

Mother and child figure

circa 1890

Yombe group, Kongo peoples

wood, brass tacks, and mirror fragments

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Produced along the Yombe and Kongo coast and originating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this maternity image is referred to as *pfemba*. Thought to exemplify spiritual force, social hierarchy, and idealized beauty, this mother and child figure specifies the need for fertility and the promise of future generations. *Pfemba* are thought to have come from the ancient kingdom of Mani Kongo, which flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Carved in the late nineteenth century - most likely in 1890 - this *pfemba* is an ideal representation of Kongo motherhood.

It can be ascertained that this woman was of high social status, as shown through her headdress, scarifications, and filed teeth. The figure's cross-legged position and composed expression showcase her thoughtfulness, in addition to her prestige and prominent lineage. The brass tacks symbolize wealth, as they were luxury goods from Europe. This *pfemba* was likely commissioned by an affluent family to commemorate an important ancestor.

Within the Kongo Kingdom (ca. 1400-1884), reflective surfaces were said to deflect evil and danger. Additionally, mirrors were seen as a window into the spirit world; Central Africa was known for its religions that promoted major ancestral veneration. The woman's mirrored eyes worked as such. It was believed that ancestors could actively influence the lives of their descendants, and that providing them with gifts, in addition to consulting them, could increase the prosperity of the family or community.

From its brass tacks to its mirrored eyes, this *pfemba* displays Africa as an internationally active continent. Due to the utilization of nonhomogeneous materials, this sculpture showcases Africa's prominence within international trade routes. It is proof that Africa was not isolated, and further recognizes the art forms, skills, and culturally significant knowledge that sprang from the continent.

written by **Leah Glimcher**