



Ancestor figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Ancestor figure

Born: 1900 - 1999

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Glass, Wood

Measurements: h. 210 x w. 60 x d. 62 mm

Accession Number: 255

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Bembe

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Ancestor figures of the western Bembe of the Lower River of Congo (as distinct from the Bembe just west of Lake Tanganyika) form one of the most individual groups in African art. They are small, and may constitute an actual representation of an ancestor, since they are shown holding an object evocative of the person concerned. In this case the man is holding a flintlock rifle and a large knife, showing that he was a good hunter and warrior.

The figures have the generic name *mukuya*, and have an anal cavity through which the diviner introduces the ancestral spirit (*mukuya*) which only remains within the statue for as long as it stays with its original family. The figures form a link between man and the Creator Nzambi: their role is to protect the lineage and punish infringements of community custom (Cornet, 1978: 84-7). Bembe figures have eyes typically made of chips of bone or china or, as here, with glass beads; the detailed rendering of cicatrises on the abdomen adds to the realistic effect. They are cared for and rubbed with palm oil, so most have a lustrous dark patina.

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. 187.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1970.

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