



Seated figure of a chieftainess

On display

Title/Description: Seated figure of a chieftainess

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 375 x w. 135 x d. 145 mm

Accession Number: 253

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Yombe

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

In addition to maternity groups (*phemba*) and *nkisi*, the Yombe carved ancestor figures. Here we have the ancestor figure of a chieftainess. The patterned skull cap is the mark of a chief after investiture; the seat and the staff of office reinforce this image. The European-looking tumbler held in the left hand could be for palm-wine libations to ancestors. Since liquor was imported by Europeans during the nineteenth century, bottles and glasses became status symbols; the glass here may be yet another sign of a chief.

The pose is reminiscent of English Toby jugs which were made from about 1770, and could have reached the Kongo soon after. In pre-colonial times, Kongo chiefs used to drink their palm-wine out of human skulls to impress their subjects with their powers over life and death. Since the heads of Toby jugs came off to form drinking cups, and they represent Europeans, they were appropriate prestige objects for chiefs, and some are still to be found on Kongo chiefs' graves. While there are actual copies of toby jugs in wood and stone, in general the idiom is translated into figures like this, expressive of the intimidating power of an ancestral chief.

The back and front of the body are covered with elaborate scarifications to enhance female beauty. The lengthy process started at about ten years of age and was completed when the woman was adult and marriageable. The lozenge and chevron patterns echo those used in basketry and textiles. The cord with a bead or amulet tied tightly across the top of the breasts is often found on female figure carvings and seems to be intended to make the breasts project. Tooth-chipping (now discontinued) on men and women was done for aesthetic reasons and was also a mark of community identity.

The figure is made of light-coloured wood, now darkened, with pyrogravure features; traces of yellow ochre and white kaolin paint remain. An ancestor figure kept at home might get spat over with the saliva produced by chewing kaolin nuts, thereby reinforcing the statue's vitality. Sometimes palm oil or palm wine was used as an offering to the figure, and so by extension to the ancestral spirits. Brass nails constitute further offerings to the ancestor and add to the carving's decorative impact.

Margret 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. 182.

Exhibitions

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

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Henri A. Kamer in 1968.

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