



Wooden palm wine cup

On display**Title/Description:** Wooden palm wine cup**Object Type:** Cup**Materials:** Wood**Measurements:** h. 190 x w. 100 x d. 150 mm**Accession Number:** 1086**Historic Period:** 19th century**Production Place:** Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo**Cultural Group:** Ba Kuba**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1992

The Kuba people inhabit the central Kasai area of the Democratic Republic of Congo, incorporating nineteen ethnic groups of diverse origin, living under the authority of the king, from the ruling Bushoong group. The Kingdom reached its apex in the years 1870-90, gaining much of its wealth from exported goods, such as ivory, raffia, camwood and other local arts. The present Bushoong dynasty was established in the seventeenth century, and contemporary independent chiefdoms continue to recognise the authority of the Bushoong king.

Artistic concern was a vital concern in Kuba society especially in relation to royalty and court members. In fact, the nineteenth century black missionary, William Sheppard, was so struck by their quality of life, he suggested a link with Pharonic Egypt. (Vansina, 1978) The emergence of patrician officials in the eighteenth century was a crucial development and a major impetus for artistic production. One important art form, identified with competition between titled court members, was carved palm-wine drinking cups. By the 1880s, half of all Bushoong men held titles, and as such competition for influence was fierce. Kuba individuals signified their social status by distributing large quantities of palm-wine to friends and associates in order to attract a following. Expression was manifested in these essentially commonplace objects, transforming them into objects of great beauty.

Myths among the Kuba acknowledge that palm-wine is drunk only by men although it is furtively drunk by women. This may indicate why most appear to be carved in the form of a male head, suggesting usage. Inebriated women are not well looked upon, while inebriated men appear interestingly amusing. It is said that palm-wine both 'kills and revives' (Vansina, 1954: 902). Drinking is a social activity among the Kuba and drinking alone is condemned.

This particular example is carved from an unspecified wood and interestingly has a handle, which is uncharacteristic of many Kuba palm-wine cups. The three main characteristics of Kuba palm-wine cups include eyes in the shape of coffee beans, a space between the mouth and nose and a receding forehead. However, the shape of the eyes is more indicative of cowrie shells, which are treasured

objects in Africa and used to decorate and embellish high status objects and attire. The carving on this cup shows an elaborate and incised hair style with scarification marks adjacent to the ears. Interestingly, the left ear is set much further back than the right, with evidence of wear, which suggests continued usage.

The handle is situated at the back of the head, and emerges from the base of the cup to the middle of the head. This is carved in the shape of a person, with a similar face to that of the cup itself. Its slim body shows the right arm flexed across the chest and the left flexed across the stomach. There is, again, evidence of wear on the handle, with the nose being completely worn away. Together with evidence of wear on the nose on the front of the cup and a smoothness of the rim, this all suggests the cup was certainly used, although it is uncertain when and if palm wine was the preferred choice.

Helen Coleman

Entry written for VADs website (www.vads.ac.uk)

Exhibitions

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

Provenance

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