

The Art of the Kings



Illustrated on cover and on page 11
Benin Bronze Crocodile Plaque, Nigeria
16th to 17th century
H. 31cm

galerie patrik fröhlich

galerie patrik fröhlich
obere zäune 24
ch-8001 zürich
+41 44 242 8900
patrikfroehlich@swissonline.ch



galerie patrik fröhlich

The Art of the
Kings
23.2. – 24.3. 2018

Illustrated as frontispiece:
Some history of the artworks

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With this thematic exhibition to be held in our gallery in Zürich, Switzerland from February 23rd to March 24th 2018, we focus on the royal art of Africa. These courtly objects that arrived often quite early in Europe and were sought after by museums and distinguished private collections alike were especially made for a king, his family, or his near political and cultural environment. Thereby, the exhibition and its accompanying online catalogue will explore the aesthetics that were connected to the important African kingdoms, such as the Benin Empire or the courts of the Grassland in Cameroon.

These mighty royal dynasties produced quite naturally important and beautiful works of art, which awarded its owner with prestige, protection and legitimation.

This is the *Art of the Kings*.



The Benin Empire

AN IMPORTANT BENIN BRONZE CROCODILE PLAQUE, NIGERIA

16th to 17th century

H. 31cm

Provenance:

William Downing Webster, London

Pitt-Rivers Collection, acquired on December 5th, 1898

Mathias Komor, New York, USA

James G. Hanes Jr., North Carolina, USA

Publication:

Pitt-Rivers, *Catalogues of his Second Collection, 1882-1898*, Vol. 6, 1898, p. 1801

Pitt-Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin – collected by Lieutenant-General*

Pitt-Rivers, 1900, n° 295

Sotheby's London, *Primitive Art*, 8th July 1974, lot 114



Dating to the period between 1550 and 1640 this highly important and beautiful Benin bronze plaque represents the head of a crocodile – a remarkably rare type of which only about 20 are known, most of them in the collections of Museums, among them the British Museum in London, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, or the National Museum in Lagos. It was first published in 1900 in what is one of the first monographs on works of art from Benin and since then is a seminal book that had much influence on the perception and appreciation of the art from the Benin kingdom. In this book – which presented the collection of *Antique Works of Art from Benin – collected by Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers* – this magnificent bronze plaque was wrongly described as the elongated head of a horse, an apparent misunderstanding, which was corrected as early as 1919 by nobody less than Felix von Luschan, the renowned German expert on art from the Benin kingdom.

