

LESSON 2: EFFICACY AND ACTION

Nkisi Nkondi: A Power Figure of Central Africa



Fig. 1.3

Power figure (*nkisi nkondi*). Yombe peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 18th–19th century. Wood, metal, nails, mirrors, cloth, cordage, beads, cowry shells. H: 114 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5837.



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Lesson Summary and Objectives

Central African power figures are the subject of students' inquiry in this lesson. Introductory activities focus on a figure's appearance and invite students' analysis of its form and affective presence. Subsequent activities allow students to examine how works of art can be instrumental in conflict resolutions and arbitrations and how the meanings of a variety of forms can embody a sense of power for an individual. Students are introduced to the idea that the outward appearance of a work of art can contribute to its ability to work, that is, to have an active, efficacious presence in people's lives. Students will

- Carefully analyze a work of art, discuss its form and style, and then draw the work noting details of the objects added to it.
- Discuss the notion of amulets and then create a work that has personal significance for them.
- Engage in a discussion about arbitration and conflict resolution.

Background Information

Among Yombe and other Kongo peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, many of life's hardships can be negotiated through ownership of a power figure that serves as a defense against misfortune. Such works (figs. 1.3-1.5) are armatures for a vast array of articles that include manufactured products—often of metal—and objects from the natural world. These accumulations were added by a healer who alone knew the secret composition of medicinal herbs, roots, plants, and animal parts that give the figures their power.

Embodiments of judicial authority with the ability to heal, power figures such as this one derive their potency from the concept of *nkisi*, which enables them to cure, protect, or incriminate. Medicinal materials are packed in cavities often located in the figure's stomach and head. The blades or nails pounded into the surface of the figure aid in awakening the spirit and attest to oaths sworn in legal proceedings.

An *nkisi nkondi* not only possesses attributes of power, it also reflects the “process” of artistic creativity. With every use, another blade or metal nail is inserted into the figure, thus adding a gradual layering and accumulation of meaning and memory. The figure is never “complete” in the usual sense of the word, for its surface and form change as its life history grows.



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Fig. 1.4 (left)

Power figure (*nkisi nkondi*). Yombe peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 18th–19th century. Wood, mirror, glass, cane, fiber, seed pod, jawbone. H: 25.5 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.8501.

Fig. 1.5 (right)

Power figure (*nkisi nkondi*). Yombe peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 18th–19th century. Wood, camwood, pigment, mirror, fiber, metal, chain. H: 26.5 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X67.879.

About the Artist

The identity of the artist who created this *nkisi* (fig 1.3) is not known. An *nkisi* may be made by the owner, or by someone commissioned by him. The artist's task is to make a powerful-looking figure, but the *nkisi* is only complete when the *nganga* or ritual expert activates it. Even then the piece is not complete because the appearance of the *nkisi* changes with the addition of nails and blades to its surface.

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Fig. 1.3
Power figure (*nkisi nkondi*). Yombe peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. 18th-19th century. Wood, metal, nails, mirrors, cloth, cordage, beads, cowry shells. H: 114 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.5837.



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Curriculum Connections

1. An *Nkisi*, Nails and Efficacy

As students look at the image of the *nkisi* (fig. 1.3) have them write down what they see. How do they describe the piece? What do they think the materials are? What size is it? What is their reaction to viewing the *nkisi*?

Activity

Tell them that an *nkisi* is often called a power figure and is made and used by peoples of Central Africa. It begins as a wooden carving. Have students make a sketch of what they envision as the unadorned wooden form of a power figure.

Further discussion about the purpose of the *nkisi* will call out its use as an affirmer of justice and arbitrator in conflicts, and its role in legal proceedings. In reality, it serves the well-being of a community as part of a system of justice. Does this knowledge change, in any way, their feelings about the figure?

Tell the students that the blades, spikes, and nails that are pounded into the surface of the figure aid in awakening the protective spirits and attest to oaths sworn in legal proceedings. Over time, the added metal and other substances transform the appearance of the *nkisi*.

Students can now interpret this process on their drawn figure, by sketching in the additions of nails, blades, and packets of medicines. Does their illustration now manifest more power?

The efficacy of the sculpture—how well it works—is demonstrated by the many additions to it. After students reiterate their first reaction to the piece, have them revisit their first impressions as they learn more about its function. What more would they want to know in order to better understand the figure? Students can do additional research on the Kongo peoples and *nkisi* in general.





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2. Other *Minkisi*, Other Forms

Minkisi (plural for *nkisi*) are primarily containers. They can take many shapes, be fashioned of ceramic, fabric, or wood, or see use in the retained forms of gourds, animal horns, or shells. An *nkisi* can be any object that can contain spiritually charged medicines or other substances.

Activity

The *nkisi* on display is in the form of a powerful human-like figure, but others are zoomorphic in form. Ask students to make an animal or a non-figurative work that embodies notions of power. Students should recall that the appearance of the work is an important aspect of its power. Since its function is that of a container, students could use a box, bottle, or bowl as the base of their sculptures.

Diverse peoples throughout the world rely on various kinds of objects to insure their protection, prevent misfortune, and/or protect against an adversary, bad luck in general, or any negative force. Pieces of jewelry historically have served this purpose. Some Catholics carry images of saints, such as the St. Christopher medal, to insure safe traveling. In Thailand, people of all ages wear amulets of tiny Buddhas encased in gold frames around their necks. Students could design and create amulets for themselves. These may take the form of display pieces or amulets to wear.

3. Resolving Conflicts

In Kongo communities an *nkisi nkondi* may be used in conjunction with judicial proceedings. The parties involved and the specialist come before the figure, and together they investigate the problem at hand. When an agreement is made, representatives from both parties take an oath in front of the *nkisi nkondi*. Each sworn promise is recorded on the figure by the insertion of a sharp metal object or nail into its surface. How is this act similar to our tradition of signing an agreement or contract?

Activity

Have your students think of a conflict in the classroom that has not yet been resolved. They should discuss possible solutions to the problem and write a contract that seals an agreement between the arguing parties. What do they consider a probable result of breaking the contract?



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Useful Readings

Blackmun Visona, Monica, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris, eds.

2001 *A History of Art in Africa.*

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Blier, Suzanne Preston

1998 *Royal Arts of Africa.*

London: Laurence King Publishing.

Poyner, Robin

2001 "The Western Congo Basin" in *A History of Art in Africa*, edited by Monica Blackmun Visona, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris. 366–411.

New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the first section of the exhibition called Art and Action. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See "Unit One—Art and Action" for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative "Questions for Thought," and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the *Intersections* web link <http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu>, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 1: The Role of the Artist: Crown for Yoruba Initiation by Jose Rodriguez, U.S.

Lesson 2: Efficacy and Action: *Nkisi Nkondi: A Power Figure of Central Africa*

Lesson 3: Beauty and Purpose: Capturing Beauty: Ikebana Baskets, Japan

Lesson 4: Encounters of Ideas, Time, and Place: Textiles of Southeast Asia

