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The Recently Acquired Kongo Mangaaka Power Figure

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The Kongo power figure at the entrance of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing's African galleries in the Metropolitan Museum cannot fail to elicit a visceral reaction (Figure 1). Its commanding presence assaults the viewer and demands a response. This seminal masterpiece of African sculpture eloquently transcends its original milieu to inspire wonder as it did on the coast of western Central Africa more than a century ago. Rarely have cultural artifacts pulled out of context so evoked the sensations of awe and intimidation in a museum context. For a fuller and more nuanced appreciation of the significance of this sculptural achievement, however, it is essential to understand the challenge the commission presented for its creator, the role such a figure played in Kongo society, and the work's place within the broader corpus of related examples.

KONGO POWER IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to situate this work in a meaningful context, we must first consider the cultural ideal it references and the tumultuous and cataclysmic social dynamic to which it responded. Kongo culture is centered in southwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo and extends north and south of the Congo River as well as into adjacent regions of Congo (Brazzaville), Cabinda, and Angola. The recorded history of this region of western Central Africa provided by outside accounts extends back to the arrival of the Portuguese along the coast in 1480. A century earlier, the Kingdom of Kongo, a loosely confederated state based on the region's iron industry, had established its capital at Mbanza Kongo in northern Angola.¹ The kingdom was situated within easy trading distance of sources of copper, iron, and salt, and the tribute system overseen by its leaders stimulated and controlled trade networks that extended from the Atlantic coast into the interior as far east as the Kwango River.

Initially, the alliance with Portugal (developed by the Portuguese in their quest to seek new sources of precious metals) contributed to the radical expansion of these arteries of exchange and the greater centralization and

consolidation of the Kongo rulers' power. To cement their ties and fortify their position, the kings of Kongo converted to Christianity in the sixteenth century.² Consequently, Christianity was adapted as a royal cult that set the nobility apart from the rest of the population. Crucifixes cast in brass by Kongo smiths are tangible evidence of this political ideology (Figure 2). Such artifacts were emblems of their owners' elite status and membership in an influential trading association.³ In this context Christ was identified with great healers and mediators and rendered with African features.⁴ The cross was similarly correlated with regional symbols that mapped the journey between this world and the next.⁵

By the 1550s the development of the transatlantic slave trade was placing great pressures on the region, and slaving interests increasingly dominated. The historian Joseph Miller has chronicled the trade's ineluctable and far-ranging destructive impact:

The revolutionary sequence of political change that recurred in the expanding Atlantic zone caused the slaving frontier to roll eastward like a wave. Behind the wave, merchant princes accumulated slaves from disturbed areas. They also took others in tribute from their own population by less overtly violent means. The process started on the coast in the mid-sixteenth century, crossed the Kwango and Upper Kwanza in the eighteenth century, and reached the innermost parts of Central Africa in the late nineteenth century.⁶

These social pressures contributed to the collapse of the Kongo kingdom by the end of the seventeenth century and an increasing balkanization of the region.

The Kongo peoples continued to play a major role as middlemen in trade networks that carried slaves and ivory from the interior to the Loango coast during the nineteenth century. The period in which the Metropolitan's great power figure was created coincided with the abolition of the slave trade to the Americas in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite this international ban, established systems of slaving stayed



in place to generate labor for the colonial exploitation of natural resources on behalf of Portuguese and Belgian interests that followed. By that point the population had already suffered incalculable trauma and the landscape had been ravaged by ecological depredation. Against this backdrop of generations of turmoil and instability, coastal communities channeled their aspirations for security and protection into an art form that was a spectacular manifestation of divine power charged with imposing social order and justice.

KONGO POWER FIGURES

One of the major genres identified with African art, Central African power figures belong to a broad category of ritual instruments known in Kongo society as *minkisi* (singular *nkisi*). One of the earliest descriptions of *minkisi* is provided by the seventeenth-century Dutch geographer Olfert Dapper.⁷ During the nineteenth century, thousands of *minkisi* collected along the coast entered Europe's newly founded ethnographic collections. They were also targeted for destruction by missionaries as pagan idols and confiscated by colonial authorities as agents of resistance; by the first quarter of the twentieth century, their creation was effectively suppressed, and many were even burned in bonfires. The generic characterization of such artifacts as "fetishes" by European sources has denied their roles as carefully calibrated diagnostic tools used by ritual specialists for investigating antisocial acts and as catalysts for divine intervention.