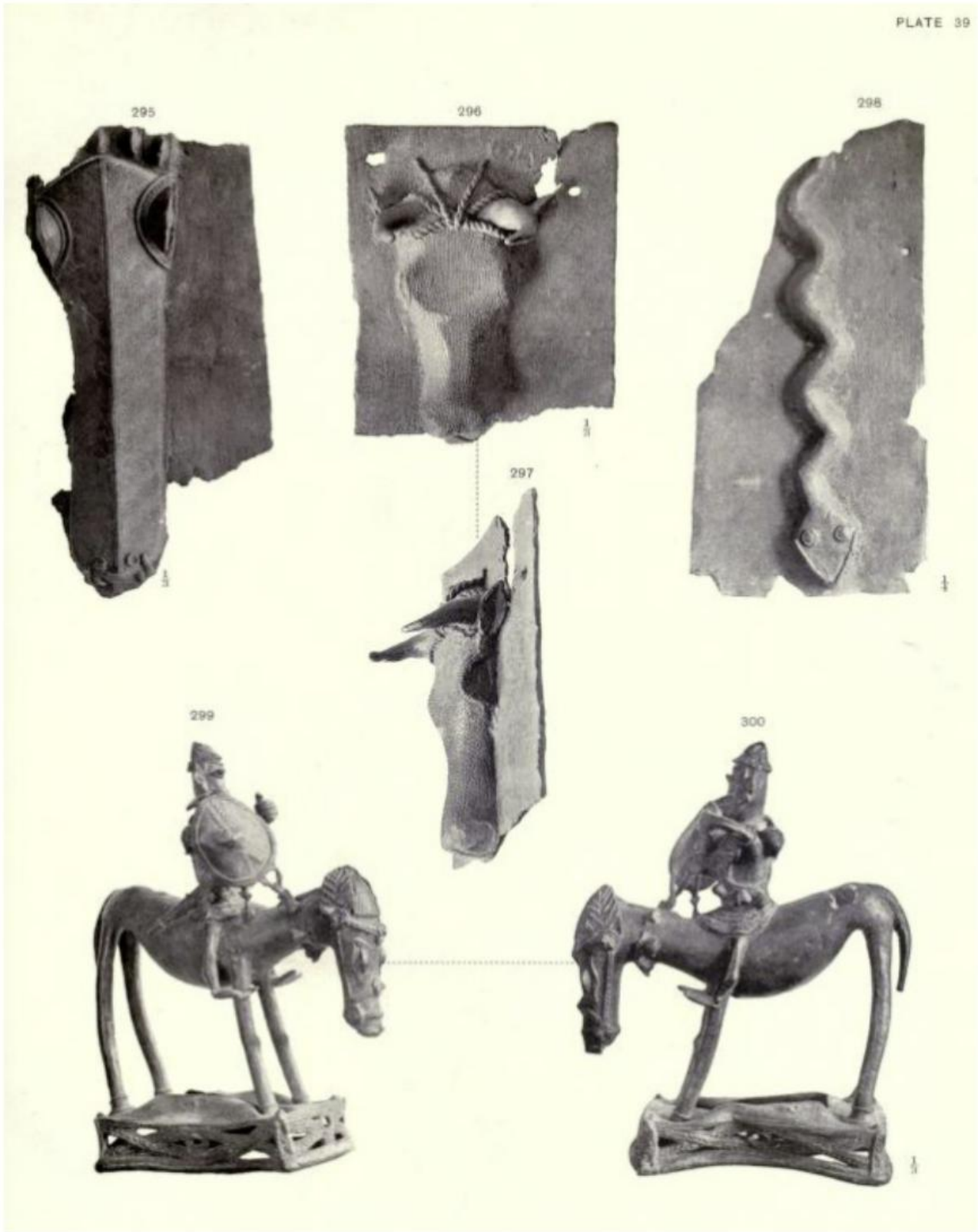
In his preeminent publication *Die Altertümer von Benin* he included this important Benin bronze plaque into the small corpus of plaques depicting the head of a crocodile while emphasizing its outstanding artistic quality:

„Der Ordnung wegen muß auch erwähnt werden, daß der ganz besonders schöne und typische Krokodilskopf Rushmore, P. R. 295, als «head of a horse, very much elongated» beschrieben ist. Das ist ganz zweifellos ein Irrtum.“

“As a matter of form, the exceptionally beautiful and typical head of a crocodile from Rushmore, P.R. 295, there described as «head of a horse, very much elongated», needs to be mentioned. This description [as head of a horse] is without any doubt a misapprehension.” Felix von Luschan, Die Altertümer von Benin, p. 273.

The crocodile was in the royal art of the Benin empire an important symbol, that linked the world of the water with the world on land. In the mythology of the Benin empire the king “*oba*” found his counterpart in the god of the ocean “*olokun*”, who was in charge of the crocodiles. That is why such heads of a crocodile can appear alone as in this example, as well as next to plaques depicting the *oba* himself.

Acquired by Pitt-Rivers in the end of the 19th century from the English dealer William Downing Webster, this important Benin bronze crocodile plaque dates to the cultural heyday of the Benin Empire whose political and cultural decline had already begun in the second half of the 17th century. When in the end of the 15th century the role of the *oba* changed from a sole warrior king to a sacral sovereign, a period of important cultural growth had started. In the time between the mid-16th and the mid-17th century these famous Benin bronze plaques were casted on an order from the king for the palace, among them was this well-known, rare and highly beautiful bronze plaque of a crocodile.



