

ART OF THE SPIRIT WORLD

KEY TERMS

- Ancestors
- Initiation
- Kongo
- Power Figures
- Ritual



CLOSE LOOKING

CARVED OF WOOD FOR A KONGO (pronounced KONgo) ritual specialist, this Power Figure was made in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the 18th century. The wide-eyed figure, called an Nkisi (pronounced enKlsee), once held a weapon in its raised right hand. Hammered iron blades, pins, and nails in various sizes are embedded in its surface. Bits of raffia and twine that were once part of longer pieces of fiber are visible among the nails. The Nkisi wears a crested hairstyle, resembling a rooster's comb. The eyes are made of glass, and the figure has a mirrored glass at its navel.

POWER FIGURE (NKISI)

19th century

Artist Unidentified
Kongo kingdom, Democratic Republic
of the Congo or Angola
Wood, iron, mirrored glass, earth,
encrustation, fiber, and cloth
Gift of Alan Wurtzburger,
BMA 1954.145.66

ART IN CONTEXT



Kongo kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola

THE THREE FIGURAL OBJECTS in this lesson express aspects of the spiritual beliefs of their communities. Though the objects themselves do not have power, they serve as vessels to which spirits are called in order to assist the earthly realm. They may also remind individuals of their connections to ancestors who reside in the spiritual domain. Diviners mediate between the physical and ancestral worlds in order to predict events and seek answers to village concerns. For these occasions, Kongo diviners use strong medicines of herbs and roots to call upon spirits to inhabit the Power Figure. During the ceremony, nails and blades are hammered into the figure to activate its authority and add to its imposing presence. Spirits, through the Nkisi, might witness legal contracts, resolve conflicts, combat evil, or fight illness. For oaths and contracts, the parties might hammer nails as well as wrap the Nkisi with pieces of raffia and string to bind the agreement. The power of the Nkisi can also be used for negative purposes, perhaps to exact revenge or kill a rival.¹ The large number of nails in the BMA Nkisi attests to its frequent use by the diviner and its power when activated by spirits. When the Power Figure was not in use, the diviner stored it secretly with a cache of medicines.



Detail of Power Figure (Nkisi)

The mirrored glass on the figure's belly can be understood in several ways. A mirror evokes the still surface of water that Kongo identify as the division between this world and the domain of the ancestors.² The flash of the mirror in sunlight deflects negative energy and evil away from the ceremony and indicates the spiritual force that is called on during mediation. The figure's wide glass eyes reference the spirit living within. The significance of the hairstyle resembling a rooster's comb lies in the rooster's crowing to announce the day at first light. The evocation of the comb in the Power Figure symbolizes the diviner's ability to shed light on or interpret difficult matters.³

The Kongo people, united by a common language, live along a 300 mile stretch of the Atlantic Coast from Congo, through Democratic Republic of the Congo, and south to northern Angola. The Kongo kingdom was founded in the 14th century and ended when it was colonized by the Portuguese in 1885. Later, a Kongo political party played an important role in helping the Democratic Republic of the Congo achieve independence in 1960, though unrest continues. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the second largest country in Africa behind Sudan and is rich in natural resources including diamonds, cobalt ore, and copper.

RELATED ARTWORK

LARGE, CARVED MALE AND FEMALE SENUFO (pronounced senUfoh) figures from Côte d'Ivoire, called "Initiated Persons" or "They Who Gave Birth," represent ancestral couples. The figures appeared until the 1980s⁴ at the initiation rites and deaths of male members of Pòrò, a primarily male governing body that allows young girls and post-menopausal women—two groups outside of childbearing years—to join.⁵ During burial ceremonies that lasted four or five days, figures were carried through the village by masked dancers and placed at funeral sites. There, the couple was watched over by young initiates. The figures were considered witnesses to all events and represented living society members as well as Pòrò ancestors. The ritual scarification marks, marking puberty, and full breasts of this Pòròpya (pronounced POROpeeha) speak of Senufo womanhood and motherhood. She stood as a metaphor for family both in this and the spiritual world and reminded villagers that the ancestors were never far away. A commanding presence, she, like all female ancestral figures, is taller than her male counterpart.⁶

