

The Song of a Bird



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Illustrated as frontispiece and on page 18
Bamun Figure, Cameroon
Wood; thick, black patina
Height: 58cm

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There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists. With this sentence, E. H. Gombrich starts his classic book: *The Story of Art* from which the following quote is taken:

Picasso himself denied that he was making experiments. He said he did not search, he found. He mocked at those who wanted to understand his art. "Everyone wants to understand art. Why not try to understand the song of a bird?"

Of course he was right. No painting can be fully "explained" in words. But words are sometimes useful pointers, they help to clear away misunderstandings and can give us at least an inkling of the situation in which the artist finds himself.

Within tribal art, where the identification of the individual artist is difficult and only recently has advanced, most of the artists remain anonymous. All that is available is the work of art itself, *the song of a bird*. Hence it is the acceptance of unexplainable beauty that makes it possible to access African and Oceanic art without knowledge of the often secret and only scarcely available information about the background of the objects.

However, as E. H. Gombrich states, when researched, the situation in which an artwork was created – be it during a specific ritual or the more general system in which the artist found himself – can help to avoid misunderstandings. Yet, even without this information, it is the inexplicable magic of the objects that makes them to intrinsic works of art, to *the song of a bird*.

Luba Stool, DRC
Wood; nails, black patina, native repairs with iron brackets
Height: 24.8cm

Provenance:
Baron Freddy Rolin, New York
May Weber, Chicago

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



Luba stools 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. As written in the book entitled *Elephant: The Animal and its Ivory in African Culture* research, conducted inter alia by Dr. Joseph Maes as early as 1924, indicates that an “elephant society” existed among some Luba subgroups. However, until today there are not many details known about the concrete role of this elephant society.

This Luba stool from the collection of May Weber (1918–2012) – 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 – is illustrated in the book *African Art in American Collections*. A related stool, in the collection of the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren¹, depicts a similar, although older elephant, whose teeth and trunk are slightly 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 elephant stool. In contrast to the Luba stool of the Tervuren Museum, the elephant in this stool is younger, which is not only apparent from the short teeth and trunk, but also from the more juvenile way in which he stands and holds the seat.

May Weber bought this stool in 1979 from Baron Freddy Rolin (1919–2001) – 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.

¹ Inventory number: E0.1960.39.82



Luba Gourd Figure, *kabwelulu*, DRC
Wood; gourd, sweating patina, shells, blue bead, lizard skin, old label
Height: 27.5cm



This beautiful *kabwelulu* gourd figure combines a gourd and its rich magical components with the calm presence of a classical Luba sculpture. Perfect in its condition with all attributes still preserved, the contrast of the black, oily patina of the figure and the different magical charges creates a fascinating artwork of tremendous grace. With the top of the head hollowed out and thereby connecting the figure to the gourd, an entity is established in which the interaction of the different parts intensify each other. Used during initiation rites, in which magical charge was over and over added, the sculpture itself gained power with every new attribute.

Unlikely enduring time without losing magical material or even the gourd itself, intact Luba *kabwelulu* figures are very rare. However, to understand the concept of these figures, it is necessary to comprehend them in their entirety, especially as *kabwelulu* figures evolved with each time used. With this *kabwelulu*, this concerns the figure itself – whose oily, sweating patina only emerged from long and sustained usage – as well as the gourd. The materials attached to the gourd – *objets trouvés* coming from a broad environment – were added over the long span of time this Luba sculpture was ritually used and each of them was carefully chosen to enrich its potency. It is the thereby achieved contrast, like sculpture–gourd or sweating patina–smooth surface that leads to the captivating composition of this magnificent Luba artwork.



Fang Figure, *N'Tumu*, Northern Gabon, Region of Oyem/ Bitam
Wood; metal, rattan, black, partially sweating patina
Height: 51cm

Provenance:

Paul Guillaume (1893 – 1934), Paris
Louis Marcoussis (1883 – 1941), Paris
René Rasmussen, Paris
Hélène and Henri Kamer, Paris and New York
Paul Tishman, New York
J. J. Klejman, New York
Milton and Frieda Rosenthal, New York (acquired 1977)

Published:

René Rasmussen, *Art Nègre ou le Salut par les Sauvages*, Paris, 1951, p. 30.
Musée de l'Homme, *Arts Connus et Méconnus de l'Afrique Noire: Collection Paul Tishman*, Paris, 1966, no. 92.
Louis Perrois, *La Statuaire Fan Gabon*, Paris, 1972, p. 75, fig. 37, pl. 11, no. 105.
Susan M. Vogel, *African Sculpture: The Shape of Surprise*, New York, 1980, p. 46, cat. 117.

Exhibited:

Musée de l'Homme, Paris, *Arts Connus et Méconnus de l'Afrique Noire: Collection Paul Tishman*, 1966.
C. W. Post Art Gallery, Greenvale, New York, *African Sculpture: The Shape of Surprise*, 1980.



This highly important Fang reliquary *byéri* statue, illustrated in Louis Perrois' book *statuaire fan* as the representation of the *N'Tumu* style and as that widely reproduced in various catalogues and exhibitions about the Fang, is without doubt one of the most iconic examples of this great style of African art.

