



SHAPING POWER: LUBA MASTERWORKS FROM THE ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA

DIDACTICS

Royal emblems were vital to the formation and expansion of the Luba Kingdom, a highly influential Central African state that has flourished for the past several centuries in what is now Katanga Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sculpted thrones, elegant scepters, and commemorative figures played significant roles in shaping the powers of a highly sophisticated African royal culture. Luba and Luba-related masterworks lent by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium are on view in Los Angeles for the first time as LACMA inaugurates its new gallery for the arts of Africa.

While many Luba works appear to have utilitarian purposes, they were imbued with spiritual attributes and esoteric wisdom. As treasures of kings, chiefs, titleholders, and diviners, they also served as emissaries, creating affiliations that extended the realm. Wide emulation of Luba aesthetics and political rituals further enlarged their reach. These same objects were, and continue to be, memory devices, encoding the histories and precepts of Luba kingship.

Shaping Power conveys the beauty and complexity of Luba art and culture, offering insight into a remarkable African sculptural and philosophical legacy. The exhibition considers the roles of sacred objects in the making of a ruler, why Luba emblems depict women, and how certain objects possess powers of healing and transformation. Complementing precolonial works is a contemporary installation by Congolese artist Aimé Mpane, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, as well as a Luba memory board from a private collection. In seminal works like these, the past is continually reimagined through eyes of the present.

Heroes and Artists

According to the great Luba epic, a culture hero named Mbidi Kiluwe came from the east and introduced royal practices—as well as the advanced technologies of hunting, healing, and blacksmithing—to the Luba. Mbidi Kiluwe fathered a son named Kalala Ilunga, who became the first Luba king. All subsequent royal emblems hold the powers of the insignia introduced by these great heroes, and reflect the etiquette and refinement that the Luba kingdom came to represent for people throughout a vast region of Central Africa.

Works on display in *Shaping Power* date to the nineteenth century or earlier and are carved from symbolically significant types of wood, with additions of copper, iron, and sometimes medicinal substances to increase the objects' effectiveness. Luba artists underwent long apprenticeships and became highly skilled and widely celebrated. Although most of their names are not known to us today, four works on display are by identifiable master sculptors. The exhibition also features the Royal Museum for Central Africa's most iconic mask, which recalls Luba heroes and has never before been lent. Several commemorative works from neighboring peoples complete the story of how widely influential the aesthetics and precepts of Luba royalty were and remain.

Luba people take great pride in their collective histories and continue their royal practices today, even as traditions are transformed to meet the needs of present circumstances. Despite changes wrought by colonialism, contemporary politics, and protracted civil strife, Luba arts offer inspiration and serve as reminders of the cultural legacy inspired by Mbidi Kiluwe and Kalala Ilunga.

The Making of a Ruler

The works in this gallery were used in enthronement rites to transform an ordinary man into a semidivine king. All Luba rulers were initiated into the esoteric knowledge of the beaded *lukasa* memory board that recalls royal precepts, rules, and particular histories. Through a complex ritual, the king acquired a caryatid throne, a staff of office, a bowstand, and a ceremonial ax; he might also drink palm wine from a deeply symbolic cup in the form of a human head.

Luba royal emblems often depict female figures. Because women bear and nurture children, Luba individuals say that only the body of a woman is strong enough to hold a spirit as powerful as that of a king. As seen in many of the works exhibited in *Shaping Power*, Luba artists portrayed women in the prime of life wearing elaborate hairstyles, for which they were widely celebrated, and bearing complex patterns of scarification on their bodies as marks of cultural identity and beauty. The female figures often gesture to their breasts, signifying where the most potent powers are preserved, thus keeping royal protocols and secrets safe.

Women also played important roles as diplomats, advisors, and guardians of sacred locales. To express the complementarity of men and women in Luba culture, a well-known proverb asserts that "men are chiefs in the daytime, but women are chiefs at night." Indeed, some say that "the king is a woman," and by adopting a woman's hairstyle on the day of his investiture, a Luba ruler demonstrated his transcendence of gender as he embodied the guardian spirits of royal culture.

Aimé Mpane

Democratic Republic of the Congo, b. 1968, active Belgium

Congo, Shadow of the Shadow, 2005

Mixed-media installation

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Museum Purchase, 2009-10-1

Aimé Mpane divides his time between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This installation addresses complex histories during and since the colonial era. The Berlin Conference of 1885, to which Mpane alludes on the cross, led to the partition of Africa by colonial powers. It was then that King Leopold II of Belgium, who reigned from 1865 to 1909, was granted the immense Congo Free State as his personal property. Because of scandalous, violent exploitation, Belgium assumed control of the colony in 1908 and held it until Congolese independence in 1960.

The standing figure in Mpane's installation is formed by 4,652 matchsticks to express the paradoxes of human strength and fragility, and the resolute ability of Congolese to transcend the horrors that have befallen their nation from 1885 to the present day. Decades of tragic—and ongoing—civil strife have taken countless lives, as reflected by the wooden silhouettes

of a pregnant woman and child that lie near the figure. As the artist writes, they are "the shadows of the dead and then there are their shoes...When a village in Congo dies after an attack by rebels or gangs, sometimes all that is left behind is their shoes." Yet, as the figure and its shadow also convey, however challenging the circumstances, a spirit of courage and resilience endures.

Agents of Empowerment

Luba royal culture expanded as people in outlying areas sought to participate in the aura of kingship. Rather than a militaristic "empire" realized through conquest, Luba influence spread more subtly, through strategic gift-giving, intermarriage, and spiritual empowerment. Many artists were itinerant, moving from one region to another to serve diverse patrons seeking affiliation with Luba dynastic rule, and people from areas adjacent to the heartland emulated the regalia and styles of the Luba courts.

Sculptures from neighboring areas often depict men, unlike the prevalence of female figures in Luba regalia. Yet the common gesture of the hands placed on the abdomen to frame the navel refers to women as the promise of lineage continuity and growth. Such figures were commissioned and cherished by particular chiefs, yet they are not portraits; instead, they permitted communication with matrilineal ancestors. By offering freshly brewed millet beer and anointing the figures with palm oil, which is still evident on many of the works, living chiefs could be assured that ancestral wisdom would be conveyed through dreams and visions.

Several works shown here were used for healing and protection. Animal horns or cavities in the head filled with herbal medicines and other healing substances empowered the figures to deflect malevolent forces, increase personal strength, and promote the community. Such sculptures were critical to the shaping of power. A bowl-bearing figure by the renowned artist best known in the West as the Buli Master, remembered through the honorific Ngongo ya Chintu (Father of Sculpted Things), assisted clairvoyance through divination, while other works invested with spirit inspired both everyday tasks and special triumphs.