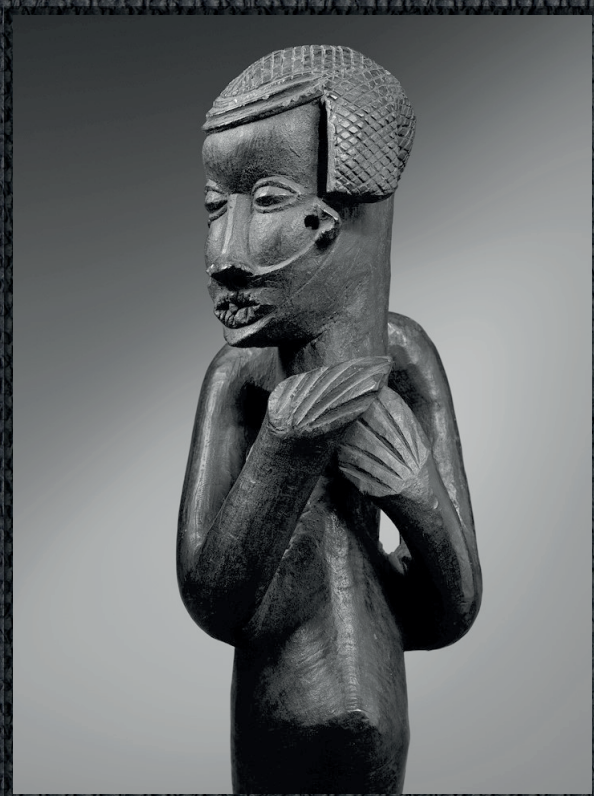


# SHARED PASSION

ANNE AND MICHEL VANDENKERCKHOVE, A COLLECTION OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

# SHARED PASSION



Déjeuner de presse  
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Statue Djenne, Mali, bronze, 23 cm © Photo Hughes Dubois

L'ouvrage *Shared Passion*, c'est l'aboutissement d'un long travail de collecte entre des passionnés d'art classique africain.

Durant dix-sept ans, Anne et Michel Vdk ont construit une impressionnante collection d'objets anciens : masques, sculptures, bijoux, poterie issus d'Afrique. Cette passion encouragée par leur ami et marchand d'art, Didier Claes, n'a cessé de croître dans l'excellence.

Le travail photographique d'exception d'Hughes Dubois et les textes d'une rigueur tout aussi scientifique que romanesque de Bruno Claessens ont apporté une dimension de qualité à ce livre qui traduit à merveille une « passion partagée ».

*« Il n'existe pas de grand marchand sans grand collectionneur, et vice versa. » Didier Claes*

## UNE RENCONTRE. UNE COLLECTION. UNE PASSION

En guise de préface, Michel Vdk et Didier Claes évoquent leur rencontre, les mises en doute de part et d'autre et leurs victoires communes. Soit, 17 ans d'échanges autour de l'art africain.

« *On a toujours besoin d'un mentor* », affirme Michel Vdk. Quant à Didier Claes, il se définit comme « *un découvreur d'objets et un passeur de rêves* », qui doit « *savoir transmettre ses vibrations pour une pièce à un collectionneur, tout en respectant ses goûts* ». Et de fait : aiguiller en matière de voir et de ressentir, certifier l'authenticité d'une pièce, sa provenance et son esthétisme sont autant d'incontournables dans la construction d'une collection.

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**PHOTOGRAPHES**  
HUGHES DUBOIS (OBJETS)  
MICHEL FIGUET (INTÉRIEUR)



Photo d'un groupe de fétiches de République démocratique du Congo © Photo Hughes Dubois

## DES PHOTOGRAPHIES REMARQUABLES

Bien sûr, l'ouvrage fait la part belle aux œuvres, avec **250 superbes images** en noir et blanc prises par le photographe Hughes Dubois, venant magnifier les œuvres par un sublime jeu d'ombres et de lumière. Celles-ci permettent au public - collectionneurs avertis ou néophytes - de les découvrir.

**350  
PAGES**

**9  
CHAPITRES**

**227  
OBJETS**

**4  
FOCUS**



Statue Baoulé, Côte d'Ivoire, bois, 60 cm © Photo Hughes Dubois

## UNE HISTOIRE DE L'ART AFRICAIN

Ce livre somptueux commenté par l'historien de l'art Bruno Claessens nous invite aussi à enrichir nos connaissances en matière d'art africain.