The Kongo art specialist Robert Farris Thompson has broadly described *minkisi* as sacred medicines from God.⁸ The historian of Kongo religion Wyatt MacGaffey has emphasized the continuity between the earliest definitions of *minkisi* from sources such as Dapper and those provided by twentieth-century Kongo authorities in the region. Both identify spiritual forces that control particular activities or functions and the material creation of a receptacle filled with medicinal matter through which those powers may be invoked.⁹ The *nganga*, or specialist who ministers the power of an *nkisi* to others, is an individual who may combine the roles of healer, diviner, and adjudicator.¹⁰ He composes the *nkisi's bilongo*, or activating medicines, gathered within a customized receptacle or affixed to its exterior.

The spectrum of concerns addressed by *minkisi* was far ranging, and each ritual instrument was broadly classified

1. *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka*. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo; second half of 19th century. Wood, paint, metal, resin, ceramic; H. 46½ in. (118 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Laura and James J. Ross, Daniel and Marian Malcolm, Robert T. Wall, Jeffrey B. Soref, Sidney and Bernice Clyman, and Steven M. Kossak Gifts, 2008 (2008.30)

as an *nkisi* of the “above” or “below,” reflecting its association with the domain of either the sky or the earth and water.¹¹ Component ingredients identified with specific attributes were chosen to attract the force that would most effectively address specific kinds of problems confronted by a given specialist’s clientele. All *minkisi* included spiritually imbued matter such as earth drawn from burial sites or white clay obtained from riverbeds, associated with the ancestral realm.¹² Additional elements were selected for their capacity to guide a particular *nkisi*’s power.¹³ *Minkisi* of the “below” were concerned with women’s affairs and healing.¹⁴ Those of the “above” were devoted to governance and maintenance of public order. Consequently, the latter were deployed in the investiture of chiefs, in the implementation of measures to achieve consensus between rival parties, and in the identification and pursuit of those responsible for disruptive criminal acts. Many of the *minkisi* devoted to these ends also served as deterrents to antisocial behavior and were categorized as *minkondi* (sing. *nkondi*). The more functions that were attributed to an *nkisi*, the greater was the importance that it was accorded.¹⁵

MANGAACA—THE ENFORCER

The monumental figure in the Metropolitan’s collection once belonged to the most influential and ambitious class of *minkondi* power figures—those identified with the pre-eminent force of jurisprudence, Mangaaka. British traders along the Loango coast mentioned Mangaaka as one of the spectacular Kongo figures with individual names and regional reputations¹⁶ and sought to collect these impressive works for museums in England. The form, created as a worthy vessel for the manifestation of Mangaaka, personifying an abstract boundless power, conveyed extraordinary strength and authority. In Kongo society the citizenry of a community presented themselves to a massive Mangaaka figure as the highest court of appeal to seal and guarantee important covenants, end disputes, regain wholeness of mind and body, and confront adversaries.¹⁷ It has been suggested that the need to regulate trade along the Loango coast ranked high among the charges brought before such figures.¹⁸ As the embodiment of the Kongo ideal of an unrivaled and unfettered force of justice, a figure of this stature was designed to intimidate and instill respect and reverence for established codes of moral conduct.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

