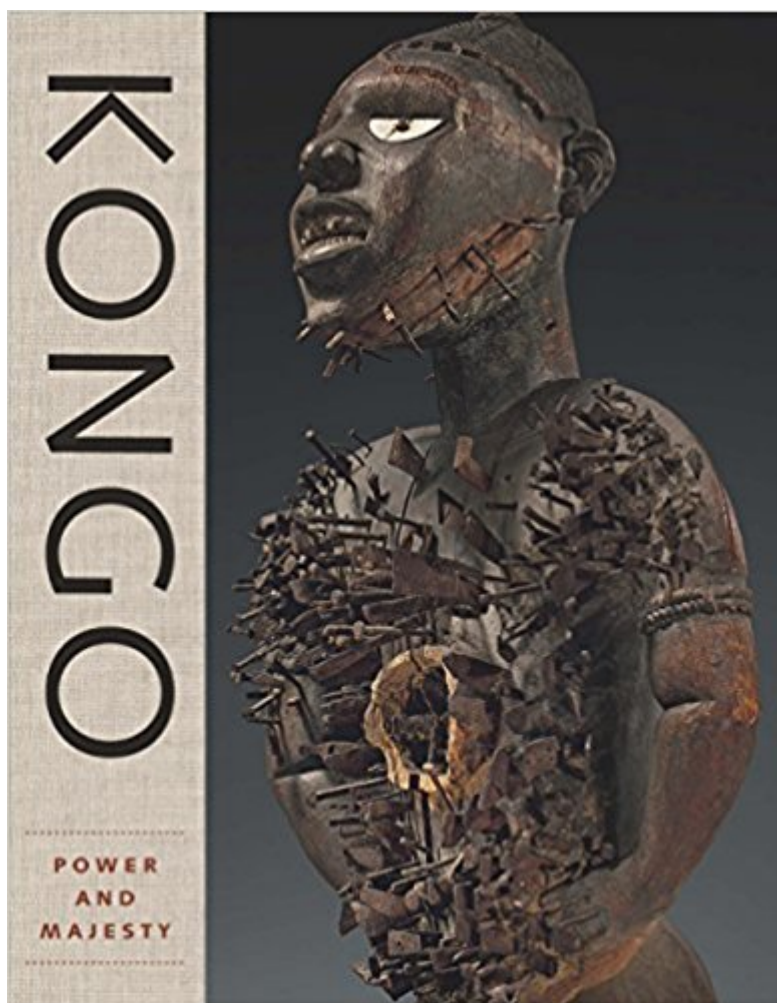


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Kongo: Power And Majesty



Synopsis

A compelling examination of one of the most artistically rich and creative African kingdoms Artists from the kingdom of Kongo—a vast swath of Central Africa that today encompasses the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola—were responsible for outstanding creative achievements. With the influx of Portuguese, Dutch, and Italian merchants, missionaries, and explorers, Kongo developed a unique artistic tradition that blended European iconography with powerful indigenous art forms. An initially positive engagement with Europe in the 15th century turned turbulent in the wake of later displacement, civil war, and the slave trade—and many of the artworks created in Kongo reflect the changing times. This comprehensive study is the first major catalogue to explore Kongo's history, art forms, and cultural identity before, during, and after contact with Europe. Objects range from 15th-century “mother-and-child” figures, which reflect a time when Europeans and their Christian motifs were viewed favorably, to fearsome mangaaka, power figures that conveyed strength in the midst of the kingdom's dissolution. Lavishly illustrated with new photography and multiple views of three-dimensional works, this book presents the fascinatingly complex artistic legacy of one of Africa's most storied kingdoms.

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Customer Reviews

"Kongo: Power and Majesty is one of two notable and highly readable books on African art this season . . . compelling."—Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith, New York Times, Holiday Gift Guide 2015 section

This major study of Kongo—a central African kingdom responsible for astounding creative achievements—explores its history, art forms, and cultural identity before, during, and after contact with Europe.

"Kongo: Power and Majesty," a beautiful catalogue published to accompany an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, presents artifacts of the former Kingdom of Kongo which stretched over a large chunk of equatorial west Africa. Although the kingdom was not coterminous with the two countries we now call Congo, it did cover much of the territory of the French Congo (capital: Brazzaville), Belgian Congo (capital: Kinshasa), and Angola. Many collectors and aficionados of African "art"—or more precisely put "artifacts"—have favorite styles associated with a particular region or ethnic group, and it would be folly to cite one as superior to others. Still, it is safe to say that Kongo art is among the most stunning and distinctive ever created on the continent. The show at the Met includes 134 works, created in wood, ivory, and textiles and drawn from numerous museum collections in both Europe and the United States. Luxury goods, often sent to Europe as gifts or used locally as prestige regalia, are prominent in the show. Also well represented and even more dramatic in size and complexity are wooden carvings that specialists employed to control the spirit world for the benefit of local populations. These artifacts in particular demonstrate how accretions such as iron nails, fabrics, and organic materials empowered such ritual objects, harnessing the energy thought to be ubiquitous in the environment. Given its location on the west coast of Africa and its early and long-term interaction with Europe, the Kingdom of Kongo lost roughly one-third of its population to the slave trade by the mid-19th century. A large percentage of those slaves were settled in the southeast coastal region of this country. Readers interested in learning more about the influence of Kongo culture in the United States may wish to pick up "Kongo Across the Waters," a highly-rated exhibition catalogue published by the University of Florida in December 2013.