It passed through the hands of several of the greatest collectors and dealers of African art in the 20th century; the first recorded owner of this *N'Tumu* was Paul Guillaume, one of the most prestigious dealers of African art between the two wars and also one of the first to advocate that African art was one of the great art forms of the world. He sold this Fang to Louis Marcoussis, the cubist artist, who was part of the circle around Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire.

Art Nègre ou le Salut par les Sauvages

After Paul Guillaume and Louis Marcoussis, René Rasmussen was the third known owner of this Fang statue. As one of the most versed dealers of his time, he is well known for bringing together objects of exceptional quality. Intimate with the Surrealist movement, Paul Éluard and André Breton often visited his gallery during the time he produced his first and only publication about African art. *Le Soleil Noir – Série Art*, a French publisher known for its carefully done art editions, issued it. Its editor, who also wrote the introduction – François di Dio – was close to both Paul Éluard and René Rasmussen.

The book – *Art Nègre ou le Salut par les Sauvages* – from 1951, was a remarkably far-reaching publication, as it brings together 32 objects of highest aesthetical quality and a seminal preface about the significance of African art, ending with the now fulfilled wish to see African art in the Louvre. One of the 32 depicted *chef d'oeuvres* is this superb Fang *N'Tumu*, an artwork in perfect equilibrium. Because all components are balanced with each other, the necessary stability, which allows the head to expand its presence, is achieved. The poise of the body and the beauty of the head – constituted by the sublime coiffure, the black, impenetrable patina and the subtle concavity of the face – endow the vitality of the figure in and of itself.

Subsequently, the *N'Tumu* was sold by René Rasmussen and came to Hélène Leloup who sold it to Paul Tishman. In 1966 the *N'Tumu* was exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme, where – as stated in the preface – a selection of the most beautiful, representative and rare objects of the Tishman collection were shown. Further it was included in the accompanying catalogue *Arts Connus et Méconnus de l'Afrique Noire: Collection Paul Tishman*. In 1977 the Fang statue, which was then in the possession of the New York dealer J.J. Klejman, was sold to Milton and Frieda Rosenthal. As this Fang not only represents the *N'Tumu* style, but is also an artwork strikingly autonomous and perfect in form, it is no surprise that this masterpiece of African art was part of distinguished collections and included by René Rasmussen – legendary for his excellent sense for great aesthetical quality – in his carefully produced publication.



Bamum Figure, Cameroon
Wood; thick, black patina
Height: 58cm

Provenance:
Maria Wyss, Basel

Published:
Pierre Harter, *Arts Anciens du Cameroun*, Arnouville, 1986, p. 160, no. 201.



In this highly exceptional statue – a centerpiece of Bamum art – all parts and the corresponding lines are in perfect harmony with each other. From the gallery of Maria Wyss – one of the earlier and significant tribal art experts in Switzerland – this work of art was part of Pierre Harters' classic monograph *Arts Anciens du Cameroun*, where he described it in the following manner:

Le meilleur exemple de ce style est la très ancienne statuette féminine de la collection E. Winizki [who in fact did not own the sculpture, but took the picture for Maria Wyss], où le dos du nez est perforé transversalement (cl. 201). L'aspect massif des épaules et des membres supérieurs, associé à une équilibre parfait des lignes, donne à l'ensemble une puissance étonnante, ce qu'accentue encore le mouvement des mains serrées contre la poitrine.

Ce même geste se retrouve chez l'homme d'un couple de figurines rapportées en 1896 par Bumiller, la femme prenant de son côté une attitude de soumission, les deux bras pendants. Etroitement liées par un rotin attachent un bras et une jambe, ces statuettes étaient fixées au pied d'un lit pour protéger un mariage. On peut on rapprocher l'émouvant fragment du Rietberg Museum, sans doute du même artiste.

Thus Pierre Harter – the leading specialist in the arts of Cameroon – accentuated and compared this female Bamum figure to a stylistically similar couple, collected in 1896 by Theodor Bumiller, whose widow donated his collection in 1920 to the Reiss-Museum in Mannheim, as well as to the famous Bamum figure from the collection of the Museum Rietberg, Zürich. The latter was donated to the museum by Eduard von der Heydt, who bought it at the legendary André Breton and Paul Éluard auction of 1931, where he paid a record price. Thus, within the small corpus of Bamum figures, of which these three figures build the core, Pierre Harter places this remarkable Bamum statue at the top.

The Bamum figure depicts a noble, highborn woman, recognizable by the pierced back of the nose, looking slightly upward – a posture intensified by the gesture of the hands and the curve of the lower legs. The surprising equilibrium of the statue, achieved by the subtle harmony of the lines – as pointed out by Pierre Harter above – shows the great artistic skill of the anonymous artist. Exemplary for this subtle harmony are the eyes. As they consist of several corresponding lines, echoing each other, they bring forth an astonishing vividness. The thick, black patina further endows the strong presence of this superb work of art. Thus this statue – one of the oldest existing figures from the Bamum kingdom and exceptional in its artistic quality – was rightfully described by Pierre Harter as the highlight of the corpus.



