



Female figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Female figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 803 x w. 154 x d. 162 mm

Accession Number: 592

Historic Period: Late 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Songye

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1974

The Songye, a Luba-related group, are found in the Cabinda region of Kasai province, roughly between the Sankuru and Lomami rivers. They produce striking masks for the Kifwebe society derived from the Luba, and power figures (*bwanga*) pulsing with magical force (Cornet, 1978).

Most Songye *bwanga*, which are often ancestor figures charged with extra medicine to strengthen their powers, are male. The arms are usually bent at the elbow, as here, and the hands placed either side of the swollen belly. The 'figure of eight' mouth is a hallmark of Songye figures and masks; male figures have a square-cut chin suggestive of a beard. Cavities for medicine in the belly are often sealed with a small sheet of copper or skin: those in the crown of the head usually have horns, nails or feathers stuck into them, while additional medicine or offerings may be attached in snakeskin neckrings, gourds, strings of beads, raphia cloth or skin strips, while head and body are often garnished with strips of copper and brass-headed nails (Cornet, 1978).

This figure, denuded of all medical material, is full of restraint and dignity: it is easy to imagine her as a venerable ancestor. The wood is hard and heavy, the feet have been attacked by termites. The sightless eyes may have been of cowrie shell, copper or brass; the long neck surely had strings of glass beads and the rest of the body would have been apparelled in a manner befitting her obvious status.

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. 205.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Kamer & Cie S. A., Paris in 1974 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