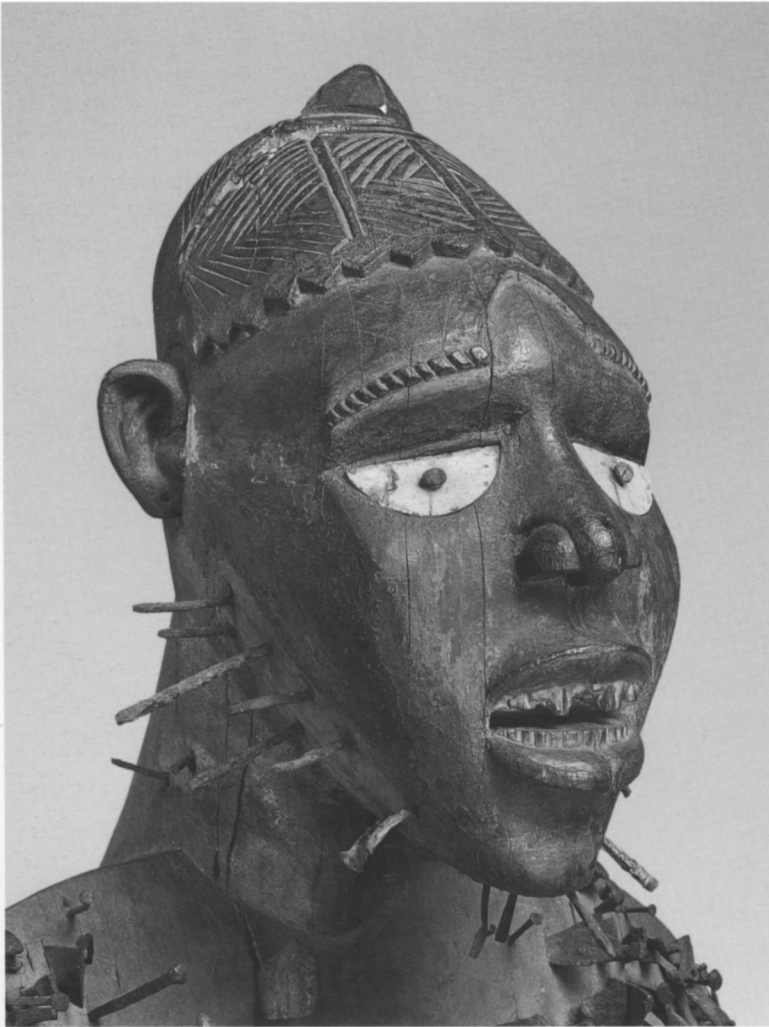
The process of composing a Mangaaka power figure for a Kongo community began with the inspired efforts of a master sculptor, followed and augmented by those of the ritual



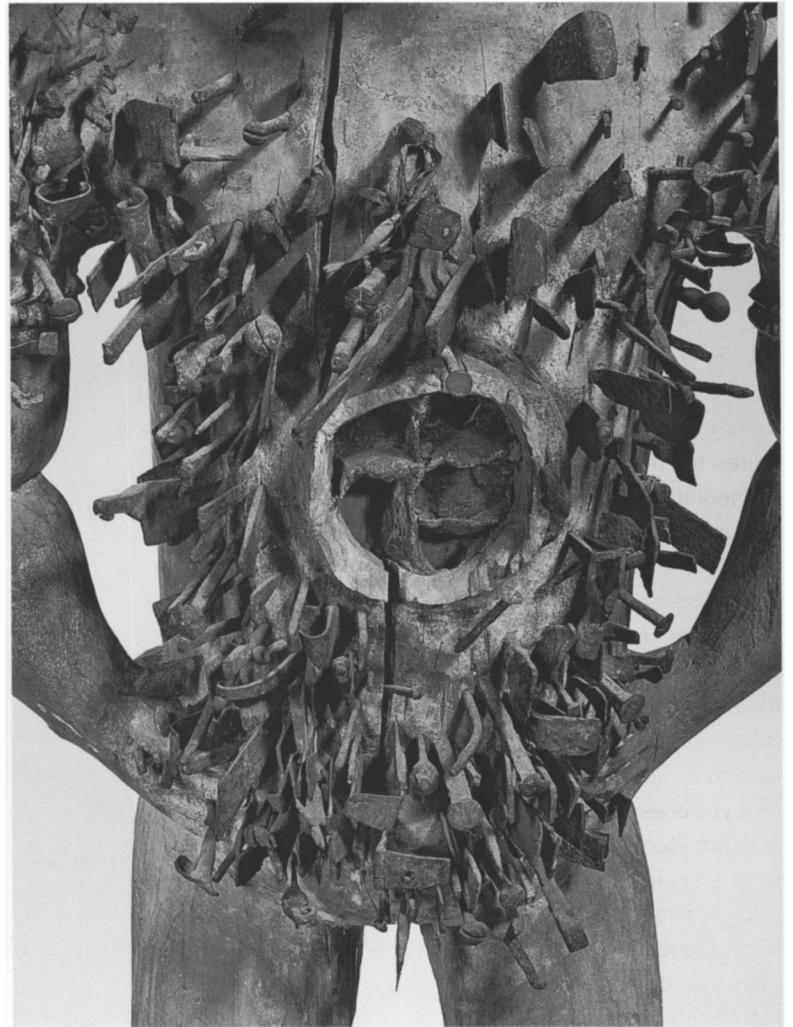
2. *Crucifix*. Angola, Kongo; 16th–17th century. Brass, H. 10¾ in. (27.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999 (1999.295.7)

