.
25. Roy 1992, p. 93.
26. Herbert 1993, p. 136; see also MacGaffey 1986, p. 67. For the mythic accounts of the founding of states in the region, see De Heusch 1982.
27. Herbert 1993, p. 136. Roberts (personal communication) points out that in Tabwa succession rituals, the skull of the previous chief is buried with the body of the chief who has just died and that eventually his skull would be buried with the body of his successor.
28. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 94.
29. Bockie 1993, p. 132.
30. Andersson 1974, p. 109.
31. Mbiti argued that African religiosity did not offer any hope concerning a future life. However, an examination of the reliquary figures employed in veneration, initiation, and other ritual activity seems to indicate that people in many African societies subscribe to an eschatology that offers hope. See Mbiti 1971.
32. Bockie 1993, p. 130. Italics are mine.
33. Vecsey 1983, p. 38.
34. Bujo 1998, p. 82.
35. Ibid., p. 83.
36. Ibid., p. 85.
37. Ibid.
38. Cameroonian writer Pabé Mongo in his novel *Nos ancêtres le baobabs* satirizes this dilemma (Mongo 1994). Mongo criticizes those he calls the *baobabs,* the new millionaires and politicians who lay claim to ancient traditions and customs to justify their selfish ambitions. The problem is not that these individuals claim ancestral heritage, but that they completely lack an ethical sense and certainly do not provide for people as the ancestors did when they lived on earth.



"To learned people this may seem to be full of superstition"

Reliquary Sculpture in the Medieval Christian Tradition

BARBARA BOEHM

Images of illustrious leaders and ancestors are everywhere in contemporary American society. Ranging in size and material from a Lincoln penny or Kennedy half dollar to the gargantuan busts of past presidents on Mount Rushmore (fig. 48) or the imposing seated Lincoln from his memorial in Washington, they convey a sense of potent authority. Whether monumental or diminutive, carved in relief or freestanding, and whatever their material, they are intended to instill a sense of shared civic or national pride.

What renders such images identifiable and authentic? Taken out of their immediate American context, those of our esteemed national ancestors immediately lose potency. No inscriptions or symbols on the Lincoln penny and Kennedy half-dollar reveal anything about the men represented. They are not identified by name or date, and nothing of their history is communicated; there is, moreover, nothing to suggest that they are deceased. The resonance of the youthful busts of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy as official images on the currency of the United States of America depends on two critical presumptions, two leaps of faith: that the community of viewers will recognize the images and that, individually and collectively, they will have some preexisting awareness of the place of these men in history. These are, in fact, audacious presumptions, but they are the accepted ones of Western culture.

In the case of the images of Lincoln and Kennedy, the artists who shaped the bas-relief visages for use on coins could depend on photographic portraits to confer authenticity on their work. In the long Western tradition of official images, varying combinations of criteria, including recognizably distinctive physiognomic traits (such as Lincoln's craggy face and beard), coiffure (Washington's wig), personal attributes (Kennedy's rocker), or identifying inscriptions have served to make a portrayal recognizable—to be the "portrait" of a prominent figure, whether secular or sacred.[1]

In the African tradition of sculpture presented in "Eternal Ancestors," a different set of socially recognized conventions was adopted to render an image identifiable and authentic: the association of that image with the physical remains, often specifically the skull, of the ancestor. To the anthropologists and missionaries who first encountered these works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this was a practice that was stunningly bizarre—primitive, pagan, even frightening. Some African sculpture was quickly shipped back to Europe for inclusion in anthropological exhibits, in a spirit of awed discovery reminiscent of Darwin's as he collected samples of unusual species while circumnavigating the globe on the *Beagle*.[2] To Christian missionaries, whether Protestant or Catholic, these were idols that needed to be removed or destroyed. Art critics

Opposite: **Fig. 47. Reliquary bust of Saint Yrieix. France (Haute-Vienne), Church of Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche, second quarter of 13th century. Gilded silver, rock crystal, gems, glass, originally over walnut core with silver leaf and gesso on interior, H. 14¾ in. (37.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.352a,b)**

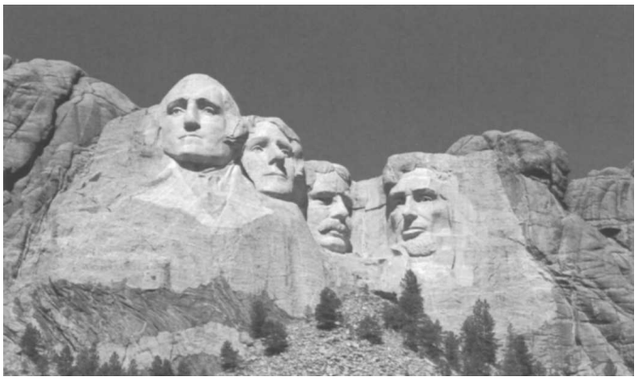


Fig. 48. John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum, American (1867–1941), Busts of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lincoln. Mount Rushmore, South Dakota, 1927–41. Granite, each face, H. 60 ft. (18.3 m). Mount Rushmore National Park, South Dakota

deplored the missionaries' destruction of African art: "Assembled in the village square, they built huge pyres of statues and masks and burned them to the greater glory of Christianity."[3] As recently as 1938–40, Roman Catholic missionaries sank the ritual sculptures of Mahongwe villagers in wells.[4] But, in fact, the tradition of African reliquary sculpture—in which relics serve as the means of creating authentic images, imbued with the essence of the person represented—finds a number of parallels in the Western European tradition of Christian reliquary sculpture, one of the most distinctive art forms to emerge during the Middle Ages.

The veneration of saints' skulls presumes a radically different notion of the meaning of the skull than that which prevails today. Indeed, before the end of the Middle Ages, images of the human skull had become indelibly linked with sober meditation on the transitory nature of life and the inevitability of death and decay. The skull became a ubiquitous motif in the visual arts, from manuscript illuminations of the Office of the Dead to ivory prayer beads of a human head bisected vertically to present a fleshy face attacked by worms on one side and a skull laid bare on the other (fig. 49). The theme has been codified in literature as well, perhaps most memorably in Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* in which the prince of Denmark muses about death while holding the skull of Yorick, the royal jester, in his hands.[5] At Halloween, a holiday popularly associated with skeletons and ghosts, Americans carve pumpkins into jack-o'-lanterns, frightening images evoking a human skull that are illuminated from within by candles.[6]

In contrast to the skulls of ordinary mortals, however, the skulls of saints, as indeed all their relics, were deemed "more precious than gold and silver."[7] The date at which Western Europeans began to create sculptures for the purpose of containing sacred relics cannot be precisely determined; the practice evolved gradually and was informed by the emerging tradition of venerating the saints, the heroes and exemplars of the Christian faith. Initially, Western European ecclesiastics were hesitant, and arguably squeamish, about the notion of disinterring and separating the sacred relics of the saints. Pope Hormisdas (r. 514–23) denied Emperor Justinian's request for bones of Saints Peter, Paul, and Lawrence as being against Roman custom.[8] Similarly, Gregory I (r. 590–604) refused to send the head or any other bodily relic of Saint Paul to Constantina, wife of the sixth-century emperor Maurice, for the new church of the palace. Indeed, the pope warned of the physical dangers that could result from disturbing bodily relics of the saints and instead ultimately offered her iron shavings from the chains of Saint Peter.[9]

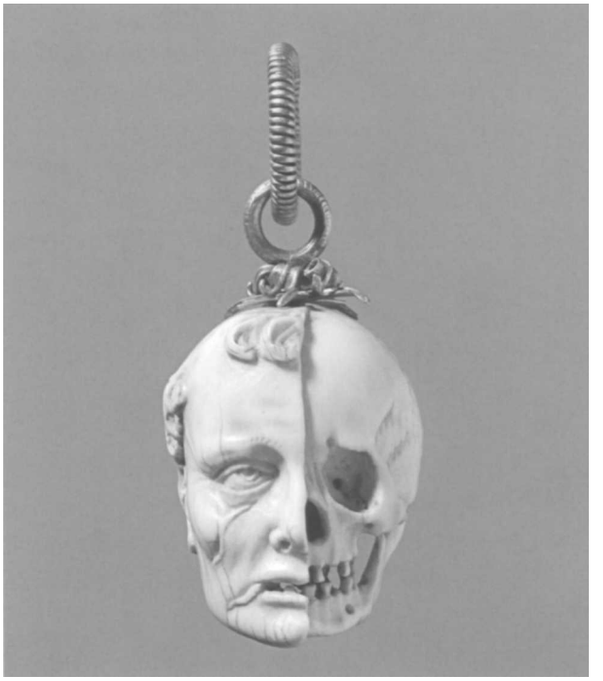


Fig. 49. Terminal bead of rosary. German, 1500–1525. Ivory, 2 1/16 x 1 7/16 in. (5.2 x 3.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.306)



Fig. 50. Reliquary. Byzantine, 6th century. Marble, 6 1/16 x 8 3/16 x 5 5/16 in. (15.5 x 20.8 x 13.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Blumka Gallery, in memory of Mrs. Barbara Paley, 1978 (1978.273a,b)



Fig. 51. Arm reliquary. Belgium (Meuse Valley), ca. 1230. Silver, partially gilded, niello, gems, over wood core, 25 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 4 in. (64.8 x 16.5 x 10.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.33)

Over time, church leaders began to perceive a useful role for relics in evangelization. Gregory I recommended that processions with saints' relics be staged in place of pagan sacrificial feasts.[10] Then, with the Carolingian imperative that a relic be contained in every altar, such sacred remains became inextricably bound to the daily life of the church.[11] Consequently, it has been argued, the cult of relics "became, in post-Carolingian Europe, the primary means of human contact with the Divine."[12] The holiness of relics necessitated their enshrinement in a suitable vessel, the most prevalent being in the form of a miniature sarcophagus (fig. 50). The sense that they provided a means of communication with the divine led inexorably to the development of reliquaries that mimicked the human form (especially busts and arms; fig. 51),[13] for communication is most easily imagined as it happens between people.

By the late 800s, church inventories begin to list reliquaries in the form of saints' heads or busts among their most important holdings.[14] This reliquary tradition would prove to be widespread and enduring, stretching well into the eighteenth century. Joseph Braun, a Roman Catholic historian, cited hundreds of examples across Europe—some preserved in church treasuries or museums, others known only through textual sources.[15] Just in the Massif Central of central France, where the practice was first documented, more than forty are recorded between the ninth and fifteenth centuries.

Indeed, it is startling to realize how integral the act of creating a sculpture to enshrine the skull of a saint was to Western Christianity.

The practice of enshrining a saint's skull or other significant relic within a sculpted image was one that was carefully and critically considered in medieval Europe before it won such universal acceptance. The arguments are elucidated in the writings of the ecclesiastic Bernard of Angers. Between 1010 and 1020 Bernard traveled several times to the shrine of Saint Foy of Conques, located in the mountainous Rouergue of south central France.[16] He described the creation of image reliquaries as a distinctly regional phenomenon. Initially he scoffed at the veneration of a gold statue containing the saint's skull. His reaction might just as easily describe the response of Christian missionaries on first seeing African reliquary sculpture: "To learned people this may seem to be full of superstition, if not unlawful, for it seems as if the rites of the gods of ancient cultures, or rather the rites of demons, are being observed."[17]

Bernard's reference to the opinion of "learned people" is indicative of his concern about theological objections to the Christian veneration of images, a subject vociferously debated in the Western church in the wake of the Iconoclastic Controversy in Byzantium. His specific allusion to the "gods of ancient cultures" appears to echo directly the sentiments penned two centuries before by Claudius, bishop of Turin under Louis the Pious, who expressed concern that people "worship the images of saints after the fashion of demons [pagan deities]."[18] Bernard initially concurs: "I also thought this practice seemed perverse and quite contrary to Christian law when for the first time I examined the statue of Saint Gerald placed above the altar."[19]

Yet, Bernard's text sets up these arguments in order to refute them. As he goes on to recount the rather quick evolution of his own thinking, he spells out what became the prevailing Western medieval attitude concerning image reliquaries. Bernard came to perceive images such as the gold statue of Saint Foy at Conques (fig. 52) as an appropriately rich container for relics because "it has long been distinguished by a more precious treasure than the ark of the Covenant once held, since it encloses the completely intact head of a great martyr." Rather than considering the skull an emblem of death, he calls the saint's relic a "precious treasure."[20] Moreover, it is a measure of Bernard's reverence for the saint's skull that he believes it more sacred than the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Inherent in this specific comparison is a powerful argument for enshrining the skull in precious metal, since the Bible affirmed that it was according to God's own precise instructions that the Ark of the Covenant was created (Exodus 25–27).



Fig. 52. Reliquary image of Saint Foy. France (Rouergue), Church of Sainte-Foy, Late Roman (?), 9th, 10th, and 14th centuries. Gold, enamel, gems, H. 32½ in. (85 cm). Église Sainte-Foye, Conques

Bernard's awareness of the presence of the relic within the statue depended entirely on his having been

informed by the monks at Conques, because the skull of Saint Foy is completely obscured by the gold reliquary.[21] Concerning the image form of the saint, Bernard observes that "it is a repository of holy relics, fashioned into a specific form only because the artist wished it." The statue's initial decoration was the artist's prerogative, since the image is "becomingly adorned with gems delicately and carefully inserted on portions of the garments, as the judgment of the craftsman thought best."[22]

But there is no doubt that the relic was pivotal in enhancing the vitality of the sculpture. Bernard indicates that Saint Foy herself sought to embellish her image, paralleling God's action in prescribing the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant. Appearing repeatedly and insistently in dreams, she demands of Bernard, abbot of Beaulieu, that gold doves be placed on the image. In other instances, the saint requires rings, bracelets, and brooches to beautify her image.[23] By attesting to Saint Foy's interest in the appearance of her image, Bernard of Angers reinforces the notion that the saint recognized the authenticity of the image containing her relic. Even more emphatically, Saint Foy shows no tolerance for those who do not properly honor her image. In response to a cleric named Odalric who "was greatly dishonoring the holy martyr and spreading some silly foolishness or other about her image," she came to him in a dream as a "lady of terrifying authority," demanding, "Why have you dared to disparage my image?" Elsewhere, Saint Foy appears in a vision "in the form of her sacred image."[24] By each of these accounts, it is the saint herself who asserts and defends the authenticity of the image.

Bernard recounts numerous anecdotes of the miracles worked through Saint Foy's reliquary image, which was remarkably animated. In particular, he mentions the rendering of the face and attributes to the image the capability of sight: "It was an image made with such precision to the face of the human form that it seemed to see with its attentive, observant gaze the great many peasants seeing it." Moreover, Bernard suggests that the eyes offered compelling evidence of the saint's presence and the power of her image to affect the lives of the faithful, "to gently grant with its reflecting eyes the prayers of those praying before it."[25] This eleventh-century account emphasizing the attentive gaze of the reliquary echoes in the insights offered by Essana Ekwaga of Oyem, Gabon, concerning the nature of Fang reliquary images, which were superimposed over the box of ancestors' skulls: "Their faces are strong, quiet and reflective. They are thinking about our problems and how to help us."[26]

To reinforce the animate qualities of the faces in Christian reliquary images, artists often utilized materials distinct from those employed in the body of the sculpture. For the eyes, a colored material suggested the iris and distinguished it from the whites, as in the reliquary of Saint Foy. This effect is commonly sought in African reliquary sculpture as well (see cat. nos. 8, 9). The shining silver of the bust of Saint Yrieix in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 47) is gilded, engraved, and pierced to articulate the saint's beard and brows.

Medieval reliquary images often incorporate the saint's skull within the carved head, and their scale is thus typically lifesize or slightly larger. These dimensions, comparable to or larger than those of Bangwa sculpture—catalogue number 2, for example, is 89 centimeters (35 1/16 inches) high, while the torso-length image of Saint Caesarius at Maurs (fig. 53) measures 91.1 centimeters (35 7/8 inches)—intensify the identification of the reliquary with the saint represented. The effect can be made more dramatic by the use of painted faces and hands and by representative gestures, a saint often being posed in benediction. Oversized arms and hands raised in blessing emphasize the functions that the saints exercised as holy figures on earth and suggest their perpetual advocacy for the faithful in heaven. In a similar vein, the Bangwa *fon* is depicted as if he were presiding at a ceremony (see "The Body Eternal" by Alisa LaGamma in this volume, pp. 100–101).

Vestments emblematic of office also animate and empower Christian reliquary sculpture. Just as bright feathers (cat. no. 4) or fabric hats (cat. no. 1) might grace the heads of African reliquary sculpture, the miter of a bishop or abbot adorns his head. Some reliquary busts bore crowns, which indicated their heavenly state. In some examples, the headpiece served as the point of access to the relic of the skull.

Often sheathed in silver or gold or embellished with jewels, as in the Metropolitan's Saint Yrieix, Christian

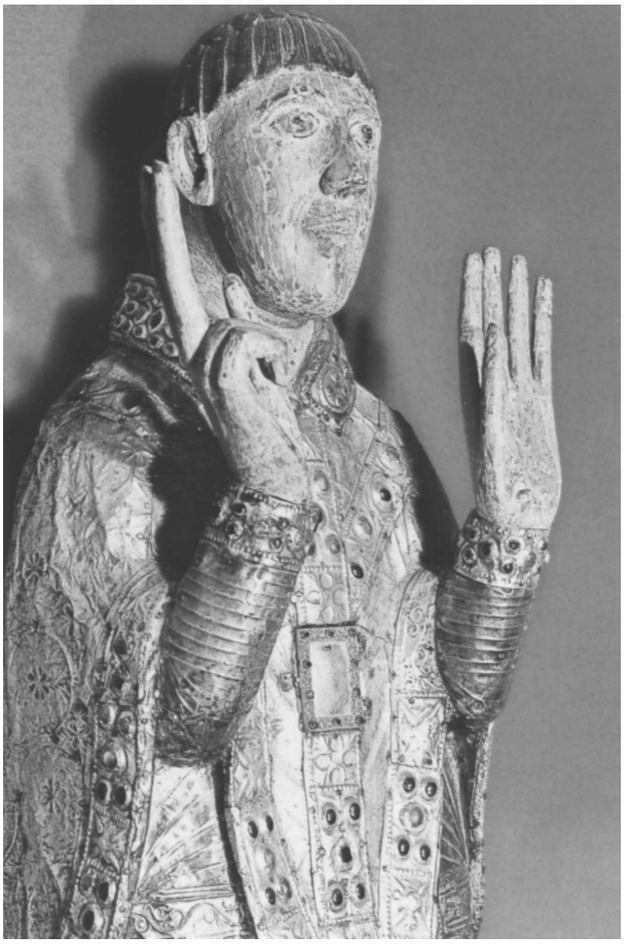


Fig. 53. Reliquary bust of Saint Caesarius. France (Cantal), third quarter of 12th century. Gilded silver, gems over wood core, H. 35⅞ in. (91.1 cm). Église Saint-Sulpice, Maurs

bust reliquaries offer a heavenly image of the saint. Even when precious metal is not employed, carving and paint serve to enrich the sculpture. On the enthroned Virgin and Child from the Auvergne, also in the Metropolitan Museum, purple and blue paint and the rhythmically carved wood together simulate luxurious garments (fig. 54).

This evocation of celestial splendor notwithstanding, the representations of saints on image reliquaries affirm their humanity and their presence in mundane affairs. Crowned as martyrs, or vested as abbots or bishops, hands raised in blessing, reliquary images served to perpetuate the earthly authority of the saints. Often these Christian saints were the founders—the "eternal ancestors"—of the communities in which their relics lay. Their celebrity depended only infrequently on dramatic martyrdom, as in the case of Saint Foy; rather, as for Saint Yrieix, it often derived from careers as exemplary ecclesiastical leaders.

Through the images of the saints, the example of their Christian lives and values was reinforced for the faithful. On the saints' feast days, their lives would be read aloud as their relics were displayed.[27] Throughout the year, the images of the saints watched over their communities. Moreover, they were carried to synods to preside symbolically: the tenth-century image of Saint Martial, first bishop of Limoges, was brought to the church of Saint-Jean-d'Angély in 1019 to witness the translation, or ceremonial transportation and installation, of the relic of Saint John the Baptist's head.[28] The same enthroned image of Saint Martial, one hand holding the Gospel and the other raised in blessing, presided on the altar at a church council in Limoges in 1034.[29] When borne in procession, the image of Saint Vivien from the abbey of Figeac was covered to protect it from the rain.[30] The reliquary of Saint Foy was paraded through the countryside to reassert the monastery's claim over valuable dependencies: "It was a custom of our senior monks that when a very welcome gift enriched the monastery with the benefices of churches or the outstanding addition of manors, the shrine of the relics was borne to that place to put it under her protection. In this way the virgin claims these things for herself and the presence of her body subjects them to her forever."[31] Similarly, image reliquaries were frequently processed to invoke the protection of the saint against disease, war, and other calamities.[32]

Processions of the reliquary image of Saint Foy were heralded by ivory trumpets, so that sound as well as sight became integral to the experience of the faithful in the presence of the saint's relic. The horn, with its strong biblical associations, ranging from Joshua to heraldic angels, and its inherently deep, penetrating resonance, communicated instantly the authority of the saint.[33] Similarly, in the case of Bangwa image reliquaries, the sounding of a carved ivory horn served not just to create an appropriately festive ceremony but actually to invoke the presence of the ancestor (see cat. no. 1).

The sense of touch broadened the range of sensations incorporated into ceremonies involving Christian image reliquaries. Written sources indicate that physical contact



Fig. 54. Virgin and Child. France (Auvergne), third quarter of 12th century. Painted wood, 31 in. (78.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194)

with the reliquary, and sometimes with the relic itself, was a privilege usually conferred at the discretion of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In a mid-twelfth-century account concerning devotion to Saint Privatus from Mende (Lozère), the bishop presented the saint's skull to other church officials and the faithful so that they could venerate his newly found relics by kissing it.[34]

A core group of medieval reliquary sculptures with Saint Foy as the most celebrated example has survived to the present day in France, where, coincidentally, the appeal of African reliquary sculpture was first recognized in the early twentieth century. Artists in Paris responded to the stylization of the African works, in which the features of the human face are boldly presented in their essential geometric forms. They sensed in this sculpture a kind of unspoiled immediacy, of pure artistic impulse, unfettered by the pervasive and inescapable predominance of the classical, naturalistic tradition in Western art[35] and the pernicious influence of capitalism.[36] Following this line of thinking, a *New York Times* review of an African sculpture exhibition mounted in 1935 asserted that "African art has a character as sharply distinguished from that of European art as European races, cultures and religions are distinguished from native African races, cultures and religions."[37]

Seeing these sculptures divorced from their original context, twentieth-century collectors and critics recognized something fundamentally powerful about the images, with their staring eyes, exaggerated limbs, and dramatic headdresses. Moreover, some artists, including René Mendès-France, sensed that African and European sculptors of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries—that is, before the Renaissance—shared a kindred spiritual inspiration that resulted in a similar aesthetic (see cat. no. 16). Yet, it seems that the comparison was a generic one, not drawing on specific comparisons to Christian reliquary sculpture. Thinking of Egyptian art as a point of comparison, Jacob Epstein perceived in a Fang head (cat. no. 43) "an evocation of a spirit that penetrates another world . . . and could only be produced where spiritism still holds sway."[38]

Notwithstanding their invocation of the common spirit of medieval sculpture, these modern artists seem to have ignored medieval European image reliquaries. The surviving French examples, geographically isolated in the hills of the Auvergne, the Limousin, and the Rouergue, were apparently little known outside the provinces, despite occasional exhibition and publication. Saint Baudime, preserved at Saint-Nectaire in the Auvergne, was included in the Exposition Retrospective de l'Art Français at the Petit-Palais in 1900;[39] Saint



Fig. 55. Engraving showing reliquary bust of Saint Chaffre (*bottom row, center*). Bust: France (Haute-Loire), second half of 12th century. Silver, partially gilded, gems, over wood core, H. 23 5/16 in. (59 cm). Église Abbatiale, Le Monastier, France. Published in *L'art pour tous* (1903), pl. 4240, fig. 6

Chaffre, at Le Monastier, was published in an engraving in *L'art pour tous* in 1903 (fig. 55).[40]

Such surviving French reliquary sculptures represent only a fraction of the original number created in the Middle Ages since, like their African counterparts, many have been destroyed over the centuries. Across Europe, reliquary sculptures in precious metal were perpetually at risk because of their inherent monetary value. Some, including that of Saint Martial at Limoges, fell victim to fire in the medieval period and had to be replaced. In 1789 all ecclesiastical goods in France were declared available for the use of the nation; by 1792 a campaign of destruction was under way.[41] While precious objects in Paris and its surroundings were more immediately at risk, the destruction eventually reached the provinces. Consequently, the bust of Saint Martin of Spain created at Brive in the southern Limousin before 1207 was melted down;[42] that of Saint Yrieix, inventoried and weighed by the revolutionary authorities and also intended for the melting pot, must have been secreted away.

Often, medieval reliquary sculptures were destroyed for reasons startlingly reminiscent of those that led to the destruction of African reliquary sculpture. They fell victim to iconoclasm and anticlericalism. The iconoclasts of the Protestant Reformation, especially in Switzerland, were particularly notorious.[43] In France, the church of Mende was burned in 1526 during the Wars of Religion, and the early-eleventh-century image of Saint Privatus may have been destroyed at that time.[44] But the Calvinists were not alone in their zealousness. The eleventh-century image of the Virgin and Child at Notre-Dame du Puy, a work that must have been similar to the Metropolitan's Auvergne Virgin and Child, was roasted on a spit in the public square during the French Revolution. As the crowd cried "Vive la république," the packet of relics secured inside the sculpture fell out onto the square.[45] The medieval devotion to the bust reliquary of Saint Denis was supplanted by an anticlerical procession in a "new voyage of the head of Saint Denis, which will not be noted in the martyrology but in the annals of Reason."[46] Official correspondence during the Revolution articulated the fear that the reliquary image of Saint Léger from Meymac might be adapted as an image of Louis XVI and become the focus for royalist devotion. Consequently, its destruction was imperative![47]

As their creators intended, power is perceived as inherent in reliquary images, power that can be adapted but not suppressed. This is not surprising, for whether in African, European, or other cultures, the notion of capturing divine presence in a work of art has long been acknowledged. To conclude with the eloquent words of the third-century philosopher Plotinus:

> I think, therefore, that those ancient sages who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that, though this Soul is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place especially capable of receiving some portion or phase of it, something reproducing it or representing it, and seeming like a mirror to catch an image of it.[48]

The quotation in the title is from Bernard of Angers (ca. 1010). For the full citation, see note 17 below.

1. See recently Perkinson 2006–7, pp. 120–23.
2. The German ethnographer Günter Tessmann, for example, gathered flora and fauna as well as African sculpture during his scientific exploration of Cameroon (see cat. no. 18), while the naturalists Jacques de Brazza and Attilio Pecile collected both ethnographic and natural history specimens for the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, on an 1883–85 mission to the Upper Ogooué River (see cat. no. 72). A similar spirit informed the development of the American Indian and Inuit collections of the American Museum of Natural History in New York.
3. Graham 1937, p. 136.
4. See catalogue number 72.
5. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act 5, sc. 1.
6. The jack-o'-lantern is said to represent the wandering spirit of a blacksmith who was allowed to enter neither heaven nor hell. See Santino 1983, pp. 8–11.
7. Eusebius's second-century account of the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp summarizes the Christian attitude toward relics: "We later gathered up his bones that were more valuable than precious stones and more to be esteemed than gold, and we placed them where it was suitable." Eusebius Pamphili 1953, bk. 4, chap. 15, p. 242.
8. "Habuit quidem petitio praedicti viri secundum morem graecorum; et nos contra consuetudinem sedis apostolicae exposuimus" (We have indeed considered the request of the aforementioned men according to the ways of the Greeks, and we have shown that it is against the practice of the Holy See). Suggestio Legatorum ad Hormisdam Papam, *Patrologia Latina*.
9. "In Romanis namque vel totius Occidentis partibus omnino intolerabile est atque sacrilegum, si sanctorum corpora tangere quisquam fortasse voluerit. Quod si praesumpserit, certum est quia haec temeritas impunita nullo modo remanebit. Pro qua re de Graecorum consuetudine, qui ossa levare sanctorum se asserunt, vehementer miramur, et vix credimus" (For in the Roman and all the Western parts it is unendurable and sacrilegious for anyone by any chance to desire to touch the bodies of saints: and, if one should presume to do this, it is certain that this temerity will by no means remain unpunished. For this reason we greatly wonder at the custom of the Greeks, who say that they take up the bones of saints; and we scarcely believe it). Gregory the Great, Epistolae, *Catholic Encyclopedia*; Gregory the Great, Epistolae, *Patrologia Latina*.
10. Knögel 1936, pp. 184–85, no. 861.
11. Boehm 1990, p. 21.
12. P. Geary 1994, p. 168.
13. See *Gesta* 1997, with articles devoted to reliquaries in the form of the human body, and Gaborit-Chopin in Paris 2005a, pp. 378–85.
14. The terminology used is variable and imprecise. Images described simply as "caput" are sometimes demonstrably bust-length sculptures.
15. Braun 1940.
16. On Bernard's career and his visits to Conques, see Sheingorn 1995, pp. 24–25.
17. Ibid., p. 77.
18. See Forsyth 1972, p. 71 n. 55; Beissel 1983, pp. 56–57.
19. Sheingorn 1995, p. 77.
20. Ibid., p. 79.
21. See Alisa LaGamma's remarks concerning Mbete figurative receptacles, in which "the relics . . . were obscured from direct view and yet were potent presences" (cat. no. 91).
22. Sheingorn 1995, pp. 79, 81.
23. Ibid., pp. 81–82, 83–88.
24. Ibid., p. 92.
25. Ibid., p. 77.
26. Fernandez 1973, p. 205; see also catalogue number 6.
27. Wallace-Hadrill 1983, pp. 85–87.
28. Bonaventure de Saint-Amable 1676–85, vol. 2, p. 644; bk. XII, chap. XV.
29. Festiac 1939, p. 15. The image, the earliest recorded of Saint Martial, is presumed to have been destroyed before the early thirteenth century, when a different chasse for the saint's head is mentioned. See Boehm 1990, pp. 322–28.
30. Boehm 1990, pp. 317–18.
31. Sheingorn 1995, p. 248.
32. Boehm 1990, pp. 89–91.
33. The text by Bernard of Angers conjures up the full pagentry of the occasion: "The reliquary of the holy virgin is carried out to that land as a witness in regaining the right to her property. The monks announce that there will be a solemn procession of clergy and laity, who move forward with great formality carrying candles and lamps. A processional cross goes in front of the holy relics, embellished all around with enamels and gold and studded with a variety of gems flashing like stars. The novices serve by carrying a gospel book, holy water, clashing cymbals, and even trumpets made of ivory that were donated by noble pilgrims." Sheingorn 1995, p. 121.
34. Brunel 1912, esp. pp. 14–18, 59–61.
35. Sieber and Rubin 1969, p. 25.
36. This is especially noticeable in the writings of John Graham. See Graham 1937, esp. p. 100.
37. Brock 1935.
38. The African sculpture to which Epstein specifically referred was in the hands of Joseph Brummer, who was also a renowned dealer in medieval works of art.
39. Paris 1900, no. 1614; New York 2006–7, p. 171 and fig. 103.
40. *L'art pour tous* 1903, pl. 4240, fig. 6.
41. See the summary by Danielle Gaborit-Chopin in Paris 1991, pp. 346–50. See also Idzerda 1954.
42. 18 frimaire an 4; Archives Départementales de la Corrèze, Q148. Boehm 1990, pp. 311–12.
43. See Miles 1985, pp. 100–108.
44. Boehm 1990, p. 330.
45. Forsyth 1972.
46. Cited by Gaborit-Chopin in Paris 1991, p. 347. See also Paris 1989, vol. 2, pp. 536–37, nos. 713–714A.
47. Boehm 1990, pp. 331–33; Treich-Laplène 1886.
48. Quoted in Miles 1985, p. 142.



The Body Eternal

The Aesthetics of Equatorial African Reliquary Sculpture

ALISA LAGAMMA

In their aspiration to connect with their ancestors, to fulfill a need central to their faith, the peoples of equatorial Africa developed a sculptural form that would enter the pantheon of universal art. In many equatorial societies, relics were preserved as essential points of contact with the ancestors. The receptacles designed to contain relics were sometimes accompanied by the sculptural genres featured in this exhibition. In the context of their original ensembles, the sculptural elements made a powerful impression on viewers through imagery that evoked the human form in a stylized and symbolic artistic language. Reliquary sculpture constituted the one dimension of the veneration of ancestors, presided over by a family's leadership, that could be appreciated universally by all its members. Consequently, it was incumbent upon the creators of these artifacts to shape images that were accessible and comprehensible. It is significant that in equatorial communities, where few other arresting forms of representation competed for attention, these highly complex works had an especially dramatic impact on and monopoly over their original viewers. So successfully did they fulfill this mission that they transcended their own cultures of origin and made a visual impact on the European masters of modern art. Like the visual narratives of Italian fresco cycles that projected essential aspects of Christian doctrine to the illiterate populace, the sculptural elements of equatorial African reliquaries were designed to address the uninitiated by means of the most directly engaging visual language possible.

Since the relics themselves were invariably the sacred component critical to harnessing the influence of the ancestors in the affairs of their descendants, it is important to consider in what way the related sculptural artifacts contributed to strengthening and expanding that connection. A careful analysis of the formal language used to articulate these diverse genres and their aesthetic qualities affords some insight into how they enriched the reliquary's content and meaning. The works in this exhibition were universally considered material extensions of the physical being of the ancestors invoked. The ancestors' enduring presence was made tangible through the preservation of inherently potent elements of their corporeal state. These elements were placed within a vehicle that envisioned their elevation to a spiritual realm.

While the diversity of the regional sculptural traditions relates to distinct cultures, examination of this corpus makes apparent a common heritage of visual and conceptual resonances. It will be evident that important shared aesthetic preferences and values yielded very different and highly original formal solutions. For example, the artists did not merely articulate their respective visions through media that were readily accessible to them. Instead they developed specialized techniques and forms that harnessed the resources most prized by their respective societies. They transformed those raw materials in order to have them serve as a bridge to the spiritual realm.

A testament to the compelling impact of these works was their capacity to transcend their own culture and

Opposite: Kwele *Beete* Ram Mask (cat. no. 104)

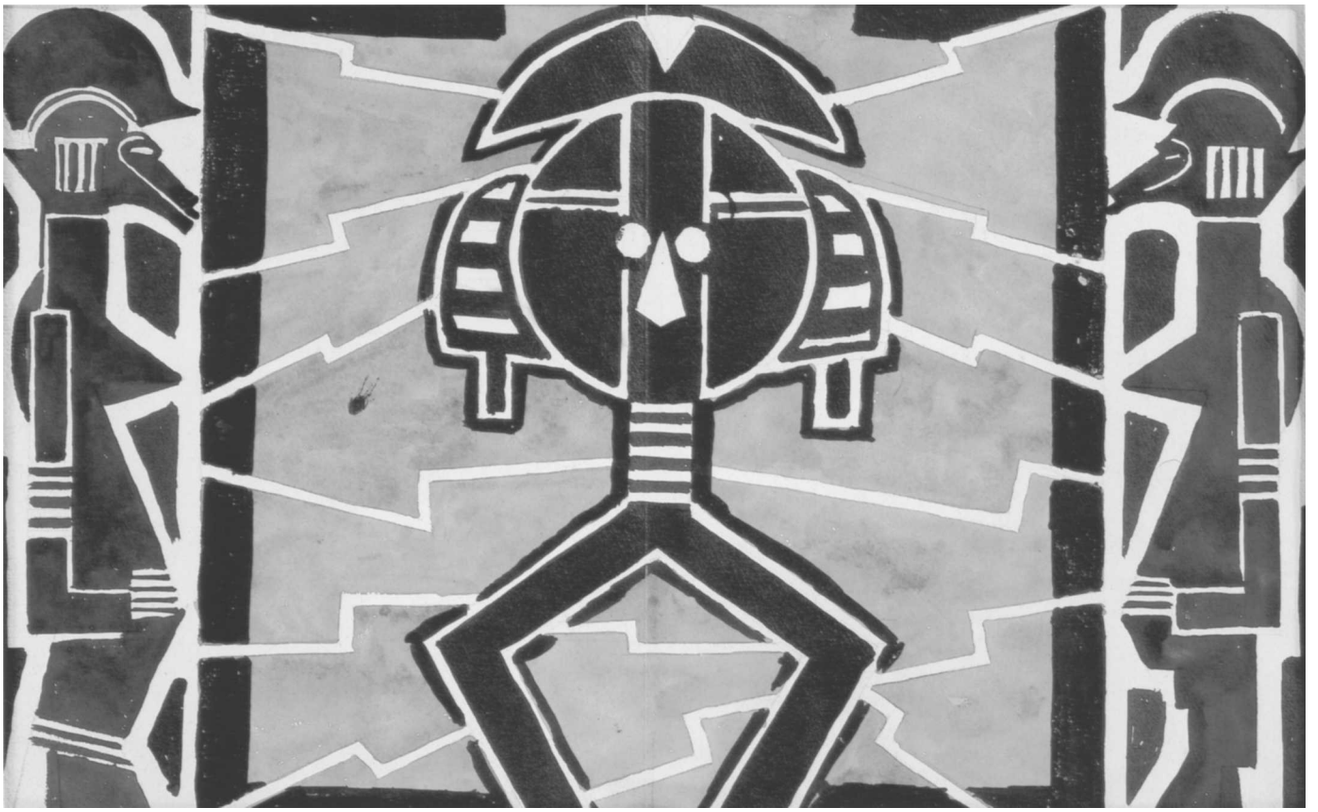


Fig. 56. Fernand Léger (French, 1881–1955), Design for the stage curtain for the ballet *La création du monde,* 1923. Gouache and pencil on paper, 12⅜ x 19⅝ in. (31.3 x 49.9 cm). Archives Barbier-Mueller, Geneva

La création du monde was first performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris on October 25, 1923, by the Ballet Suédois. With a scenario by Blaise Cendrars based on African myths, this avant-garde ballet was choreographed by Jean Börlin, who was inspired by the continent's cultural heritage and its influence on contemporary creative expression. The jazz-inflected score was composed by Darius Milhaud. Drawing upon classic African sculptural forms, Léger's sets and costumes were based on illustrations in two of the earliest publications on African art, Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (1915) and Marius de Zayas's *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916). The central image on the curtain is a Kota figural element from a reliquary, which is flanked by profile views of a female Senufo figure based upon an image reproduced in the de Zayas book.

exert an influence on Western artists at the beginning of the twentieth century (fig. 56) (see my essay "Eternal Ancestors" in this volume). It is no accident that the significance of these devotional forms of expression was first brought to the attention of the wider world because their aesthetic credentials were established by the Western avant-garde (fig. 57). Time and again, members of the avant-garde who were drawn to works from equatorial Africa in this exhibition compared them to European medieval works. It appears that they discerned in both traditions a profound lack of artifice. The American painter, theorist, and exponent of African art John Graham voiced this impression in an early manifesto: "African artists were never seduced by the desire to imitate or compete with nature, as they had, more than a thousand years before, travelled the long road from realism and exact representation to abstraction—a journey which we ourselves are only just ending. Steeped in their ancient tradition, the African sculptors produced works comparable, in their spiritual severity, to Gothic sculpture."[1]

Lacking an understanding of the religious or cultural context from which these works came, Westerners based their appreciation of equatorial African sculpture entirely on a visual response to the works themselves. The reaction was purely aesthetic, derived from the viewers' perception of their innovative approach to evoking human form and their intensity of expression. In fact there are parallel traditions in both European



Fig. 57. Charles Sheeler (American, 1883–1965), Interior of Arensberg apartment, 33 West Sixty-Seventh Street, New York, ca. 1918. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950 (1950-134-989)

The Arensbergs, influential patrons of avant-garde initiatives, hosted the unofficial Dada salon in their apartment, supported Marius de Zayas's Modern Gallery, sponsored journals such as *Others* and *Blind Man,* and collected works by many young artists. In 1918 they asked the painter and photographer Charles Sheeler, who had just contributed his work to de Zayas's publication *African Negro Wood Sculpture,* to document their collection of contemporary and non-Western art. The Arensbergs primarily collected Cubist works as well as those by artists who either antedated Cubism or were influenced by it, including Cézanne, Braque, Picasso, Gris, Léger, Rousseau, Picabia, and Duchamp. Their non-Western collection first focused on African art and later featured South American and Native American artifacts.

In this photograph, the African sculpture displayed on the mantel includes a Fang head (cat. no. 41) and figure (cat. no. 7). Surrounding them are paintings by Picabia, Braque, and Rousseau. This kind of aesthetic presentation of artists of the day and works that influenced them was established earlier in the decade by the New York art impresarios de Zayas and Alfred Stieglitz.

Christianity and equatorial African religions. The Christians' veneration of the saints was analogous to the equatorial Africans' devotion to exceptional ancestors. Each was premised on the power inherent in a physical particle from a revered individual, whether saint or ancestor, that it was believed could enhance the efficacy of prayer. The French historian Philippe Ariès has noted that in the early Middle Ages, "saints were all thaumaturges (that is miracle workers) and intercessors, and the faithful had to communicate directly with their relics, had to touch them in order to receive their magical emanations."[2] Similarly, the assemblage of reliquaries in equatorial Africa made sacred matter accessible in a form that instilled appropriate reverence for its exalted properties and significance. The figurative depictions that accompanied reliquaries created by European artists, like those created during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by sculptors in equatorial Africa, suggest a perfect state of being that transcends mortality.

Whether the medium of choice was wood, metal, or fiber, it is apparent that artists in equatorial Africa espoused established canons of ideal proportions that they responded to both creatively and rationally. The execution of the works reflects a shared approach to design in which discrete units of form served as the visual building blocks that were individually defined and combined to produce a composite figure. In order to portray their idealized immaterial subjects as active agents of change, regional artists and their patrons concurred that it was imperative to depict them as physically animated presences. The aesthetics of the sculptures themselves were not only expressed in their physical form but were also linked to ritual performance art. The sculptures were central to ceremonial events that included music and dynamic dance in the context of religious rites. Even when positioned as static artifacts, however, their essential vitality was suggested more abstractly through the reflective qualities of various surfaces that allowed for a continually shifting response to light or, more dramatically, through the emphasis on the use of red, a color that not only stimulates the eye but is identified with ritual transformation.

Bangwa sculptors, active on the frontier of the Grassfields region, were so renowned for their abilities that they received commissions not only in their own communities but also from patrons in Banyang villages to the west and Bamileke chiefdoms to the east.[3] Given the demand for their creations, full-time professional carvers were trained from childhood. So esteemed was their vocation that it was considered an honorable occupation for nobles as well as commoners. Chiefs carved in their spare time and encouraged their sons to apprentice themselves to the resident sculptor as a dignified means of earning a livelihood.

Bangwa chiefs have traditionally been the guardians of their predecessors' crania and the corresponding carved portraits of each of those individuals.[4] It is the relics of past chiefs that are to this day the ancestral shrines to which libations are directed in times of need and that afford contact with the ancestral realm. Physically separate from one another and yet originally preserved in the same enclosure, the sculptures embellished the ancestor cult and periodically served as the concrete manifestation of that cult. More than portraits that merely record likeness, however, they were considered repositories of essential characteristics of their subjects and were invoked as if they were the individuals themselves. On the occasions when the portraits were made accessible, each one was critically scrutinized by the public. A *fon*'s, or Bangwa chief's, corpus of these large-scale figures depicted his forefathers, thus illustrating the family history, and were the very source of his power. Displayed publicly at commemorative rites for a deceased *fon* or at performances of the *lefem* society, they were designed to be viewed fully from every angle.[5] Thus Bangwa sculptors, such as the creators of catalogue numbers 1 and 2, strove to portray an engaging likeness that was impressive from every conceivable vantage point. These ancestral representations, which synthesize serene tranquillity and physical dynamism, suggest that while the ancestors have transcended mortality they remain critically engaged with the well-being of their community and responsive to its needs. Each *fon* is invariably depicted as he appeared when receiving an important visitor or presiding over a ceremonial occasion for his people.[6] Two of the classic items of Fosia's chiefly apparel rendered by the sculptor in his portrait (cat. no. 1) are his headdress, a close-fitting skullcap woven from plantain fibers, and a loincloth, knotted at the waist, drawn up through the legs, and



Fig. 58. Hans Gehne, Reliquaries. Fang peoples, southern Cameroon, ca. 1913. From Abel 1914, table v, fig. 20

In Fang communities, the ancestral relics held within a cylindrical receptacle were exalted sacra accessible only to initiates of the *byeri* cult, while the sculpture featured at the summit of the lid was accessible to the eyes of the community at large. This image is one of the few visual records illustrating the original relationship of Fang sculptures to their corresponding bark containers. During the early twentieth century, in some regions of equatorial Africa, the sculptures were actively offered for sale to Europeans, whereas the containers with the relics could not be easily acquired. Christraud Geary proposes that this image may have resulted from a common practice of German colonials in Africa, who sent museums photographs of potential acquisitions (C. Geary 1995, pp. 107–8).

hanging in a series of frontal folds. The *fon* is holding a pipe of leadership and a ceremonial drinking horn.

Robert Brain and Adam Pollock suggest that Bangwa patrons evaluated a work's merit in terms of its ability to capture essential qualities that would effectively keep the memory of its subject alive.[7] Thus each depiction seeks to infuse a representation of an idealized leader with individual character traits. One artist, Ateu Atsa (ca. 1840–1910), was remembered above all for his uncompromising ability to do so.[8] His talent was immortalized in an anecdote that recounts how, on the basis of his reputation for unerring accuracy, a neighboring Banyang chief commissioned his official portrait from the artist. Ateu Atsa traveled to the chief's compound, where he carved the figure from life while in residence but working in seclusion. At its completion, he requested payment and asked that his patron defer unveiling the portrait until the evening following his departure. Only after the artist had safely arrived back in Fontem did the Banyang leader become aware of the ruthless accuracy with which unflattering features such as his crooked mouth had been reproduced.[9] While the two stylized Bangwa commemorative portraits featured in this exhibition represent the very different hands of two sculptors, each is an arresting presence that clearly succeeds in projecting a distinctive vitality. The artist's ability to impart essential aspects of individual character and immediacy to his creations is crucial in assuring the vibrancy of the *fon*'s relationship with his ancestors. In doing so, he creates a work reflecting the aspiration that the relics will be at the center of an active dialogue.

The posture of freestanding Bangwa commemorative figures is similar to that of the considerably smaller representations that accompany Fang reliquaries. This is especially apparent in Ateu Atsa's portrait of Fosia, which suggests incipient movement through the slightly bent knees and the arms held in front of the chest. This emphasis on a frontal stance, either a seated posture or one in which a standing figure's knees are bent, is shared by the figures that accompany Fang reliquaries, thereby creating a close formal parallel to the Bangwa commemorative portraits. In the same way, both traditions are aspects of the ancestral cult that are designed to be accessible to the uninitiated. The figurative representations created by sculptors of the various Fang subgroups to accompany relic receptacles are, however, devoid of reference or traits identified with individual forebears, more intimate in scale, and designed to be positioned at the summit of the lid of the relic container (fig. 58). As a result, a plinth that extends from either the base or the back is an integral part of the figure and allows it to be alternately anchored at the apex of the receptacle or grasped when manipulated by initiates in theatrical performances. When placed on the lid, the figure either stood with flexed legs or often appeared

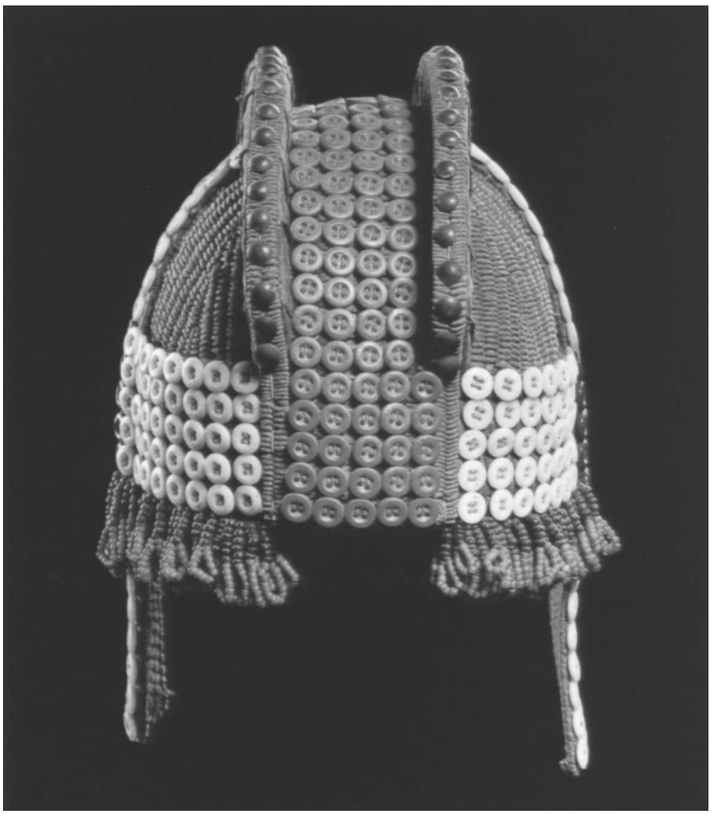


Fig. 59. Fang helmet-wig (*nlo-o-ngo),* Cameroon or Gabon, 20th century. Vegetal fibers, glass beads, copper nails, cloth, buttons. H. 9⅞ in. (25 cm). Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva

This type of headpiece, which is depicted on many *byeri* sculptures, was worn by Ntumu and Betsi men and women during the early twentieth century. Attached directly to the hair, such headgear was an important prestige item, lavishly and ostentatiously ornamented with costly trade goods such as buttons, cowrie shells, and copper nails. The extensive passages of red and white buttons make reference to ideas of vitality and spirituality. Louis Perrois indicates that this object was in the collection of Josef Mueller before 1942 (Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 212).

seated, its buttocks resting on the lid and its legs dangling over the side. In ingeniously collapsing these two distinct stances in a single representation, Fang sculptors were able to simultaneously express the figure's dual role as sentinel, serving as guardian to the receptacle's precious contents, and as active participant in *byeri* rituals.

Among the major aesthetic contrasts with Bangwa representations is the way in which each segment of the body of a Fang figure is articulated as an independent unit of form. Given that the head was considered to be the locus of one's spiritual essence both in life and beyond, it was often treated as an isolated entity joined to the relic receptacle at the base of the neck. In these especially sensitive and heroic representations, as well as in full-length figures, the importance of this site is invariably emphasized through elaborate coiffures or crested headdresses that combine braided tresses, dangling chains, mother-of-pearl trade buttons, and feathers (fig. 59).

In Fang *byeri* sculptures the eyes are invariably emphasized. In contrast to the fully rounded convexity of the forehead, the ocular recesses directly below are deeply concave. Often the figures gaze boldly forward with an intensity that suggests vigilance. In many instances this effect is achieved through further accentuating the eyes by the addition of metal or glass pupils that are made even more striking by the play of light on this contrasting reflective surface. The eyes may also serve as an opportunity for overtly prominent integration of relics into the figure itself by embedding fragments of bone, often in the form of teeth, into deeply excavated cavities (see cat. nos. 4–9, 11, 13). Alternately, closed eyes, rendered as narrow horizontal ellipses or slits, confer upon other figures an expression of concentrated otherworldly introspection (see cat. nos. 33, 46, 47).

James Fernandez has emphasized the centrality of the body as the primary visual metaphor for lineage and family genealogy in Fang culture. The focal point of most Fang figurative compositions, the chest or heart, was identified with the source of vitality, both of the individual and of the clan. That vitality was thought to spread out through the arms and terminate at the fingertips. The rendering of joints (*zong*) as sharply delineated boundaries

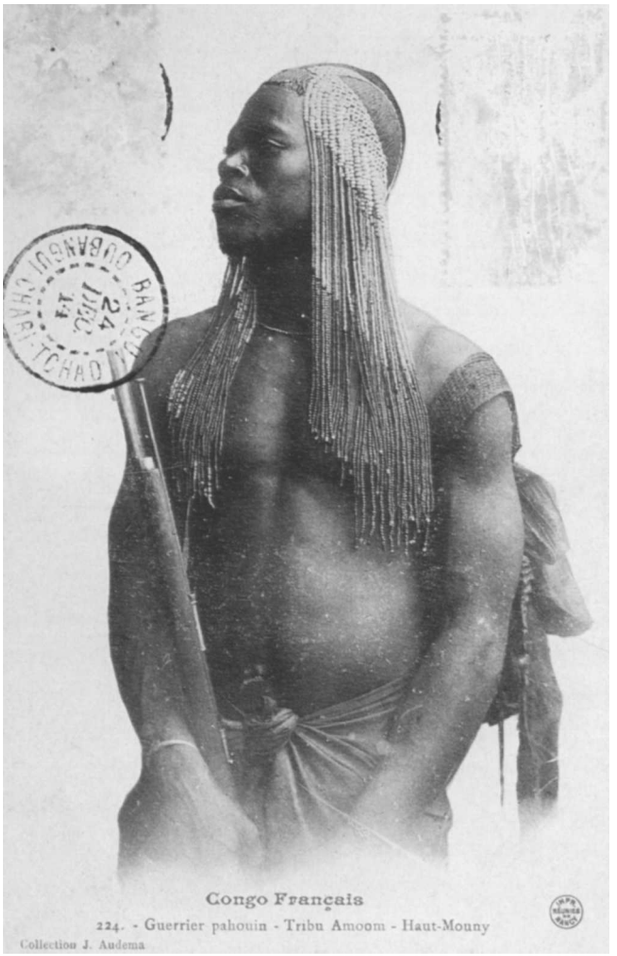


Fig. 60. Jean Audema, *French Congo—Pahouin Warrior, Amoon Tribe, Upper Monny,* early 20th century (postmarked December 24, 1914). Published by Imprimeries Réunies de Nancy, France. Postcard, 5½ x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Beginning in the mid-1890s, postcards were produced to popularize the colonial initiatives of the various European powers in Africa. The primary subjects of the photographs selected for these images were the "exotic" peoples who had come under Western rule. This photograph was taken from slightly below its subject to enhance the powerful physiognomy of a Fang warrior.

Audema was an important French postcard photographer based in French Equatorial Africa whose images were generally marketed internationally. The postmark of this card indicates that it was sent from Bangu, Oubangui, in present-day Central African Republic. Audema's themes were generally stereotypical, his choices based on the potential commercial appeal of an image.

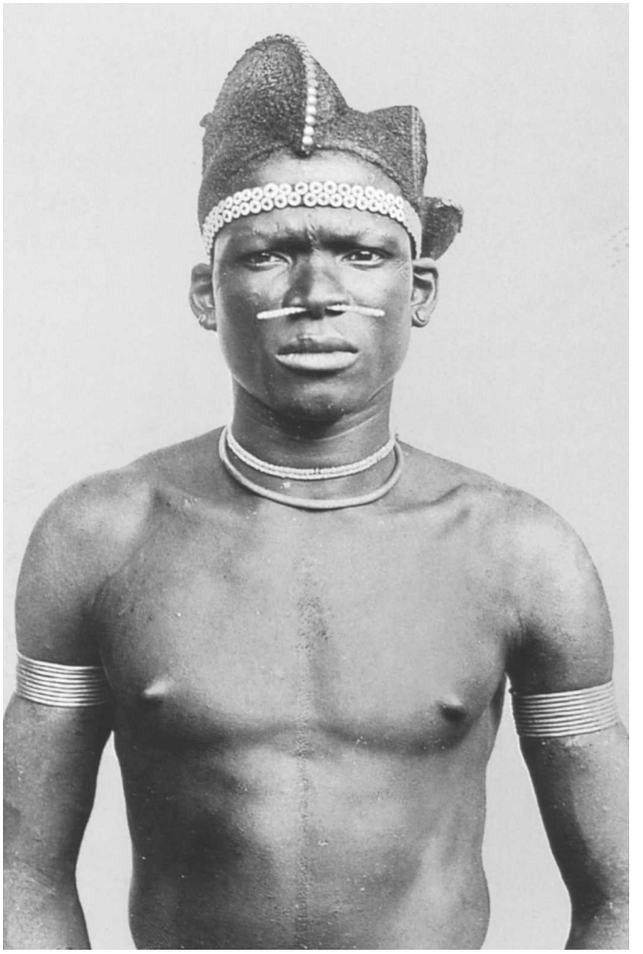


Fig. 61. Officer Guérin, *Fang Man from the Upper Ivindo Area (Northern Gabon),* 1905–6. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris

A French colonial mission led by Captain Augustin Cottes was sent to southern Cameroon in 1905 in order to define the border between Gabon and Cameroon. In the course of doing so, colonial administrative officer Guérin took numerous photographs of the Cameroonian and Gabonese peoples they encountered. The original of this photograph, along with many others from the Mission Cottes, was given to the anthropology laboratory of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris; it was subsequently transferred to the image collection of the Musée de l'Homme and more recently to the Musée du Quai Branly.

Guérin photographed this twenty-six-year-old Fang man in a direct frontal portrait. The man's body is adorned with an array of ornaments that accentuate its beauty, and his head is crowned with the traditional warrior's coiffure depicted in many works of Fang sculpture.

in Fang sculptural representations denotes the transition between generations.[10] Fang artists defined the body as a series of self-contained volumes that are apparent as autonomous elements integrated into an overarching structure. This atomization of form is reflected in the fact that the corpus of Fang figurative representations includes not only full-length figures but also half figures and independent heads, all of which have an equally finished and fully resolved visual impact. These depictions of the body as a series of lucidly interrelated components served as a metaphor for the relationship between the family that owned the work and the larger social structure. It is clear from looking at photographic portraits of Fang individuals taken during the early twentieth century that the perfect physiognomies that inspired Fang sculptors were most often those of young men in the prime of their physical development (fig. 60). The beauty of the muscular definition of that body type was enhanced by armbands and collars accentuating the various transitions emphasized by the sculptors (fig. 61).

Whether seated or standing, Fang figures often rest their hands on their thighs or abdomen in an expectant stance. Some display an attribute of their power that highlights the ancestor's role in affording protection to new life. Their composure suggests that they are prepared to be approached by petitioners. The positioning of the arms and hands in many Fang figures introduces a tension within the body in repose that suggests an inherent dynamism—the subject is poised for action. Many figures hold their upper arms parallel to a vertical torso, forearms perpendicular to it, and hands joined centrally at the heart and aligned with the navel. While sometimes the hands are clasped in a gesture that may relate to prayer, often they grasp an animal horn or a vessel. The horn depicted—an insignia of initiates of the *byeri* ancestor cult—was immersed in the relic container so that it was imbued with mystical properties.[11] When blown upon as a whistle, it dispersed any undesirable or potentially harmful spirits. Philippe Laburthe-Tolra notes that a horn similarly used in the *so* initiation ceremonies of the Fang may have been appropriated from *byeri*. The many photographic images of Fang warriors that have come down to us from the early twentieth century suggest that the relatively small delicate horns they wear suspended around their necks have been greatly enlarged in sculptural references to them in *byeri* representations (fig. 62). Contemporary elders view this feature as an unambiguous reference to spiritual power, and the gesture of wielding it as a stance of strength that designates a person of distinction.[12] When asked to comment upon its significance, Oyono Nkulu recalled situations in which a chief, surrounded by enemies in battle, resorted to blowing on such a horn to mystically transport his men out of harm's way.[13] Idiosyncratic and highly original compositions and postures provide more expansive commentaries on the ancestors' responsibilities, as seen in catalogue number 10, which depicts a female figure carrying the weight of her offspring on her shoulders, and catalogue number 9, which has the male figure of a couple holding out a small-scale figure in front of him.

Fang sculptors emphasized bilateral symmetry through figurative pairs as well as in individual figures. Although most of the surviving works have been separated from their original ensembles, it appears clear that often a pair of male and female figures were carved to accompany a relic container (cat. no. 4; fig. 63). The characterization of such couples as husband and wife suggests that they were identified with procreative powers.[14] The central role of the ancestors in enhancing fertility was reinforced by the overt emphasis upon their sexual identities. While the majority of full figures in this exhibition and the extant Fang corpus are male, a significant number (approximately a third) are female. *Byeri* was predominantly a male association, but since one of its main concerns was expansion of the patrilineage, which depended upon female procreation, its sculptural elements often celebrated the female form.[15] It is intriguing that the physical strength of those female physiognomies rivals that of their male counterparts. This is especially apparent in the muscularity of the shoulders, upper arms, thighs, and calves of catalogue numbers 23 and 33, whose bodies exude sheer power.

Fernandez has emphasized that underlying the careful formal equilibration of Fang corporeal representations is the fact that they are conceived to be the product of two coequal and complementary forces. According to this perspective, it is through the combination of maternal blood and paternal sperm that a living being begins to take shape. As human life develops,

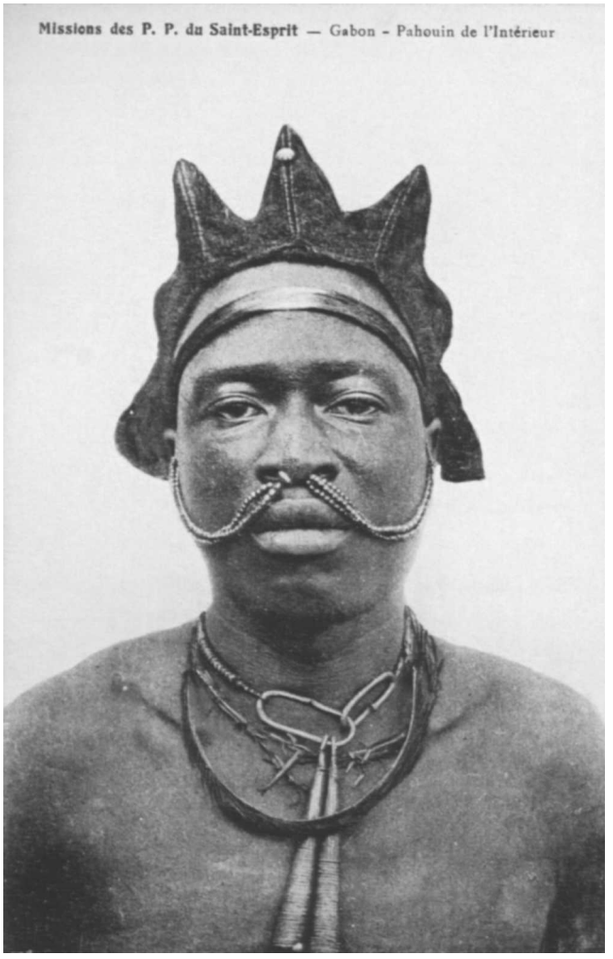


Fig. 62. Officer Guérin, *Gabon—Pahouin of the Interior,* 1905–6. Published by J. Bienaimé, Reims, for the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit. Postcard, 5 9/16 x 3 1/2 in. (14.2 x 8.9 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Like figure 61, this portrait was taken by colonial officer Guérin during his assignment to the Mission Cottes in southern Cameroon. The Fang subject wears a coiffure that is especially striking for its sculptural qualities. His imposing nose and neck ornaments include animal-horn pendants, insignia of initiation into the *so* society that are shown in the hands of many figures accompanying Fang reliquaries.

The French word *Pahouin* derives from *mpangwé* in the Omyéné language, spoken along the coast of Gabon. It designated the Fang people in general, and most often the Fang from Gabon. Because it was used mainly in the colonial vocabulary, it is today considered pejorative.



Fig. 63. *French Congo—Pahouin Man and Woman, Yenvis, Ogooué,* early 20th century. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

The Fang warrior here gazes directly at the Western photographer while the woman stands in profile. This pose is suggestive of early-twentieth-century anthropological conventions for documenting so-called exotic subjects. In Fang society the ancestors invoked in *byeri* rituals played a pivotal role in enhancing fertility, and male and female couples were often represented at the summit of relic receptacles. In those idealized representations, as in this photographic document, the female body appears as a more delicate and petite, but equally powerful, complement to that of her male counterpart.



