

Prestige Adze

circa 1880

Hemba/Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

wood, iron, and brass tacks

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This object is a prestige *adze*, or axe-like tool, made by the Luba peoples from the eastern Congo basin. This prestige *adze* belongs to a class of objects commonly referred to as “ceremonial weapons”. Labelling these items as “weapons”, however, is problematic as it helps perpetuate a common stereotype that Africa is a place of heightened violence when, in fact, they were carried by high-ranking officials in Luba society only as a symbol of status. Many of these ceremonial “weapons” were actually based off of farming tools and were used in a ceremonial context, such as in dance and ritual.

The female head at the base of the handle reflects the women of Luba society. Elaborate hairstyles were a very prominent aspect of Luba culture. The hairdo of this figure depicts a popular type of *kaposhi* hairstyle in which the hair is sectioned into four parts and then assembled to form a cross-shape.

Using female iconography is very typical of Luba figurative sculpture. Women were believed to have a strong connection to *bavidye*, or “guardian spirits.” As such, the Luba believed that by using female imagery, particularly at sites of great importance, they could attract *bavidye* to make the location more sacred.

Carrying this ceremonial *adze* also referenced the origins of Luba royalty; one story tells that the first king of Luba was believed to be a blacksmith and another that the original city where the kingdom of Luba was built was a great ironworks center. This reference to royalty would have helped the owner use the *adze* as a status symbol.

written by **Nupur Vora**