

Power Figure

circa 1875

Vili group, Kongo peoples

wood, tukula powder, fiber, metal chain, mirror, animal horn, glass, resin

2005/1.177

Minkisi (singular *nkisi*) are often referred to as power objects. They are popular among various cultural groups in Central West Africa and can take many shapes, from animal sculptures to cloth bundles. *Minkisi* house spirits who are called into the mortal world to avenge, heal, solve problems, and protect. The *nganga*, a spiritual community leader, would activate this figure's spirit through loud or disruptive actions, like ringing bells or hammering nails into the object. While this *nkisi* does not have secondary name to specify its function, its turned head implies a watchfulness that could protect the holder.

An important feature of this *nkisi* are its bright white, mirrored eyes which allow it to see into and draw power from the ancestral world. Many African cultures use the color white to represent water and the ancestral land that lies beyond the ocean.

Minkisi also functioned as visual records; materials were added, possibly like this *nkisi's* cloth wrappings, to mark transactions and contracts the *nkisi* had witnessed. The primary source of the *nkisi's* power comes from the *bilongo*, spiritually symbolic materials housed in this *nkisi's* protruding stomach and head. Since the addition of external materials is integral to the figure as a whole, *minkisi* are considered "accumulative objects."

Power objects became popular in many communities during early European colonization as a means to reclaim agency. Missionaries collected many *minkisi*, particularly the vengeful *minkisi nkondi*, and referred to them as "fetishes." While this name originally alluded to the belief that the objects held special meaning, as the word "fetish" became associated with sexually deviancy these power objects became a European symbol of Africa's immorality.

written by **Beatrice Kelly-Andrews**