Fig. 64. Jean Audema, *French Congo—Pahouin Warrior, Yeuoi, Ogooué,* early 20th century. Published by Imprimeries Réunies de Nancy, France. Postcard, 5½ x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

This young Fang warrior wears an elaborate feather coiffure, and his upper body is adorned with an impressive array of necklaces and pendants. This type of coiffure recalls those at the summit of two Fang figures in the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin (cat. nos. 4, 6). Young warriors were allowed to wear such plumage once they had passed certain tests of courage.

the Fang consider blood as well as flesh and organs to be maternal attributes, and bones, sinews, and the brain to be paternal ones.[16] *Byeri* figures not only portray the body as a synthesis of male and female elements, but also formally combine the physiognomies of mature adulthood and infancy.[17] Fernandez suggests that this is evident in the exaggerated scale of the head, which is reflective of infancy, combined with the highly developed muscularity of the adult body in reliquary sculptures. Thus on a number of different levels the figures convey qualities of balance (*bipwe*) and even-handed tranquillity (*mvwaa*) that synthesize aspects of the natural and the ideal.[18] *Byeri* sculptures are the embodiment of *mvoe,* a sense of well-being and unsurpassable harmony that encompasses physical good health, psychological stability, and social peace.[19]

The Fang palette consists of three primary colors: black, red, and white.[20] Examining the corpus of Fang *byeri* sculptures reveals that the spectrum of their tones ranges from intense black to a rich red-brown. The inky midnight black of the darkest *byeri* figures is seen by Fang viewers not as a skin tone but rather as a color synonymous with the great divide separating the ancestral subjects from their living descendants who venerate them. Black is obtained by diluting plain wood charcoal in water. The term *zik* refers to the inky black tone of this solution, as well as to silence.[21] According to Séverin Abéga, black is associated with disjunction and difficult separations from loved ones.[22] Those who have lost a family member rub it on their body and ingest a token quantity. A similar measure is taken to dissipate the pain of separation on the eve of a long journey that will remove an infant or young child from an adult he or she is especially close to. Since the heart is considered the seat of emotion and reflection, rubbing the color black on one's chest to "blacken the heart" is believed to have the effect of silencing and muting painful sentiments.[23]

Among all the Fang groups, the term for "to redden," *vela,* is the same as that for "to awaken or revive." During *byeri* rites, when the relics are anointed with sacrificial libations directed toward the ancestors, that red blood is identified with the uniting of the physical and spiritual.[24] A red powder drawn from the padouk tree is applied cosmetically to the body to mark great celebrations. It is also drawn upon in rites to afford heightened protection in order to combat the depredations of the *evus,* an organism that mystically preys on well-being.[25]

White is the color of the *ngi* society's antisorcery mask, which is intended to terrify and intimidate those who might potentially disrupt social harmony for personal gain (cat. no. 110). Anita Jacobson-Widding notes that white is used in this region only in judicial contexts and has a dominant role in rituals in which "intelligence" and "clear-sightedness" are critical.[26] In contrast to the stylized realism of the *byeri* figures, *ngi* masks are schematic and relatively two-dimensional. The appearance of the enormous distended white face bleached of any color was intended to evoke an otherworldly authority that was said to instill respect for the administration of justice by initiates charged with maintaining social order.

According to Laburthe-Tolra, Fang-Beti ancestral representations were carved from a light white wood referred to as *ekug* (*Alstonia boonei*).[27] He notes that the tree's sap is an antivenom agent; thus, like the ancestors themselves, it is perceived to give life to those who struggle against death. In addition to its formidable medicinal properties, the wood is drawn upon extensively to make tools because of the ease with which it is carved. The oil that was lavished on the surface of Fang *byeri* sculptures and continues to saturate the wood a century after their removal from Africa is also significant in a number of different ways. It is derived from the oil palm, a staple of equatorial agriculture that is highly valued for its many uses. On a practical level, applying it to the surface of the sculpture appears to have preserved and protected the work from insect damage. The substance is also thought to have curative properties when applied to the body. Most important, however, it produced the greatly desired aesthetic effect of rendering the surface of the sculpture luminous. The play of light on the contours of a Fang work animates an image and greatly alters its appearance in different settings. The appeal of reflective qualities in creating transcendent representations that pay tribute to the ancestors is manifest in other parallel regional reliquary traditions, such as that of the Kota.

The majority of *byeri* sculptures in the West are not only divorced from their reliquary containers but have been stripped of the added elements that originally enhanced their appearance. However, several of the

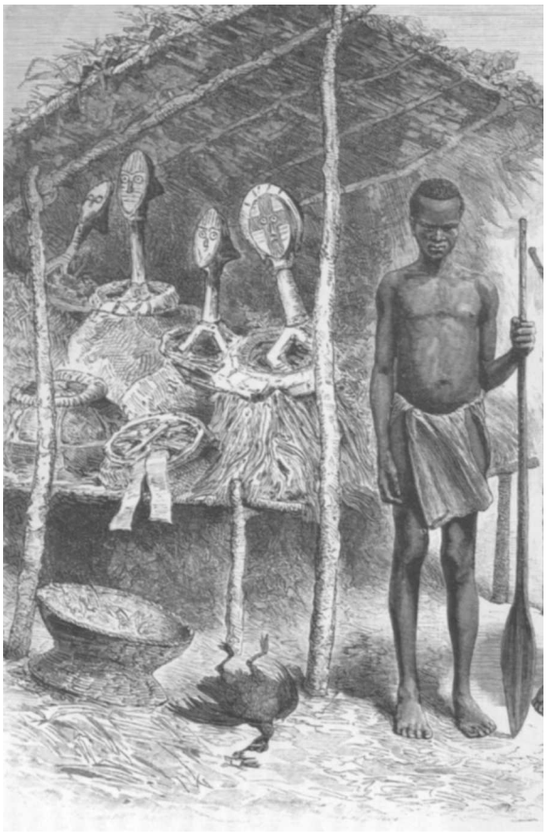


Fig. 65. *Invocation of the Fetishes* (detail). Drawing by Édouard Riou, based on a sketch by Jacques de Brazza. From Brazza 1887b, pt. 2, p. 328

Jacques de Brazza accompanied his brother Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza on his third expedition to central Africa, which was detailed in Pierre's 1887 account entitled "Voyages dans l'Ouest Africain." This print by Riou is based upon one of the sketches that Jacques made to document his impressions. The African villagers in Riou's print are so caricaturized that the only reason the image is noteworthy is this detail of an enclosure filled with reliquaries that appears on the far left. Details of the same image were used in other early publications after it was first reproduced in 1887 in *Le tour du monde*. Leo Frobenius reproduced a detail of the reliquaries in his book *Die Masken und Geheimbünde Afrikas* in 1898, describing them as "masks or ancestor images of the Aduma." One year later, James William Buel's *Heroes of the Dark Continent and How Stanley Found Emin Pasha: A Complete History of All the Great Explorations and Discoveries in Africa, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* captioned the image as "Kabba Rega's Fetish."

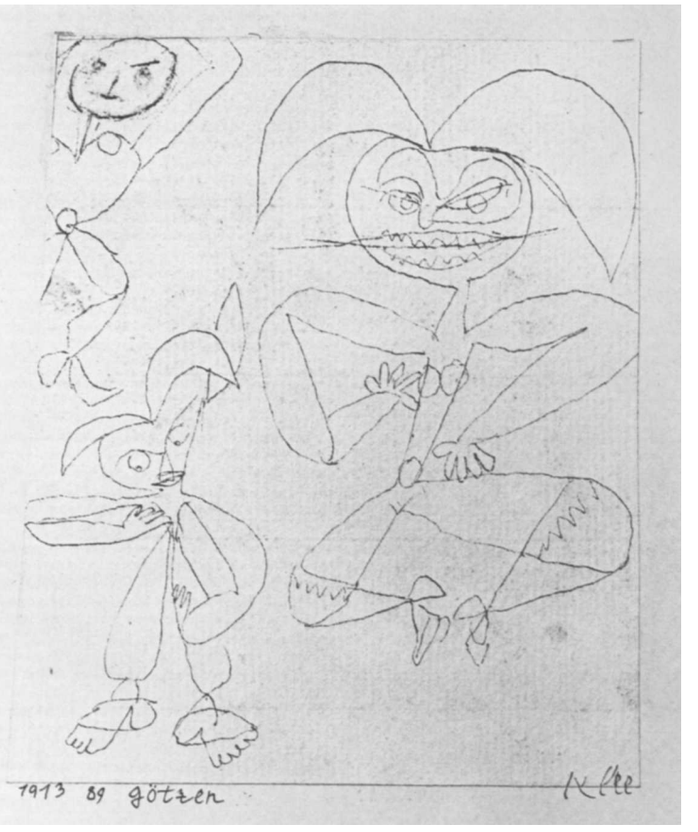


Fig. 66. Paul Klee (Swiss, 1879–1940), *Götzen* (Idols), 1913. Ink on paper mounted on cardboard, 4⅞ x 4 in. (12.5 x 10 cm). Private collection

According to Jean Laude, Klee embraced "primitivism" in his writings as "both a return to origins and the beginning of a new 'spiritual era'" (Laude 1984–85, p. 488). Klee so valued all the artistic forms developed throughout human experience—what André Malraux termed the "Museum without Walls"—that he referred to them extensively in his own creations and theoretical writings. Klee did not prize one tradition over any other. It is known that he was familiar with non-Western art and that as early as 1906 he visited the ethnographic collections of the Berlin and Bern museums. He owned reproductions of "exotic" objects published in the *Blaue Reiter* almanac and even acquired a few African masks between 1906 and 1914. This drawing from 1913 portrays whimsical figures that evoke aspects of Kota reliquary sculptures (Laude 1984–85, p. 499).

works collected in southern Cameroon by Georg Zenker and Günter Tessmann have retained matter that provides a hint of what their full visual impact would have been. The male figure in catalogue number 4 still has a glorious headdress of blue touraco feathers as its crowning element. Its expansive presence and burst of color add significantly to the head as a visual focus of the composition. Abéga has noted that the touraco was a bird that was considered dangerous to approach.[28] Young warriors were allowed to wear its plumage once they had acquitted themselves honorably and thus proved themselves by tests of courage (fig. 64). Another distinctive form of headgear that survives on a work collected in the same region, catalogue number 6, features a tuft of intense red parrot feathers at the summit. This attribute was an even more overt sign of the wearer's prowess as a warrior. The parrot's red feathers were identified with human blood, and only those who took human life in battle earned the right to wear them.[29] Finally, the surfaces of *byeri* sculptures reveal consistent patterns of original wear that indicate they were extensively handled, carefully guarded, and assiduously conserved. Catalogue number 34, for example, is striking not only for its elegance of form and flawless oiled surface but also for the elaborate and beautifully executed native repair that binds the severed proper right leg together and affixes it securely to the lower body with a complex network of fiber ties. Generally, the passages of abrasion are suggestive of a kind of erasure that has eroded areas of the nose and mouth (cat. nos. 28, 36, 40, 43–46, 49).

In contrast to Fang sculptors, who carved highly volumetric full-length figural elements, Kota artists developed a comparatively flattened two-dimensional genre of ancestral representation to accompany relics. Underlying the design of both Kota and Fang figuration, however, is a similar approach in building form from clearly delineated component elements. The focus of the Kota imagery is invariably on the head, supported by a cylindrical neck that terminates in an open lozenge. This schematic distillation of the body at the base was placed within or affixed to a basket or bark bundle that served as a receptacle for ancestral relics. The few contextual references to Kota reliquaries available from the early twentieth century suggest that multiple figures often accompanied a single receptacle. A large ensemble of such reliquaries was housed within a communal enclosure so that they collectively generated a powerful visual impact. As seen in an image that has come down to us from Jacques de Brazza's observation of such an assemblage (fig. 65), the lozenge base of each of the figures was partially exposed at the summit, and the figures themselves appear floating above their respective receptacles. As a result, Western artists often interpreted such works as "dancing" figures (fig. 66).[30]

In related regional traditions, the lozenge is a graphic motif used to refer to powers of fertility and procreation. The conflation of the prominent heads of most Kota reliquary sculptures with their relics, affixed to the area identified with the body, suggests an intentional reference to the corporeal matter within the relic packet. The contents of that packet were the essence of the collectively unified bodies of the lineage ancestors, who were called upon to enhance the reproductive capacity of their descendants. The corpus of ancestral crania invoked and preserved within the reliquary was the point of departure for the visual imagery developed by artists to comment upon their transcendent potency. The ritual importance conferred upon the heads of the ancestors was highlighted through isolation of the head and through further amplification by the framing devices that extend from the summit and sides. These petal-like elements generally include a crescent that spans the summit and lateral lobes that afford an opportunity for decorative flourishes. While Kota artists developed regionally preferred styles, the formal variation is endless, so that out of a corpus of thousands, no two are identical. On the basis of morphology alone, no two interpretations repeat exactly the same width of the face or breadth of the brow.

The metals so artfully applied to the surface of Kota representations were chosen because their great value added prestige. When an individual died, he was buried with his most important possessions, which were metal artifacts representing his wealth. Through harnessing these costly metals to enhance idealized images of the ancestors, Kota lineages honored them with the most precious materials available. The process of creating the figurative elements designed to be placed in relic containers was largely an additive one in which brass, copper, and iron were manipulated to be layered and affixed

to a wood understructure. Metal pounded into flat sheets was cut and applied to the surface. Often artists skillfully combined different metals in order to highlight specific features with contrasting colors. Given that the technical skills required to smelt metals were highly specialized ones attributed to spiritual intercession, the very act of their manufacture was by definition identified with exceptional creative abilities. The process of designing the complex variegated compositions that were applied carefully and analytically to the surface is essentially a demanding form of collage. In light of Picasso's familiarity with this tradition and the fact that he owned several examples of Kota sculpture, the method of cutting and combining different metals onto a flat surface developed by Kota artists may have served as a source of inspiration for his own interest in collage.

It appears likely that increasing access to greater varieties of metals through European trade afforded regional artists the raw materials necessary to expand this regional idiom of expression during the early twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, maritime routes to sub-Saharan Africa provided the means for an exponential leap in the selection of metal wares imported into the region. The Portuguese concentrated their trading at three locations along the western coast of Africa, one of which was São Tomé, an island off Gabon's coast. Inventories of the period document that tens of thousands of items of brass currency known as manillas, along with copper and brass basins from Lisbon, were delivered in 1590 alone for trade with the mainland. Eugenia Herbert has called attention to the discriminating requirements of African consumers in establishing what forms of metalware were imported. She notes that they demanded a diverse range of offerings and that preferences varied significantly among regional populations.[31] Kota patrons delighted in the potential for both subtle and bold chromatic juxtapositions. The most ambitious works they commissioned drew upon the most varied array of alloys available in order to achieve a nuanced palette of yellow, red, brown, and iron tones. Red tonal values were appreciated for their visual impact and association with the life force and vitality. In addition, surface details were added to the metal canvas through incised and applied graphic ornamentation. Most appealing, however, were the reflective properties of the metal surface. The quality of its luster was revived through periodic scouring with sand. The constantly changing effect of shimmering light on the polished metal surface was evocative of the play of light on water. This was an especially appropriate quality given that the ancestral realm was conceived of as a body of water.

The highly schematic Kota ancestral imagery features a formal play between concave and convex surfaces. While every Kota visage is defined by bilateral symmetry, which is often highlighted by a vertical ridge that bisects it, two-sided Janus creations feature a concave face on one side reputed to be female and a convex male face on the other (cat. no. 81). By integrating male and female aspects into a single entity, these works further abbreviate the sculptural pairings favored by Fang patrons and suggest the omniscience of the ancestors. The importance of enhanced vision as an attribute is further emphasized by the penetrating gazes of many Kota figures. This is achieved in some works through the articulation of fully opened eyes in prominent relief with tonally distinct passages of metal that contrast strongly with their background. The eyes of catalogue numbers 66 and 71 are both a red copper; in the first, they are circular, in the other, broad ellipses into which a central pupil has been added. Another device developed by Kota artists to intensify the area of the eyes is to draw upon different varieties of convex nailheads to articulate them, as in catalogue numbers 59–61, 64, and 79. Relics in the form of ocular disks were also added to heighten the eyes, as seen in catalogue number 65. Still other imposing large-scale interpretations emphasize fierce expressions with opened mouths that expose sharply filed teeth, as in catalogue numbers 84 and 86. In conferring these attributes and features upon the sculptural elements that accompanied relics, artists appear to have sought to inspire awe in their ancestors' abilities to effectively discern and divert negative forces.

In both Kota and Kele society, status was marked by the ownership and display of an important weapon, either a relatively short-handled spear with a long decorative blade or a large knife with a blade in the shape of a spearhead. A chief would bequeath both his prestigious weapon and his family reliquary to his successor.[32] The association of those two attributes of leadership is

apparent in the even more abstract Mahongwe ancestral representations (cat. nos. 51–56), which were originally affixed to relics at their bases. The only feature added to the flattened concave semicircular heads was a broad vertical band that extends from the summit to the circular eyes and beaklike nose.

While the principle of encasing a wood template within a metalwork exterior is the same as that found in Kota creations, the Mahongwe interpretations draw predominantly upon metal wire to sheath the surface, thus creating a textured effect. The wires are laid contiguously as parallel horizontal strands that form a metallic tapestry wrought of filaments. The curved silhouettes of these works are an essential aspect of their aesthetic impact—there is a delicacy to the adjustment of their breadth and the subtle degree of their concavity. The emphasis on texture is further in evidence in some of the more elaborate works, whose reverse sides are adorned with stippled graphic designs. In contrast to the dense frontal striations, with their restrained intensity, these designs are more loosely expansive. As they appear in relief, they must have been punched into the metal surface in anticipation of its application to the wood understructure. This protective coat of armor further enhances the defensive nature of the image, which synthesizes the face of an ancestor and a blade. Leon Siroto expands upon this association by suggesting that the brilliance of the metallic reliquary evoked the force of daylight, considered capable of deflecting and obliterating antisocial forces.[33] According to Louis Perrois, each Mahongwe *beete* was carefully cleansed before its ceremonial use.[34] Perrois emphasizes that the luminosity of the reflective surface was identified with vitality and prophecy and that it led individuals to probe their consciences.[35]

Relatively flat two-dimensional masks were created as an integral aspect of Kwele *beete* rites, which drew upon ancestral relics to shield a community from harm, strengthen its esprit de corps, and avert crisis. The appearance of Kwele masks on these occasions was the public manifestation of an event in which community leaders orchestrated a collaborative effort that activated the power of ancestral relics.[36] Worn by *beete* initiates whose bodies were dramatically patterned with black, white, and red pigments, most Kwele masks feature prominent animal attributes identified with physical strength and agility.[37] In this guise, the initiate took on the appearance of a thing of the forest, *kuk* (pl. *ekuk*), that led the villagers in *beete* dances.[38] Some danced in a masculine manner and were followed by men, while a few led the women in feminine movements.

A greatly varied repertory of *ekuk* was produced by Kwele sculptors. All these designs were in the public domain and could be commissioned by any patron. According to Siroto, the only factor that limited their reproduction was a sculptor's ability. Especially skilled and productive carvers were highly regarded in Kwele society. Emissaries were dispatched to commission specific mask designs from celebrated artists. A lineage head could aggrandize himself through patronage of an innovative mask and of a performer who presented it with improvisational flair.[39] Kwele masquerades played a pivotal role in animating and engaging the village to honor important ancestors by galvanizing them into active participation in dances.[40] The combined energies generated by the communal act of dancing were thought to increase the effectiveness of the relics in conferring well-being upon members of the community. Since each apparition was intended to be a riveting diversion, their exposure was regulated so that they would not be taken for granted or become overly familiar. Thus an *ekuk* could not dance before the assembled community twice within a single *beete*. Instead, in order to maintain the emphasis on novelty, if a community's *ekuk* had all made their appearances and additional performances were needed to fill the allotted time, masks and dancers from other villages were recruited. The full identity of each *ekuk,* along with sensitive information relating to the identity of its sacred relics, was disclosed only to initiates.

Kwele masks are distinctive for their silhouette-like quality and their integration of negative space within the boundaries of a composition. Minimally defined facial features, including a triangular nose and eyes depicted as angled slits or crescents, are carved so that they project in light relief from the planar surface. The area of the face that extends from the brows to the base of the chin is framed within a heartlike configuration. The contour of this passage is often highlighted with black pigment and in some instances is echoed and framed by the lateral arcs of horns. The sculptors' rendering of various

animal horns provided an opportunity to introduce some degree of depth into the representation; this is apparent in the faceting of the contours of the buffalo and ram horns and the angled tips of those of the antelope. The most widespread genre of female *ekuk, pebood,* took the pared-down form seen in catalogue number 106. Other genres build on this basic design. The defining features of catalogue number 104 and 105 are the horns curving around the face that are identified with the ram, *bata*. The application of black, white, and red pigments transformed the design into an allusion to the rainbow, *diia*. The horns that extend from the summit of catalogue number 103 and arc around the sides of the face are those of the forest buffalo, *zuom*. The most challenging of Kwele mask compositions for a sculptor to execute was that depicting the aggressive features of the skull of a gorilla, *gon,* as seen in catalogue number 108.

In central and southern Gabon, Punu, Tsogho, and Sangu patrons were responsible for a complex of wood figurative elements that were integrated with bundles of relics wrapped in hide. Unlike Fang *byeri,* which were designed to be removable, these components are affixed to one another. They are structurally similar to Kota reliquaries in that a truncated visual evocation of the ancestors is concretely embodied by the presence of their actual sacra. Intact examples of these ensembles, such as catalogue numbers 101 and 102, provide an opportunity to appreciate the overall aesthetic effect of the juxtaposition of the exactingly defined figurative element and the amorphous form of the packet at the base. The binding agent used to secure the two components to each other is clearly evident in the extensive network of fiber filaments wrapped around the exterior. This genre of representation ranges from half figures to independent heads whose placement, poised above their original bundles, affords them an immaterial aspect. This effect contrasts with that created by the application of red pigment to the surface of the body, which instills the representation with an incandescent quality. The tension between these two is most gracefully resolved in the Punu example (cat. no. 102), in which the female figure and packet are seamlessly united so that her hands are held to the sides at the point of transition with the bundle. In the same work, the manipulation of color is also especially inspired, so that there is a carefully calibrated equilibration of primary values. The black of the hair at the summit and the red of the body alternate with the prominent white of the spirit realm that defines the passages of the face and base.

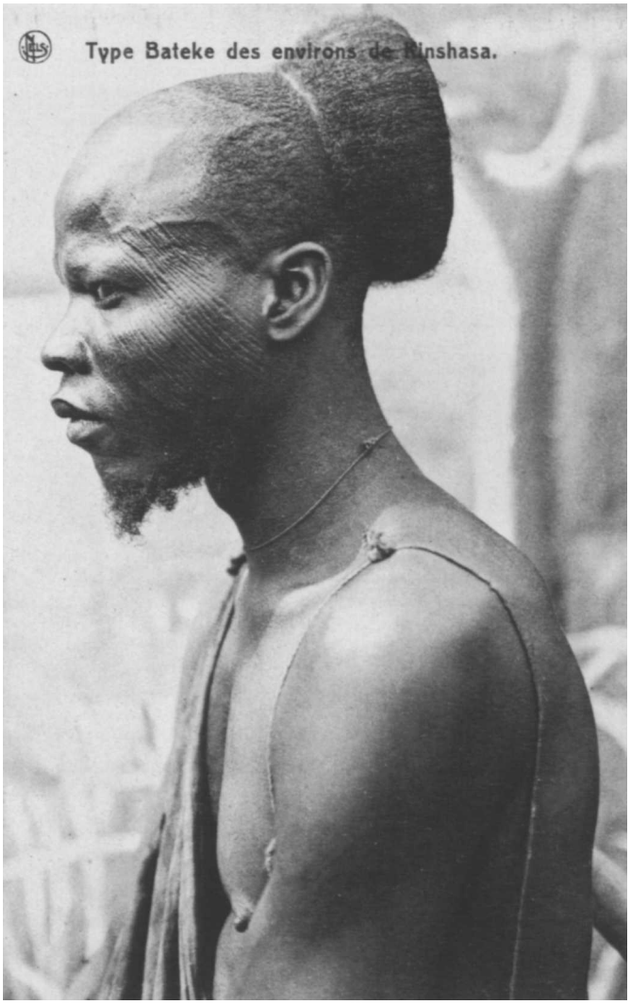


Fig. 67. *Bateke Type from Kinshasa Area,* early 20th century. Published by Nels, Brussels. Postcard, 5⅜ x 3⅜ in. (13.7 x 8.6 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

This postcard with a profile view of a Teke elder was produced by the leading Belgian company, which began commercial distribution of images from the Belgian Congo in 1898. Nels obtained its photographs from Belgian missionary societies that sought to promote their work in the colonies. Many of this man's distinctive features are recognizable in the *buti* figures created by Teke sculptors, which typically emphasize the leadership qualities of their subjects. Among these are the especially fine parallel facial striations, a form of cicatrization worn by Teke elites, as well as the beard and the elaborate coiffure projecting from the back of the head.

Among the corpus of figurative elements created for Tsogho reliquaries, the emphasis on a fiery red palette

is even more pronounced. These are generally portrayed as male half figures with arms tensed at their sides and hands clenched in front of the chest above a rounded swelling stomach with a prominent navel. Invariably the heightened sensory acuity of the subject is articulated through emphasis on boldly defined ears, eyes, and open mouths. The regional tendency of articulating the face as a heartlike configuration, apparent in Fang, Kota, and Kwele works, is especially accentuated in the linear depictions of Tsogho and Sangu sculptors. It is noteworthy that this is equally the case with full rounded representations such as catalogue number 98 and with flat graphically schematic ones (cat. nos. 99–101). In both approaches, the convexity of the forehead, accentuated by the addition of a bold band of brass that spans its center, is contrasted with the concavity of the face. The defining graphic element is the raised ridge of the brow, which extends from either temple and dips at the bridge of the nose. This heart-shaped facial structure is further underscored through the application of color—red in catalogue numbers 100 and 101 and white in catalogue number 99.

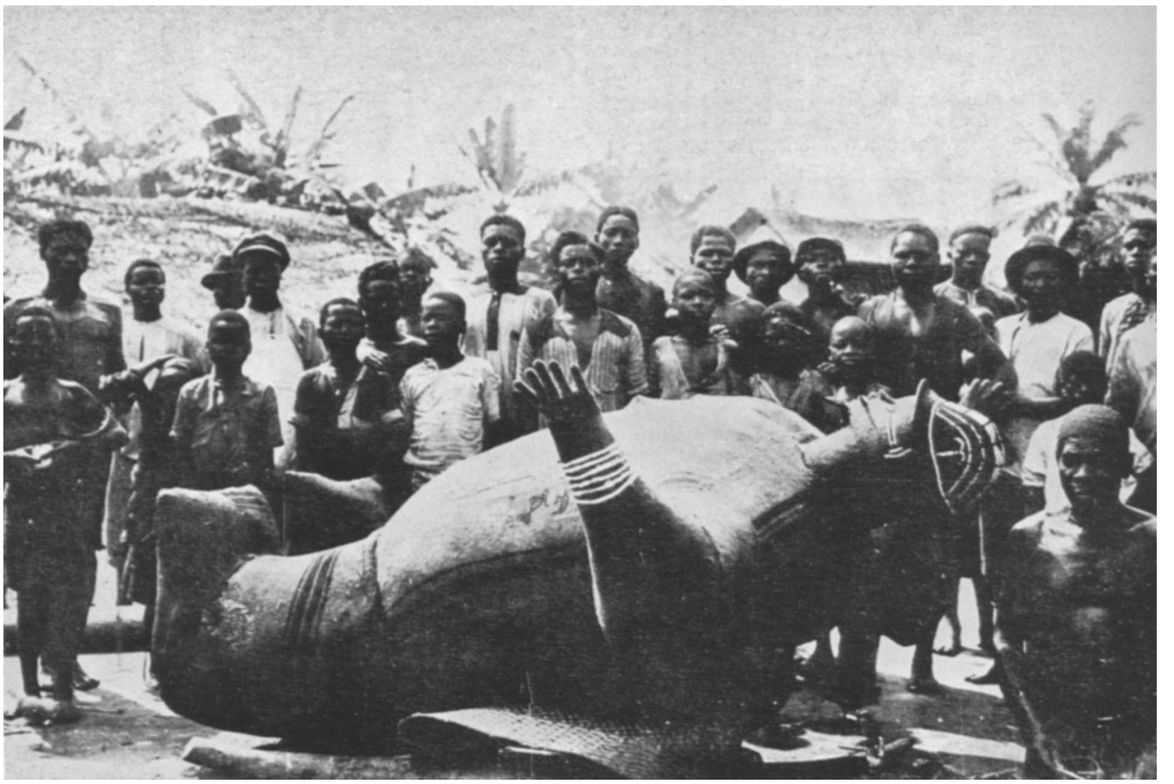
In several distinct equatorial centers, sculptural genres were developed that integrated ancestral sacra within a figurative structure. In these instances it was critical that the visual framework designed by an artist appropriately evoke the exalted significance of both its contents and its source. Mbete sculptors developed a figurative form featuring a long hollowed columnar torso that served as a recipient for ancestral sacra (cat. nos. 90–95). For the authors of these creations, the need to fashion a receptacle was the point of departure for rustic portrayals of male and female ancestors. Access was afforded to the reliquary's contents through a dorsal cavity. The importance of this section of the sculpture is emphasized by heavily applied white kaolin, which is identified with the ancestral realm. This substance highlights the length of the torso and strongly contrasts with the black and red accents applied to the features, summit, and base. The highlighted area is further emphasized by the gesture of minimally defined arms held to either side. At the base, the knees are bent above broad muscular calves. It is as if the power of the matter held within the sculptures imbues them with a vitality that is reflected in their animated stances and otherworldly exterior tones.

Teke *buti* depict male ancestors or renowned chiefs for whom they were named (fig. 67).[41] They typically emphasize the leadership qualities of their subjects, who are portrayed as august bearded statesmen crowned with elite headdresses and seated with hands resting on bent knees. The intent forward gaze of the figures is accentuated by eyes composed of added matter, embedded into the surface, in the form of European-manufactured buttons or nails obtained through trade. Beyond portraying their namesakes, *buti* constitute a



Fig. 68. Bwende funerary ceremony, first decades of 20th century. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Missionary societies were a major source of images for postcard producers. In 1881 the Svenska Missionsförbundet (Mission Covenant Church of Sweden) was the first to establish a post in the Belgian Lower Congo; from 1928 until independence, it had six stations in the area. It is likely that a Swedish missionary took this photograph showing the massive textile sculpture tied to a wooden structure before the procession to its burial site.



69



70

***Opposite, above*: Fig. 69. Edvard Karlman, *Niombo* positioned on its back before a funerary procession, Kingoyi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1927. From Manker 1932, p. 160**

Early documentation of Bwende funerary rites consists mostly of the written accounts and photographs of missionaries who lived and worked in the region. (The archives of the Svenska Missionskyrkan, Stockholm, hold about 40 meters [131 feet] of such photographs.) Karlman was the founder of the missionary school and seminary at Kingoyi. His numerous photographs of Bwende religious practices are a rare and important source of documentation. Another inestimable source is the film recording a *niombo* funeral made by the young missionary Josef Öhrneman in 1926 in the center of Bwende territory at the village of Maduda, not far from Kingoyi.

This photograph records the huge scale attained by *niombo,* whose size was proportional to the importance of the deceased individual being honored. In the foreground at the right is the master sculptor Makosa, who was celebrated for his creativity.

***Opposite, below*: Fig. 70. Edvard Karlman, *Niombo* prepared for funeral procession, Kibenza, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1925. From Widman 1971, p. 27**

In his account of this ceremony, Karlman provides the following information concerning the size of this *niombo*: "It was 3 meters [9 feet 7½ inches] high and 3.5 meters [11½ feet] wide. It contained 114 units of cotton fabric, accompanied by a great quantity of raphia cloth and mats" (Manker 1932, p. 166). The *niombo* is transported tied to a wooden bier and accompanied by family members and musicians. The celebratory display of the funeral procession is the occasion for dance and musical performance.



Fig. 71. *Niombo* carried in funeral procession, probably 1920s. From Widman 1971, p. 31

The bolts of textiles draped over the *niombo*'s shoulder were added by the family as a final lavish contribution to this impressive public tribute to the deceased.

distillation of each individual's very essence. Such a figure is conceived of as a receptacle for sacred matter known as *bonga,* which is either inserted within its core or affixed to its exterior (cat. nos. 111–115). While the chest is often the site of a rectangular cavity intended for this purpose, the figure is sometimes augmented by the addition of matter that expands its torso. In both instances, the site where the *bonga* is housed is visually prominent.

Attributed to a variety of forms of *bonga* are different mystical powers. While some are said to combat disease, others are designed to confer success in hunting, trade, or the acquisition of wives. *Bonga*'s ingredients frequently include *mpieme,* a white chalk identified with ancestors' bones, and may also include hair or whiskers taken from a venerated person. While every Teke ritual specialist owns several different types of *bonga,* the one most preciously guarded and considered most efficacious is that passed down from an original ancestor. When *bonga* was transferred to a ritual specialist from his predecessor, he often commissioned a new sculpture to house it. Consequently, while Teke figurative representations were periodically disposed of as hollow shells, the potent substances they contained were added to other *buti*. This is evident in many of the impressive examples of sculptures preserved in the West whose exposed cavities were eviscerated before Teke owners relinquished them (cat. nos. 112, 113).

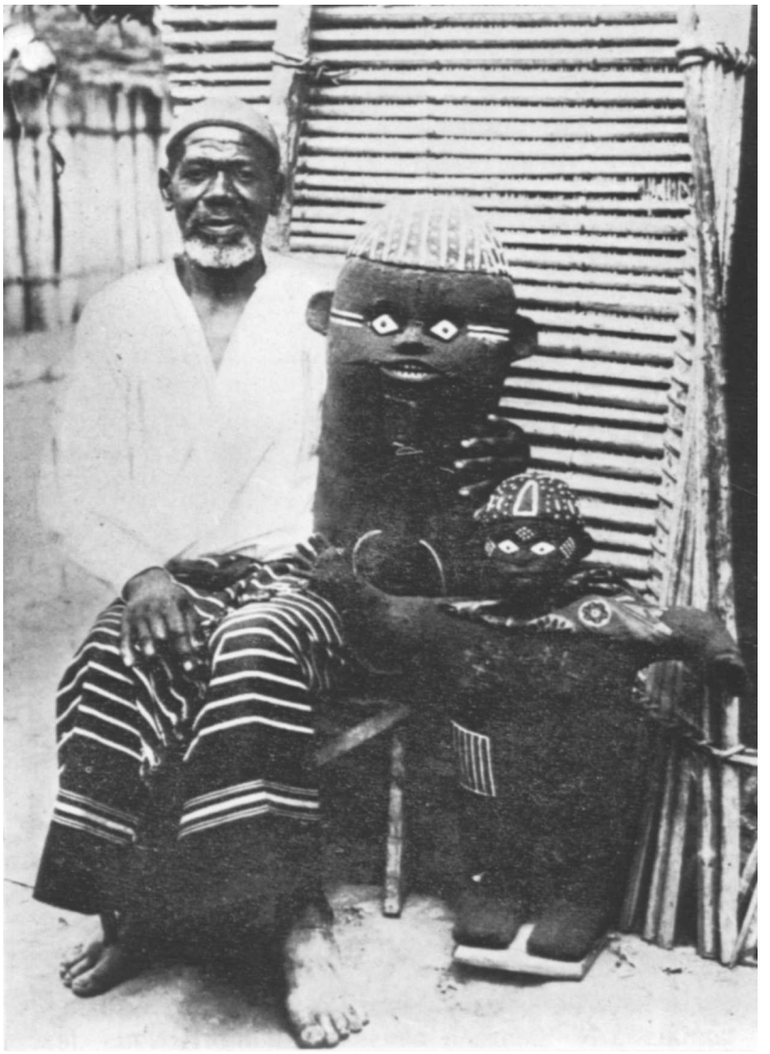


Fig. 72. Makosa and two of his creations, 1934. From Widman 1971, p. 21

The master *niombo* maker of his generation is shown here with a *niombo* head and a miniature *niombo*. The highly customized heads of the *niombo* that Makosa created from life were renowned for capturing distinctive features of their subjects, including specific facial scarifications that endowed them with a lifelike quality. In 1926, when the missionary Josef Öhrneman filmed a funerary ceremony in Maduda, he had the occasion to talk with the artist, whom he described as "an old man, with a grayed hair goatee, a soft look and with whom it feels good to converse" (Manker 1932, p. 167).

In wrapping their ancestral relics within costly and visually arresting figurative structures, Bwende and Bembe peoples were adapting ancient funerary customs of shrouding the bodies of members of the elite in textile shrines (fig. 68). *Niombo,* translated as "cadavers" or "corpses," are designed as sites to house the essence of the individuals whose beings they replicate in yet another perishable medium. In Bwende communities this tradition took two distinct forms. In one—a small version that appears not to have necessarily held relics—the representation served to maintain ties to influential departed family members invoked in times of need. The neighboring Bembe created closely related, but stylistically distinct, textile reliquary figures known as *muzidi*. Whereas Bwende figures invariably stand and their bodies feature a broad torso with arms and legs of equal length, Bembe *muzidi* are generally seated and have long narrow torsos and extended limbs that terminate in prominently articulated fingers and toes. The second type of Bwende figurative textile creation was similar to the first but was rendered on a colossal scale in order to enshroud an individual's physical remains and to be displayed in a funerary performance that culminated with its burial. This honor was reserved for great chiefs and other distinguished members of Bwende society. Since these monumental effigies were designed to be interred, catalogue number 121 is one of the rare examples to have survived. Preserved at the Museum of World Culture, Göteborg, it paid tribute to a female member of the Badondo clan from the village of Kihanga and was collected in 1938 by the Swedish ethnologist Efraim Andersson.

The impressive spectacle of such colossal, larger-than-life, and awe-inspiring representations afforded esteemed individuals a fitting farewell as they were ushered into their exalted role as ancestors (fig. 69). Given the time and skill required to weave indigenous raffia-fiber units of cloth and the cost of imported fabrics introduced through trade, textiles were a form of wealth throughout the region. The funerary bundle at a *niombo*'s core was exponentially aggrandized by the addition of layer upon layer of textiles. The quantity and quality of these were calibrated to appropriately reflect the wealth of a given individual and the esteem in which he or she was held by the community.[42] Hundreds and sometimes thousands of meters of textiles were drawn upon in the creation of a single one of these massive figures.[43] Swedish missionary accounts from the first quarter of the twentieth century report witnessing *niombo* as tall as three meters (nearly ten feet) composed variously of 114 units of cotton cloth or several hundred blankets.[44] In photographic documents of the period, these gargantuan ephemeral colossi tower over the community members surrounding them, their opulent fiber bulk further magnified by additional fabrics draped over their shoulders (fig. 70). In light of the enormous resources and labor invested in them, the ostentatious statement that funerary *niombo* represent is most apparent when one considers the brevity of their display at a final celebratory dance that precedes their burial.

Composed of malleable material that extends over a cane understructure, the bloated *niombo* figures characteristically assume a stiff stance. Their expansive outstretched directional gestures simultaneously convey a degree of animation and signal the active role their subjects are expected to play in their descendants' lives. The extension of the shoulders and arms as a horizon line suggests the boundary between life and death. Robert Farris Thompson describes the alternation of raised right hand and left hand angled down—to indicate the two distinct realms of experience the deceased is charged with bridging as a mediator—as the "crossroads pose."[45] The intensity of the ancestors' engagement is underscored by the alertness of the facial expression, with its direct gaze and open mouth. The lifelike character of monumental *niombo* is further enhanced through their manipulation by the children and grandchildren of the deceased, who jostle them so that they "dance" while being carried on a bier in a final procession (fig. 71). Similarly, the seated *muzidi* were not merely static likenesses. Instead, questions concerning future events or the solution to difficult problems were directed to them by their patron, and their perceived movements, once balanced, were interpreted as coded responses from the ancestor.[46]

The most dramatic statement of the role envisaged for ancestors honored with *niombo* is the fiery red palette used to dress them. Karl Laman has emphasized that red is the dominant tone appropriate for such representations because it is seen to endow them with a vibrant life force.[47] Jacobson-Widding further notes that red is also an allusion to the mystical power attributed to the chief or prominent individuals they honor.[48] White and black notations for the eyes, mouth, and tattoos are painted upon this vast canvas. In equatorial Africa red is a color associated with mystical power and mediation. The material identified with chieftaincy that came to be drawn upon most heavily in the creation of *niombo* was the crimson blanket, obtained from English traders during the nineteenth century. The relatively small corpus of *muzidi* that survive in the West suggests that Bembe artists were more inclined to select from a wider range of imported factory-produced trade cloths to enliven their creations. While all of them draw on boldly patterned prints that emphasize a red palette, no two examples repeat the same one, and thus their visual effect varies considerably. Some of these creations, such as catalogue number 116, skillfully juxtapose contrasting prints, so that the torso is encased in a bold plaid of red, white, and black while the long narrow arms and legs are highlighted with a red print speckled with white blossoms.

The textiles integrated into *niombo* were gathered over the course of many months from family and friends as the body of the deceased was being prepared for burial. Considering the complexity of the process, it was undertaken only for influential individuals or chiefs. At its nadir during the early twentieth century, Makosa was the master of the *niombo* tradition most sought out by leaders of his day (fig. 72). Accounts of Makosa's working methods make it clear that the unit of the head was often commissioned by individuals during their lifetimes and held in reserve until it was needed, then posthumously affixed to the summit of their funerary figures. The fact that this aspect of the creative process could

occur separately from that of the shrouding of the body may account for the dramatic differences in scale that are apparent in the relatively small heads of many massive *niombo* figures. Even though the genre was highly formulaic and stylized, it appears that the demand for Makosa was based on the great degree to which his creations were customized to make meaningful visual connections with their subjects. Thompson notes that Makosa was known to carefully scrutinize their physiognomies for distinguishing features such as filed teeth or tattoos.[49] Although details of the techniques he used to shroud the body constituted a secret formula, it seems clear that his *niombo* were pieced together from component units of form that expanded the central torso with appendages that were unified by being wrapped in an outer layer of cloth.

On one level, Fang *byeri* sculptures can be seen as but a splinter of traditions and religious practices that were largely abandoned by equatorial communities during the early twentieth century. Likewise, Kwele masks are only a small part of *beete* rites that have survived into the present as inert costume elements. Both sculptural genres are the most eloquent creations their communities produced to pay tribute to those traditions. The reliquary ensembles they relate to, held in trust by family leaders, were at the same time physical remnants of influential ancestors and visual evocations of their passage and transformation into an immaterial state. The relics themselves constituted the precious link between these abstract references to the ancestors and their progeny. Their preservation and veneration cultivated ancestral benevolence. Thought to possess mystical potency that was linked to the generation of new life within a family, they played a critical role in enhancing the quality of life of its members. The images that accompanied them served equally to inspire confidence in their efficacy, as they were to honor and thus invoke the continued engagement of departed family members. Sometimes, when relics were embedded within the very fabric of the sculpture, the boundaries between sacra and artifact were intentionally blurred.

It is essential to our understanding of this and other forms of African art that we appreciate them as surviving evidence of transient beliefs and rites. These artifacts were made of highly perishable materials and were thus vulnerable to the ravages of time. While the equatorial artistic traditions that we have considered may go back hundreds of years, the only physical record that we are aware of—the one preserved by the West—is highly fragmentary. The sculptures familiar to us reflect a body of work created during a relatively brief span of time. They represent the artistic expression of the region from which Europeans collected them during the late nineteenth century until the first half of the twentieth. It seems clear from even the surviving corpus that we are able to examine in this exhibition—a corpus that has come to crystallize the region's artistic legacy—that these works reflect the culmination of generations of experimentation in which earlier prototypes were continually adapted, refined, and renewed within a framework that linked evolving aesthetic forms to a common theme of ancestor veneration.

Through these depictions, regional artists reflected upon and codified conceptions of the afterlife as an ideally dynamic and vital state. By doing so, they created works that fueled their faith in the potential for a fulfilling afterlife. Their exaggeration of and emphasis upon a range of culturally appealing and highly desirable aesthetic qualities reflected their belief in their ancestors' positive, ongoing, and meaningful involvement in their daily affairs. The commissioning of these works not only fortified ties with the ancestors but also revealed the manner in which the regional elite ideally envisioned their own immortality. Never depicted as passive subjects, Bangwa, Fang, Kota, Kwele, Tsogho, Punu, Teke, Bwende, and Bembe sculptural representations and their related relics were simulacra of the ancestors who directly address the viewer and establish their relevance through their gazes, gestures, active stances, and astonishing virtuosity.

Across these many distinct sculptural forms, equatorial African artists clearly celebrated the body as the site that housed a remarkable soul in this life and remained imbued with its essence in the next. Many of these sculptural forms accompanied relics of revered individuals that were collectively combined. The reliquaries developed by regional artists rehoused those potent particles of matter within new vessels. The distillation of the body to elemental matter inspired many distinct forms of representation that conceive of the body as a composite whole. The formulaic quality

of the many different equatorial reliquary genres—parallel to that of comparable commemorative devotional traditions developed in the West in antiquity and medieval times—affirms the state of immortality to which exceptional individuals are elevated. Given how fundamental the body is to conceptions of existence, it remained the primary paradigm exploited by artists to reflect upon this immaterial condition. These visual evocations are not passive funerary markers but rather sites for an ongoing dialogue in which ancestors' accomplishments are extolled and their continued engagement with the living demanded. Ultimately, the corpus reveals how artists have repeatedly stretched to imagine and portray our most profound aspiration to survive in an exalted form as ancestors by projecting beyond that which is immediately perceivable through the senses.

In seeking to celebrate and aggrandize their ancestors, equatorial Africans invented an array of artistic languages that translated their religious beliefs into forms of creation that have entered the canon of universal art history. An anecdote from the early twentieth century reveals how this form of African expression was "discovered" and judged by Western artists.[50] The story is told that Maurice de Vlaminck showed his colleague André Derain an equatorial African sculpture of a female figure he had acquired and proclaimed it to be almost as beautiful as the *Venus de Milo*. Upon studying the work in question, Derain responded that he, in fact, found it to be equally as beautiful as the *Venus*. When the two later conferred with Picasso, however, he disagreed and pronounced the African work even more beautiful than the Hellenistic goddess that is among the treasures of the Louvre.

1. New York 1936, p. 4.
2. Ariès 1981, p. 209.
3. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 39.
4. Ibid., p. 118.
5. Ibid., p. 120.
6. Ibid., p. 119.
7. Ibid., pp. 121–22.
8. Bettina von Lintig has identified some twenty-two sculptures, including catalogue number 1, that she attributes to Ateu Atsa or his workshop on stylistic grounds (Lintig 2001).
9. Brain and Pollock 1971, pp. 122–23.
10. Fernandez 1982, p. 88.
11. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 265.
12. Ekata'a Mbang Theodore, mayor and traditional chief of Mengong, Cameroon, personal communication, May 2006.
13. Oyono Nkulu, Chef de Canton Ntumu-sud 2, Ambam, Cameroon, personal communication, May 2006.
14. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 340.
15. Fernandez 1982, p. 258.
16. Throughout central Africa autopsies were often performed to determine the cause of death. As a result, the Fang and many of their neighbors were intimately familiar with human anatomy.
17. Fernandez 1982, p. 257.
18. Ibid., p. 174.
19. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 12.
20. Abéga 1987, p. 191.
21. Ibid., p. 193.
22. Ibid., p. 194.
23. Ibid., pp. 191, 193.
24. Ibid., pp. 196, 199.
25. Ibid., p. 195.
26. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 188.
27. Laburthe-Tolra 1985, p. 339.
28. Abéga 1987, p. 184.
29. Ibid., p. 80.
30. New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, pp. 34, 267–68.
31. Herbert 1984, p. 125.
32. Siroto 1968, p. 86.
33. Ibid., p. 87.
34. Perrois 1969b, p. 67.
35. Ibid.
36. Siroto 1969, p. 176.
37. Ibid., p. 267.
38. Ibid., p. 218.
39. Ibid., pp. 241, 270.
40. Ibid., p. 204.
41. Hottot 1956.
42. Washington D.C. 1981–82, p. 52.
43. Widman 1971, p. 20.
44. Washington D.C. 1981–82, p. 61.
45. Ibid., p. 62.
46. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 175.
47. Ibid., p. 170.
48. Ibid., p. 172.
49. Washington D.C. 1981–82, p. 61.
50. Flam 1984–85, p. 214.

CATALOGUE

1. Royal Commemorative Portrait of Chief Fosia

Ateu Atsa, ca. 1840–1910
Bamileke peoples, Bangwa group; Cameroon, Fontem region, Lebang
Second half of 19th century
Wood
H. 33½ in. (85 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin III C 10514

This highly expressive portrait captures the vital essence of the Bangwa chief Fosia. Standing with legs slightly flexed and holding out a ceremonial pipe and drinking horn, Fosia appears ready to spring into motion. He is attired with the attributes of leadership identified with his role as master of ceremonies on the occasion of important state rites.[1] *Fwa*, or high-level chiefs in western Bangwa communities, were required to commission a likeness of themselves during their lifetime.[2]

Robert Brain and Adam Pollock have noted that in Bangwa society, carving was considered a highly regarded profession, so that chiefs encouraged their sons to undertake the necessary training.[3] At the time of its removal from Cameroon, Fosia's portrait was attributed to the master sculptor Ateu Atsa, who was active during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[4] Fourteen other works acquired by German colonials at the beginning of the twentieth century were identified as the work of the same artist. Those attributions were subsequently corroborated by Pierre Harter, who reviewed photographs of the works with leaders in Foretia and Fontem in 1967.[5] Bettina von Lintig has suggested that, on the basis of distinctive formal qualities, the corpus of works created by Ateu Atsa or his workshop might be expanded to twenty-eight.[6]

Once such a likeness was completed by its sculptor, it was given to a ritual expert or priest for consecration to transform it into a repository of its subject's soul.[7] The artifact's capacity to become an ancestral receptacle derives from the application of libations and various medicinal substances to its surface.[8] Such revered works are conserved within royal treasuries guarded by the *lefem* society.[9] They at once evoke the memory of the previous chiefs and serve as the vehicle for communication with those ancestors. Critical markers of a royal lineage during the transfer of leadership from one generation to the next, the figures are also brought out during the dry season to accompany invocations directed to those ancestors for the land's fertility.[10]

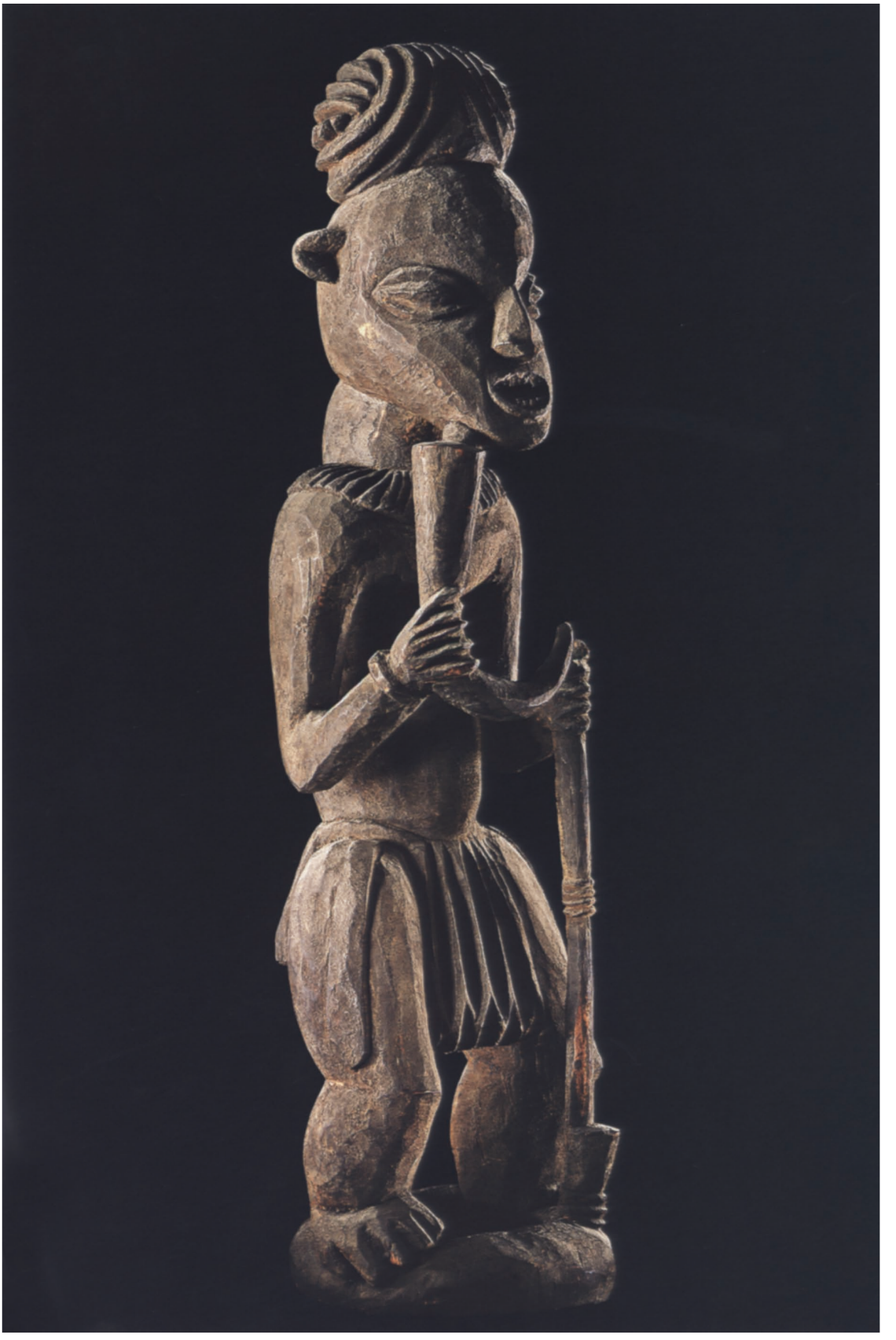
Just as a sculptural representation memorializes each generation of a family's leaders, the crania of those same individuals are preserved as sacra together within a relic shrine.[11] Each is accompanied by a carved ivory horn that is sounded by a retainer to invoke that ancestor. Also housed within this enclosure are items intimately associated with those individuals' rank such as their pipes and hats.[12] Over the course of the ceremony that blesses the transfer of leadership from a late chief to his offspring, his portrait is placed within this enclosure at the site where his relic will be interred and protected by an overturned clay vessel.[13]

1. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 119; Rudy 1972, p. 128.
2. Harter 1990, p. 70.
3. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 47.
4. Maastricht 1992, p. 307.
5. Harter 1990, p. 75.
6. Lintig 2001, p. 100.
7. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 56.
8. Harter 1990, p. 73.
9. Ibid., p. 71.
10. Brain and Pollock 1971, pp. 85, 118.
11. Ibid., p. 118.
12. Ibid., p. 82.
13. Ibid.; Harter 1990, p. 72.

EX COLL.
Gustav Conrau, Germany, 1897–99

EXHIBITED
"Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa, Collection Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992; "Arte da Africa: Obras-primas do Museu Etnológico de Berlim," Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janiero, October 13, 2003–January 4, 2004, Brasilia, January 19–March 21, 2004, Sao Paulo, January 28–March 28, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Krieger 1965, fig. 94; Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 61, pl. 31; Rudy 1972, p. 129; Harter 1990, fig. 1; Maastricht 1992, fig. 39, p. 307; Lintig 2001, p. 114, no. 26; Koloss 2002, p. 109; Lintig 2002, p. 75; Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, and Sao Paulo 2003–4, p. 88.



2. Royal Commemorative Portrait of a *Tanyi* Priest Flanked by Twins

Bamileke peoples, Bangwa group; Cameroon
19th century
Wood
H. 35 1/16 in. (89 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin III C 10521

The regal subject of this ancestral memorial is seated on a stool facing forward. At the level of his forearms there is a figure at either side that is a third the scale. A slight asymmetry is created by the fact that the figure on the proper left is male and slightly larger than the female figure on the proper right. The relative naturalism of the central protagonist, who is depicted with regalia of leadership that include a fiber hat and collar, also contrasts subtly with the abstraction of the flanking figures. Given that both secondary figures are in profile and face opposing directions, the grouping demands to be viewed in the round. The lateral pair not only anchor the composition, but their elongated slightly bent legs echo those of the central figure, creating a graceful linear openwork passage.

Bangwa royal portraiture immortalized chiefs as well as their mothers, spouses, priests or priestesses of the earth, and other favored intimates of the chief. In Bangwa society parents of twins were elevated to sacred positions as priests and priestesses (*tanyi* or *anyi*) concerned with fertility of both the earth and members of the community. The *tanyi* also performed an important function in the investiture rites of a new chief, who was often referred to as *tanyi so,* or "new father of twins," following his elevation to that title.[1] Throughout the Grassfields region, leaders are conceived of as "father of twins," in light of their association with their peoples' fertility and prosperity. Their identification with this role is often evoked in the imagery of their elaborate seats of office, which may depict twinned attendants as an attribute of leadership. The pair of figures depicted here may be interpreted equally as the central figure's offspring, his people, or his attendants. In Bangwa society, it is established that such distinctive representations were intended to capture the character of distinguished elites. This work may memorialize a priest or, alternatively, a chief who sought to emphasize his role as *tanyi so*.

Both this work and the previous one (cat. no. 1) were collected by Gustav Conrau, a labor recruiter for German coastal plantations. Conrau made contact with Bangwa settlements as early as 1897. Initially an agent of the firm Jantzen and Thormählen, he was later appointed an officer of the concession company Gesellschaft Nordwest-Kamerun.[2] Conrau acquired a series of highly important sculptural works that he documented and sent back to Germany before his death in a regional conflict.[3]

1. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 90; Lintig 2002, p. 107.
2. Chilver 1967, p. 155.
3. Brain and Pollock 1971, p. 1.

EX COLL.
Gustav Conrau, Germany, 1897–99

EXHIBITED
"Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa, Collection Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Krieger 1965, fig. 95; Rudy 1972, p. 134; Harter 1986, p. 313, fig. 351; Maastricht 1992, fig. 38; Koloss 2002, p. 108; Linting 2002, p. 67.



3. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper
H. 21½ in. (54.6 cm)
Collection of Laura and James J. Ross

According to Fang oral traditions, history began when their ancestors descended from the north on an epic journey that took them to the entrance of the equatorial forest. Mythical accounts recall their tunneling through a giant tree at the banks of a river, which served as the gateway for successive generations of migrations that dispersed into southern Cameroon, Rio Muni, and Gabon.[1]

It has been proposed that the earliest Fang reliquary figures were ideally mobile, easily transportable representations that evoked the ancestors left behind over the course of those early migrations.[2] Eventually, more sedentary artists expanded what may have been a relatively simple form to embrace the full figure, interpreted in a range of elaborate regional styles. Northern Ntumu and Ngumba sculptors favored narrow, attenuated depictions of the body.[3] In its perfection of design, this highly volumetric female figure represents the culmination of that idiom. Her powerful physiognomy embodies a dynamic tension that reconciles an alert intensity with a stance of repose. The work fully embraces the quality of balance, or *bipwe,* so valued by Fang commentators.[4] According to those sources, it is a figure's equilibrium, as well as the symmetry of its limbs, that endows it with vitality.

The figure's seated posture was designed to accommodate its original placement on the lid of a receptacle for precious relics. The central axis of its exacting bilateral symmetry is the powerful vertical torso, extended by the strong neck at the summit and by the plinth that affixed the figure to its relic container at the base. Applied copper accents underscore the breadth of the neck and enliven the gaze. Her clasped hands are the focal point of a self-contained rectangular passage at the heart of the composition. At its summit the projecting conical breasts are flanked by the gentle curve of the sloping shoulders. These in turn intersect with the cylindrical upper arms, held parallel to the torso and forming a right angle with the horizontal forearms, which are united by the joined hands.

The head is elegantly crowned with a distinctive coiffure composed of tresses that extend across the surface of the head horizontally and flare out vertically from the base of the neck. Clearly intended to be seen in the round, the shoulder blades are defined in light relief, and the profile is especially enlivened by delicate accents such as the tresses at the base of the head and arcs of the breasts, which gracefully extend beyond the columnar torso. The continuous horizontal curvature of the buttocks and thighs extends out below the waist and culminates in narrow knees. Directly below, broad muscular calves terminate in diminutive feet.

Rather than capturing the likeness of an individual, this ideal of physical perfection pays tribute to a family's collective ancestors. Its carefully measured proportions, in which distinct volumes of the body are defined in relation to the whole and seamlessly unified, suggest the articulation of a Fang canon comparable to the Vitruvian man. As in that system, Fang artists conceived of the structure of human anatomy as a microcosm of the universe.

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 738.
2. Ibid., p. 740.
3. Ibid., p. 741.
4. Fernandez 1966, p. 56.

EX COLL.
Jack Naiman, Los Angeles

EXHIBITED
"African Art in the Cycle of Life," National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., September 28, 1987–March 20, 1988.

PUBLISHED
Washington, D.C. 1987–88, p. 139; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 230, fig. 143; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 95.



4. Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male Holding Horn, Female Figure, and Receptacle

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon, Lokoundje Valley
19th century
Wood, beads, brass, relics, antelope horn, fiber, feathers, bark
H., max., 45⅝ in. (115 cm); receptacle, 21 1/16 in. (55 cm); male figure, 24⅜ in. (62 cm); female figure, 22 13/16 in. (58 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
III C 6689a–c

James Fernandez has noted that the Fang referred to their ancestor cult by the term *biang,* which was applied to substances and techniques affording influence over unseen forces. The carved representation that was the visual focal point of an ancestral reliquary was *mwan biang,* or child of medicine.[1] This sculptural ensemble is unique in its retention of the full array of aesthetic and ritual complements that were critical to its efficacy and appreciation in its culture of origin. The presence of the principal male figure is majestically amplified by a dazzling feather headdress of blue and gold feathers. Louis Perrois has suggested that such feather ornaments were worn by dancers and ritual specialists responsible for invoking the ancestors over the course of rites to designate the presence of the sacred.[2] The head is at the epicenter of this expansive field of colorful plumage, and a white button serves as a striking accent in the center of the forehead. Throughout, the golden brown wood is enlivened with brass highlights, applied to the bridge of the nose, eyes, temples, wrists, and ankles. Rows of brass tacks also delineate the pectorals, a median line bisecting the torso, and either side of the navel. Additions of strands of beads and antelope horns are strung around the neck and torso.

The proportions of the strong slender arms, torso, and legs are relatively naturalistic. The hands grasp a vertical horn held in front of the chest. A vertical plinth extends continuously from the buttocks so that the figure may be positioned along the rim of its receptacle, thus making it appear to levitate. The stance with knees slightly flexed suggests imminent movement.

This ensemble was acquired in 1897 by the Berlin museum from the German naturalist Georg Zenker, who had collected it in southern Cameroon. A letter in the museum's archive provides an account of the transaction whereby it was acquired. Zenker notes that a relic container and two sculptures were offered to him by a chief. Before paying the impatient leader, Zenker examined the work and indicated that the chief's "worries dissipated once I paid him generously and he promised to assist me in acquiring other objects. Now I am confronted with the challenge of packing and transport to the coast, for the strong superstitions of the carriers necessitates an unassuming packaging so that they will not notice anything. Otherwise they would be inclined to throw it away and destroy it."[3]

At that time, Zenker was living at the botanical and zoological station he had established at Bipindi. Archival records indicate not only that the original ensemble included a companion figure but also that the cylindrical bark receptacle held five crania of chiefs' ancestors (father, grandfather, and so on) and "medicines" that included two tin containers and one bark box filled with red wood wrapped in leaves, two arrowheads, and wood particles.[4] The inventory records identify the male figure as *mbiang* and its female counterpart as *norra mbiang*. In a letter from Bipindi dated January 3, 1897, Zenker writes to the museum's management:

> I have sent two crates and a package addressed to the museum on the *Adolf Woerman*. In this shipment, you will find a complete *Ngule* fetish. It consists of two figures, one male, the other female. . . . The description of this fetish and its explanation will follow in the next letter that I will entrust tomorrow to Governor Puttkammer. You will find below the list of objects included in the shipment. . . . The prices vary often from one dealer to another. The fetish cost me 95 marks, I hope that it is not too expensive. I may be able to obtain another, but it is unlikely.

Another letter from Zenker, dated February 4, 1897, relates to a second shipment of objects, on the *Lulu Bohlem*. It is accompanied by a detailed list of the eighty-five objects sent in the two shipments and the prices paid for them by Zenker, who sought to be reimbursed for the total cost of 450 marks and to be paid a commission. A handwritten notation on Zenker's first letter of May 5, 1897, presumably records the sum internally agreed to be



paid for the shipments: "the commission agrees to pay up to 600 marks." An official response to Zenker survives in the files:

> Dear Mr Zenker, It is with great joy that we received your last two shipments among which the *Ngule malang* is an extraordinary acquisition for which we are very grateful. Concerning payment, we have already advanced you 300 marks. If you are agreeable, we will advance once again a larger sum, perhaps 600 marks, to your old address in Hamburg if that is convenient.