Looking at the catalogue, it seems one of the best exhibition on African Art. A good synthesis of every precious research.

Beautiful book for the price.

gorgeous book

This is a catalog from the MoMA exhibit in 2015. The photography and the objects are extraordinary. The objects selected date back only as far as European contact (around 1500) and the text of the book limits itself to this historical time period. Due to the nature of trade with the Europeans, and European Renaissance collecting habits, the provenance of many of these items has been lost. The Kongolesse pieces consist of sculpture in metal, wood, and ivory and some (few) textiles. The book is rounded out with Spanish and Portuguese maps and drawings, plus photographs from the 19th and 20th centuries. Simply stunning artistry in these pieces. The book offers a good map, a timeline of kingdoms dating back to the beginning of European contact, and an excellent notes section. 180 objects, most photographed from multiple perspectives. Excellent book.

Despite the fact that Alisa LaGamma was born in the DRC (Zaire), and spent her formidable years in various West African countries - not to mention her doctorate research in the DRC - the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition surrounding this publication is grand on "razzle-dazzle lockstep moves" of fascination and alluring intrigue, but comes up short on historical-cultural truths. The guise behind (stolen) *minkisi* - "Mangaaka" - power figures are merely one example... But greater truth does not meet popular consensus approval, does it? In this case, the greater focus (deflection) is placed on "the Mangaakas" acquired by the Met. The ideology of these statues taken by Europeans during colonial times are spoils of armed conflict, labeled as "war fetishes." And, like many others before her, LaGamma clearly does not allow any lack of consonance to stop her (or the Metropolitan museum's) agenda. Of course, the array of textiles, ivories and other paraphernalia are nice -- as sprinkled in for good measure, but not at all scholarly convincing factors. After-all, the Kongo retains among the best documented accounts of European and African historical relationships, so there is absolutely no excuse anymore!... In 1890, enter a tall, charismatic, "black" American named William Henry Sheppard; the first Westerner to set foot in the Kuba Kingdom, Central Africa. Sheppard is virtually the only witness to the last of the great courts of Central Africa as these existed before the colonial era. (Reference "Presbyterian pioneers in Congo" and "King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa). Sheppard remains unknown and virtually excluded from African historical-cultural "art" books. Sheppard's authoritative accounts were based on years of substantial experience in the region, but has hardly merited even a mere footnote even decades after his death. Sheppard was not only a proven fearless big game hunter, he was a natural linguist, well known and famous among the Kuba - deemed a Kuba prince upon his arrival (the reincarnation of king Bope Mekabe) - and later a chief in control of several surrounding villages. Besides

manuscripts published by the Presbyterian Church, it was only since the 1960s that interest has been revived in his [Sheppard's] life and work. This is partly due to the adventure of his story, and the opportunity to re-examine a fascinating chapter in the historic relationship between the struggle for economic and social parity of "blacks" in America and the struggle against Africa's colonization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In political and cultural self-interest, "blacks" from America and the Caribbean organized the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900... Sheppard had already been in the Congo for a decade.... And, what of Sheppard's rich and diverse collection of the earliest Kuba objects he was given and brought back to America??Sheppard also traded, compared and exchanged "black" American cultural slave and diaspora artefacts with the Kuba peoples, sparking much curiosity among these African groups. Now on the other hand, Westerners such as H. M. Torday and Leo Frobenius - whom William Henry Sheppard preceded in the Kasai Region of the Belgian Congo - is given prominence from their first publications in the annals of Central African ethnography and exploration. "Black" American intellectuals of the time, such as the Harvard-educated Martin Delaney who visited Liberia in 1859, Fredrick Douglass had much to say, especially W.E.B Dubois' prophetic statement that: "he [Sheppard] and other "blacks" would not merit even a mere footnote in such literature... W.E.B Dubois was right. (Art of African Textiles, by Duncan Clarke is among the exceptions to mention these truths). No wonder Edward Blyden (1832-1912), the Liberian educator and statesman warned against European traveler's accounts of Africa, declaring "No people can interpret Africa but Africans."-----It is also true, the Kongo civilization - which prospered for centuries along the Atlantic coast of central Africa, found itself besieged by increasingly hostile European powers via established trade. In fact, the Kongo kingdoms and Luango's troubled history began during the 14th C., and in the south of Angola, raffia textiles was part of it. The Portuguese attempted to control production and sought to have all raffia cloths administered with a "royal arms stamp." By the 18th C., the Kuba and Kongo's indigenous authority was consonantly undermined, and their culture was directly under siege by the accelerating infernal machine of European colonialism. In part, Kongo chiefs commissioned "Mangaaka-minkisi intervention figures" in an effort to reassert their autonomy while European invaders fought to seize natural resources while dividing Central Africa into colonies ("The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912"). As a result, Kongo chiefdoms experienced intense external pressures and collapse. Furthermore, Europeans determined that stealing / looting "community power figures" - Mangaakas - proved equally victorious. Near the end of the 19th century, most surviving "Mangaaka-types" are believed to have been taken. Many ended up as

trophies within European ruler's collections or museums; some ended up in private colonial missionary, military and administrators possession; the remaining were destroyed or secretly claimed by the environment. But, this has worked to suit Western intent and "spoils" as an added bonus - even today. From the second half of the 19th century, (of course) an unprecedented array of "minkisi" were developed - or "fabricated" - along the coast in response to *incursions by colonial traders* into the interior and related social concerns.

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