

# Kongo: Power and Majesty

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A great Kongo landmark that has been a centerpiece of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection since 2008 cannot fail to elicit a visceral reaction (Fig. 1). This massive sculpture of a formidable Kongo leader leans forward toward viewers ever so slightly with hands on hips. He is at once a physically commanding and deeply reflexive presence. The carved wood figure was conceived as a receptacle for an immaterial force invoked over the course of its use through the hardware added to its exterior by petitioners. Only traces of its original consecrating matter are in evidence. Those critical additions around the perimeter of the chin and secreted within interior ocular and abdominal cavities were made by a ritual specialist (*nganga*) once it left the sculptor's hands. Before it was exported from Central Africa to Germany, the work was systematically emptied of its empowering matter.

Over the last seven years, this work has undergone close examination and study in relation to comparative examples by art historians, conservators, and scientists. Discussion of these findings in dialogue with an international network of interdisciplinary specialists in museums and universities has contributed findings that afford a more nuanced and expansive appreciation of the significance of such outstanding Kongo achievements. Those ideas have informed "Kongo: Power and Majesty," an exhibition organized by the Metropolitan that will be on view from September 16, 2015 through January 3, 2016. That presentation considers the larger historical significance and aesthetics of this work and some 120 of the most compelling artistic creations produced by Kongo masters. The works themselves reflect a very specific historical experience while constituting responses to questions of universal relevance: How does one realize the depiction of sheer might in the material world? What is the nature of power? How

may it be directed by leaders to protect the interests of their constituents? What kind of power may be summoned for a community under siege to survive? What forces may be harnessed to allow it to regenerate and prosper? What may works that have been silent presences in the West for over a century reveal about contests for power that unfolded in Central Africa?

## KONGO POWER IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the Western imagination, the electrifying aesthetic of multimedia Kongo power figures has become synonymous with African art. That superficial familiarity has carried with it an assumption that the patronage of such creations occurred in a society completely isolated from the outside world. These misperceptions have contributed to a fundamental misunderstanding of this epic form of expression. Accordingly, "Kongo: Power and Majesty" seeks to reintroduce such creations through chronicling the sustained engagement of Kongo leaders with their Western counterparts in a dynamically shifting relationship that gradually devolved from that of princely peers to colonizer and subjects. It does so through foregrounding a selection of material culture that attests to the cosmopolitan awareness of Kongo artists who were continually responsive to new idioms of expression that arrived in the region through diplomatic and trade networks. In order to situate this work in a meaningful historically specific context, the cultural ideal it references and the tumultuous and cataclysmic social dynamic to which it responded will be considered.

## TALES OF EUROPEAN AND AFRICAN KINGDOMS

Kongo society developed across a vast swathe of Central Africa over a period of two and a half millennia, and for a third of that time was engaged with the West. Nearly a decade before Colum-



(left)

**1a** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)

Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River region, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda; Angola, 19th century

Wood, paint, metal, resin, ceramic; 118 cm × 49.5 cm × 39.4 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm, Laura G. and James J. Ross, Jeffrey B. Soref, The Robert T. Wall Family, Dr. and Mrs. Sidney G. Clyman, and Steven Kossak Gifts, 2008 (2008.30)

(above and below)

**1b-c** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka), detail



bus reached the New World and landed on the island of San Salvador, the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão arrived first along the coast of present-day Cabinda, Angola, and then entered the estuary of the mighty Congo River. That great tributary, the second largest in the world, extends from the Atlantic to the highlands of northeastern Zambia. Cão and his men erected stone markers, or *padrões*, where they disembarked at key locations along the coast.<sup>1</sup> On that inaugural journey in 1483, Cão established contact with the leadership of the polity known as Kongo. Before the arrival of the Portuguese, Kongo had been a centralized kingdom, with a capital city, Mbanza Kongo, hundreds of miles from the coast in present-day northern Angola. From this strategic hilltop location, the Kongo polity had overseen exchanges between the coast

and interior as well as the Angolan savanna and Gabon forests to the north. The arrival of Portuguese ships introduced a swifter and less labor-intensive means of ferrying regional resources between the north and south along the coast.

What began during the Age of Exploration as a promising partnership between two ambitious principalities, one European and one African, shifted significantly as Portugal took on the role of middleman in transatlantic trade. The historian David Van Reybrouck (2014:40) has underscored that, despite its longevity, European engagement with the region was surprisingly superficial in nature: “Until somewhere around 1800, the continent that lay closest to Europe was also the most unfamiliar to Europeans. Since the sixteenth century, Portuguese, Dutch, and



**2** Luxury cloth: cushion cover  
Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; 16th–17th century, inventoried 1670  
Raffia; 49 cm x 50.5 cm  
Kungliga Samligarna, Sweden (HGK, Tx I, 164)  
Photo: Alexis Daflos © The Royal Court, Sweden

**3** Oliphant  
Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; 16th century, inventoried 1553  
Ivory; L: 83 cm, D: 7.5 cm  
Museo degli Argenti, Florence

British merchants on their way to India had become more or less familiar with its coastlines, but for centuries the African interior remained terra incognita.”

