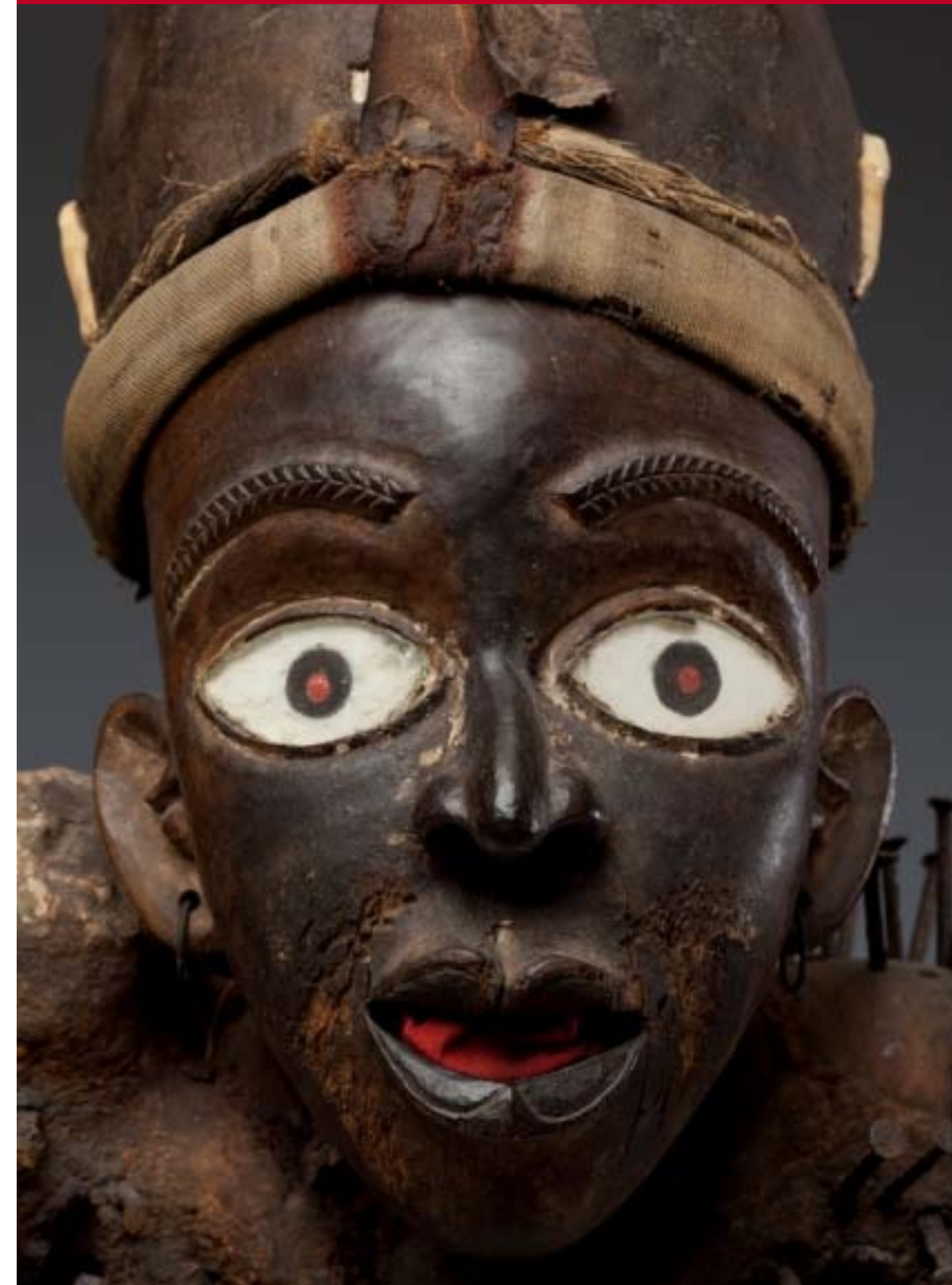


A Closer Look



Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the label printed on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the object.

When you have finished reading the label, consider the following:

In what ways did the information in the label reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own? In what ways did it surprise you? This process is not about getting all the “right” answers. It can be easy to misread art from another culture or time period because its visual language and symbolism differs from your own.

Did the label mention anything you did not see or think about previously? What?

How would your experience of this object have been different if you read the label first?

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this object might include:

What does this work tell us about the role of art in this culture?

How is it similar to or different from the role of art in American culture?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment involves questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think the people for whom this sculpture was created would think it was successful and well done? Why or why not?

This sculpture was designed to provoke an emotional response. What is your response to it?

We hope this approach enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this sculpture. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each object:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, and Alex Bortolot, former Assistant Curator, Special Projects.

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HOOD
MUSEUM OF ART
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Unknown Kongo artist and ritual expert, Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola

Nkisi nkondi, power figure

Late 19th century

Wood and mixed media

Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund, the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall Fund, the William B. Jaffe Memorial Fund, the William S. Rubin Fund, the Julia L. Whittier Fund and through gifts by exchange; 996.22.30233

Within Kongo communities in western Central Africa, objects called *minkisi* (sing. *nkisi*) enforce ideas of justice, morality, communal welfare, and healing. While some *minkisi* were figural in form like this one, others were simple bottles, packets, or pots. All were highly sophisticated instruments for wielding enormously powerful forces. In the hands of ritual experts called *banganga* (sing. *nganga*), *minkisi* restored social balance and harmony within society.

