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Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi)

Author(s): Kathleen Bickford Berzock

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Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi)

Early/mid-nineteenth century

Republic of Congo, Vili-Kongo

Wood, metal, glass, fiber, cowrie shell, bone, leather, gourd, and feather; h. 72 cm (28 1/3 in.)

ADA TURNBULL HERDLE ENDOWMENT, 1998.502



The beautifully portrayed realism of this figure's face—an expressive mouth, softly outlined lips, and glass-covered eyes with painted pupils—transcends the violence implied by the nails and blades that are driven into its body and the chain and twine that enwrap it. The figure was made to contain an otherworldly force from the land of the dead and to harness it for human good. Such objects are known as *minkisi* (singular, *nkisi*), a word for which there is no direct translation, although one common term for them, “power objects,” suggests the potency with which they were imbued by their makers and users. More specifically, the figure's assertive pose, with hands to waist and chest thrust forward, indicates that it is a type of *nkisi* called *nkondi*, meaning hunter. *Nkondi* specialized in the supernatural hunting down and punishing of wrongdoers.¹

Sculpturally, the work skillfully weds figural representation with layers of additive material. Empowering medicines are packed in resin on the figure's head and in a projecting box sealed by a mirror on its abdomen. In the words of Kavuna Simon, a Kongolese man writing in the early twentieth century, such medicines were composed of “earths, ashes, herbs, and leaves, and of relics of the dead.”² The iron chain, cowrie shells, bone, and small cal-

abashes that hang from the figure may have enhanced its overall efficacy or may instead refer to a specific problem that its power was called on to resolve. The nails and blades that are driven into its abdomen, shoulders, and arms are not medicine. They represent the many problems that have been addressed through the figure's auspices. The power that resided in the figure was invoked each time one was pounded into it, a violent provocation and powerful metaphor for the retribution being sought.

KATHLEEN BICKFORD BERZOCK



Notes

The Miracles of Mary, pp. 12–13.

1. See Getatchew Haile, “The Mariology of Emperor Zār’a Ya’eqob of Ethiopia,” *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 242 (Rome, 1992), pp. 1–2; and Marilyn E. Heldman, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Fré Seyon: A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage, and Spirituality*, *Orientalia biblica et Christiana* 6 (Wiesbaden, Germany, 1994), pp. 165–68.

2. For a lengthy discussion of this imagery, see Stanislaw Chojnacki, “The ‘Kwer’ata Re’esu’: Its Iconography and Significance,” *Annali dell’ Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 45 (Naples, 1985).

3. See Marilyn E. Heldman, “The Late Solomonic Period, 1540–1769,” in idem, *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, exh. cat. (New Haven, 1993), p. 248.

Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), pp. 14–15.

1. See Wyatt MacGaffey, “The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi,” in Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael D. Harris, *Astonishment and Power*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C., 1993), p. 76. *Nkisi Nkondi* and other types of figural *minkisi* are no longer made, although the ideas that informed them are still an important part of Kongo belief (p. 29).

2. Quoted in MacGaffey (note 1).

Maternity Figure, pp. 16–17.

1. According to Constantine Petridis, some Luluwa “read sadness and bitterness” in the figure’s face; see “Of Mothers and Sorcerers: A Luluwa Maternity Figure,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 23, 2 (1997), p. 193.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 192–93; the figure is literally a container, with two small holes at the top and back of the figure’s head for the insertion of medicine.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

Floral Medallions and Bouquets, pp. 18–19.

1. For more on textiles and the Silk Road, see James C. Y. Watt and Anne E. Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles*, exh. cat. (New York, 1997), esp. Morris Rossabi, “The Silk Trade in China and Central Asia,” pp. 7–10, and idem., “Early Exchanges: Silks from the 8th through the 11th Century,” pp. 21–26; idem., “Behind the Silk Screen: Movements of Weavers in Asia, Seventh to Fourteenth Centuries,” *Orientalia* 29, 3 (Mar. 1998), pp. 84–85; and Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China, Gansu, and Ningxia Provinces, 4th–7th Century*, exh. cat. (New York, 2001), esp. Judith A. Lerner, “The Merchant Empire of the Sogdians,” pp. 220–29, and Boris I. Marshak, “The Sogdians in Their Homeland,” pp. 231–37.

2. See Jessica Rawson, “The Ornament on Chinese Silver of the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–906),” *British Museum Occasional Papers* 40 (London, 1982), esp. pp. 8–10, 16–18; Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, *The Grand Exhibition of Silk Road Civilizations*, exh. cat. (Nara, Japan, 1988), vol. 3, cat. nos. 121–26; Kaneo Matsumoto, *Shosoin Textiles* (Kyoto, 1993); and Marshak (note 1), p. 237, fig. 8.