Au fil de des 350 pages, il nous balade à travers le continent africain, dans une variété de styles, de rites et d'usages de ces objets qui témoignent de la curiosité de leur collectionneur : d'une figure Chamba de la région de la Bénoué au Nigeria réunissant un homme et une femme en une seule statue, aux merveilleuses figures Kota du Gabon utilisées comme gardiens de reliquaires, en passant par des masques anthropomorphes Bete du sud-ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire, créés pour inspirer la peur et le respect.

En 9 chapitres, Bruno Claessens dévoile les multiples facettes de cette collection : Ancêtres, Esprits, Fétiches, Sociétés Secrètes, Masques, Objets de prestige, Ornaments et Formes.

# SECRET SOCIETIES

Art associated with the regulatory societies of Central Africa was invisible to most members of the community. It was used only at irregular intervals, for short periods of time and by a limited number of individuals. Access to these objects was restricted and the prerogative of a select few. Generally, these associations have erroneously been called 'secret societies', or sects, denominators reflecting the colonial perception of such institutions, whose existence locally was anything but a secret. Societal life of the many African cultures was structured on the communal level where regulatory associations controlled village life. Such societies were at the origin of a wide spectrum of captivating artworks.

One of the most sacred objects of Mali's Bamana culture is the *boli* (fig. 72). These are not carved, but rather assembled and molded around a wooden armature core, wrapped in cotton cloth, around which layers of clay and sacrificial materials are encrusted. This *boli* features four short legs and a single hump rising from the top. The creature it represents is unidentifiable yet resembles a bush cow or hippopotamus. The main function of a *boli* was to accumulate and control the naturally occurring life force called *nyama* for the benefit of the community. As repositories of this spiritual power, *boli* were viewed with awe and fear. They were exclusively used as altars by the Komo Society, a closed men's association of priests, elders and blacksmiths that formed the central Bamana social institution. Sequestered

in shrines or in the dwellings of priests, *boli* have forms that kept their sacred secrets hidden from the uninitiated and they could only be safely handled by those association members equipped with the most exclusive and secretive expertise and knowledge. Their form is intended to be visually inaccessible to all but the initiated, who alone knew the ritual procedures for harnessing their awesome powers. Far removed from its original context, this disquieting and powerful object has kept its secrets.

The Lega, who live in the rainforest of the southern Kivu and Maniema regions, are especially famous for their complex material culture associated with the *bwami* initiation society. *Bwami* influenced all aspects of Lega life and had a social, economic and religious function. Its teachings guided the moral development of its members and trained them in the social manners, laws and code of ethics. The art of the Lega will be addressed in detail in a separate section.

Similar to *bwami*, the Mbole's *liwa* association trained all young men to become responsible members of society and supervised ritual, educational, judicial, social, political and economic functions. Living in the region of Opala, virtually in the heart of the D.R.C., the Mbole led a socio-ritual life dominated by this association. *Liwa* initiates received an intensive and broad education and training in various skills, in customs and mores and in moral behaviour. They

initiations took place in the forest where special shelters for the neophytes and the supervising elders were constructed. The teachings of the *liwa* were illustrated with dances, songs, dramatic enactments, stories and singular objects. It was only within the context of this society that the Mbole produced wooden figures representing persons who were hanged for transgressing *liwa*'s rules (fig. 73). They were shown to incite the initiates the importance of not revealing the secret knowledge that came with membership in the society. The figures thus functioned as examples of the fate of persons who infringed upon the moral codes of *liwa*. Through the statues, the initiates remained vividly conscious of the awe, secrecy, respect and truthfulness that had to guide their lives. During the initiations, the young men had to touch the body of the figures to strengthen their fear of reprisals. Later in life, whenever their behaviour was questionable, the initiates had to swear on the images.

In the most accomplished Mbole figures, the sculptures have reproduced the essence of hanging rather than standing. The body is narrow and elongated and connected to the head by a short neck from which the shoulders and the arms fall, inert and loose from the body, touching the hips. Particularly striking are the dangling, forward-thrusted shoulders and upper arms, which parallel the bent hanging legs. The carefully carved head has a big forehead, which is enhanced with a halo-like hairdo, mirroring traditional Mbole coiffures. The refined face is heart shaped with the arched eyebrows forming a single element with the delicate elongated nose; the eyes and the mouth are indicated by narrow horizontal slits. The distinctiveness of the face is marked by yellow pigment that contrasts with the dark colour of the hairdo and the rest of the body.