Pitt-Rivers, *Antique Works of Art from Benin* – collected by Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers, 1900



The Congo and its royal art



This Kuba cup – belonging to the relatively rare corpus of small, round cups that were used at the royal court to either to mix a powder called *twool* gained from the heartwood of a local tree that was used to dye the prestige weavings or to contain and store oil – is a highly beautiful example of this style, dating back to the 19th century. With a sweating patina that shows the long usage by a high-ranking member of society, it was a cherished object, used to preserve the precious oil. With a long and well-documented provenance that includes some of the most respected collectors of African art in their time, it is rightfully an object of desire.

Its beauty is consisting of the characteristic Kuba pattern that decorates the wall, the rich patina that is deeply soaked into the wood and the handle in form of a delicate bust. With the visible torso, the anonymous artist succeeded in creating a compact miniature figure of an intense presence coming out of the perfectly round bowl which is built flawlessly around the void.

A KUBA CUP, DRC

19th century

H. 7cm

Provenance:

Dr. Stéphen Chauvet, Paris

Philippe Ratton, 1975, Paris

Hubert Goldet, Paris

Morris Pinto, New York

Myron Kunin, New York

Publication:

De Ricqlès, *Vent de la Collection Hubert Goldet*, 2001, lot 531

This remarkable Dondo container for gunpowder – collected *in situ* between 1882 and 1904 by Robert Visser and thereafter remaining for almost a century in the possession of his family – is a highly compelling work of art. As in the Congo of the 19th century the ownership and storage of gunpowder was of utter importance, it is of no surprise that the container itself was a highly significant object of prestige belonging to a distinguished member of society.

The upper part of this gunpowder container embodies a spirit-being, which is protecting the precious content. The under part perfectly forms the continuation of the body and is at the same time richly decorated with a portrayal of a tale and below that with the motif of the Kongo rosette, which can also be found on other objects that are usually linked to Kongo royal power (see: *Marc Felix, White Gold, Black Hands, Vol. 1, p. 111*). Very interesting is further that a similar lower part of a container is attached to a Dondo nail fetish collected in the end of the 19th century, thus showing that these were cherished objects that could enhance the power of a *nkisi nkondi* figure (see: *Raoul Lehuard, Art Bakongo, Vol. 1, p. 169*).

The sensibility the sculptor achieved in the calm facial expression, the fine and detailed hands and the very accomplished portrayal of the tale shows that this work of art was created by a master carver. From his hand or the hand of another artist from the same regional school is a similar statuette, donated to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro – today better known as the Musée Quai Branly – in 1888 by Prince Roland Bonaparte. Both of these statues show a related artistic vocabulary, especially in the facial features such as the nose or the mouth, as well as a similar treatment of the hands (see: *Jacques Blazy, L'Idéal Féminin dan L'Art Africain, p. 49*). With the multilayered patina that originates from long usage over decades, this Dondo container for gunpowder is a masterpiece of highest artistic quality, an outstanding work of art from the Congo.

A DONDO CONTAINER FOR GUNPOWDER, REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO 19th century

Provenance:

Collected *in situ* by Robert Visser, before 1904
Thence remained in the collection of the family





**A royal path:
The thrones of the Luba Kingdom
and of the Chokwe people**



This royal throne from the Luba kingdom, formerly in the collection of Jacques Kerchache and Michel Gaud, is a beautiful work of art and a rare example where two female caryatids hold the seat. Luba royal thrones acted as receptacle for a king's spirit and were not functional seats per se, but rather important objects of royal standing. Combining political, symbolic and religious attributes, these royal thrones are among the most important symbols of Luba kingship, only used during relevant ceremonies.

The two female figures that support this royal throne – both embodying women of aristocratic lineage as can be seen from the elaborate scarification marks that adorn their body – are very fine carved and of impressive posture, made by an excellent Luba artist. The underlining symbolism – two Luba women of noble descent are holding the seat and thereby the owner of the throne himself – gives both legitimation and status to its royal proprietor.