The origins of the Kingdom of Kongo have been traced as far back as 1300.<sup>2</sup> Its founder, Ntinu Lukeni, was said to be a “hunter” in accounts chronicled by Jesuit missionaries. According to that tradition, this prince departed from his father’s kingdom on the Congo River’s north bank to settle Mbanza Kongo.<sup>3</sup> Although Kongo is one among a plurality of culturally related but politically autonomous chiefdoms in this region, its capital has retained a degree of symbolic primacy into the present day (MacGaffey 1986:203). In addition to this celebrated polity, the exhibition considers its less well-known influential regional neighbors such as the Kingdom of Loango. The embrace of literacy by the Kingdom of Kongo’s elite from the earliest moment of contact and the survival of their writings on religious and political matters has also set it apart, making it one of the best-documented precolonial African states. Extensive correspondence between Kongo and European leadership over the fifteenth and sixteenth century affords us a critical African perspective on world events.

Exploitation of Central Africa’s abundant and diverse natural resources has always been the prime factor that has drawn the interest of the outside world. From 1483 on, the mouth of the Congo River became a nexus of trade with Europe. Thus positioned, for over three hundred years Europeans remained confined to the periphery of an immense territorial expanse. Until the nineteenth century, goods from the interior were gathered by African traders who relayed them by caravan to the temporary coastal sites where Europeans were based.

**MINING THE WUNDERKAMMER FOR EARLY KONGO:  
PRIMARY SOURCES**

Surprisingly, the Kongo works that arrived in the West earliest through the networks of exchange and remain preserved there have also been the least studied. Artifacts produced in Kongo communities arrived in Europe soon after the Portuguese landed at the mouth of the Congo River in 1483.<sup>4</sup> The exceptional caliber of those creations, which attest to the impressive technical abilities developed in the region generations before Western contact, are luxury goods in the form of delicately carved ivories and refined woven textiles (Fig. 2). “Kongo: Power and Majesty” presents an expansive selection of twenty-six of these untapped primary Kongo sources for the first time. Acquired by the heads of royal houses, merchant princes, and humanists scattered across Europe in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Prague, Rome, London, Edinburgh, Oxford, Stuttgart, Ulm, and Lisbon, this corpus



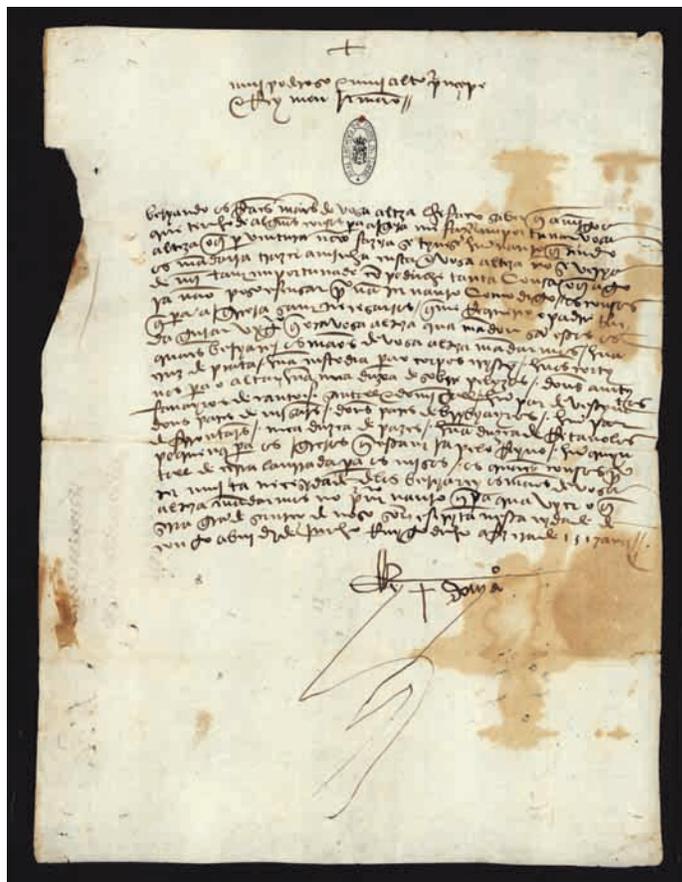
is minimally documented. As the events and transactions that led to their relay from Africa to Europe are so poorly recorded, we are left to consider the larger significance of their presence in influential repositories such as those associated with the Medici, Frederick III of Denmark, Emperor Rudolf II, Queen Christina of Sweden, Athanasius Kirchner S.J., and Sir Hans Sloane. “Kongo: Power and Majesty” questions how attitudes toward the objects shifted over time as they were often transferred into ethnography collections at the turn of the twentieth century, and what close study and technical analysis of the works themselves reveals. It is striking that, while during the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment, Kongo works in the West were integrated into collections that highlighted marvels of human ingenuity that were global in character, under colonialism Kongo material culture was segregated in newly formed ethnographic collections.

