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Fang Reliquary Head

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FANG ARTIST

Gabon

Late 19th–early 20th century

Reliquary Head (Añgokh-NIô-Byeri)

Wood

h. 31.8 cm

12 ½ in.

Provenance

Collection of Paul Guillaume, Paris;

Collection of Domenica Guillaume (born Juliette Lacaze, 1898-1977);

Maîtres Etienne Ader and Maurice Rheimes, Hôtel Drouot Paris, November 9, 1965, lot 147;

Simone de Monbrison, Paris;

Collection of Rosemary and George Lois, New York;

Lance Entwistle, London;

Collection of Drs. Marian and Daniel Malcolm, New Jersey;

Lance Entwistle, London;

Collection of Jeff Soref, New York, acquired from the above in 1997;

Sotheby's Paris, November 30, 2010, lot 27;

Lance Entwistle, London;

Private Collection, acquired from the above in 2010.

Literature

Sweeney, *African Negro Art*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1935, p. 47, no. 363 (not illustrated).

Evans, *African Negro Art: Photographs by Walker Evans*. 1935, WE 313.

Art News: Special Issue, Museum of Primitive Art, January 1968, p. 23 (Advertisement: Simone de Monbrison).

Laburthe-Tolra, Philippe, and Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau, *Fang*. Paris: Musée Dapper, 1991, p. 105.

Lagamma, Alisa, *Eternal Ancestors, The Art of the Central African Reliquary*. 2007, p. 203, no. 46.

Wick, Oliver, and Antje Denner, eds., *Bildgewaltig. Afrika, Ozeanien und die Moderne*. Basel: Fondation Beyeler/Christoph Merian Verlag, 2009, teil V, Reliquiarfiguren und -köpfe der Fang - Region, no. 21

Exhibitions

African Negro Art. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 18 - May 19, 1935; Currier Gallery of Art, New Hampshire, June 10 – July 8, 1935; San Francisco Museum of Art, July 23-September 2, 1935; Cleveland Museum of Art, September 28-October 27, 1935; Arts Club of Chicago, November

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15 – December 9, 1935; Milwaukee Art Institute, January 7-26, 1936; Baltimore Museum of Art, February 10-March 9, 1936; Wadsworth Atheneum, Connecticut, March 25 – April 14, 1936.
Fang. Musée Dapper, Paris, November 21, 1991 - April 15, 1992.

Eternal Ancestors, The Art of the Central African Reliquary. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 2, 2007 - March 2, 2008.

Visual Encounters. Africa, Oceania and Modern Art / Bildwelten. Afrika, Ozeanien und die Moderne. Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland, January 25 - May 25, 2009.

The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts. LACMA, February 26 - July 9, 2017.



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The present head is an exceptionally fine example of an *Añgokh-Nlô-Byeri*, the full head of an ancestor, from the Fang culture which thrived in Gabon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The finest work of a master sculptor, the head is defined by carefully juxtaposed exaggerations of the human form: the forehead is broad and tall, with a pair of extremely arched browbones sensitively rendered. The lower half of the face tapers into a puckered nose bone and chin, continuing the graceful arch of the slanting cheekbones. Three central incision lines flow up the nose bone through the forehead and meet a perpendicular set of incised bands along the top of the forehead. Beyond these, two tresses of hair proceed down the back of the head, gracefully extending downwards and complementing the long, slender neck, which organically broadens at the base.

The dead ancestors of the Fang people were ever-present and exerted significant influence over the decisions of the living members of the society. Ancestral figures such as this one were originally part of a larger matrix of sacred materials, atop which the present head would have stood as a representative element of the whole ancestor. The whole sacred object would have also included a container which held important bones of the ancestor (usually a skull, femur, or other large bone, sometimes broken into pieces) as well as various organic and inorganic sacred substances prepared by initiated members of the clan.

No important decision was made without the owner of a *byeri* (ancestral figure) consulting their elders with ritual acts involving the sculptures. The precise nature of these rituals varied based on the precise nature of the decision, but often involved the touching of sacred bones, or even taking scrapings from them to be joined with other sacred materials and offered up to spirits to provide success in a given decision or endeavour. It is interesting to note that the principle of extraction was also enacted on the sculptures that represented the ancestors, as in the present head, where the mouth and nose have been worn away, likely from active use and scraping off of small pieces for various ritual purposes.

Possession of the *byeri* was the primary concern of those who cared for this effective mediator between the world of the living and that of the dead. Due to wars or the nomadic lifestyle of villages, the boxes moved with families. Fearing the loss of their priceless possessions, generations jealously guarded the receptacles, sometimes containing up to ten skulls of ancestors. But they sometimes allowed the external elements to fall into the hands of the uninitiated. Thus, few pieces have survived with their original boxes.

The figures placed atop the bone receptacles have often been described as intended to keep away the uninitiated, including women and children, to prevent their curiosity from leading them to discover and potentially damage or destroy the sacred relics. In fact, the statuettes should be understood within a broader context of integration. These objects only acquire meaning insofar as they are situated within a precise and effective discourse.

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The statues of the byeri are not merely signifiers placed there, simple guardians. They are perceived and experienced by individuals either through conformity or through a tension—that of ritual. For the body of the object, alongside its functionality, is also a major instrument for accessing symbolism. It is essential to emphasize this inescapable dialectic between the body and the ritual code, the latter requiring a support upon which to inscribe its action.

Comparanda



Chicago, Illinois, Art Institute of Chicago, 2006.127.



Paris, Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, 71.1941.13.10

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