When not in use, ancestral couples were stored standing up, as they were when on display in the village. Because of this, the lower parts of the figures were at risk of decay caused by insects and weathering, the result of which is evident in the BMA example.⁷

The name Côte d'Ivoire, meaning Ivory Coast, was coined by French merchants in the 16th century and reflected the nation's largest trading commodity—ivory. The area became a French protectorate in 1843, was formed into a French colony, and gained independence in 1960. Senufo are located in northern Côte d'Ivoire (and in Burkina Faso and Mali), and their towns are divided along matrilineal lines. Pòrò is one of four Senufo societies that helps regulate the actions of its citizens.

MANY BAULE (pronounced BOW—as in "take a bow"—lay) believe that when humans are born, they remain members of spirit families who reside in the ancestral world, called *blolo* (pronounced BLOHloh). During their lives, individuals are never entirely free from the spirits they leave behind. Sometimes spirit families look kindly on their human kin. However, sometimes *blolo* family members interfere negatively with life on earth. For example, a spirit wife may become jealous if her husband on earth marries. Her displeasure may be manifest in discord between the earthly spouses, infertility, or lack of prosperity.

In order to appease a spirit spouse, a Baule man or woman will have a flattering sculpture carved to represent his *blolo bla* (spirit wife) or *blolo bian* (spirit husband).⁸ The figure is consecrated as a place for



FEMALE ANCESTRAL FIGURE (PÒRÒPYA)

c. 1930

Artist Unidentified

Senufo region, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood

Purchase with Exchange Funds from Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, BMA 1960.58



FEMALE SPIRIT SPOUSE (BLOLO BLA)

Early 20th century

Artist Unidentified

Baule region, Côte d'Ivoire

Wood

The Cone Collection, Formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.384

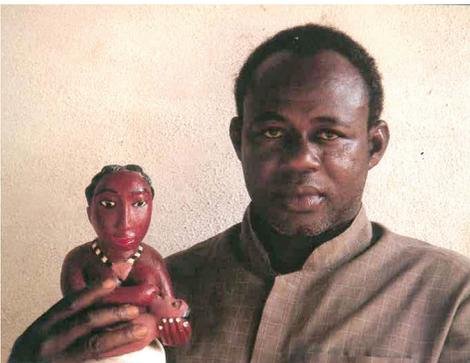
the spirit spouse to dwell and resides in a corner of the man or woman's sleeping room. As in the case of the BMA *blolo bla*, one night a week, the husband or wife would bring the carved figure to bed—in place of his or her spouse—to rest with overnight.

A Baule woman explains her relationship with her spirit husband:

My blolo bian has his day when I sleep with him, and that day I do not sleep with my husband from here [on earth].... [Before it was carved], we quarreled every day. We really quarreled! My spirit husband made me like that so I was always fighting with my husband. When I had it carved, calm returned to the house.

A placated spirit can then spread good will to the earthly children and spouse of their partner and help confer health, money, and love. At the birth of a child or at another happy event, a man may give gifts of food or money to his wife's spirit husband to be used solely by the wife and spirit spouse. In this way, the ancestral world is never far from the earthly one.⁹

The Baule have a governing body run by a chief or king who inherits his position through the maternal line of the family and oversees subchiefs of local populations. Baule reside in central Côte d'Ivoire and are neighbors with the Senufo to the north.



Kouassi Kouama and his spirit wife, Kami.

Photo: Susan M. Vogel, 1993

¹ "Democratic Republic of the Congo; Kongo Peoples," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://uima.uiowa.edu/democratic-republic-of-the-congo-kongo-peoples-2/>.

² Museum label for Power Figure (Nkisi), Baltimore, MD, The Baltimore Museum of Art, December 2009.

³ Thompson, "Idiom of Clairvoyance, Healing, and Shared Moral Inquiry: a Kongo Figure (*Nkisi Lumweno*)," 258.

⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, thefts of Pòròpya increased so dramatically that replacing the figures became a financial burden for many societies. By the mid-1980s, figures had largely disappeared from funerals and were kept in society members' homes. Till Förster, "Weathering, Restoration, and Formal Criticism: a Senufo Figure (Pòròpya)," in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 31.

