



Figure

On display

Title/Description: Figure

Born: 1850 c. - 1950 c.

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Bronze, Elephant ivory

Measurements: h. 220 x w. 35 x d. 65 mm

Accession Number: 535

Historic Period: 19th century, 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Tetela

In all probability, this small ivory figure, its bottom ending in a ring base, was made to go on top of a gourd filled with medicine. Such gourds were endowed with magical power once they were filled with medicine, assembled and compounded with proper ritual by the witch-doctor (diviner, *nganga*) with the purpose of bringing good luck and averting misfortune.

The cavity in the head of this figure had medicine in it, and in addition four brass cones on stalks, a ferrule-like brass object filled with medicine and a small barbed arrowhead have been stuck into the hole. If these six items are extra to the original charge of medicine, it is tempting to see them as six subsequent invocations or thanksgivings to the power within the gourd and its figure.

Since these figures are generally made of wood, it is possible that this one is connected with elephants and ivory in some way, and might have been part of the equipment of an elephant-hunters' guild. Such guilds existed in most central African tribes wherever there was elephant country: initiation rituals, secret languages and freemasonry-type rules of brother hood were usual features. Within such a context, the gourd and figure would have been implored to favour a successful outcome to an elephant hunt, and offerings would be made to it, whether in the form of an iron arrowhead, a brass nail or palm oil, which last has darkened the ivory with a reddish tinge and caused verdigris to form on the brass. Since a suspension hole is pierced below the head, the whole might have been hung up in a hut.

It could well be that this figure is unique. There can be no doubt of its aura of authenticity and power, wherever its origin: the nails suggest somewhere not too far from the Songye, such as the Tetela, who live to the north of them.

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. 207.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Merton D. Simpson, New York in 1974.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1989.