The animating force behind an *nkisi* is the spirit of a deceased individual. According to the Kongo worldview, the dead inhabit an invisible land parallel to that of the living but continue to be active forces within the visible world as well. Specially trained individuals such as *banganga* knew how to capture this spiritual energy, contain it, and manipulate it for the benefit of the community. To create this *nkisi*, the *nganga* commissioned an artist to carve a physical container for this force in the form of a human figure. The figure's physical appearance, which was determined by the *nganga* but executed by the artist, indicated the *nkisi*'s function. Along with the materials arrayed on its surface, it also directed the spirit to act in specific ways.

This *nkisi* dates from the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a type of *nkisi* called *nkondi*, which means “hunter” in Kikongo, the language spoken by Kongo peoples. Its purpose was to hunt down, reveal, and punish wrongdoers. Victims of theft, witchcraft, adultery, and other crimes consulted with an *nganga* and the *nkisi nkondi* with which he or she worked to determine the identity of the perpetrator and bring that person to justice. Once the *nkisi nkondi* identified the criminal, it exposed and punished the criminal by inflicting a terrible illness upon him. The *nkisi nkondi* could also act as a witness to a contractual agreement made between two parties, such as oaths of loyalty. If one side broke the contract the *nkisi* would mete out the proper punishment.

The creators and users of this *nkisi nkondi* drew upon an extraordinarily rich visual, conceptual, and material vocabulary to express its purpose and direct its actions. While the appearance or arrangement of its component parts may appear rough or even haphazard to viewers today, almost every aspect of the artwork was carefully considered and executed by highly trained specialists. A step-by-step analysis of its form and materials reveals important Kongo concepts about art, life, and the world.

Nkondi the Hunter

Several aspects of the *nkisi* combine to communicate its role as a terrifying hunter of

malefactors. The empty hand at the end of the *nkisi*'s upraised arm once held a spear or knife with which it metaphorically attacked its victims. A small bundle of powerful materials on its right bicep amplified the strength and accuracy of its blow, while the flashing mica at the wrist likens its attack to the terrible force of a lightning bolt. On the *nkisi*'s back, metal hooks and chains directed it to catch and bind its victims like hunted animals, and small clay vessels identified as old gunpowder flasks associated the *nkisi* with the ferocious power of modern weaponry.

Nails and Blades

The *nkisi* was dormant when inactive and needed to be awakened and made angry and irritable in order to be effective. This was achieved by loudly insulting it and jeering at it and, most importantly, driving a nail, screw, or metal blade into its wooden body. These actions goaded it into action and told it what to do. Different nails achieved different results. A long, thick nail accompanied a solemn and weighty vow; knotting a length of string around it bound those words to the *nkisi* and ensured that the *nkisi* would enforce them. A flattened, square blade marked a declaration of loyalty, while a sharp, pointed one instructed the *nkisi* to uncover and inflict horrific punishments upon an offender.

Posture

The *nkisi*'s posture would have been understood by its Kongo audience as overtly aggressive and confrontational. It leans forward at the waist, one hand on its hip and the other raised in the air, alert and prepared to act.

Medicine Packs

The awesome powers of the *Nkisi* are generated from the elements contained in the head and abdomen, two areas of the body that are particularly significant within Kongo philosophy. The head is the center of perception and thought, while the abdomen contains an organ called *kundu* that gives people power and energy. Ingredients deposited inside these areas in the *nkisi* include dirt from a gravesite, which contains the spirit that animates the *nkisi*, as well as a host of plants and mineral materials that are selected to direct its actions.

The Senses

The sculptor carved the eyes, ears, and mouth of this figure in a detailed way that gives maximum attention to the *nkisi*'s sensory capabilities: this *nkisi* uses its sight, hearing, smell, and even taste to hunt its victims. When called upon to consult the spirit world, *banganga* used clay to paint the skin around their eyes white—the color of death and the land of the dead—to exaggerate their size and augment their clairvoyant vision. The *nkisi*'s glass-covered eyes are equally large and white. Its vision is further improved by the addition of dogs' teeth to the four sides of the head: front, back, left, and right. In Kongo culture, dogs were attributed with double sight, the ability to see both visible and invisible realms. With dogs' teeth arrayed around its head, the *nkisi* could look in all directions simultaneously to better hunt its victims.

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

NUMBER TWO IN A SERIES

A Closer Look

As a teaching museum, the Hood Museum of Art is committed to helping visitors develop visual literacy skills—the ability to construct meaning from all that we see. One way it does this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art they encounter.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Background Information

This sculpture is an *nkisi*, or power figure. It was made in the nineteenth century through a collaboration between an artist and a diviner, or ritual expert, of the Kongo Peoples of Central Africa. The artist carved the figure and the diviner adorned it with objects and materials of great spiritual strength. The *nkisi* played a role in maintaining the balance of law and order within a community.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at the sculpture from a variety of angles.

What do you see?

What materials were used to create it?



What do you notice about the head?

The face of the figure?

Its expression?



What do you notice about the figure's pose? Consider the arms and hands, the feet, and the tilt of the body.



How is this figure proportioned?

What parts of the body are emphasized?



What do you notice about the navel?



What objects are hanging from the figure's back?

How would you describe the carving of this figure? Consider in particular the nose, eyebrows, ears, and feet. How would you describe the surface of the rest of the figure?

Step 2: Analysis

Without reading the label, think about what you have observed.

Why do you think this figure is studded with nails and blades?

What might be missing from its hand?

What do the figure's expression and pose suggest?

Why do you think its navel is so large and protruding?

What might be the purpose of the objects hanging off its back?

As you consider these questions, look to the sculpture for clues to support your ideas.