

COLNAGHI



A Yaka Standing Figure

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YAKA ARTIST

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Late 19th-early 20th century

Standing Figure

Wood

h. 27 cm

10 5/8 in.

Provenance

John & Nicole Dintenfass Collection, New York, USA;

Fily Keita, Los Angeles, USA;

Hans Petereit collection, Cologne, Germany;

Private Collection, Belgium.

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Yaka society is tightly structured and headed by a chief of Lunda origin, the *Kiamfu*, who delegates responsibilities to ministers and lineage chiefs, *Unkwagata*. Young men are expected to pass through various initiation ceremonies in order to become adult members of Yaka society. The tribe lives principally through hunting, although subsidiary farming is undertaken by women. Yaka artistic tradition is rich and various, much of it informed by their neighbors: the Suku, the Kongo, the Holo and the Teke.

The present sculpture is a fine example of classic Yaka figural tradition. The dimensions of the body are exaggerated: protruding breasts and belly indicate fertility and abundance, while thick legs show strength and stability. The exaggeration of featured continues in the face: the ears shoot forth from the body, and the eyes are not defined by sockets but by heavy lids carved in relief away from the face.

The upturned nose, a mainstay of Yaka figuration, is associated with fertility and carries phallic associations: Yaka masks, which were a key part of male initiation ceremonies, also share this feature.

Figures such as this one had various and sometimes contradictory functions for the Yaka. The majority of Yaka figures were carved in pairs and were associated with *Mbwoolo* shrines. Some figures have cavities that were filled with magic material that was thought to activate the sculpture to actuate the dedicator's will. This type, however, was instead adorned with magical attachments, hung from the neck, wrists, and waist, that fulfilled a similar function. Yaka figures were charged with overseeing healthy pregnancies and deliveries, and both curing and causing illnesses.

Comparanda



Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA., USA



Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), Tervuren, Belgium

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com