Given the secrecy that surrounded eastern Congo's initiation societies, the true function of many objects remains shrouded in mystery. An extremely rare aerophone is one of the most enigmatic musical instruments of eastern Congo (fig. 74). Locally known as *isumba mulumu*, these objects were in use among the Nande and the Pere. Both cultures had an important set of secret initiations, collectively called *isumba*—a term that was also applied to the objects seen only by the initiates. The present example, from the Pere, is the only one remaining in private hands; the four other known objects are in public collections, three being held by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren and one in the collection of the former Ethnographic Museum, now part of the Museum aan de Stroom, in Antwerp. In the literature, these objects are generally defined as trumpets, though they should more rightfully be classified as aerophones or wind instruments; they produce a scope of sounds through the vibrating air contained within the instrument. A vital object during the male initiation rituals, this unusual and mysterious instrument was the sacred and distinctive property of a small group of initiated men. During the initiation, an expert singer murmured, hummed, sung and talked into the aerophone while he created with his cupped hands various sound effects from the circular aperture that was used as a sound-box. Sounds of different animals, as well as natural hums, were imitated to restore

and maintain the goodwill of the forces of the forest. The object thus acted as a mediator in the process of reconciliation between men and nature, as a means to preserve and restore their harmonious relation.

Even more rare than the Pere aerophone is a second musical instrument in the present collection originating from the Northern Tigong, who were based near the Donga River on the Mambilla Plateau in northern Cameroon (fig. 75). This abstract male figure is the upper part of a trumpet that had for its base a large, wedged hollow gourd that acted as an amplifier for the sounds blown into the mouthpiece at the back. The arms were used as handles for the musician, who would walk bent forward with the gourd close to the ground. The unusual sounds he produced were accompanied by drumming and the howling of bullroarers, creating an out-of-this-world ambience. This trumpet was used during the dances of the elders of Kum, an all-male regulatory society among the Tigong that met at night, mainly for funerary rites. Each elder brought his own megaphone to join the others circling around a fire in mourning for a departed society member. Cultural changes among the Tigong meant the end of this society around 1936, when Paul Gebauer acquired a pair of almost identical trumpets now held by the Portland Art Museum (inv. nos 70.10.23–24).

We return to the D.R.C. with a Zande figure used by the Mani-Yanda association, whose main purpose was the diffusion of benevolent magic among its male and female members to ensure their general well-being (fig. 76). The Yanda protective spirit warranted fertility, prosperous hunting and fishing, protection against malevolent forces and resolution of family or legal troubles. Anthropomorphic power statues were owned by the highest-ranking members of Mani-Yanda. They were activated during a ritual in which they were fed a paste of roots, seeds, oil and salt and received strings of beads, rings or coins in recognition of granted petitions. Over time, the surface of the figure would become completely encrusted with thick layers of this mixture. Made of wood, the *nazere* type is carved in an abstract style with a minimum of physiognomic details. Central on an elongated cylindrical armless torso, the navel receives much emphasis. With its two faces looking in both directions, the present statue is a rare janus example of the type.

One of the most celebrated styles of Congolese masks, the so-called *kifwabe* masks, is present with three marvellous examples in this collection (figs 77–9). Used by the Songye's *bwadi bwa kifwabe* society, they formed a controlling mechanism of the ruling elite. *Kifwabe* masks were conceived as a kind of police force whose main goal was the preservation of the powers of its leaders and the lucrative exploitation of the populace, by demanding contributions from spectators during their public appearances. These were payable in agricultural produce, palm oil, goats, chickens, raffia cloth and any other goods exacted by its leaders. The presence of the *kifwabe* masks was also linked with rituals, such as the death or the investiture of a chief, new moon rites, the initiation of new members into the secret society and circumcision proceedings. Ideologically, the

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MBOLE STATUE (fig. 73)  
Wood 64 cm  
D.R.C.