Notes in the museum's objects file concerning the significance of the work appear to be the information supplied by Zenker:

> These figures have a place of honor in the men's house in a corner or at the base of the central pillar. They are set onto a circular recipient (a hollowed tree trunk) containing numerous crania. During initiation rites, which are identical among the Ngumba and Yaunde, the fetish is carried to a hut situated near the village in the bush, which is connected to the men's house by an underground tunnel. The notable in charge of the men's house leads the procession to the hut. There the crania are taken out and covered with new medicines. In the hands of the medicine man, the figures dance. After the feast the statues are displayed once again. . . . Among the Ngumba, the statues are treated this way on a daily basis, receiving much attention and frequently painted and decorated with ornaments. The Yaunde use figures similarly but their effigies are much larger.

As early as 1926, this work was published in photographs that show it positioned on its relic container along with its female counterpart, from which it had been separated but with which it has been reunited for this exhibition.

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 254.
2. Personal communication, November 16, 2005.
3. Zenker's correspondence in the Berlin museum accession files was made available by the curator of its African collections, Peter Junge, and translated from the German into French by Yaëlle Biro for this project. This letter, provided by Junge on February 13, 2007, was translated by Angelika Tunis and Yaëlle Biro.
4. Berlin files, inv. III C 6689a–n.

EX COLL.
Georg Zenker, Leipzig, 1897

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa, Collection Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Sydow 1926, fig. 6; Sydow 1954, p. 163, pl. 51B; Perrois 1972, p. 69; Perrois 1979, pp. 8, 61, figs. 2, 35; Paris 1991–92, p. 54; Maastricht 1992, fig. 17; Koloss 2002, p. 121; Perrois 2006, p. 129, pl. 11.

5. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female Holding Horn

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 21⅝ in. (54.9 cm)
Private collection

Although *byeri* was predominately a male concern, reliquary figures often depicted female subjects. In his account of a *byeri* ceremony he observed at Nssalang at the beginning of the twentieth century, Günter Tessmann notes that only two of the initiates were women. He accounts for these exceptions by explaining that one was an elderly woman who had lost all her family members, and it was thus appropriate for her to meet with her ancestors. The other had viewed the contents of a relic container and required initiation to dissipate ancestral wrath over that transgression. James Fernandez indicates that crania of *nyiabiang,* or "mothers of medicine," women who had made outstanding contributions to their lineage, might be included among a family's venerated relics. Such individuals distinguished themselves through the number of their progeny, their hard work, and their character.[1]

This figure appears in a photograph published in 1918 by Felix von Luschan of a series of works at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin collected by Georg Zenker in southern Cameroon (see fig. 6), which accounts for its close formal resemblance to the Ngumba works from the same region that remain with that museum's successor (cat. nos. 4, 6). That record suggests that it was subsequently deaccessioned from the museum's collection. In the photograph this work is positioned seated on the rim of a cylindrical bark container facing forward and is adjacent





to a seated male figure with an exposed relic behind them. Another container in the photograph is also accompanied by male and female sculptures. The caption simply reads, "Bark containers with bones and carved human figures for the ancestor cult." Without more extensive information it is difficult to determine whether the works seen in the photograph were being recorded with their original containers or if, as sometimes happened, they were artificially united at the museum to evoke greater "contextual" understanding. It is intriguing to consider, however, that Fang-Ngumba figures appear to have been placed in pairs on relic containers.

Like catalogue numbers 4 and 6 through 8, this long beautifully balanced form is exacting in its execution. A succession of harmoniously reverberating curves, suggesting the effect of radiating ripples within a pool of water, extend the length of this statuesque female figure. Its head is rounded with a vertical brass band that bisects the forehead from the hairline to the bridge of the nose. A band that extends around the perimeter of the forehead features an unusual design of inscribed cowries. The alert facial expression is defined by the deeply bored circular depressions for the eyes, which originally must have housed relics, and by the projecting oval mouth that exposes sharp-filed teeth. The strong columnar neck is flanked on either side by the arcs of the shoulders. Directly below, the attenuated conical breasts project from the otherwise flat chest. In contrast, the gradual curve of the sloping abdomen extends out sharply at the navel. Flanking the narrow vertical torso are the slender cylindrical upper arms that intersect at right angles with the more fully rounded forearms. The staggered hands grasp a vertical horn held parallel to the torso. At the base, the legs—sleek foreshortened thighs that curve inward, narrowing at the knees, and broad rectilinear muscular calves—dangle suspended. The back features a deep vertical spinal channel. Its flatness is dramatized by its intersection with the curved horizontal shelf created by the buttocks. The long vertical plinth extends from its underside parallel to the legs.

In the 1918 photograph this figure appears wearing a bead necklace and a metal ring around the waist, both of which have since been removed. The work was later documented in a "contextual" image of its subsequent display with a series of other Fang figures exhibited in "African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," held at the Brooklyn Museum from March 20 to April 25, 1937 (fig. 7).

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 258.

EX COLL.
Georg Zenker, Leipzig; Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin; Charles Ratton, Paris; Frank Crowninshield, New York, 1937; Charles C. G. Chaplin, Philadelphia; William A. McCarty-Cooper, Los Angeles

EXHIBITED
"L'art nègre," Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, November 15–December 31, 1930; "African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," Brooklyn Museum, March 20–April 25, 1937; "Treasures," National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., November 17, 2004–August 15, 2005.

PUBLISHED
Luschan 1918; Brussels 1930, pl. 38; Brooklyn 1937, no. 86 (not illustrated); Perrois 1972, p. 181; Christie's 1992, p. 72, fig. 135; Lehuard 1992, p. 17; Clarke 1995, p. 36, fig. 5; Washington, D.C. 2004–5, n.p.

6. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Horn

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon, Lokoundje Valley
19th century
Wood, brass, copper, relics, feathers
H. 27 15/16 in. (71 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
III C 18066

In his questions to Fang sources concerning the identity of the figures that accompany the relic containers, James Fernandez elicited the following insightful comments from Essana Ekwaga in Oyem, Gabon:

> There are many skulls in the reliquary. Who should we choose to represent? And who would be satisfied with the choice if his own grandfather should be ignored. The figures were made to warn others that this was "the box of skulls" and they were made to represent all the ancestors within. What causes us satisfaction in seeing the *eyima* atop the *bieri* is that we see disclosed our ancestors. Their faces are strong, quiet and reflective. They are thinking about our problems and how to help us.[1]

In a letter from Bipindi dated January 28, 1902, Georg Zenker provided the Berlin museum with a list of thirty-four objects, including this figure, that he had sent to the museum in the hope they would be of some interest. This figure's black wood surface is brilliantly illuminated by brass accents and a vibrant crown of scarlet parrot feathers. Zenker himself comments on these local aesthetic practices: "The body as well as common objects are decorated with brass copper" and "On the occasion of celebrations, which are extraordinarily frequent here, or for palavers, and in war, the supreme chiefs of families wear a coiffure made by them decorated with the tail of a gray parrot."[2]

Copper disks that echo those of the eyes have been added to the forehead and pectorals, while bands encircle the wrists and ankles. The bold features include a conical nose with delicately flared nostrils and an open oval mouth that exposes filed teeth. The pronounced projection of the mouth is juxtaposed with the vertical rectangular extension of a beard. At the core of the composition is the vertical horn held parallel to the torso in a fluid gesture that complements the curvature of the thighs. The passages of the forearms and hands are delineated as continuous arcs, as are those that span from the buttocks to the fine pointed knees. The figure was seated when positioned on the rim of its original receptacle; from this perspective, the legs with their abbreviated muscular calves appear foreshortened. While from a frontal view the figure seems somewhat flattened and hieratic, in profile it is extremely dynamic. From that vantage point the conical elongation of the apex of the head intersects at a forty-five-degree angle with the long vertical neck, and the mouth and cylindrical navel constitute dramatic projections.

In 1886, at the age of thirty-one, Zenker left Europe for Africa as a participant in an official fact-gathering trip to Congo.[3] At the conclusion of that journey he stayed in the region, eventually serving in the German colonial administration of Cameroon beginning in 1889. His tenure as the official presence at the recently established post of Yaoundé, the present-day capital of Cameroon, was marked by isolation from Europe and close friendly ties with residents of the region. His pacific tendencies led to his removal from that position and his departure from the colonial administration. During a brief return to Germany, Zenker published an account of his observations in a monograph entitled *Yaoundé*. In 1896 he returned to the region, settling at Bipindi along the banks of the Lokoundje River, sixty kilometers (about thirty-seven miles) from Kribi,



on the road to Yaoundé. There he amassed significant scientific collections and subsisted on a cacao, coffee, and rubber plantation until his death in 1922.

1. Fernandez 1973, p. 205.
2. Laburthe-Tolra 1970, pp. 53, 55.
3. Ibid., pp. 7–13.

EX COLL.
Georg Zenker, Leipzig, 1902

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa, Collection Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Arte da Africa: Obras-primas do Museu Etnológico de Berlim," Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janiero, October 13, 2003–January 4, 2004, Brasilia, January 19–March 21, 2004, Sao Paulo, January 28–March 28, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Krieger 1965, p. 84, fig. 168; Perrois 1972, p. 183; Perrois 1979, p. 61, fig. 34; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 420, fig. 557; Paris 1991–92, p. 138; Maastricht 1992, fig. 52; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 552, fig. 297; Paris 2000–2001, p. 241; Koloss 2002, p. 121; Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia, and Sao Paulo 2003–4, pp. 124–25, 321; Perrois 2006, p. 129, pl. 9.

7. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Horn

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon, Lokoundje Valley
19th century
Wood
H. 23⅝ in. (60 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950 1950-134-200

Although it appears to have been stripped of a number of its original added accents, this work retains passages that stylistically echo the related one in Berlin's collection (see cat. no. 6). This is evident in the similar treatment of the broad open mouth and the beard as well as the configuration of the torso and legs. Despite the significant formal parallels, which suggest that the two works may be attributed to the same sculptor, they project distinct interpretations of their respective subjects. While the Berlin work is reminiscent of a sentinel, this figure assumes a fiercely aggressive stance. James Fernandez has observed that Fang communities thought of the dead as protecting the living and that the ancestor cult, *byeri,* sought to assure the flow of that ancestral protection.[1] At the same time, the German ethnographer Günter Tessmann notes that the figures accompanying the ancestral relics preserved by *byeri* were intended as decoys to distract the attention of the uninitiated away from the sacra.[2] It is probable that the author of this work sought to give expression both to the ideally protective stance of the ancestors toward the living and to their role in discouraging unauthorized access to their precious material remains.

The manner in which the horn is grasped in the proper right hand and the arms held to the sides parallel to the torso affords the figure an added degree of vigor and immediacy. This enhanced formal dynamism is also apparent in the parallel ridges of hair that project around the sides and back of the head. The deep exposed circular cavities of the eyes may originally have been the site of relics embedded in the sculpture. It is likely that they were once covered with brass disks that are now missing along with other metal appliqués.

This work was one of three African sculptures, including a Fang head (cat. no. 41), prominently on view in the New York apartment of Louise and Walter Arensberg between 1914 and 1921. A photograph records their display on the mantel along with early-twentieth-century works by Georges Braque, Charles Sheeler, Henri Matisse, Marcel Duchamp, and Henri Rousseau (fig. 57).

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 253.
2. Tessmann 1991–92, p. 285.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris; The Walter and Louise Arensberg Collection, New York and Los Angeles

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935.

PUBLISHED
Einstein 1915, p. 39; Evans 1935, WE 310, 311; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 361; Clifford 1954, introduction, n.p.; Robbins 1966, p. 178, fig. 230; Perrois 1972, p. 177; Florence 1989, p. 15.



8. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Horn

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon
19th century
Wood, brass, pigment, relics
H. 22 13/16 in. (58 cm)
W. and U. Horstmann Collection

Acquired from Georg Zenker in 1897, this work was deaccessioned from Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde in 1929 and sold to the German antiquarian Arthur Speyer Jr. It appears on the inventory list that Zenker provided to accompany works sent in his first shipment to the museum, which also included the "*Ngule malang*" ensemble (cat. no. 4). In a 1928 photograph, the relics inserted into the eye sockets are covered with metal appliqué. That image additionally records the spiral-grooved summit of the horn receptacle, now missing above the proper left hand.

This figure's prominent oblong mouth and rectangular beard echo those of catalogue numbers 6 and 7. It is especially distinctive, however, for its radical compression of the lower body in relation to the elongated torso. The upper section of the torso is framed by the configuration of the arms. Transitions from shoulder to upper arms and forearms are gradually delimited before they meet in the unifying gesture of the superimposed hands. At the base, a horizontal shelf that integrates the buttocks and thighs and terminates in pointed angular knees is supported by squat abbreviated calves. This treatment of the lower body suggests a severe foreshortening that factors into account the view of the figure when it was seated along the rim of its original receptacle. Directly above, the navel projects as a prominent cylinder encased in brass.

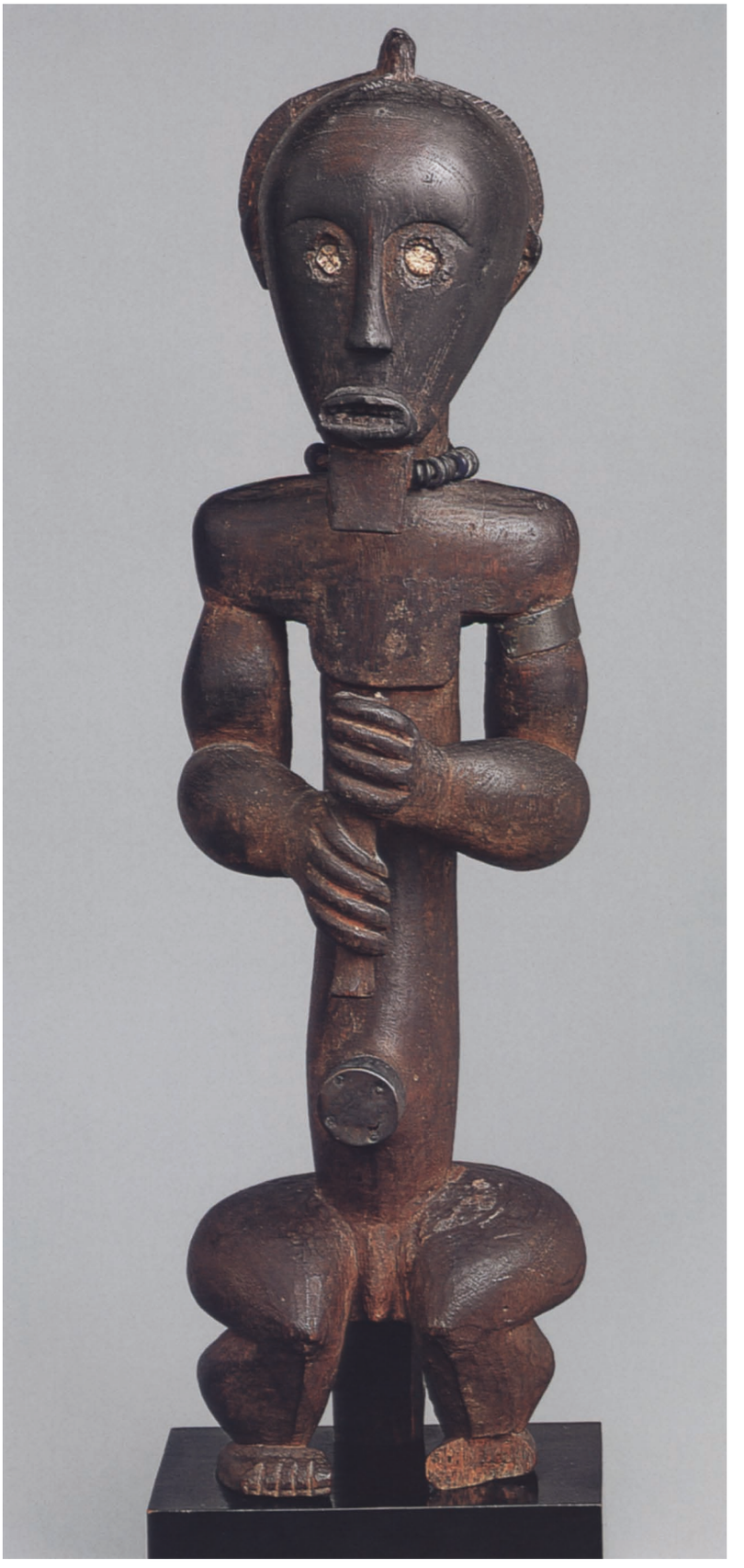
Günter Tessmann had observed that in contrast to the preciously guarded vessels of ancestral relics, their accompanying sculptural artifacts were more readily traded to outsiders. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, James Fernandez found that the Fang had come to place increased value on the sculptures.[1] This may have reflected the fact that in order to protect against missionary or administrative expropriation of sacred relics, pieces of crania were introduced into the ancestor figures.[2] Here, for example, the body is crowned by a pear-shaped head whose focal points are the exposed relics embedded into the eye cavities. On the reverse side, a sagittal crest projects as a ridge from the crown of the head to the nape of the neck. The shoulder blades and spine are lightly inscribed and the vertical plinth extends from the base of the lower body. Throughout, a reddish pigment appears as a highlight in the interstices.

1. Fernandez 1966, p. 55.
2. Fernandez 1982, p. 266.

EX COLL.
Georg Zenker, Leipzig, 1897; Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (III C 6691); Arthur Speyer Jr., Berlin, 1929; Charles Ratton, Paris; James Johnson and Laura Sweeney, New York

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Exhibition of African Art," Oberlin College, Oberlin, February 6–March 6, 1956; "African Sculpture Lent by New York Collectors," Museum of Primitive Art, New York, Summer 1958; "Close Up: Lessons in the Art of Seeing African Sculpture from an American Collection and the Horstmann Collection," The Center for African Art, New York, September 12, 1990–March 11, 1991; "Meisterwerke afrikanischer Plastik aus Schweizer Privatbesitz," Kunsthaus Zug, June 9–September 3, 1995.

PUBLISHED
Einstein 1915, no. 40; Mansfeld 1928, p. 143, fig. 181; Pijoán 1931, p. 175, fig. 238; Evans 1935, WE 260; New York 1935, p. 44, no. 322; Radin and Sweeney 1952, pl. 68; Oberlin 1956, pl. 53; New York 1958, no. 45; Perrois 1972, p. 65; Perrois 1973, p. 24; Sotheby's 1986, lot 51; New York 1990–91, no. 13; Paris 1991–92, p. 137; De Grunne 1994, p. 53, fig. 15; Zug 1995, no. 3; Bassani, Bockemühl, and McNaughton 2002, p. 114.



9. Figures from a Reliquary Ensemble: Couple

Fang peoples, Ngumba or Okak group; southern Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea
19th century
Wood, brass, relics, organic matter, glass, beads
H., male figure, 26½ in. (67.3 cm); female figure, 21½ in. (54.6 cm)
Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University, Museum Purchase, Huntington Frothingham Wolcott Fund, 1930 30-2-50/B4973, 30-2-50/B4974

This idealized couple is remarkable for its sculptural beauty and its status as one of the rare surviving pairs of male and female Fang reliquary sculptures. The works appear to be in a fragmentary state and were originally full figures. Collected by the American Presbyterian missionary George Schwab in 1930, they provide a unique insight into how men and women were conceived of as complementary opposites, with equal social standing, in Fang society.

The principal distinction between these monumental representations, otherwise closely parallel in form, is the miniature being held horizontally in front of the male figure. The manner in which he handles it, grasping its head in his proper right hand, suggests that it is not an infant or child but a metaphor for the progeny of a lineage. At the same time, the Fang believed that their offspring were recreations of their direct ancestors. James Fernandez notes that this was reflected in a father's addressing of his infant son as *ate,* the familiar form of "father."[1] Among the primary responsibilities of the ancestor cult was maintenance of the kin group's fertility. Fernandez suggests that this strong association between ancestors and infants is in fact given visual expression in the *byeri* sculptural representations, which combine features of idealized maturity with proportions similar to those of infants.[2] The male's gesture also evokes the manner in which the Fang handled their ancestral relics during *byeri* rites. Fernandez states that on those occasions, the crania were looked upon with an almost paternal indulgence by the elders, who cared for them and took them up in their arms to rock and sing to them.[3]

Subtle physiognomic contrasts further distinguish the male from his female counterpart. The male figure's flat beard projects vertically from the base of his chin. He is slightly taller and more slender, with articulated pectorals and a longer neck, torso, and arms. The female is more robust. Her comparatively muscular upper body suggests greater physical power. Strong shoulders frame the full conical breasts that project from her chest, and the clearly delineated transitions from upper arms to forearms culminate in clenched empty hands.

The intense expressions of both figures suggest a state of heightened awareness. Their eye sockets are deeply gouged cavities with raised ridges. While the male's eyes are somewhat oblong and filled with pieces of glass, the female's are circular with metal pupils. Their wide-open mouths expose filed teeth—and in the case of the male, a tongue—imbuing them with animation.

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 254.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 254–55.

EX COLL.
George Schwab, Philadelphia, 1930

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Sculpture: A Loan Exhibition," M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, September 24–November 19, 1948; "Masterpieces of African Art," Brooklyn Museum, October 21, 1954–January 2, 1955; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001.

PUBLISHED
San Francisco 1948, figs. 65, 66; Brooklyn 1954–55, fig. 205 (female figure only); Robbins 1966, figs. 224, 225; Delange 1967, fig. 106 (female figure only); Perrois 1972, pp. 360–61; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 420, figs. 561, 562; Paris 1991–92, pp. 12–13; Thompson 1993, p. 11, pl. 6 (female figure only); London 1995–96, p. 322; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 552, figs. 301, 302; Paris 2000–2001, p. 242; Perrois 2006, p. 130, pl. 20 (male figure only).



10. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female Supporting Figure on Shoulders

Fang peoples, Ngumba group; southern Cameroon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 21 15/16 in. (55.8 cm)
Private collection

The iconography of this work—a full-scale female carrying a miniature figure on her shoulders—is utterly unique within the corpus of Fang sculpture. On stylistic grounds, judging by the relatively elongated and slender treatment of the torso, Louis Perrois has attributed it to the Ngumba of southern Cameroon.[1] The female subject is somewhat asexual except for the gentle curve of her conical breasts. Her eyes are accented with brass sheeting cut into circular units and attached to the surface. Another dominant facial feature is the open mouth, which takes the form of an abstract rectilinear orifice directly above the rounded chin. The bold clarity of these features is also applied to the careful and exacting manner in which the limbs are rendered—the rounded shoulders, upper arms, and forearms are depicted as contiguous but distinct entities, as are the thighs, calves, and feet. Bursting with autonomous energy, these independent masses are gracefully integrated into the overall composition. The contours are a symphony of harmonious curves: the sloping breasts and thighs echo one another, as do the sweeping lines of the superimposed coiffures. The main protagonist holds the calves and feet of the figure seated on her shoulders. Despite the secondary figure's reduced scale, it is depicted with a similar fully developed physiognomy. It grasps the sides of the main figure's coiffure and faces forward with an intense stare in the same direction, so that the two heads are superimposed.

Within northern Fang patrilineages, the "house," or *ndebot,* is the crucial grouping with which individuals identify. The cohesion of the *ndebot* derives from its uterine origin and traces its key parentage to the woman out of whose womb it was born.[2] Through this frame of reference, strangers could confer and potentially arrive at a common ancestry, a discovery that was expressed in sayings such as "We are of common birth" or "We are of one stomach."[3] The subject of this representation may be the female ancestor who is associated with the origins of the *ndebot* that owned the work and whose members are the offspring of her womb.

The Fang's participation in a massive northeast-to-southwest migration of peoples across present-day southern Cameroon, Rio Muni, Gabon, and the northeastern portion of Congo-Brazzaville profoundly informed their cultural identity. Jan Vansina has emphasized that movement in the region occurred in several waves: the first of these took place in the fourteenth or fifteenth century and was followed by a series of others that began after 1830.[4] *Nkande* is the Fang term for an accurate accounting of events witnessed.[5] The *nkande* of Fang origins relates their formidable passage from savanna to rainforest, where they experienced a new beginning. This depiction of an ancestor carrying a diminutive figure might be interpreted as an allusion to a family's forebears who carried their progeny to the site of their current residence.

1. London 1995–96, p. 321.
2. Fernandez 1982, pp. 89, 90, 95.
3. Ibid., p. 76.
4. Vansina 1990, pp. 136–37.
5. Fernandez 1982, p. 53.

EX COLL.
Georges de Miré Collection, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africain et d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Genesis: Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, November 19, 2002–April 13, 2003.

PUBLISHED
Einstein 1930, p. 104, no. 1, fig. 1; Paris 1930, no. 174 (not illustrated); Paris 1991–92, p. 136; London 1995–96, p. 321, fig. 4.93; New York 2002–3, p. 69, fig. 30.



11. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Female

Fang peoples, Mabea group; southern Cameroon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, relics, metal
H. 26½ in. (67.3 cm)
Robert T. Wall Family

Ownership of this work has been traced to the influential French art critic and dealer Félix Fénéon. In 1919 Fénéon began adding a considerable body of African sculpture to his collection of works by artists such as André Derain, Georges Braque, Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Camille Pissarro, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, and Pierre Bonnard. In addition to his passionate pursuit of African masterpieces, Fénéon is noted for having played an important role in elucidating the historical significance of Neo-Impressionism, distinguishing it from Impressionism and emphasizing its espousal of scientific determinism. In his art criticism from 1883 through 1896, he considered works of art independent of their subjects and strove to analyze and describe their material qualities.[1]

The poised and alert stance of this figure is complemented by her intense penetrating gaze. Her riveting eyes are defined by applied stippled metal disks that encircle exposed passages of wood. Their intensity is accentuated by the raised curved ridges of the brows, which extend from the bridge of the nose to the temples. The face is oval with a convex forehead, prominent ears that extend out at the sides, and a broad open mouth. Among the plethora of details rendered are cartilage within the ears, raised lips, sharply filed teeth, and the tongue. Crowning the head is a broad band that follows the contours of the forehead and is bisected at the center by a raised vertical striated crest.

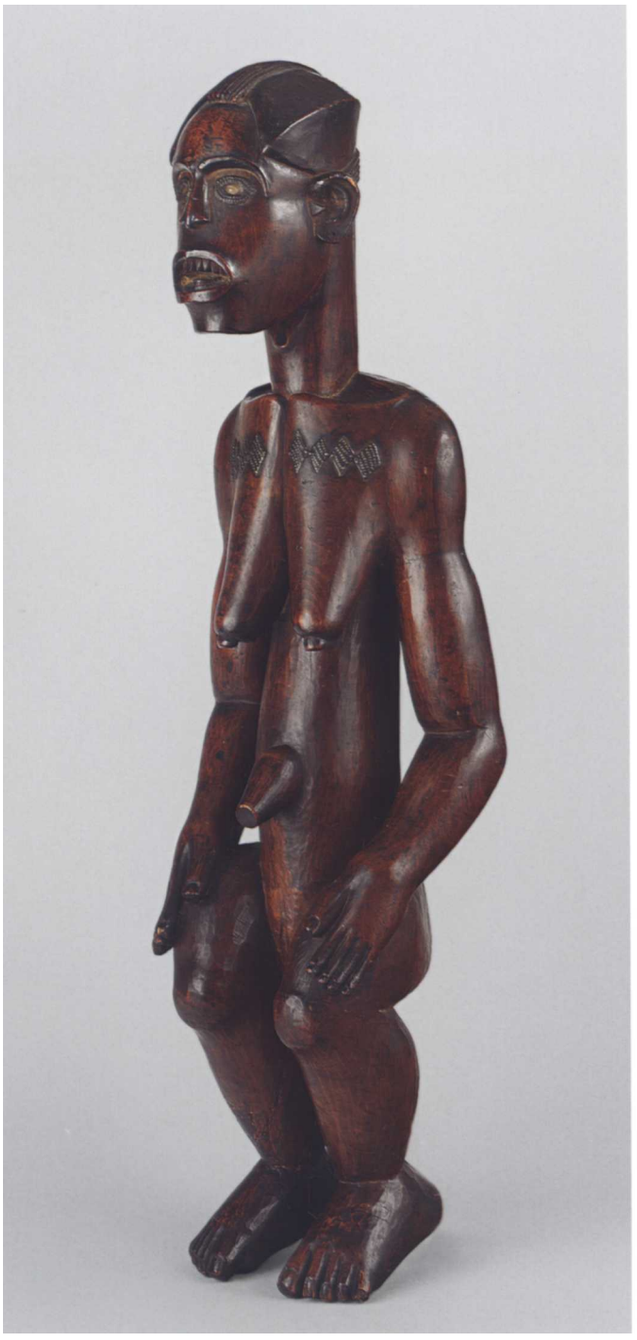
Directly below the ridge of the collarbone and above each breast is a band of stippled metal appliqué in the form of four lozenges. The long pendent conical breasts terminate in nipples. Their form is echoed by the dramatic navel that projects down from the center of the slender torso. Care has also been invested in rendering the long fingers and nails of the hands, which are placed on the thighs just above slightly bent knees. In back, the ridges of the shoulder blades are apparent, as well as a long vertical split that extends the length of the proper right shoulder and is repaired with metal staples. The work's appearance in profile is radically different from the frontal view. From the side, the elongation of the torso, neck, and arms, along with the body's response to the forces of gravity, is apparent.

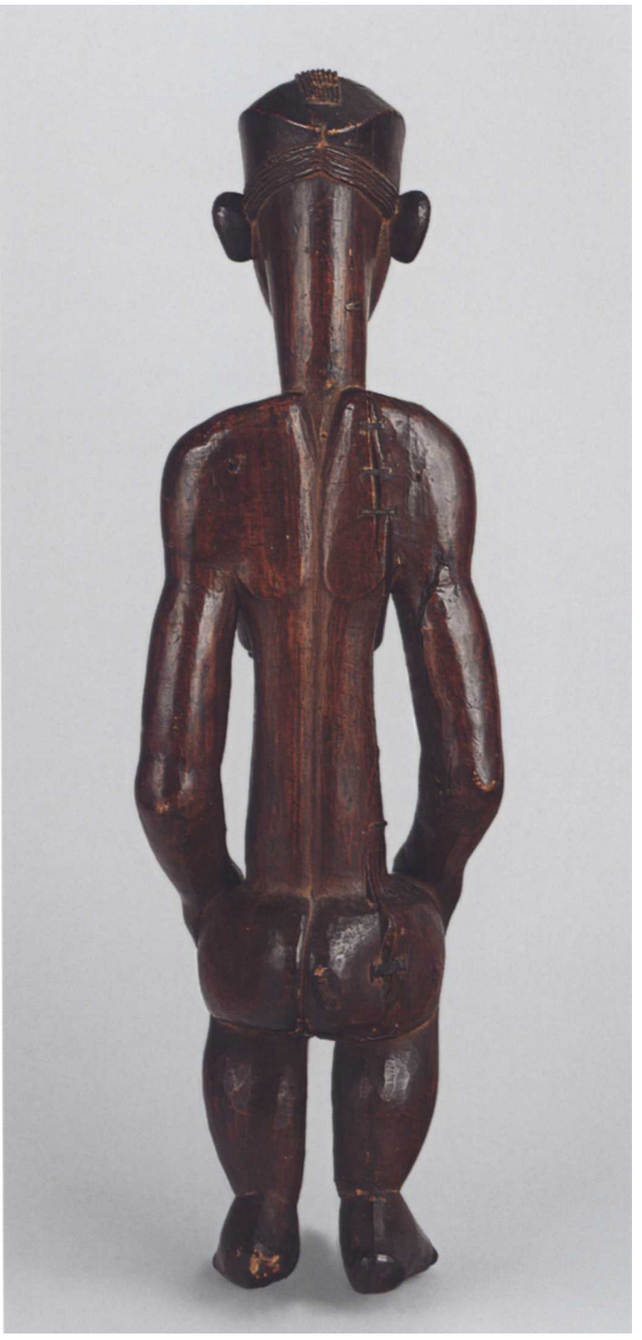
1. Rapetti 2005.

EX COLL.
Félix Fénéon, Paris; Jacques Kerchache, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Les arts anciens de l'Afrique noire," Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1930; "La sculpture des Noirs de l'Afrique," Théâtre Édouard VII, Paris, 1936.

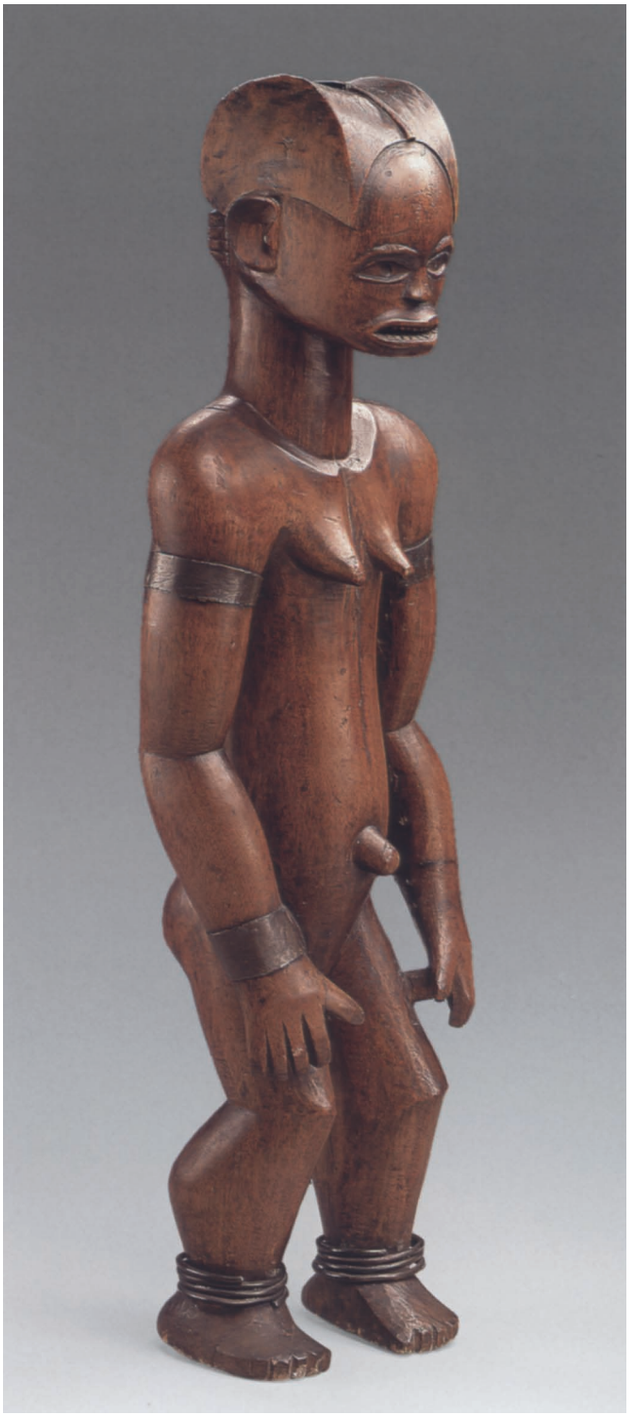
PUBLISHED
Drouot 1947, lot 63; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, cover and p. 229, fig. 141; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 401; Bethenod 2003, p. 63.





12. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Female

Fang peoples, Mabea group; southern Cameroon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 27⁹⁄₁₆ in. (70 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-5



On the basis of their shared naturalistic style, this work and the previous female figure (cat. no. 11) have been attributed to the Mabea, a Fang subgroup that settled along the coast of southern Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.[1] This figure's lyrical elegance is achieved through a restrained insistence on curvaceous forms.

A crescendo effect is gently set in motion at the summit with pronounced lateral arcs created by a caplike helmet that crowns the head. While the ears project boldly at the sides, delicate features are finely but densely inscribed in the lower half of the face. The narrow ellipses of the eyes are punctuated by incised circular pupils with lightly incised arcs for the brows above. The mouth, framed by fine lips, is slightly open with exposed teeth. Petite angular breasts curve outward, high above the undulation of the convex stomach, which is extended by the accent of the pronounced navel. At either side, the segmented contours of the long arms reiterate the understated curvatures of the torso, with hands positioned above the thighs. Not visible from a frontal view is the fact that the hands are not completely separated from the body: a block of wood connects them to the thighs as a structural precaution. At the base of this formally animated figure, the knees are slightly bent and positioned so that the proper left leg is slightly forward, suggesting a contrapposto stance. The straight edges of the thighs and calves create a dynamic contrast with the curvilinear upper body.

1. Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 213.

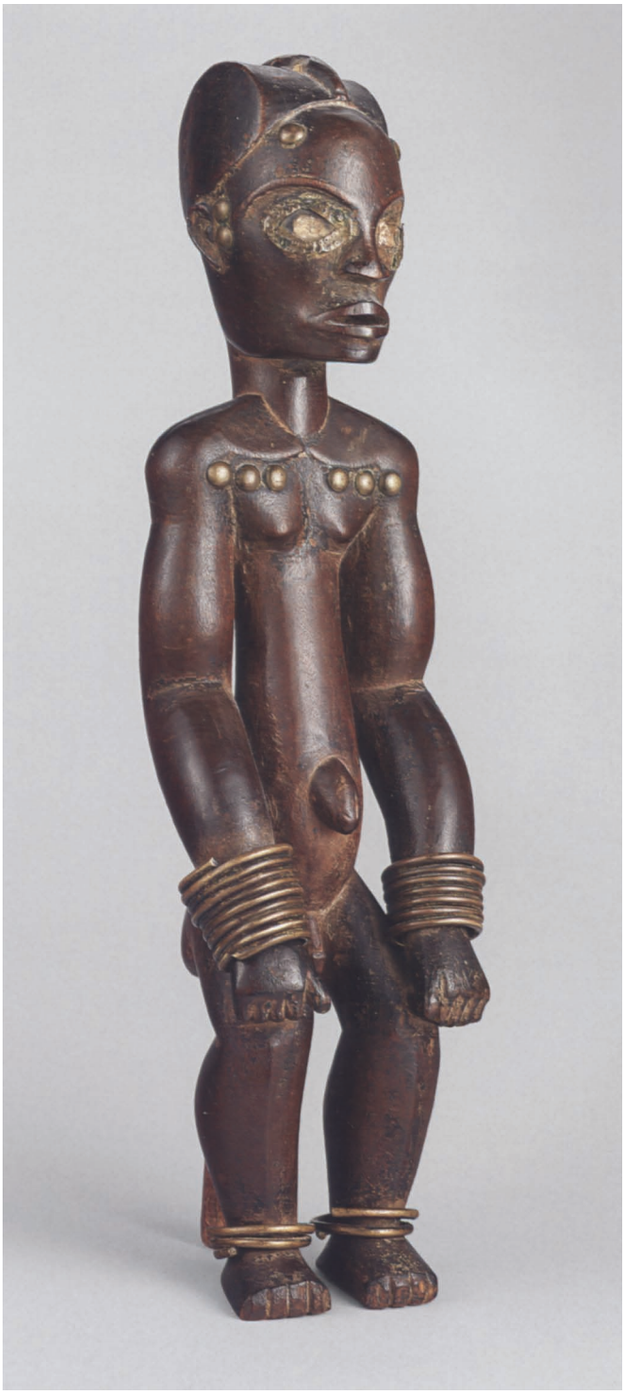
EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris, 1939; Josef Mueller, Solothurn, Switzerland

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêstres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992; Geneva 2007.

PUBLISHED
Geneva 1978, cover and p. 109; Solothurn 1981, p. 97; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 213; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 202, no. 119; Paris 1991–92, p. 130; Marseille 1992a, pp. 71, 110; Geneva 1994, p. 19, fig. 14; Visonà 2001, p. 357; Geneva 2007, pp. 188–89, 389.

13. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male

Fang peoples, Mabea group; southern Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea
19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, glass, brass, relics
H. 16¼ in. (41.3 cm)
The Kronos Collections



Despite the refined treatment of this intimately scaled figure, he is a formidable and imposing presence. His perfectly proportioned physiognomy is at once subtly sleek and vigorous in its definition. Sensitive details such as the lightly raised contours of the collarbone and triangular breasts are integrated with the undulating extensions of the arms and the bold metallic accents. The latter include applied brass tacks at the temples and across the chest as well as copper wire bangles around the wrists and ankles. The weight of the body appears concentrated in the flexed knees, where the hands are positioned. The fullness of the figure's frontal appearance contrasts with the relative flatness of the back.

Especially striking is the commanding gaze, which is informed by additions to the eyes and cut metal disks enclosing these passages. This effect, augmented by the poised posture, heightens the figure's "alert repose," a quality that James Fernandez notes was sought in Fang representations.[1] In an earlier photograph of this work, loss of matter in the proper left eye revealed the depth of the cavity. This feature was intended to conceal ancestral relics, in this case apparently teeth. While this added sacra was inserted deep within the work, it also remained visible on an immediate level. Its presence at the visual focal point of the figure was critical in informing the work's aesthetic impact. This dialectic rings true with what Günter Tessmann suggests was the intention of such works—to serve as signs that something incomprehensible and untouchable was held within.[2]

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 742.
2. Ibid.

EX COLL.
Philippe Guimiot, Wijnegemhof and Brussels, Belgium; Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm, New Jersey

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Arts d'Afrique noire 1973; Perrois 1979, p. 63, fig. 36; Paris 1991–92, p. 137.

14. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female

Fang peoples, Ntumu group; Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, brass, oil
H. 14 15/16 in. (38 cm)
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm

The lyrical form of this female figure is distinctive for the fluidity with which its author has bridged bodily transitions. Despite the delicacy of its petite scale, its design is powerfully compact. So various is its appearance from different vantage points that it demands to be viewed in the round.

From a frontal perspective the composition seems somewhat two-dimensional except for the volumes of the breasts, which extend down and curve outward from the chest. The round face is juxtaposed with a broad neck encircled by a collar consisting of two brass rings. The eyes are also brass additions of applied disks punctuated by tacks as pupils. The shoulders extend out to create a rectilinear configuration. Parallel to the torso, the arms bend slightly at the elbow and terminate in hands that grasp bent knees. This gesture creates a continuous undulating line that extends from each shoulder to the feet. Negative space between the torso and arms as well as the legs is unusually pronounced.

In profile, the angles of the elbows provide a strong counterpoint to the sloping outward curve of the breasts. The volume of the lower body also becomes apparent as a tightly compressed horizontal extension from the buttocks to the knees. These intersect with the powerful robust calves at a forty-five-degree angle. When the work is seen from the back, its rectilinear character is most apparent. Successive parallel horizontal lines, created by the ridge of the coiffure, shoulders, and buttocks, intersect with the vertical lines of the coiffure's sagittal crest, neck, torso, upper arms, and calves. Holes have been drilled into the coiffure for attachments at the summit of the raised crest as well as in the broad curved horizontal ridge that projects from the back. The chocolate brown matte finish is slightly darker on the face, apparently an area where oil has been absorbed.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Three African Traditions: The Art of the Dogon, Fang and Songye," Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut, January 31–April 18, 1999.

PUBLISHED
Basler 1929, p. 42, fig. b; Perrois 1972, p. 209; Greenwich 1999, p. 23, no. 31.





15. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male

Fang peoples, Ntumu group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 31½ in. (80 cm)
Private collection

This attenuated regal figure asserts a stately and commanding presence. At the summit, the teardrop configuration of the head is juxtaposed against the broad elongated neck encircled by three brass rings. The breadth of the figure's profile is further expanded by the graceful undulating curve of the coiffure down the back of the neck. The forehead is full and rounded, and incised arcs form the eyebrows and mouth. The raised brow is continuous with the narrow ridge of the nose and bisects the recessed ocular depressions. There is light abrasion to the base of the chin.

The neck and the torso constitute an especially long continuous cylinder that broadens at the stomach. Below the base of the neck, the shoulders project forward and extend outward. The arms are held at the sides, elbows slightly bent, with slivers of negative space on either side of the torso. Given the concentration of extensive abrasion across the surface of the hands and forearms, it seems clear that this wear was deliberate and arose from ritual handling. The proportionately diminutive legs are segmented into buttock/thighs, calves, and feet. The radical condensing of the lower half of the body may reflect an attempt to foreshorten this passage.

The plinth designed to affix the figure to its receptacle bisects the buttocks and legs. James Fernandez has advanced the theory that Ntumu sculptors represented the avant-garde among Fang artists and were responsible for generating the most significant departures in figurative representation.[1] As the Ntumu were the last of the Fang subgroups to migrate, he theorizes that their relative stability was most conducive to artistic changes, affording them the opportunity to initiate innovative approaches to the sculptural forms designed to accompany reliquaries.[2] Fernandez also proposes that the extreme linearity of the bodies of Ntumu figures such as this, with their minimal appendages, derives from the adaptation of the vertical shafts that emanated from earlier freestanding heads.

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 741.
2. Ibid., pp. 738–39, 740.

EX COLL.
Sir Jacob Epstein, London; Rosemary and George Lois, New York; Morris J. Pinto, New York

EXHIBITED
"The Epstein Collection of Tribal and Exotic Sculpture," The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1960; "Arts primitifs dans les ateliers d'artistes," Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1967; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêstres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992.

PUBLISHED
London 1960, n.p., no. 2 (not illustrated); Paris 1967, p. 63; Perrois 1972, p. 201; Bassani and McLeod 1989, p. 113; Florence 1989, p. 19; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 333, fig. 864; Marseille 1992a, p. 142; De Grunne 1994, p. 49, fig. 6.



16. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male

Fang peoples, Ntumu group; Gabon, Woleu-Ntem region
19th–early 20th century
Wood, oil
H. 21¼ in. (54 cm)
Private collection

This ethereal figure is anchored at the summit and base by a head and lower body that delimit a slender willowy torso and neck. Beyond structural features such as the pear-shaped forehead, nose with flared nostrils, horizontal mouth, and strong chin, the facial expression is inscrutable. The narrow polelike torso with carefully articulated pectorals is flanked by the arms at the sides, hands held to the abdomen. The stance allows for a passage of negative space between the trunk and arms. The coiffure, apparently windblown, projects beyond the neck, curves out over the back of the head, and slopes down and out. A pair of sagittal ridges covered with incised herringbone patterning accentuates its curve. At the base, the legs hang downward. Originally they would have been suspended over the rim of the relic receptacle. While there is a quality of rigidity to the upper half of the figure, the transitions of this passage are notable for their fluidity. A great deal of residual ritually applied oil is visible across the entire surface of the work.

This work was in the collection of the artist René Mendès-France. Born in Paris in 1888, Mendès-France comments upon his exposure to African art, including many of the works featured in this exhibition: "In 1923, at the Percier Gallery, with which I collaborated, I was in especially close touch with many artists, connoisseurs, and dealers; certain among them were interested in and already collected fetishes and *art nègre* objects: Picasso, Lhote, Miré, Tzara, Breton, André Level, Henri Clouzot, André Lefèvre, Alfred Richet, Dr. Girardin, and Paul Guillaume among others."[1]

Mendès-France admired African sculptors as gifted individuals whose accomplishments enriched the art of his time: "Without ever having gone to black Africa, through their moving works and that which I've been able to read or see of the lives of these peoples, I'm very interested in them, in their customs, in their existence, which often, alas, must be very difficult. Of course I'd like to know certain of the authors of these objects, as I would have liked to have known Michelangelo, Vinci, Ingres, etc."[2] In musing about the attraction such creations held for him, Mendès-France underscored their affinity with his own work as well as the spiritual inspiration their authors shared with artists of the Middle Ages: "Their aesthetic discoveries that renew themselves across a ritual tradition . . . make me think of the sculptors of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries whose religious emotion appears to be close to an occult magic, suggested by the black idols. In these two poles of the art and its religiosity we find the emotion, the humility, the mystique resulting from the state of grace of the white and black sculptors."[3]

1. Paris 1967, Mendès entry, n.p. (my translation).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

EX COLL.
René Mendès-France, Paris; Patricia Ann Withofs, London and Sydney

EXHIBITED
"Arts primitifs dans les ateliers d'artistes," Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1967.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1967, p. 60; Perrois 1972, p. 223.



17. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male

Fang peoples, northern Ntumu group; southern Cameroon or Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood
H. 27⅝ in. (69.8 cm)
Private collection

In this delightfully willowy creation, the narrow elongation of Ntumu figuration has been taken to a radical extreme. The body has been distilled to a vertical axis with limbs that gracefully extend horizontally outward as a pair of superimposed arcs. In the upper one of these arcs, the curve of the shoulders extends down as arms that parallel the torso. At the base, the legs are depicted as a continuous curvature that extends from one foot to the other. The classically defined passage of the face as a concave heart-shaped configuration interrupted by a raised nose is also especially minimal in its descriptive detail. The exposed plinth, which would have been inserted within the relic container, is continuous with the torso, extending it beyond the outward flourish of the legs. Divorced from the original receptacle upon which it was to be seated, the isolated figure now seems to be leaping. For this reason, one of its earliest owners in the West, the American painter and theorist John Graham, christened it the Dancing Pahouin.

A member of the earliest generation of American connoisseurs of African art, Graham organized the pioneering "Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations" in 1936 at the Jacques Seligmann Gallery in New York. In doing so, he sought to stimulate interest in the formal qualities of African sculpture and to develop a system for aesthetically relating individual works to distinct regional traditions as well as to the broader history of art. Among the various artistic centers that he highlights is the "Pahouin Civilization," or Fang culture, which he defines as "an art justly called classical. Its abstractions are the result of profound and final argumentation."[1] Graham features this Fang work from his own collection as an exceptional masterpiece and identifies it as: "Finest figure of this type. Rarissime. Exhibited for the First Time."[2]

1. New York 1936, p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 4.

EX COLL.
John D. Graham, New York; Frank Crowninshield, New York, 1936; Julius Carlebach, New York; Harry and Frieda Schaeffer, New York, 1989; Jack Passer, New York

EXHIBITED
"Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations," Jacques Seligmann Gallery, New York, January 4–22, 1936; "African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," Brooklyn Museum, March 20–April 25, 1937; "The Language of African Art," Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Fine Arts and Portrait Gallery Building, Washington, D.C., May 24–September 7, 1970.

PUBLISHED
New York 1936, p. 5; Brooklyn 1937, no. 83 (not illustrated); Perrois 1972, p. 192; Segy 1975, p. 217, fig. 280; Robbins and Nooter 1989, fig. 863; Washington, D.C. 1970, no. 341, ill., n.p.



18. Ancestral Sculpture: Articulated Male Figure (*Niămōdo*)

Fang peoples, Ntumu group; Equatorial Guinea, Rio Muni region
19th century
Wood, brass, fiber, feathers
H. 37⅞ in. (95 cm)
Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck T 13 (70.13:3)

This arresting work, impressive for its scale and unusual marionette-like appendages, was collected by Günter Tessmann in Equatorial Guinea. Its articulated limbs complement the animated performative role that Tessmann ascribed to figurative sculpture in Fang ancestral veneration. Against the blond tone of the wood, the crowning cluster of feathers at the summit is an even more vibrant accent. The expression of the round face is at once dazed and startled. Two metal disks are added to the surface of the ocular recesses. A raffia beard is attached through perforations at either corner of the mouth and at the lower lip. There is a raffia collar around the neck as well as extensions to the tresses at either side of the head. At the summit of the torso, raffia fiber binds the arms, which are suspended at either side. The figure's lower body features prominent genitals and attached diminutive legs at the base.

Tessmann's commentary suggests that such works may constitute a distinctive genre of ancestral representation: "The large figures associated with celebrations for the ancestors are striking exceptions among the ordinary ancestral figures which are carved out of a single piece of wood. These large figures have attached arms which are slightly movable, legs, and sex organs."[1] He further implies not only that figures in this distinctive style were never intended to be affixed to a reliquary but also that they may have performed a complementary and separate role: "The most modern of all forms according to the Pahouins is the independent wood statue separated from the barrel; generally its scale is larger (as much as a meter high) and it is called *niămōdo*. This sculpture remains hidden from the eyes of women."[2] In recounting the closing sequence of a ceremony he attended, Tessmann implies that a single autonomous *niămōdo* was contrasted with multiple detached reliquary sculptures. He observes that an elder "called Niamodo; the little figurines seemed to take this sign very badly, because they displayed a great agitation throughout the discourse and even threw little pieces of wood at the orator, clearly manifesting their unhappiness. As the appearance of Niamodo indicates that the celebration is coming to an end, it was doubtless, according to what was told, the cause of the unhappiness of the little ones."[3]

1. Tessmann 1959, 310 E-5 [1904–1909] 1913 FH9 Fang FH9.
2. Tessmann 1991–92, pp. 285–86.
3. Ibid., p. 287.

EX COLL.
Günter Tessmann, Lübeck, brought back from Rio Muni, 1909

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1991–92, pp. 54–55; Tessmann 1991–92, p. 287, fig. 45; Perrois 2006, p. 131, pl. 31.



19. Figurine from a Reliquary Ensemble with Attachments

Fang peoples, Okak group; Equatorial Guinea, Rio Muni region
19th century
Wood, brass, copper nail, glass beads, tanned skin, rope, animal teeth, antelope horn, bell, animal crania, molar
H. 10⅝ in. (27 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)



This miniature figurine is striking for the profusion of different attachments that engulf it. Despite its small scale, these bristling additions radically inform its dramatic visual impact. In this work the body appears shielded by a rich array of potent matter drawn from nature. Such elements, which were potentially critical to the spiritual efficacy of Fang sculpture, may have been stripped from most of the other surviving works. The figure's upper body is obscured by layers of necklaces composed of long narrow animal teeth alternating with glass beads, antelope horns, and a brass bell. The round face is devoid of details beyond the boldly projecting eyes, made of brass tacks, and the lightly eroded mouth and nose. The same tacks also demarcate the hairline, extending in a transverse row from one side of the head to the other and as two raised sagittal crests at the crown. The arms, held at the sides, meet through joined hands in front of the abdomen. Brass-wire bands encircle the upper arms and the slightly bent elbows. The lower body is encased in an animal hide secured at intervals with cord. A chain extending from the waistband anchors the figure to an animal relic whose eye sockets are filled with a copper nail and a tooth.

Collected in Equatorial Guinea, this work was brought back to Barcelona about 1915 by the Misioneros del Corazón de María. It resided there until the French collector André Fourquet acquired it in 1967.

EX COLL.
Mission des Frères Claretins de Barcelone (Misioneros del Corazón de María, Barcelona), ca. 1915; André Fourquet, Paris, 1967

EXHIBITED
"Culturas primitivas de la Juineo Ecuatorial," Museu Arqueologico, Barcelona, December 1965–January 1966; "Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971; "The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987.

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1973, p. 42, fig. w; Perrois 1979, p. 84, fig. 73; Paris 1986–87, p. 27, fig. 27; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 558, fig. 974.

20. Ancestral Sculpture: Standing Female

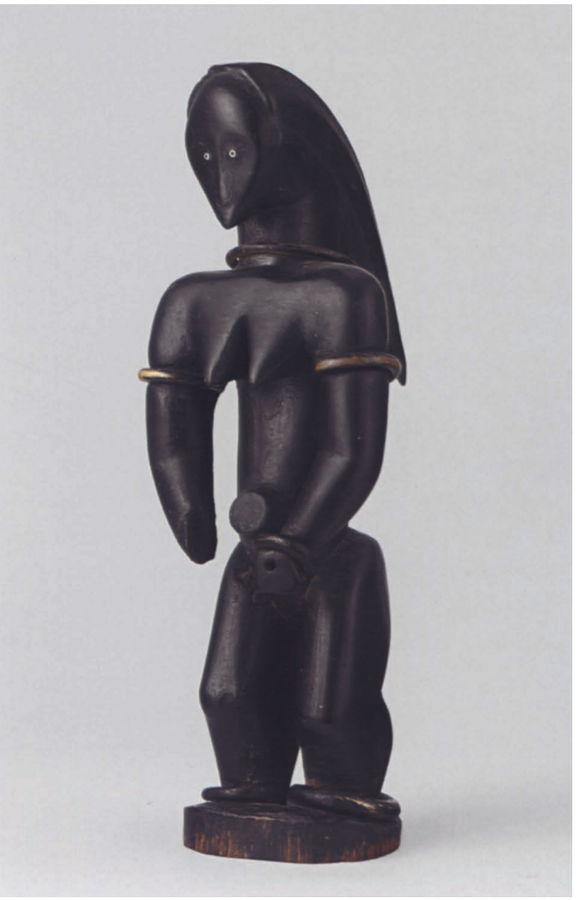
Fang peoples, Okak group (?); Equatorial Guinea
19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, glass beads
H. 10⅞ in. (26.5 cm)
Private collection

Despite its petite scale, this work is able to embrace the qualities of composed power and vitality inherent in the most monumental Fang creations. While a frontal view presents a highly controlled composition, in profile the dramatic arc of the coiffure, extending far beyond the figure's physical boundaries, is astonishing.

Two tiny white seed beads embedded in the face jump out as eyes against the lustrous dark brown surface of the wood. Above, the rounded forehead contrasts dramatically with the sharply pointed triangular lower half of the face, a configuration echoed by those of the breasts, which project down from the chest. The body is highly compact, with squared shoulders depicted as a continuous line from which strong arms extend down vertically, so that they flank the torso. Copper bangles have been added to the neck, upper arms, and proper left wrist. A profile view underscores the form's solidity and expansiveness. From this vantage point, given the breadth of the neck, torso, thighs, and calves, its appearance is more massive. The single tress of hair projects as a continuous curve that tapers radically to a narrow point. While the hands are now missing, a closely related female figure formerly owned by Charles Ratton, now in the collection of the Musée Dapper, Paris, holds a staff horizontally in hands joined in front of the torso.[1]

In light of this figure's size and stance—slightly bent knees with minimal feet embedded in a circular base—it may have originally been the finial of a chief's staff,





comparable to an example published by Günter Tessmann in his Fang monograph.[2] Tessmann asserts that such representations were primarily of religious significance, and he places them in the same category as ancestral figures.[3] Regardless of whether this is the case, the formal parallels between the present work and related examples in the Dapper and Barnes collections are striking. The Barnes figure, of the same approximate size, is centered on a round base with a perforated rim.[4]

1. Paris 1991–92, p. 23.
2. Tessmann 1913, vol. 1, fig. 227.
3. Ibid., 310 E-5 [1904–1909] 1913 FH9 Fang FH9.
4. Paris 1991–92, p. 20.

PUBLISHED
Drouot 2001, lot 97.

21. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female

Fang peoples, Okak group; Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, Rio Muni region
19th century
Wood, brass, oil
H. 20 1/16 in. (51 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)

Despite the effects of wear that give this work a fragmentary appearance, the fact that it was created as a bust is evident from the interior channel that extends along the full length of the base of the torso. This was once used for the insertion of a rod that affixed the work to its receptacle. Suspended parallel to the central vertical axis of the torso are the heavily eroded arms. The figure's pronounced rounded convex forehead crowns the representation. A horizontal band of dots is incised across its center, its summit delimited by the sharp V of the hairline. The coiffure is subdivided into a series of sections within which individual strands of hair are delineated. These dense textured lines contrast with the otherwise smooth luminous surface. The face narrows precipitously at the jaw. While abrasion to the mouth and nose is apparent, the added circular metal disks of the eyes survive. A collar encircles the base of the long neck. The contours of the sloping shoulders and abdomen are gentle rounded curves that are repeated by the raised passages of the breasts. Despite the abrupt terminus of the abdomen and the weathered appearance of the arms, which extend no farther than the elbows, the representation suggests a being whose essential core is intact.

In their seminal 1929 treatise *La sculpture nègre primitive*, Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro propose this figure as one of the forty-three works of African sculpture that define the core principles of the continent's art. Their selection also includes the Metropolitan's Great Bieri head (cat. no. 45), which like the present work was drawn from Guillaume's own collection. None of the works featured is discussed in individual terms. The authors explain that their overarching text seeks to establish a foundation for appreciating a tradition whose fresh approach to representation was first recognized by artists seeking alternatives to the established canon of the Académie. They name the Fang, along with the Baule and Dan among others, as one of a select group responsible for Africa's most influential and accomplished sculptural traditions. In identifying this new canon, they note that neither exceptional sensibility nor organizational power is sufficient to achieve the aesthetic coherence embodied by these works from Côte d'Ivoire or Gabon. Instead they suggest that "one must add something mysterious that renders a work of art unique, personal, and attractive."[1]

1. Guillaume and Munro 1929, p. 81.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris; André Fourquet, Paris, 1965

EXHIBITED
"Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971.

PUBLISHED
Guillaume and Munro 1929, pl. 33; Sautier 1930; Drouot 1965, n.p., fig. 148; Perrois 1979, fig. 77.



22. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male

Fang peoples, Okak or Mekeny group; Gabon or Equatorial Guinea
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 27 9/16 in. (70 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 3132

In his autobiography the American expatriate sculptor Jacob Epstein comments on this figure, the centerpiece of his collection:

> In the De Miré Sale of 1932, a superb collection was dispersed at the Hôtel Drouot. This was undoubtedly the finest collection of African Art outside a museum, and the great standing figure from Gabun River equals anything that has come out of Africa. This piece, with its natural poise and striking head, is very remarkable. It has the astounding attitude of being held spellbound by sorcery. It still retains the metal discs used for eyes, bringing light into the dark head.[1]

More than half a century later, despite his lack of any nuanced awareness of its intended spiritual role, Epstein's estimation of this astonishing creation remains an incontrovertible assessment of its artistic importance.

Arguably, no other Fang reliquary sculpture is as awe-inspiring in its visual impact. The dense physical heft of the cylindrical torso and the strength of the supporting legs are unparalleled in their monumentality. The trunklike core is given little definition beyond the relatively miniscule raised pectorals at the extreme upper limits of the torso and the raised navel. Once cherished as a devotional object, this figure forcefully asserts the corporeality of the ancestral. This effect is countered by the relatively slender arms that extend out at the sides and end abruptly at the elbows. When seen from the side, the massive figure appears to lean precariously back, a posture that would have accommodated its integration with a receptacle. Evidence of this is apparent in a small hole on the underside of the buttocks, which would have allowed an inserted post to anchor it to its container. On the reverse side, passages of the buttocks are less polished in their finish and reveal signs of adze marks in an area that may have originally been obscured from view.

The figure gazes rapturously outward, its attention concentrated on something beyond us. The strong lower jaw is thrust forward, while the regal massive mane of the coiffure weighs down the back of the head. Details of the face distinguish it from other works in the Fang corpus. A band of light raised dots extends across the middle of the forehead, with a cluster concentrated in its center. The delicacy of this passage is dramatically contrasted with the enormous applied disks of the brass eyes. Seen in profile, the outline of the nose is a pronounced curve. The base of the chin is extended by a broad beard whose surface is stippled with the same raised dots that appear on the forehead. From a frontal view, only a raised transverse arc of the coiffure is apparent. Beyond the first two locks, which span from the crown of the head down either side, are four others that extend around to the back of the head in increasing lengths. Each of these is defined as an independent highly volumetric mass. A comparatively flat section covers the back of the head and terminates in a narrow pointed tip.

1. Epstein 1955, pp. 189–90.

EX COLL.
Georges de Miré, Paris; Sir Jacob Epstein, London; Carlo Monzino, Lugano

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africain et d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "The Epstein Collection of Tribal and Exotic Sculpture," The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1960; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "African Aesthetics: The Carlo Monzino Collection," The Center for African Art, New York, May 7–September 7, 1986; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Le grand héritage: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, May 21–September 15, 1992; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006– July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1930, p. 15, no. 172; Drouot 1931, p. 7, lot 46, pl. 5; Kjersmeier 1938, fig. 18; Fagg 1952, no. 15; Radin and Sweeney 1952, fig. 74; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 172; London 1960, n.p., fig. 5; Leiris and Delange 1967, pp. 9, 409, fig. 10; Pericot-Garcia, Galloway, and Lommel 1967, p. 168; Sweeney 1970, nos. 74–75; Perrois 1972, p. 283; Segy 1975, pp. 21, 220, fig. 13; Cork 1976, p. 457; Bassani 1984, p. 10; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 2, p. 437; New York 1986, pp. 130–32, no. 99; Bassani and McLeod 1989, pp. 39, 111; Florence 1989, pp. 19, 250, no. and pl. 75; Paris 1991–92, pp. 97–100; Paris 1992, p. 181; Paris 2000–2001, pp. 232–34; Perrois 2006, p. 129, pl. 16; Paris 2006–7b, pp. 114–15.



23. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female

Fang peoples, Okak group; Equatorial Guinea or Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, brass, oil
H. 25 3/16 in. (64 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.441)

This formidable female figure personifies controlled exuberance. Despite her contemplative expression, her being exudes vitality and boundless physical dynamism. The eyes are defined as deeply incised pupils within expansive recesses. These concave passages are echoed in the round at the summit of the forehead by the bold globular projections of the coiffure elements. This regal and original arrangement of hair is highly detailed. Several contiguous crests extend across the crown of the head and are gathered in a single vertical tress at the nape of the neck.