specialist charged with consecrating the work and assuming the role of its intermediary. Initially, the contracted artist was presented with the challenge of rendering the elusive and intangible subject of peerless power in concrete terms. Ultimately, the work’s success would be measured by the artist’s ability to generate a representation that would harness the force housed within the figure. Given this goal, it was critical that the artist capture a sense of an engaged and animated presence.

The sculptor first selected the wood of a sacred tree favored for *nkondi*.¹⁹ Testing of the Mangaaka figure in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (see Figure 5) identified this wood as *Canarium schweinfurthii*. Although most of the other figures preserved in Western institutions have not been analyzed to date, testing of the Metropolitan’s example has yielded a consistent finding, identifying the genus as *Canarium* or *Dacryodes*, in the same family.²⁰ On a practical level, MacGaffey notes that this hard, dense wood is among those less prone to insect damage.²¹ Once the figure of this immensely powerful being was freed from the wood block by the sculptor, the entire surface was subsequently rubbed with red clay by the *nganga* to emphasize its role as mediator between living and dead, and visible and invisible.²² Examination of the Metropolitan’s work has revealed several layers of black plant-derived organic pigment covering the entire figure except for the upper legs.²³



3. Detail of the head of *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka* in Figure 1



4. Detail of the torso of *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka* in Figure 1

VISUALIZING MANGAAKA

At some undocumented point in time, a Kongo sculptor in the Chiloango River region formulated a highly compelling set of conventions for representing Mangaaka, and these features were adopted as a distinctive iconography and body language associated with the subject. Central to the treatment is Mangaaka's representation as a presiding authority and enforcing lord or chief. A key attribute for establishing this status is the crowning element of his distinctive *mpu* woven bonnet, worn by chiefs or priests in Kongo society.²⁴ Protective double bands of raffia cord, *nsunga*, encircling the biceps allude to the interlacing of mortal and ancestral realms and a ritual leader's potential to give and take life.²⁵ This idea is reinforced by the figure's elevation on raised blocks, which underscore his privileged position straddling the boundary between life and death. The defiant forward thrust of the chin and the bend of the knees intimate readiness to confront crises and spring into action. His pose (known as *pakala*), in which he leans forward with arms placed akimbo on the hips, is the aggressive

attitude of one who challenges fearlessly.²⁶ The stance has also been related to the attitude *vonganana*, meaning "to assert oneself, to be somebody, to come on strong."²⁷

The sense of Mangaaka's unyielding physical strength is articulated through the dramatic expanse of his torso and the heft of his broad shoulders. These are configured to suggest an impenetrable defensive barrier capable of absorbing and withstanding any challenge. The massiveness of the shoulders at once gives aesthetic expression to the idea of indomitability and may also highlight the seat of the spiritual capacity associated with taking control known as *mayembo*.²⁸

Features of Mangaaka's facial physiognomy also complement his uncompromising, aggressive appearance while asserting his intensely alert and omniscient character (Figure 3). The prominent forehead is a feature identified with intelligence. The capacity for heightened understanding is further apparent in the dramatic contrast between the wood and the cut and inlaid glazed ceramic eyes pierced with prominent iron pupils. MacGaffey has noted that such "glaring" or "naked" eyes were intended to inspire fear.²⁹ Beyond

this intimidating effect, however, the prominence given to the eyes announces the unrelenting scrutiny that will be brought to bear on all matters that fall under Mangaaka's purview. His sensory acuity is also apparent in the emphasis given to the ears that project from the sides of the head. Finally, the open mouth exposes filed teeth, a sign of civilized refinement, and intimates the animate character of the figure and its subject's readiness to pronounce on matters brought before it. Examination of the Metropolitan's work has revealed that the teeth were further accented in white: one layer is an indigenous pigment, while the other is European paint.³⁰ The pronounced emphasis on the facial features, in combination with the posture and gaze, conspires to impress the viewer with a sense of the figure's immediacy.

