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ATTRIBUTED TO SEMANGOY
A Kota Reliquary Figure

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Kota, Gabon

Late 19th-early 20th century

Reliquary Figure

Wood, brass, copper alloy

h: 52.8 cm; 20 ³/₄ in.

Provenance

Collected prior to 1939 by the grandfather of S. O'Malley, Esquire

Sotheby's London. *Primitive Art. Tibetan and Nepalese Sculpture also Islamic Pottery*. 11 July 1972, lot 274

Ex Entwistle, London, 1972

Ex Alain Schoffel, Paris/Tours

Ex Robert Burawoy, Paris

Ex Jerry Solomon, Los Angeles

Ex Gallery K, Los Angeles, 1980

Estate of Barry Kitnick, California

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The Kota and related peoples preserved the relics of honored ancestral leaders in baskets guarded by reliquary figures, believing that their strength and wisdom survived after death in their remains. Affixed to the baskets, the figures were carved from a single piece of wood and covered in metal. The metals attached to the surfaces of the reliquary figures helped avert evil spirits and added prestige because of their great value. Ancestors were contacted to ensure the well-being of individuals as well as the village, and in times of great distress all *mbulu ngulu* were brought together to combine the power of all of the important dead.

In contrast to the figurative reliquary guardians of other African cultures, the Kota guardians appear abstract. A large ovoid head with minimal facial features rests on a lozenge shape that represents the arms of a truncated body. The forms projecting from the top and sides of the face correspond to men's elaborate hairstyles or headwear, and some figures, such as the present example, have iron accents and ear ornaments. Size may indicate function. Large, Janus-faced figures are thought to have guarded the relics belonging to an extensive lineage group, while smaller ones guarded those of families or individuals. It is unknown whether one side represents a female and the other a male—though some have supposed that concave faces represent females and convex males.

Based on stylistic comparisons, this reliquary guardian figure is attributed to Semangoy, a Wumbu group artisan from Zokolunga, a small village near Moanda. A Janus-faced figure in the Dallas Museum of Art serves as a close parallel, and there are even closer single-faced examples in Private Collections (pictured below).

Comparanda



Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art

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Private Collection (Italy)



Private Collection (USA)

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