The Portuguese chronicler Rui de Pina in 1491 noted the use of side-blown ivory horns for local royal, military, and religious rites. As networks of exchange developed with Europe during the Renaissance, carvers also created exquisitely crafted oliphants embellished with purely abstract geometric decoration within spiraling registers. These were sent by their royal patrons as diplomatic gifts. Among the earliest examples of these were several that were likely brought to Rome as part of an embassy to Pope

Leo X that were first inventoried in 1553 as part of the Medici collections in Florence (Fig. 3). Related motifs also appear inscribed on precontact ceramics found near Buali, the capital of the Kingdom of Loango, and woven into luxury textiles, another form of prestige art that flourished regionally. By the nineteenth century, elephant tusks were carved as purely decorative artifacts whose surfaces were filled with dense programs of figurative imagery that unfolds in the same spiral arrangement. Designed exclusively for export by Vili sculptors along the Loango coast, their iconography featured scenes that depicted local events and include references to European printed matter (Fig. 4).<sup>5</sup>

**4** Tusk with figurative relief (detail)  
Kongo peoples; Vili group, Loango Coast,  
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of  
the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; c. 1880–90  
Ivory; 68.6 cm  
Collection of Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm,  
New Jersey

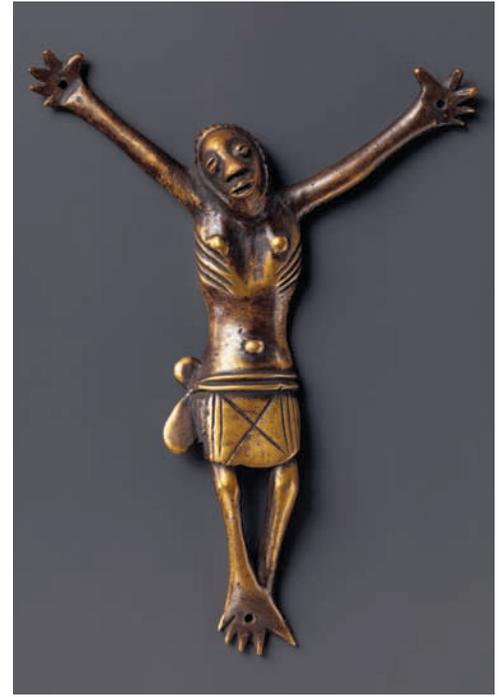
**5** Carta do rei do Congo para o rei a pedir  
uma cruz de prata, uma custódia, retábulos,  
breviários, entre outros, tudo para a sua capela  
real (Letter from Afonso I Mvemba a Nzinga of  
the Kongo, to Manuel I of Portugal requesting  
religious paraphernalia)  
Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the  
Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; June  
8, 1517  
21 cm x 28.7 cm  
Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon  
(PT/TT/CC/1/22/5)





**6 Crucifix**  
Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; 16th–17th century with later additions  
Figure of Christ: brass (solid cast); halo: copper alloy (solid cast); 3 end pieces: bronze (hollow cast); 1 end piece: brass (sheet); figure of Mary: copper alloy (solid cast); nails: copper and brass (forged); wood; 45.7 cm x 21.6 cm x 1.8 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999 (1999.295.8)

**7 Figure of Christ**  
Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; 18th–19th century  
Brass, open-back cast; 11.1 cm x 11.4 cm x 2.2 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999 (1999.295.3)



Kongo patrons and creative talent were immediately responsive to the influx of new ideas and forms of expression that arrived by way of Europe. While in some instances preexisting visual idioms were inflected by these novel points of reference, in others, entirely new genres developed. Kongo woven and cut-pile raffia panels were historically, technically, and aesthetically distinct for their repeated loom-woven design elements. The earliest known examples feature variations on the knot motif in two formats. The first is an overall pattern of interlaced bands which suggests an endless network extending in every direction. The second features individual knot motifs framed within rectangular units arranged in horizontal and vertical rows and columns. This tradition was innovatively adapted by Kongo weavers to produce tasseled cushion covers that likely reflect the influence of European decorative arts. The baptism of the Kongo sovereign Nzinga a Nkuwu as João I in 1491 and his adoption of Christianity as his state's official religion ushered in the arrival of thousands of Christian devotional artifacts from Portugal. Among the primary sources highlighted in "Kongo: Power and Majesty" is a missive from Mvemba a Nzinga, or Afonso I, to Manuel I of Portugal dated June 6, 1517, requesting such imported religious paraphernalia and describing the destruction of indigenous ones (Fig. 5). Kongo artists drew directly upon these European devotional medallions and crucifixes as molds for their own castings (Fig. 6). Eventually they departed from replicating these prototypes to reinterpret Christ's features according to their own vision of him as a Kongo subject (Fig. 7).