Kongo Power Figure, DRC

19th century

Wood; porcelain eyes, remains of magical charge, old patina

Height: 30.5cm

Provenance:

Allan Stone, New York



This Kongo sculpture, almost fully stripped of its magical charge and thus revealing the pristine work of art created by the anonymous artist, has the strong presence expected of a power figure. Extremely elaborate in its details, like the fine lines of the chest, the compelling curved arms and the protruding mouth, this figure is perfect in form. The thick, black patina – revealing the long ritual usage of this Kongo figure – contrasts with the shimmer of the white porcelain eyes. Thereby an intensity of the face is achieved, which is further deepened by the dynamic posture of the sculpture, making it a fascinating artwork.

Its previous owner was Allan Stone, the New York dealer and expert on Abstract Expressionism, also well known for assembling one of the world's most distinguished group of power figures from the Congo. It is thus no surprise that this sculpture – combining vigorous rhythm with well-balanced strength – was included in his famous collection.

The creation of such a power figure always needed two people, each of them fulfilling an entirely different function. The first one was the creator of the object itself, thus the artist responsible for the formal aspects. Further, in order that the object established its ritual function, it was necessary to charge it with magical materials. This was done by the *nganga* – hence the second person involved – responsible for the social, religious and magic component of the artwork. Thereby the artist himself could concentrate on the creation of the sculptural solution of the artwork alone and was liberated from the transition of the figure into a ritual object. With only traces of this ritual additions left, this Kongo power figure reveals is the work of art in and of itself – the sculpture how it was created by the artist. Combined with the superb patina, reflecting decades of usage, this power figure is an intense work of art.



Songye Belande Figure, *nkisi*, DRC
Wood; nail, animal tooth, partially sweating patina
Height: 26cm

Provenance:
Charles Ratton, Paris



Strong in presence, this highly accomplished Songye *nkisi* sculpture combines an alluring expressivity with an elaborate and precise harmony. Its particular parts are rhythmically composed and interact with each other as in the coiffure or in the knees – where the artist used an abstract geometrical form to mirror the shape of the stomach and the buttocks. The distinctive open mouth, characteristic of the *belande* style, shows the teeth and makes space for magical charge. Further magical material was placed in the legs, in the back, as well as in the top of the head. Between the feet, an animal tooth remains. Hence the sculpture, whose various attributes constitute a potent *nkisi* figure, possesses an expressive appearance that makes this very old Songye sculpture to a significant artwork.

Coming from Charles Ratton, one of the pioneering and legendary dealers in African art, it is a sculpture in the Songye *belande* style, which was based in the southern boarder of the Songye territory and is recognizable by its characteristic physiognomy. The smaller Songye sculptures, such as this one, have been used by individuals or by individual families. Thus owned by a small group of people, such *nkisi* sculptures were used for various tasks, such as protection from dangers, curing illnesses or assistance during hunting. Proof of the long ritual usage of this figure are not only the above mentioned various magical attributes, but also the oily – partly sweating – patina. These traces of long ritual use make this Songye sculpture not only to a work of art, but also to a fascinating power object.



In African art similar ritual functions did not entail similar formal solutions. Thus there is no implication of the usage in the form. In this sense Kota reliquary figures – fulfilling similar ritual functions as the Fang reliquary *byéri* statues but of opposed formal solutions – are a highly interesting formal creation and among the most surprising and iconic inventions of African art. This well-proportioned Kota, where all forms are balanced with each other, offers all the classic qualities of a Kota reliquary figure, such as the deep concavity of the face, the combination and contrast of the red copper and the yellow brass and interaction of the oval face with the sides and the crescent.

However, extraordinary decisions of the anonymous artist gave this Kota its distinctive appearance. Strikingly elaborate in its details, like the elegant shape of the lozenge, or the overlapping edges of the crescent, it is a very carefully done work of art. The quality of this Kota figure is further constituted by astonishing and unexpected solutions, among them the bold mouth – whose teeth lie perfectly in the continuation of the ornamentation of the sides. This mouth gives the Kota figure an aggressivity, seldom seen on Kotas with a concave face. The rejection of the use of metal strips within the face intensifies the expressiveness of the face further, as the focus lies unbroken on the composition of the figure as a whole. This balanced unity thus constitutes the strong presence of this beautiful Kota reliquary figure.

Kota Reliquary Figure, Gabon
Wood; copper, brass, pigments
Height: 59cm

Provenance:
Collected in the early 1930s by the Missionnaires d'Afrique
Given to Dr. André Mary and Lucienne Mary in 1935



Songye Axe, *malléla*, DRC
19th century
Iron; copper, wood, fibers
Height: 39cm, Width: 38cm, Length: 43.5 cm

Provenance:
Allen Wilcox, 1958, Australia



Prestigious, ceremonial *malléla* axes with the characteristic blades of tremendous size are extremely rare. Only around ten are known worldwide. Thereof two are in the Tervuren Royal Museum of Central Africa¹; one is in the Wereld Museum in Rotterdam² and one in the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva. Because of their rarity, it is difficult to determine from where exactly these axes derive. Often Songye-Sanga or Luba-Kalanga is suggested. However the axe from the Wereld Museum in Rotterdam has a handle in the style of the Pende. Thus, describing the axe in the collection of the Barbier-Mueller Museum, Jan Elsen has suggested a Songye-Sanga or Luba-Kalanga origin for this type of axes, whereat at least the blade sometimes travelled long distances, which explains the handle of the Wereld Museum axe.