Among the visual focal points of a monumental power figure, ultimately regarded as a vessel for the force it embodies, is the hollowed receptacle designed to be filled with medicines once the sculpture was transferred to the ritual specialist (Figure 4). The principal site for embedding such matter is a centrally positioned cylindrical cavity that, once filled, was sealed with resin, so that it protrudes prominently from the figure's abdomen. In Kongo culture the belly, or *mooyo*, is associated with life and the soul.³¹ Its projection is associated with an organ that Kongo peoples believe to be present in those capable of consuming others mystically. Mangaaka's protruding belly signals his capacity to combat such agents.³² The unaltered mystical charge of medicinal matter is still intact in many examples of Mangaaka such as the work in the Detroit Institute of Arts (Figure 5). Residual vestiges of the interior compartments that once housed the empowering medicines are apparent in the exposed and emptied stomach cavity of the Metropolitan's figure.

All Mangaaka figures appear to have originally had beards composed of added organic matter. The example in Detroit, as well as those in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (Figure 6), and the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Central, Tervuren (Figure 7), have retained this feature, composed of a compound of resin, clay, palm wine, medicinal matter, and a raffia fiber fringe.³³ Identified with the power and status of elders and ritual specialists in Kongo society, the attribute was held in place with nails.³⁴ While the fragile organic matter of the beard is missing from the Metropolitan's figure, its outline survives as a smear of resin (which may have served as an adhesive) along the contours of the face that is punctuated by the surviving nail understructure. The black pigment along this edge is thicker than elsewhere because it was added once the beard was in place.³⁵

The Mangaaka figure was "dressed" in an item of the *nganga's* attire, further underscoring both its lifelike quality and its identification with the ritual specialist who oversaw its deployment. Typically, the figure's lower half was con-



5. *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka*. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo; second half of 19th century. Wood, metal, resin, enamel, cowrie shell; H. 46 1/8 in. (117 cm). The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Eleanor Clay Ford Fund for African Art (76.79). Photograph © 1998 The Detroit Institute of Arts

cealed by a skirt, hung directly below the stomach and extending to just above the feet, composed of woven raffia palm fiber.³⁶ This relatively fragile fiber addition, which remains in place on the Field and Tervuren works, is missing from a good number of the figures in the corpus. Metal elements added to the knees of the Metropolitan's Mangaaka suggest that the skirt may have been removed while the figure was still in use.

A noteworthy feature of this genre is an exterior bristling with nails and other metal elements. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the dramatic exterior was not part of the work's original aesthetic. As individuals petitioned the force to sanction agreements or redress various social conflicts, those appeals and resolved matters were recorded by driving different hardware elements into the figure. These alterations were overseen by an officiating ritual expert, who aroused the force housed within the sculpture to action or summoned it to witness resolutions between parties.³⁷ The hardware elements succinctly distilled, documented, and provided closure on debates and conflicts. Consequently, the exterior additions represent the cumulative concerns of a community

6. *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka*. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo; second half of 19th century. Wood, metal, resin, ceramic, fiber, clay, cowrie shell, animal hair; H. 44½ in. (113 cm). Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. © The Field Museum (A109979_Ac)



7. *Nkisi N'kondi Mangaaka*. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo; second half of 19th century. Wood, metal, resin, enamel, fiber, clay, cowrie shell; H. 44⅞ in. (114 cm). Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium (EO.0.0.7777). Photograph: R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©



and attest to the figure's central role in adjudicating these matters over an extended period of time. Thompson has surveyed the different types of hardware among the forest of accumulated metal elements embedded in the closely related Mangaaka figure in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Those found on the Metropolitan's example are similar, but they differ in their quantities and relative proportions, and also include a few additional varieties.³⁸