# KONGO MINKISI

This section explores a group of power statues from different Kongo peoples generally known as *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*). The term *nkisi* has no equivalent in any western language and should best remain untranslated. The word was not only given to the wooden figure, but it also referred to the spirit it housed. Only after a ritual specialist (*ling*, *nganga*; pl. *banganga*) activated the wooden figure through elaborate rituals did it come to house a *nkisi* spirit. This power was put into the statue by the accretion of ritual ingredients (*bilongo*), including specific earths and stones, leaves and seeds, animal parts, bits of skin, leather, fur and feathers. The ritualist also encrusted the eyes with pieces of glass, which symbolized the fetist's ability to see beyond the natural world. *Banganga* were approached by clients to address any type of crisis that could emerge in the community, such as illness and social conflicts. The spiritual forces of the *nkisi* were directed to investigate the underlying cause of a specific problem. It was the responsibility of the *nganga* to customise a *nkisi* by adding symbolic materials and ritual substances to attract particular spirits. Consequently, each *nkisi* was unique and could be controlled only by the *nganga* who created it, as a focal point from which he drew upon the spirit realm and its powers. There existed as many types of *minkisi* as there were problems. Scholarly attempts at a systematic classification ignore the multitude of circumstances in which power figures could have been employed and how their morphology didn't necessarily correspond

with a certain function. A *nkisi* was identified not by its form but by its tradition, meaning its name, the *nganga* in charge of it and its formulae of activation—information that was often lost. We are left to enjoy the sculptural pleasure they bring and the powerful presence with which they are imbued (fig. 64).

Without the involvement of a ritual specialist, a *nkisi* was considered just a piece of wood. The figure left the carver's hands thus in an unfinished stage. The *nganga*'s intervention was a ritual one, yet it fundamentally influenced the morphology of the figure and its artistic effect. The sculptor usually anticipated the coming ritual activation of the figure: he could prepare a *nkisi* for having a container for magical ingredients by carving a hole in its torso or, while delicately finishing the face, by not sculpting the headdress. The sculptor often prepared a kind of peg or cylindrical structure on top of a flattened head to accommodate and facilitate the attachment of a power charge (fig. 65). This headdress added by the *nganga* became an integral part of the figure. Before being sold, *nkisi* were often deconstructed—stripped of their *bilongo*—posing a previous stage of non-finito (fig. 66). While the sculpture was made of wood, an activated figure would be an assemblage of heterogeneous objects and materials, continuously accumulating while being ritually used. *Bilongo* were habitually packed in a cavity cut into the figure's head or

stomach (fig. 67). Loaded with sacred power, these 'medicines' were often lightly wrapped in knots and nets to give visual expression to the idea of contained forces. The diverse ingredients of the medicines included special earths and stones, leaves and seeds, parts of animals and pieces of hide and feathers.

Only the most experienced *nganga* could assume the responsibility of important and powerful *minkisi*: figures concerned with political matters and the administration of justice were known as *nkisi nkondi*. These large *minkisi* had a communal function, in contrast to the smaller ones, which were often devoted to more individual ends. Such major *minkisi* were used at hearings, acting as a kind of detective who could prove the accused person's guilt, but also as the guardian of public safety, morality and social order. On special occasions, a *nkisi nkondi* was displayed in a public setting where judicial procedures took place. The parties involved met in front of the figure together with the *nganga* to investigate the problem at hand. When an agreement was to be made, representatives from both parties took an oath in front of the awe-inspiring statue. The oath was then sealed by driving a nail or other sharp metal object into the figure to activate its power. According to some sources, each party first licked the nail, to render the agreement binding and by this means informing the *nkisi nkondi* of the identities of those involved. The *nkisi* spirit swore to observe the engagement and punish anyone breaking the accord.

An elementary characteristic of a *nkisi nkondi*, such as one of the masterpieces in this collection, is the large number of pieces of metal driven into the figure to activate the spirit it contained (fig. 68). Consequently, this type of power statue is often called a 'nail figure'. Nails and metal wedges have been inserted all over the figure's body. The torso is the usual place for nails because problems were felt in the chest, around the heart. The head, hands, legs and feet are usually left relatively untouched. The large quantity of nails shows that this was an important power statue that must have been famous at the peak of its ritual life. A *nkisi nkondi* was never really finished: a work in progress, the statue continued to be packed with power charges throughout its existence. Each of the nails represents the taking of an oath, the witnessing of an agreement or some other occasion when the power of the figure was invoked. Besides the head, the statue's body was another spiritual focal point, packed with ritually charged substances and then sealed with a mirror, which was considered a window to the supernatural world. Collected by the White Fathers in 1914, this spectacular *nkisi nkondi* was recorded as having the name

Ngwadi (God of Thunder), linking the figure to the violence of the sky. Its powers must have been as explosive as thunder, and it was probably deemed to be able to kill using lightning.

