

NKISI

POWER AND MAGIC

As part of his involvement in BRAFA, Didier Claes is presenting an impressive selection of “fetishes” from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The “Nkisi” exhibition focuses on the beauty of these “objects of power” which are among the best-known examples of Central African art and today can be found in various private and museum collections.

These figures of power take the form of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic statuette and each one has its own name, a specific function and a ritual to activate them. By adding elements from the animal, plant, mineral and/or metallurgical world, these objects would be “magically” charged. These ingredients or medicines allowed the nkisi (plural of nkisi) to perform their ritual function of divination and communicating with spirits and the spirit world.

A nkisi becomes a “medium of spiritual communication” through the action of a diviner, nganga. The nganga was consulted by “patients” to solve specific problems affecting a community or an individual. The nkisi is used in times of illness, sterility, economic instability, political conflict or in taking revenge. The nkisi is ambivalent, as it can both cause evil and contain it. It can heal as well as attack.

The size of these statues varies and differs according to their ethnic origin. Among the Kongo, they measure less than 20 cm while those of the Songye can reach 120 cm. The larger ones had a community function, while the smaller ones were intended for personal use.

These “objects of power” were discovered just when Europeans were present in the Lower Congo region in the late 15th century. At that time, Westerners judged and viewed the nkisi with distrust, fear, rejection, repulsion and sometimes all the above mixed with fascination. Identified as “images of the devil” and considered as “fetishes” (from the Portuguese word “feitiço” = spell, enchantment), many nkisi were destroyed in the 15th century with the aim of eradicating “the roots of evil”.

A few Westerners, however, have had the audacity to bring back a nkisi in their luggage. They therefore had the opportunity to carry out more in-depth research on this esoteric object which is evidence of an established art and an undeniable aesthetic power.

Didier Claes is a Belgian gallery owner who specialises in African art. Noted for his atypical career and his discoveries of exceptional items from the moment his career began, he is now one of the world’s leading specialists in ancient African art. In 2002, Claes opened his first gallery in Brussels. He then devoted his work to the presentation of high-quality art objects from major Western collections. He is now involved in major Belgian and international events in his area of specialism: the Brussels Art Fair (BRAFA), the European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Maastricht/New York, the Paris Biennale, Frieze Masters in London, the Tribal & Textile Art Show in San Francisco, Brussels Non European Art Fair (BRUNEAF), but also Also Known As Africa (AKAA) and this year, 1.54. His gallery thus works on the dialogue between contemporary creations and classical African art. Its clientele includes a number of American and European collectors as well as international museum institutions.

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