These axes differ very much from the smaller Songye axes, not only in terms of their rarity or the high quality of the metalwork, but particularly by their stunning modernity, which comes from the enormous size of the blade, jumping out of the handle. The thereby achieved force, where the enormous size of the blade stands in contrast to a facileness – accomplished by the impetus and the fineness of the insertions – raises them over the status of a simple ceremonial axe and makes them impressive artworks of astonishing actuality. Moreover, the exactness in which these axes are realized, often with delicate copper insertions, is proof of the sophisticated technique used to make them. It is therefore no surprise that these axes have been a symbol of power and have been so appreciated within the Congo that the blades covered long distances.

This *malléla* axe is very precisely and carefully done. The knot at the beginning and the openwork rosette in the middle, both done in copper, flash up on the grey-blue background of the iron. Especially the openwork rosette is more delicate and complex than on comparable *malléla* axes. The blade itself has a superb impetus. In addition, because the curved edge of the blade is echoed by three more lines, the forward course is further increased. Together with the very old handle, which readopts the knot as well as the openwork rosette with the round ornamentation, it builds a complete ensemble of marvelous quality.

1 Inventory number: E0.1956.11.1and E0.o.o.27400

2 Inventory number: 32659



Baga Janus Mask, Guinea
Wood; kaolin, pigments
Height: 37.5cm

Provenance:

Collected in the Baga Koba village of Katema, by November 1950
Josef Herman, London
Jan Krugier, Geneva

Published:

William Rubin, «*Primitivism*» in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York, 1984, Vol. II, p. 472.
Frederick Lamp, *Art of the Baga: a Drama of Cultural Reinvention*, New York, 1996, p. 46, fig. 29.
Galerie Jan Krugier, Geneva (adv.), *Arts and Cultures*, 2004, p. 24.
Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Christine Ekelhart, *Goya bis Picasso: Meisterwerke der Sammlung Jan Krugier und Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski*, Vienna, 2005, p. 310, ill. 2.

Exhibited:

Galerie Jan Krugier, Geneva, *Fire under the Ashes, from Basquiat to Picasso*, 06.11.2003–06.01.2004.
Albertina Museum, Vienna, *Goya to Picasso: Masterpieces from the Collection of Jan Krugier and Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski*, 2005.



This Baga mask was collected by November 1950 in the Baga Koba village of Katema, which is situated near the coastal area. This information, rarely so detailed with African art, was in this case a crucial one, as it allowed Frederick Lamp to correct an earlier misattribution in his book *Art of the Baga. A Drama of Cultural Reinvention*. The mask was for a long time owned by the Polish-British artist Josef Herman (1911–2000). During the time he owned the mask, it was published two times; once in Frederick Lamps' book mentioned above and once in one of the most seminal publications concerning the influence of tribal art on modern art: *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, by William Rubin. It was this book, together with the corresponding exhibition at the MoMA in New York, which influenced the perception of African art sustainable.

That this mask was owned by an artist who influenced British contemporary art and further was included in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art* is not surprising. The mask perfectly illustrates what Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler called a "plastic rhyme". Each form finds its corresponding part within its respective half. Thus, the interaction of simple forms – mainly the half-round and the diamond-form – build a complex over-all structure. Further, the depth of the mask is accomplished by the contrast of the different levels, as well as the use of white pigments to accentuate specific parts. This complex over-all structure, increased through its immense depth, together with the unexpected formal solutions, is responsible for the masks closeness to modernity.

Thus it is no surprise that Jan Krugier, the well known art dealer, not only published this Baga mask in an advertisement in Barbier-Muellers' *arts and cultures* of 2004, but also had it included in the Albertina Museum exhibition, where a selection of the most important objects of his collection were shown. The advertisement of 2004, showing the Baga mask together with a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat, announced the exhibition: *The Fire Under The Ashes – from Picasso to Basquiat*, an exhibition that was based on artists like Basquiat, Dubuffet or Picasso, who shaped the iconography of avant-garde art and included the Baga mask as a counterpart. The exhibition in the Albertina Museum in Vienna of 2005 with the title *Goya to Picasso: Masterpieces from the Collection of Jan Krugier and Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski* focused on important drawings and was supplemented by selection of African art. In the accompanying catalogue, the Baga mask faces a drawing by Picasso of 1909, thus from the first year of Cubism. Because both the Baga mask and Picassos drawing, found a formal solution, where the plastic volume of the head is rhythmically composed of different forms in varied angles, they share an elementary aspect that became important for the development of twentieth-century art.



Luluwa Figure, DRC

Wood; kaolin

Height: 26.5cm

Provenance:

Collection Gustave E. De Hondt, Brussels

Collection J.H.W. Verschure (1899–1977), Heer-Sur-Meuse

Published:

Jadot, « *Les Arts et Métiers Congolais à l'exposition de Paris en 1937* », in: *Les Beaux-Arts. Bulletin du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles*, n°250, 25 juin 1937, p. 28.

