



Reliquary guardian head (Añgokh-Nlô-Byeri)

On display

Title/Description: Reliquary guardian head (Añgokh-Nlô-Byeri)

Born: 1800 - 1900

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Brass, Wood

Measurements: h. 260 x w. 110 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 240

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: Africa, Gabon

Cultural Group: Fang

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

The figurative reliquary guardian head (Añgokh-Nlô-Byeri) is one of the exceptional objects in the Sainsbury Centre collection. It was made by the Fang (Nzaman-Betsi group), located in the valleys of the Okano, Ogowe and Abanga rivers that dominate the dense rain forests of present-day Gabon.

Dating back to the 19th century, this sculpture or commemorative statuary is a stylized representation. It is carved in hardwood and anointed with palm oil. The anointment with palm oil formed part of the process of purification of these sacred sculptures. The wood is so impregnated with applications of oil that it continues to exude to the present day.

The sculpture would have originally been attached to the lid of a cylindrical bark relic container. The carved head is a complete sculpture and not a fragment, made from a single piece of wood. Reliquary figures of either male or females were carved as heads, half-figures as well as whole figures. In Fang sculpture, each segment of the body is articulated in an independent unit of form, the head was often the prime focus and locus of one's spiritual essence. [1]

The form is dominated by the serenity of the gaze and the intensity of the eyes, wide open and watchful. The eyes are formed from inlaid non-identical asymmetrical brass discs. There are two conjoining holes in the crown for the attachment of feathers. The lines of the cheeks refine the lower face, result in a small, stylized mouth, and curved chin. The convexity of the forehead leads to the treatment of the hair, coiffed with a set of wide braids, known to the southern Fang, Betsi by the term *ekôma* (plural: *bikôma*). [2] The elongated nape of the neck serves to enhance the overall elegance of the finely detailed facial composition.

The deep dark surface colour is achieved not by the underlying wood but rather the application of charcoal to the surface. This colouring represents the great divide between the ancestors and the living relatives who venerate them. Guardian figures were often produced in pairs or as individual figures. It has been suggested that carved heads preceded half-figures and whole figures. There are a number of stylistically comparable reliquary head and figure sculptures in a number of collections. [3]

The Fang, of present-day Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and South Cameroon placed remains of ancestors in containers surmounted by guardian heads or figures. These relic containers were housed in small purpose-built structures. Ancestor worship through the veneration of relics was common practice before colonial and missionary activity disrupted traditional ways of life and death. The Fang historically derived a sense of continuity with their past and communal cohesiveness in the present through an ancestral belief-system known as byeri. [4]

However, By the 1950s the role of byeri in Fang culture was replaced by a syncretic religion known as bwiti [5]. Bwiti is a spiritual discipline that incorporates animism, ancestor veneration, and Christianity into a syncretistic belief system. The significance and meaning of these historic objects are not entirely lost, even though they have been stripped of their context and separated from the ancestor relics.

Historically, as the Fang migrated into southern Cameroon and northern Gabon over centuries, families brought with them bark boxes filled with the skulls or bones of their forebears. [6] These boxes were topped with sculptures such as this example, carved heads or sculpted figures that at once evoked the ancestors and served to protect the contents of the reliquary boxes. The reverence towards relics is trans-cultural as is the belief in relics to perform miracles. [7] The sacred relics themselves had primacy over the reliquary container and guardian sculptures. Notable venerated relics belonged to important deceased relatives who were venerated, leaders, courageous warriors, especially fertile woman, village founders or superior artists. Relics were believed to be imbued with the powers those extraordinary people had during their lives, powers that could be drawn upon to help the living.

The disruption caused by colonialism and existing trade networks meant objects such as Fang sculpture begun to appear in Europe in the 19th century. European colonial officials banned reliquaries and restricted priests who controlled them during the first decades of the twentieth century. This coincided with the spread of Christian doctrine. By the early years of the twentieth century, European artists associated with the Parisian avant-garde became obsessed by them. Artists such as Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse and Derain appropriated their designs on a purely stylised basis. Stripped of their context and meaning, they exoticized them, fantasised about their agency for magic and perceived potency. European artists typically valued them not for their indigenous context or as important sacred objects in their own right but viewed them as sexual and erotically charged, referring to them as 'fetishes'. [8]

This form of appropriation fuelled developments in European art, but the language and context of colonialism obscured a deeper understanding. This in turn led to the use of the and discredited term 'Primitive' being applied to any object created by non-sedentary or non-industrial societies. This could be applied as a pejorative term but also sometimes used as a value judgement or complement. European artists and collectors who considered themselves 'cultured' valued these 'expressive forms' for their perceived lack of 'sophistication' but often in apparent ignorance or casual regard

for their original use, context and the motivation of the maker. This coincided with unfounded attempts at pseudo-science propagating racial theories that denigrated cultures and societies that existed before colonial disruption. This continually served to obscure the original context of such objects and has persistently lasted until present times.

