



Seated figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Seated figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Porcelain, Wood

Measurements: h. 279 x w. 111 x d. 122 mm

Accession Number: 915

Historic Period: Late 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Yombe

Credit Line: Purchased with support of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1985

A carving of this type, with medicine or its traces (as here), is known as a *nkisi*, a figure endowed with magical power. The medicine was on the chest; its traces are to be seen in a discoloured patch with small nail holes at the top and bottom. In a letter, Dr Van Geluwe says that a *nkisi* figure such as this one, wearing the chief's regalia (plaited skull-cap and investiture armlets) is not so much representing the chief himself as emphasising the rank of the figure in the *nkisi* hierarchy; 'it is an important one since it is a chief *nkisi*'. The cross-legged attitude, with the head resting on the right hand, is a convention signalling the thoughtfulness and wisdom to be found among chiefs and elders.

Nkisi figures were used in a variety of rites which are not clearly understood or defined. The medicine is what makes a figure into a *nkisi*; this is a mixture of various substances (wax, rubber, blood, earth, bark, roots, seeds, etc.), put together by a *nganga* or diviner ('witch-doctor') and visible as a lump on the stomach or head (as in object 262); in other cases the magic mixture may be in a body cavity sealed by a piece of glass or mirror, or placed in small horn. *Nkisi* are not effective unless validated by the *nganga's* rituals; they are generally understood to be protective and propitiatory charms.

The cross-legged attitude, with the chin resting on the right hand, recalls the stone funerary figures (*mintadi*) produced in the area of the Mboma and Solongo, by the lower Zaire river. This figure is carved from heavy fine-grained wood, and has a good patina. The carving is skilful, with precise detail on the chief's cap, the dorsal keloids, armlets, hands and feet. The eyes are realistically rendered in porcelain with the pupils painted black; there is no chronological distinction between eyes in glass or in porcelain.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 179.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia on the advice of Robert Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1985 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