The Fang sculptor, who lucidly articulated this figure as a series of discrete component elements, integrated them masterfully into a seamless form to stunning effect. The pronounced ovoid volume of the head is abruptly juxtaposed with the broad columnar neck. At the outer corner of each eye a deep arc extends to the bridge of the nose. The nostrils are slightly flared, and the open mouth is cast as a broad oval. Especially alluring is the effect of the shimmering highlights that glance off the luminous midnight black wood, which is thoroughly saturated with oil. Another arresting visual accent is provided by the pendent oval breasts. These do not appear as sensuous elements but rather as overt attributes of power. Their formal definition complements the muscular curves of the physiognomy, so that they are echoed in the successively larger cylindrical units of the shoulders, upper arms, and forearms. The arms are bent at the elbows, hands held in front of the body in a pose suggesting arrested animation.

Positioned as freestanding with slightly flexed knees, the figure appears to shift her weight slightly to the proper right side. The fact that she was originally conceived as seated is apparent from the extreme abbreviation of the powerful thighs, when seen frontally, in contrast to the full forms of the elongated calves. On the reverse side the vertical channel of the spine extends the length of the back and intersects with the horizontal passage of the buttocks. The original patrons sought to repair a break to the proper left shoulder by affixing horizontal metal bands with five nails to the front and reverse side. Two brass rings appear around the neck as well as one around the proper left wrist and each ankle.

This work was owned successively by two members of the Western avant-garde, André Derain and Jacob Epstein. According to legend, Derain acquired his first work of African sculpture, a Fang mask, from his friend and close associate Maurice de Vlaminck. Around that time, he went to London and studied the ethnographic collections of the British Museum. That transforming experience led him to write Vlaminck of the "amazing, disquieting" impact of the works he encountered. Jack Flam has noted that despite this emotional response to African sculpture, Derain strove to grasp the key to its inherent formal logic.[1]

Flam has proposed that Vlaminck was principally drawn to and identified with African art's instinctive expressive qualities.[2] He has further noted that, although Vlaminck did not extensively appropriate the formal qualities of such works in his own painting, he was eager to establish his own seminal role in the avant-garde's "discovery" of African art. By Vlaminck's account, the experience that ignited his own interest occurred in a bistro in Argenteuil, while taking a break from painting outdoors. Three African artifacts on a shelf behind the bar caught his attention, and he acquired them in exchange for buying the house a round of drinks. Shortly afterward, a friend of his father gave him three more works. Among these was a Fang mask that he hung in his bedroom. Upon seeing the mask, Derain asked to buy it from him, but Vlaminck initially refused. A few weeks later, in need of money, he relented and it entered Derain's collection. According to Flam, these events, which may have occurred between 1903 and 1905, became the most frequently related narrative of the discovery of "primitive art."[3]

Vlaminck's insistence on his role in instilling in his contemporaries, such as Matisse and Picasso, an awareness of African art's aesthetic qualities is underscored in another account he disseminated. According to a version related by his biographer Francis Carco, Vlaminck showed an African sculpture to Derain and said that he found it to



be "almost as beautiful as the Venus de Milo." Derain responded that it was in fact "as beautiful as the Venus de Milo." The two then showed it to Picasso, who reputedly deemed it "more beautiful than the Venus de Milo."[4]

1. New York 1994, p. 60.
2. Flam 1984–85, p. 215.
3. Ibid., p. 214.
4. Ibid.

EX COLL.
André Derain, Paris; Sir Jacob Epstein, London, 1962; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africain, d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "The Epstein Collection of Tribal and Exotic Sculpture," The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1960; "Exhibition 22," The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, April 18–July 1, 1962; "First World Festival of Negro Arts," Dakar, Senegal, April 1–24, 1966, and Grand Palais, Paris, June 1–August 20, 1966; "Art of Oceania, Africa and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 10– September 1, 1969; "Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, November 10, 1970–June 1, 1971; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, and Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989.

PUBLISHED
Clouzot and Level 1919, n.p.; Basler 1929, fig. 42a; Paris 1930, p. 15, no. 173 (ill. n.p. pl.); Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 172; Dakar and Paris 1966, pp. 14–15, no. 24; Robbins 1966, p. 177, fig. 228; Leiris and Delange 1967, pp. 216, 416, fig. 246; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 155; Perrois 1968–69, fig. 1d; New York 1969, no. 405; Wingert 1970, fig. 98; New York 1970–71, p. 253, no. 267b; Perrois 1972, p. 83; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 225; Newton, Jones, and Ezra 1987, p. 94; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 422, fig. 567; Bassani and McLeod 1989, pp. 32, 111; Florence 1989, p. 19; Paris 1991–92, p. 128; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 554, fig. 307; Perrois 2006, p. 130, pl. 19.

24. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Mvai group; Gabon, Ntem Valley
19th–early 20th century
Wood
H. 18⅛ in. (46 cm)
Private collection



It appears that Fang artists favored two distinct stylistic approaches to full-length representations: the elongated figures of the northern Ngumba and Ntumu and the shorter concentrated volumetric ones of the Mvai, Betsi, and Okak. James Fernandez has suggested that the fullness of the latter may evoke the formal relationship of earlier heads and the cylindrical relic container synthesized into a single entity.[1]

This work is replete with curves that invest it with a baroque flair. There is a great deal of definition to the upper body, which is petite relative to the proportions of the lower half. Attention has been lavished on details such as the flared nostrils, open mouth with exposed teeth, pectorals, and shoulder blades. Three prominent sagittal crests rise above the summit of the rounded forehead and extend across the back of the head as undulating ridges of hair. The figure broadens at waist level, and there is a loosening of the composition toward the base of the form, which is defined in broader strokes. A projecting herniated navel is unified with the figure's joined hands, which hold a vessel in the center of the chest, by a two-dimensional incised vertical herringbone band. Flanking the base of the torso, bold full thighs intersect with thick calves.

The earliest documented work in this regional style was collected by Günter Tessmann at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1907 Tessmann obtained a subvention from his hometown museum in Lübeck to launch a scientific exploration of southern Cameroon. This mission lasted two years, and upon his return in May 1909, Tessmann deposited written observations, photographs, specimens of flora and fauna, jewelry, musical instruments, and a series of artifacts with the museum.[2] Among these materials, published by Tessmann in 1913, is a related work seen in a photograph of nine ancestor figures collected for the museum, classified respectively as "ntoumou, fang, and mvai" (fig. 36).[3] One of the two Mvai examples was conserved at the Lübeck museum until its disappearance during the bombing of that city in 1942.

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 741.
2. Perrois 2001b, p. 125.
3. Ibid., pp. 123, 126.

EX COLL.
Armand and Corice Arman, New York; Armando Scamperle, Rome; Jacques Kerchache, Paris; Patricia Ann Withofs, London and Sydney

EXHIBITED
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, and Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Sotheby's 1972, p. 43, lot 189, pl. 33; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 151; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 253, fig. 159; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 332, fig. 858; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 233; Perrois 2001b, p. 138, no. 35; De Grunne 2003, p. 88, fig. 3, p. 89, fig. 8.



25. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Mvai group; Gabon, Ntem Valley
19th–early 20th century
Wood, beads
H. 20 in. (50.8 cm)
Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc. 2003.3.MCD

In Fang communities, sculptural techniques—knowledge of woods, treatment and drying, preparation of the block, cutting methods, finishes and patinas—were passed from master to apprentice often, but not exclusively, within the same lineage.[1] Fang works collected over the last century have been grouped according to distinct styles associated with regional artistic preferences. Such attributions are fraught with problems when applied to works that lack documentation gathered in the field. James Fernandez suggests that in at least one instance a known master appears to have worked in an idiom that lay outside the stylistic parameters associated with his own ethnic background. The individual in question, Ndutumu Singho (d. 1960), lived most of his life in Akonayop, a village in the heart of Rio Muni's Ntumu country. According to Fernandez, this outstanding mid-twentieth-century sculptor from an Okak clan produced works in the classic Mvai style.[2] This observation indicates that despite classificatory attempts to identify style with ethnicity, individuals appear to have created works reflecting their own aesthetic preferences.

1. Perrois 2001b, p. 130.
2. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 737.

EX COLL.
Marc and Denyse Ginzberg, New York

EXHIBITED
"Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Lehuard 1978a, p. 7; Perrois 1979, p. 88, fig. 81; Perrois 2001b, p. 137, no. 34.



26. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Mvai group; Gabon, Ntem Valley
19th–early 20th century
Wood
H. 17 1/16 in. (45 cm)
Collection of Laura and James J. Ross



Very subtle details distinguish this work from the one previously considered (cat. no. 25). In this example the lines of the trilobed coiffure at the summit are even more sharply angular. Despite the hard edges that inform the frontal view of this crowning element, as the ridges extend down the back of the head they soften to create gently sloping undulating lines that curve out from the back of the neck. The collar carved in relief is an unusual feature. The span of the shoulders appears slightly broader than in the preceding example, and directly below, the curved passages of the pectorals are rendered more two-dimensionally. The most striking departure is the figure's deep black patina.

It has been suggested that individual Fang sculptors completed only a limited number of works over the course of their careers; by James Fernandez's estimation they cannot have produced more than a dozen figures in their lifetimes. However, they communicated their skills to those who assisted and were closely associated with them.[1] Louis Perrois was able to recover the following names of earlier Mvai sculptors who were still remembered in the villages near Minvoul on the Upper Ntem in 1968: Edzomo Nde Zongo of the Esabok clan; Mfolombo, his son Opaminko, and Evun Ndong of the Esangwan clan; and Elana of the Esesep clan.[2]

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 724.
2. Perrois 2001b, p. 130.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume (?), Paris; Marc Eizenberg, Paris; Samir Borro, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, and Brussels

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001; "Africa: Capolavori da un continente," Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin, October 2, 2003–February 15, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1979, p. 89, fig. 83; Paris 1986–87, pp. 24–25; Paris 1991–92, p. 148; Bacquart 1998b, p. 124, fig. 4; Perrois 2001b, p. 136, no. 33; De Grunne 2003, p. 88, fig. 4, p. 89, fig. 10; Turin 2003–4, p. 231, no. 3.63.

27. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male

Fang peoples, Mvai group; Gabon, Ntem Valley
19th century
Wood, iron
H. 23 in. (58.4 cm)
Brooklyn Museum, New York 51.3 (5201C 003)



This exceptionally fine figure is taller and more attenuated than the series of related Mvai works previously considered in catalogue numbers 24 through 26. There is a perfection to the delicate rendering of its features. At the summit, the wide round forehead serves as a counterpoint to the rectilinear cast of the jaw. The miniaturized upper body is distilled at the upper reaches of the long torso. In contrast, the lower body is given more ample treatment, evident in the curvature of the fuller thighs and calves. The arms are arranged in a dense rectangular configuration formed by the shoulder and upper arm, which flank the torso, the bent elbows, and the forearms; the latter extend across the chest, with the hands meeting at its center.

Seen in profile, the slender figure's neck, torso, and calves are all aligned as a vertical column. The curves of the jaw, elbow, and buttocks, intersecting with that vertical axis, are increasingly pronounced. From that vantage point, departures from the disciplined control of the compressed frontal composition are evident in graceful flourishes. These expand the representation beyond a schematic two-dimensional one to include the bold extension of the thighs and buttocks as well as the arcs of the base of the coiffure and jawline. Flanking the herniated navel, which projects prominently, are deeply incised vertical lines that extend to the forearms. This light-wood sculpture has not been patinated with the usual dark coating. The surface, which shows evidence of wear, has remained blond.[1]

1. Perrois 2001b, p. 130.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Masterpieces of African Art," Brooklyn Museum, October 21, 1954–January 2, 1955; "Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêstres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Brooklyn 1954–55, fig. 202; Robbins 1966, p. 332, fig. 858; Zurich 1970–71, p. 235; Leuzinger 1972, p. 251; Perrois 1972, p. 87; Perrois 1973, p. 30; Lehuard 1978b, p. 11; McKesson 1982, fig. 12; Marseille 1992a, pp. 64, 212; Perrois 2001b, p. 135, no. 32; De Grunne 2003, p. 88, fig. 2, p. 89, fig. 2; Perrois 2006, p. 130, pl. 21.

28. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th century
Wood, oil
H. 15¾ in. (40 cm)
Private collection

A votive gesture lies at the substantial core of this figure's being. It unfolds fluidly through the arc of the outstretched arms and terminates in the hands joined as an offering cup. Although separated from its original accompanying receptacle, this figure is unambiguously seated. The head is broad at the brow, narrows at the chin, and is supported by a thick neck. The facial features have undergone extensive erosion. Given the emphasis on the head and outstretched arms, the figure appears somewhat top-heavy when seen from the front. In profile, however, the body is masterfully equilibrated, so that the extension of the powerful thighs and calves from the torso and the vertical plinth at the base of the back anchor the figure securely. Thick layers of palm oil residue concentrated on the head, neck, and arms bring attention to the upper body, the visual focal point of the image.

This miniature masterpiece is reputed to have been brought to France in 1842 by a sailor and then to have entered the possession of a certain Doctor Bergier in Avignon.[1] The work was subsequently acquired by Léonce Guerre and his son Pierre, who became passionate collectors of African art following their exposure to the Exposition Nationale Coloniale of 1922. As hospital administrator for the city of Marseille, Léonce Guerre was in contact with doctors and officials recently returned from the colonies. Using these contacts, he was able to draw up lists of owners of African artifacts who resided on the Provençal coast, and he then sought them out with his son. Beyond his passion for African sculpture, Pierre's interests as an art critic embraced and actively promoted the literary achievements of the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude movements.







1. Marseille 1992b, p. 53.

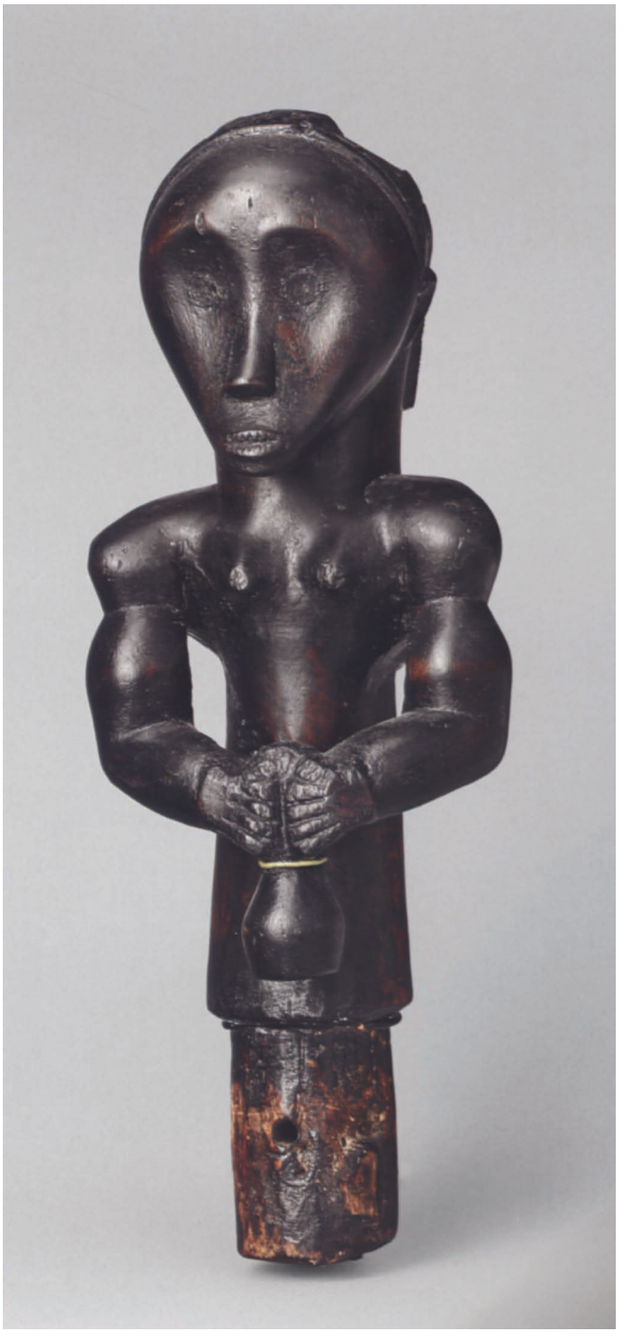
EX COLL.
Dr. Bergier, Avignon; Léonce and Pierre Guerre, Marseille

EXHIBITED
"Première exposition rétrospective internationale des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie," Palais Miramar, Cannes, July 6–September 29, 1957; "Arts Africains," Musée Cantini, Marseille, March–May 1970; "Pierre Guerre: Un érudit en son temps," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, March 20–May 31, 1992; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêstres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindians, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Cannes 1957, no. 214; Leiris and Delange 1967, p. 447; Marseille 1970, no. 116; Perrois 1972, p. 261; Perrois 1979, no. 59; Marseille 1992a, pp. 79, 206–7; Marseille 1992b, p. 93, fig. 31; Perrois 2006, p. 132, pl. 40.

29. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 12¼ in. (31.1 cm)
Maureen and Harold Zarember



Fang *byeri* sought to intercept the ancestors and direct them to protect and ameliorate the condition of the living. In contrast to the immaterial ancestors they address, such works invariably emphasize the corporeal being of their subjects in a style that is visually accessible and lucid. Günter Tessmann states that half figures such as the present work evolved from carved heads and were eventually succeeded by a variety of full-length figures.[1]

This compact presence combines elements of physical power and delicacy in its execution. Brass studs inserted into the surface articulate an alert gaze. The curves of the brows and ridge of the nose delineate a heartlike configuration that terminates at the chin. At the core is a slender torso, framed by appendages that abound in curves. The shoulders, upper arms, and forearms are interlinked cylindrical units of form. The hands meet in front of the torso and grasp a vessel whose rounded form echoes that of the shoulders and arms. The gesture of holding the vessel at the level of the umbilicus underscores the physical site of an individual's vital connection with his or her progenitors and also poetically alludes to the relic vessel that this work originally accompanied.

1. Tessmann 1991–92, p. 285.

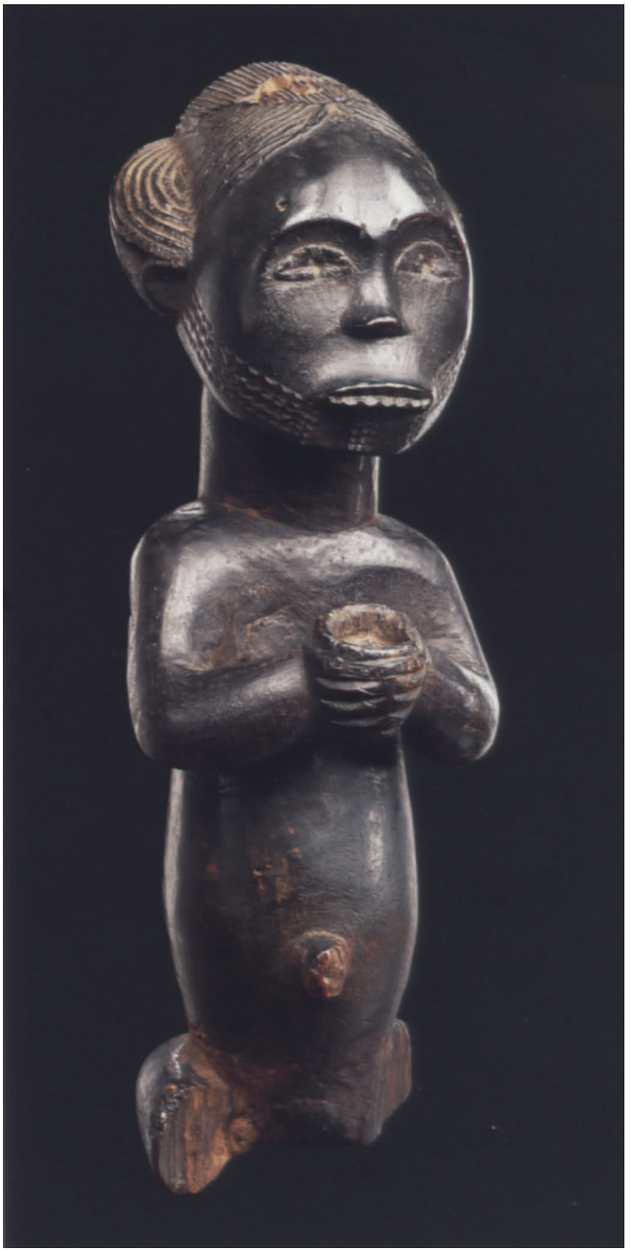
EX COLL.
Pierre Loeb, Paris; Rosemary and George Lois, New York

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935.

PUBLISHED
Evans 1935, WE302; New York 1935, p. 46, no. 352.

30. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood
H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 5206



The Fang author of this figure interpreted a classic subject with unsurpassed sensitivity and refinement. No other work in the corpus is more poetic in its allusion to the integral relationship between the sculpture and its accompanying relic container. The sculptor underscores their unity through the cupped hands, whose fingers wrap around the perimeter of the receptacle they grasp. The gesture also evokes a benediction conferred by Fang elders in which they blew upon their own cupped hands and pressed them directly on the body of the person being blessed.[1] This physical transfer of protection was accompanied by the expression "Rest always well."

At the base of the torso, the stomach is full and rounded. While the gesture of the arms is abbreviated, so that they extend from the shoulders to the hands in a continuous curve, the delicate details of the head are exactingly articulated. The eyes, with empty pupils, are circumscribed by a semicircular motif. The curvature of the arms echoes that of the chin. The same line is underscored by a broad band of four contiguous zigzag lines that extend from the outer corner of the mouth to the ears. A band of the same deeply carved motif reaches from the chin to the lower lip. The bridge of the nose is a gentle concave curve that projects from the surface above the pursed lips. Deeply inscribed strands of hair swept to the sides cover the crown of the head.

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 245.

EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006–July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1972, p. 376; Perrois 1979, p. 81, fig. 69; Paris 1986–87, p. 22; Paris 1991–92, p. 122; Perrois 2006, p. 132, pl. 38; Paris 2006–7b, p. 110.

31. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, brass, oil
H. 13½ in. (34.3 cm)
Private collection

James Fernandez has observed that the qualities Fang adults held in greatest esteem were "composedness" (*nlem mvore*), "even-handed tranquility" (*mvwaa*), and the capacity to hold opposites in balance.[1] Fang sculptors translated those valued attributes in works such as this half figure. There is a quiet serenity to this delicately equilibrated work. The transitions between features are gentle and understated. The summit of the head is a full rounded volume that narrows at the chin. On the surface of the softly sloping concave face, ocular depressions flank a raised vertical nose. Held back at the sides of the narrow polelike torso, the arms are cut off at the wrists owing to abrasion. The graceful curvature of the coiffure intersects with the line of the jaw. Brass additions are missing from the eyes, but a broad collar of this material is tied around the back of the neck, there are bands around the upper arms, and a pectoral is affixed between the breasts. The front of the work is sticky from the palm oil applied to enliven its surface.

1. Fernandez and Fernandez 1975, p. 742.

EX COLL.
Jean Roudillon and Olivier Le Corneur, Paris; Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York

EXHIBITED
"L'Art de l'Afrique noire et 'l'époque nègre' de quelques artistes contemporains," Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, Saint-Étienne, 1956; "Masks and Sculpture from the Collection of Gustave and Franyo Schindler," The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, November 2, 1966–February 5, 1967.

PUBLISHED
Saint-Étienne 1956, fig. 29, no. 124 (Collection Le Corneur and Roudillon); New York 1966–67, n.p., no. 23; Perrois 1972, p. 370, figs. 259, 260.



32. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 11½ in. (29.2 cm)
Private collection



Günter Tessmann asserted that Fang reliquary sculpture evolved from isolated heads to half figures.[1] One such example, this petite female, is unequaled in the corpus for its delicacy and refined detail. The smooth polish of the jet black wood surface reflects light, as do the broad round brass disks of the slightly asymmetrical eyes. Fine bands of raised dots appear across the rounded convex forehead and the underside of the chin. The shell-like coiffure is subdivided into six bands with a central sagittal extension from the forehead to the back. Its surface is covered with a dense lattice of incised lines. The nose, located at the visual center of the highly finished face, has been subjected to significant abrasion.

The figure's shoulders project forward, and the arms, held parallel to the body, are broadest at that level. The proper right arm is severely eroded below the elbow. In profile, the proper left arm extends the length of the torso as a concave curve and terminates in a broad flat hand. The breasts also project forward and curve out. A lightly incised partially eroded motif provides a flourish at the level of the navel. On the back, a line articulates the vertebral column, and light crescents carved in relief indicate the shoulder blades. The lower back features an extensive passage of incised lozenge cicatrization markings. At the base, a hole is drilled at either side that pierces the work transversely; a peg was originally documented in earlier images.[2]

James Fernandez has observed that Fang reliquaries could carry a woman's name.[3] He notes that ascending generations were traced alternatively through male and female progenitors. At the most basic level, one's "house," or *ndebot,* was personified by a female ancestor.[4] Beyond that level, going further back into one's extended ancestry, minor clan segments, or *mvogabot,* were identified with male forebears. Cohesive and stable familial entities were characterized as female, while relatively volatile ones vulnerable to division were thought of as male.

1. Tessmann 1991–92, p. 285.
2. Evans 1935, WE 300, 301.
3. Fernandez 1982, p. 258.
4. Fernandez 1966, p. 60.

EX COLL.
Dr. Paul Chadourne, France; Morris J. Pinto Collection, New York

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996.

PUBLISHED
Evans 1935, WE 300, 301; New York 1935, p. 46, no. 350; Radin and Sweeney 1952, p. 46, fig. 72; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, pp. 170–72, fig. 212; Perrois 1972, p. 369; Sotheby's 1988, lot 69; Paris 1991–92, p. 104; De Grunne 1994, p. 48, fig. 3; London 1995–96, p. 323.



33. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female (The Pahouin or Black Venus)

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, raffia
H. 22 1/16 in. (56 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 2891

This stunning work is unique in its synthesis of elegant strength and refined grace. Response to its sensuous allure led to its female subject's being heralded as the Pahouin Venus, when the sculpture was exhibited in 1933 at the Lefevre Galleries in London. Its author moves beyond the controlled definition of the body mastered by Fang sculptors to instill his creation with a wondrously fluid plasticity.

Seated yet suspended in space, this regal figure is balanced on a vertical plinth that merges with her buttocks and thighs. Her breasts extend downward from the chest as triangular projections. The contours of the arms are parallel wavy rivulets. The brief curves of the shoulders become rounded contours merging into the vertical cylinders of the upper arms and culminating in the final ribbonlike passages of the forearms. These terminate in the abbreviated hands, which rest on the thighs. A native repair has reattached the proper left forearm to the elbow with raffia fiber. A continuous rounded curve extends from the thighs to the base of the feet. The calves are full rounded volumes that contrast with the narrow thighs. There is no articulation of the knees to distinguish them from the calves. The cylindrical navel extends abruptly from the torso. A broad neck joins the body to the head, with its wide luminous forehead. At the summit a raised sagittal crest extends across the back of the head. In profile, the plane of the face is a concave curve that offsets the convex forehead. The body and head are harmoniously cast so that the curvature of the lower jaw is echoed by that of the tips of the breasts. The poise, presence, and cool perfection of this figure place it among the most exalted artistic representations of the female form.

This work was one of the eleven full-length figures and five heads carved by Fang sculptors for placement above reliquary vessels that were at the core of Jacob Epstein's celebrated personal collection (fig. 9). According to Ezio Bassani and Malcolm McLeod, not only were these works a source of delight to the sculptor but they supplied him with a varied repertory of formal solutions to representing the human figure and head that were significant to his own explorations as an artist.[1] In his autobiography Epstein observes that "there is a profound and genuine reason for a sculptor's interest in African art, for new methods and problems are presented in it different from those of European Art. African work opens up to us a world hitherto unknown, and exhibits characteristics that are far removed from our traditional European rendering of form in Greek, in Gothic, or in Renaissance traditions."[2]

1. Bassani and McLeod 1987, p. 12.
2. Epstein 1955, p. 188.

EX COLL.
Georges de Miré Collection, Paris; Louis Carré, Paris, 1935; Sir Jacob Epstein, London; The Carlo Monzino Collection, Lugano

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africain et d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "Primitive African Sculpture," Lefevre Galleries, London, May, 1933; "African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "The Epstein Collection of Tribal and Exotic Sculpture," The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1960 (not in catalogue); "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "African Aesthetics: The Carlo Monzino Collection," The Center for African Art, New York, May 7–September 7, 1986; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Le grand héritage: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, May 21–September 15, 1992; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006–July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1930, p. 16, no. 175; *Art News* 1931; *Burlington Magazine* 1931; London 1933, n.p., no. 77; *Bazaar* 1935; Brock 1935, p. 10; Evans 1935, WE 305, 306; New York 1935, p. 46, no. 356; Kjersmeier 1938, fig. 19; Olbrechts 1946, fig. 10; Portier and Poncetton 1956, pl. 7, fig. 8; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 174, fig. 215; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 156; Perrois 1972, p. 79; Mirimanov 1986, p. 119, fig. 294; New York 1986, pp. 136–40; Bassani and McLeod 1989, pp. 33, 111; Florence 1989, pp. 19, 250, no. and pl. 74; Webb 1991, p. 61, fig. 13; Paris 1991–92, pp. 158–59, 161–62; Paris 1992, pp. 267–68, no. 182 (ill. p. 182); Roy 1998, p. 10; New York 2000, p. 44; Paris 2000–2001, pp. 240–41, fig. 183; Perrois 2006, p. 132, pl. 34; Paris 2006–7b, pp. 112–13.



34. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th century
Wood, raffia, brass, oil
H. 19¾ in. (50.2 cm)
Private collection

The devotion with which this seated male figure served its original patrons is evident in the considerable efforts that were made to preserve its integrity. A split in the proper right thigh has been bound and encased in an elaborate network of raffia ties. This distinctive addition transforms the only potential flaw of a refined and elegantly composed figure into a striking badge of honor.

The stunningly handsome face is defined by a series of gently sweeping curves from the convex of the smooth forehead and to the concave of the jaw. The eyes are brass nails that project from the deeply recessed sockets. The coiffure is delimited by a band that extends across the forehead, reaches around the back of the neck, and flares out slightly along its lower edge. Individual tresses are described by finely incised herringbone patterns. The same motif is repeated in two vertical bands carved along the entire length of the back in parallel columns. At the summit of the slender torso is a delicately articulated muscular upper body. The elbows are bent, and the long slender forearms reach out to present a vessel. Directly below this gesture, a tubular navel projects from the surface. The transition from cylindrical torso to the lower body occurs where the rounded curve of the thighs intersects at a forty-five-degree angle with the powerful columnar calves, which terminate in block ankles. The residue of palm oil creates luminous passages on the face, upper arms, hands, and back.

Candidates for initiation into *byeri* were usually young married men. Over the course of the rites that inducted new members (*adzi malan*), the initiates were washed. Following this cleansing, red padouk powder was applied to the left side of the body, and raffia palm oil to the right. Fernandez notes that the palm oil signified cleanliness, the padouk powder joyfulness. The same substances were applied to the reliquary figure and relics, respectively, suggesting an association between the initiate's body and the sculptural representation.[1]

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 263.

EX COLL.
René Mendès-France, Paris; William A. McCarty-Cooper, Los Angeles; Morris J. Pinto, New York

EXHIBITED
"Three African Traditions: The Art of the Dogon, Fang and Songye," Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut, January 31–April 18, 1999; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels. March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 230, fig. 142; Sotheby's 1989a, lot 56; Lehuard 1992, p. 17; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 95; Greenwich 1999, p. 24, no. 34; Perrois 2001b, p. 134, no. 31.





35. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood
H. 20 in. (50.8 cm)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. J. Tomlinson Hill

As early as 1925 John Graham was retained to advise Frank Crowninshield on the acquisition of a significant collection of African sculpture. A prescient collector of modern art, an organizer of the New York Armory exhibition in 1913, and the founding editor of *Vanity Fair,* Crowninshield introduced both modern and African art to the readers of his publication, thus increasing appreciation for such works among a sophisticated audience.[1] Graham used his eye and aesthetic judgment to assemble Crowninshield's influential collection of African art, and as Christa Clarke notes, many works he himself owned were transferred to his patron.[2] Graham found Fang sculpture especially appealing. In his treatise on the nature of art, *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937), he observed that "a good Pahouin figure is rarer than a good Greek or Gothic statue [and] there are fewer Pahouins than there are Cézannes."[3] At the time of the Crowninshield collection's dispersal in 1957, the present work was acquired by Russel B. Aitken. It is so closely related to catalogue number 34 that the two figures appear to be the work of a single artist.

In this example, as in the latter, a band that spans from one side of the face to the other across the summit of the head is the point of departure for a sheath of hair that falls over the neck and is covered with incised bands of herringbone design. Likewise, the manner of defining the body is virtually identical. There is a delicacy to the arms, whose rounded shoulders and slender forearms are depicted as independent yet gracefully integrated elements. Seen laterally, the intersection of the upper arm and forearm is echoed on a more voluminous scale by that of the thighs and torso. In contrast to the thighs with their ample curves, the calves are more rectilinear. The length of the back is bisected by a depressed vertical channel that is continuous with the vertical plinth, which parallels the calves and ends at the base. Aside from the dramatic repair to the thigh of catalogue number 34, other formal variances apparent in this example include the relatively muted articulation of the eyes and mouth and the omission of an incised decorative band extending the length of the back. The absence of those details gives this work a quieter, more restrained appearance that may reflect the earlier creation of a master who added aesthetic flourishes to his later oeuvre.

1. Clarke 1995, p. 28.
2. Ibid., p. 29.
3. Graham 1937, p. 33.

EX COLL.
Frank Crowninshield, New York; H. F. Sachs Gallery, New York, 1940; Russel B. Aitken Collection, New York, 1957

EXHIBITED
"Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations," Jacques Seligmann Gallery, New York, January 4–22, 1936; "African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," Brooklyn Museum, March 20–April 25, 1937.

PUBLISHED
New York 1936, no. 44; Brooklyn 1937, no. 84 or 85; Christie's 2003, pp. 54–55, lot 69.



36. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass
H. 18¾ in. (47.6 cm)
Robert T. Wall Family



John Graham had begun acquiring African art through Parisian art circles and galleries by the late 1920s. Christa Clarke has suggested not only that Graham's theories on art and the unconscious, laid out in *System and Dialectics* (1937), greatly influenced his contemporaries, but also that his collecting inspired many of them to acquire works of African art themselves.[1] Among those in Graham's immediate circle who did so were the artists David Smith and Adolph Gottlieb. This work, which entered Graham's collection during the 1930s, was subsequently transferred to Frank Crowninshield.

The treatment of the face is distinctive for its combination of added and inscribed facial features. The metal disks of the eyes are placed on either side of a double line that spans from the bridge of the nose to the summit of the forehead. On either side of this median, an arc extends horizontally across the forehead, echoing the curves of the brow and eyes. At the base of the face, the mouth is an incised horizontal flush with the chin. The definition of the upper body mirrors that of the lower body. Both the forearms and the thighs are slender elongated cylinders positioned at slight angles and parallel to one another. From the reverse side, it is apparent that the trunk gradually broadens from its narrow summit and is framed, at its upper limit, by the rectangular configuration of the shoulders and upper arms and, at its lower limit, by the volumes of the buttocks, which intersect at the base of the back. There is extensive erosion to the hands, which meet to grasp a vessel. An incised-dot motif extends below the navel in an arrowlike configuration. The rectangular sheet of the coiffure, which hangs down from the back of the head, is subdivided into alternating bands inscribed with a light herringbone design.

1. Clarke 1995, p. 39; Graham 1937.

EX COLL.
Louis Carré, Paris, 1930; John Graham, New York, 1930s; Frank Crowninshield, New York; Paul and Peggy Rabut, Westport, Connecticut, 1950–86; Armand and Corice Arman, New York, 1986–2000; Adam M. Lindemann, New York, 2000–2003

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield," Brooklyn Museum, March 20–April 25, 1937; "African Sculpture Lent by New York Collectors," Museum of Primitive Art, New York, Summer 1958; "Western Artists/African Art," The Museum for African Art, New York, May 6–August 7, 1994; "Arman et l'art africain," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Chapelle de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, June 23–October 30, 1996, Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, December 3, 1996–February 17, 1997, and Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Museum für Völkerkunde, Cologne, March–June 1997; "African Faces, African Figures: The Arman Collection," The Museum for African Art, New York, October 9, 1997–April 19, 1998; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Brooklyn 1937, no. 84 or 85; New York 1958, fig. 10; Perrois 1972, p. 269; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 2, p. 616; De Grunne 1994, p. 47, fig. 1; New York 1994, pp. 14, 17, no. 4 (center); Marseille, Paris, and Cologne 1996–97, p. 75; New York 1997–98, p. 75, fig. 24; Perrois 2001b, p. 133, no. 30.



37. Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group (Nzaman subgroup); Gabon
19th century
Wood
H. 18 1/16 in. (47.5 cm)
Collection of Adam Lindemann



This highly original work is especially flamboyant in its combination of bold fully articulated sculpted features and incised details. That flair is most apparent in the articulation of the head. Its summit is defined by the round expansive convex forehead, while the base of the chin is a relatively abrupt narrow horizontal line that coincides with the incised downcast arc of the mouth. The figure's most distinctive features are its dramatic squared ears, which project out prominently from the sides of the head. Their pronounced definition contrasts with the inscribed slightly asymmetrical oval eyes, bisected by a horizontal line. The forearms reach up to raise a vessel in front of the incised pectorals. The fingers of the abbreviated hands are incised linear notations. The curved relatively naturalistic torso differs stylistically from the blocky powerful legs.

The striking emphasis given to the prominent ears suggests an intentional visual allusion to the role that Fang ancestors, honored through reliquaries, played in listening to the invocations of their offspring. The author has drawn upon this detail as a sign of their engagement.

This work has been compared formally to one in the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris that shares a similar treatment of the head and sleek coiffure, curves of the stomach and buttocks, and positioning of the vessel held to the chest.[1] However, the present example is distinguished by the comparatively rectilinear cast of the ears and legs. It also appears closely related to a work that was published by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro in their 1929 survey and attributed by them to the Roland Tual Collection.[2]

1. Marseille 1992a, p. 190.
2. Guillaume and Munro 1929, fig. 28.

EX COLL.
Georges de Miré, Paris, 1920–31; Mr. Marazaki, Paris (?); Albert Kleinmann, Paris, 1930s–1950s

EXHIBITED
"Exposition de l'art indigène des colonies françaises d'Afrique et d'Océanie et du Congo Belge," Pavillon de Marsan, Paris, October 1923.

PUBLISHED
Drouot 1931, p. 8, lot 49; Perrois 1972, p. 256, no. 167; Christie's 2004, pp. 66–67, lot 186.

38. Reliquary Ensemble: Receptacle and Standing Male Figure Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass (?), bark, relics
H., total, 38 15/16 in. (99 cm)
Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva 15232



This complete reliquary is unusual both for its intact state and for the extraordinary extent to which its history is documented. The slender standing male figure remains positioned at the summit of its original tall cylindrical bark receptacle. He holds an hourglass vessel before his chest in both hands. His knees are bent, his calves embedded in the vessel's lid. Both the sharply modeled facial features and the body are attenuated. A whimsical cicatrization motif, consisting of a horizontal band of vertical lines spanned by a curve above a floating cross, is emblazoned on his cheeks. Metal has been applied to the passages of the eyes in the form of ellipses. Semicircular ears project from the sides of head. The head is crowned by a classic helmet headdress. The sculpture is a slightly darker brown than the bark.

The Protestant missionary Fernand Grébert obtained this work as a result of its owner's conversion to Christianity. It is one of some three hundred artifacts, ranging from reliquaries to smithing implements, that he brought back from Gabon between 1917 and 1951. Grébert placed these in the collections of two Swiss ethnographic museums, one in Geneva, the other in Neuchâtel. Born in 1886 in the Alsace region, Grébert was ordained pastor of the evangelical missions of Paris in 1913 and was sent to work in Gabon. Over the course of the next twenty years, he kept a running visual record of his observations in two manuscript albums (see figs. 18, 19).[1]

A drawing of this work, documented in its original setting and accompanied by a written commentary, appears in one of Grébert's albums (fig. 18). In that image, the vessel lid with the figure has been removed and the empty receptacle is on its side. A series of four relics have been placed before a *byeri* official, who sacrifices a goat over them. While a second initiate holds the animal, a third stands beside them gazing out at the onlooker. The accompanying text reads as follows: "Bloody sacrifice on the crania of the ancestors (byeri) taken out of their bark container, adorned here with the statue of Mba Baña, father of the Esibaña tribe, image of the spirits of four generations of crania . . . brought to Talagouga following the conversion

of the chief of the tribe at Nengeyñ, 1927."[2] Grébert's commentary suggests that the figure was conceived of as an evocation of both the founder and the collective ancestors of an extended family.

The moment captured in this visual notation portrays the strengthening of *byeri* relics. Other accounts of this rite relate that the sacrificial blood was poured in a receptacle of banana leaves that held additional ingredients such as the barks of several significant trees, the head of the viper *Bitis gabonica,* and boiling water. This potent brew was then used to cleanse the crania. After the cleansed relics were displayed in a row, *byeri* members danced in circles around them.[3] The skulls were then packed back into the barrels and returned to their respective chambers in the village. The next day the ancestral crania were revealed to the initiates, who passed from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment as they were given knowledge concerning the identities of the different family relics as well as the proper way to care for them.[4]

1. Grébert 2003.
2. Ibid., fig. 197.
3. Fernandez 1982, p. 263.
4. Ibid., pp. 264–65.

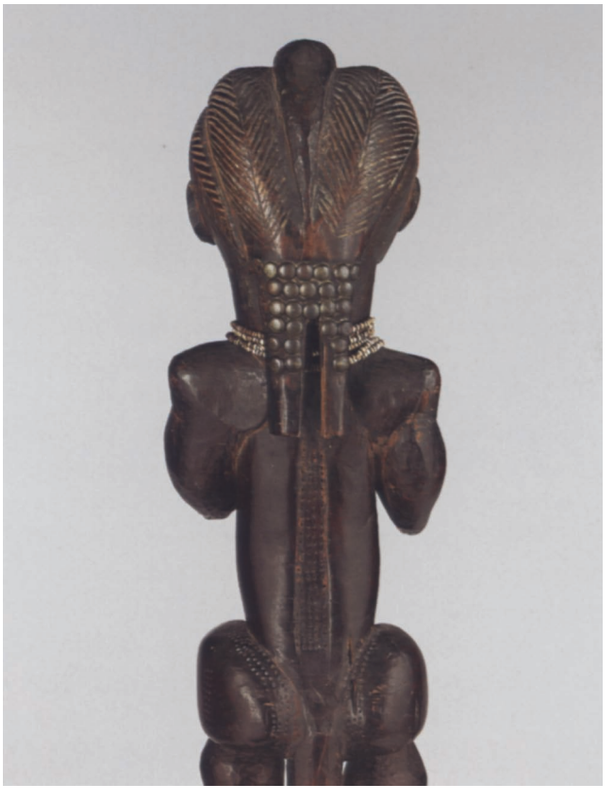
EX COLL.
Fernand Grébert, collected in Gabon's Ogooué River region, 1927

EXHIBITED
"Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêstres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992; "Objets de pouvoirs: Ancienne magie Bantou en Afrique centrale," Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1979, p. 60, fig. 31; McKesson 1982, fig. 78; Geneva 1992, p. 36; Marseille 1992a, p. 202; Savary 2002, p. 43; Grébert 2003, p. 16; Perrois 2006, p. 132, pl. 39.

39. Reliquary Ensemble: Receptacle and Seated Male Figure Holding Vessel

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, brass, copper, beads, bark, relics
H., total, 34 1/16 in. (88 cm); figure, 20 1/16 in. (51cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)



This work was brought back to France from Equatorial Africa around 1904 by one of the missionaries of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit. Founded in 1703, this religious congregation established an extensive missionary presence in sub-Saharan Africa beginning in the nineteenth century. The majority of artifacts collected by these missionaries were initially grouped at the Musée Missionnaire des Orphelins Apprentis at Auteuil until their subsequent transfer to the missionary museum of the Abbaye Blanche at Mortain in 1960. While the collections were almost entirely composed of material from the former French Equatorial Africa, little accompanying documentation concerning the histories of individual artifacts has come down to us.[1] This work was featured as part of the collection of the Auteuil museum at the Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris in 1937. It was deaccessioned by Mortain and transferred to private hands in 1969.

The figure has survived with an original bark relic container that houses six crania tops tinted with red *n'gula* powder. The contents of the receptacle, *nsuk byeri,* accord with the eight to ten relics that would have been assembled over several generations by an integrated lineage,

or *ndebot*. When lineages split apart, a reliquary was divided.[2] James Fernandez has noted that because the Fang engaged with ancestors who remained vivid in their memory, crania diminished in relevance as the individuals they related to were forgotten. Consequently, their potency dissipated, they were reburied after several generations. In an early photograph of this ensemble taken by the collector Dr. Stéphen-Chauvet in 1937, on the occasion of the Exposition Coloniale, alterations to its appearance are evident. The figure is shown wearing a raffia skirt, which may have been added by the missionaries. A handwritten label affixed to the neck and strands of vine attached to the base of the receptacle are now missing.

The strong somewhat stocky figure is in a seated posture balanced by a tripod formed by the muscular calves and the plinth that extends from the back. The arms raise a hollowed bowl before the chest. When the work is seen from the side, a continuous arc extends from the shoulder to the fingers. Treatment of the facial features is rudimentary. Below the raised ridge of the brow, the eyes are broad horizontal ellipses cut from brass and nailed to the surface. The nose is a triangular form, the minimal slit of the mouth projects out slightly at the base, and the ears are semicircular ridges in relief. The primary decorative feature is the coiffure, arranged in a prominent raised sagittal crest flanked by deeply incised lateral tresses that are all gathered together and extend down the back of the neck. The arc of the back is bisected by a stippled band that is repeated along the arc of the thigh, where it is juxtaposed against the torso. Metal accents in the form of copper wire and brass tacks are applied to the coiffure and around the figure's wrists and prominent navel.

1. Millot 1965, p. 56.
2. Fernandez 1982, p. 256.

EX COLL.
Mission des Pères du Saint-Esprit, collected in northwestern Gabon, 1904; Musée Missionnaire des Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil, France, until 1960; Musée Missionnaire de l'Abbaye Blanche à Mortain, France

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Réceptacles," Musée Dapper, Paris, October 23, 1997–March 30, 1998.

PUBLISHED
Millot 1965, p. 57, fig. 2; Perrois 1973, p. 31, fig. g, p. 33, fig. i; Perrois 1979, fig. 71; Paris 1986–87, figs. 10, 23a,b; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 422, fig. 572; Paris 1991–92, p. 146; Paris 1997–98, pp. 28–29; Bacquart 1998a, p. 127; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 554, fig. 312; Perrois 2006, p. 132, pl. 35.



40. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, copper, iron, oil
H. 15¾ in. (40 cm)
Private collection

The Fang believed that a ritual death was a prerequisite for an initiate to be admitted to the ancestor cult, for only in that way would he gain exposure to the miracles, or *akyunge*, that the ancestors were capable of performing. Access to this desired state of exalted awareness is referred to as "having one's head opened" (*akwia nlô*).[1] This heroic lifelike orb personifies that state of enlightenment. Despite extensive abrasion to the mouth and nose, the expression remains alert and probing. Within the rounded contours of the face, the features are embedded in a heartlike core that is gently scooped out of the surface. In profile the configuration of the head is a concave curve. The luminous copper-disk eyes with pierced iron pupils are affixed asymmetrically and project slightly from the surface. Each eyebrow is a graceful curve, inscribed within the lower limit of the raised forehead. A linear arc of lightly inscribed dots appears directly above, on the proper left side of the forehead. The coiffure, pierced by a large hole at the crown, is raised from the full rounded forehead. Five thick tresses cover the surface of the head and narrow at the summit and base. The three on the proper left side are broken at the base of the neck.

The passages of wear to the nose, mouth, and chin are consistent with those found on related works subjected to ritual handling, which has resulted in the deliberate erosion of focal points of the representation. These obscure the beard at the base of the chin. The especially broad neck ends abruptly and is supported by a brief pierced plinth. That palm oil survives mostly on the proper left side of the face and the back of the head suggests that this work was intended to be experienced in the round.

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 262.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Ernest Ascher, or Charles Ratton, Paris, 1891–1934; Helena Rubinstein, New York and Paris; Alice M. Kaplan, New York; Murray and Barbara Frum, Toronto

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Three African Traditions: The Art of the Dogon, Fang and Songye," Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut, January 31–April 18, 1999.

PUBLISHED
Evans 1935, WE 323, 324; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 372; Bantel 1981, pp. 72–73; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 331, fig. 854; Sotheby's 1990, lot 117 and cover ill.; Paris 1991–92, p. 106; De Grunne 1994, p. 50, fig. 8; Sotheby's 1996, lot 114 and cover ill.; Bacquart 1998b, p. 125, fig. 12; Roy 1998, p. 11; Greenwich 1999, p. 28, no. 41.



41. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon, Lower Ogooué River valley
19th century
Wood, brass, resin, oil
H., without base, 10⅝ in. (27 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950 1950-134-202

The austere severity of this work, which is quite formally distinctive within the Fang corpus, exercised a powerful influence on the Western avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century. It appears prominently in Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (Leipzig, 1915), the first book to focus on the aesthetics of African art. Joseph Brummer, a Hungarian sculptor who promoted interest in what was described as *l'art nègre* among the avant-garde and who later became an art dealer, served as a mentor to Einstein. Jean-Louis Paudrat has noted that while Einstein wrote the text, Brummer not only provided the necessary financial support for the publication but also selected and supplied a significant number of the illustrations.[1] While no captions identify or attribute the works featured, and Einstein never discusses any specific works in his own commentary, Paudrat estimates that more than half of those illustrated once belonged to Brummer. The three plates of this work in Einstein's landmark edition capture the face in detail along with full-profile and frontal views.

This head is especially striking for the squareness of the jaw. Although the mouth lacks lips, it exposes teeth boldly carved in relief with gaps between them. Such is the severity of the lines that the overall form suggests a skull. The elongated rounded forehead overpowers the strong cylindrical form of the head, which appears relatively top-heavy. It extends down into a broad nose, flanked by the circular contours of the eye sockets. The passages of the eyes are flush with the surface, although the pupils of inlaid brass are additions that have been adhered and blackened with resin. These applications suggest that relics may be embedded below the surface. A raised hairline defines an otherwise minimal caplike coiffure. The ears are described by semicircular ridges that project in relief at either side of the head.

A friend of the artist Frank Burty Haviland (fig. 44), Brummer was the source of the collection of African and Oceanic works that Haviland began acquiring in 1908.[2] Given that this work is known to have been owned by Haviland, it seems most likely that he obtained it from Brummer. Walter and Louise Arensberg, active members and patrons of the New York avant-garde, subsequently acquired it for their celebrated collection, which integrated African and Pre-Columbian art with modern art (fig. 57). In 1935 the Arensbergs lent works to the exhibition "African Negro Art" organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. On that occasion this head was photographed by Walker Evans as part of his portfolio of 477 images recording that epic presentation of African art.

1. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 151.
2. Ibid., p. 144.

EX COLL.
Joseph Brummer, Paris (?); Frank Burty Haviland, Paris; The Walter and Louise Arensberg Collection, New York and Los Angeles, 1935

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêtres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 1–September 3, 2000.

PUBLISHED
Einstein 1915, pp. 32, 33, 34; Pijoán 1931, p. 172, fig. 235; Evans 1935, WE 317, 318; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 368; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 292; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 254, fig. 161; Florence 1989, p. 15; Marseille 1992a, p. 166; London 1995–96, p. 320; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 399; New York 2000, p. 80.



42. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon, Mitzic region, Ndjolé
19th century
Wood, mirrors, oil
H. 19⅛ in. (48.5 cm)
Musée d'Ethnographie, Neuchâtel III.C.7400

This work was brought out of Gabon at the beginning of the twentieth century by Father Henri Trilles, a Catholic missionary who sold it to the Neuchâtel museum in 1902. A generation later, in 1922, Fernand Grébert, who resided among the Betsi in the vicinity of Ndjolé, documented a very similar work in situ in a drawing of a *byeri* enclosure. That highly abbreviated image of a head at the summit of a cylindrical barrel, positioned in the corner of an interior, also emphasizes piercing eyes highlighted within a black sculpture (fig. 19). Grébert noted that the *byeri,* or sacra, were in the container and characterized the "bust" as "ornamental."

The reflective properties of the surface so enliven this work that its appearance varies from every vantage point. This quality derives from the fact that over the course of its use, well over a century ago, the wood was so completely impregnated with applications of palm oil that it continues to exude that substance. Certain features are inscribed into the surface as abstract linear notations: a series of contiguous parallel bands for the hair, a semicircular configuration for the ears. The face, with its gently curved jaw and rounded forehead, is afforded a naturalism by its open mouth, whose parted lips appear to inhale. This is underscored by the riveting gaze of its bold mirror pupils, which amplify the play of light on the shimmering wood surface. The work's author has successfully conveyed the effect of an ethereal presence that appears to be weightless. At the base of the strong neck, a vertical extension was originally inserted into the receptacle that it accompanied.

Over the course of the decades he spent in Gabon, beginning in 1892, Trilles studied Fang beliefs and ritual practices and produced one of the earliest monographs on an African religion, *Le totémisme chez les Fân* (1912). While that text reflects the prejudices and biases of the day to a great extent, it provides many descriptions of rites of ancestral veneration that its author observed during the late nineteenth century. Regrettably, despite his interest in recording the practices that works such as this were created to enhance, Trilles failed to comment on this object's specific history and original use. In his more general observations, he offers the following insight into the significance of the Fang's placing the greatest emphasis on the head in their sculpture: "The head is the most noble part of the body, that in which life resides, and it is for this reason that one preserves only the crania of the ancestors."[1] In Trilles's descriptions of the ancestor cult, *byeri,* he refers to the fact that the wisdom contained in a family's ancestral crania is imparted to adolescents over the course of initiation, during which they acquire the ability to visually identify and recite the names associated with the relics contained within the receptacle. Mastery of that information allowed individuals both to define their place within their family and to assure both its fertility and material prosperity.[2] Trilles's account establishes and clarifies the primacy of the initiates' relationship with the relics.[3]

Although this work has been previously published with a relic container, it has been established that that receptacle was not original to the piece but rather a replacement added at some point by the museum.

1. Trilles 1912b, p. 327.
2. Ibid., pp. 94, 97.
3. Ibid., pp. 370, 374.

EX COLL.
Father Henri Trilles, France, purchased in Gabon's Estuary region, 1902

EXHIBITED
"Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Byeri Fang: Sculptures d'ancêtres en Afrique," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Marseille, June 6–September 6, 1992; "Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals," The Museum for African Art, New York, February 13–August 22, 1993.

PUBLISHED
Gabus 1967, p. 168; Zurich 1970–71, p. 245; Perrois 1972, pp. 132, 320; Leuzinger 1972, p. 258; Chaffin 1973, p. 16; Paris 1991–92, p. 9; Marseille 1992a, p. 152; New York 1993, p. 154, no. 77; Bordeaux 1997–98, p. 88 (not exhibited); Roy 1998, p. 8; Perrois 2006, p. 128, pl. 3.



43. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, metal
H. 24 13/16 in. (63 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 2664

This masterpiece—exceptional for the prominent rounded volume of the forehead, the elegant cascading tresses of the coiffure, and the elongated neck—entered the collection of Joseph Brummer as early as 1911. Within avant-garde circles in Paris it became identified with Brummer and was featured extensively in the early literature on African art, including Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (1915).[1] In a letter to his patron John Quinn, dated Paris, February 4, 1913, Jacob Epstein writes of seeing a marvelous African head, beyond his means to acquire, in a local collection. Elizabeth Barker has suggested that the work alluded to was in fact this one and that Epstein attempted to capture its striking features in a drawing made that year.[2] It was a personal coup when, following Brummer's death,[3] Epstein was able to add the work to his own collection of antiquities. He reflects on this in his autobiography: "African works lend themselves to analysis of plasticity, and several writers have attempted such analysis. I have in my possession the great work called 'Brummer Head' which I had seen in Joseph Brummer's shop in Paris many years before in 1913."[4]

In 1912 the art critic André Warnod used this work as a point of departure for an illustration of the formal power of African sculpture, which by then had captured the imagination of the art world:

> Consider this head with its long hair, look with what simplicity it is executed; a few planes, very direct lines, and that suffices to give the work something definitive, which impresses. The eyes are close together, the chin is simply drawn as the point made by intersecting lines; the face has sharp angles; and it all works together to give this head an unfamiliar appearance. The hair is stylized with the same authority; several locks fall on the right, in a single thrust. Undoubtedly, this head was created with a feeling of absolute love and faith and yet in accordance with a very savage, brutal, and violent law, which is perhaps what gives this face its character and expression. Put a Greek head next to this Negro figure. What will at first strike you is that the Greek head would seem, by contrast, almost limp in execution and nearly insignificant in expression beside the rude vigor and directness of Negro Art. Without a doubt, the Greek head will continue to offer its admirable harmony and its superhuman beauty, but after some time, one might find it a little tame, especially if you were not too outraged and shocked by the pungency and violence of the other. It seems that today pungency is especially favored.[5]

Within the Fang corpus, this work is especially distinctive for its definition of the full ovoid head as an independent form supported by the cylindrical neck and crowned by subtly animated locks. Most prominent of the inscribed facial features are the eroded metallic disks of the eyes. The tresses with tapered tips are staggered in length and bridge the transition between the head and neck. Clusters of locks flare out from the sides and back of the neck ever so slightly. The one at the back of the head consists of three distinct curved tresses that are gathered at the nape and extend farther down the neck. Each tendril is deeply carved as a distinct mass so that the surface of the head is an alternation of negative and positive striations.

Epstein's own commentary reflects the awe he felt, as a practicing sculptor, for the formal accomplishment of the work: "This remarkable Pahouin head has qualities which transcend the most mysterious Egyptian work. It is an evocation of a spirit that penetrates another world . . . and could only be produced where spiritism still holds sway. On the plastic side also, the head is very remarkable, with its surrounding prongs of hair off-setting the large roundness of the forehead, a perfect example of free-wood-carving."[6]

1. Einstein 1915, pp. 16–17.
2. Barker 1988, p. 908, fig. 25.
3. In his autobiography, Epstein remembers the year of this acquisition as 1935; however, Brummer died in 1947 (Passuth 2002, p. 43).
4. Epstein 1955, p. 189.
5. Warnod 1912.
6. Epstein 1955, p. 189.

EX COLL.
Joseph Brummer, Paris, ca. 1911; Sir Jacob Epstein, London, 1947; Carlo Monzino, Lugano

EXHIBITED
"Exhibition of Avant Garde French Paintings," Skupyna Vytvarnych Umelcu, Prague, 1913; "The Epstein Collection of Tribal and Exotic Sculpture," The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1960; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27,



1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1,1985; "African Aesthetics: The Carlo Monzino Collection," The Center for African Art, New York, May 7–September 7, 1986; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Le grand héritage: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, May 21–September 15, 1992; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006–July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Warnod 1912; *Umělecký měsíčník* 1913; Einstein 1915, pp.16–17; Basler 1929, fig. 41a; Kjersmeier 1938, pl. 17; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, pp. 168–69, fig. 209; London 1960, cover; Delange 1967, p. 141; Perrois 1972, p. 93; Perrois 1973, p. 32 (drawing only); Segy 1975, pp. 21, 220, fig. 12; Cork 1976, p. 455; Bassani 1984, p. 10; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 2, p. 395; New York 1986, pp. 140–44; Leeds and London 1987, p. 18 (not exhibited); Barker 1988, p. 909, fig. 24; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 421, fig. 564; Bassani and McLeod 1989, pp. 34, 69, 110; Florence 1989, pp. 19, 251, no. and pl. 77; Paris 1991–92, pp. 116–17; Paris 1992, pp. 178–79; Bordeaux 1997–98, pp. 221–22 (not exhibited); Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 553, fig. 304; Paris 2000–2001, pp. 244–45; Perrois 2006, p. 128, pl. 2; Paris 2006–7b, p. 121.

44. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood
H. 11 7/16 in. (29.1 cm)
Private collection

This haunting work was procured by Paul Guillaume for Joseph Brummer and was featured in their earliest influential publications of 1915 and 1917. A spectral presence, it was fervently handled by its original patrons and thus exhibits extensive erosion of its features. The full broad forehead narrows sharply, culminating in an almost triangular chin. The bridge of the nose, which is now completely abraded, once bisected the deep hollowed recesses of the eyes. A transverse band stretching from one side of the head to the other frames the face and intersects at the summit with a sagittal crest that extends down the back of the head.

In its current state, reflecting the impact of prior veneration, this artifact powerfully evokes a sense of absence and loss. The results of its being handled over generations amount to a kind of erasure. More than any other surviving work in the Fang corpus, this work gives expression to the impetus behind the tradition responsible for its creation—the desire to impart material form to that tradition and in doing so to evoke a host of otherwise intangible and elusive ancestral relations.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris; Joseph Brummer, Paris; Ernest Brummer, Paris; Alphonse Kann, Paris; Rosemary and George Lois, New York

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Einstein 1915, p.18; Apollinaire and Guillaume 1917, pl. 1; Pijoán 1931, p. 171, fig. 234; Berjonneau and Sonnery 1987, ill. p. 113; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 331, fig. 853; Paris 1991–92, p. 113.



45. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head (The Great Bieri)

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, brass
H. 18⅝ in. (46.5 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 1979.206.229



In reflecting upon the significance of this work, Robert Goldwater observed, "For every style and every period, in the history of the arts of mankind, a few works stand out above the rest. Somehow they both contain and surpass all these qualities which we value in the art of the culture from which they come. They seem to have captured the ideal of design and expression toward which many artists tended. . . . The Great Bieri is such a work: it is the embodiment of Fang sculpture, and one of the great classics of African art."[1]

This majestic work is among the most frequently reproduced works of African art. Its impact derives from its bold hierarchic presence, which has been rendered on a monumental scale. While the Great Bieri is the largest of the known Fang heads, it is also the most formally succinct and pared down. Its author has masterfully distilled the genre to its essential elements through gently equilibrated curved lines. So that the astonishing breadth of the domed forehead does not overpower the narrow eroded chin, a band of hair extends at either side of the head. These vertical extensions are broadened and enlivened at successive intervals by the added features of the inverted C-shaped ears and two cylindrical rolls. A third, broader tress falls from the crown of the head down the back. The penetrating omniscient gaze is directed outward from the circular metallic disks of the eyes, framed by lightly incised curved brows; the vertical nose is squared at the base. On the inky black surface of the face, there are highlighted passages of oil residue. On the reverse side, areas of the patina have worn away to expose the underlying rich red-brown wood. The abrasion and wear at the base of the face, across the mouth and chin, occurred through ritual handling. A vertical split reaches from the summit to the chin.

This icon has been a muse to artists both in the West and beyond since the early twentieth century. The first person to whom its ownership has been attributed was the Chilean poet and founder of the *Creacionismo* movement, Vicente Huidobro. In 1916 Huidobro settled in Paris, where he established contacts with such members of the avant-garde as the artists Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Francis Picabia, and Jacques Lipchitz and the writers Blaise Cendrars and Guillaume Apollinaire. He appears to have acquired this work shortly after his arrival in Paris and in 1918 was inspired to write the poem *Ecuatorial,* dedicated to Picasso, which reflected his embrace of Cubism in poetic expression—and specifically of this work from



equatorial Africa as his muse.[2] Like his counterparts in the visual arts, Huidobro did not refer overtly to the imagery of the African sculptures he collected, but rather identified powerfully with what he saw as their ideal blending of representation and abstraction.

Huidobro subsequently relinquished this epic creation to Paul Guillaume (fig. 38), who in turn sold it to Jacob Epstein by the late 1920s. Epstein recalls his earliest encounter with Guillaume: "When I was in Paris in 1912, I saw an advertisement in a colonial paper asking for African carvings in hard wood. Calling at the address in Montmartre I met Paul Guillaume for the first time, in a small attic room. He started the vogue in African work."[3] Epstein's collection was sold after his death in August 1959.[4] Before its dispersal at auction, Goldwater acquired four of the works for the Museum of Primitive Art in New York in 1961. Among these were the Great Bieri and a Fang female figure that was once owned by André Derain (cat. no. 23).