By the First World War, Fang sculptures were acquired by collectors who saw them as optimizing sophisticated European taste. In Paris, collector, critic and art dealer Paul Guillaume (1891-1934) became a significant proponent. The Fang sculpture head was acquired from his gallery in Paris by Robert Sainsbury in 1935. Guillaume was part of the avant-garde circle that surrounded the French art critic and poet Guillaume Apollinaire, with whom he shared a passion for African sculpture.

Paul Guillaume worked first in a garage in Montmartre but had links to traders working in West Africa. In 1914, he lent 18 sculptures from Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire from his collection to experimental exhibitions at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in New York. Paul Guillaume opened his first gallery (Galerie Paul Guillaume) in February 1914 at 6, rue de Miromesnil. He became one of the pre-eminent dealers in African objects, as well as European Modern art. Guillaume also promoted Giorgio de Chirico, André Derain, Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, Francis Picabia, and Chaïm Soutine, among others. [9] Paul Guillaume ultimately established his gallery at 59, rue La Boétie. He spearheaded numerous exhibition projects, lent works from his collection internationally, and published frequently on the subject. Chief among those writings is *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, which he co-authored with American art historian Thomas Munro (1897-1974).

By 1929 Guillaume was financially overextended, however, and decided to sell his collection. Valentine Dudensing offered to publish a lavish, fully-illustrated catalogue documenting the works. In the spring of 1930, the Valentine Gallery in New York presented an exhibition of seventy-four pieces from his Collection. [10] In 1933, Guillaume organised an exhibition dedicated to André Derain at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York. This reliquary guardian head sculpture featured alongside several others. The exhibition then apparently travelled to the Chicago Arts Club as part of an exhibition called *Early Heads and Statues from the Gabon Pahouin Tribe*.

The sculpture was back in Paris in 1934, where Robert Sainsbury saw it in Paul Guillaume's gallery. Sainsbury was instinctively drawn to the Fang Head sculpture but decided the asking price was too high. On his return to London, he regretted his decision and coincidentally heard that Guillaume had died suddenly. He decided to write to Madame Guillaume and acquired the Fang Head for £90. [11] The circumstances of its removal from its original context are not known and currently, the earliest known reference is the exhibition in New York in 1933.

Calvin Winner, February 2022

[1] A summary of the description of these figures from Alisa LaGamma, et al. (eds.), *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.25; p.107, suggested that a light wood, known as ekug (*alstonia boonei*); an example illustrated in a sketch dated 1913-17 (p.25) and a photograph dated, 1913. p.101. Catalogue no. 38 is an intact example, p.187.

[2]

[https://collection.barnesfoundation.org/objects/6722/Reliquary-Guardian-Head-\(Angokh-Nlo-Byeri\)/](https://collection.barnesfoundation.org/objects/6722/Reliquary-Guardian-Head-(Angokh-Nlo-Byeri)/)
Accessed 16/02/2022

[3] A summary of the description of these figures from LaGamma, p.107, p.172, catalogue numbers, 29; 30; 31; 32; 33; 34; 35; 36; 37; 38; 39; 40; 41; 42; 43; 44; 45; 46; 47; 48; 49. In addition, there is a similar example in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou.

[4] LaGamma, p.40, p.81, p.49

[5] <https://african-arte.com/fang-byeri-mistery/> Accessed 16/02/2022

[6] LaGamma, p.21 - trade and European colonialism caused these migrations.

[7] LaGamma, p.11

[8] originally a Franco-Portuguese term that was applied by Europeans in the early twentieth century. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fetishism> Accessed 16/02/2022

[9] <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/libraries-and-research-centers/leonard-lauder-research-center/research/index-of-cubist-art-collectors/guillaume> Accessed 16/02/2022

[10] Exhibition of Rare African Sculptures ran from March 24 - April 12, 1930, featured statues and masks from the Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Sudan, and Gabon.
<http://www.thevalentinegallery.org/blog/tag/Paul+Guillaume> Accessed 16/02/2022

[11] Steven Hooper (ed.), Catalogue to the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection. University of East Anglia, (Yale, 1997) p. xli

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This figurative reliquary guardian head (Añgokh-Nlô-Byeri) is one of the masterworks of the Sainsbury Centre collection. It was made by the Fang (Nzaman-Betsi group), located in the valleys of the Okano, Ogowe and Abanga rivers of present-day Gabon. It was carved in hardwood and anointed with palm oil, used to purify these sacred sculptures. The wood is so impregnated with oil that it continues to exude it to the present day. In the twentieth century, Fang sculptures were acquired by European artists, art critics and collectors. This example was bought from art dealer Paul Guillaume.

Exhibitions

London Art Fair, Business Design Centre, London - 22/01/25 - 26/01/25

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Paul Guillaume, Paris, a dealer in African art between 1911 and his death in 1934.

Acquired from his widow by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1935.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