A LUBA ROYAL THRONE OF TWO FEMALE CARYATID FIGURES, DRC
H. 44cm

Provenance:

Jacques Kerchache, Paris
Michel Gaud, Nice
Pace Primitive, New York

Publication:

Pace Primitive, *Couples in African Art*, 2003, n° 35 and back cover

Royal thrones from the Luba kingdom with an animal as support are very rare and even more so is the depiction of an elephant. Nevertheless, there are some stools and other objects in the art of the Luba representing elephants, which suggest that this animal played a significant role within their society, most likely in connection with royal initiation rites, as it is common for sovereign to avail oneself of the symbolism of the fauna.

This throne from the collection of May Weber – the founder and president of the now defunct May Weber Museum of Cultural Arts in Chicago, as well as the president of the Primitive Arts Society of Chicago from 1983 to 1985 – shows a young elephant with short teeth and a short trunk. A related stool, in the collection of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, depicts a similar, although slightly older elephant, whose teeth and trunk are already a bit longer and whose seat is not directly fixed on the elephant. Notwithstanding, it is a clearly related stool, which certainly comes from the same region as the May Weber Luba throne (see: *Doran Ross, Elephant – The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture*, p. 307).

May Weber bought this royal throne in 1979 from Baron Freddy Rolin – the Belgian dealer who transferred his gallery to New York in the 1970s – in his *Luba-Hemba* exhibition. This was the first American exhibition solely dedicated to the art of the Luba and the Hemba and consisted of, as Freddy Rolin wrote in the foreword of the accompanying catalogue, a highly selective and personal choice of objects, with a greater emphasis on aesthetically and culturally important pieces than on a more comprehensive view. Thus, it was at this historic exhibition that made the art of the Luba and the Hemba accessible to the American public, where May Weber had the possibility to buy this important Luba artwork.

What makes this Luba elephant stool – of whose long usage the old, local restoration on the leg and the seat prove – to an extraordinary work of art is its juvenile vitality, endowed by the powerful, yet reserved posture of the animal. The echoing of the trunk in the tail, the way in which the top of the head is repeated by the geometrical shoulders, as well as the characteristic deep, black patina – termed *Luba skin* by William Fagg – are further proof of the high quality of this artwork. In addition, the height of this elephant stool is exactly the same as the diameter of the seat. This detail, not visible at first sight, is nevertheless highly important for its overall compactness.

A LUBA ROYAL THRONE OF AN ELEPHANT, DRC

H. 24.8cm

Provenance:

Baron Freddy Rolin (1919–2001), New York
May Weber (1918–2012), Chicago

Published:

F. Rolin & CO., INC., *Luba Hemba*, New York, 1979, no. 9
Robbins and Nooter, *African Art in American Collections, Survey 1989*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989 n° 1137



This Luba *mboko* – used to store kaolin, which was for the Luba a highly important substance that allowed communication with the realm of the spirits – is a very fine artwork that merges two iconographic traditions. On one hand, it is a bowl bearing female figure and on the other hand it represents the female caryatid of a royal throne, whereas the seat becomes a wide basin used to store kaolin. Thus, as a work of art that is in association with the royal throne, the caryatid seat and the bowl bearer become here somewhat interchangeable. A related object that shares the same underlying concept is in the collection of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (see: *Luc de Heusch, Objects – Signs of Africa, p. 118*).

Placed on the palace threshold it belonged to a Luba chief and served as connection between the sovereign and the world of the spirits. Hence, a significant ritual and royal object that was once in the collection of the Musée Missionnaire des Orphelins d'Auteuil, it is a beautiful, vibrant artwork, very refined and detailed, both from the front and from the back. Moreover, in 1970 this *mboko* was part of the seminal exhibition *Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika* held in the Kunsthaus Zürich that was curated by Elsy Leuzinger.