Approximately four hundred nails, spikes, knives, blades, and other diverse items of iron hardware make up the dense assemblage that projects from the Metropolitan's figure. There are signs that some additional forty-four were either removed or broken off at some point. The metal elements include both locally handcrafted varieties and imported European machine-manufactured ones that became available in the nineteenth century. The types of hardware include *nsonso*, long iron nails used when an argument was

sealed with a vow; *mbeezi*, blades that served to unite an individual to the community; and *baaku*, knives with flaring heads and tapered stems used to eradicate evil in a community.³⁹ Ellen Howe, conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has noted that there are multiple sizes of *baaku*, some of which appear to be miniatures, inserted in the Museum's figure in various orientations. On the basis of visual analysis, she has observed that the most impressive pieces of ironwork are centrally positioned on the torso and chest, suggesting a hierarchy of placement. She has also pointed out that, since the nails holding the beard in place were probably among the first to be added at the time of the work's completion, they are likely to be among the earliest items of hardware present. Two types of handmade nails remain in place—one was forged and hammered into a pin-like shaft form, and the other was cut with a chisel from a piece of metal sheet.⁴⁰

Another hint of the work's original use can be detected in surviving traces of fiber tied or wrapped around fourteen of the metal elements. Known as *mfunya*, these shreds of European cotton fabric and indigenous plant fiber were generally drawn from bits of a client's clothing to underscore the source of a particular petition.⁴¹ Another, more intimately scaled *nkisi* in the Metropolitan's collection retains an abundance of *mfunya*, reflecting a very different aesthetic of accumulation and displaying a demeanor of serenity and inward reflection (Figure 8). The concerns directed to that figure are manifested in the complex tangle of artifacts suspended from textile ribbons draped around the exterior of the figure. This weighty cloak bedecked with attachments, representing problems requiring resolution, includes miniature carvings, bands of beads, powder and snuff containers, arrows, and vegetal matter.

THE CHILOANGO RIVER MASTER

The Metropolitan's Mangaaka figure is one of only about twenty such monumental (more than a meter high) Kongo works that have been preserved in Western collections. Given the consistency of certain shared traits and stylistic features, the art historian Ezio Bassani has attributed seven of these works collected between 1898 and 1912 to a single artist. He has proposed that the sculptor, active along the Chiloango River between 1880 and 1910, was responsible for this group of works in concert with a single *nganga*.⁴² The formal criteria he sets forth as distinctive to the corpus are for the most part evident in the Metropolitan's example. Bassani identifies the elements of the signature style of the Chiloango River Master as the following: elongated, muscular bodies; broad, rounded shoulders whose frontal silhouette delineates an arc; a stance in which the upper body is bent slightly forward and the weight is shifted to the right; slight relief definition of the upper back, marked at the summit by curved lines delineating the shoulder blades bisected by a vertical indentation of the spine; an upraised face that is thrust forward on a strong neck; a gesture of arms bent at the elbow so that the hands rest on the hips, with the horizontally placed thumbs thrust backward; short legs that are slightly bent and spread apart; and carefully carved feet and ankles raised on discrete rectangular blocks.⁴³

Bassani extends the Chiloango corpus to three additional figures (including the Detroit example), which he proposes to be works by the master's atelier.⁴⁴ Based on the visual evidence, however, I would suggest that while the ten examples identified by Bassani (as well as others in the Kongo corpus that have since been likewise associated with the Chiloango River Master's circle) belong to the distinct Mangaaka sculptural genre, it is unlikely that they represent the work of a single hand or atelier. Although the authors of



8. *Nkisi*. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo; 19th–first half of 20th century. Wood, metal, fiber, cowrie shells, beads, arrows, nuts, pigment; H. 23 1/8 in. (58.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.127)

these complex large-scale works clearly embraced many significant conventions of an established prototype, stylistic nuances point to many different authors' interpretations of a paradigm rather than the vision of an individual sculptor.

Two of the seven works attributed to the Chiloango River Master are those in Tervuren and the Field Museum. As noted previously, these examples are especially striking for the pristine state of the features added by the *nganga* such as the beard, skirt, and abdominal power charge. In order to assess the fine points of such a sculpture's rendering, it is necessary to look beyond the gestalt of the body as the site for a dramatic accumulation of applied matter. It then becomes apparent that the work in the Field Museum is considerably more elongated than the others. The pronounced verticality is consistent throughout the work, seen in the greater height of the blocks supporting the feet, the attenuation of the lengthy torso, and the spiky finial of the headdress at the summit. The overall form of the work in

