

Prestige Adze

circa 1880

Hemba/Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

wood, iron, and brass tacks

2005/1.225

This elegantly carved ax-like tool hails from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Hemba group carved this prestige *adze* from wood and embedded an iron axe-head and brass tacks within the ornamental carving. In this piece you can see the celebration of women, and their revered position in Hemba society.

The graceful female figure is poised and serene, conveyed through elongated lines, closed eyes, and delicate features. Female ancestors are held in high regard in Hemba and Luba societies, thus the prestige adze serves as an important status object. The ax-like tool is usually used for carving wood or farming applications. This prestige adze, however, serves mainly as demonstration of power and prominence so only the most powerful members of Hemba or Luba society would have this in their possession.

As mentioned above, Hemba and Luba cultures both celebrate femininity. The full lips are a motif associated with Luba, while the elongated features are more commonly found in Hemba artwork. The Luba tried to incorporate the Hemba into their empire during the 19th century and thus we see some similarities. The prestige adze, with its combination of multiple cultural styles, counters the stereotype that “Africa is a country,” as different groups have their own unique styles within Africa’s many regions.

written by **Larry Jia**