

Object of the Month—October
Kabila, Luba, Democratic Republic of Congo

Identification:

Name: Kabila

Artist: Unknown

Date: c.1900

Classification: Sculpture, wood, 20 ¼" x 9 ½"

Accession#: 2001.198.37

Social/Historical Context:

The name Luba is a political attribution for a group of people who are ethnically diverse but related historically. They live in the SE provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This region extends from the Kasai River on the west to the Lualaba River on the east. The Luba kingdom flourished from late in the 15th century to the 19th. The kingdom declined after the death of their last king, Ilunga Kabale. The Luba speak a dialect of Bantu. As of the end of the 20th century the Luba population numbered from 1 million to 5 million, sources differ. The divine lineage of the king plus a ruling council lead to a stable centralized government. By the 17th century the Luba people had subdued neighboring chiefdoms and were regulating lucrative trade routes. The king was the leader of the important secret society known as the Babridye. The purpose of this society was to remember and interpret the history of the Luba people. Interpretations of the past often influenced the policy decisions of the present. In 1885 King Leopold II of Belgium secured European recognition of his control of the territories occupied by the Luba. In 1960 the Democratic Republic of the Congo was granted independence from Belgium.

Luba women were held in high esteem. Royal women acted as counselors and advisors to the court. They often married neighboring chiefs to solidify political boundaries, treaties and policies. Women were thought to have extra spiritual powers, and were better able to communicate with the spiritual world and the ancestors. Vilu, the first woman spirit and founder of the clan, was considered to be the grantor and guarantor of fertility. The Luba saw the sexes as complementary and inner-connected.

Object: The Kabila (ka-Bee-la) is a wooden figure of a woman holding a mboko, a sacred calabash, which is also a figure of a woman. The fact that the kabila is holding a figure of a woman emphasizes the high status of women in Luba society. The figure maybe associated with divination ceremonies that call upon the ancestors for protective and rejuvenating powers. The figure is also associated with fertility and childbirth and may be left outside the home of a new mother to invite the community to leave gifts for the baby. The MIA kabila shows evidence of a white clay powder that is associated with purification rituals. The figure is of a woman of high status as evidenced by her elaborate hair-do and scarification.

Possible open-ended questions:

What are some items that we might have that connect us to previous generations?

How do we celebrate the arrival of a new baby in our community?

Tour Possibilities:

Highlights of World Art

People and Places

Safari through Art

Women in Art

Resources:

Oxford Art on Line

ArtsconnectEd gallery label and audio stop

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Wikipedia, "Luba People"