The Great Bieri's formal qualities evoke one of Epstein's statements concerning the eloquence of African sculpture: "In much of the work there is great anatomic truth to be found, extremely simplified, and often expressed architecturally."[5] Epstein further comments on the keen powers of observation manifested in the heads carved by Fang masters: "These heads are realistic works, obviously the result of a very minute study of nature. You can see the well-developed bony structure of the forehead, the sunken eyes, protruding jawbone and the flesh around the mouth and nose shrinking, as if to crumble away. They are burial symbols."[6]

1. Goldwater 1962, p. [1].
2. Louis Perrois, personal communication, March 2005.
3. Epstein 1955, p. 188.
4. Bassani and McLeod 1989, p. 61.
5. Epstein and Haskell 1932, p. 87.
6. Epstein 1955, p. 90.

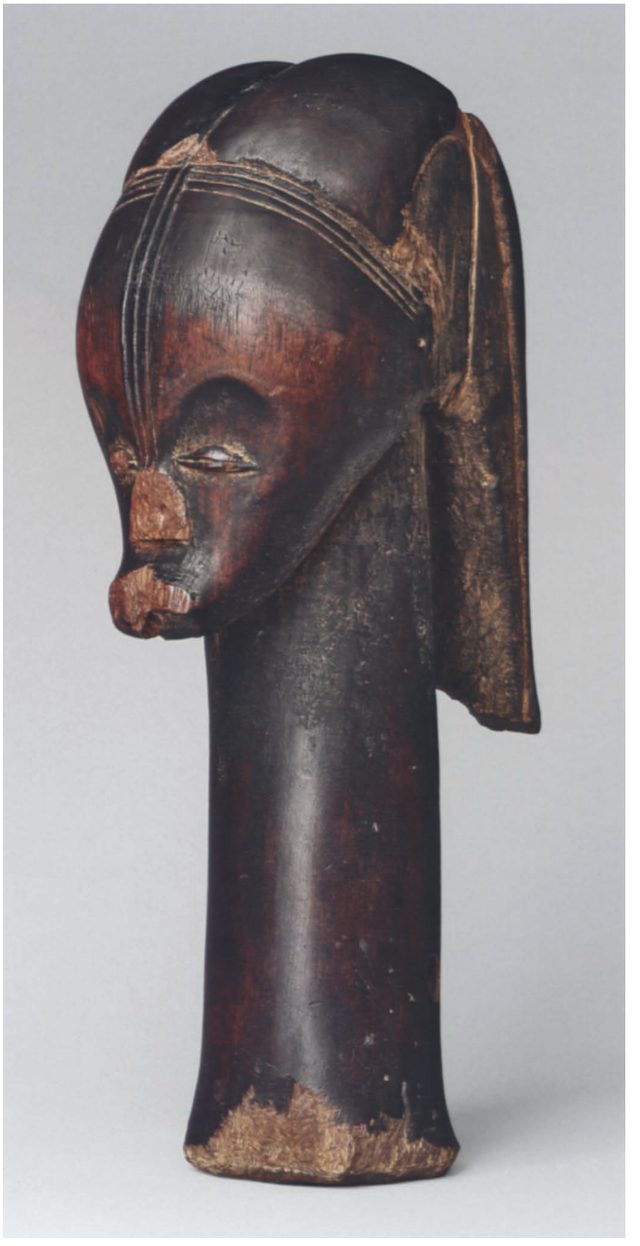
EX COLL.
Vicente Huidobro, Paris, before 1920; Paul Guillaume, Paris, 1925; Sir Jacob Epstein, London; Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1961

EXHIBITED
"La grande peinture contemporaine à la collection Paul Guillaume," Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, May 25–June 27, 1929; "Primitive African Sculpture," Lefevre Galleries, London, May 1933; "African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Arte in Africa," Centro di Studi di Storia delle Arti Africane, Florence, March 15–18, 1984; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989; "Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 1–September 3, 2000; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Basler 1929, fig. 44; Guillaume and Munro 1929, pl. 32; Paris 1929, pp. 172–73; Pijoán 1931, p. 173, fig. 236; London 1933, n.p., no. 67; Evans 1935, WE 315, 316; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 366; Radin and Sweeney 1952, pl. 71; Portier and Poncetton 1956, pl. 6, fig. 7; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, pp. 166–67; Roy 1958, p. 9; Goldwater 1962, pp. [3–6]; Robbins 1966, p. 176, fig. 226; Leiris and Delange 1967, pp. 326, 420, fig. 375; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 154; Wingert 1970, fig. 99; Perrois 1972, p. 91; Braun 1982, p. 78; McKesson 1982, fig. 17; Moser 1982, p. 41; Bassani 1984, p. 10; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 266; Bassani 1986, p. 8; Newton, Jones, and Ezra 1987, p. 95; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 252, fig. 158; Bassani and McLeod 1989, pp. 38, 111; Florence 1989, p. 19; Paris 1991–92, p. 109; Webb 1991, p. 60, fig. 9; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 38; Roy 1998, p. 6; New York 2000, p. 80; Paris 2000–2001, p. 235; Visonà 2001, p. 356; Perrois 2006, p. 128, pl. 1.

46. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood
H. 13½ in. (34.3 cm)
Collection of Jeff Soref



Beginning in 1911, Paul Guillaume, a twenty-year-old employee of a rubber tire firm, began to provide Joseph Brummer with artifacts from Gabon and Congo. According to an account by Brummer, Guillaume Apollinaire had brought to his attention several artifacts in the window of the store where Guillaume worked.[1] Brummer negotiated with Guillaume concerning the purchase of these and other artifacts that made their way to the firm through its colonial sources. Eventually, Guillaume independently directed those contacts in Africa to supply him with Gabonese sculpture.[2] As a result, Guillaume became the most prestigious collector and dealer of African art between the wars. Over the course of his career, he also sought to actively promote African art as one of the world's great artistic traditions.

This especially refined head came to be owned by Guillaume. The full rounded forehead at the summit contrasts with the sharply tapering jaw, which terminates in the narrow base of the chin. The hairline is underscored by a series of incised lines that intersect with others bisecting the forehead. At the crown of the head the hair is subdivided into two tresses that gracefully extend down and away from the back of the neck. The narrow horizontal slits of the eyes are raised in slight relief, while the nose and mouth are substantially abraded. This serene and tranquil head is supported by an especially long slender neck, evocative of the stalk of a plant, that broadens at its base.

1. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 152.
2. Ibid., p. 153.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris; Rosemary and George Lois, New York

EXHIBITED
"African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935.

PUBLISHED
Evans 1935, WE 313; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 363; Drouot 1965, lot 147, ill.; Paris 1991–92, p. 105.

47. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, oil
H. 13¼ in. (34.9 cm)
Private collection



Striking in its lustrous surface impregnated with palm oil, this work is informed by an incomparable grace. The Fang sculptor has both captured an ideal of transcendent beauty and created an eloquent tribute to immortality. The columnar neck serves as an axis that underscores the perfectly equilibrated symmetry of the face. The features of the delicate orb are defined by a heartlike configuration beginning at the central vertical ridge of the nose, which is continuous with the brow, and terminating at the chin. Within the recessed plane of the face are the raised elliptical passages of the closed eyes and slightly open mouth. The expression is one of serene introspection.

At the apex of the forehead, three evenly spaced tresses of hair extend as broad bands back and away from the head. The outer two of these frame the face when viewed frontally, while from the sides they evoke undulating ribbons that instill this solid form with an ethereal quality. In paring down the representation to elemental forms, the sculptor has seized upon the bands of hair as an opportunity to endow a static representation with a dimension of kinetic vitality.

According to James Fernandez, such works played a role in inspiring the visions visited upon *byeri* initiates during their rite of passage. Following a night during which they were made to sleep with the relic receptacle and its sculptural element facing them at the head of their beds, they were questioned in the morning about their dreams. These were in turn interpreted as signs sent by their ancestors.[1]

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 263.

EX COLL.
Ernest Ascher, Paris, before 1935; Helena Rubinstein, New York and Paris, 1935–66

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africaine et d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Afrique: Cent tribus—cent chefs-d'oeuvre," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Pavillon de Marsan, Paris, October 28–November 30, 1964; "Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Africa: The Art of a Continent, 100 Works of Power and Beauty," Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 7–September 29, 1996; "Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 1–September 3, 2000.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1930, p. 15, no. 165 (ill. n.p. pl.); Evans 1935, WE 321, 322; New York 1935, p. 47, no. 370; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 164, fig. 206; Paris 1964, fig. 59; Parke-Bernet 1964, pp. 190–91, lot 213; Fagg 1965, p. 76, fig. 79; Fagg 1966, p. 37; Pericot-Garcia, Galloway, and Lommel 1967, p. 170; Perrois 1972, p. 92; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 330; Paris 1991–92, p. 111; London 1995–96, p. 318; New York 1996, pp. 98–99; New York 2000, p. 81.



48. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, iron, brass (?), oil
H. 11⅛ in. (28.2 cm)
Private collection

Günter Tessmann claimed that the earliest form of Fang ancestral sculptures consisted of freestanding heads terminating at the base in a stem that was inserted into the cylindrical bark vessel containing a family's relics.[1] According to James Fernandez's Fang sources, the container was seen as the torso that completed the head positioned at the summit.[2] He noted that these two centers of the body were seen as complementary opposites in Fang culture: while the stomach is considered to be the locus of power and thought, the head is responsible for apprehending and directing one's actions.

This disembodied head is distinctive for its compact form and streamlined contours. Its appearance is completely transformed depending on the viewer's vantage point. Facing the work underscores the oval form of the face, with its broad expansive forehead. Seen in profile, the face appears flat, as does the crown of the head, and its strong vertical intersects with the horizontal line of the projecting coiffure element at a forty-five-degree angle.

From the frontal perspective, the contours of the face narrow sharply, terminating in the horizontal lines of the incised mouth and chin. In contrast with the refined, highly polished surface of most of the face, that of the prominent ovoid eyes is uneven and punctuated by iron pupils. Above are the gentle curves of the brows. The long vertical bridge of the nose, beginning at the level of the inner corner of the eyes, broadens at its base and terminates in a line that is parallel to those of the mouth and chin. Undertones of red are apparent throughout, as is applied oil concentrated in the area of the forehead.

Across the surface of the head, parallel inscribed lines depict hair that is divided by a central part and arranged in a series of distinct sections. At either side at the level of the ears, horizontal winglike elements of the coiffure extend outward. These lateral projections continue around the perimeter and meet at the back of the head. The neck terminates in a broadened, comparatively roughly hewn base.

James Johnson Sweeney, co-curator of the exhibition "African Negro Art," held in 1935 at the Museum of Modern Art, acquired this work for his own collection from Charles Ratton. Jean-Louis Paudrat documents that, as the leading dealer of his generation, Ratton began assembling African works about 1923. He himself lent sixty-two sculptures to the landmark MoMA exhibition.[3]

1. Tessmann 1991–92, p. 285.
2. Fernandez 1966, p. 55.
3. Paudrat 1984–85, pp. 160, 164.

EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris, 1931; James Johnson and Laura Harden Sweeney, New York; William A. McCarty-Cooper, Los Angeles





EXHIBITED

"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Africa: The Art of a Continent, 100 Works of Power and Beauty," Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 7–September 29, 1996; "Three African Traditions: The Art of the Dogon, Fang and Songye," Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut, January 31–April 18, 1999; "Treasures," National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., November 17, 2004–August 15, 2005.

PUBLISHED

Ratton 1931, pl. 18; Buraud 1948, pl. [10]; Roy 1957, p. 69; Roy 1958, p. 69; Perrois 1972, p. 337; Sotheby's 1986, lot 52; Paris 1991–92, p. 121; Christie's 1992, pp. 68–69, lot 133; Lehuard 1992, p. 17; London 1995–96, pp. 319–20, no. 4.91b; Greenwich 1999, p. 28, no. 42; Washington, D.C., 2004–5, n.p.

49. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Fang peoples, Betsi group; Gabon
19th century
Wood
H. 12¼ in. (31.1 cm)
Private collection

Over the course of his sojourn in Fang communities in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea at the beginning of the twentieth century, Günter Tessmann noted that creation of different kinds of artifacts was a highly specialized affair: "A person who manufactures eating spoons cannot make any other wood product, not even a stirring spoon. A stool maker knows only how to make stools, a crossbow carver can only make crossbows . . . in one village there are often no more than one or two people who know a craft."[1] During his own research among the Fang in the second half of the century, James Fernandez observed that carvers were nonetheless subjected to forceful critiques by members of their communities that were intended to influence the ultimate form of a work in progress.[2] Although works such as this *byeri* head were never intended to depict individuals, it was critical that the representation convincingly evoke a living being. A smooth finished face that replicates the sheen and glow of healthy skin is a notable aesthetic quality of sculptures of the highest caliber.[3]

Relatively round with a slightly rectilinear cast to the chin, this subject's face is asymmetrical: the graduated curvature of the proper right side is fuller. The expression is one of sensitive introspection. The abrasions to the base of the nose and surface of the mouth, as well as the far more extensive pitting of the entire neck, represent alterations intentionally wrought upon such works throughout their ritual lives. The complex coiffure is articulated through deeply incised individual tresses parted at the center of the forehead and swept to the sides, where two parallel superimposed horizontal ridges project outward at an angle. These lateral pairs of tresses extend around to the back of the head, where they meet above the nape of the neck. The crown of the head is flattened in the back, and its surface is enlivened with a pattern of semicircular motifs inscribed around the perimeter. This "transverse chignon" arrangement has been identified by Louis Perrois as one of three different hairstyles featured on *byeri* heads. He suggests that the heads with hair plaited close to the scalp high on the forehead and with a chignon portray female subjects.[4]

Like catalogue number 42, this work was collected by Catholic missionaries. Among the significant changes in Fang society reflected by the observations of Tessmann at the beginning of the twentieth century and by Fernandez at midcentury was the decreased willingness of families to provide access to and relinquish such works. According to Tessmann, the *eyima byeri* sculptures were easily purchased, while the reliquary was impossible to obtain. Fifty years later, Fernandez found "it became difficult indeed to buy or even view these statuettes which were practically all secreted away from the zealous eye of administration and missionary."[5]





1. Tessmann 1913, vol. 1, p. 213.
2. Fernandez 1966, pp. 54–55.
3. Ibid., p. 56.
4. Perrois 1995–96.
5. Fernandez 1966, p. 55.

EX COLL.
Musée Missionaire des Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil; Musée Missionaire de l'Abbaye Blanche à Mortain, France; Morris J. Pinto, New York

EXHIBITED
"Fang," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991–April 15, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Sotheby's 1989a, lot 57; Paris 1991–92, p. 120; De Grunne 1994, p. 50, fig. 9.

50. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 23¼ in. (59 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 8013

Collected before 1890 by a colonial administrator named Guyot, this strikingly minimal reliquary sculpture has been attributed to a Mahongwe author working in the eastern Gabon region defined by the juncture of the Ivindo and Mouniangui rivers. Beginning with the research of Efraim Andersson, the Mahongwe have been described as one of several subgroups of the northern Kota that include the Shamaye, Shaké, and Kota.[1] Members of Kota society directed prayer and sacrifices at the burial sites of the dead *(aku)* in order to enlist their help in redressing misfortune or sickness.[2] Parallel to those regular appeals for intercession was the cult through which families honored their most notable ancestors by preserving their relics in a woven receptacle tied to a schematic guardian figure.

In this work the human figure has been radically distilled to the elemental form of a narrow attenuated ellipse joined to an openwork lozenge. The elongated head tapers to a narrow point at its crown and chin and is bisected by a median line. Its only features are a pair of circular perforations suggesting eyes. On the reverse side, a series of empty holes extend from the summit to the base of the neck along a ridge that once served for the attachment of organic additions. These accessories would have significantly expanded the pared-down abstraction of the representation. The soaring form is especially riveting for the brilliant luminosity of the copper that has been applied to the surface of the face.

Eugenia Herbert has emphasized the extent to which copper was valued over gold by societies throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Given its relative scarcity in the region, it was the preferred material drawn upon for aesthetic enhancement in the form of adornments that covered the body from head to toe.[3] The process of annealing, or alternately heating and cold-hammering, was used to configure the metal into sheets as thin as 0.4 millimeters. Beyond its commercial worth and visual appeal, this material historically invoked associations with fertility, healing, and protection in the region.[4]

1. Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 11.
2. Andersson 1974, p. 109.
3. Herbert 1984, p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 11.

EX COLL.
Paul Guyot, before 1890

EXHIBITED
"Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006–July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 2000–2001, p. 107; Paris 2006–7b, p. 76.



51. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 21⅛ in. (53.5 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
III C 1088

This work is the first example recognized in Europe of a major tradition of reliquary sculpture developed in eastern Gabon. It was collected by Dr. Oskar Lenz, an explorer and geologist born in Leipzig, who made several trips on the Upper Ogooué River between 1874 and 1876 on behalf of the Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Äquatorialafrikas. In giving this figure to Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde in 1875, Lenz identified it as a "fetish-idol" of the "Aduma" and "Oschebo" peoples, who lived intermingled along a stretch of the Middle Ogooué.[1] Leon Siroto's careful reconstruction of the history of this and closely related works in museum collections has led him to attribute them more precisely as the creations of several peoples located between the eastern tributaries of the Lower Ivindo River. These include the Shaké, BoNgom, and Ndambomo groups, belonging to Kele-speaking peoples, and the Mahongwe, BuSamai, and Kota groups of the Kota-speaking peoples.[2]

In the Kota, Mahongwe, and Shamaye devotional cult dedicated to the ancestors, the relics conserved and venerated by members of a clan and the figural artifact accompanying them were all referred to as *bwete*.[3] The highly abstract Mahongwe representations are distinctive for their construction, which encases a wood core within an alluring brass sheath. These are often described as "foliate," given their flattened leaflike configuration. While the design is relatively two-dimensional, it is subtly modulated by the play between the concave face and convex base, established by the carved-wood understructure, and by the shifting surface textures of the applied metals. The shape of the head is ovoid, with a straight lower edge. The head is surmounted by a cylindrical extension encased in brass wire that is positioned at a forty-five-degree angle. According Louis Perrois, this feature represents a thick braid, called *i-benda,* worn by notables in a traditional hairstyle known as *bakani*.[4]

A broad median band extends from the upper rim to the bridge of the beaklike nose, made from a projecting brass element. The facial features are all concentrated at its base and are aligned with this axis. One of the two applied circular metal eyes—the proper left—is missing in early photographic records and has since been replaced.[5] The nose is flanked by a pair of bands, composed of a series of wire filaments, that extend below the eyes and curve out to the rim of the chin. On either side of the central axis, the surface is covered with carefully applied cut-metal bands that create a succession of horizontal striations. The cylindrical neck echoes the form of the coiffure at the summit and is also wrapped in brass wire. The lower part, an ovoid perforated at the sides, is covered with brass sheeting enhanced with repoussé designs. Ancestral relics were bound within a packet or basket that was tied to this base.

1. Siroto 1968, p. 24.
2. Ibid., p. 89.
3. Perrois 1969, p. 9.
4. Perrois and Siroto 1969, p. 67.
5. Siroto 1968, p. 87, fig. 8.

EX COLL.
Oskar Lenz, Leipzig and Vienna, ca. 1874–75

EXHIBITED
"Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa. Collection Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992; "Arte da Africa: Obras-primas do Museu Etnológico de Berlim," Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro, October 13, 2003–January 4, 2004, Brasilia, January 19–March 21, 2004, Sao Paulo, January 28–March 28, 2004; "Weltsprache Abstraktion: Gestalt, Magie, Zeichen," Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, May 21–October 15, 2006.

PUBLISHED
Siroto 1968, p. 87, fig. 8; Krieger 1969, fig. 126; Perrois and Siroto 1969, p. 67; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 90, fig. 14; Maastricht 1992, fig. 53; Koloss 2002, p. 122; Rio de Janiero, Brasilia, and Sao Paulo 2003–4, pp. 122–23, 321; Berlin 2006, p. 16, cover.



52. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 20⅞ in. (53 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)

This superb creation is considered the finest of its kind for its physical breadth and the artistry of its construction. When the work is compared with the previous example, collected by Oskar Lenz (cat. no. 51), a series of striking and subtle distinctions are apparent. Not only is the width of the head greater in expanse, but the filaments that extend horizontally across the surface are not as flattened, affording the work greater surface contrast. Another distinction lies in the manner in which the tips of those filaments are integrated into the decorative scheme of both the front and back sides, to very different ends. The virtuosity of the metalwork is apparent on the front, where the folded filament tips form a delicate seam along either side of the vertical axis in a manner reminiscent of fine needlepoint.

No mere two-dimensional frontal representation, the sculpture displays even more complex adornment on the reverse. Here the filaments have been wrapped around the edges so that their ends define an elegant alternating serrated border around the outer perimeter. At the center, aligned with and below the extension of the chignon, is a median axis composed of four parallel raised ridges that span the entire length of the back. On either side are bilaterally symmetrical repoussé designs of a series of concentric triangles that reach to the outer edges. These densely stippled graphic patterns afford the work another textural dimension. Directly below the striated coiled neck, the plated surfaces of the base are embossed with a network of lozenges.

In Mahongwe society such works were assigned guardianship of relics derived from singularly important individuals. According to Louis Perrois, the candidates worthy of contributing relics included not only a clan's most distinguished male leaders but also mothers of an exceptional number of children or of twins, the latter being associated with prosperity and good fortune.[1] Leon Siroto notes that those who distinguished themselves were perceived to be invested with mystical powers that inhered in their skulls following their death. Close relatives in turn retained these as a means of positively influencing the affairs of their extended family.[2] The foliate figure that surmounts the relic was intended to deflect any adversaries from interfering with its power.[3]

Such works were also taken out of seclusion by clan leaders and deployed in village rites in response to significant crises such as the death of a communal leader, the approach of an epidemic, or the launch of a dangerous hunting expedition. In order to intensify their potential to address these concerns effectively and fortify the community on such occasions, all the reliquaries of a village were brought together in the belief that their combined power constituted a formidable protective barrier and an impenetrable shield.[4]





1. Perrois 1969, p. 11.
2. Siroto 1968, pp. 22–23.
3. Ibid., p. 86.
4. Ibid., p. 27.

EX COLL.
André Fourquet, Paris, 1972

EXHIBITED
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "Kota," Musée Dapper, Paris, April–October 1986; "The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987.

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 88–89, 324, fig. 13; Perrois 1979, p. 132, fig. 130; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 18, vol. 2, p. 352.

53. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 22 3/16 in. (56.3 cm)
Private collection

Among Kele- and Kota-speaking peoples, the contents of each family reliquary were conceived of as highly distinct in character. Not only did the preserved relics, enhanced with decorative metal additions, represent ties to specific ancestors, but the magical substances that accompanied them varied greatly. These could include copper artifacts such as rings and bracelets.[1] Leon Siroto has noted that each of the foliate figures was identified by an individual name unrelated to those of the family members represented by the relics, but rather derived from the reputation of that figure for efficacy in certain magical endeavors.[2]

Despite this emphasis on the individualized nature of each reliquary ensemble, the corpus of accompanying foliate sculptures is surprisingly consistent, both stylistically and technically. Louis Perrois has suggested that this is due to the small size of the Mahongwe population.[3] Subtle differences are evident both in delicate adjustments to the proportional relationships between different elements and in the repoussé motifs that decorate the surface.[4] In this exceptionally lovely example, the concavity of the head is especially pronounced, and the neck elongated. The wire filaments covering the surface are slightly curved, as is the bottom edge of the head. The median band that extends from the coiffure finial down the length of the back of the head is composed of three parallel raised ridges. The sides of the back are elegantly enhanced by vertically oriented serrated bands. One of these is articulated by the tips of the wire filaments that have been extended from the front of the head across the edge to create a border along the length of the reverse side. This is complemented by a more expansive zigzag motif stippled into the surface of the metal sheeting that covers the back of the head.

Siroto has proposed that the silhouette of the foliate figures evokes the blade of a knife or a spear mounted on a "handle."[5] And, in fact, elaborately ornate regional knives often featured handles similar to the necks of these reliquary forms wrapped in fine copper wire or heavier brass or copper ribbon. Siroto suggests that the formal reference to a bladelike configuration invested the works with a design identified with the collective character of leadership exemplified by the individuals whose relics they accompanied.

1. Perrois 1969, p. 10.
2. Siroto 1968, p. 27.
3. Perrois 1976, p. 16.
4. Siroto 1968, p. 23.
5. Ibid.

EX COLL.
Jean Roudillon and Olivier Le Corneur, Paris

EXHIBITED
"African Sculpture: The Shape of Surprise," C. W. Art Gallery, Greenvale, Long Island, 1980; "African Masterpieces from Private Collections," Katonah Museum of Art, December 1993.

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 78, 323; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 892.





54. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 18½ in. (47 cm)
W. and U. Horstmann Collection



The incandescent russet tonality of the copper surface is disrupted here by the introduction of two delicate brass filaments. These yellow threads extend from the corner of each eye to the outer edge of the work. Foliate creations of this kind not only expanded upon the significance of the contents of ancestral reliquaries, but also assumed an active role in animated ritual performances of the *bwete* association. Every extended family owned one such *bwete* figure. The work served as a point of contact with the powers of notable forebears, whose intercession was sought in matters of vital importance. These included familial concerns, among them the fertility of its female members, bounty from hunting or fishing, prosperity from trading, and good health.[1] Petitions took the form of offerings of nourishment, sacrificial libations, and recitations of special prayers. While such works generally remained concealed within the home of the family's head, they were brought out at dances performed during great festivals.

According to Louis Perrois, the *bwete* was conserved in its own small chamber at the back of the house of the clan chief.[2] Although the figure was attached to the relic basket with vegetable fibers, it could be removed for certain rites. These included the presentation of the relics during initiation as well as a *bwete* dance likened to a comic skit in which the figures were manipulated like marionettes.[3] Over the course of his research, Leon Siroto learned from his Mahongwe and BuSamai sources that their fathers danced with the "face of the *bwété* during the great communal *bwété* rites that periodically gathered a clan's membership together."[4] Observance of *bwete* was accompanied by feasting, dancing, and the making of medicines to mystically fortify the community.

The foliate figures were also drawn upon as part of the rites required for initiation into *bwete*. Siroto notes that young adolescent men had to compensate the family chief with fowl and bananas in order to "see the *bwété*."[5] The initiation rite involved the convocation of every lineage, whose representative brought his *bwete* with him. Following secret ceremonies held outside the village in the untamed bush, intended to protect the initiate from the power of the relics, all of a clan's *bwete* (as many as

twenty or thirty) were collectively displayed in the village square before assembled relatives. According to Perrois, the relic basket containing bone fragments that was attached to each figure was covered with a red powder (*iyola*) and libations. On that occasion, the head of each lineage, sumptuously dressed in a costume made of red raffia cloth and an enormous headdress of touraco feathers, danced holding the *bwete* figure and basket.[6] This gesture was intended to instill respect for the ancestors among all members of society.[7]

1. Siroto 1968, p. 27; Perrois 1969, p. 11.
2. Perrois 1976, p. 24.
3. Ibid.
4. Siroto 1968, p. 88.
5. Ibid., p. 86.
6. Perrois 1969, p. 11.
7. Perrois 1976, p. 24.

EX COLL.
René Rasmussen, Paris

EXHIBITED
Paris 1986–87; Florence 1989; New York 1990–91; Paris 1992; Zug 1995.

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 85, no. 7; Paris 1986–87, pp. 16–17, no. 16; Florence 1989, p. 253, no. and pl. 84; New York 1990–91, pp. 100–101, no. 17; Paris 1992, pp. 184, 268, no. 184; Zug 1995, p. 23, no. 9; Bassani, Bockemühl, and McNaughton 2002, p. 128, fig. 48.

55. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 17 in. (43.2 cm)
Private collection



Brass was not produced indigenously in the region of western equatorial Africa where this sculptural tradition was developed. Instead it was introduced gradually by European traders. The major brass commodities imported from Europe as units of wealth, which were both accumulated as currency and harvested for their metal, were wire and neptunes, a form of industrially produced vessel. Leon Siroto notes that the lateral strips of the *bwete* figures were composed of flattened-out wires, and the broad frontal and dorsal vertical strips were cut out of neptunes.[1] On one level, sheathing reliquary sculptures in such costly materials made evident the degree to which they were preciously valued heirlooms that manifested a family's prosperity and prestige. Additionally, the innate characteristics of brass and copper as expressive media—their luminous reflective qualities, identified with spirituality—appear to have ideally suited their integration into this genre of devotional representation.

Louis Perrois has pointed out that Mahongwe society is patrilineal and that its three defining divisions are the tribe (*ilongo*), the clan (*ikaka*), and the lineage (*diyo*).[2] Mahongwe relic baskets were frequently accompanied by multiple figures that referenced the various lineages, or segments, of a clan.[3] In such instances the primary

sculpture is the largest and evokes the clan's founding ancestor. The present work, slightly more intimate in scale than the previously considered foliate *bwete* representations, features some subtle variations. Among these is the application of the wire bands to the surface of the face in tiers that are slightly curved and extend around the back, terminating on either side of the spine. Other elements introduced in this version include a raised median ridge that bisects the forehead's central vertical band and the contrasting tone and uneven surface of the iron eyes.

1. Siroto 1968, p. 86.
2. Perrois 1976, p. 20.
3. Perrois 1969, p. 12.

EX COLL.
Marc and Denyse Ginzberg, New York

PUBLISHED
Lehuard 1978a, p. 7; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 80–81; Perrois 1979, p. 129, fig. 124; Bacquart 1998b, p. 122. fig. A.

56. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mahongwe group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, brass
H. 15⅛ in. (38.2 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-68

The formal design of this foliate figure is classic, its technical artistry exquisite. Its aesthetic is distinctive for the natural patina that overlays the lightly encrusted surface. This effect doubtless developed over the course of years, during which the work survived in Gabon but was no longer in use and subjected to regular polishing. Leon Siroto has noted that the practices of veneration associated with such works came under attack by missionaries and indigenous witch-hunting movements during the 1920s.[1] The abandonment of such artifacts may have begun in 1923, when entire communities fleeing from colonial forced labor carried their familial relics with them but disposed of the cumbersome *bwete* figures. According to Louis Perrois, between 1938 and 1940 the Mahongwe villages beyond Mekambo surrendered their ritual figures to Catholic missionaries, who disposed of them in deep wells.[2]

In the 1940s an antiwitchcraft movement, known as Mademoiselle, was introduced from the Middle Congo into several regions of Gabon. Under the leadership of a Kota from Mekambo, local acolytes sought to expose and destroy all the sacred rites and related artifacts that they considered dangerous to society. Accused of using *bwete*'s influence for nefarious ends, clan chiefs disposed of their own reliquaries by throwing them into the rivers.[3] As a consequence, artifacts of this kind were either confiscated, destroyed, or concealed by the families that owned them. Caches of such works were subsequently found shallowly buried in old villages (see fig. 8). The significant disruption of the related rites not only brought an end to the ongoing creation of these traditional reliquary sculptures but also displaced those that survived from their central position in the spiritual lives of the patrons who had once cherished them. By Perrois's calculation, a relatively small corpus of Mahongwe *bwete* figures has survived in the West. He estimates that until 1965 it comprised no more than thirty works; with the subsequent discovery of a series of village caches, it now numbers approximately two hundred.[4]

1. Siroto 1968, p. 27.
2. Perrois 1969, p. 14.
3. Perrois 1976, p. 26.
4. Ibid., p. 16.

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; "Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Barbier-Mueller, Genf," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, February 27–April 10, 1988, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt-am-Main, June 4–August 14, 1988, Haus der Kunst, Munich, December 17, 1988–February 19, 1989, Musée Rath, Geneva, March 15–May 15, 1989; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 66; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 217, no. 132; Geneva 2007, pp. 202–3, 389.



57. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Shamaye group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 17 1/16 in. (43 cm)
Private collection



The use of seemingly pedestrian wire or bands of copper and brass to enhance sublime reliquary sculpture is characteristic of the creative efforts of artists in the Ivindo River basin, including those of Shaké, Shamaye, Ndambomo, and Mahongwe heritage.[1] The Shamaye of the Bouéni region, to the south of Makoke, were closely related to the Mahongwe.[2] In its overall configuration, this highly abstract representation evokes regional forms of metal currency. The outline of the head closely resembles those of the Mahongwe corpus, but the foliate passage has been condensed into a narrow vertically oriented ellipse at the center that projects slightly from the surface. The face is elaborated so that it both appears in relief and contrasts texturally with the smooth metal applied to the surface of the sides of the head. It is bisected by a vertical metal strip with a raised central ridge that extends three-quarters of its length. On either side of this central passage are finely applied metal filaments that stretch horizontally to the outer edges. At its apex a cylindrical projection from the summit is wrapped in coiled-wire metal. This form is repeated on a broader scale by the neck and echoed by abbreviated elements that hang down from either outer corner of the head. Below the neck two unadorned vertical extensions, curving outward, delineate an open center.

1. Perrois 2001b, p. 150.
2. Perrois 1969, p. 7.

EX COLL.
André Fourquet, Paris, before 1976; Henri Kamer, Paris

EXHIBITED
"L'esprit de la forêt: Terres du Gabon," Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, December 19, 1997–May 3, 1998.

PUBLISHED
Drouot 1983, lot 61, ill.; Loudmer 1989, lot 162, ill.; Bordeaux 1997–98, p. 212, no. 292.

58. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Shamaye group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, bone
H. 14¾ in. (37.5 cm)
Collection of Patrick and Beatrice Caput

The Shamaye are responsible for a corpus of delicate, meticulously composed figurative elements. According to Louis Perrois, both the Shamaye and the Mahongwe used copper-leaf ornamentation to enhance not only these elements but also the relics held within the receptacles they originally accompanied.[1] In this composition the neck bridges a complementary opposition between the equilibrated head and base. The density of the face, fleshed out at the summit, contrasts strongly with the simplicity of the foundation, which encircles an empty core. The head is circumscribed by a band that is peaked at the summit and curves out at either side. Subdivided into a series of distinct passages, the face has a prominently raised forehead bisected by a brass band stretching from the summit to the bridge of the nose. A series of diagonally oriented applied strips gives further definition to the forehead, while the sides of the face are covered with horizontal metal strips. The flat base of the face is fitted with a semicircular section of copper. Small circular bone disks affixed to the surface with metal pupils form the eyes. Brass wire is coiled around the neck. Directly below, the representation is anchored by the curvature of a fluid loop. The pestlelike base would have been the site where the sculpture was attached to its original basket.

1. Perrois 1976, p. 24.



59. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 22⅜ in. (57 cm)
Private collection

Kota reliquary figures were among the earliest African artifacts to be exhibited in France. Jean-Louis Paudrat has noted that this first occurred in 1878 with the opening of the Musée Ethnographique des Missions Scientifiques in Paris.[1] That occasion brought together "tribal" objects scattered in various establishments of the French state, including two displays from Gabon with material culture collected during the naturalist Alfred Marche's second Ogooué River expedition (1875–78). William Rubin has emphasized the appeal that the daring abstraction of Kota and Mahongwe reliquary figures held for Pablo Picasso. He notes that, along with Fang masks and reliquary heads, they were the most influential African prototypes for Picasso's art from June 1907 until the summer of 1908. Not only were examples of these accessible to the artist at the Musée Ethnographique, but two Kota figures were among the earliest non-Western artifacts that he acquired.[2]

In this example an abbreviated cylindrical neck joins the graphically bold head to the powerful openwork lozenge that anchors the base. When the work is viewed simply as a sculpture, divorced from the original ensemble of relics attached to its base, the lozenge area has invariably been interpreted as legs. Rubin indicates that this is evident in the work of both Picasso and Paul Klee, who both drew upon that idea but translated it differently in their own creations.[3] While Klee sees the form as a leaping figure with knees splayed out and ankles joined (fig. 66), Picasso uses the radically bent knee position as a point of departure for his own explorations of dancing figures in his paintings.

The rounded subtly concave face is only slightly narrower at the chin. Its surface is defined by broad brass bands that extend across its length and width. Their convergence at the center is underscored by applied features: convex circular eyes bisected by iron pupils on either side of a narrow triangular nose. Beyond these two intersecting bands, the remaining quadrants of the face are covered with carefully applied strips of red-toned copper. While those in the upper half are horizontally oriented, the lower two feature a formal tension between shifting passages of contrasting horizontal and diagonal bands. Petal-like crescent forms frame the face and expand it organically. The sculptor-smith has gone to great lengths to create a representation that is not merely two-dimensional but whose component forms provide multiple layers of depth and vibrant tonal contrasts. The raised brass crescent at the summit features a trapezoid-like element at its center that projects from the surface and is highlighted in copper. The lateral extensions at the sides of the face are composed of an inner copper lobe and an outer brass one.

1. Paudrat 1984–85, pp. 125–26.
2. New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, pp. 266, 267.
3. Ibid., p. 267.

EX COLL.
Hubert Goldet, Paris

PUBLISHED
Maison de la Chimie 2001, pp. 220–21, lot 274.



60. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 13¾ in. (34.9 cm)
Private collection

Eugenia Herbert has estimated that over the span of two millennia, African societies absorbed hundreds of thousands of tons of cuprous metal that were transformed into artifacts created for burials.[1] Given the association of this metal with wealth, its presence in this context reflected the affluence of the deceased. In the forest region of equatorial Africa this linkage between metals, prosperity, and ancestry resulted in an immensely diverse repertory of wood figures encased in copper and brass and attached to baskets that preserved relics of venerated lineage ancestors. Within these ensembles the relics were likewise covered with precious metals along with brass rings, bracelets, beads, and medicines.[2]

The various aesthetic processes drawn upon to enhance the sculptures accompanying Kota reliquaries are all delicately interwoven in this complex creation. The especially rich gradations of color include tonalities of brown and yellow brass as well as a red copper accent. The brass covers the surfaces of the elements framing the face as well as the cruciform at its center. The fine metal filaments applied in diagonals across the surface of each of the four exposed segments are composed of brass and copper. Embedded in a field of brass striations are series of copper ones. Together the red diagonal bands in each quadrant intersect at the level of the eyes to form an X.

The work is no mere flat silhouette: its openwork configuration embraces negative space within its contours as well as extensive inscribed textural detail. The concave face projects forward from the framing crests at the summit and sides. A broad vertical band extends the length of the face and intersects at its midpoint with a horizontal band that reaches its outer edges. The vertical axis is bisected by a raised ridge denoting the brow and nose. The circular eyes are nailheads added at the intersection of the central cruciform. The tips of the graceful horizontal crescent at the summit connect to the lateral wings at their outer limits. Their edges are highlighted by a continuous band of incised triangles. Inscribed notations include an X framed by incised dots within a square above the forehead and a crescent field of incised lozenges at either side of the face.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 271.
2. Ibid., p. 275.

EX COLL.
J. J. Klejman, New York; Doreen Chu, New York

EXHIBITED
"Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals," The Museum for African Art, New York, February 13–August 22, 1993.

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 316, fig. 199; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 341, fig. 886; New York 1993, p. 152, no. 75.



61. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 20 1/16 in. (52.5 cm)
Private collection

The fundamental formal elements of ancestral reliquary figures from eastern Gabon and Congo allude to the role of the reliquaries in mediating between the living and the dead.[1] These include the cruciform that divides the elliptical face as well as the lozenge configuration at the base. Both are Kongo notations for the cosmos and for a being's journey through life and the afterlife. The reflective qualities of the surfaces evoke the body of water that serves as the fluid boundary between these two realms of existence.[2]

This interpretation of a classic Kota design distinguishes itself as a towering presence crowned by a delicate head. Striking emphasis is placed on the prominent elongated openwork lozenge. Supported by a long cylindrical neck encased in metal bands, the concave face takes the form of an oval whose length and width are bisected by applied bands of yellow metal. At their intersection in the center, facial features are superimposed. The narrow triangular ridge of the nose projects from the surface and is flanked by concave eyes. The central cruciform subdivides the surface into four equal quadrants that are covered with horizontally applied red metal strips. In certain areas these have lifted off, exposing the underlying wood. Recessed and relatively narrow lateral lobes encircle the head and pick up the central yellow palette. Those smooth surfaces contrast with the incised linear network of lozenges punctuated by dots that covers the arched element at the apex.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 280.
2. Ibid., p. 281.

EX COLL.
Olivier Le Corneur, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Gabon, l'ordre du sacré: Masques et statues des peuples de l'Ogooué," Galerie Leloup, Paris, June 1988.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1988, no. 15.



62. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon
First half of 20th century
Wood, brass, bone
H. 10⅝ in. (27 cm)
Private collection, Brussels

This work, like catalogue number 39, appears to have been brought by a missionary of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit to the order's Musée Missionnaire de l'Abbaye Blanche at Mortain, France, and subsequently transferred to private hands. The entire surface of the head is covered with applied brass sheeting, the upper reaches of the long cylindrical neck are wrapped in coiled metal bands, and the lozenge base is exposed wood. At the summit an abbreviated crest connects with slight lateral crescents that frame either side of the face. The bilateral symmetry of the oval face is underscored by a ridge that extends the length of the forehead to the tip of the nose. In contrast, its upper and lower halves are rendered as distinct concave and convex passages. The pronounced double arc of the brows intersects with the vertical axis in the center. This undulating horizontal ridge casts the lower half of the face in a heartlike configuration. Circular bone-disk eyes with perforated pupils are added to the recessed ocular cavities. Directly below the nose is an open oval mouth. All these features instill the figure with an alert demeanor.

EX COLL.
Musée Missonnaire de l'Abbaye Blanche à Mortain, France, 1920; André Fourquet, Paris, 1960; Gottfried Künzi, Oberdorf-Solothurn, Switzerland, 1970

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1979, fig. 199.



63. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon, Sébé Valley
Late 18th–19th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 21¼ in. (54 cm)
Private collection

In Kota tradition burial rites were preceded by a three-day wake during which the body was placed on a display bed surrounded by the deceased's most significant possessions. Ubiquitous among these were metal artifacts that denoted wealth. As itemized by Efraim Andersson, these might include currency in the form of forged iron, great copper rings, collars, throwing knives, bells, and a smith's anvil.[1] A great individual was buried with his throwing knives and anvil not only to signify his status but also to provide him with arms in the afterlife.[2]

This work masterfully plays off a prominent volumetric face against a flat, uniformly two-dimensional lower half. The sharp rectilinear angles of the lozenge base also contrast powerfully with the profusion of curved contours that define the head. The face is distinguished not only by its fullness but also by a raised red band that circumscribes its perimeter and sets it apart from the crescents spanning the summit and sides. It is broadest at the level of the forehead, whose breadth is enhanced by its convex quality and contrasted with the narrowness of the concave chin. A vertical axis bisects the length of the face. This takes the form of a raised ridge that extends from the forehead to the tip of the nose and continues as a flat band terminating at the base of the chin. The facial features are symmetrically positioned on either side of this median axis, which is continuous but shifts in tone from copper in the upper half to brass below the nose. The eyes consist of added circular copper disks punctuated by iron pupils. Directly below, the lower half of the face is covered with fine horizontally applied copper bands. That passage of the face takes on a heartlike configuration from the strongly defined raised arcs that delineate the outer contours of the eyes.

Recently a corpus of six additional works in this highly distinctive style has been attributed to the same author, a gifted sculptor and smith referred to as the Sébé Master.[3] These sculptures represent a significant departure from typical Kota works in that they de-emphasize the two-dimensional in favor of a convex head. This interpretation is powerfully suggestive of the skull that is at the core of a reliquary ensemble. Louis Perrois has noted that inspired Kota artists such as the Sébé Master exploited the chromatic possibilities afforded by various metals as well as the contrasts between convexity and concavity, curves and angles, abstraction and heightened realism.[4]

1. Andersson 1974, p. 120.
2. Ibid., p. 102.
3. De Grunne 2001.
4. Brussels 2001, p. 148.

EX COLL.
Barbara and Murray Frum, Toronto

EXHIBITED
"African Majesty from Grassland and Forest: The Barbara and Murray Frum Collection," Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, May 22–July 12, 1981; "Mains de maîtres: A la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Arts d'Afrique noire 1977, p. 41; Domme 1977, p. 319, fig. 6; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 300, fig. 184; Perrois 1979, p. 12, fig. 3; Toronto 1981, p. 83, pl. 29; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 245, fig. 151; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 337, fig. 875; Brussels 2001, p. 152, no. 37; De Grunne 2003, p. 90, fig. 3.



64. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa or Wumbu group; Gabon
19th–20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron, zinc
H. 16 in. (40.6 cm)
Private collection



Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the smith is assigned a central and influential place in both the natural and supernatural spheres. Given that esoteric knowledge is required to manipulate the dangerous forces at play in the extraction of ores and their transformation into aesthetic creations, authors of works such as this Kota figure were specialists who commanded mastery of both unusual skills and mystical powers.[1]

The bold three-dimensionality of the head of this work appears incongruous with its petite scale and refined features. Its fully realized form is underscored by the flat extensions of the lateral arcs that frame its contours at the sides and summit. Nonetheless, only the surface is covered with metal: when the work is seen in profile, the sides of the face are revealed as exposed wood. A broad raised copper ridge bisects the convex forehead, intersects with the gentle undulating horizontal curve of the brow, and aligns with the fine vertical nose directly below. The ridge is highlighted by its red tonality, which contrasts with the yellow of the brass facial surface. Copper is also the material that defines the bold convex rounded eyes, the series of fine horizontal bands applied directly below, and the cylindrical projections at either side of the base of the head. Contrasting with the curvilinear emphasis of the summit of the head, the rectilinear cast of the lower half of the face culminates in a square jaw. Zinc bands are coiled around the cylindrical neck, which links the head to the broad wood lozenge base.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 33.

65. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa or Wumbu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, bone, iron
H. 18⅝ in. (46.5 cm)
Private collection

This robust work is distinguished by its physical solidity and the prominence of its boldly projecting brow. While the tone of the metal sheeting applied to the forehead is variegated, the pronounced raised ridge that bisects the forehead is copper. Below the heavy brow, the brass surface of the lower half of the face is enlivened with incised dots and articulated by bone-disk eyes punctuated by iron pupils and flanking a triangular nose. At either side of the face a cylindrical tress projects from the base of a lateral crescent that stretches across the perimeter of the head. This framing device is accentuated by a bold decorative band of alternating rectangular panels that begins at the level of the brows. This powerful head dramatically synthesizes the rounded convex volumetric forehead with the flat two-dimensional plane of the face, which terminates in a rectilinear jaw. In order to carry the weight of this massive crowning element, the width of the supporting lozenge is considerable.

EX COLL.
British Rail Pension Fund

PUBLISHED
Loudmer–Poulain 1979, lot 120; Sotheby's 1989b, pp. 74–75, lot 135.



66. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 16⅛ in. (41 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-4F

Efraim Andersson identifies as southern Kota groups the Obamba and Mindumu, to whom this jewel-like creation has been variously attributed, along with the Bawumbe and Ndassa.[1] The work is singularly lovely in the refined precision of its exacting composition, the contrasting chromatic palette, and the play between recessed and projecting elements. The representation focuses intensively on the head, which contrasts radically with the base, distilled to a simple unadorned lozenge. That elemental configuration is repeated in relief on the solid wood surface of the back of the head.

Three different tones of metal are strategically integrated into the representation. The most vibrant among these is the red copper that highlights the prominent circular pupils projecting in relief from the deep convex recesses of the brass eyes. The red metal is also employed at the base of the face to highlight the upper lip, open mouth, and delicate chin. Finally, it appears again around the perimeter of the crown of the head as a series of individuated units in a tiara-like band.

The face is an oval encased in faceted brass that narrows at the chin. While the forehead is convex, the continuous arcs of the brows and nose delimit broad ocular depressions that are bisected by the delicate raised vertical ridge of the nose. Flat extensions from the sides and crown of the head frame its elegant contours—a raised arc at the summit and undulating lateral wings featuring a prominent perforation, all with double rows of incised dots along the edges. Additional perforations directly below the horizontal crest and along the horizontal ridge on the reverse side appear to have served for feather attachments. A band of brass around the neck is covered with the same dots, incised in a cruciform.

1. Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 11.

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; "Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Barbier-Mueller, Genf," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, February 27–April 10, 1988, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt-am-Main, June 4–August 14, 1988, Haus der Kunst, Munich, December 17, 1988–February 19, 1989, Musée Rath, Geneva, March 15–May 15, 1989; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Roy 1957, p. 56; Roy 1958, p. 56; Meauzé 1967, fig. 199; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 152; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 152–53, 329, fig. 62; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 191; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 215, no. 130; Roy 1998, p. 40; Visonà 2001, p. 359; Perrois 2002, p. 85; Geneva 2007, pp. 200–201, 389.



67. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 20⅝ in. (52.3 cm)
The Kronos Collections

A taste for copper, a highly desirable commodity, was well entrenched in equatorial Africa by the time European metal imports were introduced. Phyllis Martin notes that the Vili of the Loango coast had developed a purely intra-African copper trade of caravans that distributed Niari Basin copper in the interior.[1] Eugenia Herbert has suggested that the far-flung intermediaries who participated in this activity may have included the Mpongwe, Orungu, and Benga.[2] The Vili's highly developed network made copper available regionally as well as for export across the Atlantic. It appears likely that the long-standing patterns of local consumption for this highly coveted resource included the manufacture of artifacts of this kind honoring prestigious ancestors.

The metalwork skillfully applied to this representation draws upon copper as a highlight to accentuate certain features against the otherwise brass surface. These include the eyes, the mouth, and alternating elements of the tiara at the summit of the forehead. The overall form of the face is attenuated, terminating in a pointed chin. The crescent form that spans the crown of the head follows its contours and is separated only at the narrow pointed tips. At its apex a triangular motif is inscribed. The span of the upper limit of the forehead and the bridge of the nose is also highlighted by a band of individuated rectangular copper units. The eyes are added to the concave surface as narrow horizontal ellipses surmounted by broad crescents. The lower half of the face is composed of a patchwork of intersecting triangles that define the cheeks, chin, and upper lip and mouth, all of which project in relief. The especially long neck terminates in a delicate lozenge base.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 142.
2. Ibid., p. 143.

EXHIBITED
"Africa: Capolavori da un continente," Turin, October 2, 2003–February 15, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Ratton Hourdé 2001; Turin 2003–4, p. 234.



68. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 16¾ in. (42.5 cm)
Private collection



During the nineteenth century, African markets were flooded with industrially produced European metals. Eugenia Herbert notes that Birmingham brass foundries turned out sheet metal, manillas (units of metal currency in the form of bracelets), and rods by the ton in steam-powered rolling mills.[1] This influx of metal entered coastal distribution systems at a time when their reach into the interior was significantly extended in direct competition with indigenously produced metals, which were being adversely impacted by ecological impoverishment and political upheaval. In this climate imported brass became the metal of choice over African copper.

Given the expansive brass surface of this representation, the copper accents of the medial ridge, elliptical eyes, and upper lip appear even more fleeting. Below the broad convex forehead, the facial features are densely concentrated in the lower half of the face within a distinctive heart-shaped configuration. This encompasses the pronounced arches of the brows, extends down the sides of the face, and terminates in the pointed chin. Within this framework is a collage of exactingly integrated units of form. Below the brows are concave semicircular arches and the narrow horizontal slits of the eyes. The cheeks are triangular units, flanking the central trapezoid of the upper lip. The crescent that crowns the head spans the entire width of the representation. Flat lateral extensions with undulating contours project at either side of the face. The columnar neck is encased in brass into which vertical bands of a herringbone motif have been incised.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 154.

EX COLL.
Félix Fenéon, Paris; Ralph Nash, London; Olivier Le Corneur, Paris; Robert Burawoy, Paris; Bernard le Dauphin, Paris

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 158, fig. 66.

69. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 18⅛ in. (46 cm)
Collection of Laura and James J. Ross



The corpus of works created by Obamba sculptor-smiths to accompany ancestral relics display a rich range of original variations on a regionally preferred style. This interpretation of a relatively two-dimensional genre is striking for its many different layers of relief. A narrow crescent is balanced on the crown of the head. That recessed element contrasts with the forehead, which projects outward and is flanked by the flat sides of the face. The head is broadest at the forehead, then narrows sharply at the chin. Facial features, applied as individual elements in copper, are densely concentrated in the lower half of the face. The eyes are narrow slits that intersect at an angle with the nose. The mouth is incised in a rectangular panel that extends below the nose and projects from the surface. Elements of both the eyes and mouth are highlighted through the use of copper against the otherwise brass panels. Recessed narrow lateral extensions along the sides of the face each flair out at the base and feature a lobe pierced by a broad hole. Throughout, the edges are accented with a stippled band.

Over the centuries, cuprous metals produced indigenously and imported from Europe and the Near East were exploited not merely for their aesthetic effect but also for their association with divine authority, fertility, ancestral propitiation, and the ability to deflect negative influences.[1] Eugenia Herbert emphasizes that Africa's absorption of copper and brass into so many critical facets of life also had a considerable impact on Europe's economy. During the eighteenth century, it was instrumental to both the development of the British brass industry and the interrelated expansion of the slave trade.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 302.

EX COLL.
Armand and Corice Arman, New York

EXHIBITED
"Arman et l'art africain," Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens, Amérindiens, Chapelle de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, June 23–October 30, 1996; Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, December 3, 1996–February 17, 1997; Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Museum für Völkerkunde, Cologne, March–June 1997.

PUBLISHED
Marseille, Paris, and Cologne 1996–97, fig. 66.

70. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 17⅛ in. (43.5 cm)
Private collection

The coast of equatorial Africa from the Cameroon estuary to Cape Lopez emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an important supplier of slaves, ivory, and rubber. European explorers and trading companies gradually pushed their way up the Gabon and Ogooué rivers to obtain direct access to these resources and new markets for their own wares.[1] During his 1883–85 mission, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza carried twenty-one cases of four different varieties of currencies, known as manillas, in groups of 125 dozen; twenty cases of different kinds of copper neptunes; copper and brass wire in rolls; and assorted bells, bracelets, and chains. This inventory was calculated to satisfy a diverse clientele with a discerning and wide-ranging taste for metals. While both imported copper and brass were made available, Eugenia Herbert emphasizes that brass rapidly emerged as the new metal favored throughout the Congo Basin.[2]

This elegant creation features crisp contours underscored with double rows of incised dots. At its core is an especially elongated convex forehead encased in brass and bisected by a narrow copper band stretching from its apex to the tip of the nose. The facial features are concentrated in a heart-shaped configuration at the base of the head. Stippled bands accent the curve of the brow and the horizontal apertures of the eyes and mouth. The tips of the horizontal crescent extend downward to connect with the triangular projections at the sides of the face. A narrow sliver of negative space is exposed at their interstices. The representation is delicately balanced at the base by the openwork lozenge. Associated with fertility, that motif is repeated prominently on the reverse side of the head, where it appears as an abstract design carved in relief.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 170.
2. Ibid., p. 171.

EX COLL.
Max Itzikovitz, Paris

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 156, 157, no. 65; Perrois 1979, cover, no. 198.



71. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa or Wumbu group; Gabon or Republic of Congo, Sibiti region
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron, zinc, kaolin
H. 20⅞ in. (53 cm)
Private collection

Like a carefully composed collage, this work is exactingly pieced together. The face emerges forcefully in the round from the core of the two-dimensional structure. Its convex forehead narrows at the summit, while the lower half of the face is concave from the brows to the base of the chin. The surface is composed of a sheet of brass, yellow in tone, that contrasts vividly with the red accents of the copper additions. These include a bisected vertical band stretching from the apex of the forehead to the bridge of the nose; a rectangular panel between the base of the nose and the rim of the chin, into which the mouth is inscribed; the horizontal elliptical eyes; and the inner crescent framing either side of the face. White kaolin has been added to the mouth aperture. Projecting slightly from the surface, the eyes are punctuated by circular iron pupils. The lateral lobes are subdivided into a brass outer element accented with a matrix of incised linear lozenges and an inner crescent, in slightly greater relief. At the base of the face tablike units that may represent ears project at both sides. The cylindrical neck is wrapped in coiled bands of zinc. At its base are two lateral angled extensions encased in brass. These form the upper half of an openwork lozenge configuration. The exposed wood of the reverse side features a lozenge at its center that is carved in relief and bisected by a vertical ridge.

EX COLL.
Hubert Goldet, Paris

PUBLISHED
Maison de la Chimie 2001, pp. 218–19, lot 273.



72. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mindumu group; Gabon, Upper Ogooué River
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 15¾ in. (40 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 71.1884.37.22



This work is of exceptional historical note, given its early collection by Jacques de Brazza and the naturalist Attilio Pecile during Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's 1883–85 mission, which included travels along the Upper Ogooué River. Brazza's explorations over the course of three expeditions to equatorial Africa, beginning in 1875, laid the foundation for French sovereignty over the Middle and Upper Ogooué River system, the Loango coast, the Kwilou Niari River, and the Congo River system north of the Malebo Pool. The scientific collections gathered during his third expedition were presented at an exhibition sponsored by the Ministère de l'Education Nationale and held in the Orangerie of the Jardin des Plantes between July 1 and July 15, 1886. According to Jean-Louis Paudrat, almost thirty thousand visitors attended.[1] As members of the mission, Jacques de Brazza and Pecile had been engaged by the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in 1883 to collect ethnographic and natural-history specimens, including this work, which were placed on view and eventually formed the foundation of a national collection first displayed at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (fig. 2).[2] Paudrat notes that the most important of these objects were prominently featured at the Exposition Universelle of 1889 as part of a concerted effort to popularize France's early colonial success.[3]

In this striking composition, the vertically oriented convex face tapers to sharp points at its summit and base. It is bisected by a raised vertical ridge that subdivides it into two narrow crescents. Eyes that project prominently from the surface are the only articulated facial feature. At the base of the narrow pointed chin, an especially long columnar neck unites the head with the openwork lozenge base. The face is embedded into a broad circular configuration so that there is a crescent extending beyond it on either side. The horizontal crescent at the summit spans the width of the head. The surfaces of the elements framing the face are incised with a dense network of lozenges. The design is very similar to that of a Kota figure formerly in the Pierre Guerre Collection.[4]

1. Paudrat 1984–85, p. 128.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 130.
4. Marseille 1992b, p. 91, fig. 30.

EX COLL.
Attilio Pecile and Jacques de Brazza, France, 1884; Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1884–86; Musée de l'Homme, Paris

EXHIBITED
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985; "L'esprit de la forêt: Terres du Gabon," Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, December 19, 1997–May 3, 1998.

PUBLISHED
Roy 1957, p. 57; Roy 1958, p. 57; Bolz 1966, p. 122, pl. 39c; Chaffin 1973, p. 33; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 112–13; Perrois 1979, p. 175, fig. 172; New York 1984–85, p. 8; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 266; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 427, fig. 593; Bordeaux 1997–98, pp. 6, 217; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 559, fig. 333; Roy 1998, p. 42.

73. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 11 7/16 in. (29 cm)
Private collection



There is a playful quirkiness to this highly schematic representation. The edges of the ovoid face are raised and project in relief against the broader field of the head, which features a vertical extension at its apex. The face is subdivided into three sections. A vertical ridge—an allusion to a nose—bisects the upper half and intersects with a horizontal one that spans the width of the face. The eyes are heads of tacks of a richer red tone than the comparatively yellow brass of the face. The highly unusual horizontal extensions directly below the chin suggest arms. The broad vertical neck, encased in coiled superimposed metal bands, terminates in a small delicate lozenge base.

EX COLL.
André Fourquet, Paris; Claude Rogue

EXHIBITED
"Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971.

PUBLISHED
Zurich 1970–71, p. 256; Perrois 1979, p. 174, fig. 170.

74. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 19 in. (48.3 cm)
Private collection

This representation is so abstract that its reference to the human form is not obviously apparent. Individual passages of the composition are articulated as distinct forms whose elemental character is underscored through contrasting fields of color. Despite the precision devoted to delineating each of these forms, the contours are gentle curves and the composition emphasizes bilateral symmetry. Its focal point is the central lozenge configuration, which has no hard edges. This slightly convex passage is bisected by a broad vertical band with a raised central ridge spanning its length. That axis subdivides the face into two crescents that mirror one another. Positioned at the outer edges of its midpoint are convex circular eyes pierced by iron pupils. An outer lateral recessed crescent projects beyond either side of the face.

The dialectic created by the dominant vertical band is underscored by the use of two distinct metals—the rich red copper of the band, eyes, and vibrant horizontal flourishes projecting from the upper and lower reaches of the head and the brass applied to the rest of the surface. In regional cosmology and ritual, red refers to the passage from this world to the next as well as to the rising and setting of the sun.[1] Eugenia Herbert suggests that its use in relation to reliquaries served to augment their power by addressing both their associations with worldly wealth and their position of mediation between life and death.[2] While most Kota designs feature variations on a unitary crescent spanning the crown of the head, this interpretation displays two distinct elements that curve outward and resemble horns or wings. The brief cylindrical neck unifies this fantastical head with a crisp openwork lozenge base that echoes the form of the face.

1. Herbert 1984, p. 279.
2. Ibid., p. 280.

EX COLL.
Buru Family Collection, France

EXHIBITED
"Treasures," National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., November 17, 2004–August 15, 2005.

PUBLISHED
Washington, D.C. 2004–5, n.p.



75. Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mindumu group; Gabon
19th century
Wood, iron, copper, lead, zinc, feathers, fiber, leather, bone, skin
H. 22 1⁄16 in. (58 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 71.1897.39.1

This reliquary ensemble was brought to France by Charles-Vital Roche, the colonial official in charge of the government's headquarters at N'Ghimi (Franceville), who also provided support for the third West African expedition (1883–86).[1] Roche gave it to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in 1897. The documentation that accompanied it identified it as a "M'boueti" or "mboumba bwete" ancestor and as the "symbolic representation" of the founder of a lineage who guards over his descendants.[2] The ensemble is exceptionally rare in its completeness: the figurative element remains integrated with its original sacra, both held within their basketry receptacle.

Although the representation is relatively minimal, its alert facial features are deliberately and skillfully defined by metal filaments. The long ovoid head is punctuated at either side by triangular ears that project sharply outward. Fine threadlike metal bands are exactingly applied to the wood surface so that they extend vertically from the crown to the brow across the forehead and horizontally on either side of the nose across the cheeks. The circular eyes, surmounted by double arcs, are positioned between these two striated fields. Cut metal is applied to each ear, and the columnar neck is covered with coiled metal strips. The reddish tone of the copper used to accentuate the facial features and the key filaments spanning the forehead and cheeks is complemented by a profusion of russet feathers that cascade from the back of the head. According to Eugenia Herbert, these red accents reflect associations with blood, encompassing sacrifice, vitality, and essential transitions such as that from mortal adult to ancestor.[3] Similarly, the plumage and hide drawn upon allude to the poultry and goats typically harvested for offerings. The delicate representation is inserted into the container in such a way that the upper half of the openwork lozenge is exposed along its upper rim, and it thus appears to be floating above the dense mass of organic matter. Recent scientific analysis of the reliquary has revealed that its contents feature the vestiges and finery of a single individual and that it was designed so that the sculptural element was removable.[4]

A drawing published in the narrative account of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's *Voyages dans l'Ouest Africain, 1875–1887*, features several reliquaries within an enclosure in the village of Pongo, along the Lower Sébé (fig. 65). While the sculptural elements depicted are clearly different from this example, they are similarly integrated into a comparable receptacle with a dense fringe of hide filaments around its perimeter obscuring its exterior.

1. Mohen and Dubrana 2006, p. 155.
2. Ibid.
3. Herbert 1984, pp. 277–80.
4. Mohen and Dubrana 2006, p. 158.

EX COLL.
Charles-Vital Roche, France, before 1897; Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris, 1897; Musée de l'Homme, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée de l'Homme," Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1965; "Sculptures africaines dans les collections publiques françaises," Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, November 7, 1972–February 26, 1973; "African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme," The Center for African Art, New York, September 17, 1984–January 6, 1985; "Mains de maîtres: À la découverte des sculpteurs d'Afrique," Espace Culturel BBL, Brussels, March 22–June 24, 2001.

PUBLISHED
Griaule 1947, p. 37; Radin and Sweeney 1952, fig. 143; Sydow 1954, p. 170, fig. 131B; Trowell 1954, fig. 39; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 184, fig. 229; Paris 1965, pp. 84–85, no. 23; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 153; Wassing 1968, p. 240; Wingert 1970, fig. 102; Paris 1972–73, fig. 112; Segy 1975, pp. 33, 213; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 288, 335, fig. 172; Perrois 1979, p. 207, fig. 213; New York 1985, p. 148, no. 66; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 427, fig. 594; Bordeaux 1997–98, p. 32 (not exhibited); Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 559, fig. 334; Perrois 2001b, p. 143, fig. 15; Perrois 2002, p. 103; Mohen and Dubrana 2006, pp. 152–59.



76. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, bone
H. 8¼ in. (21 cm)
Private collection



This miniature creation has survived as a highly animated presence independent of its original reliquary structure. The long oval head and openwork lozenge base are united by a long columnar neck. Its author has concentrated his efforts within the contours of the face, delicately placing a series of additions that endow it with an exquisitely variegated surface of shifting textures. At the summit the considerable expanse of the slightly convex forehead is encased in a smooth expanse of brass. A transition is articulated by the pronounced double arcs of the metal filaments applied to define the brows, which project ever so slightly. These intersect directly above the long narrow triangular nose and frame the bone-disk eyes. On either side of the nose the cheeks are covered with a series of superimposed horizontal bands. Directly below are the stippled contours of the flat brass semicircle of the lower face. The work's two-dimensionality is dissipated by horizontally projecting ears and a triad of tresses extending out from the nape of the neck and from below each ear.

EX COLL.
Paul and Ruth Tishman, New York, by 1968

EXHIBITED
"Sculpture of Black Africa: The Paul Tishman Collection," Los Angles County Museum of Art, October 16, 1968–January 5, 1969, The High Museum of Fine Arts, Atlanta, Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, August 31–November 1, 1970, University of Texas College of Fine Arts, Austin, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Champaign, City Art Museum, St. Louis, August 20–October 17, 1971, Des Moines Art Center, Huntington Galleries, Huntington, West Virginia, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, 1973.

PUBLISHED
Los Angeles and other venues 1968–73, fig. 108; Gillon 1979, fig. 115.

77. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, brass, bone
H. 6¾ in. (17.1 cm)
Private collection



This highly refined fragmentary creation features subtle flourishes that further expand the Kota artistic repertory of fine metalwork applied to the surface of wood sculpture. The head features a broad slightly convex forehead, bisected by a raised vertical ridge, and a narrow tapered chin. The curved contours of the face are contrasted with the sharp angular lateral projections of the stylized ears and tresses. A striking virtuosic detail is the twisting of the arched brows, which endows them with an additional texture that contrasts with the flat horizontal strips across the cheeks. The alertness of the gaze derives from a combination of the emphasis given to the brows, the intensity of the small bone eyes, and the void of the open mouth. The representation ends abruptly at the base of the cylindrical neck. The sheathing of the neck in horizontal metal bands suggests that the fragment may have been the summit of either a reliquary sculpture or a related ritual implement such as a bell.

EX COLL.
Gaston T. de Havenon, New York

EXHIBITED
"The de Havenon Collection," Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., May 1971–April 1972.

PUBLISHED
Washington, D.C. 1971–72, fig. 189; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 287, fig. 171.

78. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 26 in. (66 cm)
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm



As guardians of the relics of influential ancestors, southern Kota *mbulu* figures assured the happiness and well-being of the descendents that cared for them.[1] Janus *mbulu viti* were considered especially efficacious given their ability to anticipate danger from either direction. They were also believed to be endowed with the capacity to consume two different kinds of offerings simultaneously.

The two sides of this Kota janus *mbulu viti* figure juxtapose convex and concave representations that draw upon strong shifts in tonal definition. It has been suggested that the oppositions embraced by such works are meant to evoke the existential polarities of life and death.[2] On the convex side a powerful rounded semicircular forehead projects prominently above the concave lower half, where the facial features are concentrated. This transition is highlighted by the use of brass on the surfaces of the crowning crescent, forehead, and lateral extensions, while brass bands accentuate the edge of the brow and the area into which the ovoid eyes and triangular nose are set. The lower half of the face shifts back to copper.

On the concave side, a vertical brass band is applied to the center of the forehead and is flanked by panels of copper. Directly below, the facial features are applied to the brass surface that covers the lower half of the oval face. The lateral elements, also surfaced in brass, include an incised striated band that extends around the contours of the face, accentuating the transition between passages of the composition. Both sides bear identical facial features, among them a pair of vertical bands directly below the eyes, a stylized reference to tears. A distinct graphic motif is incised at the summit of the crowning crescent on either side.

1. Andersson 1974, p. 165.
2. Herbert 1984, p. 280.



79. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon, Upper Ogooué River
19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, nail
H. 22 1/16 in. (56.1 cm)
Ville de Périgueux–Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie du Périgord
F. 401

The concave oval face of this ancestral representation narrows at its base. Its surface is subdivided into four quadrants by two applied brass bands that bisect its length and width. The added projecting triangular nose, positioned at their intersection, is flanked by two circular eyes made from nails. The outer surfaces of the face are covered with successive bands of cut copper filaments. Where these are now missing, the underlying wood core is exposed. While the curved lateral extensions, which have been described as the cheeks (*abaa*), are encased in unadorned brass, the transversal crescent at the summit, the moon (*ntsuo*), features six circular nails arranged in a triangular configuration.[1] Louis Perrois has suggested that motifs so prominently positioned constituted a clan's identifying mark.[2] The vertical neck (*kii*) is wrapped in brass into which a succession of parallel horizontal ridges has been incised. The upper half of the openwork lozenge, the shoulders (*okwane*), is also accented with applied brass into which a dense lozenge motif has been inscribed. An unusual detail on the reverse side is a small face carved into the exposed wood surface in low relief. Perrois notes that this feature is found in several other works in this style.[3]

1. Andersson 1974, p. 340.
2. Perrois 1997, p. 214.
3. Ibid.

EXHIBITED
"L'esprit de la forêt: Terres du Gabon," Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, December 19, 1997–May 3, 1998.

PUBLISHED
Lehuard 1977; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 174–75; Perrois 1979, p. 179, fig. 176; Bordeaux 1997–98, pp. 112, 214.





80. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 23⅝ in. (60 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin III C 33264



This classic two-dimensional Kota commemorative representation is animated by the subtle shifting textural patterns inscribed into its metal sheeting. The concave oval face is surmounted by a broad crescent and flanked by lateral extensions that curve outward and terminate in straight lower edges, each extended by a small pendent element. A broad vertical band bisects the center of the face. Within this, a triangular passage stretching from the upper edge to the bridge of the nose is inscribed with a herringbone motif. The facial features are positioned symmetrically at the center. On either side of the central axis, the outer edges of the face are inscribed with striated triangular configurations that shift from diagonal to horizontal lines. Beyond the contours of the face, the wings are subdivided into an inner striated section and an outer unelaborated one. Graphic patterns also enhance the metal covering the neck and upper half of the lozenge base, which is inscribed with alternating fields of dense lozenge networks and stripes.

This work was acquired for the Berlin museum's collection from the estate of the early African art dealer Heinrich Umlauff in 1926.

EX COLL.
Heinrich Umlauff, Hamburg, 1911

PUBLISHED
Krieger 1965, p. 85, pl. 172.

81. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 22 in. (55.9 cm)
Collection of Laura and James J. Ross

While this janus displays a juxtaposition similar to that in an example in the Berlin museum (cat. no. 82), it represents a subtly distinct interpretation. On the convex side, the oval face is entirely encased in copper, and features are added in contrasting bands of brass and iron. The pyramidal brass upper crescent has three circular copper bosses at its center and a raised band of bold zigzag lines at the summit. The swathe of incised lozenges across the forehead is repeated on the metalwork around the cylindrical neck. A lightly inscribed band of cowries flanks the iron bands inlaid from the inner corner of each eye to the base of the chin. The narrow elliptical eyes and open semicircular mouth are applied brass elements that contrast with the warm red of the face. On either side of the face, a flat brass extension features an inner striated crescent.

In this example, the concave visage also features a more pronounced horizontal band across its entire width. The horizontal crescent eyes are positioned at its upper





limits, so that they are higher than in the Berlin example, and the triangular nose is situated at the center of the intersection with the broad vertical band transversing the face. A raised vertical element extends below the lower rim of either eye.

This image of complementary opposites is evocative of the Kota's dual conception of divinity: *nzambi watanda*, the celestial deity identified with the sun, and *nzambi wamutsele*, the deity of the earth and water, associated with the moon, fertility, and the ancestors.[1]

1. Andersson 1974, p. 168.

EX COLL.
Georges de Miré Collection, Paris, until 1931; Ernest Le Veel, Paris, 1931–69; John J. Klejman, New York, 1969–70

PUBLISHED
Drouot 1931, p. 9, lot 55; Drouot 1969, lot 13, ill.; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 339, fig. 881.

82. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus

Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 24 13/16 in. (63 cm)
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
III C 33268

This work was acquired in 1926 by the Berlin museum from Carl Einstein, the German art historian and author of *Negerplastik*, the pioneering 1915 study of African art forms. A janus, it embraces contrasting styles of representation on either side. Efraim Andersson has suggested that such double *mbulu viti* were the earliest and most powerful of the southern Kota guardian figures and cites sources that identify the concave half as female and the convex one as male.[1]

The opposing faces juxtapose an intensely heightened physical presence with a highly schematic abstracted one. The convex side is relatively basic in its adornment when compared with the single-sided convex examples in the catalogue entries that follow (see, for example, cat. nos. 83–86). A simple striated band appears as an accent around the perimeter of the relatively flat two-dimensional elements that project from the summit and sides of the face. On the reverse, the concave face is graphically spare. A broad vertical panel down the center of the face is flanked by alternating passages of densely incised diagonal and parallel lines that extend out to the rim. In the lower half of the face the added features of a triangular nose and two horizontally oriented crescent eyes project prominently from the surface. There is a curved flourish to the upper contours of the lozenge base.

1. Andersson 1974, p. 163.

EX COLL.
Carl Einstein, Berlin, until 1926

EXHIBITED
"Kings of Africa: Art and Authority in Central Africa, Collection Museum für Völkerkunde," Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Center, The Netherlands, June 26–August 27, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Krieger 1965, p. 85, pl. 173; Chaffin 1973, p. 37; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 200, fig. 101; Maastricht 1992, fig. 55; Koloss 2002, p. 123.



83. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron, cowrie shells
H. 26¾ in. (67.9 cm)
Private collection

Among the Kota, all images of ancestors are positioned above ancestral baskets, or *usuwu*, to which they are attached.[1] Commentaries from the first half of the twentieth century suggest that while Kota guardian figures were frequently traded to European visitors, the ancestral baskets they accompanied were not.[2] In at least one instance, however, at the time of their owner's conversion to Christianity, some of these sacred receptacles were transferred to Swedish missionaries Oscar Burell and Linder Svensson, who were based in Congo's Mossendjo district. These now reside in the Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm. Analysis of their contents has made it apparent that two distinct types of relic receptacles were preserved. In one the relics of a clan's most important members were collectively gathered in a basket (*musuku mwangudu ou usuwu angulu*). The other conserved relics of clan leaders admitted to an exclusive secret society in a bark receptacle (*nkobe a Ngoyu*). Only the first of these was central to a clan's spiritual life and was thus accompanied by a guardian figure.[3]

The immense stature and monumental scale of works such as those featured in catalogue entries 81 through 85 constitute an impressive tribute to a clan's past leaders. The convex oval face of this example is defined by features applied to the surface. The double arcs of the brows are composed of two distinct metals, copper and iron. Iron bands are also positioned in parallel diagonals across the surface of the copper cheeks. The open mouth with sharp-filed teeth is filled with a cowrie shell. Largely composed of brass, the surface of the forehead is interrupted by a horizontal copper band, framed by two continuous rows of incised dots, and also features a cowrie at its center. A broad crescent spanning the crown of the head is emblazoned with a continuous band of incised lozenges along the perimeter of its upper contour. Appearing in the interstices of the lozenges are triangles highlighted in copper. The lateral wings at the sides of the face are subdivided into an inner striated crescent, contiguous with the face, and an outer unadorned one whose base terminates with an outward flourish. In its prominence, the head overpowers the openwork lozenge base that extends from the brief neck. This schematic lower half is encased in metal sheeting onto which graphic patterns of openwork lozenges and alternating triangles are inscribed.

1. Andersson 1953, p. 339.
2. Söderberg 1956, p. 108.
3. Andersson 1974, pp. 111–12.

EX COLL.
René Rasmussen, Paris

PUBLISHED
Fagg 1966, p. 38; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 201, 331, fig. 102; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 339, fig. 882.



84. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass
H. 26¾ in. (68 cm)
Private collection

Subtle variations distinguish this work from the previous example of this formidable Kota genre (cat. no. 83). A different equilibrium has been achieved between the ornamentation of the face and that of the upper and lateral extensions. In this example, the crescent at the summit features an arched copper band added to the otherwise smooth brass surface. Likewise, each lateral extension is unadorned except for a horizontal band of inscribed herringbone design along its lower edge and a triangular pendent form accented in copper. The relative simplicity of these surfaces places the dense elaboration of the face in greater relief. The brass surface of the forehead is interrupted by a horizontal copper band filled with an incised lozenge motif. Because the eyes are not punctuated by pupils, they afford the gaze a more meditative expression. The prominent open mouth is circular in form. The cheeks are covered with copper that is more densely striated with parallel iron bands, the first of which extends diagonally from the inner corner of each eye to the chin.

The contents of the clan baskets that accompanied such works included relics of ancestors going back three generations. Efraim Andersson noted that, although those relating to individuals of even earlier generations were still considered to be invested with vitality, they were discarded to make room for more immediate relations.[1] In light of space limitations, precedence was given to conserving the skulls of wealthy and powerful clan members, which were elaborately decorated with painting and ornaments such as shells, cowries, glass, beads, and brass buttons. Lesser-ranking members were represented on a far more modest level with smaller relics. In addition to ancestral remains, an element derived from a clan's totemic animal often appears to have been included.

1. Andersson 1974, p. 126.

EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris

EXHIBITED
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985.

PUBLISHED
New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 302; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 236, fig. 155; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 405.



85. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, leather, brass, iron
H. 22 1/16 in. (56 cm)
Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, Bequest of Dr. Maurice Girardin AMS 276



At the apex of this work, a bitonal upper crest is subdivided into two distinct brass and copper crescents. A raised herringbone ridge bisects the forehead and intersects with a broad horizontal band of incised lozenges. The eyes, narrow horizontal slits punctuated by pupils, are especially long. The notably rounded puffed-out cheeks suggest the expiration of a breath. There is a bold graphic contrast between the dense network of lozenges on the neck and the striated surface of the lozenge base, which echoes the motifs inscribed on the forehead and on either side of the face.

This work was acquired by Dr. Maurice Girardin from Charles Ratton in 1944. An early supporter and collector of both twentieth-century and African art, Girardin obtained his first work of African sculpture, a Baule seated figure from Côte d'Ivoire, from Maurice de Vlaminck in 1916, along with a series of canvases by the artist. His interest in African sculpture developed in response to the privileging of that art by artists of the day such as André Derain, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and Jacques Lipchitz. Girardin's bequest to the city of Paris—five hundred paintings and sculptures by twentieth-century artists and one hundred works of African and Oceanic sculpture—constituted the core of the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne, which opened in Paris in 1951.

EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris, until 1944; Dr. Maurice Girardin, Paris; Musée du Petit Palais, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée des Beaux-Arts, Pau, December 1961–January 1962; "Arts Africains," Musée Cantini, Marseille, March–May 1970; "Sculptures africaines dans les collections publiques françaises," Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, November 7, 1972–February 26, 1973; "Masques et sculptures d'Afrique et d'Océanie: Collection Girardin," Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1986.

PUBLISHED
Pau 1961–62, p. 40, no. 174; Marseille 1970, no. 124; Paris 1972–73, p. 21, fig. 302; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 206, fig. 106; Paris 1986a, pp. 26, 114, fig. 61.

86. Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble

Kota peoples, Ndassa group; Gabon or northwestern Republic of Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, copper, brass, iron
H. 25 3/16 in. (64 cm)
Frum Collection, Toronto

When compared with catalogue numbers 83 through 85, this work is especially dramatic and intimidating. Tonal shifts across the composition are more radical. The bold iron bands used to define the brows and the striations across the cheeks stand out as the focal points of the composition. While the surface of the forehead is brass, the face below the brows is a rich red copper. The lateral and crowning elements are carefully balanced. The convex face appears at the epicenter of a series of concentric extensions. The segmentation of these elements amplifies their otherwise flat forms, especially at the summit, where the transversal crescent is composed of copper and augmented by a brass arc.

EX COLL.
René Rasmussen, Paris

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, pp. 212, 213, figs. 113, 333.



87. Reliquary Vessel Lid: Half Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin
H. 14⅝ in. (37 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 71.1889.115.4



The Mbete-Obamba and other peoples of the Upper Ogooué River, along with those of the Ogooué-Ivindo, share a common history that has led to their categorization as "Kota."[1] André Even's research during the 1920s and 1930s among the central Mbete of the Okondja region documented an important tradition of relic veneration relating to the widely disseminated *ngoye* association. Clan leaders attributed mystical power to certain bones of their deceased predecessors that were conserved within the hollowed interior of wood figures called *mitsitsi-na-ngoye*.[2] One example documented by Even was about 50 centimeters (19 11/16 inches) tall and composed of two parts. The head, neck, and shoulders formed an element that covered the receptacle's summit. The less figurative lower half, which served as the vessel for the relic, was created from a carved-out tree trunk approximately the same diameter as the bust.

Such bipartite Mbete receptacles are relatively rare, and few are known to have survived. This example of an upper half takes the form of a hollowed torso with arms carved in bold relief and held at the sides. The head, highlighted with white kaolin, is stylized by a radically distended concave forehead. A sweeping incised double arc denotes the brows, which intersect at the projecting nose. The otherwise flat semicircular lower half of the face features minimally rendered horizontal slits as eyes and a broad rectilinear mouth accented with fine vertical striations around its perimeter.

1. Perrois 2002, p. 76.
2. Siroto 2000, p. 180.

PUBLISHED
Sydow 1930, p. vii, fig. 10; Perrois 2002, p. 87, fig. 19.

88. Reliquary Vessel Lid: Half Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood (*Ricinodendron heudelotii*), iron, fiber, pigments, kaolin
H. 22 7/16 in. (57 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 0215



An elaborately defined head acts as the finial here for a highly schematic hollowed lid, whose base suggests an upper torso. Below the cylindrical neck the upper edge of the lid appears as the subject's collarbone; at the front, diminutive arms with bent elbows are carved in relief. At the summit, the head is crowned with an especially ornate coiffure. The corpus of related works clearly indicates that carvers delighted in the opportunity to depict a rich range of complex hairstyles. In this example, the crest that rises high above the forehead extends across the top and back of the head as a bold arc and terminates in a narrow tress suspended parallel to the back of the neck. This prominent central element is flanked by vertically positioned lateral crescents. Along the sides of the head a series of parallel ridges are carved in relief. The meditative facial expression features closed eyes carved in relief, with finely incised vertical lines spanning the length of the cheeks. The negative space of the open mouth exposes upper and lower rows of iron teeth.

When they were not being used, such works were hung in special shelters that also held other cult objects. Their main function appears related to initiation rites.[1] Over the course of a particular ceremony, they were brought before the candidates for entry into the *ngoye* association in order to expose them to the names and history of the relics, which were taken out and arranged around them. These sacred vestiges were generally composed of fragments of specific crania and finger bones. When the remains of a leader conserved with those of other chiefs in the sculpture began to disintegrate, they were replaced by those of recently departed *ngoye* members.

1. Siroto 2000, p. 180.

EX COLL.
Charles Ratton, Paris; Jos Hessel, Paris

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1986–87, p. 42; Perrois 2002, p. 86.

89. Reliquary Vessel Lid: Head

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood (*Ricinodendron heudelotti*), fiber, pigments, kaolin, iron, glass beads
H. 24 13/16 in. (63 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 0214



In this component of a Mbete reliquary vessel, the representation is limited to the head. The columnar neck is integrated into the upper lid of the receptacle, which serves as a platformlike base. Such an artifact appears to correspond with the reference made by the French colonial official Hubert Deschamps to "masks" that surmounted bags of relics kept by the great Mbete chiefs.[1] Deschamps emphasizes the importance of such sacra by noting that in order for a new wife to be properly inducted into her spouse's community, she had to sit in their presence within the relic house.

The vibrant red, relatively naturalistic, face is dramatically juxtaposed with the ornate black coiffure. The narrow incised elliptical slits of the closed eyes are accented with white kaolin and surmounted by broad black brows. Facial cicatrization appears as a long incised striation stretching diagonally across the cheeks from the inner corner of each eye to that of the mouth and beyond to the edge of the jaw. The parted lips, highlighted in black, expose an upper row of added metal teeth. A pair of filaments with white and blue glass beads hangs suspended from the chin. The helmetlike structure of the hair features a prominently raised two-dimensional crescent that extends from above the forehead to the nape of the neck and intersects with horizontal crescents projecting from the sides.

1. Perrois 2002, p. 82.

EX COLL.
Jos Hessel, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Ouvertures sur l'art africain," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, May 13–June 29, 1986; "The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "L'esprit de la forêt: Terres du Gabon," Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, December 19, 1997–May 3, 1998.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1986b, p. 35, fig. 25; Paris 1986–87, p. 41; Berjonneau and Sonnery 1987, p. 227; Bordeaux 1997–98, pp. 222–23; Perrois 2002, p. 84.

90. Reliquary: Standing Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood (*Alstonia congensis*), pigments, kaolin, fiber
H. 26⅛ in. (67 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 0224



In addition to the half figures placed at the summit of reliquary vessels (cat. nos. 87–89), the Mbete peoples of the basin of the Upper Ogooué and its tributaries also created hollowed full-length figures into which relics of deceased leaders and other spiritually potent ingredients were introduced through an opening along the length of the back. The representation here features a highly abstract face at the summit of a broad and capacious barrel-like chest whose surface is covered with white kaolin. Abbreviated rectilinear arms are carved in relief as right angles at either side. Fiber is threaded through holes bored into the underside of each arm in order to suspend a cast-metal bell, which may have served to attract the attention of the ancestral realm. The lower body is almost entirely obscured by its voluminous raffia garment. The face has been distilled to an elemental configuration, minimally modeled in which a white forehead is juxtaposed with a red lower half. This flat visage is contrasted with the black coiffure, which covers the back of the head and is articulated by a succession of carved horizontal ridges.

This genre of figurative receptacle with an interior cavity at its core is exceedingly rare. Three examples are in the French national museums; eight others were acquired by the Parisian dealer Charles Ratton from Aristide Courtois, administrator of France's Middle Congo colony from 1910 to 1936. Between 1920 and 1930, Courtois collected the most exceptional series of such sculptures north of Congo-Brazzaville toward Ewo, Kelle, and Odzala, including this work and catalogue numbers 91 through 94.[1] During this period, Courtois was the major source of sculpture for the Parisian art market from the region of French Equatorial Africa (present-day Gabon, the Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic).

1. Perrois 2002, p. 99.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1986–87, p. 35; Perrois 2002, p. 96, fig. 33.

91. Reliquary: Standing Male Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood (*Alstonia congensis*), pigments, kaolin, glass beads, cowrie shells, fiber, bone, iron
H. 28⅜ in. (72.5 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 0214

The relics at the core of Mbete figurative receptacles were obscured from direct view and yet were potent presences. Louis Perrois has noted that throughout eastern Gabon, reliquary sculptures overtly evoke the indelible ties linking the realms of the dead and the living, while the sacred and secret aspects of ancestral veneration reside within the material remains of the relics.[1] Whereas in other regional reliquary ensembles the relics were housed within a packet or receptacle affixed to a representation, the Mbete fully integrated the two through concealment of the relics within the figure.

The hollowed torso of this figurative vessel is more slender than that of the previous example (cat. no. 90). The schematic face features a slightly raised broad brow. Cowrie-shell eyes have been added to the surface horizontally on either side of the simple vertical ridge of the nose. Below, the negative space of the open mouth is filled with sharp metal teeth. Rows of brass tacks are featured on the prominent raised sagittal crest of the coiffure, while the sides of the head are inscribed with dense parallel grooves. The neck is obscured by the numerous loops of a beaded necklace and strung seeds alternating with wood elements. A woven-raffia cloth is tied around the hips, below which are abbreviated flexed legs with broad calves and rudimentary feet.

The scheme of black, white, and red pigments applied to the surface of this and culturally related wood sculptures from the Lower Congo region constitutes a coherent system of symbolic color widely manifested in ritual contexts.[2] This primary palette is derived from a series of natural sources. Black was usually obtained by pounding the bark of the *mwindu* tree. A deep black was produced by mixing the bark with water and adding pulverized charcoal of *nsenga* wood. While seldom used alone, black is widely drawn upon in connection with death, burial, and mourning. White dye (*mpemba*) consisted of either kaolin or chalk. The ancestral realm is characterized as white, and it is most dominantly manifested in rites relating to vision and intelligence such as initiations into esoteric associations. Red was most frequently obtained from pulverized wood of the coral tree (*tukula*). A widespread cosmetic, red pomade was sometimes rubbed on the body of the deceased, and palm wine and *tukula* applied to their insignia to instill in them renewed power.[3]

Pierre Amrouche has noted that Aristide Courtois, the first European owner of this work, initially had business dealings with Paul Guillaume, who may have made contact with him through advertisements Guillaume placed in a colonial paper alerting officers in the field of his interest in acquiring artifacts they encountered on assignment.[4] After Guillaume's death in 1934, Courtois began working closely with Charles Ratton, whose ledger books record approximately two hundred acquisitions from Courtois between 1938 and 1943.

1. Perrois 2002, p. 89.
2. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 16.
3. Ibid., pp. 155–57, 167, 182, 188.
4. Amrouche 2006, p. 188.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Afrique: Cent tribus—cent chefs-d'oeuvre," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Pavillon de Marsan, October 28–November 30, 1964; "African Sculpture," National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., January 29–March 1, 1970, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, March 21–April 26, 1970, Brooklyn Museum, May 26–June 21, 1970; "The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "Afrikanische Skulpture: Die Erfindung der Figur/African Sculpture: The Invention of the Figure," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, July 27–September 30, 1990, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, November 1990–January 1991; "Le grand héritage: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, May 21–September 15, 1992.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1964, fig. 61; Fagg 1965, p. 78; Trowell and Nevermann 1968, p. 158; Washington, D.C., Kansas City, and Brooklyn 1970, p. 70, no. 68; Paris 1986–87, p. 34; Cologne and The Hague 1990–91, p. 165; Paris 1992, p. 104; Perrois 2002, p. 96, fig. 32.



92. Reliquary: Standing Male Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin, iron, cowrie shells
H. 32½ in. (82.6 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse Collection, 2002 2002.456.17

This intensely concentrated figure resembles an active sentinel. The suggestion of arrested movement derives from the slight torsion of the torso and lower body. There is also a slight asymmetry to the placement of the hands on either side of the stomach. The thighs narrow to a point at the bent knees, which are supported by powerful muscular calves. Seen frontally, the trunk appears much narrower than it actually is; its full breadth is apparent in profile. The reverse side features a long rectangular panel that serves as the aperture to the hollow interior of the torso.

An alternation of black, white, and red applied pigments, established at the summit with the coiffure, forehead, and face, is repeated on the neck, trunk, thighs, and calves. Especially thick applications of white kaolin have survived in the interstices of the arms. The relative flatness of the visage contrasts with the volumetric form of the head. A prominent raised sagittal crest is flanked by lateral tresses carved as a series of deeply incised parallel lines. The smooth crescent of the forehead projects slightly above the lower half of the face, which is enlivened by additions of cowrie-shell eyes and fine iron teeth within the open mouth.

This Mbete figure was among the series of full figures collected by Aristide Courtois for Charles Ratton. The foremost dealer of African art in Paris, Ratton was interested in the potential of the American market. In the 1930s he sold this and a considerable number of other works to Pierre Matisse, the second son of Henri Matisse. Pierre had launched his career as an art dealer in New York in 1924 by mounting an exhibition of his father's prints and drawings. By 1931 the Pierre Matisse Gallery represented established European modernists such as Marcel Gromaire, André Derain, Jules Pascin, Georges Rouault, and Marc Chagall in the United States. Eventually the gallery took on the role of promoting and advancing the careers of younger artists, notably Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, Balthus, Alberto Giacometti, and Jean Dubuffet.

In addition to presenting the works of his father's generation of artists, Matisse underscored the inspiration they drew from non-Western sources by regularly exhibiting the various traditions referred to at the time in Europe as "primitive art." John Russell observes that the dealer's "stockbooks indicate that his interests ranged from Cambodia to Gabon, and British Honduras to Vera Cruz."[1] Early in his career as a gallery owner—before he came to represent a full stable of first-rate European artists and when "primitive art" was garnering a great following among French collectors—Matisse took on the challenge of introducing African art to his clientele.[2] From March 30 through April 20, 1935, his gallery presented "African Sculptures from the Ratton Collection" at the same time as the exhibition "African Negro Art" was being held at the Museum of Modern Art. While this foray into a new territory of the art world caused Matisse some trepidation, Alessandra Carnielli and Margaret Loudon note that the critics praised his gallery's careful selection and focus on individual creations, in contrast to the gargantuan presentation of some six hundred works at the Museum of Modern Art.[3]

1. Russell 1999, p. 103.
2. Ibid., p. 100.
3. New York 2002, p. 166.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris; Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse, New York

PUBLISHED
Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 348, fig. 902; Perrois 2002, p. 94, fig. 30; LaGamma 2003.





93. Reliquary: Standing Male Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood (*Alstonia congensis*), pigments, kaolin, beads, cowrie shells, fiber, iron
H. 31½ in. (80 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-86

For the purity of its conceptualization of the body as a vessel, this work has been ranked as the masterpiece among the series of Mbete figurative reliquaries collected by Aristide Courtois. The rectangular dorsal opening to the interior chamber extends the height of the back and is fixed in place with fiber filaments in three places on either side. At the upper limit of the slender columnar torso the collarbone is depicted as a horizontal band that intersects with the diminutive black arms held with elbows bent. These delimit a quadrant whose rectilinear configuration contrasts with the rounded swelling of the stomach and the curvatures of the thighs and calves. Compared with the minimalist arms, the legs are more fully defined and animated in their flexed stance.

There is an exacting emphasis on the palette of red, white, and black, with blue-black beads as an accent around the neck. White kaolin covers the surface of the torso and extends to the knees, while the pigment applied to the calves abruptly shifts to red. The lozenge passage of the face is also red. Directly below the raised ridge of the forehead, cowrie-shell eyes are applied horizontally and the open mouth reveals upper and lower rows of fine iron teeth inserted along the perimeter. The prominent sagittal ridge of the coiffure is flanked by incised passages of concentric bands of hair. Anita Jacobson-Widding has noted that throughout the Lower Congo region black, white, and red are integrated into a single pictorial program only for rites of divination and diagnosis, ordeals that seek to reveal truth, and masquerades representing mythical ancestors.[1] These associations may reflect different aspects of the role such works originally played in the lives of their Mbete patrons.

1. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 285.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris; Madeleine Rousseau, Paris; René Rasmussen, Paris; Hubert Goldet, Paris

EXHIBITED
"The Way of the Ancestors: A Tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 6, 1986–February 7, 1987; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1986–87, p. 36; Berjonneau and Sonnery 1987, p. 228; Bacquart 1998b, p. 119, fig. D; Perrois 2002, p. 75; Geneva 2007, pp. 196–97, 389.



94. Reliquary: Standing Female Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Republic of Congo
19th century
Wood, pigments, buttons, fiber, beads
H. 27⅝ in. (70 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)

Leon Siroto has observed that while most Mbete reliquaries depict male figures, some are clearly female.[1] He suggests that a range of exceptional accomplishments may have qualified certain females for entry into *ngoye* and that they were idealized in reliquary figures that formally very closely resembled those of males. In this matrilineal society, women could occasionally attain the status of chief. Likewise, mothers of twins and celebrated diviners were held in great esteem.

A number of significant stylistic departures are apparent in this female figure, a spectral white presence covered with remnants of applied kaolin. At the summit, the coiffure fans out as a series of five transversal lobes. The forehead projects beyond the deeply recessed applied button eyes. The neck is especially broad, and the midsection striking for the negative space created between the trunk and the slender arms, held out at the sides. Essentially cylindrical, the body is supported by rudimentarily defined legs that are spaced apart and slightly flexed. Many attachments survive, including a band of beads around the hips and one suspended from the proper right arm. Within the corpus of published Mbete reliquary sculptures, this highly original work is most closely related stylistically to one that entered the collections of the French national museums in 1938 and is now on exhibition at the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions.[2]

The present work was acquired from Charles Ratton by the French painter and printmaker Louis Marcoussis, whose association with Guillaume Apollinaire and Georges Braque led him to experiment with Cubism during the first decade of the twentieth century. From the mid-1920s, Surrealist poets had a significant impact on his work. During the 1930s Marcoussis was engaged by the cosmetics manufacturer Helena Rubinstein as a decorator and adviser on her art collection.[3] Rubinstein went on to assemble one of the great collections of African art of her generation.

1. Siroto 2000, p. 180.
2. Ibid.
3. D. Robbins 2006.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris; Louis Marcoussis, Paris; Jean Roudillon and Olivier Le Corneur (Galerie Le Corneur-Roudillon), Paris; André Fourquet, Paris

PUBLISHED
Perrois 1979, fig. 219; Bacquart 1998a, p. 117, fig. 7.



95. Reliquary: Standing Male Figure

Kota peoples, Mbete group; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, brass
H. 19 1/16 in. (50 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 71.1941.13.12



This highly original creation fuses the aesthetic of two-dimensional Kota ancestral representations, which exploit the application of precious metal to a wood surface, with the full-length volumetric figurative corpus of Mbete receptacles. Louis Perrois attributes the work as "Kota" and has suggested that it was probably collected in the 1920s.[1]

At the core of the representation, the trunk, flanked by rigidly held arms, takes the form of a barrel-like cylinder. The brass sheeting applied to the surface from the crown of the head to the stomach features incised designs; the nipples and umbilicus are highlighted along with an abstract hourglass-like motif on the chest. A convex dome-shaped forehead and double-arc eyebrows surmount the flat surface of the face, which features raised additions of horizontally positioned elliptical eyes bisected by a strong nose. Striking projections of broad semicircular ears are positioned at either side of the head.

1. Perrois 2002, p. 91.

EX COLL.
Paul Guillaume, Paris; Musée de l'Homme, Paris, Gift of Mme P. Guillaume, 1941

EXHIBITED
"D'un regard l'autre: Histoire des regards européens sur l'Afrique, l'Amerique et l'Océanie," Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, September 19, 2006–January 21, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 2006–7a, p. 304, fig. 363.

96. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble

Tsogho peoples; Gabon
19th century
Wood, pigments, brass, iron, glass
H. 16¾ in. (42.5 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)

In Tsogho society, such half figures associated with sacred relics were attributed with great powers of protection and were integrated into the most profound dimension of religious experience, *bwete* ancestral rites.[1] A male initiation association concerned with ancestor veneration, *bwete* originated among groups in the Ngounié River area, including the Tsogho, and was subsequently adopted by

peoples throughout the region. It has been suggested that communities along the Middle Ogooué and the coasts embraced it as a measure through which they might fortify themselves against the slave trade.[2] This diverse range of regional peoples gradually adapted and customized it as *bwiti*. Otto Gollnhofer identifies the Tsogho's role in the development of *bwete* as elevating the ancestor cult from its private frame of reference of extended families to that of the greater collective of a universal faith.[3]

In this figure, the forearms extend across the flat chest and meet at its center. Joined together, they form a horizontal line that delineates the transition from the chest to the abdomen, which expands into a rounded convex volume and culminates in a pronounced umbilicus. The work is extraordinary for the intensity of the facial expression captured by the artist. The emphasis he has placed on its features underscores the subject's heightened awareness and receptivity to the full range of sensory stimuli: the deeply carved ears project from the sides of the head; the wide-open mouth seems to draw in air; the eyes appear startled, their gaze intensified by the brass disks framing the iron pupils; and the nostrils are flared. A band of brass added to the forehead extends to the brows. The tone of this metal band complements the reddish brown wood surface while introducing a lustrous reflective highlight.

1. Daney 1924, p. 276; Gollnhofer and Sillans 1965, p. 143; Perrois in London 1995–96, p. 315.
2. Gardinier 1981, p. 50.
3. Gollnhofer 1968.

EX COLL.
Roland Tual, Paris, 1929; Gil Tchernia; André Fourquet, Paris, 1992

EXHIBITED
"Formes et couleurs: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, April 1–September 15, 1993; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1993, p. 46; London 1995–96, p. 353.



97. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble

Tsogho peoples; Gabon, Mimongo region
Early 20th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin, brass
H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Private collection (formerly Collection of André Fourquet, Paris)

In Tsogho society, *bwete* is the spirit that mediates between the divine and those initiated into its association. It is first revealed during initiation rites, while subsequent mastery of its sacred language and invocations affords initiates the opportunity to address *bwete* directly. Over the course of their participation, adepts seek to advance in their understanding of human nature, its place in the cosmos, and spiritual transcendence.[1] Situated in the center of the village, the *ebandza,* a structure consecrated to *bwete,* is both a sacred space in which funerary, commemorative, and initiation rites are held and a place where men gather informally for daily conversation. Within that setting, *bwete* is represented by a wood or terracotta male figure painted red and white.[2]

Works of this kind, depicting departed ancestors, conform closely to those used to evoke *bwete*. In this exceptional example the elongated torso is especially slender. The gesture—bent elbows, raised arms, joined hands—is tightly integrated into the condensed passage of the chest and suggests an inner tension. Directly below this area, the abdomen gently swells, the raised navel aligned with the intersection of the hands. The proper right wrist is accented with a series of three brass bracelets added to the surface. The head features prominent semicircular ears that project from the sides. An applied brass band spanning the length of the convex forehead complements the broad black raised arcs of the eyebrows and terminates at their intersection. The penetrating gaze of the bold eyes is articulated through oval brass disks that outline circular pupils defined as negative spaces at their centers. White kaolin fills the open mouth, which is framed by raised lips. The figure's vivid rich red derives from a layer of applied pigment that has survived across its surface.

1. Gollnhofer and Sillans 1965.
2. Daney 1924, p. 278.

EX COLL.
Jacob Epstein, London; Charles Ratton, Paris; André Schoeller, Paris, 1962–65; Tara Collection, London; Jacques Kerchache, Paris; André Fourquet, Paris, 1975

EXHIBITED
"Formes et couleurs: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, April 1–September 15, 1993; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Gabon: Présence des esprits," Musée Dapper, Paris, September 20, 2006–July 22, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Gillon 1979, fig. 116; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 425, fig. 581; Paris 1993, p. 47; London 1995–96, p. 314; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 557, fig. 321; Paris 2000–2001, p. 104, fig. 82; Paris 2006–7b, p. 133.



98. Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble

Tsogho peoples; Gabon
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, brass, iron, pigments, kaolin
H. 15 in. (38.1 cm)
Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm

In accounts of Tsogho *bwete* rites, ancestor busts or the *bwete* representations accompanied by ancestral relics are described as being housed in a tabernacle positioned at the far end of the *ebandza* temple.[1] During the first phase of initiation, neophytes were invited to open the shutters of this niche to take a long hard look at the half figure representing Nzambé-Kana, the first male ancestor of humanity.[2] Displayed on the walls of the interior are the various attributes of *bwete,* including antelope horns holding the ashes of the dead, bells, civet-cat pelts, and red and white painted shells.

The amplitude of this figure makes it an arresting, commanding presence. Its remarkable full rounded head tapers into a narrowed lower body at the base. Two bold axes define the face—the sweeping curvilinear horizontal created by the raised brows, extending from either temple to the bridge of the nose, and the vertical created by both the sagittal crest of the coiffure and the applied brass band spanning the length of the forehead. The pronounced configuration of the brow and the curves of the sides of the face endow its lower half with a heartlike form. Prominent ears projecting at the sides are accented by applied kaolin. The gaze is heightened by the addition of the brass oval eyes with iron pupils. At the base of the chin, the mouth is a striking empty ovoid. The forearms meet across the torso in such a way that they create a square frame around the upper limit of the chest. Curving inward slightly, the shoulders are narrower than the decidedly blocky hands and wrists. The slight space between the hands aligns with the raised navel.

1. Daney 1924, p. 278.
2. Gollnhofer, Sallée, and Sillans 1975, p. 38.

EXHIBITED
"African Art from New Jersey Collections," Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, January 30–April 10, 1983.

PUBLISHED
Montclair 1983, fig. 69; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 350.



99. Head from a Reliquary Ensemble

Tsogho peoples; Gabon
19th–20th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin, brass
H. 12⅛ in. (30.8 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-75



When positioned at the summit of relics wrapped in a black cloth, *gheonga,* or busts that materialize disembodied ancestors, take on the role of what are called *mbumba*.[1] Such ensembles are invested with protective power that is drawn upon by *bwete* initiates. Their potency gradually diminishes over time unless measures are taken to reinvigorate them ritually. Given that Louis Perrois has suggested that the Tsogho sculptors and musicians who contributed their talents to *bwete* were not professionals but rather initiates, the refinement of their creations, as seen in catalogue numbers 96 through 100, is truly exceptional.[2]

This abbreviated form of representation, designed for placement in bags or baskets that held relics and other potent matter, daringly synthesizes two-dimensional and volumetric pictorial approaches. The expansive visage features a rounded polished convex forehead surmounted by a transverse raised ridge accented in white that extends out at either side as an attenuated tress. A sweeping continuous double arc, shaping the face into a heartlike configuration, delimits the brow. The white kaolin applied to the flat surface of the face further accentuates its form. The facial features include an elliptical mouth and eyes as well as a conical nose that projects in relief. Brass accents are added as rings dangling from either lateral tress and as strips with punched stippled borders and crosses on a vertical band bisecting the forehead and a horizontal band wrapped around the neck.

1. Gollnhofer and Sillans 1987, p. 161.
2. Perrois in London 1995–96, p. 315.

EXHIBITED
"Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971; "Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987.

PUBLISHED
Zurich 1970–71, p. 259, fig. R20; Leuzinger 1972, p. 275; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 201.

100. Head from a Reliquary Ensemble

Tsogho peoples; Gabon
19th–20th century
Wood, brass, pigments, kaolin
H. 14½ in. (36.8 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-53



Bwete ancestor busts are invested with prophylactic power through their association with ancestral relics and certain vegetal and animal matter integrated within the structure of a woven basketry receptacle. Placed within a secret chamber of the *bwete* temple, such *mbumba* were tendered offerings and prayers by senior initiates so that neophytes might be afforded visions of the beyond.[1] As seen previously in related examples (cat. nos. 96–99), the mouth is often the most expressive facial feature of these sculptural representations. That is the case in this schematic elliptical form, given both its scale and the cavernous negative space within which wooden teeth are added. The ears, projecting from the sides of the face and intersecting with the transverse ridge that circumscribes the crown of the head, also display a certain dramatic panache. These semicircular horizontal extensions feature concave depressions highlighted with red pigment. Below the raised double arc of the brow, the face is defined as a red field with features carved in bold relief. The cylindrical eyes are punctuated by broad pupils that are highlighted in white, as are the lips. The simple foliate brass band accenting the convex forehead is repeated on a larger scale by one applied to the neck.

1. Gollnhofer, Sallée, and Sillans 1975, p. 82.

EX COLL.
Baron Rang des Adrets, administrator in Gabon, 1927–36; Sommer Collection, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; "Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Barbier-Mueller, Genf," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, February 27–April 10, 1988, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt-am-Main, June 4–August 14, 1988, Haus der Kunst, Munich, December 17, 1988–February 19, 1989, Musée Rath, Geneva, March 15–May 15, 1989; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Drouot 1982, p. 117, pl. 18; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 117; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 220, no. 134; Geneva 2007, pp. 208–9, 389.

101. Reliquary Ensemble: Head

Sangu-Tsogho peoples; Gabon
19th century
Wood, pigments, fiber, leather, brass, bone
H. 16⅛ in. (41 cm)
W. and U. Horstmann Collection

In this rare example of a complete relic ensemble, the cylindrical neck of the figurative element is inserted into the summit of the pyramidal bark fiber packet, which is securely bound with fiber cord. The transition between those two elements is underscored by the presence of a brass bangle at the base of the neck. While the ears are represented as cylindrical elements that project laterally from the sides of the head, the face is two-dimensional. It takes the form of an oval that is fullest at the summit and narrowest at the chin. The brass band bisecting the forehead is especially ornate, with a row of semicircular decorative additions that extend along its center. Below their intersection, the double arcs of the brows continue down as the vertical bridge of the nose. The surface of the face below the brows is highlighted with red pigment, and the elliptical eyes and mouth are accented in white.

EX COLL.
Helen and Mace Neufeld, Los Angeles

EXHIBITED
"Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals," The Museum for African Art, New York, February 13–August 22, 1993; "Meisterwerke afrikanischer Plastik aus Schweizer Privatbesitz," Kunsthaus Zug, June 9–September 3, 1995.

PUBLISHED
Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 285; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 349; New York 1993, p. 153, no. 76; Zug 1995, p. 24, no. 10; Bassani, Bockemühl, and McNaughton 2002, p. 130, fig. 49.



102. Reliquary Ensemble: Female Half Figure

Punu peoples; Gabon
19th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin, hide, fiber, relics, organic matter
H. 11 13/16 in. (30 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 71.1943.0.433

Southern Gabon's Punu sculptors created the well-known *mukudj* masks, which immortalized the most admired and revered female members of a community. The surfaces of those transcendently lovely idealized portraits were invested with white kaolin, associated with the ancestral realm, thus elevating their subjects to an exalted status. While numerous examples of the masks and the formally related female figures commissioned by diviners are represented in Western collections and continue to be produced within the region, the present work is the only example of reliquary figures of this kind known to survive.

This female figure is a poised and dramatic presence—delicate, ethereal, and otherworldly. Carved in the round, her hands held to her sides, she appears to both assert herself in space and float above the weight of the relic packet to which she is anchored. The base of her torso is integrated into the expansive bundle, encased in animal pelt



and bound with cord. Close study suggests that the hide is that of a civet cat, a creature associated with hunting and divination.[1] The relationship of the two elements implies that only she is intimately familiar with the matter held within its tightly wrapped core. Their intersection is underscored by the asymmetrical placement of the hands, which appear to grasp the upper edges of the relic bundle as if it were the waistline of a voluminous skirt. Recent X-rays of this work have revealed that the figurative element is full length and that its lower half is embedded within the packet at the base. This obscures the fact that the posture of shifting weight is carried through below, so that the proper right leg is slightly more flexed than the left.[2]

At the summit, the head is crowned by an elaborate deeply carved coiffure accented in black with heavy vestiges of red pigment evident in the interstices. The abrupt contrast with the face, covered in white kaolin, is dramatic. The facial features have been sensitively rendered—the brows are high arcs above closed eyes—and articulate an enigmatic expression. The gaze variously appears to reflect tranquil introspection or omniscience. The torso is enhanced with a warm red brown pigment. Under either arm are what appear to be miniature raffia-cloth bundles. Analysis of this work's contents has further revealed that those sachets contain red laterite earth and that no other identifiable relics are among the matter gathered at the base.[3]

1. Mohen and Dubrana 2006, p. 164.
2. Ibid., p. 163.
3. Ibid., pp. 163–64.

EX COLL.
Musée de l'Homme, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée de l'Homme," Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1965; "Sculptures africaines dans les collections publiques françaises," Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, November 7, 1972–February 26, 1973; "African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme," The Center for African Art, New York, September 17, 1984–January 6, 1985.

PUBLISHED
Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 180; Paris 1965, pp. 80–81, no. 21; Laude 1966, p. 141; Leiris and Delange 1967, pp. 238, 416, fig. 271; Wassing 1968, p. 240; Paris 1972–73, p. 113; Chaffin 1973, p. 17; Chaffin and Chaffin 1979, p. 29; New York 1984–85, p. 87; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 428, fig. 598; Thompson 1993, p. 10, pl. 3; Bordeaux 1997–98, p. 130 (not exhibited); Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 560, fig. 338; Visonà 2001, p. 330; Mohen and Dubrana 2006, pp. 161–66.

103. *Beete* Mask: Forest Buffalo (*Zuom*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th–early 20th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin
H. 16 9/16 in. (42 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-15

Leon Siroto has noted that Kwele settlements established in the Dja and Ivindo River basin as far back as the nineteenth century emphasized relatively small discrete family units known as *ebaaz*. These lineage groups were composed of a father and his sons or of brothers and their progeny.[1] Generally a village was made up of a dozen such groupings. Its founding was invariably the initiative of a visionary individual whose affluence, charisma, and generosity attracted peers to join him in the establishment of a new community. Once he verified through divinatory rites that the village in question was viable, protective medicines were commissioned to be buried in its central court. These included certain family relics, chief among them those of his father's sister.[2] Influential family relics were deemed critical to fostering cohesion and collective well-being, given that these communities were notoriously ephemeral and that members regularly split from the group in order to pursue their own interests.

When a need for unity arose to confront crises such as epidemics, the deaths of leaders, poor hunting, or disruptive rivalries, large-scale *beete* ceremonial rites fortified Kwele communities. These harnessed the power of important relics in order to restore a sense of harmonious unity.[3] Siroto notes that the relics of exceptional *ebaaz* members were kept in a large basket with potent substances that included powdered camwood, white earth, and special leaves. These were held in trust by the leader, for he was considered most intimately in contact with their power, and were subsequently passed on to his successor. In the brewing of the mystical "medicine" ingested at the climax of *beete* rites, the relics were thought to be the most potent elements, those capable of catalyzing the other ingredients.[4]



Siroto has observed that over the course of *beete*'s protracted proceedings, masks were used to divert the opposing factions of a community and in so doing bring them into amicable interaction. *Beete* masks were kept near the relics in order that they might be fortified by association.[5]

This surreal apparition consists of a schematic visage at the center of an elaborate superstructure of gracefully expansive horns. White kaolin has been applied to the face, which is flat except for the eyes and nose rendered in relief; these take the form of raised horizontal ridges bisected by broad slits on either side of a triangular nose. The arc of the brows is defined as a double incised band accented in black. At the very base of the chin, the mouth appears as an abbreviated incised notation. The overall configuration of the horns echoes and amplifies that of the brows. Their point of intersection is also the site from which they emerge from the crown of the head to curve around either side. Highlighting the span of their continuous double arc is white pigment, juxtaposed with black bands that delimit their upper and lower edges. Above the narrowed tip of each gradually tapering horn is a minuscule face carved in relief. The features of these secondary visages mirror those of the central one in a compressed format and on a reduced scale.

1. Siroto 1972, p. 58.
2. Siroto 1969, p. 135.
3. Ibid., p. 176.
4. Ibid., p. 173.
5. Ibid., pp. 166–68.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Vignier, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; "Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Barbier-Mueller, Genf," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, February 27–April 10, 1988, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt-am-Main, June 4–August 14, 1988, Haus der Kunst, Munich, December 17, 1988–February 19, 1989, Musée Rath, Geneva, March 15–May 15, 1989.

PUBLISHED
Delange 1967, fig. 111; Perrois 1979, p. 277; Fagg 1980, pp. 114–15; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 81, pl. 11, p. 195, fig. 18; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 211, pl. 128; New York 1995, p. 39; Perrois 2001a, p. 91, fig. 15.

104. *Beete* Mask: Ram (*Bata*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin
H. 18 in. (45.7 cm)
Private collection

Among the Kwele, masquerades were critical both in focusing the attentions of a community during the long *beete* rites and in instilling a spirit of cooperation in its members. The masks worn by the performers personified beings identified with the forest that were known as *ekuk*. These representations were abstract evocations of animals or humans with prominent animal features.[1] In addition to the mask, a *beete* dancer wore a woven-raffia loincloth with a genet pelt attached to the front, and his body was dramatically enhanced with black, white, and red pigments. The basic choreography ranged from rhythmic prancing to shuffling movements that were also performed by the audience. The channeling of energies into such dances contributed significantly to *beete*'s alleviation of tensions among members of a Kwele community.[2]

Leon Siroto has identified the Kwele masks having horns curved around the face as *bata* (the ram). He qualifies this, however, by noting that when the form is enhanced with black, white, and red pigment, it depicts *diia* (the rainbow; see cat. no. 105).[3] At the epicenter of this creation are the boldly raised crescent arcs of the eyes, whose contours are amplified at each successive level of its formal evolution. In contrast to the previous example (cat. no. 103), the horns dramatically encircle the central form of the face. The silhouette-like shallowly carved mask structure embraces sweeping expanses of negative space within its boundaries. The interior and exterior configurations of the composition complement each other: the overarching heartlike form is repeated within as the concave face, highlighted with white kaolin and a bold black brow. The expansive horns intersect with the disk-shaped head at both its apex and base. They rise up and around its perimeter, their contours faceted so that the inside curve is accented in white, the outer one in reddish brown, and the upper one in black.

1. Siroto 1969, p. 165.
2. Ibid., pp. 218, 219, 234.
3. Ibid., p. 221.

EX COLL.
Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York

EXHIBITED
"Masks and Sculptures from the Collection of Gustave and Franyo Schindler," The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, November 2, 1966–February 5, 1967.

PUBLISHED
New York 1966–67, fig. 28; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 346; Perrois 2001a, p. 91, fig. 14.



105. *Beete* Mask: Rainbow (*Diia*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th–early 20th century
Wood, pigments, kaolin
H. 21 1/16 in. (55 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 4536

Kwele *beete* rites responded to adversity or sought to dissipate a potentially fractious situation by creating a climate of communal cohesiveness. A variety of activities instilled in participants a spirit of cooperation.[1] Among these were communal hunts, dances, initiation and purification rites, and the communal consumption of the *beete* meal. Directly before that final feast, according to Leon Siroto, candidates for initiation were guided in an altered state through the forest, where the relics upon which *beete* was founded were revealed to them, as were the *ekuk* masks. Siroto notes that they were given information about the family members identified with the relics and were presented with the opportunity to take on the role of *ekuk*.[2]

This tour de force of Kwele sculpture foregrounds a face encircled by a continuous outer band that creates a slender channel of negative space between the two. At the summit of the head, a vertical projection extends out around the sides of the face and merges below the mouth, so that its entire circumference is embraced. Highlighted in black, this passage suggests horns that serve as a protective barrier around the face suspended at the heart of the composition. The broad forehead features traces of white kaolin, while the slightly concave heart-shaped face is accented in contrasting red pigment. The continuous raised arcs of the brows meet at the bridge of the nose, echoing the projections from the summit of the head. The mouth is a broad incision along the lower perimeter of the face. Strikingly positioned at forty-five-degree angles, the closed eyes are raised ovals bisected by slits.

The monumental presence and expansive continuum of this creation successfully evoke the hovering appearance of the rainbow. Throughout equatorial Africa, the rainbow is identified with mystical power, and the *beete* rites in which this arresting mask were featured sought to harness the boundless influence of the ancestors to fortify and restore the community's well-being.

1. Siroto 1969, p. 62.
2. Ibid., p. 234.

EX COLL.
Aristide Courtois, French colonial administrator of Middle Congo; Charles Ratton, Paris

EXHIBITED
"African Tribal Sculpture," The University Museum, Philadelphia, April–September 1956; "African Sculpture," National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., January 21–March 1, 1970, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City, March 21–April 26, 1970, The Brooklyn Museum, May 26–June 21, 1970, "Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971; "Ouvertures sur l'art africain," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, May 13–June 29, 1986; "La grande scultura dell'Africa nera," Forte di Belvedere, Florence, July 15–October 29, 1989; "Le grand héritage: Sculptures de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, May 21–September 15, 1992; "Arts d'Afrique," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 30, 2000–June 30, 2001; "Africa: Capolavori da un continente," Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Turin, October 2, 2003–February 15, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Philadelphia 1956, fig. 24A; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 179, fig. 220; Washington, D.C., Kansas City, and Brooklyn 1970, p. 138, no. 170; Zurich 1970–71, p. 233; Leuzinger 1972, p. 249; Paris 1986b, p. 45; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 424, fig. 578; Florence 1989, p. 255, fig. 89; Paris 1992, p. 192; Bacquart 1998b, p. 120, fig. 4; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 556, fig. 318; Roy 1998, p. 12; Paris 2000–2001, p. 71, fig. 54; Perrois 2001a, p. 89, fig. 13; Turin 2003–4, p. 239.



106. *Beete* Mask (*Pebood*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon
19th–early 20th century
Wood, pigments
H. 10 in. (25.4 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-80

This iconic work was acquired by Tristan Tzara, the Romanian-born poet, essayist, and founding member of the revolutionary artistic movement known as Dada, which was committed to the restoration of authentic experience through focusing on elemental forms of speech and gesture. Robert Jensen points out that, from the inception of the movement, the Dadaists found their vocabulary in the tribal and folk art celebrated by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky.[1] Beginning in 1916, when Tzara took over the helm of Dada in Zurich, he reached out to the world at large through publications and gallery exhibitions of Cubist and African art. In 1917 he made the following observations in "Note 6 sur l'art nègre": "The new art is of the very first order . . . through this purity we have, first of all, deformed and decomposed the object, we have approached its surface and penetrated it. We want a clarity that is direct. . . . Let's draw the light from the dark. Simple-rich. Luminous naïveté. Diverse materials, balance of form."[2]

Following his move to Paris in 1919, Tzara began collecting African sculpture during the 1920s and was active in this pursuit until his death in 1963. It is easy to see the appeal this work would have held for his sensibility. The form is at once pure in its elemental simplicity and dazzling in the perfection of its formal resolution. At the core of the image is the pronounced black outline of a heart configuration that defines the contours of the face. The interior of this passage is concave and further accentuated with densely applied white pigment. The angled crescent eyes and triangular nose are carved in relief so that they project boldly from the surface. The symmetry of the composition is underscored by a broad vertical line that extends from the bridge of the nose to the base of the chin.

Leon Siroto identifies Kwele masks of this compact type as *pebood* and notes that the Kwele considered them to be extraordinarily beautiful.[3] When seen in the context of other *beete* masks, this basic design is clearly the foundation and point of departure for the full range of mask forms developed by Kwele sculptors.

1. Jensen 1988, p. 366.
2. Tzara 1917.
3. Siroto 1969, p. 225.

EX COLL.
Tristan Tzara, Paris

EXHIBITED
"Exposition d'art africain et d'art océanien," Galerie Pigalle, Paris, February 28–April 1, 1930; "African Negro Art," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18–May 19, 1935; "Première exposition rétrospective internationale des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie," Palais Miramar, Cannes, July 6–September 29, 1957; "Afrique: Cent tribus—cent chefs-d'oeuvre," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Pavillon de Marsan, Paris, October 28–November 30, 1964; "African Masks from the Barbier-Mueller Collection, Geneva," Haus der Kunst, Munich, February 14–April 27, 1997, Kunsthalle Bielefeld, May 15–August 3, 1997, Banque Générale du Luxembourg, September 1–October 30, 1997, Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium, May 29–September 13, 1998, Fondation Bismarck, Paris, Fall 1998; "L'homme & ses masques: Chefs-d'oeuvre des Musées Barbier-Mueller," Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris, May 23–August 28, 2005; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1930, p. 17, fig. 205; Ratton 1931, pl. 17; New York 1935, fig. 414; Buraud 1948, pl. [11]; Cannes 1957, fig. 62; Elisofon and Fagg 1958, p. 178, fig. 218; Paris 1964, fig. 62; Fagg 1966, cover ill.; Drouot 1988, pp. 76–77, lot 193; Paudrat 1996, p. 52, fig. 9; Munich, Bielefeld, Luxembourg, Tervuren, and Paris 1997–98, p. 71, fig. 188; Paris 2005b, pp. 226–27, 351, no. 78; Geneva 2007, pp. 192–93, 389.



107. *Beete* Mask: Antelope (*Booang*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon or Republic of Congo
19th–20th century
Wood, pigments
H. 14 1⅝6 in. (38 cm)
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva 1019-49



Duiker antelopes figured prominently in a Kwele community's *beete* observances. Leon Siroto notes that many of the younger men embarked on a great weeklong net-hunt for these animals in the forest. The collaborative *beete* quest, which could last more than a month, generated a collective camaraderie. A successful hunt was interpreted as an indication that the forest was favorably disposed to the community's *beete* rites. The antelope meat was among the chief ingredients of the mystically potent stew that was ultimately consumed by the community at large.[1]

This elegant antelope face mask is defined by dynamic contours that are especially crisp. The flatness of the form is dissipated by the subtle undulation of the concave snout, which shifts to a convex forehead. A raised central ridge extending the length of the head is flanked by the diagonally oriented slits of the eyes, emphasizing the bilateral symmetry of the representation. The apex culminates in a simple arrangement of the horns that is at once decorative and beautifully equilibrated. The surface of the antelope is white up to the midpoint of the horns. At their base, the horns extend out so that they form a V. Above this point, they are painted black up to their sharp attenuated tips and are angled so they meet at the summit. A sharply defined negative space in the form of an elongated lozenge lies between them. The angularity of this passage is muted directly below the horns, where the ears curve gently out to the sides.

1. Siroto 1969, p. 213; Siroto 1972, p. 62.

EXHIBITED
"Ancestral Art of Gabon from the Collections of the Barbier-Mueller Museum," Dallas Museum of Art, January 26–June 15, 1986, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 28, 1986–March 22, 1987; "Afrikanische Kunst aus der Sammlung Barbier-Mueller, Genf," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, February 27–April 10, 1988, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt-am-Main, June 4–August 14, 1988, Haus der Kunst, Munich, December 17, 1988–February 19, 1989, Musée Rath, Geneva, March 15–May 15, 1989; "Arts of Africa and Oceania: Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller," Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, April 26–September 30, 2007.

PUBLISHED
Fagg 1980, p. 114; Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 83, pl. 12, p. 196; Düsseldorf, Frankfurt-am-Main, Munich, and Geneva 1988–89, p. 210, no. 127; Perrois 2001a, p. 96, fig. 22; Geneva 2007, pp. 194–95, 389.

108. *Beete* Mask: Gorilla (*Gon*)

Kwele peoples; Gabon or Republic of Congo
20th century
Wood, traces of camwood powder and kaolin
H. 17 1/16 in. (45 cm)
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 73.1963.0.189



While most Kwele dance masks are planar representations whose features are carved in shallow relief parallel to the viewer, the sculptural effect of *gon* runs counter to this by impinging on the spectator's space.[1] Of all the Kwele mask genres, this is the one that is most fully conceived in the round as a vital presence bristling with dangerous vibrancy. Its aggressive menacing appearance gives expression to a wild untamed force. At the summit the brow projects forcefully—a triangular form flanked by sloping sides and surmounted by a median ridge—and casts the cutout ocular openings in shadow. According to Leon Siroto, this key passage is modeled on the upper part of the skull of an adult male gorilla, an animal identified with aggression and the despoiling of Kwele plantations.[2] The strong rectilinear hooked nose also emerges prominently from the surface. At the base, the jaw curves outward and features two sharpened fangs that extend down at an angle. The black surface is interrupted by passages that once featured camwood powder (the triangular depression of the brow) and kaolin (the mouth and fangs).

Over the course of *beete* rites, the arrival of *gon* was announced to a village the day before its appearance. In anticipation of its disruptive presence, domestic animals were confined within homes. Siroto has noted that the *gon* performer could not be an ordinary person but rather one invested with attributes of bravery, ferocity, madness, and mystical powers.[3] The body of this menacing masked being was covered with powdered charcoal, and he brandished multiple spears. Bound around the chest, he was restrained by his followers, who sang a special song requesting that he kill something. Eventually he broke free and stalked the village for prey. According to Siroto, the property that members of the community lost as a result was considered part of the prescription for saving a village in crisis.[4] In the concluding rite of purification and communion, the animals sacrificed to this end were subsequently consumed. *Beete* masks were then returned to the chambers where they were kept by the leaders of lineage groups with family relics until the next *beete* rite. Originally adapted from the Ngwyes, the Kwele's use of *gon* came to an end sometime after the consolidation of French colonial power in the early 1920s.[5]

In Kwele society, gifted carvers enjoyed prestigious regional reputations.[6] Siroto has emphasized the premium that was placed on creatively interpreting *gon* mask forms, which invariably required conceptual sophistication. He observes that lineage leaders valued ownership of *gon* masks so highly that they sought the services of master sculptors. As the creations of skilled professionals, *gon* masks were among the highest-priced Kwele mask forms, costing as much as an anvil, a hammer, twenty pieces of iron money, ten work knives, and one goat.[7]

1. Siroto 1972, p. 71.
2. Ibid., p. 76.
3. Ibid., p. 68.
4. Ibid., pp. 63, 66.
5. Ibid., p. 65.
6. Siroto 1969, p. 241.
7. Siroto 1972, pp. 70, 72.

EXHIBITED
"Sculptures africaines dans les collections publiques françaises," Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, November 7, 1972–February 26, 1973; "Africa: The Art of a Continent," Royal Academy of Arts, London, October 4, 1995–January 21, 1996.

PUBLISHED
Bolz 1966, pp. 210–11, pl. 61b; Delange 1967, fig. 112; Paris 1972–73, p. 87; Perrois 1979, p. 275, fig. 296; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1988, p. 233, fig. 147; London 1995–96, p. 312; Kerchache, Paudrat, and Stéphan 1998, p. 99; Roy 1998, p. 35; Perrois 2001a, p. 101, fig. 29; Visonà 2001, p. 363.