The West's appetite for Central Africa's natural resources accelerated exponentially in the nineteenth century. The policies of King Leopold of Belgium's Free State led to the decimation of its population by disease, reduction of its agricultural system, dismantling of its commercial networks, and abandonment of vocations such as iron smithing and wood carving (Van Reybrouck 2014:94). During this period, vast quantities of Kongo artifacts

of a spiritual nature were removed from the region for the first time. This shift in the character of the material culture collected by Europeans was not incidental. Instead it reflects fundamental changes in the nature of the relationship between regional leaders and their Western counterparts from that of peers to colonized subjects. Although all known examples of Kongo figurative sculpture were collected no earlier than the nineteenth century, they have paradoxically been considered as timeless cultural expressions. "Kongo: Power and Majesty" seeks to counter that misinterpretation and propose certain of these as responses to the stresses individuals living in Kongo communities experienced in the face of European intrusion into the interior during the second half of the nineteenth century.

#### FEMALE PERSONIFICATIONS OF POWER

In Kongo society, wealth was measured not merely in the form of material possessions but rather in terms of the number of one's dependents. To reflect the value placed on human capital in the form of wives, children, clients, and slaves, historians have come to use the term "wealth in people" (Guyer and Belinga 1995:91). This concept is reflected in the diverse art forms produced by sculptors during the nineteenth century that give expression to ideals of leadership. A primary visual metaphor emphasized by Kongo sculptors in the Yombe region was that of female procreation. A major sculptural genre that likely developed to redress the region's depopulation, one of the results of the cataclysmic Atlantic slave trade, and related concerns with infertility, takes the form of regal female figures. Seated on a rectangular dais, these commanding women cradle a secondary figure in their arms and are crowned with the *mpu* cap of leadership (Figs. 8–9). While in the past these have been generically referred to as "mother and child" figures, scrutiny of the representations makes it evident that they are not merely literal depictions of mothers. In some instances the miniature figure they hold is an infant, which may not only express a

basic prayer for new life in the form of biological offspring but also a leader's ambition to expand and sustain his constituency. In others, a small fully formed figure held by the regal woman may reference the fact that founders of clans were conceived of as "mother" figures to successive generations of dependents.

"Kongo: Power and Majesty" assembles a diverse array of this form interpreted by the most gifted Kongo sculptors. Among these are examples that have been attributed on purely formal grounds to two major stylistically distinctive ateliers (Figs. 10–11). The signature carving style of those workshops is also apparent in other Kongo sculptural genres that include staffs of office, masks, and decorative elements for ritual interiors (Fig. 12). In marked contrast to the nurturing and regenerative qualities of leadership underscored in depictions of Kongo female figures, that of omnipotence wielded uncompromisingly might be evoked through male representations threatening violence (Fig. 13). At the base of a Kongo chief's ivory scepter, a slave in an overt position of subjugation is gagged, with bound limbs. Directly above, an enthroned chief faces in the opposite direction of the victim he dominates. Clenched in his teeth is a *munkisa* root, whose juice was attributed with the power to repel harmful forces. The image at once underscores a ruler's capacity to shield himself from destructive elements and subjugate rivals.

Following his baptism in 1491, the Kongo sovereign Nzinga a Nkuwu called for the destruction of all local idols or *minkisi* in his kingdom. Although a Portuguese Jesuit father is reported to have at once burnt some such "fetishes" and sent others back to Portugal in 1631, no examples of *minkisi* are known to have been preserved in the West before the second half of the nineteenth

century. Information gathered over the last century has defined an *nkisi* as the complex of physical matter and ritual actions associated with an *nganga's* harnessing of a specific spiritual force (see MacGaffey 1986). It might be housed within a portable shrine that takes the form of a utilitarian clay vessel or a customized wood figure commissioned from a professional carver. During his travels to the region in the 1870s, the German ethnologist Eduard Pechuël-Loesche noted that an especially effective variety of *nkisi* had the potential to generate a great deal of demand and profit its creator: "The glory of his invention is known in the entire country. He receives followers and orders, and becomes simultaneously a manufacturer and a rich man" (1907:369).<sup>6</sup> The *nganga* responsible for launching an influential *nkisi* benefited from a virtual copyright (MacGaffey 2012:7). Accordingly, he reissued his discovery to other communities and trained them to operate it.

