exhibition review

Kongo: Power and Majesty
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
reviewed by Carlee S. Forbes

Reflecting its global reach and reputation for authoritative exhibitions in an array of fields, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Kongo: Power and Majesty” brought together an impressive selection of 146 of the finest Kongo objects from over 50 European and American collections. While acknowledging the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism as cataclysmic events in Kongo’s history, the exhibition continually drew attention to Kongo creative expressions before and in spite of these events. The exhibition emphasized the ways in which Kongo artists from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries creatively responded to historical experiences. In each gallery visitors were introduced to objects with a variety of functions including diplomacy, prayer, and defense.

Curator Alisa LaGamma organized the exhibition into four galleries, structured thematically and beginning with the earliest objects. Throughout the exhibition, visitors were presented with an array of multiples, which demonstrated the artistic possibilities for each object type as well as the capabilities of the Kongo artists. Encouraged by label texts to see each object in its own light, labels addressed diverse aspects of the objects, elucidating materials, techniques, artists, functions, and provenances.

The exhibition opened with a small, darkened foyer, empty but for the introductory text on the fall left wall. From the entrance, glass cases allowed partial views of many objects, inspiring curiosity and drawing visitors into the exhibition. With its dark walls and spotlight objects, the first gallery was reminiscent of a treasure trove, much like the Kunstkammern (“cabins of curiosities”) in which several of the objects were once located. Filled with fine raffia textiles and intricately carved ivory oliphants (horns), the objects in this room represented the earliest contact between the Kongo Kingdom and Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Figs. 1–2). Both the ivory horns and raffia textiles demonstrated superb material and production quality. The multiple examples also illustrated the longstanding use of intricately interwoven geometric patterns that appear across mediums and continue over several centuries in Kongo art. In addition to its emphasis on materials, this gallery also considered the impression that these objects had on Europeans, tracing the story of their movement into European collections.

Of note was the Met’s inclusion of provenance information on each object label. Some objects were accompanied by a lengthy history of movement and careful documentation, while others included much less. This text, while printed in a small font, illustrated the narrative of European interest in Kongo objects that ran throughout the exhibition. Just as Kongo artists responded to historical events, so too did Europeans collect and understand objects within their specific historic and cultural contexts. Europeans gradually moved from understanding Kongo objects as treasures inspiring wonder to categorizing them as ethnographic curiosities.

All photos: Peter Zeray, Senior Photographer, Metropolitan Museum of Art, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1 In 1483, the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão placed limestone pillars—such as this one displaying the standard of Saint Augustine—along his route. The pillar stood at the entrance to the first gallery of “Kongo: Power and Majesty” and guided visitors into the Kunstkammer-like space.

2 Textiles in multiples. Gallery 1 exhibited a large array of textiles, including an unfinished example (not pictured) and this central example of a textile with dyed fibers.
An impressive set of fifteenth–seventeenth century books and manuscripts provided conceptual continuity between the first and second galleries. In addition to being important historical sources, the letters are exciting, rarely exhibited examples that demonstrate the Kongo kings’ literacy in European forms of expression. A 1615 letter from the Kongo king Afonso II to the Portuguese king Philip III included an impression of the Kongo king’s coat of arms pressed into its wax seal (Fig. 3).

To demonstrate the broader context of this symbolism, a case in the second gallery presented a sixteenth-century Portuguese book illustrating a range of royal and noble coats of arms that includes those of the Kongo king. The second gallery focused on Kongo insignias of power, including elements of rulers’ regalia such as elaborately woven mpulraffia caps, nkutu raffia capes, staffs, and staff finials. Each element referenced and enhanced the ruler’s spiritual and worldly power. A wall of crucifixes served as a reminder of the continued presence of Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom and the varied responses of Kongo artists to Christian art forms. Further attesting to the power of multiples, the exhibition brought together three ivory finials attributed to the Master of Makaya-Vista (Fig. 4). Displayed together, these objects serve as yet another reminder of the exhibition’s implicit acknowledgement of the innovations of individual Kongo artists.

Dedicating an entire wall to a text describing the impact of the slave trade and colonialism in Kongo, a subsection of the second gallery created a powerful juxtaposition between two types of human interactions between Kongo and Europe (Fig. 5). On one side, Jaspar Beckx’s portraits (ca. 1640–1647) of Dom Miguel de Castro and his servant Diego Bemba were hung with a display of objects used in trade and diplomacy, while on the other, two Loango carved ivory tusks represented brutalities of the slave trade. This dichotomy opened a space for visual comparisons, placing Kongo within the historical context of the slave trade, and reflecting upon the intense upheaval that occurred due to the growth of this trade and the inception of colonial rule.

Gallery 3 initiated themes that traveled through the fourth gallery, both spaces focused on the spiritual power of Kongo objects and representations of women. Gallery 3 included several nganga masks, whistles, bells, smaller minkisi, two drums, and funerary objects (Fig. 6). Again, containing exemplary examples of beautiful Kongo art, this gallery provided an introduction to the spiritual empowerment of objects, the role...
of nganga (ritual specialists) within the community, female initiation rites, and the role of women in society.

The fourth gallery, the exhibition’s largest space, was occupied by the most imposing array of objects. Mother and child figures were lined up on the left side of the room while a veritable militia of mangaaka minkisi reigned over the center and right portion of the space (Fig. 7). While smaller in size than the minkisi, the mother and child figures call attention to the role of women within Kongo political and social systems. Communities rapidly declined in numbers due to both the slave trade and the brutality of colonialism. The representations of powerful women illustrate the role of mothers in maintaining and rebuilding strength. The inclusion of several mother and child figures attributed to the Master of Boma-Vonde region and the Master of Kasadi workshop reasserts the exhibition’s attention to individual artists and their innovations. When exhibited together in this way, the distinctive hands became clear and formal comparisons could be made, even by the nonspecialist.

Placed on high pedestals, the minkisi towered over most visitors, an affirmation of the strength they contained (Fig. 8). The wall text made it clear that the creation of mangaaka occurred in a relatively short time period, thus emphasizing the artistic and spiritual response to the extreme duress created by colonialism in the Congo. With their powerful stances and accumulation of materials, these objects cannot help but appear powerful. This final section drives home the theme of artistic agency present throughout the rest of the exhibition and was combined with the narratives concerning provenance and the objects’ appearance within European collections. The final gallery provided nonspecialists with several opportunities to better contextualize and explore the mangaaka figures. Brightening the gallery, three large backlit screens displayed rotating images of the Congo River. With the images reflecting off the objects themselves, these screens gave some context about the land in which the minkisi resided (Fig. 9). The gallery also included an interactive touch screen pedestal next to the Met’s mangaaka figure. This interactive element allowed the Met to share the extensive research on its own object and provided an opportunity for visitors to explore specific aspects of the figure, such as its beard, skirt, and stomach.

The sheer number of institutions and collections represented in “Kongo: Power and Majesty” displays the power of the Met as an institution. These loans were a key to creating a viewing experience that will not soon be replicated. Uniting fifteen mangaaka in one gallery offered a unique opportunity for specialists and the general public to carefully scrutinize and compare the formal qualities of these impressive objects, while placing them in the context of a specific history of exchange with and, later, decimation by Europeans.

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive exhibition catalog: Kongo: Power and Majesty by Alisa LaGamma (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art Press, 2015, 352 pages. $65 hardcover).

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