

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Unidentified Kongo artist

Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), 19th century





Unidentified Kongo
(Kakongo subgroup) artist
Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi)
19th century

Wood, iron, glass mirror, resin, pigment, 33⁷/₈ x 13³/₄ x 11 in.
(86 x 34.9 x 27.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1922,
Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 22.1421

Description of the Artwork

Chin up, chest out, hands on hips, and feet firmly planted, this wooden figure stands on rectangular blocks. Rusty metal nails and blades pierce its surface, while a small mirror framed with a rounded ridge emerges from its stomach. Adorned with a crown and armbands, the imposing figure looks ahead.

Background Information

A power figure with a profusion of nails and blades such as this example is known as an *nkisi nkondi* (pronounced en-KEE-see en-KOHN-dee). These figures served as containers for potent natural ingredients (including, but not limited to, shells, leaves, and soil from sacred sites) that channeled supernatural powers to protect, heal, and govern the community. To make an *nkisi nkondi*, a carver began by sculpting a male human or animal figure with a cavity in the abdomen. Then, a ritual expert, known as an *nganga*, completed the work by placing the power ingredients in the empty cavity. After breathing into the cavity, he immediately sealed it off with a mirror. Nails and blades were driven into the figure to activate the supernatural powers it channeled, either to affirm an oath or to destroy an evil force responsible for an affliction or disruption of the community. The pose, with hands on hips, symbolizes the readiness of the *nkisi nkondi*, a special type of aggressive and protective *nkisi*, to defend a righteous person and destroy an enemy. The power packet in the abdomen is still intact. The crown of the head and the second bundle on the back were originally filled with medicines as well, but these were probably removed to “deactivate” the figure before it left the region where it was made.

Questions for Viewing

What stands out as you take your first look at this figure?

Each time the spirit of this *nkisi nkondi* figure was called upon to witness a promise or protect the community, a nail or blade was driven into the surface. How are promises made in your community? Who is responsible for making sure that promises are kept?

In the Congo, the spirit accessed through the *nkisi* protected those who were truthful and punished those who were dishonest. How has the artist communicated this figure's important role as a protector?

Take a moment to think about a powerful figure in your own community. Who comes to mind? What kinds of power do they possess? How is this power communicated to others? What does this figure have in common with the *nkisi nkondi*? What is different?

The creation of an *nkisi nkondi* was the result of a collaboration between a carver who sculpted the figure and a ritual expert, or *nganga*, who completed the work by placing ingredients with supernatural powers in the special cavities. Look closely at the figure. Besides the abdomen, where might these spiritual materials be located?

Activity

With a partner, identify one person to play the role of *Sculptor*, and one person to play the role of *Wood*. Turn to face one another. Be sure that Wood is standing with his or her back to the artwork or photograph of the artwork.

Sculptor: Provide *Wood* with directions to transform his or her body to match the pose of the artwork. Use descriptive language based on what you see.

Wood: Listen closely to your partner's directions. Change your body language to match the verbal description. How does this pose make you feel?

Together, look closely at the artwork. Discuss why the original artist may have chosen this pose.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/

The Brooklyn Museum's online collection database, featuring a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

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