For the most part we lack any specific information concerning the history or use of tens of thousands of *minkisi* gathered by Europeans during the nineteenth century. Such is the case for an *nkisi* that arrived in Leiden in 1885 following its likely acquisition at the riverine trading center of Banana during an expedition sponsored by the Royal Dutch Geographical Society (Fig. 14). On the basis of style and the especially complex iconography the work in question has been attributed to an unknown Vili carver. It takes the form of a kneeling female figure whose entire torso is a hollowed receptacle. The empty interior is exposed from the back where a large rectangular panel is now missing. The woman supports a miniature figure that is seated on her right knee and who drinks from a ritual vessel she holds to its mouth with her left hand. Serpents extend from the base of her buttocks and up the length of her back as a series of parallel ridges. The central scaled serpent continues over the crown of her head to devour the tips of two horn-like tresses of hair. Its dramatic arc is likely a representation of the primordial force known as Mbumba, evoked by healers and diviners for treatment of physical dysfunction and to further the social ambitions of their clients. The interaction of this woman and the sprite-like appendages is not that of a mother and her mortal progeny, but rather of a priestess engaged with emissaries from the spiritual realm.



**8** Seated female with child  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Cabinda, Angola; 19th–early 20th century, inventoried 1916  
*Canarium Schweinfurthii* Engl. wood, vegetable fiber, glass, leopard claw, kaolin, pigment; 20 cm x 10 cm x 8 cm  
Museu da Ciência da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal (ANT.ANG.1087)

**9** Prestige cap (*mpu*)  
Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Angola; 16th–17th century, inventoried 1674  
Raffia or pineapple fiber; H: 18cm, D: 15 cm  
Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen (EDc123)





(left and above)  
**10** Master of the Boma-Vonde Region  
Lemba staff finial with female figure and child  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th–early 20th century  
Wood; 69.5 cm x 7 cm x 8.2 cm  
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (70.2003.3.9)  
*Photo: Patrick Gries; Musee du Quai Branly/Scala / Art Resource, NY*

((right and below)  
**11** Master of Kasadi Workshop  
Staff final: kneeling female figure  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th–early 20th century  
Wood, iron, metal strips; 142.1 cm x 15.2 cm x 6.4 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;  
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1968 (1978.412.570)





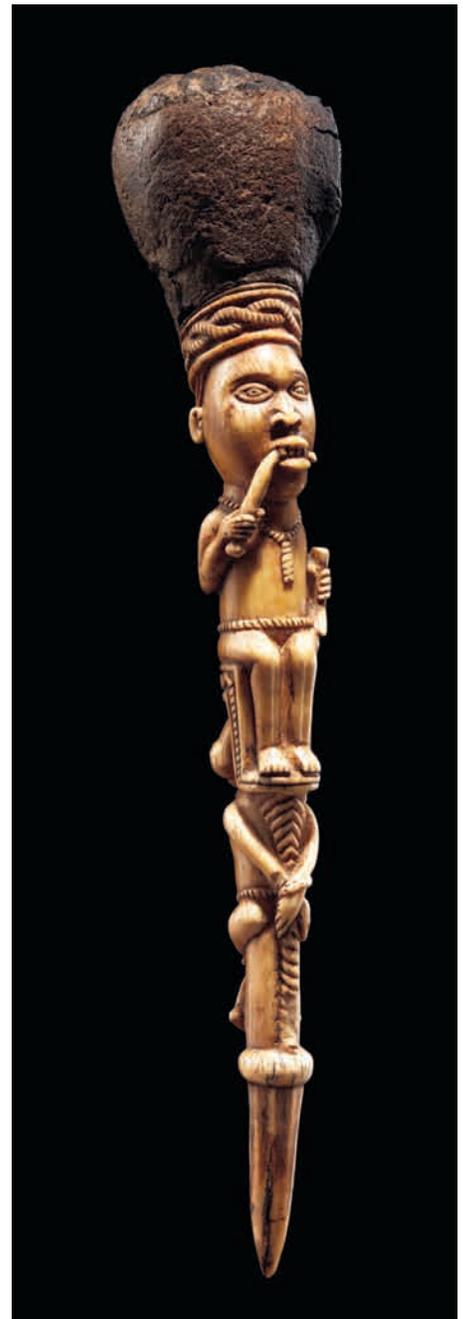
**12** Master of Kasadi Workshop  
 Kumbi bed panel with six seated figures and dog  
 Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Kangu village (?), Democratic Republic of the Congo; 19th–early 20th century, inventoried 1934  
*Adansonia digitata* L. wood, pigments; 27.8 cm × 86 cm × 12 cm  
 Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (EO.0.0.35776)  
 Photo: R. Asselberghs, © RMCA Tervuren