9. Back view of *Nkisi N'kondi*
Mangaaka in Figure 1



10. Side view of *Nkisi N'kondi*
Mangaaka in Figure 1



Tervuren is broader, with a wider face and stockier, more compact torso. There are also differences in the gazes of these two figures. While the head of the Field Museum figure is inclined slightly upward, that of its counterpart in Tervuren faces squarely ahead. Ironically, the completeness of these two works tends to eclipse the sculptural form, obscuring the fact that the representations are far stiffer and less expressive than the figures in the Metropolitan Museum (as will be discussed below) and the Detroit Institute of Arts. Although the *Mangaaka* in Detroit has retained its sealed abdominal receptacle, other additions are now missing, affording an unobstructed view of the physiognomy. The forward lean of the body is graceful and agile, and the powerful torso is in more harmonious proportion to the head

and lower body. It is also apparent that the artist sought to impart a greater degree of naturalistic modeling to the face and legs.

A DISTINCTIVE VISION

MacGaffey has emphasized that realism was rarely an important dimension of *Mangaaka* representations.⁴⁵ Although the Metropolitan's work shares the hint of naturalism apparent in the Detroit example, its sculptor introduced a heightened expressive intensity that generates greater dramatic impact. While the massive scale of the head is impressive and intimidating, at the same time there is a sensitive rendering of the contours of the cheekbones and a soulful

aspect to the facial expression. Clearly the face, which radiates a great deal of character, was fully conceived before the now-missing beard was secured in place with metal elements. Careful scrutiny of this visage suggests a judge who is all too familiar with the full range of human foibles and has the ability to see into the consciences of those who come before him.

The most astonishing achievement, and original departure, evident in this interpretation of Mangaaka is how assertively it occupies our space. This is a work of sculpture that one experiences differently from every angle. The raking forward lean of the figure is as close to imminent motion as one can imagine. The work's dramatic impact is most impressive from the back (Figure 9). The impossibly broad sweep of the curved shoulders beyond the immense trunk is a riveting sight, above which the upper limit of the sharply inscribed spine gives rise to the steep incline of the neck. Viewed from either side, the curved contours of the buttocks and the calves counter the overall forward thrust of the figure (Figure 10). Ironically, although the sculptor introduced this remarkable formal tension, it is apparent that he realized that it would be concealed from the viewer, since the surface of the buttocks retains evidence of adze marks that were deliberately left rough, in contrast to the highly finished back.

In the representations of both the head and torso, there is something at once slightly monstrous and recognizably human. The colossal physique distorts the mortal body to suggest an epic apparition so formidable it would be inconceivable to challenge its authority.

The delicacy of the ankles terminating in diminutive feet appears incongruous with the rest of the sculpture's proportions. This disparity may in part reflect the fact that the feet have undergone extensive restoration. X-radiography at the Museum has revealed that the front sections of each foot (the toes and part of the instep) and the rectangular blocks at their bases are replacements.⁴⁶ At some point in time, rot or insect damage began from the underside of the blocks as a result of direct exposure to the ground and continued vertically through the interior, so that when the figure left Africa, it is likely that the sculpture was barely self-supporting. Similar long-term damage to the base and feet appears to have affected a significant number of related works now in European collections.⁴⁷

The condition of the Metropolitan's figure suggests that it may have been deconsecrated at some point before it left Central Africa. Although it has been stripped of much of the matter that would have been added by the ritual specialist, ghostly traces of such substances remain across the surface. The exposed abdominal cavity, although an emptied void, affords us a view of the capacious interior chamber that was a defining feature of the sculptor's design, providing a

glimpse of the inner workings of this complex instrument. The aperture is subdivided into a series of separate chambers that served as discrete compartments for different medicines to be added by the *nganga*. The beard and skirt originally contributed by the *nganga* are now absent, allowing us to appreciate the remarkable vitality of the figure. Thus, the ravages and interventions over time that have resulted in various losses of sacred matter have denuded the work on one level. On another, they reveal traces of the figure's engagement in the most pressing issues confronting its community and ironically restore an unobstructed sense of the sculptor's original vision.

