The beautifully portrayed realism of this figure’s face—an expressive mouth, softly outlined lips, and glass-covered eyes with painted pupils—transcends the violence implied by the nails and blades that are driven into its body and the chain and twine that enwrap it. The figure was made to contain an otherworldly force from the land of the dead and to harness it for human good. Such objects are known as minkisi (singular, nkisi), a word for which there is no direct translation, although one common term for them, “power objects,” suggests the potency with which they were imbued by their makers and users. More specifically, the figure’s assertive pose, with hands to waist and chest thrust forward, indicates that it is a type of nkisi called nkondi, meaning hunter. Nkondi specialized in the supernatural hunting down and punishing of wrongdoers.

Sculpturally, the work skillfully weds figural representation with layers of additive material. Empowering medicines are packed in resin on the figure’s head and in a projecting box sealed by a mirror on its abdomen. In the words of Kavuna Simon, a Kongoles man writing in the early twentieth century, such medicines were composed of “earths, ashes, herbs, and leaves, and of relics of the dead.” The iron chain, cowrie shells, bone, and small calabashes that hang from the figure may have enhanced its overall efficacy or may instead refer to a specific problem that its power was called on to resolve. The nails and blades that are driven into its abdomen, shoulders, and arms are not medicine. They represent the many problems that have been addressed through the figure’s auspices. The power that resided in the figure was invoked each time one was pounded into it, a violent provocation and powerful metaphor for the retribution being sought.
Notes


2. For a lengthy discussion of this imagery, see Stanislaw Chojnacki, ‘The Kw’er’ata Re’esu’: Its Iconography and Significance,” Annali dell’Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli 45 (Naples, 1985).


Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), pp. 34-35. 1. See Wyatt MacGaffey, “The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi,” in Wyatt MacGaffey and Michael D. Harris, Astonishment and Power, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C., 1993), p. 76. Nkisi Nkondi and other types of figurine minkisi are no longer made, although the ideas that informed them are still an important part of Kongo belief (p. 29).

2. Quoted in MacGaffey (note 1).

Maternity Figure, pp. 16-17.

1. According to Constantine Petridis, some Lulua “read sadness and bitterness” in the figure’s face; see “Of Mothers and Sorcerers: A Lulua Maternity Figure,” Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies 13, 2 (1997), p. 193.

2. Ibid., pp. 192-93; the figure is literally a container, with two small holes at the top and back of the figure’s head for the insertion of medicine.

3. Ibid., p. 192.

Floral Medallions and Bouquets, pp. 18-19.


3. This fragment was published in Watt and Wardwell (note 1), cat. no. 6. Two additional fragments are known to these authors: Feng Zhao, Treasures in Silk (Hangzhou, 1999), cat. no. 04 04 (private collection); and Aegae Collection, Bern, Switzerland (inventory no. 4903), in Catherine Diepieraz, Kostenbarkeiten der Aegae-Stiftung (Riggisberg, Switzerland, 2003), pp. 52-51. Zhao described this technique (also called sanmoe) as Central Asian in origin (p. 140).

4. See Zhao (note 3), p. 136. To our knowledge, silk fabrics constructed in this technique have not yet been published among the extraordinary textiles found in this repository, which is datable to a ritual offering of A.D. 874. For the Famensi finds, see Ma Zhongyi et al., Famensi (Beijing, 1992).

Two Bands and Four Fragments from an Orphrey Band, pp. 20-21.


Border, pp. 22-23.

1. For a discussion of laces and lace, see Santina M. Levey, Lace: A History (London, 1985), and the entry on lacies by Christa C. Mayer Thirman in Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte (Munich, 1987).

Valance, pp. 24-25.


Bedcover, pp. 26-27.

1. For information on Indian textiles, see John Irwin and Margaret Hall, Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics, Historic Textiles of India at the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad 1 (Ahmedabad, India, 1971).


Long Shawl, pp. 28-29.


Two-Sided Bedcover, pp. 30-31.

1. See John Beardsley et al., Gee’s Bend: The Women and Their Quilts, exh. cat. (Atlanta, 2002), and idem, The Quilts of Gee’s Bend, exh. cat. (Atlanta/Houston 2002).

Hanging entitled Found, pp. 32-33.


2. Quoted from a brief, untitled statement by the artist; files of the Department of Textiles, The Art Institute of Chicago.