Frans Olbrechts, *Tentoonstelling van Kongo-Kunst, Antwerpsche Propagandaweken*, 1937, n°277.

Frans Olbrechts, *Plastiek van Kongo*, 1946, pl. XVIII, n°95.

Exhibited:

Paris, *Exposition Internationale de Paris*, 1937.

Anvers, Stadsfeestzaal, *Tentoonstelling van Kongo-Kunst*, 24 décembre 1937 – 16 janvier 1938.



This impressive sculpture is striking for the ease in which the interaction of scarification marks and complex formal inventions builds a self-contained work of art. As a Luluwa *lupingu lwa bwimpe* or simply *bulenga* figure, with the characteristic cup in the left hand filled with kaolin – a substance considered to be the most powerful to assure its effectiveness – the sculpture was used to shield a young mother and her newborn from danger and to conserve their beauty and health. The scarification marks, subtly echoing already existing forms as in the navel, which ends in a plane and is followed by three additional marks, were considered to be a sign of beauty, as well as protection against witchcraft. The navel itself, imitating an umbilical hernia, is a further ideal of beauty that symbolically represented a close connection to the ancestors.

Frans M. Olbrechts, the highly influential Belgian scholar and director of the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren from 1947 to 1958, included and depicted this Luluwa *bulenga* figure in his seminal publication *Plastiek van Kongo* of 1946. Prior to that, the Luluwa was part of the legendary *Tentoonstelling van Kongo-Kunst* exposition in Antwerp, an exhibition that was also organized by Frans M. Olbrechts and served as the basis for his book. Earlier in 1937, the Luluwa *bulenga* figure was shown in Paris at the *Exposition Internationale de Paris*, where a part of the exhibition was devoted to the Congo. Many objects shown in this section of the exhibition, such as this Luluwa figure, came from the collection of Gustave de Hondt. Furthermore, in the summer of 1937, the Luluwa figure was published in a review about the Paris exhibition in the *Bulletin du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles*. Thus two times exhibited in 1937 and included in Olbrechts' *Plastiek van Kongo*, this Luluwa figure was part of early and groundbreaking exhibitions about the art of the Congo.

As a figure that must be viewed from various angles, another important aspect of this Luluwa *bulenga* figure is its three-dimensionality. When seen from the side, the deepness of the figure – reaching from the plane navel to the far backwards stretched arms – as well as the roundness of the head, become visible. From a frontal perspective, the narrow torso and the expressiveness of the face constitute the beauty of this Luluwa *bulenga* figure.



Comparable in size to the Songye sculpture on page 60, the formal solution of this *nkisi* is entirely different. The big, round nail on top of the sculpture, closing the cavity in which magical materials were placed, builds the ending point of this rather long and slim figure. This elongated over-all structure is further increased by the oblong neck, which perfectly ends in a plane, defining the upper part of the body in an elegant abstracted form. The head – in this way clearly separated from the body by the pronounced neck – can by that unfold its volume and is thereby, also as it is the place where the magical material was put – not only in the top but also in the ears – the center of the figure.

Coming from the same estate as the other miniature Songye, both of them are very different in their formal solution and as that highly individual sculptures. Within this small *nkisi* sculpture – showing signs of extensive handling, especially at the back of the carefully done coiffure – it is the interaction of the self-contained head and the geometrical body that composes a compelling *nkisi* fetish.

Songye Figure, *nkisi*, DRC
Wood; nail, pigments, magical charge
Height: 12.5cm

Provenance:
Alfred Meyer (1901–1967), Bremgarten



Bidjogo Figure, *iran otibago*, Bissagos Islands, Guinea Bissau
Wood; pigments
Height: 34.5cm

Provenance:
Phillips, *Antiquities and Ethnographic Art*, New York, October 30 1978, lot. 223



These three *iran otibago* figures – each highly individual – reflect the broad spectrum of Bidjogo art. Based on the Bissagos islands, an archipelago off the coast of Guinea consisting of several smaller and bigger islands, they were to a certain degree independent from each other. This independency is shown in the sculptural differences of these three figures. All three of them are devoted to the souls of the ancestors and are as that not ancestor figures per se, but more intermediaries with whose help supernatural spirits could be reached. Hence playing a central role within the Bidjogo society, the *iran otibago* figures have been placed in a shrine and came to use in various contexts, such as on the occurrence of illness and conflicts.

Within these three sculptures a combination of subtle differences lead to a very different formal result, although the common principle – an anthropomorphic figure seated on a small chair holding the armrests – is shared by each of them. This general requirement thus defined the foundation of this type of Bidjogo figures and it was only within this context that the artist could develop his own formal style. This resulted in three highly individual works of art, as the diversity of these three Bidjogo *iran otibago* sculptures is apparent when they are compared with each other. Each of them sublimates in their respective quality, they all embody a unique structure that defines their beauty.

