



Ceremonial staff

On display

Title/Description: Ceremonial staff

Born: 1850 - 1899

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Brass, Fibre, Iron, Shell, Wood

Measurements: h. 1465 x w. 80 x d. 90 mm

Accession Number: 266

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Luba-Hemba

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Growing up in northern Nigeria, I have seen what people purported to be charms, especially those worn by hunting parties or wrestlers. Whilst I cannot verify the efficacy of any such charms, as far as I could see, the very fear of it, or the respect accorded to it by others, was evidence, if not outright proof, of its efficacy.

On the figure's belly are raised incisions, which are not just made on Luba women, but throughout the large regions of Central Africa. Like many elements of Luba art and thought, the patterns and meanings of scarification have more than one possible meaning. Marks worn by the king's first wife were often replicated by Luba commoners emulating royal, high fashion.

Mary Nooter Roberts quotes a Luba high chief as saying, "all the women had scarification, and spirits respond above all to women" [1]. The ringed beads of varying shapes and colours on the figure's body "constitute a kind of alphabet that articulates a vocabulary for Luba royalty." [2] However, their uses are diverse. They accentuate sensuality especially when strung around the waist and body of a nude female figure. On a diviner's body, the beads bolster her defences and support when she is in the grips of a possessing spirit. [3] Put another way, the beads, together with the web of scars and amulets, are all essential apparatus when humans encounter the spiritual world of Luba beliefs. According to art historian Robert Farris Thompson, an upright figure in Congo ritual world is an "ethical instrument" which suggests "spiritual potential and reactivity." [4]

In his comprehensive survey of African ceremonial masks, *Medusa: The African Sculpture of Enchantment*, Boris Wastiau succinctly identified the common denominators in the use of scars as purely decorative ("reinforces the skin in public for show"), a private pleasure ("for love making"), protection from harm ("against witchcraft") and for warfare ("against enemies") [5]

The eyes on the Luba-Hemba figure are fitted with cowrie shells whose lashes are finely cut, zig zag shapes, the lids of which are smooth and shaven. One function of the eerie, white colour and zig zags is that they are aposematic: eye spots that serve as a "warning signal" [6], which adds a fear factor to the Hemba figure of the sceptre. The bottom part is of wrought iron which plays a crucial role in

Congo, not least because the first king is believed to have been a smith. [7]

Sabo Kpade, April 2023

[1] Roberts, Mary Nooter. "The King Is a Woman: Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts." *African Arts* 46, no. 3 (2013): 73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307397>.

[2] Roberts, Mary Nooter. "The Naming Game: Ideologies of Luba Artistic Identity." *African Arts* 31, no. 4 (1998): 31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337649>.

[3] Nooter Roberts, 1998: 33.

[4] Cited by Wastiau, 2008: 121.

[5] Wastiau, 2019: 103.

[6] Meadows, 1993: 236.

[7] Herbert: 1984, 34.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

The Luba people of south-east Democratic Republic of Congo are one of its largest cultural groups, comprising a number of related people who have combined under a paramount chief (*mulopwe*) from the sixteenth century onwards. The empire expanded considerably, causing great population shifts, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After 1885 the empire began to break up; the colonial period followed shortly after, 'freezing' group locations. Much research is needed to unravel Luba traditions and history: analysis of the differing art styles within the Luba orbit should illuminate the historical enquiries.

The Luba-Hemba subdivision live in the eastern part of the territory, east of the Lualaba river, in the area that nineteenth century explorers called Urua. Luba sculpture is in the top rank of art from Africa, and the Luba-Hemba substyle is perhaps its supreme expression. This chief's staff (*kafunda ya kutembele*), surmounted by an elaborately attired standing female figure (identifiable as Hemba by the cruciform coiffure) depicts a female ancestor, perhaps a founding mother of the group, and consequently most appropriate to a royal sceptre. Such sceptres symbolise formal leadership among the Luba; they serve to identify a chief or his spokesman: they were used to emphasise points of judgment or validate important parts of a message and to stress their binding nature. One of the chief's wives kept them in her charge.

The wooden part of the staff, comprising figure and hand-grip, is attached to a tanged iron spike over three foot long, enabling it to be driven into the ground beside the chief as he sat in audience among his councillors. The various and numerous bead ornaments, spiked and domed brass nails and cowrie shell eyes give this figure a great feeling of tradition and authority; the belly scarifications reinforce the cultural identity.

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. 203.

Many African chiefs and dignitaries possess elaborately carved staffs. Those of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Luba chiefs are famed for their exquisite anthropomorphic figures of blackened and oiled wood. Termed kibango, they were hereditary emblems of authority passed down from generation to generation. This transfer, together with regular ritual use, accounts for the extraordinary patinas that long appealed to collectors. This beautifully balanced piece is recorded as having belonged to Henri Pareyn (1869-1928), a pioneering Belgian collector and dealer who acquired objects at Antwerp docks from colonials returning from the Congo. Luckily, the successive owners of this great art work were never tempted to remove the beadwork and cloth that adorn the carving, as so often was the case before it was understood that they were as important as the carving itself. Beads, cowry shells and cloth were indicators of wealth and conveyed symbolic meanings.

Kibango staffs were used for the transmission of power at chiefs' investiture ceremonies and were placed beside the royal throne when the chief officiated, the long iron spike being driven into the ground. It is also reported that kibango staffs served to encode biographical and historical information about the lineage of the chief.

Ever since I became a student of African art, Luba carvings were in my eyes the testimonies to one of the most admirable traditions of the continent, and to have such a refined piece as this one in the Sainsbury Centre gallery when I was a student was a daily treat.

—
Boris Wastiau, Director, Ethnographic Museum of Geneva

Further Reading

Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: University Press, 1986.

Gell, Alfred. *The Art of Anthropology: Essay and Diagrams*. New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 1999.

Roberts, Mary Nooter. "The King Is a Woman: Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts." *African Arts* 46, no. 3 (2013): 68-81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307397>.

Roberts, Mary Nooter. "The Naming Game: Ideologies of Luba Artistic Identity." *African Arts* 31, no. 4 (1998): 56-92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337649>.

Meadows, Dwayne W. "Morphological Variation in Eyespots of the Four-eye Butterflyfish (*Chaetodon Capistratus*): Implications for Eyespot Function." *Copeia* 1993, no. 1 (1993): 235-40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1446319>.

Steiner, Christopher B. *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge: University Press, 1994.

Wastiau, Boris. *Medusa : The African Sculpture of Enchantment*. [Milan] Genève London: 5 Continents; Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, 2008.

Provenance

Formerly in the Pareyn Collection, Antwerp.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1953.

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