**13** Scepter with seated chief above bound prisoner (*nkisi*)  
 Kongo peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th–early 20th century  
 Ivory, resin; 28.5 cm  
 Collection of James J. and Laura Ross, New York

**MINKONDI: HUNTERS OF MALFEASANCE**

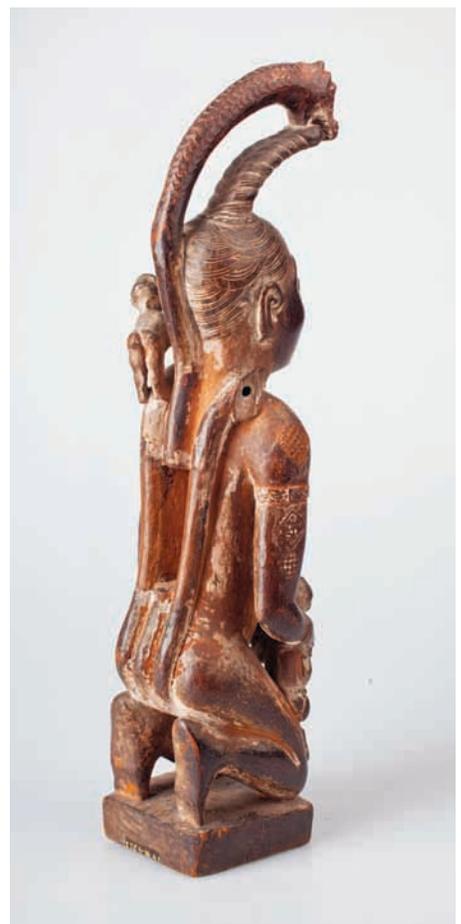
Formidable wood figures bristling with added hardware were the most influential class of *nkisi*. This broad category came to encompass more than thirty recorded varieties known in the interior as *nkondi*, or “hunter.” *Minkondi* were credited with assisting regional chiefs to address a range of concerns to maintain public order. The diverse array of blades, nails, screws, and other elements driven into such works constituted the signing of particular vows and the sealing of covenants (Fig. 1b). Disputants came before an *nkondi* in order to finalize a binding agreement or to formalize a pledge. The relevant parties touched their lips to the inserted iron element and tied matter associated with their person in the form of hair or cloth to physically imbue the *nkondi* with the verbally pronounced agreement. Failure to honor the accord was understood to result in retribution. *Minkondi* were believed to have the capacity to punish with life-threatening ailments and avenge those wronged. An *nkondi*’s imposing stature, aggressive stance, and penetrating and challenging gaze served as a deterrent to antisocial behavior. Failing its ability to preempt social transgressions it was carried to a crime site and deployed in the pursuit of a culprit and the reinstatement of terms of an agreement.

In Kongo society, trade relied on alliances that were ritually sanctified. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the increasing penetration of European trading companies into the interior combined with rival claims by French, Belgian, and Portuguese political interests had completely disrupted the systems in place that had protected Kongo interests. As regional trade intensified, a proliferation of *minkisi* designed to control and regulate trade were developed. Credited with the capacity to attack foes or foster peace, *minkondi* were dispatched to the front lines of conflict. After 1870, the *minkisi* known as Mabyala, Mavungu, and Mangaaka appear to have served as a last line of defense in an increasingly anarchic marketplace. In fulfilling that role, they made frequent appearances at markets. Belgian officer Alex Delcommune recalls the seizing of an *nkondi* in a war zone in the Boma region during the second half of the nineteenth century. In that instance local leaders were defeated in battle and Delcommune equated his removal of their *nkondi* with the mortal blow inflicted to their prestige.



(right)

**14a–b** Power figure: kneeling female with serpents and secondary figures (*nkisi*)  
Kongo peoples; Vili group, Cabinda, Angola; 19th century, inventoried 1885  
Wood, glass; 44 cm x 11.3 cm  
Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden, Netherlands (RV-1354-47)  
Photo: ©National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden



(below, l-r)

**15** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River region, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th century, inventoried 1906  
Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, pigment, cowrie shell, animal hide and hair (colobus monkey?); 106 cm x 45 cm x 44 cm  
Wereldmuseum Rotterdam (10633)

**16** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Kozo)  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River region, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th century  
Wood, iron, plant fiber, textile, resin, pigment; 36.2 cm x 68.6 cm x 26.7 cm  
Private collection



### THE RISE AND FALL OF MANGAAKA

The variety of *nkisi nkondi* known as Mangaaka was the undisputed “king and master among the formidable varieties developed along the coast” (De Campos 1960:35–36). This personification of an abstract force was associated with the arbitration of trade disputes. It was once the supreme adjudicator of conflicts and protector of communities across the Chiloango River region and the most ambitious and monumental sculptural form developed as a high point in Kongo expression (Fig. 15). Conceived as a presence that would inspire respect for that authority, Mangaaka might be operated with one or several adjuncts characterized as a female spouse and a janus canine (Fig. 16). Its displeasure