This female figure – uniting a combination of precise lines and protruding forms – has a strong, harmonious presence. Beautiful from the front as well as from the back, it is an artwork perfect in form. The visible age, resulting in the loss of one leg and in a deep patina whose red pigments have turned brown, arises from long lasting ritual usage in a shrine. The dynamic of this sculpture consists of the body, whose energetic pose ends in the cylindrical, short neck, which builds in perfect symmetry the pillar for the head. In this way the head unfolds its subtle and calm presence, satisfying the mighty responsibilities of an *iran otibago* figure.

When seen from the back, it becomes clear that the artist did not emanate from the frontality of this sculpture, but quite the contrary strongly considered the three dimensionality of this figure. The elbows, whose backwards impetus is balanced by the concavity of the back, as well as the impeccable line of the blade bones – continuing the lines of the arms – are only two details that absorb the forms the front of the sculpture implies and consequently implement them in the back. Thus, a sculpture in which every detail constitutes the strong presence and at the same time the subtle delicacy of this *iran otibago* figure, it is a complete work of art that invites to be viewed from all angles.



Bidjogo Figure, *iran otibago*, Bissagos Islands, Guinea Bissau
Wood; red and black pigments
Height: 49cm

Provenance:
Edith Hafter, Solothurn

Published:
Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, *Maske und Skulptur*, Olten, 1989, p. 22.
Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, *Lexikon Afrikanische Kunst und Kultur*, München, 1994, p. 82.



This male Bidjogo *iran otibago* figure – twice published by Karl-Ferdinand Schädler – combines a balanced harmony with strong, voluminous forms. Thus, rhythmically composed – the neck mirrored in the chair leg, as well as the accentuated navel immediately readopted in its border – it is this repeated usage of similar forms that lead to a consistent sculpture of mild but serious presence. Compared to the other two Bidjogo *iran otibago* sculptures, it is not only the gender that differentiates this figure from the two females, but also the use of more pronounced volumes. Clearly evident on the neck, this leads to a more immense over-all impact. In this way both strength and vigor are accentuated within this Bidjogo figure and it is this focus that, among other things, sets this sculpture apart from the other two and thereby constitutes its individuality.

The red pigments, turned brown from extensive handling and in some more remote parts, as on the chair leg, completely untouched, give the sculpture its distinctive patina. Together with the black pigments on the base, the chair and the head, the aspect of colors builds further an important component of this work of art. Even more so reinforce the metal eyes – in terms of material and of color – this particular element. The red feet resting on the surface of the black, round base and the hands holding the darkened armrests, also exemplify the effect of the colors, as already existing forms are intensified by the achieved contrast.



Bidjogo Figure, *iran otibago*, Bissagos Islands, Guinea Bissau
Wood; red and black pigments
Height: 49cm

Provenance:
Edith Hafter, Solothurn

Published:
Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, *Maske und Skulptur*, Olten, 1989, p. 22.
Karl-Ferdinand Schädler, *Lexikon Afrikanische Kunst und Kultur*, München, 1994, p. 82.



This last of the three Bidjogo *iran otibago* figures is a well-balanced, tall sculpture, whose quality is based on its calm but dynamic presence. The legs turned to the proper right and the head turned to the proper left, a precise balanced equilibrium is achieved. When seen from the side, it becomes clear how each form has a corresponding part, as in the convex stomach, which is echoed by the protruding buttocks and balanced by the concavity of the back. The backwards turned, annulated neck – absorbing the line coming from the chest and giving the head its necessary space to fully develop its potential – is a further detail that establishes the balance of this Bidjogo sculpture.

Coming from the same Swiss collection as the preceding Bidjogo figure and twice published together, these two figures might come from the same village, especially as they share some specific details, as the use of metal for the eyes. However, they are two different, very individual sculptures, so there is no indication of them being from the same shrine or artist. The sculpture's expression, as well as its more slender posture, sets it apart from the other two Bidjogo figures. The elaborate coiffure and the gracile chair – suitable to this tall sculpture – are an additional particular attribute of this sculpture. Thus, especially when compared to the first female Bidjogo figure, it becomes evident that even though they exercised the same cultural task as *iran otibago* figures, each of them embodies a unique formal structure.



The concept of beauty provides the basis for this Baule miniature sculpture, whether it is a *bloblo bian* figure – thus representing the husband waiting in the after life – or a *asié usu* figure – thus a sculpture venerating a spirit-being and in this way liberating a possessed person. The beauty manifests itself in every detail of the sculpture, as in the carefully rendered feet, the impetus of the legs and in the precise arrangement of the scarification marks. Thereby each detail contributes to the harmonious composition of this work of art. The calm presence of the face, whose round, closed eyes are immediately mirrored by a circular boarder and whose form is resumed in the ears as well as in the coiffure, further enhances the grace of this Baule sculpture.

From the collection of Maria Wyss, the Swiss tribal art expert who was based in Basel, this Baule figure derives from a Sakassou/Essankro atelier, as it shares the decisive criteria such as the stylized chignon on the top of the head, the round eyes and the from the rest of the fingers separated thumb. Thus it is not only a beautiful figure of tremendous finesse, but also a remarkably rare Baule sculpture.

