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Christ Crucified

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KONGO ARTIST

Democratic Republic of the Congo, 16th-18th century

Christ Crucified

Copper alloy

h. 13.5 cm
5 ¼ in.

Provenance

Collected between 1920-1935 by a Belgian colonial administrator, François Restiau;
Sold by his grandchildren in 2005;
Lucien Van de Velde, Antwerp, Belgium 2005;
Private collection, Belgium.

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This expressive figure of the Crucified Christ, produced in the Kongo Kingdom, is a compelling expression of Christian iconography transformed through a distinctly Central African lens. Cast in copper alloy using the lost-wax technique—a sculptural tradition long established in West and Central Africa—the work reflects both a local mastery of form and a sophisticated adaptation of imported religious imagery.

Christianity was first introduced to the Kongo Kingdom in the late 15th century through sustained contact with Portuguese missionaries and traders, and it became deeply embedded in royal and elite identity. By the 18th century, Christian imagery developed distinct material expressions. Brass crucifixes were not merely liturgical objects but also potent symbols of political authority, personal devotion, and ancestral mediation. Their portability and durability lent them special significance in a society where visual objects played a central role in spiritual life. Kongo crucifixes circulated among court officials and clan leaders, often serving as markers of legitimacy, spiritual protection, and access to divine intercession.

Both the figure and the cross were cast in a mold using metal obtained from a traditional African brass currency known as *manillas* (which often took the form of bracelets) and subsequently incised with finer details. The scale of the sculpture suggests that it may have originally functioned as a handheld devotional object or status emblem.

Kongo crucifixes stand as material testaments to a deeply entangled history of cultural encounter, artistic exchange, and religious syncretism. Christian visual culture was not passively received but actively reimagined in Africa—rendered local, legible, and operative within the spiritual landscape of the Kongo. In the Kongo Kingdom, the form of the cross was not a foreign sign but a deeply embedded cosmological symbol. Long prior to and independent of the arrival of Christians, cruciform motifs encoded the *dikenga* or “the Four Moments of the Sun” (dawn, noon, dusk, and midnight)—a schema that represented life, death, spiritual transformation, and rebirth. The convergence of Christian crucifixes with this symbol of the indigenous belief system enabled a particularly resonant fusion of spiritual meaning and visual form. In this context, Kongo crucifixes operated not only as emblems of Christ’s Passion, but as ritual charms that invoked protection and ancestral intercession.

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