⁵ "Senufo," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Senufo>.

⁶ Förster, "Weathering, Restoration, and Formal Criticism: a Senufo Figure (Pòròpya)," in *See the Music Hear the Dance*, ed. Frederick John Lamp (Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2004), 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ Susan Mullin Vogel, *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1997), 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹¹ "Baule," University of Iowa Museum of Art, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Baule>.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: Exploring Power Figures

Grades: 9–12

Subjects: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Students will examine the Power Figure (Nkisi), first making a basic sketch of the object. The teacher will then lead them in discussion using the following questions:

- At first glance, what do you notice most about the work?
- Describe the art elements—line, color, shape, texture, space, and form—that you see in this work.
- Are there elements in this work that you think you recognize? What are they?
- How is the human form presented in this work?

As students respond to questions, the teacher will provide relevant information about the object.

The teacher will then divide students into pairs and each pair will look at two additional Kongo Power Figures found on the following sites:

- <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2008.30>
- <http://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/153/index.html>

The pairs will then compare and contrast both figures with the BMA Power Figure (Nkisi) by sketching the figures individually, then engaging in a discussion. Students can use the following questions to help guide their exercise:

- Which art elements—line, color, shape, texture, space, and form—are similar in these works? Which are different?
- How is the human form presented in these two works? In what way are they similar? In what way are they different?
- What else is similar? Different?
- Can you find anything in the online information that accounts for any of the differences?
- What is the most interesting/intriguing thing you now know about Kongo Power Figures?

Teachers will then ask the student pairs to share their responses for a group discussion. The teacher will record the responses on the black/white board.

To extend this activity to an exploration of how one contemporary artist has referenced Power Figures, the teacher can present an image of the sculpture *Strange Fruit* by American artist Alison Saar, created in 2000, currently in the BMA contemporary collection. The teacher can project an image from BMA GoMobile and share information, such as the multimedia resources that support the exploration of the artwork (<http://gomobileartbma.org/#object/7780>), which include curatorial interviews and information on how Saar refers to a Power Figure's power pack in her sculpture.

- To which elements from a Power Figure did the artist (Alison Saar) refer in *Strange Fruit*?
- What is unique or different about the way she referenced these elements?
- How do the aesthetics connect these elements? How do the ideas connect these elements?
- Given what you understand now about Power Figures and *Strange Fruit*, what are some questions you have about either of the objects or their connections?

ACTIVITY 2: Researching Religious Art

Grades: 9–12

Subjects: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Students will look closely at the Power Figure (Nkisi), the Female Ancestral Figure (Pòròpya), and the Female Spirit Spouse (*blolo bla*). They will make basic sketches of each object and then following the sketching period, they will discuss their observations using the following questions as guidelines:

- At first glance, what do you notice most about the work?
- Describe the art elements—line, color, shape, texture, space, and form—that you see in this work.
- What are some elements in this work that you recognize?
- What are the different ways that the human form is represented in these works?

As students respond to the questions, the teacher will share relevant information about the objects provided in this guide. The teacher will then divide students into pairs and ask them to brainstorm other examples of figural religious artworks. Students will share

their ideas in a larger class discussion. After the discussion, students will perform preliminary research to find figural religious works of art from any cultural tradition that they find compelling or interesting. (The teacher should ask students to be respectful in approaching works of art from living traditions. For some basic guidelines on how to talk about religious art, please visit: <http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/teacherResources/chola.connections.pdf>, page 9.)

After doing in-depth research, each student will then write a three- to five-page essay about that artwork including its aesthetics, material and technical aspects, artist(s), audience(s), meaning(s), historical context, and any other relevant information, such as related works.

STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

Grades 9–10

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Grades 11–12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

Essential Learner Outcomes

Visual Arts

Grades 9–12

Outcome II: Expectation A: Student will propose ways that visual art reflects significant historical, cultural, and social issues.

Outcome II: Expectation B: The student will determine factors that influence the creation of art in specific historical eras and places by studying artworks and other sources of information.