

Cup

circa 1890

Kuba peoples. Democratic Republic of the Congo

Wood, copper, and cowrie shells

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For over a century, these exquisitely carved wooden cups were used widely throughout the Kuba Kingdom. During this time, a large portion of men within the Bushoong, the central ethnic group of Kuba from which this cup can be specifically attributed, held important titles. For this reason, ordinary objects were used to distinguish one's power and wealth from others. Hence, the most beautiful cups represented the most powerful men of the Kingdom.

This particular cup was likely carved for someone of high prestige. This is seen by the level of detail and specific features associated with the Kuba Kingdom that are incorporated into the carvings. For example, the high hairline represents the practice of hair shaving to frame and accentuate the forehead, signifying wisdom. Additionally, cowrie shells, seen on the neck of the cup, signify wealth. Finally, the intricate geometric patterns covering the head and neck are indicative of Kuba textiles.

Often sculpted in the form of a head or full body, Kuba cups were used for ceremonial, medicinal, and ritual purposes in which they most often held palm wine. This popular alcoholic beverage, made from the sap of raffia palm trees, was valued by the Kuba peoples.

These cups were held to high esteem throughout the 19th century. However, by the mid-20th century, the use of them declined due to colonialism and the increased monetary value placed on them by Western collectors. They were in turn replaced by cups made of materials like plastic.

written by **Alyssa Bolen**