

COLNAGHI



Teke Seated Figure (buti)

COLNAGHI

TEKE ARTIST

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Late 19th–early 20th century

Seated Figure (buti)

Wood, glass, cowrie shell, resin, organic matter, brass

h. 29.3 cm

11 5/8 in

Provenance

Collection of Jacques Deprince, Brussels;
Collection Count Baudouin de Grunne, Brussels, 1990;
Bernard de Grunne, Brussels;
Private collection, New York, 1990-2025

Literature

Bastin, Marie-Louise. *Introduction aux Arts de l'Afrique Noire*. Arnouville: Arts d'Afrique Noire, 1984, p. 291, no. 304.

De Heusch, Luc et al. *Utotombo: Kunst uit Zwart-Afrika in Belgisch Privé-Bezit*. Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts, 1988, p. 96, no. XXVIII.

Göhr, Siegfried et al. *Afrikanische Skulptur: Die Erfindung der Figur / African Sculpture: The Invention of the Figure*. Museum Ludwig, Cologne and The Hague, 1990, p. 172, no. 77.

Lehuard, Raoul. *Les Arts Bateke: Congo - Gabon - Zaïre*. Arnouville: Arts d'Afrique Noire, 1996, p. 263, fig. 1.2.

Bacquart, Jean-Baptiste. *The Tribal Arts of Africa*. London: Thames & Hudson. French translation: *L'art Tribal d'Afrique Noire*. Paris: Editions Assouline, 1998, p. 315, fig. D.

LaGamma, Alisa. *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 302-303, no. 111

Exhibitions

Utotombo - L'Art de l'Afrique Noire dans les Collections Privées Belges. Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 25 March - 5 June 1988.

Afrikanische Skulptur - Die Erfindung der Figur / African Sculpture - The Invention of the Figure. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 27 July - 30 September 1990

Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, November 1990 - January 1991.

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

COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI

The spiritual and symbolic heart of a Teke ancestral figure, known as a *buti*, lies in the medicinal substance placed within a cavity carved into the front of its torso. When a figure lacks this spiritually activating material (*bonga*), it is called a *tege*. This seated male example still contains its powerful abdominal charge, secured with a resin seal into which a fragment of glass and a cowrie shell have been embedded. Such sculptures were commissioned by individuals seeking assistance with personal matters, whether success in hunting or trade, the acquisition of wives, or relief from physical or psychological distress.

To acquire the knowledge required to endow a wooden figure with spiritual force, a carver underwent initiation and apprenticed with a ritual specialist. Often, the same person both sculpted the figure and prepared and inserted the *bonga*, thereby granting it the efficacy to counter misfortune or illness. Each specialist maintained a unique formula for *bonga*, typically combining various ingredients. Before a *tege* was empowered, its torso was coated with *mpieme*, a potent white clay or chalk medicine also used in *bonga*. Metaphorically associated with the bones of the ancestors, *mpieme* acted as a catalyst that activated the other components, enabling the *buti* to assume a specific spiritual function. Substances incorporated into *bonga* might include beard hair from esteemed elders or ritual experts, leaves from a sacred plantain variety (*nga a ba*), and elements of totemic animals such as snakes. Although the relic cavity most commonly appears in the abdominal region, it could be placed elsewhere on the figure.

A figure's worth was judged by its proven spiritual effectiveness. The wood selected for carving was chosen with care; in rare cases, as here, it was a soft, pale yellow type known as *mulong*. These sculptures were intended for frontal viewing. Hallmark features include the *mabina* facial scarification, parallel lines running from the temples down the cheeks, a pronounced mouth signifying ritual authority, and a full beard, emblematic of virtue and sacred stature. Special emphasis is consistently placed on the coiffure's crowning form; in this instance, the spiraled hairstyle called *ntali*, favored by the Fumu subgroup of the Teke and associated with a totemic serpent.

Within Teke belief, the *ikwii*, spirits of the deceased, protected the living from harm caused by witches. A father might call upon the *ikwii* of his parents, and at times his maternal uncle, to safeguard his wives and children. Family shrines dedicated to departed relatives included reliquary figures (*buti*) representing some of those ancestors, accompanied by other sacred objects.

COLNAGHI

Each *buti* bore the name of and embodied a particular male ancestor, often a distinguished chief or leader whose continued presence ensured communal stability and prosperity. The sacred core of the figure contained earth taken from the ancestor's grave, believed to hold traces of his physical essence. Typically kept within the household of the family head, *buti* belonging to village leaders extended their protective benefits to the broader community. Upon the death of its owner, a *buti* was frequently interred alongside him, together with his personal possessions.

This remarkably rare and well carved example is one of the finest examples in the world: the facial scarification and the *ntali* hairstyle are carved in extremely fine detail. Furthermore, this figure is hermaphroditic: while having neither male nor female genitals, it has both female breasts and a male beard, symbolizing fertility and wisdom, respectively, and must have been particularly powerful for that reason. Comparison with the quality of the examples from museums below quickly reveals the exceptional nature of this piece.

Comparanda



London, The British Museum,
Af1995,06.1.



Geneva, Musée d'Ethnographie,
ETHAF 044416.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com