109. *Emboli* Helmet Mask

Kota peoples; Gabon, Ivindo region
20th century
Wood, pigments, resin, beads
H. 27 7/16 in. (69.6 cm)
Private collection

In contrast to the plethora of Kota *beete* sculptures created to accompany reliquaries, only a small corpus of the works at the center of the related masquerades has survived. Known as *emboli*, works of this genre take the form of cylindrical helmet masks. According to Louis Perrois, *emboli* headdresses were worn in performances of rites intended to dispel antisocial forces as well as those associated with initiations and with funerals of dignitaries.[1] The emergence of an *emboli* dancer from the forest was meant to instill respect for social order through intimidation of the noninitiated. The fact that such apparitions featured an artifact manipulated by men was revealed to neophytes over the course of their initiation.

Among the examples of *emboli* headdresses in Western collections, even those documented in Africa as early as 1920 appear to be have sustained minimal use, which suggests that such artifacts were readily replaced by fresh versions. This work was collected in the field in 1966 by the Belgian art dealer Christian Duponcheel.

As in the treatment of *beete* facial structures, the eyes and nose of this highly abstract representation are depicted as protuberances framed by the pronounced continuous curved ridge of the brows. The asymmetrical rectilinear forehead features a median ridge flanked by angled black and white sides. The visual impact of the brow's formidable double arc is heightened by an incised central band into which small red seed beads have been affixed with resin. In other examples the dotted pattern created by the seeds, which alludes to panther markings, is variously represented with applied pigment or brass tacks. At the summit a dramatic finlike crest projects from the crown of the head. Perrois has suggested that, as in Kwele *gon* masks (cat. no. 108), this feature is an attribute intended to evoke the gorilla.[2] Complex tonal contrasts enliven the surface. The bilateral symmetry of the face is subverted through the use of contrasting palettes: black on the proper left side of the forehead and white on the proper right, while the concave ocular recesses feature white on the proper right and black on the proper left.

1. Dallas and Los Angeles 1986–87, p. 56.
2. Ibid.

EX COLL.
Christian Duponcheel, Brussels, field collected 1966

EXHIBITED
"Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika," Kunsthaus Zürich, October 31, 1970–January 17, 1971.

PUBLISHED
Zurich 1970–71, p. 257, fig. R14; Leuzinger 1976, p. 106.



110. *Ngi* Mask

Fang peoples; Gabon
19th century
Wood, pigment, kaolin
H. 25 in. (63.5 cm)
Private collection

The ancestors nourish all aspects of power in Fang communities, including that of the group charged with dispensing social justice, which uses masks such as this one. Günter Tessmann observed that "white is the color of death, for the moon in its waning phase is white and the bones of the dead are white."[1] The color identified with the spirits of the ancestors, white was used in masks that evoked the subjects of *byeri* reliquary sculpture, a distinct but related tradition. A thick surface of white kaolin has been applied to this succinct representation of a strikingly elongated vertical face with minimal graphic details articulated in black.

Below the forehead the brows are raised arcs that begin at the outer perimeters of the face and meet at the center. Accented in black, they merge at their intersection into the vertical ridge of the nose, which extends the length of the face and terminates directly above the chin. This extremity features a mouth in the form of an open horizontal rectangle with exposed carved teeth. The linear axis defined by the nose is narrowest at the summit and broadens slightly toward the base. On either side of this divide the face is a flat angled plane. Toward the summit are minute horizontal perforations indicating the eyes. Crescent ears project out at either side. The blackened crown of the head features a prominent sagittal crest. From both the back and in profile, horizontal bands of dense abstract linear passages are evident. These are defined by raised black lines as well as by kaolin embedded in the grooves. When the mask was worn in performance, a raffia collar was affixed to the perimeter and feathers were added to the summit. Louis Perrois has noted that despite the dramatic contrast in proportion and color sensibility, this mask genre shares underlying formal features with *byeri* representations, including the heart-shaped configuration of the face.[2]

Such imposing masks related to rites held by *ngi* (*ngil*), a Fang antiwitchcraft association and force that transcended clan interests to regulate village life and protect individuals against mystical aggression.[3] James Fernandez has observed that *ngi* was the most potent medicine, or *biang*, drawn upon by the Fang to expose hidden dangers. Villages adopted *ngi* ceremonies as they experienced a need to combat witchcraft by detecting and punishing sorcerers. New versions of the rites were continually developed and disseminated.[4] It appears that in some instances *ngi* members gathered in small groups with an emblematic mask in order to investigate foul play as well as to expose the perpetrators and bring them to justice.[5] In their mission to eliminate those who engaged in antisocial behavior, such ghostly apparitions materialized armed at dawn or twilight.[6] Despite the serene appearance of his mask, the intimidating emissary emitted terrifying raucous noises and was identified with punishment and retribution.[7] It appears that while *byeri* was gradually abandoned, *ngi* continued to evolve for a time in Fang society in response to a sense of increasing vulnerability to witchcraft.[8]

1. Fernandez 1982, p. 248.
2. Perrois in London 1995–96, p. 325.
3. Siroto 1969, p. 19.
4. Fernandez 1982, pp. 222, 224, 227.
5. Alexandre and Binet 1958, p. 64.
6. Perrois 1986, p. 150.
7. Perrois in London 1995–96, p. 324.
8. Fernandez 1982, p. 222.

EX COLL.
French missionary doctor, field collected late 1800s; J. J. Klejman, New York; Renée Withofs, Brussels; Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York

EXHIBITED
"Het masker: Alle volken, alle tijden," Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, September 16–November 15, 1956; "Masks and Sculptures from the Collection of Gustave and Franyo Schindler," The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, November 2, 1966–February 5, 1967; "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985, Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27–May 19, 1985, Dallas Museum of Art, June 23–September 1, 1985.

PUBLISHED
Antwerp 1956, no. 176; Leuzinger 1959, p. 142; Sotheby's 1960, lot 167; New York 1966–67, no. 34; New York, Detroit, and Dallas 1984–85, vol. 1, p. 13; Robbins and Nooter 1989, p. 335, fig. 868.



111. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure

Teke peoples; Republic of Congo, Mbé region
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, glass, cowrie shell, resin, organic matter, brass
H. 11⅝ in. (29.5 cm)
Private collection



The physical and conceptual core of Teke ancestral figures, or *buti,* is the medicinal matter contained in a cavity carved into the front of the trunk. A figure devoid of these spiritually empowering substances (*bonga*) is referred to as *tege*.[1] This seated male figure retains its abdominal concentration of spiritually potent matter, which is fixed in place by a resin sealant into which a glass fragment and cowrie shell are embedded. Such works were created for individual patrons to address personal concerns that might range from the desire for success in hunting, trading, or acquiring wives, to the need to combat physical or psychological affliction.[2]

To obtain the knowledge necessary for instilling spiritual potency within a wood figurine, its creator underwent an initiation and apprenticed himself to a ritual specialist. According to the French traveler Richard Hottot, the same individual might both carve the artifact and be responsible for composing and adding the *bonga,* which afforded it the influence necessary to redress ailments. Each specialist mastered a distinct *bonga* formula, generally a mixture of different substances. Before a *tege* was empowered, its entire trunk was coated with *mpieme,* a powerful medicine commonly used in *bonga*. A white clay or chalk identified metaphorically with the bones of the ancestors, *mpieme* served as the catalyst for the other ingredients in imbuing the *buti* with a specific power.[3] Among the various substances drawn upon for *bonga* were beard bristles or hair of venerated individuals and ritual specialists, leaves of a special plantain plant (*nga a ba*), and parts of totemic animals, including snakes. While the relic cavity is generally positioned in the stomach area, it could be added to any part of the figurine.[4]

The value placed upon a given figure is measured in terms of its demonstrated potency. The wood from which the work is carved was carefully selected, and on rare occasions, as in this instance, it is a soft light yellow variety called *mulong*. Such representations are designed to be seen frontally.[5] Classic features apparent in this work include the distinctive *mabina* facial cicatrization of parallel lines extending from the upper temples down the side of the face; a prominent mouth, associated with ritual importance; and an ample beard, considered a sign of excellence and sacred character.[6] Invariably, emphasis is also placed on the crowning element of the coiffure: in this example, the spiraling form of a hairstyle known as *ntali*, favored by the Fumu subgroup of the Teke and identified with a totemic serpent.

1. Hottot 1956, p. 27.
2. Ibid., p. 29.
3. Ibid., pp. 29–30.
4. Lehuard 1974, p. 22.
5. Hottot 1956, pp. 26, 27.
6. Ibid., p. 25.

EX COLL.
Comte Baudouin de Grunne, Brussels

EXHIBITED
"Afrikanische Skulpture: Die Erfindung der Figur/African Sculpture: The Invention of the Figure," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, July 27–September 30, 1990, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, November 1990–January 1991.

PUBLISHED
Cologne and The Hague 1990–91, p. 172; Lehuard 1996, p. 263, fig. 1.2.

112. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure

Teke peoples; Republic of Congo, Bouala Ntangou region
19th–first half of 20th century
Wood, iron, mother-of-pearl buttons
H. 12⅝ in. (32 cm)
Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva 44416



Richard Hottot emphasizes that it is the addition of the *bonga* that transforms the inanimate sculptural shell of a Teke figure into an ancestor.[1] Often, as in this example, it is apparent that such ancestral reliquaries were "desacralized," their mystical substances entirely removed and eliminated before the figure was relinquished by its original owner. The absence of what once defined this and related works is apparent in the deep centrally placed orifices that formerly sheltered a voluminous packet of sacred matter. The nature of the power with which each work was invested was a carefully guarded secret to avoid its subversion by an enemy.[2] If a *buti*'s power was dissipated, a ritual specialist could remove the *bonga* and subsequently provide another client with the same artifact, now invested with fresh *bonga*. Jan Vansina notes that while the ancestral spirits, or *ikwii,* were guardians of the living, sometimes they became angry and required propitiation. This might result from their feeling neglected because their statue had been worn out and not replaced or because they had an appetite for a sacrifice.[3] The cause for their discontent might manifest itself in an illness that was revealed by a diviner and remedied with the desired offering.

1. Hottot 1956, p. 30.
2. Ibid., p. 31.
3. Vansina 1973, p. 43.

EX COLL.
Émile François-Chambon, Geneva, before 1981

EXHIBITED
"Objets de pouvoirs: Ancienne magie Bantou en Afrique centrale," Musée d'Ethnographie, Geneva, 1992; "Batéké: Peintres et sculpteurs d'Afrique centrale," Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, September 30, 1998–January 4, 1999.

PUBLISHED
Geneva 1992, p. 75; Lehuard 1996, p. 253, fig. 2.2.1; Paris 1998–99, pp. 146–47.

113. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure

Teke peoples; Republic of Congo, Mayama region
19th century
Wood, cloth, mother-of-pearl buttons, accumulative materials
H. 19½ in. (49.5 cm)
Robert T. Wall Family

In Teke society the *ikwii,* or shades of the dead, warded off calamities perpetrated by witches. The father of a family invoked the *ikwii* of his father, mother, and sometimes his mother's brother on behalf of his own children and wives. A shrine to one's deceased family members featured reliquary figures of some of those individuals (*buti*) along with other items, which might include memorial vessels for deceased twins of the household, receptacles containing white and red kaolin and medicines, and a wooden bell and rattle used to summon the spirits of the shrine before prayers.[1] The attention of the *ikwii* was engaged when they heard their favorite songs played on a kind of stringed musical instrument known as a pluriarc (see fig. 23).[2]

Buti were named after and identified with the specific male ancestors whom they embodied. Generally those individuals were renowned chiefs or leaders whose presence assured the community's well-being. The sacred component of *buti* was composed of earth from the grave of the deceased, which was considered to contain traces of his corporeal being.[3] Marie-Claude Dupré observes that the Teke produced this sculptural genre at the moment in their history when they were being dispossessed of their ancient territories. She suggests that this impetus to represent themselves through their ancestors reflected a desire to assert and perpetuate their heritage.[4] Jan Vansina notes that the *ikwii* would provide counsel in dreams and that the Teke king Iloo consulted the grandfather of his grandfather in this manner concerning the treaty Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza presented to him.[5]

As the responsibility of individual family leaders, *buti* were kept within their owners' home. Those of a village leader afforded benefits to the community at large. It appears that, on the death of its owner, a *buti* was often buried with him along with all his other belongings.[6] Over the course of his field research in 1963–65 among the Tio-Teke of the Congo's right bank, Vansina made the following observations concerning the use of Teke figures in relation to lineage rites:

> Almost every day the master of the house would pray to his *ikwii*, usually during the evening. He rang the bell, shook the *õtsara* [rattle] and began by calling them, whispering *shwii shwii* close to the statue. . . . After a while he started a conversation as if the relative was still alive. After he had spoken, he chewed some kola and spat it on the statue . . . for the *ikwii* to eat. Then he might pour some lustral water *ntsã* over the statue . . . to clean it and pour wine afterwards for the *ikwii* to drink.[7]

Impressive in its monumentality, this seated figure gazes intently forward, its diminutive arms with bent elbows resting on raised knees. It closely resembles one collected by Richard Hottot now in the collection of the British Museum. Hottot photographed that work in 1906 in the village of Kinda in the present-day Republic of Congo.[8] Teke representations such as these emphasize a median crestlike coiffure, known as *mupani,* that is identified with the Sise subgroup.[9] They were carved from *ngasu* wood, whose reddish tone is considered to be mystically potent. Similarly, the use of European buttons for eyes is not merely an aesthetic decision but is intended to enhance the work's spiritual potency. Hottot notes that the same varieties of buttons are drawn upon for amulets.[10]

Despite outward formal resemblances among Teke figures, their internal contents differed significantly, given that the *bonga* prescribed was specific to each patron's needs. Individual ritual specialists were identified with formulas reputed to be efficacious in addressing specific medicinal and prophylactic requirements.[11] These carefully guarded secrets were conferred from one generation of specialists to the next.[12] In this *tege,* the mystically potent ingredients were originally secured in place with an outer wrapping of textile around the torso, which now exposes the empty chest cavity.



1. Vansina 1973, pp. 40, 42, 63.
2. Ibid., p. 43.
3. Paris 1998–99, p. 130.
4. Ibid., p. 134.
5. Vansina 1973, p. 42.
6. Hottot 1956, p. 35.
7. Vansina 1973, p. 41.
8. Lehuard 1996, p. 246.
9. Hottot 1956, p. 25.
10. Ibid., p. 28.
11. Widmer 1992–93, p. 69.
12. Hottot 1956, p. 28.

EX COLL.
French Catholic missionary, collected in Republic of Congo; Eddy Hof, The Netherlands

EXHIBITED
"Treasures," National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., November 17, 2004–August 15, 2005.

PUBLISHED
Washington, D.C. 2004–5, n.p.

114. Reliquary Sculpture: Male Figure with Figural Additions

Teke peoples; Republic of Congo, Mbé region
19th–early 20th century
Wood, cotton and plant fibers, feathers, cowrie shell (*Cypraea tigris L.*), organic matter
H. 11 7/16 in. (29 cm)
Museum der Kulturen, Basel III 7131

Exhibited in the Pavillon de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris, this work was acquired by the Basel museum from Dr. Stéphen-Chauvet. In an archival letter to the museum, dated November 17, 1931, he emphasizes its importance and comments on the great interest it generated at the exposition: "I know of no other comparable piece and of this level of aesthetic and religious interest." Stéphen-Chauvet identified the work as a Teke "fetish" from the region between the Congo and Lefini Rivers that is notable for its multifigural composition featuring three ancillary miniature figurines.[1] Two of these, on the proper right side, are Teke ancestral figurines similar to those that the Teke carry in their rucksacks, while the one on the proper left, with its cutlass and gourd, is a typical Bembe figure.

Among the rare early contextual descriptions of Teke figures to come down to us is that of Léon Guiral, who visited the Teke plateaus while journeying to supply colonial posts along the Ogooué in 1882. During that time, while in the house of a man named Ntchoulou on the Congo River, he had the opportunity to study a related work that he refers to as a "divinity": "Of about a meter in height, it was in wood, crudely carved, wearing a Teke cloth. . . . Around this 'fetish' approximately ten secondary divinities were grouped. All were in wood; and some among them were carved with such care and taste as to inspire envy in the great 'fetish.'"[2]

Each such ensemble of multiple figures appears to reflect the distinctive role of the individual creation. In this example, a series of independent elements has been harnessed to amplify the power of the central figure. All but its head and legs have been obscured by the dense added matter that expands its girth. Historically, shells were drawn upon as units of currency. Marie-Claude Dupré has noted that the giant cowrie centrally positioned here is of a rare variety and that its great size comments upon the power of the object as well as its peaceful intent.[3] She proposes that the shell may have served as a semantic construction designed to effect an accord between peoples who were close but separate.

1. Museum der Kulturen, Basel, correspondence.
2. Paris 1998–99, p. 126.
3. Ibid., p. 185.

EX COLL.
Dr. Stéphen-Chauvet, Brussels, 1931

EXHIBITED
"Pavillon de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française," Exposition Coloniale, Paris, 1931; "Zaïre Masken Figuren," Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerische Museum für Volkskunde, Basel, 1986; "Batéké: Peintres et sculpteurs d'Afrique central," Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, September 30, 1998–January 4, 1999.

PUBLISHED
Lehuard 1974, p. 111, fig. 55; Basel 1986, p. 32, no. 21; Lehuard 1996, pp. 300–301, fig. 34.1.5; Paris 1998–99, pp. 183–84.



115. Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Figure

Teke peoples; Republic of Congo
19th–20th century
Wood, soil, other organic matter, fiber, cloth
H. 14 15/16 in. (38 cm)
Musée Dapper, Paris 0008

The substantial mass of potent matter that expands the exterior of this figure is consolidated within what appears to be a sacklike garment. Prepared and then inserted into the work by a spiritual specialist, it is the most visually arresting aspect of this creation. The only figurative features, exposed at its upper and lower limits, are the crest of the coiffure and the legs and feet. The indeterminacy of the form is further strengthened by the fact that the area of the face not obscured by the fabric wrapping is covered with applied libations. By engulfing the representation in this weighty shroud, its author sought to direct the attention of the ancestral force being evoked to material concerns. Such works were conceived of as "receptacles" customized to accommodate the sacred substances that were applied within and without. Jan Vansina has noted that those individuals who could not afford such figurative forms honored and maintained contact with important ancestors through simpler versions whose contents, which often included earth taken from burial sites, were wrapped within an animal pelt.[1] This example appears to transpose that more elemental form upon a more costly figurative structure, so that its power may also be derived in large part from earth taken from ancestral graves. The reddish hue of the *ngasu* wood selected by sculptors to carve such figures was identified with mystic potency.[2] Similarly, the faded red of the outer fabric membrane is a reference to the life force.

1. Paris 1998–99, p. 129.
2. Ibid., p. 127.

EXHIBITED
"Magies," Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1996–September 29, 1997.

PUBLISHED
Paris 1996–97, p. 21.



116. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure (*Muzidi*)

Kongo peoples, Bembe group; Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–20th century
Wood, cotton, cane, ivory
H. 23 in. (58.4 cm)
Private collection

The earliest descriptions of this genre of ancestral reliquary designated them as the "cloth idols of the Babembe."[1] Among Bembe clans of the Mouyondzi Plateau, the cult of the ancestors takes precedence over all others.[2] Bertil Söderberg observes that although the ancestors ultimately draw their vital force from God (*nzambi*), they are the focus of the devotions of the living members of their clan.[3] The spirits of the dead, *minkuyu*, remained influential members of the extended family in Bembe society. This was reflected in the fact that when a diviner investigated the source of a misfortune, he might interpret it as a sign that an ancestor of the clan required greater consideration. Such adverse developments are thought to communicate that the deceased requires a more fitting burial site, such as that afforded by being enshrined within a commemorative "display cadaver."[4] This may take place a year after the first burial, when relics are transferred from the exhumed body to a *muzidi* that an initiated man has prepared to conserve them.[5]

According to Söderberg, the term *muzidi* (also variously transcribed as *mudziri* or *muzuri*) most precisely designates the intimate-scale figures created for the cult of the ancestors. He suggests that while there is some evidence of attempts to capture traits of the ancestor being commemorated, the *muzidi* were never considered to be realistic portraits.[6] It appears that such works were often made in advance and sold for use after a death. When Söderberg visited the Bembe in 1952, Nzaba Mankele of Nsumbu village, Mpingi Makaya of Miyambi, and Mpandi Mankakutu of Mpanga were among the few individuals capable of creating such works.[7] They are composed of a cane armature that is encased in textiles and stuffed with dried banana leaves and other compressed fibrous matter.[8] The earliest examples would have used locally woven raffia cloth colored with red *tukula* dye for the outer material, but eventually this was upgraded to imported cottons and blankets, which were highly valued as traded commodities. One of the Kongo sources of the Swedish missionary Karl Edvard Laman observed: "When the *muzidi* is empty and no *nkuyu* [spirit] has entered it, then it is just an image (*kinsisia*). A *muzidi* into which *nkuyu* has entered is called *nkuyu*."[9] Beyond honoring a particular ancestor with a mere image, the *muzidi* was itself clearly a sacred receptacle that housed traces of the ancestor's physical being in the form of relics. While Efraim Andersson refers to these as bones, Paul Timmermans suggests that hair, nails, and skin from the body of the deceased also served this function.[10]

Bembe ancestral devotion was directed to textile reliquary figures and to wooden ancestral sculpture.[11] This animated seated figure combines both those media. Crowned with a pith helmet and extended at the base of the chin by a prominent beard, the head is carved from wood and has inlaid ivory eyes. The European colonial headgear identifies the subject as a distinguished individual, whose age and wisdom are indicated by the beard.[12] Aside from this passage, however, the representation is defined by soft sculpture. The animated arms and legs are extravagantly outstretched, so that they extend horizontally from the narrow vertical torso and terminate in dramatically exaggerated hands and feet. These elements are wrapped in two different varieties of European patterned trade clothes. The combining of different cloths found in some of the more refined *muzidi* creations is referred to as *soba nlele*.[13] Although the prints paired in this composition share a red palette, plaid calico defines the vertical axis of the torso while the limbs are arrayed in a lively floral pattern. Red tones were preferred for ceremonial dress, given their identification with vitality.[14] This quality was complemented by the expansiveness of the figure's stance and the suppleness of the body. Robert Farris Thompson has identified the stiff seated posture of legs positioned parallel to and in front of the body as *sendama,* or sitting in pure repose.[15]



1. Ragnar Widman, quoted in Söderberg 1975, p. 23.
2. Söderberg 1975, p. 34.
3. Ibid., p. 23.
4. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 54; Söderberg 1975, p. 24.
5. Söderberg 1975, p. 26.
6. Ibid., pp. 23, 27.
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Thompson in Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 54.
9. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 136.
10. Söderberg 1975, p. 28.
11. Ibid., p. 23.
12. Ibid., p. 26; Thompson in Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 57.
13. Thompson in Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 54.
14. Söderberg 1975, p. 24.
15. Thompson in Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 54.

117. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure (*Muzidi*)

Kongo peoples, Bembe group; Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–first half of 20th century
Fiber, pigments, iron, cane, bone
H. 17 1/16 in. (45 cm)
Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm 1954.1.2331

This seated Bembe ancestor figure outfitted in a striped trade cloth reveals exposed sections of its cane armature on its proper left hand and foot. X-ray examination of four *muzidi* in the collection of the Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm, established that they held no internal relics, which suggests they were acquired from artists before they were consecrated.

Such a figure was ritually transformed following the death of a remarkable individual as a vehicle by which to maintain contact with the deceased. It was displayed as part of a great funerary celebration known as *kitu* that included dance, music, song, and feasting. At the conclusion of that memorial ceremony in honor of the deceased, the *muzidi* was positioned either in the home or in a special family enclosure. Prayers were subsequently addressed to the ancestor to appeal for the family's prosperity, the fecundity of its women, and the fertility of its land and livestock. These invocations were presided over by a clan leader.[1] It is important to note that the figure itself was not the focus of these prayers, but rather the ancestral relics held within. According to Robert Farris Thompson, *muzidi* could be consulted concerning the future or the resolution of a dispute. Their affirmative or negative response was gauged through interpreting body language. "Yes" might be indicated by a perceived nod from the figure, whereas falling over or otherwise losing equilibrium would register the opposite.[2]

1. Söderberg 1975, pp. 24, 26, 32.
2. Thompson in Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 55.

EX COLL.
Karl Edvard Laman, Stockholm, before 1954

PUBLISHED
Söderberg 1975, p. 25.



118. Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure (*Muzidi*)

Kongo peoples, Bembe group; Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–first half of 20th century
Cotton, cane, pigment
H. 17½ in. (44.5 cm.)
Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm 1954.1.2332

Bembe *muzidi* sculptures served as emissaries that conveyed messages between a clan and one of its influential ancestors. They were commissioned when ancestors informed their heirs through signs that they wished to be so honored.[1] Typically, the process was set in motion with the construction of an enclosure to which the exhumed remains were transferred and in which the *muzidi* would eventually be housed. This shrine was accessible only to the son on Sundays, when his father or mother might visit him in a dream. The portable *muzidi* might be moved to another location when the ancestor was called upon to provide family members with direction.

While this *muzidi* is depicted in a classic seated posture with legs outstretched, one arm raised, and the other extended, it is distinctive for the dramatic alternation of two lively printed fabrics that highlight different passages of the body. The author of this work reserved a primarily solid red textile for the arms, rendering their gesture more prominent, while the two patterned cloths are applied to the face and torso. The one employed for the face is red with white geometric lozenge and rectangle motifs. A band of black cloth has been applied horizontally across the chin to denote a beard. The proper right side of the torso is covered with a broad swath of white fabric with a blue print of six-petaled flowers alternating with rectangles.

1. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 175.

EX COLL.
Karl Edvard Laman, Stockholm, before 1954



119. Miniature Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Male Figure (*Niombo*)

Kongo peoples, Bwende group; Democratic Republic of the Congo
20th century
Fiber, pigments
H. 24 13/16 in. (63 cm)
Private collection

Like the Bembe, the Bwende also developed a relatively ephemeral variety of "soft sculpture," known as *niombo*. These works similarly exploited the qualities of highly valued textiles as an exterior material wrapped around vital aspects of an exceptional ancestor's being. A Kongo-speaking people, the Bwende live north of the Congo River between two of its tributaries, the Luala and the Kenké.[1] Anita Jacobson-Widding has observed that the Bwende and related peoples of the Lower Congo recognize three distinct categories of ancestors: recently deceased individual members of one's family; relatively distant mythical *bakulu*; and further removed *nkisi* spirits.[2] Their cult of the dead memorializes important individuals going back as far as three generations with *niombo*. Translated as "cadavers" or "corpses," *niombo* are ancestral representations that hold the spiritual power of the individual they evoke.[3] While the spectacular larger-than-life *niombo* were prepared for burial (see figs. 68–71), it appears that the more intimately scaled versions were housed in shelters, where they received libations and other offerings. Through the intermediary of the *banganga* (healer or priest), the ancestral leaders of a family or clan were invoked for advice and assistance.

Robert Farris Thompson has emphasized that in Kongo culture, ritual transformations transporting the individual from one level of existence to another are invariably considered a metaphor for the journey of the sun about the earth.[4] According to this perspective, a person's birth and maturation are compared to the rising of the sun and its reaching its maximal position at noon, while decline and death are seen as its gradual waning and eventual disappearance beneath the sea or earth. The culmination of this cosmological trajectory occurs below the horizon line in a parallel ancestral realm of experience, whose zenith corresponds with midnight in the realm of the living. Referred to as "the four moments of the sun," the continuum of this world and the next, through which the soul travels, is visually charted in relation to a cross with arms of equal length, which Thompson suggests underlies the physiognomy of the *niombo*.[5]

1. Widman 1971, p. 13.
2. Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 94.
3. Widman 1971, pp. 15, 31.
4. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 43.
5. Ibid., p. 64.

EXHIBITED
"Baselitz: Die Afrika-Sammlung," Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, June 7–August 24, 2003, Pinakothek der Moderne, Sammlung Moderne Kunst, Munich, September 25–November 16, 2003, Kunstsammlungen, Chemnitz, December 14, 2003–February 22, 2004.

PUBLISHED
Düsseldorf, Munich, and Chemnitz 2003–4, p. 56.



120. Miniature Reliquary: Standing Male Figure (*Niombo*)

Makosa of Kingoyi
Kongo peoples, Bwende group, Badondo clan; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mounyondzi region, Kingoyi
Early 20th century
Fiber, pigments
H. 23⅝ in. (60 cm)
Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium 161001

Robert Farris Thompson emphasizes the ideals of power and responsibility that are given symbolic expression through *niombo*. Details such as the figure's open mouth underscore a leader's role in communicating in the ancestral realm.[1] Red, a color associated with mediation and the mystical power of chiefs and exceptional individuals, is the dominant palette drawn upon for this genre of representation.[2] The authors of such works carefully studied their subjects in order to impart to the generic *niombo* imagery certain distinctive defining features such as facial or bodily clan tattoos or cicatrization motifs and filed teeth.[3] Beyond individualizing the body by reproducing aesthetic details identified with the subject, however, the graphic notations transcribed on the surface of *niombo* include Kongo ideographic signs. Known as *bidimbu,* these motifs have been drawn upon since antiquity to record reflections concerning the land, cosmos, medicine, law, authority, and the power of the dead.[4]

Considered a tour de force of the miniature *niombo* genre, this work has been attributed to Makosa of Kingoyi, one of the great masters of the tradition. The artist was given the name "Makosa" to evoke his status as the "darling" of his village of Kingoyi, where he produced his most important work during the first three decades of the twentieth century in response to intense demands for *niombo*.[5] While other *niombo* masters were active in Bwende communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Swedish missionary Josef Öhrneman states that, by the time of his visit to Kingoyi in 1926, Makosa was considered the only remaining individual capable of making *niombo* of the finest caliber. The artist was admired not only for his technical abilities but also for his creative talent and "faculty of invention."[6] Despite the fact that Makosa converted to Christianity in 1893, he continued to create *niombo* inspired by the traditional practices of ancestor veneration. This work was collected at Kingoyi and sent to Tervuren by another Swedish missionary, Edvard Karlman, in the summer of 1934.[7] That same year, Karlman took a photograph of Makosa with two other miniature *niombo* (see fig. 72) that he refers to in a letter dated May 19, 1934.[8] The work nearest to the artist in that image was also sent to Tervuren.

Through its expression, stance, and graphic program, this example is especially eloquent in articulating the mediatory role that *niombo* embody. Thompson has suggested that its dense display of signs and ideograms clarifies the visual commentaries found on related works. The two parallel vertical lines beneath each eye are signs for tears (*mansanga*), identified with the appeal, "Go with our tears, wet upon your face, and represent our problems among the dead: be our medium." This idea is reinforced by the *nsungwa* band on the proper left arm that carries messages to the other world.[9] A graphic flourish that appears around the proper right nipple denotes the spiral shell (*kodya*) that calls for the delivery of knowledge and insights from the other world. The rectangle at the center of the chest, bisected by a cross (*pa*) embroidered and underscored in ink, alludes to the chief's absence from the upper world of the living. Concentric black lines within the triangular divisions refer to the successive generations of various lineages that are unified by the crisscrossing lines, which allude to the leader's power. The column of lozenges that extend up from the navel to the heart signifies the python, identified with both longevity and "the bridging of enormous distances."[10]

1. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 61.
2. Ibid., p. 64; Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 172.
3. Widman 1971, p. 22; Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 61.
4. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 43.
5. Ibid., p. 60.
6. Widman 1971, p. 21.
7. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 67.
8. Ibid., p. 60.
9. Ibid., pp. 61, 67.
10. Ibid., p. 69.

EX COLL.
Edvard Karlman, Sweden

PUBLISHED
Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 68 (not exhibited).



121. Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Female Figure (*Niombo*)

Makosa of Kingoyi
Kongo peoples, Bwende group, Badondo clan; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kihanga village
Early 20th century
Fiber, cane, pigment
H. 70⅞ in. (180 cm)
Museum of World Culture, Göteborg 1938-27.1

Such massive larger-than-life funerary *niombo* reflect the escalation of long-standing regional traditions that honored the dead by wrapping the body in voluminous layers of textiles. With cloth being valued as a form of wealth, the quantity and quality of material shrouding the deceased's physical remains were both a tribute and a measure of that individual's importance, wealth, and status.[1] *Niombo* translated these opulent fabric offerings into titanic figurative forms that were paraded to dramatic visual effect. Given the complexity of assembling such a monumental transitory reliquary and undertaking the related burial rites, *niombo* were the prerogative of only the most powerful chiefs and other exceptionally successful individuals—those in Bwende society judged worthy to serve as mediums with the spiritual realm.[2]

According to Bwende custom, a body was initially placed on a bed in the home for several nights while those closest to the deceased wept beside it. Following the wake, the corpse underwent a form of mummification through a drying process.[3] At the same time, contributions for a worthy shroud were accumulated. Relatives from across the region were obliged to donate cloths, mats, and blankets commensurate with their means, so that the largest and most impressive *niombo* possible could be constructed in order to appropriately reflect the family's wealth.[4] At the end of this process, an artist of Makosa's caliber might be summoned to study the body for distinguishing physical features and to undertake the shrouding operation.[5] While this involved wrapping the body in raffia cloth, enveloping it in hundreds of successive layers of textiles, and constructing a reinforcing canework frame, the details of the procedure were kept secret.

Various accounts by outsiders quantify the units of material integrated within some of the more monumental *niombo* as including several hundred blankets or a thousand meters of textiles.[6] Edvard Karlman specifies that a *niombo* three meters (ca. 10 feet) high prepared for a burial at Kimbenza in 1925 consisted of masses of raffia mats and 114 pieces of cotton cloth. The preferred materials for the outermost layers of the bundle were red blankets, associated with chieftancy, that were obtained from European traders during the nineteenth century.[7] Arms and legs, reinforced by a solid woven armature, were constructed as units to be added in animated attitudes to this core.

The creation of Makosa of Kingoyi (see also cat. no. 120), this colossal female figure preserved in the Göteborg museum is portrayed with her right hand raised and left hand lowered. Robert Farris Thompson has identified this as the "crossroads pose."[8] Its extension of one hand above a horizontal median line and one below underscores the frontier separating the realms of the living and the ancestors, as well as the deceased's crossing of this boundary. Thompson emphasizes that her gesture indicates the threshold between two worlds of experience and announces her role as a mediator between her surviving family members and the ancestors. The Congolese scholar Fu-Kiau further suggests that, thus positioned, she is uniquely capable of separating truth from falsehood and foiling witchcraft attacks against the living.[9]

Once scheduled, the burial of a chiefly *niombo* was marked by several days of dancing. The children of the deceased bore the *niombo* to the burial site in an animated procession, so that the huge presence appeared to be dancing toward the grave (see fig. 71).[10] In 1926 the missionary Josef Öhrneman filmed a *niombo* in this context in a village near Kingoyi on behalf of the Svenska Missionsförbundet (Mission Covenant Church of Sweden). His impression was that the event resembled a popular amusement more than a somber funereal occasion.[11]

1. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 52.
2. Widman 1971, p. 16; Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 58.
3. Widman 1967, p. 17; Jacobson-Widding 1979, p. 169.
4. Widman 1971, pp. 20, 22.
5. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, pp. 60–61.
6. Widman 1971, p. 21.
7. Washington, D.C. 1981–82, pp. 58, 61.
8. Ibid., p. 62.
9. Ibid., pp. 63, 64.
10. Widman 1971, p. 24; Washington, D.C. 1981–82, p. 58.
11. Widman 1971, pp. 14–15, 24.



EX COLL.
Efraim Andersson, Sweden

EXHIBITED
"The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds," National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., August 30, 1981–January 17, 1982.

PUBLISHED
Lehuard 1974a, p. 10; Washington, D.C. 1981–82, pp. 26, 59, 226; Blier 1998, p. 217.

122. Commemorative Coffin: Male Figure (*Efomba*)

Ngata peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th–early 20th century
Wood, pigments, iron, fiber
H. 100⅜ in. (255 cm)
Jean Willy Mestach



This towering male presence is a bipartite vessel composed of a figurative lid and a simple hollowed receptacle. Its elaborate monumentality emphasized the importance of both the exhumed relics it housed and the ancestor it honored. Herman Burssens notes that such works were historically created for influential individuals of the Ntomba communities in the Mbandaka region as well as for those of the Lifumba, Bombwanja, Bonkoso, and Wangata [Ngata] to the east.[1] The Belgian colonial officer and diplomat Charles François Alexandre Lemaire, who served King Leopold II in the Belgian Congo from 1889 to 1893, provides a commentary that emphasizes parallels between Bwende and Ngata commemorative figurative receptacles.[2] His brief account of Ngata funerary rites states that such works were prepared to house the body for an extended period of time before its burial. The monumental receptacle was subsequently displayed to accentuate the site of the interment.

A relatively small corpus of works of this genre has survived, including two examples (one male and one female) in the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, collected between 1884 and 1887 and attributed to the Ntomba. According to the Catholic missionary Gaston Hulstaert, those works portray deceased individuals and were created to conserve their memory in a domestic setting. Clearly designed to be oriented horizontally, they were raised from the ground by two supporting plinths that extend from the back. Although such works are generally referred to as "coffins," whether this correctly describes their original role is unclear. It is possible that they were ultimately buried, but the attention lavished on their surface elaboration and the structural features that elevated them clearly indicate that they sought to amplify the significance of their contents. In doing so, they made vividly present a concrete link with an important ancestor.

The aggressive stance of this figure may express its role as guardian both of its contents and of the members of the family with which it was identified. This idea may be supported by a drawing after a photograph that shows two such works standing vertically armed with weapons.[3] The

flatness of the rectilinear receptacle contrasts with the realism of the full rounded head, the genitalia, and the long narrow legs. At the upper end the contours are slightly curved to suggest the gradual sloping of the shoulders, and the width is expanded by the arms, which project at either side. The male subject brandishes a weapon in his left hand, and his fierce expression is intensified by the added eyes and the exposed teeth within the open mouth. In addition to its scale, the present work is impressive for the degree to which bold graphic chromatic adornment covers the entire surface in bands of alternating pattern. These include fields of reddish brown ocher, highlighted by networks of stippled white chevrons, and passages with blue lozenges defined against a white background. The only deviations from the flat surface ornamentation are the delicately raised nipples and navel.

While not much is known about the creation of such works, it has been suggested that their sculptors were initiates of a society referred to as *bonganga,* in which only the most senior men and women could assist in the preparation of relics.[4] For a period of three to four months, the artist worked in a temporary dwelling in the forest, isolated from the community.[5] A statement by Hulstaert about the creative process likened it to that of carving a dugout canoe: "When it was a matter of an individual belonging to a family that had a good deal of authority in the group, a coffin (*ejomba*) is used. They are two halves of the trunk of a *bofeko* tree carved in the manner of a pirogue in order to hold the body. . . . The whole is then tied in place with vines."[6] This observation intimates that such works may have been seen as vessels designed to transport the ancestors into another realm.

1. Tervuren 1995, p. 392.
2. Cited in Manker 1932, p. 167.
3. Baumann and Westermann 1957, p. 206, fig. 130.
4. Paris 1993, p. 25.
5. Tervuren 1995, p. 392.
6. Paris 1993, p. 25.

EXHIBITED

"The Intelligence of Forms: An Artist Collects African Art," The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, October 5–November 24, 1991, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, December 21, 1991–March 22, 1992; "Beauté fatale: Armes d'Afrique centrale," Crédit Communal, Brussels, December 18, 1992–February 28, 1993; "Formes et couleurs: Sculpture de l'Afrique noire," Musée Dapper, Paris, April 1–September 15, 1993.

PUBLISHED

Leiris and Delange 1967, pp. 357, 421, fig. 418; *Actualité des Arts* 1973; Schädler 1975, p. 246, fig. 361; Neyt 1981, p. 25, fig. 1.5; Mestach 1991, p. 137, fig. 80; Kansas City and Minneapolis 1991–92, pp. 19, 96, no. 80; Brussels 1992–93, p. 126, fig. 147; Paris 1993, p. 25; Gosseau 1997, p. 26; Bacquart 1998a, p. 138, fig. A; Visonà 2001, p. 454; Mestach and Sirven 2003, p. 64.

Other Works

The following works were also selected to appear in the "Eternal Ancestors" exhibition in order to expand upon the featured reliquary sculptures from central Africa (cat. nos. 1–122).

ILLUSTRATED IN CATALOGUE

Fig. 4. Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864–1946), Installation view of "Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art," 291 gallery, New York, November 3–December 8, 1914. From *Camera Work* 48 (October 1916), p. 66. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, by exchange, 1953 (53.701.49)

Fig. 5. Alfred Stieglitz, Photograph based on the "Picasso-Braque" exhibition, 291 gallery, New York, 1915. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.55.36)

Fig. 11. Reliquary with contents. Pakistan, Kushan period, late 1st century. Schist with gold, copper, crystal, pearl, turquoise objects, Diam. 2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1987 (1987.142.44a–m)

Fig. 22. *Ngombi* harp. Kele peoples, Gabon, 19th century. Wood, skin, vegetal fiber, 18 1/2 x 3 x 4 3/4 in. (47 x 7.5 x 12 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.3527)

Fig. 23. *Ntsambi* pluriarc. Lumbu or Punu peoples, Gabon, 19th–20th century. Wood, vegetal fiber, pigment, H. 26 3/16 in. (66.6 cm). Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington (77.34.3)

Fig. 47. Reliquary bust of Saint Yrieix. France (Haute-Vienne), Church of Saint-Yrieix-la-Perche, second quarter of 13th century. Gilded silver, rock crystal, gems, glass, originally over walnut core with silver leaf and gesso on interior, H. 14 3/4 in. (37.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.352a,b)

Fig. 50. Reliquary. Byzantine, 6th century. Marble, 6 1/16 x 8 3/16 x 5 5/16 in. (15.5 x 20.8 x 13.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Blumka Gallery, in memory of Mrs. Barbara Paley, 1978 (1978.273a,b)

Fig. 54. Virgin and Child. France (Auvergne), third quarter of 12th century. Painted wood, H. 31 in. (78.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916 (16.32.194)

Fig. 59. Fang helmet-wig (*nlo-o-ngo),* Cameroon or Gabon, 20th century. Vegetal fibers, glass beads, copper nails, cloth, buttons, H. 9 7/8 in. (25 cm). Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva

Fig. 60. Jean Audema, *French Congo—Pahouin Warrior, Amoon Tribe, Upper Monny,* early 20th century (postmarked December 24, 1914). Published by Imprimeries Réunies de Nancy, France. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Fig. 62. Officer Guérin, *Gabon—Pahouin of the Interior,* 1905–6. Published for the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit by J. Bienaimé, Reims. Postcard, 5 9/16 x 3 1/2 in. (14.2 x 8.9 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Fig. 63. *French Congo—Pahouin Man and Woman, Yenvis, Ogooué,* early 20th century. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Fig. 64. Jean Audema, *French Congo—Pahouin Warrior, Yeuoi, Ogooué,* early 20th century. Published by Imprimeries Réunies de Nancy, France. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

Fig. 67. *Bateke Type from Kinshasa Area,* early 20th century. Published by Nels, Brussels. Postcard, 5 3/8 x 3 3/8 in. (13.7 x 8.6 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

NOT ILLUSTRATED IN CATALOGUE

Asian Art

The Indravarman Casket. Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara, Bajaur), 5–6 C.E. Schist, Diam. 2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Gift of Samuel Eilenberg, 1987 (1987.142.71a,b)

Seated Buddha. Nepal, 14th–15th century. Repoussé copper inlaid with semiprecious stones, 16 x 13 1/16 in. (40.6 x 33.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of The Kronos Collections, 1982 (1982.462.7)

Portrait of a Zen Master. Japan (Muromachi period), 15th century. Lacquer on wood with inlaid crystal eyes, figure 37 3/8 x 22 3/8 x 18 1/4 in. (94.9 x 56.8 x 46.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Gift, 1963 (63.65)

Model of a stupa. Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara), ca. 4th century. Bronze, 22 3/4 x 7 1/2 in. (57.8 x 19.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald J. Bruckmann, 1985 (1985.387a,b)

Central African Art

Fang helmet-wig (*nlo-o-ngo*), Cameroon or Gabon, 20th century. Vegetal fibers, glass beads, copper nails, fabric, cowrie shells, H. 7 1/16 in. (18 cm). Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva

Medieval Art

Reliquary in the form of an arm raised in blessing. South Lowlands (Meuse Valley), ca.1230. Silver over oak, silver gilt, copper alloy, niello, cabochons, 25 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 4 in. (64.8 x 16.5 x 10.2 cm) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.33)

Reliquary for a piece of the True Cross. French, probably from the Abbey of Grandmont, near Limoges, ca. 1180. Silver gilt, crystal, glass cabochons; wood core, 11 3/4 x 4 15/16 x 1 in. (29.8 x 12.5 x 2.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Michel David-Weill Gift, The Cloisters Collection, and Mme. Robert Gras Gift, in memory of Dr. Robert Gras, 2002 (2002.18)

Periodicals

Ogooué—Congo, halftone relief print, sheet size, 19 x 25 in. (48.3 x 63.5 cm). Published in the periodical *291* (New York: February 1916, no. 12). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.55.330 [18])

Marius de Zayas (Mexican, 1880–1961), Untitled text on African art. Published in the periodical *291* (New York: February 1916, no. 12). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949 (49.55.330 [19])

Camera Work 48 (October 1916), pp. 66–67, showing four halftone prints, sheet size, 11 3/4 x 8 3/16 in. (29.9 x 20.8 cm), including *Negro Art Exhibition, November 1914* (*top left*; fig. 4) and *Detail: Picasso—Braque Exhibition, January, 1915* (*bottom right*). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Alfred Stieglitz Collection, by exchange, 1953 (53.701.49).

Photographs

Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975), Selected photographs from *African Negro Art* portfolio (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1935)

Ancestral Figure [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 265] (see cat. no. 6). Gelatin silver print, 8 3/4 x 3 1/4 in. (22.2 x 8.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2100)

Ancestral Figure [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 266] (see cat. no. 6). Gelatin silver print, 8 3/4 x 3 1/2 in. (22.2 x 8.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2101)

Ancestral Figure [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 267] (see cat. no. 8). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/8 x 3 1/4 in. (23.2 x 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2102)

Ancestral Figure [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 268] (see cat. no. 8). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 3 1/4 in. (23.5 x 8.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2103)

Ancestral Figure [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 305] (see cat. no. 33). Gelatin silver print, 8 7/8 x 3 5/8 in. (22.5 x 9.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2138)

Ancestral Figure [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 306] (see cat. no. 33). Gelatin silver print, 8 7/8 x 4 in. (22.5 x 10.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2139)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 315] (see cat. no. 45). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 5 7/8 in. (23.5 x 14.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2145)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 316] (see cat. no. 45). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 5 1/4 in. (23.5 x 13.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2146)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 317] (see cat. no. 41). Gelatin silver print, 9 x 5 1/8 in. (22.9 x 13 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2147)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 318] (see cat. no. 41). Gelatin silver print, 8 7/8 x 5 1/2 in. (22.5 x 14 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2148)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Front view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 321] (see cat. no. 47). Gelatin silver print, 9 3/8 x 5 5/8 in. (23.8 x 14.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2151)

Ancestral Figure, Head [Profile view of Fang reliquary sculpture; WE 322] (see cat. no. 47). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. (24.1 x 14 cm). New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, Visual Resources Collection (L.1999.7.322)

Mask [Front view of Kwele mask; WE 358] (see cat. no. 106). Gelatin silver print, 7 1/2 x 7 in. (19.1 x 17.8 cm). New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, Visual Resources Collection (L.1999.7.358)

Mask [Three-quarter view of Kwele mask; WE 359] (see cat. no. 106). Gelatin silver print, 9 1/4 x 6 1/2 in. (23.5 x 16.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2182)

Postcards

Brazzaville, Bankoa, Leader of the Bateke (Portrait), early 20th century. Postcard, 5 1/2 x 3 7/16 in. (14 x 8.7 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

J. Haudy, *Brazzaville, Traditional Discussion,* early 20th century. Postcard, 3 9/16 x 5 1/2 in. (9.1 x 14 cm). Holly W. Ross Postcard Collection

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Index

Page numbers in *italics* refer to illustrations.

aba (classroom of ancestral education), 23
Abambou (spirit), 63
Abéga, Séverin Cécile, 23, 107
achondroplasia (medical condition), 47
Aduma peoples, 63, 67, 71
adzap tree, in Fang beliefs, 23, 41
Adziana peoples, 5, 65, *65*
adzi malan (Fang initiation ceremony), 57, 180
Africa, central. *See* Africa, equatorial
Africa, equatorial
  art, core principles of, 158, *159*
  and diaspora, 29, 31n123
  early explorations of, 63–67, *64, 65, 66*
  effect of Atlantic trade on, 20, 21, 34, 40, 43, 54–56, 110, 236
  effect of European colonialism on, 10–11, *12,* 68–69
  effect of missionaries on, 10–11, *24, 67,* 67–68, 72–74, 80, 88, 113
  environment of, and kingdom formation, 35–40, *36*
  lack of historical data on, 33, 34
  language groups of, 35–43, 59n8
  major historical events in, 34
  major kingdoms of, *37,* 38–39, *39* (*see also specific peoples*)
  modern-day threats to tradition in, 29, 84, 85n38
  Niger-Congo influence on beliefs, 43–48
  seen as "primitive" by Europeans, 34, 68, 105, *105,* 272
  shared belief system in, 18, 82–84, 118
African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art (de Zayas), 98
"African Negro Art" exhibition (Museum of Modern Art, 1935), 4, 192, 206, 272
"African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield" exhibition (Brooklyn Museum, 1937), 10, *10,* 132
afterlife, views on, and belief system, 82–84, 85n31, 118, 230
agriculture, 60n53
  and Bantu expansion, 35
  and "earth priests," 46
  and introduction of iron tools, 48
akom adzal (village-strengthening ritual), 57
akom bieri (village-strengthening ritual), 57
alan root, used as hallucinogen, 27
albinos, as "water spirits," 51
alliances, kin
  and Fang migration, 41, 42, 43
  fictional lineages used to create, 48, 58
  spread of languages through, 41, 48
alumbi-house, 21
Ambete group, 11, 38
  See also Mbete peoples
Ambrose, Saint, 12, 13
Amrouche, Pierre, 270
ancestor(s)
  authenticity of, rendered through relics, 87–88
  categories of (Bembe/Bwende), 79, 318
  Christ as, 84
  communicating with, 82, 204, 304
  conditions for becoming, 80, 81, 84
  invoking of (*see* cult of the ancestor, invoking)
  "principle of precedence" in migration of, 44
  and saints, as "eternal ancestors," 92
  term defined, 79, 80
ancestor veneration, 11–13, 79–85
  apotheosis concept in, 84
  blessings obtained through, 80, 82–84
  and blood offerings, *24,* 107
  crania used in, 58
  and grave offerings, 80
  manifested through reliquary art, 81, 97, 100
  methods for, 80, 82, 111
  modern-day effect on tradition of, 84
  and political power, 81–82
  versus worship, 80
  See also cult of the ancestor, invoking ancestral portraits. *See* portraits, commemorative
Andersson, Reverend Efraim, 73–74, 210, 230, 234, 262
  on *bwiti,* 50–51
  on *mbulu viti,* 258
  on *mungala-mwili,* 56, 61n94
  on *muzidi,* 310
  on *niombo,* 116
  on *ombwiri,* 55
Angilbert II (archbishop of Milan), 12
antisocial behavior, 111
  rituals used to discourage, 28, 300
antisorcery masks. *See ngi* masks
antiwitchcraft movement (1940s), 220
antiwitchcraft rituals
  ikwii (Teke), 304
  ngi (Fang), 300
Anyambe (God), 54
Apindji peoples, 55
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 4, 276
  and Paul Guillaume, 8, 71, 203
apostles, relics of, 13
archaeological excavations (central Africa), 33, 35, 38
Arensberg, Louise and Walter, 99, *99,* 134, 192
Ariès, Philippe, 100
Ark of the Covenant, 90, 91
arm reliquary (Christian), 89, *89*
art, Western
  influence of African art on, 5, 6–7, 74, 93, 97–98, *98, 99,* 272, 294 (*see also specific artists*)
art nègre, introduced to West, 3–4, 5
Ashoka (emperor), 14, 15
Asian reliquaries, 14–18
  Buddhist, *14,* 14–17, *15, 16, 17*
  contents of, 14, 15, *15*
  decoration of, 14, 15, *15, 16*
Assegai peoples, 65, *65*
Atsa, Ateu, 101
  Chief Fosia portrait, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
Audema, Jean, 103, *103,* 106, *106*
Au Gabon (Grébert), 73
Augustine, Saint, 12–13

baaz (Kwele familial grouping), 22
Badondo clan (*niombo* of), 116, 320, *321*; cat. no. 121
Bafut peoples, 45
bakulu (ancestor category), 79, 316
Ballay, Noël, 65–67
bambwiiti rituals (Yaka), 49, 51
  See also bwiti rituals
Bamileke (term), applied by Germans, 30n58
Bamileke peoples, 45, 100
  belief system of, 40, 45, 46, 47
  Chief Fosia royal commemorative portrait, 6, 19–20, 40, 45, 91, 92, 100, 101, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
  and Fontem, 19, 20
  geographical location of, *37,* 45
  modern-day traditions preserved by, 28
  tanyi royal commemorative portrait, 6, 19–20, 40, 47, 91, 100, 101, 124, *125*; cat. no. 2

Bamum peoples, 45
belief system of, 19, 45
and centralized political rule, 19, 45
geographical location of, *37*, 45
kingdom of, 19
and trade routes, 40
banana trade, effect of, on central Africa, 34, 48, 54
Bane peoples, 70
Bangwa peoples, 20, 40
Bantoid language spoken by, 40, 45
belief system of, 19, *20*, 45, 46, 47–48, 100
and centralized political rule, 19, 40, 45, 100
geographical location of, 19, *37*, 40, 45
German reprisals against, 20, 30n63
lekat (protective figurine), 46–47, 51, 60n39, 60n40
as patrilineal society, 30n63, 45
reliquary art style, versus Fang, 101, 102
reliquary commissions received by, 100
Royal Commemorative Portrait of a Tanyi *Priest Flanked by Twins*, 6, 19–20, 40, 47, 91, 100, 101, 124, *125*; cat. no. 2
Royal Commemorative Portrait of Chief Fosia, 6, 19–20, 40, 45, 91, 92, 100, 101, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
royal shrine of, 19, *20*
Banquet Years, The (Shattuck), 4
Bantoid language group, 35, 45
"Bantu expansion," 34, 35
Bantu language groups, 18, 35, 38, 41, 45, 59n8, 61n88
Bantoid language group, 35, 45
"narrow Bantu" language group, 35
Bantu peoples, 59n32
belief system of, 38, 40, 43, 47, 49
effect of Fang migration on, 41
geographical location of, *37*
political systems of, 43, 49, 54
and rainforest habitation, 34, 35, 38, 48
Banyang peoples, 59n19, 100, 101
banzambi bampungu (creatures of God), 80
bark, tree
as hallucinogen, 49, 57
as reliquary receptacle material, *26*, 57, 70, 101, *101*, 109, 128, *129*; cat. no. 4
Barnes, Dr. Albert C., 8, 74, *75*
Barnes Foundation (Pennsylvania), 72, 75
baskets, relic, 11, 22, 56, *66*, 67, 82, 109, 219
corbeille des ancêtres, 82
and *usuwu* (Kota), 260
Bateke. *See* Teke
Bateke Type from Kinshasa Area (postcard), *112*
Battell, Andrew (English trader), 54
Batwa peoples, 60n53
and Bantu, as ancestors of, 48
in Bumwele belief system, 56
and *bwiti* ideology, 50, 51, 54
in Fang belief system, 41, 58
as first-comers, 44, 45, 46, 48, 54, 59n2
geographical location of, *37*
in humanity's origins, 34, 46, 54
and political rule, 48
and rainforest habitation, 34, 48
and twins, as living "territorial spirits," 46
Baudime, Saint, 93
beard, as leadership attribute, *112*, 113, 310, *311*
beete masks (Kwele). *See* Kwele *beete* masks
beete rituals
Kwele, 22, 28, 111–12, 118, 290, 292
Mahongwe, 111
Beketshe, in Bangwa belief system, 46
Bekwil peoples, 38
See also Kwele peoples
Belgian Congo, missionary posts in, 112, 113
belief systems (equatorial Africa)
and ancestor veneration, 79–85
Niger-Congo roots of, 43–48
primacy of communal interests in, 44, 59
shared beliefs, 18, 82–84, 118
See also specific peoples
Belle Époque period, art collecting during, 4, 72
Bembe peoples
and ancestor veneration, 79, 82, *83*
Bembe figure, on Teke *buti*, 306, *307*
geographical location of, *37*, 38
muzidi sculptures, 11, *73*, 82, *83*, 116, 117–18, 310–11, *311*, 312, *313*, 314, *315*; cat. nos. 116–118
Beng peoples, 47
Benue-Kwa speech community, 35
Bergier, Dr., 76
Bernard of Angers (ecclesiastic), 90–91, 95n33
Beti peoples, 10–11, 28, 107
Betsi peoples, 24, 69
attitudes of, toward dead, *23*, 24
helmet-wig, *102*
and missionaries, 68, 72
origins of, 41
See also Nzaman peoples
Betsi reliquary sculpture, 164
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female (The Pahouin or Black Venus), 29, 102, 104, 178, *179*; cat. no. 33
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel, 76, 109, *170*, 170–72, *171*; cat. no. 28
Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female, 176, *176*, *177*; cat. no. 32
Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Male Holding Vessel, 172, *172*; cat. no. 29
material used for, 107
Reliquary Ensemble: Receptacle and Seated Male Figure Holding Vessel, *188*, 188–89, *189*; cat. no. 39
Reliquary Ensemble: Receptacle and Standing Male Figure Holding Vessel, *24*, *25*, 27, 73, *187*, 187–88; cat. no. 38
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head (The Great Bieri), *13*, 29, *72*, 109, 158, *200*, 200–202, *201*; cat. no. 45
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head (various), 5, *13*, 68, 93, *99*, 102, 109, 190, *191*, 192, *193*, 194, *195*, 196, *197*, 198, *199*, 203, *203*, 204, *204*, *205*, *206*, 206–7, *207*, *208*, 208–10, *209*; cat. nos. 40–44, 46–49
See also Nzaman peoples
bidimbu motifs (Kongo), 318
Bienaimé, J. (publisher, Reims), 105
birth process
associated with Supreme Creator, 47
imagery, in *bwiti* rituals, 50
See also pregnancy
bisimbi (Bembe/Bwende ancestor category), 79
black (color), symbolism of, in reliquary sculpture, 107, 270, 274
Black Venus, The (Betsi reliquary sculpture), 29, 102, 104, 178, *179*; cat. no. 33
blood offerings, as symbol of physical/spiritual union, *24*, 107
Bockie, Simon, 81–82
Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, 17
bonga (sacred matter)
and Teke *buti*, 115, 302, 303
bonganga (Ngata society), 323
Borglum, John Gutzon de La Mothe, 88
Bouvier Collection, 65
Brain, Robert, 20, 45, 47–48, 101, 122
Braque, Georges, 3, 9, *9*, 74, 99, *99*, 276
brass, as reliquary sculpture material, 219, 238, 240
Braun, Joseph, 89
Brazza, Jacques de, 65–67, *66*, 95n2
and expedition with Pierre (brother), 108, *108*, 109, 244, 248
Brazza, Pierre Savorgnan de, 65–67, *66*, 71, 76, 240, 244, 304
expedition accounts, publishing of, 5, *6*, 67, 108
British colonialism, 21, 30n58
Brooklyn Museum
"African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield" exhibition (1937), 10, *10*, 132
Brummer, Joseph
as African art collector, 5, 95n38, 196, 198
as African art dealer, 7–8, 30n20, 30n21, 74, 192
collaboration with Paul Guillaume, 8, 203
Buddhism, 13–17, *14*, *15*, *16*, *17*
Buel, James William, 108
Bujo, Bénézét, 84
Bulu peoples, *37*, 38, 41, 42, 59n8
Bumwele clan, 55–56
Burssens, Herman, 322
buti figures (Teke). *See* Teke *buti*
Bwende *niombo*, 11, *73*, 113, *113*, *114*, 115, *115*, 116–18
figurative representation in, 116, 117, 318
by Makosa, *114*, 115, 116, *116*, 117–18, 318, *319*, 320, *321*; cat. nos. 120, 121
Miniature Reliquary: Standing Male Figure (Niombo), 318, *319*; cat. no. 120
Miniature Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Male Figure (Niombo), 316, *317*; cat. no. 119
Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Female Figure (Niombo), 116, 320, *321*; cat. no. 121
Bwende peoples, 79
ecological environment of, *36*, 38
geographical location of, *37*, 316
bwete rituals, 50, 218–19
functions of, 218–19, 285

origins of, 278–79
See also specific peoples
bwetyi rituals, 50
bwiti rituals, 49–54, *52*, *53*
described, 48, 50, 59
migration of practice, 60n64, 60n65, 79
origins of, 279
See also specific peoples
byeri rituals (Fang)
antisocial behavior ridiculed in, 28
described, *26*, 27–28, 57–58, 107, 187–88
discontinuance of, 28–29, 50, 57, 58, 118
functions of, 27, 57, 104, *105*
initiation rite, *25*, *26*, 27–28, 57, 81, 104, *105*, 180, 188, 190, 194, 204
origins of, 49, 56
skull-handling during, 58
suppressed by colonial administrators, 28
symbolism of red color in, 107
types of, 57
Byzantine reliquary (Christian), 89, *89*

Caesarius, Saint, 91, *92*
Cameroon
and Bantu expansion, 35
chiefdoms, described, 18–20
current boundaries formed, 69
environment of, *36*
geographical location of, 18, 35, *37*
peoples of, *37* (*see also specific peoples*)
and social organization, 18–21
Carnielli, Alessandra, 272
Carolingian beliefs, and relics, 12, 89
carvers, mask (Kwele), 111, 298
carvers, reliquary sculpture, 93, 100–101, 107, 122, 166, 168, 208, 230, 302, 310
Ceder, Teofil, 73
Cendrars, Blaise, 98
ceremonies. *See* rituals
Chaffre, Saint, 94, *94*
charms, placement of, and *mwiri*, 56
Chez les Fang ou quinze années de séjour au Congo Français (Trilles), 67
chief
and ancestor veneration, 80, 81, 82, 84
and "earth priests," as advisers to, 45
functions of, 19
versus house leaders, 20–21
importance of reliquary art to, 93, 100
investiture ceremony, 45
in lineage systems, 18–19, 276
and memorial portraiture, 19, *20*
and modern-day political corruption, 84, 85n38
as reliquary sculpture carvers, 100
requirements for, 47
role of, in lineages, 43, 44, 51
staff finial of, 157–58
women as, 276
See also specific peoples
"child of medicine" (Fang), 27
children
as ritual experts, 47, 51
and twins, as living "territorial spirits," 46–47
"children of the gods," and fertility specialists, 45, 47
China, ancestor veneration in, 14, 15, 17
and reliquaries, 15, *16*
Chirico, Giorgio de, 8, 75, *75*
Chiwa peoples, 67
chorten (Tibetan stupa), 14
Christ
as ancestor, 84
and True Cross relic, 11
Christianity
African ancestral beliefs incorporated into, 84
and colonialism, 11
early views of, on relics, 88–90, 95n8, 95n9
skull, as motif in, 88, *88*
veneration of saints' relics in, 11–13, 88–90, *90*, 95n7, 100
See also missionaries
Christian reliquaries, 93
destruction of, 94
early church views on, 89–90
form of, 12, *89*, 89–91, *90*
origins of, 88–89
parallels to African reliquary sculpture, 88–89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 98–100
physical contact with, 92–93, 100
powers attributed to, 91, 92, 94, 100
processions, 92, 95n33
sarcophagus form used for, 89, *89*
Chufu (monk), 15
cicatrization
Bwende, 318
Fang, 187, *187*
Teke, 112, *112*, 302, *302*
Cinnamon, John, 58
clan relic baskets (Kota), 260, 262
clan (social unit)
and alliances, 48
ancestor spirits connected to, 79
described, 43, 219–20
elders, and ancestor veneration, 81
identifying mark of, in reliquary, 254
and kinship ties, 45, 48, 55
Claudius (bishop of Turin), 90
Cloisters, The (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), 8
Coastlands societies
and Bantu languages, 54, 61n88
and *bwiti*, 49, 50, 51–54
effect of Atlantic trade on, 54, 55
and *ombwiri*, 54–55, 61n69
coffin, commemorative (Ngata), *322*, 322–23; cat. no. 122
coiffures
of Fang, 102, 103, *103*, *105*, 106, *106*
of Teke, 112, *112*
collage, reliquary sculpture design as, 110, 242, *243*
collecting, reliquary sculpture
by "colonials," 68–71, 74, 76
by early explorers, 63–67
by missionaries, 67–68, 72–74
by museums, 71–72, 73, 95n2, 101
by Western collectors, 57, *71*, 71–72, 74, 76–77, 93
colonialism, European
Berlin Conference treaty (1885), 68–69
"civilizing mission" in, 10, 12, *12*, 28, 68, 69, 136
effect on Fang migration, 42
and "Franco-Spanish" boundaries expedition, 68
impact of, on central Africa, 10, 40, 42
postcards used to popularize, 103, *103*
and slave trade, 29, 34, 40, 42
"colonials," as collectors, 68–71, 74, 76
commemorative coffin (Ngata), *322*, 322–23; cat. no. 122
commemorative portraits, royal. *See* portraits, royal commemorative
commissions, of reliquary sculpture, 10, 12, *12*, 100, 101, 111, 115, 117–18, 302, 314
communal interests, primacy of, in belief system, 44, 59
Compiègne, Marquis Victor de, 65
Congo, Republic of, 8
current boundaries formed, 69
environment of, 35, *36*
and Fang migration, 42
geographical location of, 18, 35, *37*
peoples of, *37* (*see also specific peoples*)
roots of, in belief system, 43–48
Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, 67, 105, 188, 229
Conrau, Gustav, 6, 20, 122, *123*, 124, *125*
Constantina (wife of Emperor Maurice), 88, 95n9
containers, relic. *See* receptacles, relic
Contributions à l'ethnographie des Kuta (Andersson), 74
copper, as reliquary sculpture material, 210, 216, 223, 236, 238
corbeille des ancêtres (basket of ancestral relics), 82
cosmology, Niger-Congo. *See* Niger-Congo belief systems
Côte d'Ivoire, 8, *72*, 264
and Beng peoples, 47
Cottes, Captain Augustin, 69, 103, 105
Courtois, Aristide, 269, 270, 272, 274
cranium, as relic. *See* skull, as relic
création du monde, La (ballet), 98, *98*
Creator (God), 43, 61n77
act of birth associated with, 47
and Bamileke, 50
and Batwa, 50
and Christianity, 80, 89
divine presence of, in reliquary art, 94
infants and dwarfs, as intermediaries with, 47
and Kongo, 79, 80, 310
and spirits, as intermediaries with, 38, 47, 50, 58, 80, 84
"wind" of God, and creation, 50, 51
worship of, versus ancestor veneration, 80
and **-yambé*, 59n14
"crossroads pose" (Bwende *niombo*), 117, 320
Crowninshield, Frank, 10, *10*, 74, 132, 182, 184
Crux Vaticana, 12
Cubism, 276
influence of African art on, 99, *99*
See also specific artists

cult (term), in African belief system
defined, 43
cult of relics (Christianity)
origins of, 89
cult of the ancestor, invoking
purposes of, 22, 27, 81, 104
role of reliquary sculpture in, 97, 100, 101
uninitiated, and accessibility to, 21, 101, *101*, 134
use of horns for, 92
water imagery for, 110
See also ancestor veneration; *specific rites*
"cult of the dead." *See* cult of the ancestor, invoking
currencies, use of, in trade, 48, 110, 238, 306