In the activation of a *nkisi*, vegetal material could also be used on top of iron wedges. Other forms of constraint included binding or shackling the figure—as can be clearly observed in a magnificent statue that can be attributed to the Dondo, one of the north-eastern Kongo peoples (fig. 69). Its style is one of the more realistic of the Lower Congo River region, characterised by a rounded head and big eyes covered with oval pieces of metal. A typical diamond-shaped scarification in high relief can be found on the forehead and the temples. Unlike the decorative round-headed nails that occur in Songye statuary, the metal wedges on the *nkisi nkondi* figures are far more heterogeneous in nature, which indicates a long ritual life.

Nonetheless, two particular types of *minkisi* can be easily identified: mother-and-child figures (*phomba*) and dog figures (*kozo*). The latter helped a diviner track down witches and other wrongdoers. It was often grouped together with a *nkisi nkondi*. The figure shown here still retains traces of resin and medicinal materials on its back, indicative of its frequent ritual activation (fig. 70). The shining glass-inlaid eyes symbolised its ability to see into the spirit realm. This beautiful, realistically carved dog elegantly sits upright, ready to act. The other type of *minkisi*, *phomba*, are among the most gracious mother-and-child figures from Congo (fig. 71). In use among the Yombe, they celebrate the important role women played in this matrilineal society. The exquisite craftsmanship of the sculptor of this beautiful maternity figure is revealed in the delicate carving of the facial features. While seeming emotionally detached from her child, she gazes straight forward, nonetheless gently supporting the back of the child with her right hand. Seated with the legs bent sideways, a rather unique position, she holds a small vessel in the left hand; such a container possibly held medicines related to fertility matters. *Phomba* were associated with women's cults among the Yombe, where they might have been conceived to fulfil the imperative of childbearing for the group's continued survival. The woman's prestigious position within society is indicated by the body scarifications on the torso and her filed teeth. The sculpted upper arm bands and especially the *mpu* (*cap*) associate her with traditional Yombe leadership. She is thought to represent the mother and founder of the clan, while the child represents her descendants—hence, a visual statement of the female roots of Yombe society.

VILLI STATUE (fig. 64)  
Wood, metal, fibres, glass 27 cm D. R. C.

KONGO STATUE (fig. 55)  
Wood, metal, glass, fibres 15 cm D. R. C.

KONGO STATUE (fig. 66)  
Wood, glass 15 cm D. R. C.

## DANS L'INTIMITÉ DU COLLECTIONNEUR

*Shared Passion* se conclut sur une dizaine de *close up* d'œuvres prises par le photographe Michel Figuet dans l'intérieur des collectionneurs. En touchant à l'intime du lieu de vie, celles-ci viennent souligner la profondeur du lien les unissant à leur collection.

En acceptant que nous entrions dans son univers, cette passion dévorante partagée entre le collectionneur et son marchand s'étend à tous les amateurs. L'éclectisme de l'art contemporain lié à l'art africain permet à tous les passionnés d'art de se retrouver dans cet ensemble.



## UNE INVITATION AU VOYAGE

On parcourt cet opus avec délectation, à la fois ébahi par la qualité du travail photographique, envouté par la passion qu'exhalent ces pages et curieux d'en apprendre davantage sur ces œuvres d'exception.

Si les livres de collectionneurs pullulent bel et bien depuis quelques temps déjà, celui-ci rappelle que toute collection naît d'une relation, artistique certes, mais avant tout humaine, entre un collectionneur et son marchand.







« **SHARED PASSION** »  
A COLLECTION OF THE 21TH CENTURY/

« **PASSION PARTAGÉE** »  
UNE COLLECTION DU XXE SIÈCLE

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**SIGNATURES & PRÉSENCE  
DES COLLECTIONNEURS,  
DE BRUNO CLAESENS & D'HUGHES  
DUBOIS**

**5 SEPTEMBRE 2023 À 17H**  
Galerie Philippe Jousse  
18 rue de Seine, 75006 Paris

**EXPOSITION DE LA COLLECTION  
DURANT PARCOURS DES MONDES**

**DU 5 AU 10 SEPTEMBRE 2023**  
Galerie Philippe Jousse  
18 rue de Seine, 75006 Paris

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