

COLNAGHI



A Kota Reliquary Figure

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KOTA ARTIST

Gabon

Late 19th-early 20th century

Reliquary Figure

Wood, copper, brass

h. 54.5 cm

21 1/2 in.

Provenance

Inna and Boris Salomon Collection, Paris, France, acquired in the 1960s;

Christie's Paris, *Une Passion Surréaliste: Collection Inna and Boris Salomon*, 30 March 2022, lot no. 25;

Alessia Vis Van Heemst Collection, Brussels, Belgium

AHDRC Archive #0195039



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The Kota and related peoples preserved the relics of honored ancestral leaders in baskets guarded by reliquary figures, believing that their strength and wisdom survived after death in their remains. Affixed to the baskets, the figures were carved from a single piece of wood and covered in metal. The metals attached to the surfaces of the reliquary figures helped avert evil spirits and added prestige because of their great value. Ancestors were contacted to ensure the well-being of individuals as well as the village, and in times of great distress all *mbulu ngulu* were brought together to combine the power of all the important dead.

In contrast to the figurative reliquary guardians of other African cultures, the Kota guardians appear abstract. A large ovoid head with minimal facial features rests on a lozenge shape that represents the arms of a truncated body. The forms projecting from the top and sides of the face correspond to men's elaborate hairstyles or headwear, and some figures, such as the present example, have iron accents and ear ornaments. Size may indicate function. Large, Janus-faced figures are thought to have guarded the relics belonging to an extensive lineage group, while smaller ones guarded those of families or individuals. It is unknown whether one side represents a female and the other a male—though some have supposed that concave faces represent females and convex males.

The present example is in classic Kota style, with a slightly concave oval face, round eyes extending forth in conical protrusions, a curved coiffure, and lateral flanges ending in horizontal lines.

Comparanda



Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, France



Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, France

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