**17** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River  
region, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic  
of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th century,  
inventoried 1903  
Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pig-  
ment; 120 cm x 54 cm x 38.5 cm  
Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin  
(III C 17114)

Photo: bpk, Berlin / Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen/Photo: Martin Franken / Art Resource, NY

**18** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)  
Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River  
region, Cabinda, Angola; 19th century, inventoried  
1898  
Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pig-  
ment, cowrie shell, animal hide and hair; 118 cm  
Manchester Museum, University of Manchester  
(0.9321/1)



was manifested through symptoms of chest ailments and spitting blood (see Laman 1936:494, Bittremieux 1922:357). It likewise had the power to cure these acute physical ailments. Slightly under life-size, the carving of Mangaaka's figurative container required the talents and seasoned experience of a master sculptor. Because of the dramatic scale of the representation and the consistency of the iconography, the art historian Ezio Bassani (1977) had at one time proposed the extant works to be the work of a single atelier. Close study of the corpus, however, makes it evident they relate to a single genre but are in fact the work of a number of different artists. Only some twenty Mangaaka figures survive in institutional and private collections Europe and the United States. "Kongo: Power and Majesty" culminates with the opportunity to view fifteen of these together.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the Mangaaka figures is crowned with a chief's *mpu* cap (Fig. 17). The expression of the sensitively rendered face is intensely alert with the penetrating gaze accentuated through the addition of white enamel applied to the passages of the eyes. Around the perimeter of the chin, an armature of projecting metal elements served to hold in place a massive beard composed of organic matter. Directly below, the colossal body takes on an aggressive and intimidating stance. The chest is broad and expansive in contrast to the narrowed waist. While the torso tilts forward, veering into the space of those who stand before it, the hands are positioned on either hip in a posture of challenging assertiveness. The relatively abbreviated lower body was origi-

nally covered by a lower garment composed of raffia cloth. At the base, the feet are positioned raised on rectangular blocks. At its compositional core is a circular cavity in the area of the stomach. Once the sculpture was complete, this was the main receptacle for sacra added by the priest responsible for its consecration. The specialist had lined the interior of this cylindrical container with a resinous substance composed of tree sap and used it to define a series of distinct internal sub-compartments for this added matter. Once filled, the resin was used to seal it and a large shell was embedded within this exterior surface. As it was used over time, the figure's upper body became the site of additions of metal inserted to seal accords.

The example now in the Metropolitan can only be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century, when it entered the Hamburg collection of Lor Kegel-Konietzko. The provenance of related works indicates that they were collected in the Chiloango River region over the course of the late nineteenth century as this milieu became increasingly destabilized. Among these is the work now in Manchester acquired by a Hatton and Cookson trading agent, Arthur Clare, before 1898. In a subsequent letter from Clare in the museum file, he specifies he obtained it "from the Portuguese government for acting as intermediary in a palaver between them and the natives. It may be of interest to know that owing to the great abuses of the fetish priests the Portuguese Government determined some six years ago to destroy [all] the fetishes; but notwithstanding the destruction fetish-



(above, l-r)  
**19** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)  
 Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River  
 region, Cabinda, Angola; 19th century, inventoried  
 1903  
*Canarium schweinfurthii* Engl. wood, iron, resin,  
 ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pigment, cowrie shell;  
 116.8 cm x 47 cm x 36.2 cm  
 Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders Society Purchase,  
 Eleanor Clay Ford Fund for African Art (76.79)  
 Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts, USA / Eleanor Clay  
 Ford Fund for African Art / Bridgeman Images



**20** Power figure (*nkisi n'kondi*: Mangaaka)  
 Kongo peoples; Yombe group, Chiloango River  
 region, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic  
 of the Congo, or Cabinda, Angola; 19th century  
 Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pig-  
 ment, glass; 115 cm x 44 cm x 28 cm  
 Horstmann Collection

(below)  
**21** Oliphant (detail)  
 Kongo peoples; Kongo Kingdom, Democratic  
 Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, or  
 Angola; 16th century, inventoried 1887  
 Ivory; 63 cm  
 Museo Nazionale Preistorico ed Etnografico "Luigi  
 Pigorini," Rome (5290)

ism is just as it was then" (Mullen 1905:104). The work in the Museum for Central Africa at Tervuren in Belgium was given by a Belgian medical doctor Gaston David in 1912. The Mangaaka now in the Pigorini Museum in Rome was obtained by an Italian infantry captain Carmelo Scandino, who served in the Belgian Force Publique from 1903–1906. The acquisition of such important works by colonial figures suggests that what were intended to serve as a last line of defense fell into the hands of the very Europeans they failed to keep at bay.