3. This fragment was published in Watt and Wardwell (note 1), cat. no. 6. Two additional fragments are known to these authors: Feng Zhao, *Treasures in Silk* (Hangzhou, 1999), cat. no. 04.04 (private collection); and Abegg Collection, Bern, Switzerland (inventory no. 4903), in Catherine Depierreaz, *Kostbarkeiten der Abegg-Stiftung* (Riggisberg, Switzerland, 2003), pp. 50–51. Zhao described this technique (also called *samite*) as Central Asian in origin (p. 340).

4. See Zhao (note 3), p. 136. To our knowledge, silk fabrics constructed in this technique have not yet been published among the extraordinary textiles found in this repository, which is datable to a ritual offering of A.D. 874. For the Famensi finds, see Ma Zhongyi et al., *Famensi* (Beijing, 1990).

Two Bands and Four Fragments from an Orphrey Band, pp. 20–21.

1. For information on related pieces, see Ruth Grönwoldt, “Florentiner Stickereien in den Inventaren des Herzogs von Berry und der Herzöge von Burgund,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 10, 1 (May 1961), pp. 33–58; idem., “A Florentine Fourteenth-Century Orphrey in the Toledo Museum of Art,” *Apollo* 89,

87 (May 1969), pp. 350–55; Laurence B. Kanter et al., *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence, 1300–1450*, exh. cat. (New York, 1994); Mario Salmi, “Il Paliotto de Manresa e l’ ‘Opus Florentinum,’” *Bollettino d’arte* 10, 9 (Mar. 1931), pp. 385–406; David van Fossen, “A Fourteenth-Century Embroidered Florentine Antependium,” *Art Bulletin* 50, 2 (June 1968), pp. 141–52; and Anne E. Wardwell, “A Rare Florentine Embroidery of the Fourteenth Century,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 66, 9 (Dec. 1979), pp. 322–33.

Border, pp. 22–23.

1. For a discussion of lacis and lace, see Santina M. Levey, *Lace: A History* (London, 1983), and the entry on lacis by Christa C. Mayer Thurman in *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte* (Munich, 1987).

Valance, pp. 24–25.

1. On English needlework, see George Wingfield Digby, *Elizabethan Embroidery* (London, 1963); Yvonne Hackenbroch, *English and Other Needlework, Tapestries, and Textiles in the Irwin Untermyer Collection* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Christa Charlotte Mayer, *Masterpieces of Western Textiles from The Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago, 1969); and Marie Schuette and Sigrid Müller-Christensen, *A Pictorial History of Embroidery*, trans. Donald King (New York, 1964).

2. See London, Phillips Son and Neale, *The Margaret Simeon Collection of Needlework, Lace, Costume, and Fans*, sale cat. (Sept. 9, 1992, lot no. 121).

Bedcover, pp. 26–27.

1. For information on Indian textiles, see John Irwin and Margaret Hall, *Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics*, *Historic Textiles of India at the Calico Museum*, Ahmedabad 1 (Ahmedabad, India, 1971).

2. For a comparable acquisition and information on Marot, see Susan Anderson Hay, “Department of Costume and Textiles (recent acquisitions),” *Rhode Island School of Design Museum Notes* 76, 1 (Oct. 1989), pp. 14–21.

3. Information on Jean Berain I can be found in Adolphe Hullebroeck, *Toussaint Du Breuil, Jean Berain, Claude Audran, Nicolas Bertin, Jean Le Prince* (Paris/Leige, 1936); Gervase Jackson-Stops, “Daniel Marot and the Court Style of William and Mary,” *Antiques* 134, 6 (Dec. 1988) pp. 1321–31; and Jérôme de La Gorce, “Berain decoreur d’un regne,” *Connaissance des Artes* 418 (Dec. 1986), pp. 106–109. For additional treatment of Marot, see Koen Ottenheim, Willem Terlouw, and Rob van Zoest, *Daniel Marot: Vormgever van een deijtig bestaan* (Zutphen, The Netherlands, 1988).

Long Shawl, pp. 28–29.

1. For a discussion of the history of shawls, see Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England, 1986); Matthew Blair, *The Paisley Shawl and the Men Who Produced It* (Paisley, Scotland, 1904); Pamela Clabburn, *The Norwich Shawl*, exh. cat. (London, 1995); John Irwin, *Shawls: A Study in Indo-European Influence* (London, 1955); Monique Lévi-Strauss, *The Cashmere Shawl* (New York, 1986); and Hilary Young, *Designs for Shawls* (New York, 1988).

Two-Sided Bedcover, pp. 30–31.

1. See John Beardsley et al., *Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, exh. cat. (Atlanta, 2002), and idem., *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*, exh. cat. (Atlanta/Houston 2002).

Hanging entitled Found, pp. 32–33.

1. Anne Wilson, with A. B. Forster, *Anne Wilson: Voices*, exh. cat. (Ferndale, Mich., 1998). See also Eleanor Heartney, “Anne Wilson at Revolution,” *Art in America* 87, 3 (Mar. 1999), pp. 114–15.

2. Quoted from a brief, untitled statement by the artist; files of the Department of Textiles, The Art Institute of Chicago.