A LUBA *MBOKO*, DRC
H. 44cm

Provenance:
Musée Missionnaire des Orphelins d'Auteuil
Galerie Künzi, Solothurn
Private collection, Switzerland

Exhibition:
Elsy Leuzinger, *Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika*, Kunsthaus Zürich, 1970, W32





Wealth acquired through the trading of ivory and rubber led to the expansion of the Chokwe kingdom in the second half of the 19th century. It is in that time that some groups – who always have been quite independent – left what is today Angola and went into the Kwilu–Kasai region in the Congo. It was a chief of one of those groups that owned this beautiful caryatid stool. The pose of the female figure – seated with the elbows on the upraised knees and the head cradling in the hands – is characteristic for the artistic vocabulary of the Chokwe and was associated with elders and people in deep thought. Further, it was also the typical burial position of chiefs and important members of society. Thus, embodying the spirit being of a woman of high social status – as also can be seen from the *masoji* scarification marks beyond the eyes which represent tears – it is a very sensitively carved Chokwe caryatid chief's stool of great quality and considerable age.

A CHOKWE CARYATID CHIEF'S STOOL, KWILU–KASAI, DRC
H. 45 cm

Provenance:
Morris Pinto, New York

Published:
Sotheby's London, *The Pinto Collection*, 1977, lot 103



**The Courts of Cameroon:
Three objects from the Hans
Röthlingshöfer
Collection**

A BALI ELEPHANT MASK, NORTHWESTERN GRASLAND, CAMEROON
19th century
H. 67cm

Provenance:

Collected *in situ* by the German medical officer Dr. Zupitza in 1902
Linden Museum, Stuttgart (inventory number: 32934), deaccessioned
Hans Röthlingshöfer, Basel

Publication:

Georg Buschan, *Illustrierte Völkerkunde*, Stuttgart, 1922, p. 538
Gert Kutscher, *Exotische Masken*, Stuttgart, 1953, n° 29



reihen, wobei alle Beziehungen nach dem Osten weisen. Bei d
Buschongo ist der Totemismus nur mehr andeutungsweise erhalt
und Exogamie in neuerer Zeit nicht immer befolgt; auch bei d
Bakongo sind totemistische Anschauungen noch belegbar.



Abb. 238. Häuptlingsstöcke und religiöse Holz-
schnitzereien. 1 Geschnitzter Sultansstock, Urua,
Kongo; 2 Häuptlingsstock, Emonbo, Yaunde, Kamerun;
3 Yujukopf, Landschaft Boki; 4 Ahnenfigur, Bassa-
gebiet, Kamerun; 5 Holzfigur, Schimpanse, Bamum,
Kamerun; 6 Tanzhut mit Perlstickerei, Bagango;
7 Tanzmaske, Elefantenkopf, Bali, Kamerun; 8 Tanz-
maske, Rotbüffel darstellend, Fongu. (Etwa $\frac{1}{16}$ n. Gr.)
(Lindenmuseum, Stuttgart)

Im ganzen nördlichen Kongogebiet, von den Ababua bis
den Babangi, zerfallen die totemistischen Stämme in konsequen
Unterordnung in exogame Vatersippen; dagegen bestehen
den Bakongo und in Loango Vererbung des Totems vom Va
und mutterrechtliche exogame Sippengliederung ohne Bezug neb
einander. Im südlichen Kongogebiet sind die Verhältnisse ungekli
wohl aber denen der Maschukulumbwe usw. ähnlich (s. u.),

This remarkable elephant mask from the Bali kingdom – which is situated in the northwestern region of the Grassland of Cameroon – is one of the earliest collected masks of this type. The mask, as the representation of the elephant, had the exclusive status of a royal icon and when danced during funerals or important festivities there was a high privilege inherent to that dance. The symbolism of the elephant was also found on other royal objects, such as on the royal chair from the collection of the British Museum in London that was carved by the king himself and collected in 1925 by Frank Christol and depicts, among others, the head of an elephant that is strikingly similar to this mask (see: *Pierre Harter, Arts Anciens du Cameroun, p. 185*).