THE APOTHEOSIS OF POWER

A formidable presence, this Kongo personification of sheer power leans forward with head thrust out, invading our zone of comfort and defying gravity. Its fully resolved form is riveting from all vantage points. The term in the history of art that best captures the intention and impact of this African masterpiece is *terribilitá*. Since the Renaissance, its use has been synonymous with Michelangelo and the awesome quality of his artistic conception and execution. The Oxford English Dictionary also defines this concept more broadly as a "terrifying or awesome quality." The author of the Metropolitan's Mangaaka figure, among the most impressive sculptural creations from sub-Saharan Africa, sought to inspire awe, to intimidate, and to evoke a power without bounds. At the nexus of the most contentious and vital concerns of the community it served, the work was ultimately intended to inspire reflection on the consequences of transgressing established codes of social conduct. On a sculptural level, the Museum's Mangaaka figure is arguably the most outstanding example of a key genre in the African art canon.

In Kongo society the success of such a sculpture was doubtless measured in terms of its searing visual impact as a force for deterrence that shielded its membership from antisocial acts. Thompson has characterized this genre at the very summit of its tradition's creativity as a monument "to Kongo cultural self-confidence."⁴⁸ When we consider the volatility of the sociopolitical landscape in which Mangaaka operated, patronage of the power figure may be seen as the effort of a defiant community to seize some measure of control over its people's lives at a time of social chaos. By allying their fates to the most august power imaginable, society members sought to inoculate themselves against acts of treachery and to prevent rivals from challenging their rights to self-determination. Removed from that context, the container for this force remains indisputably an electrifying and majestic creation that transcends its tradition to strike a profound chord within all those who stand before it.

ABBREVIATIONS

Bassani 1977

Ezio Bassani. "Kongo Nail Fetishes from the Chiloango River Area." *African Arts* 10, no. 3 (1977), pp. 36–40, 88.

MacGaffey 1986

Wyatt MacGaffey. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. Chicago, 1986.

MacGaffey 1993

Wyatt MacGaffey. "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo *Minkisi*." In *Astonishment and Power*, pp. 18–103. Exh. cat., National Museum of African Art. Washington, D.C., 1993.

Thompson 1978

Robert Farris Thompson. "The Grand Detroit N'Kondi." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Art* 56, no. 4 (1978), pp. 206–21.

NOTES

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2. Joseph Miller, "The Paradoxes of Impoverishment in the Atlantic Zone," in *History of Central Africa*, vol. 1, pp. 135–36.
3. MacGaffey 1986, p. 210.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
6. Miller, "Paradoxes of Impoverishment," p. 150.
7. Olfert Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique* (1686; facsimile, New York, 1970), pp. 333–38, cited in Sylvia H. Williams, "Fragments of History," in *Astonishment and Power*, p. 13, exh. cat., National Museum of African Art (Washington, D.C., 1993).
8. Thompson 1978, p. 209.
9. MacGaffey 1993, p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
12. Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C., 1981), p. 37.
13. Thompson 1978, p. 209.
14. MacGaffey 1993, p. 71.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
17. Thompson 1978, p. 207.
18. MacGaffey 1993, p. 42.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
20. Ellen Howe and Marijn Manuels, correspondence, July 2008, Department of Objects Conservation, MMA.
21. MacGaffey, conversation with the author, January 4, 2008.
22. MacGaffey 1993, p. 44.
23. Adriana Rizzo, Department of Scientific Research, MMA, email message to the author, July 2008.
24. Thompson 1978, p. 214.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
26. *Ibid.*
27. MacGaffey 1993, p. 44.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
30. Howe, correspondence, July 21, 2008.
31. MacGaffey 1993, p. 65.
32. Thompson 1978, p. 219.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
34. MacGaffey 1993, p. 43.
35. Howe, correspondence, July 21, 2008.
36. Thompson 1978, p. 219.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
38. Preliminary examination by Ellen Howe, to be followed by further analysis and forthcoming publication in the new periodical *Metropolitan Museum Studies in Art, Science, and Technology*.
39. Thompson 1978, p. 216.
40. Howe, correspondence, July 21, 2008.
41. MacGaffey 1993, p. 76.
42. Bassani 1977.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
45. MacGaffey, conversation with the author, May 16, 2008.
46. Howe, correspondence, June 15, 2008.
47. The Metropolitan's work was acquired in January 2008 from the collection of Boris Kegel-Konietzko, a Hamburg collector and former dealer who had inherited the work from his mother. Kegel-Konietzko's parents were antiquarians who collected for the Völkerkunde museums of Hamburg, Berlin, Lübeck, Leipzig, and Frankfurt.
48. Thompson 1978, p. 219.