Baule Figure, Ivory Coast
Wood; pigments, beads
Height 18.5cm

Provenance:
Maria Wyss, Basel



This miniature Songye figure offers all the distinctive features of the classical Songye style, such as the voluminous head, the elongated neck and the accentuated navel. Magical charge, necessary to activate a Songye *nkisi* figure and thereby making it into an effective object, can also be found within this sculpture. At the top of the head as well as on the bottom of the sculpture a cavity – possibly going through the whole sculpture – is filled with a mixture of magical materials. It comes from the collection of the Swiss artist Alfred Meyer (1901–1967), who came in contact with African art in Paris in the early 1930s when he began to build an important collection of African and Oceanic art.

This little sculpture was most likely attached to a larger *nkisi* figure. However, as it is charged with magical material, the figure functioned as an independent *nkisi* itself, which strengthened the larger fetish. The artist responsible for this sculpture put great emphasis on the lines. So the arm, whose round shoulder merges into the elongated upper arm and ends in the carefully rendered hand, echoes the line of the back. Hence the impetus of the arm is immediately repeated with another line, which leads to a work of art of brilliant rhythm.

Songye Figure, *nkisi*, DRC
Wood; pigments, magical charge
Height: 10.5cm

Provenance:
Alfred Meyer (1901–1967), Bremgarten



The stunning plasticity of this miniature Songye fetish from the collection of Josef Müller makes it to a figure with a monumental presence. The voluminous head with the elongated back of the head makes space for the magical charge with the ears perfectly adapted to this elongated form. The vibrant body, where various forms interact in a fascinating way, further increases the plasticity of this Songye *nkisi*, as do the big feet in which the figure ends.

Josef Müller was – as a student of Cuno Amiet and as a friend of Ferdinand Hodler – well integrated in the Swiss art scene of the second decade of the 20th century. When he left for Paris in 1921, where he stayed until 1942, he soon came in contact with its vivid art scene. He continued collecting contemporary artists like Braque, Leger and Miró and also acquired important works from Cézanne, Picasso and Kandinsky. He further became quickly aware of African and Oceanic art, in which he recognized the same plastic vigor and intensity of expression as in the western art he had already assembled. Thus, not seeing an essential difference between European and non-European arts, he started to build an important collection of African and Oceanic art, thereby completing his collection of paintings. When he returned to Solothurn, he took the collection with him and soon became a highly influential person for his hometown, as well as for all Switzerland. Both, the Songye *nkisi*, as well as the following Senufo figure, are carefully selected works of art, reflecting his distinguished understanding of art.

Songye Figure, *nkisi*, DRC
Wood; pigments, magical charge
Height: 16cm

Provenance:
Josef Müller, Solothurn
Kornfeld, *Art d'Afrique et Art d'Océanie de la collection Josef Müller*, Bern, 1979, lot. 217



Offering pure form and intense appeal, this miniature Senufo *tugubele* figure from the collection of Josef Müller is an artwork of vigorous rhythm. The monumental breasts, echoed in the knees as well as in the accentuated belly and merging without any interruption into the arms, perfectly interact with the downwards-pointed chin. Furthermore, the thick sacrificial patina, most pronounced on the head – originating from long ritual use as a *tugubele* sculpture, which was created for a divinatory spirit – adds to the dense appearance of the face. Hence a Senufo figure perfect in form, Josef Müller clearly held it in high esteem as he let Kichizô Inagaki produce the custom made socle.

The services of Kichizô Inagaki, legendary to this day for perfectly understanding how African art needs to be mounted on a base, were used by the most important dealers of the early tribal art scene in Paris, such as Joseph Brummer, Paul Guillaume and Charles Ratton. Thus it is no surprise that he was the base maker of choice for Josef Müller during his years in Paris. The present socle is subtly accentuating the quality of this Senufo figure by choosing the perfect size of the base, as well as by the carefully chosen colors, which assists the sacrificial patina perfectly.

Senufo Figure, *tugubele*, Ivory Coast
Wood; thick sacrificial patina
Mounted on a base by Kichizô Inagaki
Height: 14.5cm

Provenance:

Josef Müller, Solothurn

Kornfeld, *Art d'Afrique et Art d'Océanie de la collection Josef Müller*, Bern, 1979, lot. 56



This Basikasingo ancestor figure, sold by Maria Wyss in 1976 to the Swiss African art collector Eduard Hess, combines the absence of right angles – characteristic for the Bembe-Boyo style where round forms have been favored – with carefully converging lines. Both can be seen on the shoulders and arms, which are connected with each other by the prominent blade bones and avoid any hard geometrical forms. The distinctive facial features with the open protruding mouth, the closed eyes and the oblong, triangular nose – mirroring the form of the face itself – further offers this unity of round form and connected lines, as does the into the ears running jaw line.

The Basikasingo people, a clan within the Bembe-Boyo tribes, live on the western shore of lake Tanganyika. Their neighboring peoples, like the Luba, the Hemba and the Lega, all had a certain influence on them, so could for example the central *bwame* society of the Lega also be found among the Bembe-Boyo. Their ancestor figures have been placed in special huts, where individual and lineage ancestors have been venerated. This Basikasingo ancestor figure, depicting an ancestor as a half figure with the hands ending on the lower chest – a pose often found on Basikasingo figures – offers an old, red, partially crusty patina, originating from long ritual usage in such a shrine.

