



Drinking cup with figure

On display

Title/Description: Drinking cup with figure

Born: 1900 - 1950

Object Type: Cup

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 146 x w. 68 x d. 30 mm

Accession Number: 256

Historic Period: 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The form of cup for the ceremonial drinking of palm wine has here an addition in the form of a bipod figure with a rather sheep-like animal head. The cavity is not divided, and it would be impossible to drink from one end only. Patina occurs where one would expect if the cup were held with the head towards the drinker; the heavy, typically Yaka legs would allow this cup to be set down without tipping over.

Such cups pass by inheritance within the lineage. Bourgeois (1984:56) writes: 'A recitation of previous owners typically details the presentation of this vessel at the decline or deathbed of its owner to his successor, together with admonitions on how lineage members are to be treated.' a fine small cup like this might have been made for a chief, since it was thought vulgar to use a large cup. A chief might drink thirty to forty small cups of palm wine, but would lose dignity if he were to use a larger cup.

It is tempting to speculate whether a spirit of fantasy caused this cup to be carved with head and legs, or whether some magical apotropaic purpose was intended.

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. 190.

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 1972.

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