The earliest examples of this important type of mask entered German collections shortly after the turn of the 20th century, as is the case for this highly beautiful example. Collected in 1901 or 1902 by the German medical officer Dr. Zupitza in Bali, this mask might even be the first collected example. Dr. Zupitza – who was in Cameroon together with Hans Glauning who himself was a collector of important objects – later gifted the mask to the Linden Museum in Stuttgart. Georg Buschan included it in his illustrated ethnology of 1922 and in 1953 – at that time still in the possession of the museum – the scholar Gert Kutscher included it into a careful publication on masks from Africa, Oceania and the Americas. When later deaccessioned from the museum, it entered the collection of Hans Röthlingshöfer from Bale. In Gert Kutschers publication of 1953 all objects had been carefully selected from the collections of three major German museums and were well described just as this highly impressive elephant mask:

„Die Stuttgarter Maske, die auf dem Scheitel getragen wurde, besticht die natürliche Selbstverständlichkeit, mit der hier die große konkave Fläche der Ohren und die nach innen gebogenen Stoßzähne gegeneinander gestellt sind.“

“The mask from Stuttgart, which was worn on top of the head, captivates with the natural implicitness in which the big concave area of the ears and the inwards bent teeth are posed against each other”
Gert Kutscher, Exotische Masken, p. 7

Hans Röthlingshöfer – from whose collection the three works of art form the royal courts of Cameroon depicted in this catalogue are – was a known collector of African art in Switzerland. He had started collecting African art in the late 1940s, early 1950s and was well connected with other collectors, dealers and scholars; among his friends was the renowned scholar Frans Olbrechts. With these contacts and a trained eye, he was able to assemble a far-reaching collection, many of the objects coming from old and important German and Belgian provenances.

This Bafum prestige stool is a beautiful exemplar of the courtly art of Cameroon. In the characteristic style of the Bafum kingdom – with the pointed faces, the acuminate coiffure of the male figure and the big feet that make use of the whole supporting area – it is an expressionistic work of art of striking presence. Three female and one male figure are holding the seat, which belonged to a high-ranking official. As a caryatid stool, it was the foremost prestige object and a symbol of royal office because the act of sitting represented both command and confidence. Each king owned several stools, some inherited from his predecessors, which directly linked him to his royal ancestors. Hence, to own such a stool meant for its noble owner to be awarded with both prestige and legitimation.

A BAFUM PRESTIGE STOOL, CAMEROON
H. 39cm

Provenance:
Hans Röthlingshöfer, Basel





Smoking is widespread in the Grassland of Cameroon and shared by men and women of all social classes. However, the type of pipe used was different. Whereas simple examples had a small, non-figurative head, members of the court used more refined pipes. This example is such an object with the bowl made from clay representing a human being, which is very carefully sculpted with every line set by highest precision. The protruding mouth, the voluminous forehead and the slight movement are fine details that show its striking artistic quality. Further, the wooden stem is carefully covered by a metal design, which is characteristic of the more refined pipes.

Collected before 1914 by Adolf Diehl, it is also a well-documented work of art that Hans Röthlingshöfer acquired from the renowned dealer Mathias Lemaire from Amsterdam. Adolf Diehl was an active and early German collector in Cameroon. Next to the Umlauff Museum in Hamburg – whose inscription in white ink can be seen on the back of the bowl and on the stem – he sold many objects to the Linden Museum in Stuttgart and the Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig. With pronounced traces of long usage, this carefully and elaborately made pipe that once belonged to a high member of the courtly society of Bali, it is an exceptionally fine object.

A BALI PIPE, NORTHERN GRASSLAND, CAMEROON
H. 37.5cm

Provenance:

Collected *in situ* by Adolf Diehl before 1914
Völkerkundliches Institut und Museum J. F. G. Umlauff, Hamburg
Galerie Mathias Lemaire, Amsterdam
Hans Röthlingshöfer, Basel

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- Marc Felix, *White Gold, Black Hands*, Vol. 1, 2010

Text: Theodor Fröhlich
Photos: Katrin Fröhlich
Online Catalogue for the
exhibition held in Zürich
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Preview for our upcoming Summer Exhibition →
A Songye power figure, DRC
H. 94.5cm

Provenance:
Galerie Maria Wyss, Basel
Private collection, St. Gallen





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