



Container for snuff or 'medicine'

On display

Title/Description: Container for snuff or 'medicine'

Born: 1850 - 1899

Object Type: Vessel

Materials: Brass, Wood

Measurements: h. 121 x w. 36 x d. 40 mm

Accession Number: 250

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late

Production Place: Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania

Cultural Group: Makonde

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The Makonda group of peoples live on either side of the Ruvuma river which divided Mozambique from Tanzania. Tanzania was a German colony till after World War I, so it is not surprising that a German ethnographer should even today be one of our best sources of information on the Makonda. Karl Weule (1908) illustrates several pieces similar to this one, and describes them as boxes for snuff or medicine, worn attached to a belt. While the container was usually made from a piece of bamboo or reed, Weule lists 'even a European cartridge- case' among the materials used. The lid was normally of wood, ornamentally carved in different shapes including animals and human torsos.

The cartridge-case is an 11.5mm center-fire type of Austrian or German make. It bears the monogram of the manufacturer, the letters FAB and the date 1887. Ammunition of this type was used for the German Mauer rifles of this period.

The portrayal of face and body scarification by relief carving is surely on account of the small scale. On masks and larger figures, scarification is rendered in applied strips of black beeswax, subsequently by black paint, and later still by pyrogravure or incisions. Some Makonda carvings lack scarification but retain the lip-plug which can be seen here in the protruding upper lip. The little female torso is beautifully carved with fine attention to detail, even to five perforations in each ear rim, some with the ear-pegs still in place.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 215.

Exhibitions

'Power Plants: Intoxicants, Stimulants and Narcotics', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 14/09/2024-02/02/2025

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1964.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