While a number of the extant Mangaaka works appear complete, the majority have undergone interventions in which criti-

cal elements have been deliberately removed from the sculptural container. At one end of the spectrum are the virtually intact examples at Rotterdam, Tervuren, the Pigorini, and Field Museums. At the other extreme are those now at the Metropolitan and Detroit Museum of Art's collections, extensively denuded of original empowering matter contributed by the *nganga* (Fig. 19). Comparative examination of the surviving corpus over the last three years has revealed that while not so immediately apparent, most of the remaining examples have also undergone varying degrees of decommissioning. The methodical manner in which such operations were undertaken suggests that the original han-



dlers of the works likely intentionally sought to defuse them before they were released into the world but then went to lengths to conceal this. For instance in some cases, once cavities concealed under the eyes were emptied of consecrated matter, the enamel eyes were put back in position (Fig. 20).

A foundational precept of Kongo ideology since at least the sixteenth century is the division of the universe into two parallel realms of the living and the dead. Existence has been described as a cyclical journey across each of these halves. The creations of Kongo artists have embraced genres conceived to amplify the worldly prestige of their patrons as well as those relating to spiritual practices. All such Kongo manifestations of power were derived from the otherworld. The spirals of abstract geometric designs or figurative scenes delicately chiseled into the surface of precious ivory tusks express the notion of longevity (Fig. 21), while the massive power figures carved from wood like Mangaaka personify an abstract force of regional law enforcement and divine retribution (Fig. 1c).

The sustained scrutiny of a single artistic landmark, the Metropolitan's Mangaaka power figure, has led to the development of this particular exploration of African art. Rather than continue to think of it as simply an artifact of another time and place out of context, we will consider the security needs of regional leaders its patronage precipitated, the painstaking efforts that went into the thorough evacuation of its empowering matter, and the convergence of colonial and trade networks that served as conduits for the transfer of such works to the West. While the lack of documentation makes a detailed account impossible, the larger

historical context and scrutiny of the work itself offer intriguing possibilities. Might the denuded state of the Metropolitan Mangaaka in fact constitute an act of defiance? Instead of conceiving of the original Kongo owners of such works as defeated through their capture by outside interests as proposed by Delcommune, might they not have engaged in a subversive act of sabotage instead by relinquishing what was in fact a harmless decommissioned artifact into the world? If we follow this line of thinking, the three Mangaaka works that appear complete may represent the rare exceptions in which such interventions were not possible. How can we truly arrive at any assessment of this potential counternarrative unless we experience Mangaaka in its stripped and fully intact iterations? Finally, how can we fully comprehend the artistic license that Kongo sculptors took in developing this form of expression unless we situate this genre in relation to a fuller Kongo visual lexicon of power? The most talented Kongo artists of the day translated awesome grandeur and brutality into Mangaaka's fixed form and the height of elegant cultivation and compassion in female maternity figures that are a fraction the size. "Kongo: Power and Majesty" demonstrates throughout how lesser known Kongo creations that embody the full range of artistic sensibilities have informed the most ambitious achievements. We will see it for the first time as the outer limit of a tradition that became entangled with those of the West beginning in the fifteenth century.

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- 1 See Ravenstein 1901:2-14.
- 2 John Thornton, personal communication, August 18, 2014.
- 3 The king's name is also recorded as Ntinu Lukeni. See Thornton 2004:33.
- 4 The art historian Ezio Bassani's catalogue raisonné (2000) identifies some 450 sub-Saharan African works that entered European collections between 1400 and 1800. Eighty of these, 14% of his total, appear to be of Kongo origin.
- 5 The author would like to acknowledge Z.S. Strother, Riggio Professor for African Art, Columbia University, for dating this work based on changes in men's fashion c. 1880. See Strother forthcoming.
- 6 Trans. from the German by Mecka Baumeister.
- 7 The complete corpus of extant Mangaaka power figures include works in the following collections (inventory numbers are provided for those that are known): National Museums Liverpool, World Museum (29.5.00.21); Manchester Museum, University of Manchester (0.9321/1); Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (029623); Ethnographic Collection, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg

University, Mainz (2594); Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (III C 17114); Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig (MAf16828); Detroit Institute of Arts (76.79); Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini," Rome (75909); Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (EO.o.o.7777); Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam (10633); Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (A109979-Ac [91300]); Afrika Museum der Saint Petrus-Claver-Sodalität, Zug; Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (73.1963.o.175); Dallas Museum of Art (1996.184.FA); Horstmann Collection, Zug; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2008.30); Royal Geographical Society, London; Fondation Beyeler, Basel; Geographic Society, Lisbon; Private collection (for which see LaGamma 2000:31-32); National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (1407-14).

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