Dada, influence of tribal art on, 294
dagoba (Sri Lankan stupa), 14
Dalai Lamas, preservation of bodies of, 17
dance, use of, in rites, 100
and *beete*, 111–12, 290
and *byeri*, 73
and *niombo* procession, 115, 117, 320
"dancing" figures, Kota sculptures seen as, 108, *108*, 109
Dapper, Olfert, 51
Darwin, Charles, 34, 40, 87
Dayunsi excavations (China)
nested reliquaries from, 15, *16*
dealers, art
African art promotion by, *7*
and "Negro Arts" period, 74
See also specific dealers
death, in belief system
and afterlife, 82–84, 85n31, 118, 230
"four moments of the sun" (Kongo), 316
Democratic Republic of the Congo
environment of, 35–38, *36*
geographical location of, 18, 35, *37*
peoples of, *37* (*see also specific peoples*)
demoiselles d'Avignon, Les (Picasso), *7*
Denis, Saint, 94
Denny, Walter, 18
Derain, André, 3, 4, 7, 74
as African art collector, 4, *4*, 119, 162–63, 202
1933 exhibition (Durand-Ruel Galleries), *7*, 8
Deschamps, Hubert, 268
diakonia (Christian spirit of service), 84
diseases, 34
ancestor veneration used to fight, 46, 82–84, 92
introduced through colonialism, 10, 42
"display cadaver" (Bembe), 310
"districts" (rainforest societies), and politics, 48
divination ceremonies, 81
DNA testing, use of, for determining heritage, 29, 31n123
drinking horn, ceremonial, 101, *123*
drums, 5, *6*
used in *byeri* initiation, *26*, 27–28
Du Chaillu, Paul, 21, 51, 63, *64*
on *ngombi* harp, 52–53
Duponcheel, Christian, 298
Dupré, Marie-Claude, 304, 306
Durand-Ruel Galleries, Derain exhibition at (1933), *7*, 8
dwarfism, in Niger-Congo belief system, 47, 51, 58, 60n50, 61n78

"earth priest"
commemorative portraits of, 6, 40, 47–48, 91, 100, 101, 124, *125*; cat. no. 2
functions of, 45, 46, 47
prerequisites for becoming, 46
earth spirits, miniature (Kongo), 51
Ebäangon (southern Cameroon), *26*, 27
ebaaz (family unit), Kwele, 288
ebandza (men's gathering house)
in *bwete/bwiti* rituals, 50, 51, 280, 282
Eckendorff, Jean, 74
ecotone regions, settlements in, 39
efomba (Ngata peoples), *322*, 322–23; cat. no. 122
Ehret, Christopher, 43
Einstein, Carl
Negerplastik, 8, 98, 192, 196, 258
Ekoi peoples, 40
ekug (Alstonia boonei) (wood)
medicinal qualities of, 107
ekuk (things of the forest)
in *beete* ritual, 111–12, 290, 292
Ekwaga, Essana, 91, 132
elders, clan, 81
benediction by (Fang), 173
as role models, 84, 85n38
Teke, 112, *112*
emboli helmet mask (Kota), 298, *299*; cat. no. 109
Encyclopédie pahouine (Largeau), 69
environments, equatorial African, 35–40, *36*
See also specific types
Epona-ware (pottery), 59n24
Epstein, Jacob, 3, *13*, 74, 93, 162, 178, 196, 202
on *Standing Male Figure* (Fang), 160
Equatorial Guinea
current boundaries formed, 69
environment of, *36*, 38
Fang migration into, 40
geographical location of, 18, *37*
peoples of, *37* (*see also specific peoples*)
esana (Fang funerary rite), 23
Esseng family (Cameroon)
byeri rite of, documented, 27
ethnographic goal, in early explorations, 67, 68, 71
Ethnologie religieuse des Kuta: Mythologie et folklore (Andersson), 74
Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin), 65, 70, 106, 128, 130, 212, 256, 258
Etnografiska Museet (Stockholm), 260, 312
Eucharist, and veneration of relics (Christianity), 12
evangelization, role of relics in, 89
Even, André, 61n94, 74, 266
evil spirits
sacrificial rites used to ward off, 80
sources of, 44
evus (cosmic energy), 24–27, 107
"Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations" (Jacques Seligmann Gallery, 1936), 152
exhibitions, African art, 8, 93
"African Negro Art" (Museum of Modern Art, 1935), 4, 192, 206, 272
"African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield" (Brooklyn Museum, 1937), 10, *10*
and Durand-Ruel Galleries (1933), *7*
"Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations" (Jacques Seligmann Gallery, 1936), 152
and "Picasso-Braque" exhibition (291 gallery, 1915), 9, *9*
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" (Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 4–5
"Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" (291 gallery, 1914), *8*, 8–9
See also expositions, international
explorations, early, 33, 63–67, *64*, *65*, *66*
and African art collecting, 63–67, *65*, 74
colonialism and, 68–71
ethnographic goals in, 67, 68, 71
"Franco-Spanish" boundaries expedition, 68
expositions, international, 5, 76, 93, 244
eye depiction, in reliquary sculpture. *See* "gaze," in reliquary sculpture

Famensi temple (Xi'an, China)
nested reliquaries found in, 15, *16*
Fang helmet-wig *(nlo-o-ngo)* (Cameroon or Gabon), 102, *102*
Fang Man from the Upper Ivindo Area (Northern Gabon) (Guérin), *103*
Fang migration, 41–42, 57, 58, 126, 140
Fang peoples, *105*
attitudes toward dead, *23*, 23–24, 28
and *byeri* (*see byeri* rituals; Fang reliquary sculpture)
Christianity introduced to, *23*, 24, 28, 50, 57, *67*, 67–68, 68, 72–73
and early Western exploration, 68, 69, *103*, *105*
effect of colonialism on, 28
and *evus* (cosmic energy), 24–27, 107
as "fierce" peoples, 72
geographical location of, *37*, 38
headdresses, 102, *102*
influence of *bwiti* on, 57, 58
and language, 38, 41, 59n8, 60n65
malan (melan) rites, 24, *26*, 27, 180
and morality beliefs, 80
and *ndebot* (house), in lineage, 57, 140, 176
ngi mask, 300, *301*; cat. no. 110
nkande rites, 22–23, 140
ombwiri rites, 55
origins of, 40, 55, 126
Pahouin designation for, 105
and patrilineal system, 23, 104, 140, 176
so initiation ceremony, 23, 104
and trade, 40, 41, 43, 58, 59n24
village size, 57
warriors, 41, *103*, 104, *105*, 106, *106*, 109
See also specific groups
Fang reliquary sculpture, *24*, *25*, 27, 73, *75*, 76, *77*, 101, *101*
aesthetics of, 107

with articulated limbs, 154, *155*; cat. no. 18
and carvers, 166, 168, 208
core principles of African art embodied in, 158, *159*, *200*, *201*; cat. nos. 21, 45
described, 11, 101, *101*, 172
early accounts of, 25, *25*, 67–68, *70*, 71
evolution in style of representation, 164, 172, 176, 206
figuration in, *101*, 101–4, *103*, 109
and gender, 104, 130, 176
infancy/ancestry association in, 24, 26
origins of, 56–58
physiognomy of, 58, 102–4, *103*, 105, *105*, 130, 176
protective powers of, 57, 58, 91, 104
and sacra, accessibility of, 101, *101*
surface wear on, 109
three-dimensional aspect of, 100, 107, 190
and trade to outsiders, 10, 136, 208
Western displays of, *7*, *8*, 8–9, *13*, *74*
Western views on, 3–4, 33, 72
See also specific peoples
"fattening" rituals, premarriage, 46
feather ornaments, use of
in Fang reliquary sculpture, 102, 109, 128–30, *129*, 132–34, *133*, 154, *155*; cat. nos. 4, 6, 18
for Fang warrior, 106, *106*, 109
Feldman-Savelsberg, Pamela, 45
Fénéon, Félix, 142
Fernandez, James
on *bwiti*, 79, 80
on *byeri*, 27, 130, 132, 134, 138, 164, 166, 168, 174, 189, 204, 206, 208
on Fang lineage system, 23, 102
on Fang migration, 41
on *ngi*, 300
on *ombwiri*, 55
fertility rites
and Fang, 27, 104, *105*
and first-comer appeasement, 44, 45–46
and Kota, 108, *108*, 109
performed by *fon*, 19
fertility specialists
and "children of the gods," 45, 47–48
fetishes, 66, *66*, 70–71, 306
collecting of, 63, 65, *65*
Invocation of the Fetishes (detail) (Riou), 108, *108*
and reliquary sculptures, 63
Fetishes from Pongo (Pâris), *66*, 67
figurines, protective. *See* protective figurines
"First Cause or Creator." *See* Creator (God)
first-comers (spirits)
appeasing of, by late-comers, 46, 51, 54
Batwa as, 46, 47, 54, 59n2
and *bwiti*, 51, 54
and *byeri*, 56–57
claimed by late-comers, 46, 51, 55
in humanity's origin stories, 46, 47, 54
linked with territorial spirits, 51
"little people" associated with, 58
"mythical," 46, 51
and *ombwiri*, 55
and "principle of precedence," 44
supernatural powers of, 45–46
Flam, Jack, 162
fon. *See* chief
Fontem (Bangwa chiefdom), 19, 20, 46
Fosia, Chief (Bangwa), 6, 19, 40, 45, 91, 92, 100, 101, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
Foy, Saint, *90*, 90–91, 92, 93, 95n33
France
and colonialism, 21, 68, 69, 76, 244, 269
reliquary genre in, 12 (*see also* Christian reliquaries)
Francis of Assisi, Saint, 11–12
"Franco-Spanish" boundaries, expedition to resolve, 68
French Congo–Pahouin Man and Woman, Yenvis, Ogooué (postcard), 104, *105*
French Congo–Pahouin Warrior (postcard), 103, *103*
French Congo–Pahouin Warrior, Yeuoi, Ogooué (postcard), 106, *106*
French Revolution, and Christian reliquary destruction, 94
Frobenius, Leo, 108
Fu-Kiau (Congolese scholar), 320
funerary rites
Bangwa, 20, *20*
Fang, 23, *26*, 27–28
Kota, 230
See also Bwende *niombo*

Gabon
and Atlantic trade, 21
chiefdoms, described, 18
current boundaries formed, 69
and early Western exploration, 5, *6*, 21–22, 64, *65*, 68, 69, *103*, *105*
effect of Fang migration on, 40, 42, 56
environment of, 35–38, *36*
geographical location of, *37*
and missionaries, 68, 72
peoples of, *37* (*see also specific peoples*)
rainforest flora diversity in, 38
and smallpox epidemics, 21
Gabon–Pahouin of the Interior (postcard), 104, *105*
Galwa language, 54
"gaze," in reliquary sculpture
and *buti*, 113
and *byeri*, 102, 160, *161*
and Christian reliquaries, 91
and *niombo*, 117
Geary, Christraud, 26, 28, 101
Gerald, Saint, 90
Germany
and artifact-collecting, museum-directed, 71
and colonialism, 6, 20, 30n19, 30n58, 30n63, 69, 133
and Georg Zenker, 69–70
See also Tessmann, Günter
Gervasius, Saint, 12, 13
gheonga (Tsogho busts), 284
Girardin, Maurice, 264
God. *See* Creator (God)
Golden Altar of Saint Ambrogio, 12
Goldwater, Robert, 200, 202
Gollnhofer, Otto, 279
Götzen (Idols) (Klee), 108, *108*
governments. *See* political systems, in equatorial Africa
Graham, John, *10*, 74, 98, 152
System and Dialectics of Art, 182, 184
Grassfields societies (Cameroon)
belief systems in, 28, 44, 45–48, 58
and chiefdoms, 18, 19, 20
effect of Fang migration on, 41, 58
geographical location of, 35, *36*
and language groups, 35
peoples of, 45 (*see also specific peoples*)
Gray, Christopher, 56
Great Bieri, The (Betsi reliquary sculpture), *13*, 29, *72*, 109, 158, *200*, 200–202, *201*; cat. no. 45
Great Cloud Monastery (Dayunsi, China), 15
Grébert, Fernand, *24*, *25*, 72–73, 187, 194
Greenough, Sarah, 9
Gregory I (pope), 88, 89, 95n9
guardian figure, reliquary, 5, *73*, *214*, 214–16, *215*, 258, *259*
See also protective figurines
Guérin, Officer (colonial officer), 103, *103*, 105, *105*
Guerre, Léonce and Pierre, 76–77, *77*, 170
Guerre Collection, 76–77, 244
Guillaume, Paul, 3–4, 8, *8*, *71*, 71–72, *72*, 74, 198, 202
and Aristide Courtois, 270
and Barnes Foundation, 72, 75
collaboration with Joseph Brummer, 8, 203
as promoter of "Negro arts," 72, 203
La sculpture nègre primitive, 158
Guinea. *See* Equatorial Guinea
Guiral, Léon, 306

hairstyles, 212
Fang, 102, *102*, *103*, *105*, *106*, 208
Teke, 302, *302*, 304, *304*
Halloween, skull motif used during, 88, 95n2
hallucinogenic substances, and rites, 49, 50
Hamlet (Shakespeare), 88
Hamy, E. T., 5
harp
and *bwiti*, 50, *52*, *53*
and *byeri*, *26*, 27–28
ngombi, *52*, 52–53
Haviland, Frank Burty, 7, 30n20, 74, 76, *76*, 192
head, as relic. *See* skull, as relic
headdress
and color, symbolism of, 102, *102*
helmet mask (Kota), 298, *299*; cat. no. 109
helmet wig (Fang), 102, *102*
as indication of leadership, 100, 113, *123*
See also feather ornaments, use of
"head reliquaries," origins of, 12
heart, symbolism of, in African art, 102, 107
helmet mask, Kota *(emboli)*, 298, *299*; cat. no. 109
helmet wig, Fang *(nlo-o-ngo)*, 102, *102*
Herbert, Eugenia, 82, 110, 210, 226, 236, 238
on use of metal for reliquary art, 239, 240, 246
Heroes of the Dark Continent and How Stanley Found Emin Pasha (Buel), 108
Heymann, Émile, 6, 74

Himalayas, belief system in, 15
Holy Land, relics collected from, 12
Holy Spirit (Christianity), 13
Hong Bian (Chinese monk), 15–17, *17*
Hormisdas (pope), 88
horn
in *byeri* rites, 104, *105*
in Christian processions, 92, 95n33
depicted in reliquary art, *96*, 104, 111–12, 128, *129*, 130–32, *131*, 132–34, *133*, *135*, 136, *137*, 288–89, *289*, 290, *291*, 292, *293*
for drinking, 100–101, *123*
to invoke ancestor, 92, 122
mystical powers of, 104, *105*
in *so* initiation ceremony (Fang), 104, 105, *105*
Hottot, Richard, 302, 303, 304
household head, ancestor veneration rites by, 81
house leaders, rule by
versus *fon*, 20–21
"house of the land" (reliquary structure), 18
Huidobro, Vicente, 200–202
Hulstaert, Gaston, 322, 323
humanity, creation of
in belief system, 46, 47, 51
and *mungala-mwili*, 56
hunting
effect of iron tools on, 48
shift away from, due to climate change, 35
hunting and gathering communities, self-sufficiency of, 60n53
hypochondroplasia (dwarfism condition), 47

iboga (*Tabernanthe iboga* Baillon)
as hallucinogenic substance, 50
Iconoclastic Controversy (Byzantium), 90
"idols," collecting of, 65, *65*
See also fetishes
Igoumbié village, decorative doors in, *64*
ikwii (shades of the dead) (Teke), 304
image reliquaries, Christian. *See* Christian reliquaries
incest, ridiculed in *byeri* rites, 28
infants, in Niger-Congo belief system
body traits of, in reliquary art, 58, 107, 278–79, *279*, 280, *281*, 282, *283*
linked with territorial spirits, 47, 51
See also newborns, in Niger-Congo belief system
initiates
and access to ancestral cult, 9, 27, 81, 101, *101*, 190, 194, 204
beete, 292
bonganga, 323
byeri, 180
as future ancestors, 81
ngi masks worn by, 107
initiation societies
beete, 111–12, 292
bwete, 218–19, 280, 282, 284, 285
bwiti, 50
byeri. *See byeri* rituals (Fang)
importance of, in political system, 43
and manhood, 21
mwiri, 56
ngoye, 266, 267, 276
so, 104, 105, *105*
installation ceremony (chiefs), 82
instruments, ceremonial, 5, *6*, *26*, 27–28, 92, 95n33
See also harp; horn; pluriarc
intercessors, spirit, 38, 210
Batwa as, 50
and *bwiti*, 49, 50, 51, 54, 56
and *byeri*, 58, 104
"experts" as, 79
metalsmithing skills attributed to, 110, 232
and *niombo*, 117
and *nkani*, 54
in rainforest habitat, 38
red (color) associated with, 117
and reliquary sculpture imagery, 91
saints as, 91–92, 100
investiture ceremonies
supernatural skills conferred during, 45
Invocation of the Fetishes (detail) (Riou), 108, *108*
iron, introduction of, 47
effect of, on Bantu political system, 54
as "watershed" event, 34, 48
Islam, and relic veneration, 18
Isogho peoples, *64*

jack-o'-lanterns, skull imagery in, 88, 95n6
Jacobson-Widding, Anita, 79, 80, 107, 117, 274, 316
Jacobsson, Rev. G. A., 73
Jacques Seligmann Gallery (New York), 152
Janus figure (reliquary sculpture), 110, 252, *252*, *253*, *257*, 257–58, *259*; cat. nos. 78, 81, 82
Japan, and belief system, 14, 17
Jensen, Robert, 294
Jesus. *See* Christ
John, Saint, 84
John the Baptist, Saint, 92
Journey to Ashogo-Land, A (Du Chaillu), 64, *64*
justice, administration of
and *ngi*, 107
and *nkani*, 54
and *ombwiri*, 54–55
Justinian (emperor), 88
Justin II (emperor), 12

Kaʿb bin Zuhayr (poet), 18
kanda (concept), in belief system, 82, 84
Kann, Alphonse, 7, 30n20
kaolin, use of, on reliquaries, 113, 269, *269*
Karlman, Edvard, 73, 115, 318, 320
Karutz, Dr. Richard, 71
Kele peoples
and *bwiti*, 49, 50, 60n68, 61n69
and *mwiri*, 55, 56
ngombi harp of, 50, *52*
and *ombwiri*, 55
and trade, 41
and weapons, as status symbol, 110
Kele-speaking peoples, 42
conflict with Tsogho-speaking peoples, 41–42
distribution of, 41, *42*
and trade, 41
kendo (royal bell), 21
Kingoyi (Swedish missionary station), *73*, *115*
Kingsley, Mary, 9–10
kini (invisible body), in Niger-Congo belief system, 84
kinship ties, strengthening
methods for, 45, 48, 55
Kjersmeier, Carl, 73
Klee, Paul, 108, *108*, 224
Kongo Kingdom, 33
and belief system, 49, 51–54, 79, 80, 82, 85n27, 228, 316, 318
geographical location of, *39*
kono (Tsogho religious society), 41–42
Korea, ancestor veneration in, 14, 17
Kota guardian figures *(mbulu-ngulu)*, 56, *66*, 67, *73*, 252, *252*, 258, *259*, 260
Kota masks
*"*Emboli*" Helmet Mask*, 298, *299*; cat. no. 109
Kota peoples, 42, 72
and ancestor veneration, 82, 110
Andersson monographs on, 73–74
and *bwete* rituals, 49, 50
and early Western exploration, *66*, 67, 74
geographical location of, *37*, 38
influence of art, on West, *98*
and metal trade, 110, 210, 219, 236, 238
and *mungala-mwili* rituals, 56, 61n94
and *ombwiri*, 55
Swedish missionaries to, 73, *73*
Kota reliquary sculpture
aesthetics of, 11, 107, 109, 110, 113
communal housing for, 109
complementary opposites portrayed in, 252, *257*, 257–58, 258, *259*
displayed in West, 9, *9*, *74*
early collecting of, 5, *6*, 71
evoked in Klee's art, 108, *108*
"iconic" status of, in West, 33
lozenge motif in, 108, *108*, 109, 224, *225*
materials used for, 109–10, 111
and relic receptacle types, 260
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble, 246, *247*; cat. no. 74
seen as "dancing" figures, by West, 108, *108*, 109, 224
size of, and political hierarchy, 82
two-dimensional aspect of, 252, 256, *256*
See also specific peoples
kuk, in *beete* rite, 111
kungang (male association), 46, 60n39
kutiwa zingila (where we shall live), in belief system, 80
Kwa language. *See* Benue-Kwa speech community
Kwele *beete* masks, 22, 28, 111–13, 289
Antelope (Booang), 22, 296, *296*; cat. no. 107
and commissions, 111
Forest Buffalo (Zuom), 22, 111–12, 288–89, *289*; cat. no. 103
functions of, 111
Gorilla (Gon), 22, 112, *297*, 297–98; cat. no. 108
Pebood, 22, 112, 294, *295*; cat. no. 106
Rainbow (Diia), 22, 112, 290, 292, *293*; cat. no. 105

Ram (Bata), 22, *96*, 112, 290, *291*; cat. no. 104
Kwele peoples, 22, 42, 65
beete rituals, 22, 28, 111–12, 118, 290, 292
early relic collecting from, 76
ebaaz (family unit), 288
effect of colonialism on, 28
effect of Fang migration on, 58
geographical location of, *37*, 38
migration of, 42

Laburthe-Tolra, Philippe, 10–11, 20
on Fang, 23, 24, 28, 104, 107
Laman, Karl (Swedish missionary), *73*, 117, 310
language communities, equatorial African, 35–43, 59n8
and Bantu, 35, 38, 59n8
early observations on, 34, 68
effect of Fang migration on, 41
expansion of, through alliances, 41, 48
and relic distribution, 54
role of trade in spread of, 49
spread of Niger-Congo linguistic traits, 43
Largeau, Victor, *68*, 69
Late Antique period, and Christian reliquary art, 12
late-comers
appeasement of ancestor spirits by, 44, 45–46, 47, 54–58
first-comer ancestors claimed by, 46, 51, 55
Laude, Jean, 74, 108
Lawrence, Saint, 88
leadership attributes, portrayals of
Bamileke, 100–101, 122, *123*, 124
Mahongwe, 52, 53, 111, 212, *213*, *214*, 214–16, *217*, *218*, 218–19, *219*, 219–20, *221*
Teke, 112, *112*, 113
lefem society, 100, 122
Léger, Fernand, 98, *98*, 99
Léger, Saint, 94
lekat (protective figurine), 46–47, 51, 60n39, 60n40
Leloup, Hélène, 3–4
Lemaire, Charles François, 322
Lenz, Oskar, 63, 67, 212
Leopold II (king), 322
Le Roy, Monsignor, 68
Le Testu, Georges, 74
libations as reliquary offerings
and Bangwa, 19, *20*
and Fang, *24*, 107
lineage-based systems, 20
and clans, 43, 219–20. *See also* clan (social unit)
development of, 40
divisions of, 219
and *ebaaz* (Kwele), 288
in Grassfields societies, 45
importance of, to trade, 58
importance of skull cult in, 27–28, 45, 48
patrilineal, 18–19, *20*, 23, 45, 59n32, 104, 219
and role of chiefs in, 18, 43, 44, 82
seen as "primitive," by West, 34
"little people"
associated with first-comers, 58
See also dwarfism; infants
Loango Kingdom
and belief systems, 51, 54, 60n64
early explorations of, 68, 69, 76
geographical location of, *39*
role of trade, in growth of, 55
Loudon, Margaret, 272
Louis the Pious (emperor), 90
Louis XVI (king), 94
Lower Congo, and belief system, 80
lozenge motif (Kota), as fertility and procreation symbol, 108, *108*, 109
Lumbu peoples, 53, *53*, 55

Mabea peoples, 41
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male, 102, 145, *145*; cat. no. 13
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Female (various), 102, 142, *143*, 144, *144*; cat. nos. 11, 12
MacGaffey, Wyatt, 84
magic. *See* "witchcraft"
Mahongwe peoples, 74
bwete rituals, 50, 61n69 (*see also bwiti* rituals)
geographical location of, *37*, 38
and patrilineal system, 219
Mahongwe reliquary sculpture, 5, 11, *12*, 67, 111, 222
destroyed by missionaries, 88, 220
leadership attributes depicted in, 111
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), *62*, 65, 111, 210, *211*, 212, *213*, *214*, 214–16, *215*, *217*, *218*, 218–19, *219*, 219–20, *221*; cat. nos. 50–56
Make peoples, 65, 68
Makosa of Kingoyi (*niombo* maker), *114*, 115, 116, *116*, 117–18
Miniature Reliquary: Standing Male Figure (Niombo), 318, *319*; cat. no. 120
Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Female Figure (Niombo), 116, 320, *321*; cat. no. 121
malan (Alchornea floribunda)
bark of, used in *byeri* rituals, 57
malan (melan) initiation rite (Fang), 24, *26*, 27, 180
Malraux, André, 108
Manianga peoples, 82
manillas (brass currency), 110, 238, 240
maps of equatorial Africa
environmental, *36*
Kele-speaking clans, *42*
major 17th-century kingdoms, *39*
peoples of the region, *37*
Marche, Alfred, 5, 65, *65*, 224
Marcoussis, Louis, 276
Mark, Saint, 11
marsh forest environment (equatorial Africa), 35, *36*, 38
Martial, Saint, 92, 94, 95n29
Martin, Phyllis, 55, 236
Martin, Saint, 94
martyrs, and relic veneration, 11–12
Masken und Geheimbünde Afrikas, Die (Frobenius), 108
masks, African
collecting of, 4, *4*, 6, *6*, 71–72, *72*, 73, *75*
emboli helmet mask (Kota), 298, *299*; cat. no. 109
mukudj (Punu), 286
mwiri, 56
ngi, 27, 107, 300, *301*; cat. no. 110
See also beete masks (Kwele)
masquerades, in *beete* rites, 22, 111, 290
Matisse, Henri, 3, 6, 30n12, 272
Matisse, Pierre, 272
matrilineal societies, 43, 276
matrimonial exchange, in alliances, 41, 48
matrimonial rites, 46, 268
Maurice (emperor), 88, 95n9
Mauryan dynasty (India), 14
Mbete peoples, 11, 113
figurative receptacle with interior cavity (genre), 269, *269*, 274, *275*
geographical location of, *37*, 38
as matrilineal society, 276
mitsitsi-na-ngoye (wood figures), 266
and *mungala-mwili* rituals, 55, 56
Reliquary: Standing Female Figure, 113, 276, *277*; cat. no. 94
Reliquary: Standing Figure, 113, 269, *269*; cat. no. 90
Reliquary: Standing Male Figure (various), 113, 270, *271*, 272, *273*, 274, *275*, 278, *278*; cat. nos. 91–93, 95
Reliquary Vessel Lid: Half Figure (various), 266, *266*, 267, *267*; cat. nos. 87, 88
Reliquary Vessel Lid: Head, 56, 268, *268*; cat. no. 89
mbiri rituals (Fang), 50
See also bwiti rituals
Mbiti, John, 84
mboy (Obamba reliquary sculptures), 56, 61n103
Mbuirri (powerful spirit), 63
mbulu-ngulu (Kota/Mbete/Obamba reliquary figure), 56, *73*
See also Kota guardian figures
mbumba (Tsogho reliquary figure), 284, 285
mbumba-bwiti (Sangu/Tsogho reliquary figure), 51, 56, 61n77
mbwidi-mbodila, in Kongo origins, 49, 51, 60n64
mediators, spirit, 117, 320
"experts" as, 79
See also intercessors, spirit
medicinal brews, relics used for, 22
medicine, 70–71, 107
alternate meanings for term (Bantu), 49
and *beete* rite libations, 288
and *buti*, 302
"mothers of medicine" (Fang), 130
and *ngi* rites, 300
and relics, as catalysts for, 22, 302
medieval art, compared with African art, 98
Mekeny peoples, 68
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male (Mekeny or Okak), *13*, 160, *161*; cat. no. 22

melan rites. *See malan (melan)* initiation rite (Fang)
Mende, church of (France), 94
Mendès-France, René, 74, 93, 150
Meng Shen (Chinese vice prefect), 15
metal, use of, in reliquary sculptures
and availability, 111, 210, 216, 219, 226, 230, 236, 238, 240
purpose of, 111, 239
as wealth indicator, 226
metalsmiths, as specialists, 110, 232
metal trade
influence of, on African reliquary sculptures, 110, 236, 240
and iron, introduction of, 34, 47, 48, 54
Metropolitan Museum of Art, The (New York)
and African art, 29
medieval collection, 8, 91, 92
Pakistani reliquary in collection of, 14–15, *15*
Michaud, Joseph, 67
migration (equatorial Africa), 20, 21
appeasement of first-comer spirits during, 44–46
and Bantu expansion, 35
effect of banana crops and ironworking, on rainforest societies, 48
effect of French colonialism on, 42
effect of slave trade on, 40
environmental changes, and effect on, 35, 39
and Fang migration, 40, 41–42, 57, 58
of language and cultural traits, 43 (*see also* language communities)
and "principle of precedence," 44
and use of "palavers," 41
Miller, Joseph, 40
Mindumu or Obamba peoples
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus (various), 252, *252*, *253*, 258, *259*; cat. nos. 78, 82
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 56, 110, 234, *235*, 236, *237*, 238, *238*, 239, *239*, 254, *255*; cat. nos. 66–69, 79
Mindumu peoples, *66*, 67, 73–74
Reliquary Ensemble, 56, 248, *249*; cat. no. 75
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 5, *6*, 95n2, *244*, 244–45, *245*, 250, *250*, 251, *251*; cat. nos. 72, 73, 76, *77*
minkuyu (spirits of the dead), Bembe, 310
missionaries, 54, 56, 73, *73*, 113
African art collecting by, 67–68, 72–74, 208
discouragement of African traditions by, 10, 28, 29, 80, 87–88, 136, 189, 220
documentation of Africa by, 72, 115, 116
and Fernand Grébert, *24*, 72–73
and Henri Trilles, *67*, 67–68, 72, 76
sale of African images by, 112, 113
Mission Cottes. *See* Cottes, Captain Augustin
mitsitsi-na-ngoye (Mbete wood figures), 266
modernism
influence of African art on, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, *9*, 29, 93, *98*
Modigliani, Amadeo, *71*, *72*, *75*
Mongo, Pabé, 85n38
morality, in belief system
and discouragement of antisocial behavior, 28, 111
holistic approach to, 80
and political misconduct, 81
as prerequisite for "ancestor," 80
Moris, Père, 74, *74*
mpangwé, *Pahouin* derived from, 105
mpieme, as *bonga* ingredient, 115, 302
Mpongwe peoples, 54, 55, 63, 236
Mueli-Ngeli (Bumwele founder), 55–56
Mueller, Josef, 102
Muhammad, Prophet, 18
mungala, in belief system
and Teke, 55
mungala-mwili, in belief system, 50
and Kota, 56, 61n94
and Mbete, 55
and Ndassa, 55
and Obamba, 55
and Wumbu, 55
mupani (Teke hairstyle), 304, *305*
mu'po (protective figurine), 46–47
dwarfism characteristics in, 47, 51
Musée d'Art Moderne (Paris), 264
Musée de l'Homme (Paris), 5, 74, 103
Musée des Arts Africains, Océaniens et Amérindiens (Marseilles), 77
Musée d'Ethnographie (Neuchâtel), 68, 73, 187, 194
Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (Paris), 5, 6, *6*, 65, 67, 244, 248
Picasso's visit to, 74
Musée d'Histoire Naturelle (La Rochelle), 76
Musée d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris), 95n2, 103, 244
Musée Ethnographique des Missions Scientifiques (Paris), 224
Museum für Völkerkunde (Berlin), 6, 136
Museum of Modern Art (New York), 4, 7, 76
"African Negro Art" (1935 exhibition), 4, 192, 206, 272
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" (1984 exhibition), 4–5
Museum of World Culture (Göteborg), 116
museums, early collecting by, 71–72, 73, 95n2, 101
"Museum without Walls" (Malraux), 108
musical instruments. *See* instruments, ceremonial
muzidi. *See* Bembe peoples
Mvai peoples, 164
early studies of, *70*, 71
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel, 168, *168*; cat. no. 26
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male, 169, *169*; cat. no. 27
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male Holding Vessel, 164, *164*, *165*; cat. no. 24
origins of, 41
Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure Holding Vessel, 166, *167*; cat. no. 25
mvamayong (benevolence of the clan), in Fang belief system, 58
mvong (lineage), as social unit, 20
mvwaa (even-handed tranquillity), in Fang belief system, 107, 174
mwan biang (child of medicine), 58
mwei, in belief system (Tsogho), 55
mweli rituals (Coastlands and Vili-speaking peoples), 50
See also bwiti rituals
mweri, in belief system (Sindara), 55
mwetyi, in belief system (Sekiani/Kele), 50, 56
mwiri, in belief system (Vili-speaking peoples), 49, 54–56, 60n64
Myene language, 68

named ancestor spirits (Niger-Congo beliefs), 43–45
described, 43
newborns associated with, 47
names, transfer of, to newborns, 24
"narrow" Bantu (language group)
origin of, 35
Nassau, R. H., 54
natural death, as prerequesite for ancestor, 80
Ndambomo peoples, 212, 222
Ndassa or Wumbu peoples
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 110, 232, *232*, 233, *233*, 242, *243*; cat. nos. 64, 65, 71
Ndassa peoples, 73–74, 234
and *mungala-mwili*, 55
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus, 110, *257*, 257–58; cat. no. 81
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 110, 256, *256*, 260, *261*, 262, *263*, 264, *264*, 265, *265*; cat. nos. 80, 83–86
ndebot (house), in Fang lineage, 57, 140, 176
Ndem, Supreme God, 19
Ndongo Kingdom, 33, *39*
Ndza (Batwa first-comers), 45–46
Negerplastik (Einstein), 8, 98, 192, 196
Négritude movement, 170
"Negro Arts" period, and African art collecting, 74
Nels postcard company (Brussels), 112, *112*
Neoplatonism, 12
nested reliquaries (China), 15, *16*
newborns, in Niger-Congo belief system
and protective figurine form, 47, 60n46
spirituality of, 47
See also infants, in Niger-Congo belief system
nganga (Sangu healer), *67*
ngasu wood, as Teke *buti* material, 304, *305*, 308, *309*
Ngata peoples
Commemorative Coffin: Male Figure (Efomba), *322*, 322–23; cat. no. 122
geographical location of, *37*, 38
ngi masks, 27, 107, 300, *301*; cat. no. 110
ngi society (Fang), 27, 107, 300

Ngolet, François, 41
ngomalan (initiates), in Fang *byeri* ritual, 27
ngombi harp (Kele), 50, *52*, 52–53
Ngom peoples
and *bwiti* origins, 49, 50, 56, 60n65
and *byeri* rituals, 49
migration of, 42
ngoye association (Mbete), 266, 267, 276
Ngumba or Okak peoples
Figures from a Reliquary Ensemble: Couple, 91, 102, 104, 138, *139*; cat. no. 9
Ngumba peoples, 6, 10, *10*, 65, 70, 126, 164
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female Supporting Figure on Shoulders, 104, 140, *141*; cat. no. 10
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 126, *127*; cat. no. 3
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female Holding Horn, 6, 10, 71, 102, 130–32, *131*; cat. no. 5
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Horn (various), 6, 71, 91, *99*, 102, 106, 109, 132–34, *133*, 134, *135*, 136, *137*; cat. nos. 6–8
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male Holding Horn, Female Figure, and Receptacle, 6, 70–71, 91, 102, 104, *105*, 106, 109, 110, 128–30, *129*; cat. no. 4
origins of, 41
Ngwyes peoples, 42
niămōdo (Fang ancestral sculpture), 6, 71, 95n2, 154, *155*; cat. no. 18
Nicolas, Alain, 76
Niger-Congo belief systems, 43–45
in Grassfields societies, 45–48
in rainforest societies, 48
spread of, 35
Nigeria, and belief systems, 35, *37*, 40
niombo reliquary sculpture. *See* Bwende *niombo*
Njoya (Bamum *fon*), 19
nkande rites (Fang), 22–23, 140
nkani (Bantu, "judge"), 54
nkisi (Bembe/Bwende spirits), 79, 82, 316
nkisi nsi (Kongo earth spirits), 51
Nkomi peoples, 54, 55, 63
nkulu (good ancestor), 80
nnom ngi (leader of Fang *ngi* society), 27
Notre-Dame du Puy (France), relic destruction at, 94
Nsangu (Njoya's father)
in Bamum history, 19
nsimim (shadow of ancestor), in Fang belief system, 24
nsuk byeri (Fang reliquary receptacle), *24*, 27, *188*, 188–89, *189*; cat. no. 39
ntali (Teke hairstyle), 302, *302*
Ntinu Lukene (founding king of the Kongo), 51
ntsambi pluriarc (Lumbu or Punu peoples), 50, *53*
Ntumu peoples, 27, 69, 70, 164, 166
Ancestral Sculpture: Articulated Male Figure (Niămōdo), 6, 71, 95n2, 154, *155*; cat. no. 18
early studies of, *70*, 71
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 146, *147*; cat. no. 14
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male (various), *13*, 93, 148, *149*, 150, *151*; cat. nos. 15, 16
headpieces, *102*
origins of, 41
Ntumu peoples, northern
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male, 126, 152, *153*; cat. no. 17
nwela (soul), in Niger-Congo belief system, 84
Nyamiti, Charles, 84
Nzaman peoples
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Male Holding Vessel, 173, *173*; cat. no. 30
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Male Holding Vessel (various), 109, 180, *180*, *181*, 182, *183*, 184, *184*, *185*, 186, *186*; cat. nos. 34–37
Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female, 174, *175*; cat. no. 31
origins of, 41
Nzambé-Kana (first male ancestor of humanity), and Tsogho, 282
nzambi (Supreme Being), in Kongo belief system, 79, 80, 310
Nzebi peoples, 55
Nzem peoples, 42, 58

oaths, swearing of (*mwiri* rituals), 56, 61n99
Obamba or Mindumu peoples
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 56, 110, 234, *235*, 236, *237*, 238, *238*, 239, *239*, 254, *255*; cat. nos. 66–69, 79
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Janus (various), 252, *252*, *253*, 258, *259*; cat. nos. 78, 82
Obamba peoples, 5, 65, *65*, *66*, 67, 74, 266
and early Western exploration, 65, *65*, 67
and *mungala-mwili*, 55, 56
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), *78*, 110, 224, *225*, 226, *227*, 228, *228*, 229, *229*, 230, *231*, 240, *241*; cat. nos. 59–63, 70
Obamba/Wumbu guardian figures, *73*
Odalric (cleric), Saint Foy appearance to, 91
Ogooué River
bwiti origins along, 49
and colonialism, 76
early exploration of, 63, 66, 67
missionary post on, 72
and settlements, 41
Öhrneman, Josef, 115, 116, 318, 320
oil
used on reliquary sculpture, 72, 107, 174, *174*, 180
Okak group (?)
Ancestral Sculpture: Standing Female, *157*, 157–58; cat. no. 20
Okak or Mekeny group
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Standing Male, *13*, 160, *161*; cat. no. 22
Okak or Ngumba group
Figures from a Reliquary Ensemble: Couple, 91, 102, 104, 138, *139*; cat. no. 9
Okak peoples, 164
Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 3, *4*, *13*, 104, 162–63, *163*; cat. no. 23
Figurine from a Reliquary Ensemble with Attachments, 156, *156*; cat. no. 19
Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Female, 158, *159*; cat. no. 21
origins of, 41
ombudi (Coastlands politico-religious association), 50
Ombure (chthonian creature), in Fang origin myth, 55
ombwiri, among Coastlands-speaking populations, 49, 50, 54–56, 61n69
omweli/mwele (Apindji male association), 55
omwetsi, among Coastland-speaking peoples, 50
See also bwiti rituals
Omyéné language, 105
Ondoumbos peoples, *6*
oral traditions, belief systems perpetuated through, 79–80
Orungu (Coastlands Bantu language group), 21, 54, 63, 236
Oschebo peoples, 63–65
ossyeba figure (Kota-Mahongwe), 67
Ossyeba peoples, 63–65, 65, *65*
"others" (concept), in Western ideology, 34
Oyono Nkulu (Fang-Ntumu chief), 27, 104

packets, sacra. *See* sacra packets
padouk powder, used in *byeri* initiation, 180
padouk tree, used for red color, 107
pagoda, as relic receptacle, 14, 15
Pahouin (Fang)
derivation of word, 105
French Congo–Pahouin Warrior (Audema), *103*
The Pahouin Venus (Betsi), 29, 102, 104, 178, *179*; cat. no. 33
Pahouin Goddess, 65
warrior, 106, *106*
Pahouin Venus, The (Betsi reliquary sculpture), 29, 102, 104, 178, *179*; cat. no. 33
Pakistani reliquaries, 14–15, *15*
Palais des Beaux-Arts exhibition (1930, Brussels), 76
"palavers," and settlement formation, 41, 61n99
palm oil
reliquary oil derived from, 107, 174
used in *byeri* rites, 180
Pangwe, Die (Tessmann), *70*, 71
Pâris, Alfred, *66*
parrot feathers, as warrior attribute, 109, 132–34, *133*; cat. no. 6
Paths in the Rainforests (Vansina), 29, 33, 34, 40
patrilineal systems, 59n32
and Bangwa, 30n63, 45
and Fang, 23, 104
and *fon*, 18–19, *20*
and Grassfields societies, 45
versus house leaders, 20–21
and Mahongwe, 219
Paudrat, Jean-Louis, 5, 6, 8, 192, 206
on Kota, 224, 244

Paul, Saint, 88, 95n9
Pecile, Attilio, 95n2, 244
pendants, animal-horn, 105, *105*
Perrois, Louis, 102, 111, 168
on *bwete*, 212, 214, 218–19, 223, 254, 284
on Kota, 230, 270, 278, 298
Peter, Saint, 88
photographs, and ancestor veneration, 17
Picabia, Francis, 8, 99, *99*
Picasso, Pablo, 7, *72*, 74, *75*, 99, 200
and Guillaume Apollinaire, 4
and collage, 110
influence of African art on, 3, 5, 6–7, 30n14, 30n18, 74, 110, 119, 224
photograph by, *76*
"Picasso-Braque" exhibition (291 gallery, 1915), 9, *9*
Pierre Matisse Gallery (New York), 272
Pilastre Collection, 65
pipe of leadership, 101, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
pipes (Gabonese), 5, *6*
plinth, reliquary sculpture
functions of, 101
Plotinus (philosopher), 94
pluriarc
used in *buti* ceremonies, 304
used in *bwiti* ceremonies, 50, *53*
poetry, epic
and *evus*, 24
political hierarchy, reflected in reliquary sculpture size, 82
political misconduct, 81–82, 84, 85n38
political systems, in equatorial Africa, 46
ancestor veneration as integral to, 80, 81–82
and *bwiti*, 50, 54
centralized, 18, 20, 33, 34, 39, 40, 45
effect of environment on type of, 39
effect of trade on, 39–40
and Grassfields societies, 45
importance of initiation societies in, 43
modern-day effects on, 84
noncentralized, 20, 34, 39, 40
and rainforest societies, 39–40, 48
Pollock, Adam, 20, 47, 48, 101, 122
Portrait of an Old Lady (Zude), 17, *17*
Portrait of the Monk Hong Bian (unknown), 15–17, *17*
portraits, commemorative
veneration of, in Asia, 15–17, *17*
portraits, royal commemorative
Chief Fosia (Bangwa), 6, 19, 40, 45, 91, 92, 100, 101, 122, *123*; cat. no. 1
tanyi priest (Bangwa), 6, 40, 47, 91, 100, 101, 124, *125*; cat. no. 2
portrait sculptures, 21–22, 45, 58
of "earth priests," 47
of female fertility specialists, 47–48
of *fon*, 19, *20*
functions of, 19, *20*
style differences in, and rank, 48
Portugese traders, 21, 110
pose, in exotic subject documentation, 105, *105*
postcards
images for, from missionary societies, 112, *112*, 113, *113*
used to popularize colonialism, 103, *103*
pregnancy
and fertility specialists, 45, 47–48
portrayed in *lekat* and *mu'po* figurines, 47, 51
See also fertility rites
"primitive," African continent seen as, 34, 72, 272
"primitivism," and Klee's art, 108
"'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" (Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 4–5
"principle of precedence," in belief system, 48, 57
Privatus, Saint, 93, 94
procreation rituals. *See* fertility rites
Protasius, Saint, 12, 13
protective figurines, 47
origins of, 46
placed in family compounds, 46
reliquary sculptures as, 58, 111
Protestant Reformation
destruction of Christian reliquaries during, 94
proto-Bantu speech community
and *bwiti*, 49, 54, 60n64
spread of, 35, 59n8
and **-yambé*, 59n14
"proto-Fang" speech community, 40
proto-Niger-Congo speech community, 43
psychoactive drugs, use of. *See* hallucinogenic substances, and rites
Punu peoples, 11, 55, 74
and environment, *36*, 38
geographical location of, *37*, 38
and *mwiri*, 55
ntsambi pluriarc, *53*
Reliquary Ensemble: Female Half Figure, 112, 286–88, *287*; cat. no. 102
purification rites
beete (Kwele), 22, 111, 297
so (Fang), 23
"pygmy" communities, Batwa, 34, 59n2, 76

Quengueza (Orungu leader), 21

rainforest environment, 35, *36*
Bantu expansion into, 35
belief systems in, 48, 54 (*see also bwiti*)
and climate, 38, *39*
earliest habitation of, 38
peoples of, *37*, 38, 48
political organization in, 39–40, 48
and "refuge" forests, 38
savanna–forest mosaics in, 35
and village alliances, 48
Western misconceptions of, 34
rainmaking ceremonies, and "earth priests," 46
rattles (Gabonese), 5, *6*
Ratton, Charles, 74, 76, 206, 264, 276
and Aristide Courtois, 269, 270, 272
receptacles, relic
and *byeri* rites, 104
function of, 97
with interior cavity (Mbete), 269, *269*; cat. nos. 90–94
and Kota, 260
and relic housing, types of, 269
tree bark used for, *26*, 57, 70, 101, *101*, 109, 128, *129*, 260
See also baskets, relic; *specific peoples*
red (color), symbolism of, 100, 102, 107, 110, 112–13, 117, 270, 274, 318
"regroupment" (population relocation) and French colonialism, 42
reincarnation, belief in (Betsi), 24
relic (term), defined, 11
See also sacra
relic bag, *fon* (Cameroon), 18
relic baskets, 11, 22, 56, *66*, 67, 82, 109, 219
and *usuwu* (Kota), 260
relic receptacles. *See* receptacles, relic
relics, ancestral
ancestor authenticity rendered through, 87–88
Buddhist, 15
Christian, 88–90, 95n8, 95n9
cranium as (*see* skull, as relic)
effect of European trade on, 21
and efficacy, over time, 22, 27, 189, 262
embedded into reliquary sculpture, 102, 110, 118, 136
Islamic, 18
as medicinal catalysts, 22, 302
as *sacra*, 9–10
supernatural powers of, 13, 91, 100, 115
symbols used for (China), 15
veneration of (*see* ancestor veneration)
relic shrines, 18, 19, *20*, 21–22, 51, 79, 80, 82, 100, 268, 314
religion (equatorial Africa). *See* ancestor veneration; belief systems (equatorial Africa)
religion (term), defined, 79
reliquaries, Christian. *See* Christian reliquaries
reliquaries, Asian. *See* Asian reliquaries
"reliquary" art, defined, 11
reliquary ensembles
Betsi, *187*, 187–88, *188*, 188–89, *189*; cat. nos. 38, 39
Mindumu, 248, *249*; cat. no. 75
Ngumba, 128–30, *129*; cat. no. 4
Punu, 286–88, *287*; cat. no. 102
sacra packet in, 112
Sangu-Tsogho, 286, *286*; cat. no. 101
sculptural elements of, offered for sale, 9–10
reliquary sculpture, equatorial African
accessibility of, to uninitiated, 9, 101, *101*, 134
as accompaniment to reliquaries, 97
aesthetics, in, 97–100
as collage art, 110, 242, *243*
color palette, symbolism of, 270
commissions, 10, 12, *12*, 100, 101, 111, 115, 117–18, 302, 314
core principles embodied in, 158, *159*
"desacralizing" of, before selling, 303
destruction of, 30n63, 87–88, 94, 220
functions of, 56, 81, 97, 100, 102, 116, 118, 228
importance of, to *fon*, 93
influence of, on Western art, 5, 6–7, 9, *9*, 74, 93, 97–98, *98*, *99*, 272, 294

miniature-sized, 116, *116*, 140, *141*, 156, *156*, 250, *250*, 316, *317*, 318, 318, *319*; cat. nos. 10, 19, 119, 120
origins of, 43
power embodied in, 57, 58, 91, 94, 97, 104
size of, and political rank, 82
textile (*see* textile reliquary sculpture)
traded to outsiders, 67, 101, 136, 208, 260, 303
See also specific peoples
Riou, Édouard, 108, *108*
rituals
color palette used for, 274
reliquary sculptures, as central to, 22, 100
traditions codified through, 79–80
See also specific types
ritual societies, 50–56
as "politico-religious," 43
See also specific peoples
ritual specialists, 44, 81, 82, 115, 303, 304
Roche, Charles–Vital, 248
Rockefeller, Nelson, 29
rosary, skull motif in, 88, *88*
Rousseau, Henri, 4, 74, 99, *99*
royal ancestors, supernatural powers of, 45
royal courts (Grassfields societies), ancestor veneration in, 45
royal shrine
Bangwa, 19, *20*
Orungu, 21
royal titles, adoption of, for kinship ties, 55
Rubin, William, 5, 7, 74, 224
and "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition, 4–5
Rubinstein, Helena, 276
Rushmore, Mount, 87, *88*
Russell, John, 272

sacra (term), 118
defined, 9
See also relics, ancestral
sacra packets, in reliquary ensembles, 112, *286*, 286–88, *287*
sacrificial rites
purposes of, 80–81, 82
Sainsbury, Robert and Lisa, 7
saints, Christian
and martyrdom, 11, 92
and relic veneration, 11–13, 88–90, 95n7, 100
skulls of, as relics, 88–90
See also Christian reliquaries
Sallée, Pierre, 52
Samkita (trading district), 41
Sanchi. *See* Stupa One (The Great Stupa)
Sangu peoples
and early Western exploration, 63, 67
geographical location of, *37*, 38
nganga (healer), *67*
reliquary sculptures, 11, 112, 113
Sangu-speaking peoples
and *bwiti*, 51
Sangu-Tsogho peoples
Reliquary Ensemble: Head, 112, 113, 286, *286*; cat. no. 101
San Marco (Venice), 11
sarcophagus form, for reliquary
in Christianity, 12, 89, *89*
and nested reliquaries (China), 15
savanna environment, 33, 35, *36*, 38, 55–56
savanna-forest mosaics
early settlements in, 38, 43
location of, 35, *36*
topography of, 38
scarification. *See* cicatrization
Schweitzer, Albert, 72
Sébé Master (carver), 230
secret society (term), ritual societies as, 43
Sekiani speech community, 56
and *bwiti* word origins, 50, 60n68, 61n69
effect of Fang migration on, 41
Selim I (sultan), 18
Senufo peoples, *98*
settlements, African, *37*
effect of trade on, 39, 40
tactics for establishing (Fang), 41
See also migration
Shaké group (Kele peoples), 210, 212, 222
Shakespeare, William, 88
Shamaye peoples, 210
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 222, *222*, 223, *223*; cat. nos. 57, 58
Shannon, Helen, 9
Shattuck, Roger, 4
Sheeler, Charles, 99, *99*
Shiwa peoples, 65
shrines, relic, 19, *20*, 21–22, 51, 79, 80, 82, 100, 314
Si (Supreme Earth Spirit), 46
Sibiti peoples, 73
Siddhartha Gautama, 14, 15
simbi (Kongo earth spirits), 51
Sindara peoples, 55
Singho, Ndutumu (carver), 166
Siroto, Leon, 22, 111, 212, 216, 219, 220, 276
on *beete*, 288–89, 292, 296, 297
Sise peoples, 304
Sixth Synod of Carthage, 12
skull, as Christian motif, 88, *88*
skull, as relic, 18, 19, *20*
ancestor authenticity rendered through, 87–88
and *bwiti*, 51
and *byeri*, *26*, 27, 57, 58, 102
and Christianity, 88–90, *90*
guardians of, 45, 100
in *mungala-mwili* rituals, 56
used for ancestor veneration, 45, 58
skull-house, 19, *20*, 45
skull receptacle. *See* receptacles, relic
slave trade, Atlantic, 40, 55, 61n108, 239
and *bwete*, 279
and diaspora, 29
effect on Bantu ideologies, 40
effect on Fang migration, 29, 41
as "watershed" event, 34
smallpox epidemics, in Gabon, 21
soba nlele (Bembe *muzidi)*, 310
Social Darwinism (theory), 34, 40
societal organization (central Africa), 43, 219
See also clan (social unit); lineage-based systems
Söderberg, Bertil, 310
so society (Fang), 23, 104, 105, *105*
Spanish colonialism, 69
specialists
metalsmiths as, 110, 232
used for rituals, 81
See also fertility specialists
spirit intercessors. *See* intercessors, spirit
spirit "levels" (Niger-Congo beliefs), 43
spirit mediators. *See* mediators, spirit
Sri Lanka, and *dagoba*, 14
"Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" (291 gallery, 1914), *8*, 8–9
Stein, Gertrude, 6, 76
Stephen, Saint, 13
Stéphen-Chauvet, Dr., 76, 189, 306
Stieglitz, Alfred, *8*, 8–9, 74, 99
"Picasso-Braque" exhibition (1915), 9, *9*
Stupa One (The Great Stupa), 14, *14*
stupas, 14, 15
Sudanic regions, and Fang migration, 41
Sui dynasty (China), 15
Supreme Being. *See* Creator (God)
Surrealism, *7*, 276
Swedish missionaries, 73, 113, 115, 260, 318, 320
Sweeney, James Johnson, 206
Swiss missionaries, 24, 68, 72–73, 73

tagne (Bamileke earth priest), 46
Tang dynasty (China), 15, *16*, *17*
tanyi (earth priest)
commemorative portrait (Bangwa), 6, 40, 47, 91, 100, 101, 124, *125*; cat. no. 2
fon as, 47
functions of, 46, 124
teeth (relics), embedded into reliquary sculpture, 102
tege (Teke ancestral figure), 302
Teke *buti*, 112, *112*, 113–15
aesthetic qualities of, 113
bonga (sacred matter) placed in, 115, 302, 303
buttons added to eyes of, 113, 304, *305*
choice of wood for, 302, 304
composition of, 304
procurement of, by collectors, 115
Reliquary Sculpture: Male Figure with Figural Additions, 76, 115, 306, *307*; cat. no. 114
Reliquary Sculpture: Seated Male Figure (various), 115, *302*, 302–3, *303*, 304–6, *305*; cat. nos. 111–113
Reliquary Sculpture: Standing Figure, 115, 308, *309*; cat. no. 115
Teke peoples
Bateke Type from Kinshasa Area (postcard), *112*
and early Western exploration, 67
and ecological environment, *36*, 38
elder, 112, *112*
geographical location of, *37*, 38, *39*
and *ikwii* (shades of the dead), 303, 304
and *mungala*, 55
Ten Commandments, 90

territorial spirits
and *bwiti*, 49, 51, 54
and *byeri*, 57, 58
dwarfs and infants linked with, 47, 51
"earth priest" as translator for, 45
and fertility rituals, 45–46
first-comers linked with, 46, 58
and *mungala-mwili*, 56, 61n94
and *ombwiri*, 55
as spirit "level," 43–44
twins, as living representations of, 46
veneration of (Grassfields societies), 45
Tessmann, Günter, 6, 9, *70*, 71, 95n2
on *byeri*, 130, 134, 154, 164, 176, 206, 208, 300
malan (melan) initiation rite documented by, *26*, *27*
on *ngi* masks, 300
textile reliquary sculpture
muzidi, 310, *311*, 312, *313*, 314, *315*; cat. nos. 116–118
niombo, 316, *317*, 318, *319*, 320, *321*; cat. nos. 119–121
textiles, and trade, 117, 310
Thompson, Robert Farris, 117, 118, 310, 312, 316, 318, 320
Tibet, and ancestor veneration, 17
Tikar peoples, 45–46
Timmermans, Paul, 310
Tio Kingdom, 33, 38, *39*
Topkapi Palace (Istanbul), 18
touraco (bird), 109
Tour du monde (journal), 5, *6*, *65*, 67, 108
trade, 21
and alliances, 42
Bangwa, as "middlemen" in, 40
common ancestry as tool for, 58
effect of banana crops and ironworking on, 48, 110
effect on kingdom formation, 39
effect on political system development, 39–40
and Fang migration, 40, 43, 59n24
and *forest-specialist* (term), 48, 60n53
individual interests versus communal, 44
and Kele-speaking clans, 41, *42*
oath-swearing in, 56, 61n99
organized channels for, 71–72, 236
spread of *ombwiri/mwiri* through, 54–56
use of "palavers" to expand, 41, 61n99
trade goods, displayed on headpieces (Fang), 102, *102*
trade routes
and migration, 21
spread of *bwiti* along, 49
and Tsogho-Kele conflict, 41
trading factories, European
establishment of, 42
tree bark. *See* bark, tree
"tribal" art
influence of, on Western art, 5, 6–7, 74, 93, 97–98, *98*, *99*, 294
Trilles, Henri, *67*, 67–68, 72, 76, 194
True Cross, as relic, 11, 12
Tsogho peoples, 60n67
bwete/bwiti rituals, 49, 50, 51, 54, 56, 60n67, 278–79, 280, 282, 284
conflict wtih Kele-speaking populations, 41–42
geographical location of, *37*, 38
and *mwei/ya-mwei*, 55
and *ombwiri*, 54
origins of, 282
See also Sangu-Tsogho peoples
Tsogho reliquary sculpture, 11, 51, 56, 112–13
Half Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), *32*, 51, 113, 278–79, *279*, 280, *281*, 282, *283*; cat. nos. 96–98
Head from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 113, 284, *284*, 285, *285*; cat. nos. 99, 100
and physiognomy, 51, 112–13
See also Sangu-Tsogho peoples
twins
as living "territorial spirits," 46–47
and *mungala-mwili*, 56
ombwiri rituals, at birth of, 54–55
291 gallery (New York)
"Picasso-Braque" exhibition (1915), 9, *9*
"Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art" (exhibition, 1914), *8*, 8–9
291 (journal), 9
Tzara, Tristan, 294

United States
African art introduced to, 8
and missionaries, 56
Upper Ivindo River, 58

Vansina, Jan, 10, 18, 21, 48
on Bantu political charter, 54
on Fang migration, 140
on "house leader" (Cameroon), 20–21
Paths in the Rainforests, 29, 33, 34, 40
on role of rituals, 80
on Teke, 303, 304, 308
Varnedoe, Kirk, 4–5
Vecsey, Christopher, 84
veneration, ancestor. *See* ancestor veneration
Veneration of the Ancestors (Tessmann), *26*, 27
Vignier, Charles, 7, 30n20
Vili-speaking peoples
and *bwiti*, 49, 50, 54
and copper trade, 236
and *ombwiri/mwiri*, 54, 55
Virgin and Child
from Auvergne (12th century), 92, *93*, 94
from Notre-Dame du Puy (11th century), 94
Vivien, Saint, 92
Vlaminck, Maurice de, 3, 4, *4*, 74, 119, 264
influence of African art on, 162–63
Völkerkundesammlung der Hansestadt Lübeck, 71, 164
"Voyages dans l'Ouest Africain" (Pierre de Brazza), 108, *108*, 109, 244, 248

Wandji peoples, 74
Warnod, André, 5, 196
warrior imagery (Fang), 41, *103*, 104, *105*, *106*, 109
Wars of Religion (France), 94
water imagery, ancestral realm and, 110
"water spirits," albinos as, 51
wealth, indicators of
metals, 226, 230
textiles, 117
weapons
as leadership attribute, 82, 110–11, 230
portrayed in reliquary sculpture, 111
Wendi (emperor), 15
West Africa, climate shifts in
and Bantu expansion, 35
"West African mission" (Brazza exploration), 65–67
Western art, influence of African art on, 5, 6–7, 74, 93, 97–98, *98*, *99*, 272, 294
white (color), symbolism of, 107, 112, 113, 270, 274, 300
Wills, Gary, 11
Wilson, J. Leighton, 56
"witchcraft," 34, 43
and antiwitchcraft movement (1940s), 220
and Bangwa, 40
byeri seen as, by West, 57
described, 44
"good" ancestors not subject to, 80
and *ikwii*, 304
and *ngi*, 27, 300
and *ombwiri*, 55
"women of god" (Bangwa), 47–48
woodland savanna (environment), 35, *36*, 43
Wu (empress), 15
Wumbu or Ndassa peoples
Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble (various), 110, 232, *232*, 233, *233*, 242, *243*; cat. nos. 64, 65, 71
Wumbu peoples, 55, *73*, 73–74

xylophones, used in *byeri* ritual, *26*, 27–28

Yaka peoples
and *bwiti*, 49, 51–54
*-*yambé* (Bantu, "first spirit"), 38
ya-mwei (Coastlands politico-religious association), 50, 55
Yang family, imperial (China), 15
Yrieix, Saint, *86*, 87, 91, 92, 94

Zayas, Marius de, 8, *8*, 9, 98, 99
Zenker, Georg, 6, *69*, 69–71, 128–30, 133–34
Fang-Ngumba reliquary figures, 10, *10*, 128, 133, 136
Zude (artist), *17*

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