Basikasingo Figure, Lake Tanganyika, DRC
Wood; pigments
Height: 25cm

Provenance:
Maria Wyss, 1976, Basel
Eduard Hess



Head of a *malangan* Figure, New Ireland, Bismarck Archipelago
Wood; pigments, turbo petholatus
Height 79.5cm

Provenance:
Collected in situ by Norbert Jacques in 1912/13



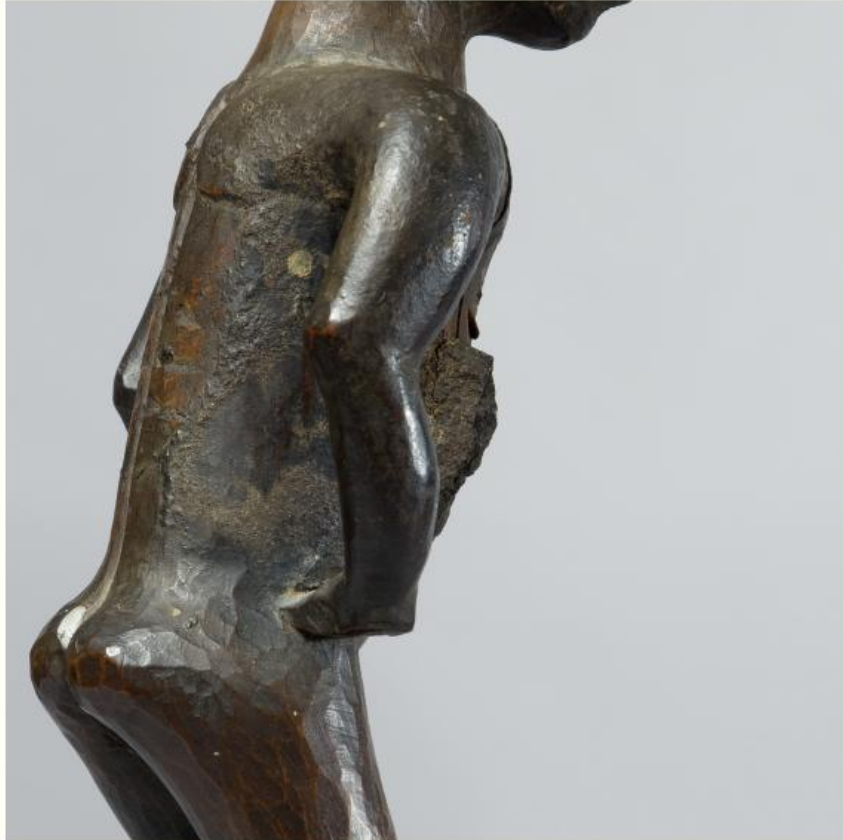
As an artwork of intense presence, brought out of New Ireland in 1912 or 1913, this head of a *malangan* figure embodies the vigor sought after in New Ireland sculpture. In its ritual context, the head was most likely put on a figure made of fiber and other bush materials, whereas only the wooden head itself endured over time. The forceful black helmet with the feathers, the flat nose with the big nostrils, as well as the unsteady shine of the turbo petholatus eyes all establish the presence of the head. Furthermore, the by the consummation of betel nuts blackened teeth and the elongated ears with their extended earlobes, add to the powerful appearance of this remarkable artwork from the *malangan* culture of northern New Ireland.

This *malangan* head came to Europe with the Luxembourger writer, photographer and voyageur Norbert Jacques, famous for his book *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*. When Norbert Jacques married his second wife in 1912, he traveled with her around the world. His over a yearlong travel in the German colonies of the South Sea – on which he published a travel report in 1922 – started in Madang, then called Friedrich-Wilhelms-Hafen, on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. As he spent most time around the Bismarck Archipelago, he did not stay there for a long time, but took a ship to Rabaul in New Britain, then the domicile of the Governor of Deutsch-Neuguinea. From there he made a few short jaunts to nearby villages, before he boarded another ship that took him to Kavieng, the settlement of the German officials in New Ireland. It was there, where he met and became good friends with Franz Boluminski (1863–1913), who died shortly after Jacques' visit; in fact Jacques was among his last visitors. Boluminski was one of the important collectors in New Ireland and his collection – mostly donated to various German museums – consisted of several well known *uli* figures. Furthermore, he is famous in New Ireland until today for the highway he built along the coast named after him. After his stop in Kavieng, Norbert Jacques boarded the *Sumatra*, a German ship under the commando of Karl Nauer, who like Boluminski, was an important collector within the Bismarck Archipelago. Nauer, who mostly used the occasionally long stays of the *Sumatra* on different islands to gather objects, also collected mostly for German museums. The *Sumatra* first took Jacques down the coast of New Ireland, where he stayed with a German planter for some time, and then further to Tabar Island and Buka Island. On each of these islands the *Sumatra* stayed a few days to amass copra, which was the main task of the ship. Finally the *Sumatra* took Norbert Jacques, who was fortunate to meet two major collectors within the Bismarck Archipelago, back to Rabaul, from where he left the South Sea and traveled back to Europe; with this magnificent *malangan* head in his luggage.



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