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*A Benalulua Standing
Figure (lupfingu or mbulenga)*

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BENA LULUA ARTIST

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Late 19th-early 20th century

Standing Figure, lupfingu or mbulenga

Wood, fiber

h. 21 cm

8 1/4 in.

Provenance

Victor and Leontine Goldschmidt Collection, Heidelberg, acquired ca. 1920;

Bernd Muhlack Collection, Kiel, Germany;

Sotheby's Paris, *Arts d'Afrique et d'Amerique*, 4 Decemeber 2019, lot no. 94;

Kegel Konietzko and Dorn, Hamburg, Germany;

Private Collection, Belgium.

AHDRC Archive #0032924

Publications

Schaedler, Karl-Ferdinand, *L'Arte Africain Dans Les Collections Privée Allemandes*, Munich, 1973, p. 350, no. 502.

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Small, sculpted figures holding a vessel in one hand are called *mbulenga*, which means "for beauty, for good luck" in the Lulua language, and were believed to protect infants. The figure's reddish-brown patina is the result of being coated with *ngula* (red powder from the camwood tree mixed with water). Its power comes from the contents of the vessel, which would have included the hair of a female albino (considered a blessing by the Lulua), the bark of a sacred tree (*mutshi muabi*), and the red feathers from the tail of a grey parrot.

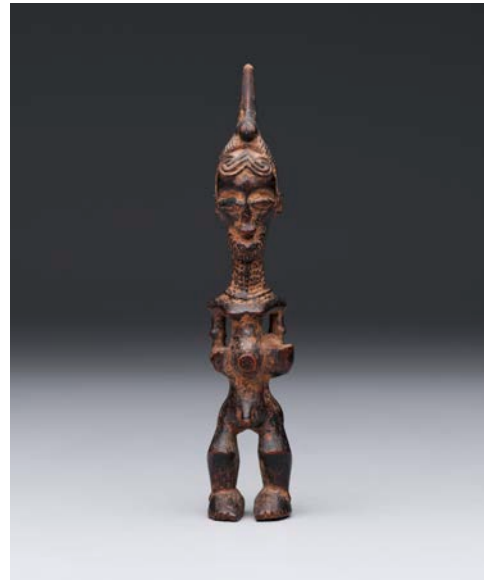
The sculptor carved this figure with special attention to carefully depicting details of the hairstyle, clothing, ornamentation, and scarification that were in fashion. Having one's body decorated with scarification made an individual *bwimpe*-that is, beautiful, not only physically but morally as well. Scarification is produced by making cuts in the skin, which must heal properly to leave smooth and shiny raised scars. An individual whose skin did not heal properly was not considered to be a beautiful and moral person. To give themselves a healthy glow, individuals applied a mixture of red earth, oil, and kaolin to their bodies.

The present figure is female: a close parallel can be found in the collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama no.1985.335.

Comparanda



Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama, USA



Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas, USA

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