

Art from an African Kingdom: Luba Masterworks from Central Africa

THE SPECIAL EXHIBITION *SHAPING POWER: LUBA Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa* (on view July 7, 2013–January 5, 2014) is the first offering in LACMA's newly dedicated gallery for the arts of Africa, and marks the creation of a permanent and prominent presence for African art at the museum. Over the next few years, temporary displays will feature the dynamic spectrum of African artistic production, from historical to contemporary times and from diverse regions of this vast continent and its diasporas. Situated next to the Egyptian gallery, this new space fosters an understanding of the relationships between sub-Saharan Africa and ancient Egypt as part of the shared continent of Africa, and signals LACMA's commitment to presenting Africa's innumerable artistic and cultural legacies.

Luba Art

The Luba Kingdom is an influential Central African state that has flourished for the past several centuries in what is now the Katanga Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sculpted thrones, elegant scepters, and commemorative figures played significant roles in shaping the powers of this sophisticated African culture. Royal emblems were vital to its formation and expansion.

While many Luba works appear to have utilitarian purposes, they were imbued with spiritual attributes and esoteric wisdom. As treasures of kings, chiefs, titleholders, and diviners, they also served as emissaries, creating affiliations that further extended the realm. Wide emulation of Luba aesthetics and political rituals further enlarged their reach. These same objects were, and continue to be, memory devices, encoding the histories and practices of Luba kingship. *Shaping Power* conveys the beauty and complexity of Luba art and culture, offering insight into a remarkable African sculptural and philosophical legacy. The exhibition considers the roles of sacred objects in the making of a ruler, why Luba emblems depict women, and how certain objects possess powers of healing and transformation. Also on view in this exhibition is a contemporary installation by Congolese artist Aimé Mpane, as well as a *lukasa*, a Luba memory board. In seminal works like these, the past is continually reimagined through eyes of the present.

Curriculum Connections

Included here are descriptions of several objects from the exhibition, as well as curriculum connections that can be adapted for use in the classroom for students of all ages. For many students, this information may be their first introduction to the richness and complexity of Luba—and African—art.

Mask

19th century, Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo

LUBA MASKS ARE QUITE RARE, AND LITTLE IS KNOWN of their use and iconography. This example is one of the largest and most imposing of Luba masks. It has become an iconic mask for Luba people, for whom it may evoke the remembrance of the great culture hero, Mbidi Kiluwe, who is often referred to as a man in the form of a majestic buffalo. Mbidi Kiluwe brought kingship to the Luba, as well as advanced hunting and blacksmithing technologies. The mask's regal eminence, hornlike coiffure, and bird on the back may allude to the powers of kingship that were celebrated through masquerade. The mask blends human and animal attributes, just as a Luba king transcends earthly categories, and its features bespeak the cool composure expected of a sacred ruler. The bird on the back of its head was broken off and separated from the mask long ago, but has since been reattached. It most likely represents an oxpecker. And the beard of the mask, which may have been held by the dancer, is shaped like a *lukasa* memory board, which holds the precepts and principles of Luba kingship.

Culture Heroes and Legends

Ask your students to think about the qualities and attributes of heroes from throughout history and literature. For example, in Luba tradition, Mbidi Kiluwe is often represented as a buffalo, an animal considered to be majestic and powerful. Other heroes, such as the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl and the Greek soldier Odysseus, are depicted in ways that similarly communicate heroic status. Choose a hero from a literary or nonfiction text, whether mythological or historical. What adjectives would you use to describe his/her traits? Chart a list of words that articulate your hero's character and values. Review the chart and brainstorm an animal that evokes two or three of these qualities. How will you represent your hero through the image of an animal? Sketch a design for a clay mask that incorporates relevant human and animal characteristics. Translate your sketch into a sculpture, using air-drying clay (such as Crayola® Model Magic®) and clay techniques (such as scoring, tearing, and pinching) to mold the mask in three dimensions. Share your work with classmates by writing your hero's story in words then reciting or performing the legend for others.



Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Mask, 19th century

Wood, 14 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 17 ¹¹/₁₆ x 15 ³/₄ in.

Royal Museum for Central Africa (RG 23470)

Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©.

Caryatid Stool

19th century, Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo

STOOLS WERE AND CONTINUE TO BE POTENT EMBLEMS of Luba sacred kingship. A privilege of Luba rulers, they figured prominently in royal enthronement rites. Luba kings were semidivine, and their feet never touched the ground, so a ruler would sit upon a throne with his feet resting on a leopard pelt. The female figure supporting the stool attracted and contained the spirits of Luba kingship through marks of Luba identity and physical perfection, including scarification patterns, an elegant coiffure (hairstyle), gleaming skin, and a serene, composed attitude. She symbolized the powerful roles women played in Luba politics and as vessels of sacred authority. Because women bear and nurture children, Luba individuals say that only the body of a woman is strong enough to hold a spirit as powerful as that of a king.

Commemorative Paper Thrones

Who is an important woman in your life? How does she care for and support you? What women have impacted local, national, or international history? What did this person do to bring about social change? Choose a female mentor or historical figure to honor in a commemorative paper throne. How will you alter the essential elements of the throne (the backrest, seat, and legs) to customize or personalize the design according to your inspiration? What shapes, colors, or functions will you incorporate? Build your throne using paper (such as poster board or card stock) and paper-folding techniques (such as scoring, tearing, and cutting). Regardless of the scale, ensure that your maquette (or model) is structurally sound. Lastly, share your maquette with others in a classroom gallery display.



Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Caryatid Stool, 19th century
Wood, glass beads, 14 ³/₁₆ 7 ⁷/₈ 8 ¹/₄ in.
Royal Museum for Central Africa (RG 22725)
Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©.

Anthropomorphic Headrests

19th century, Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo

WOODEN HEADRESTS, WHICH PRESERVE ELABORATE hairstyles and keep the head comfortable in sleep, were popular among high-ranking Luba people of earlier generations. Intimately valued by Luba, headrests sometimes were used in burials, accompanying their owners to the world beyond. The figures in these headrests don a hairstyle popular in the Shankadi region of the royal Luba Heartland called the "step coiffure," which was created through hours of meticulous work. Headrests were sometimes conduits for messages from the ancestors, conveyed through the prophecy of dreams.

Hairstyling was and still is important to Luba people, and women continue to wear dramatic and labor-intensive hairdos. The coiffures can identify one's marital status or indicate one's cultural role; however, the primary purpose of hairstyling is to beautify the wearer. As a Luba woman named Ngoi Ilunga has said, "An elegant hairstyle makes a woman radiant." Like scarification, a beautiful hairstyle is a sign of civilization and of a person's status and self-esteem.

Journey to the Afterlife

In many cultures around the world, artisans craft objects for use during and *after* life. These objects take many forms and are often believed to ensure a safe voyage to, and stay within, the afterlife. Do you have an ancestor who might need a helping hand? A headrest, a table, or a backpack? Interview members of your family and talk about the memories that they hold about parents, grandparents, or great grandparents, aunts, and uncles. What were their favorite objects and treasures? What might they need in this next stage of life? What object will you design to fulfill a specific need? Draw the object that you would create, incorporating tips for use and special functions. Address the drawing to your ancestor and display it in a special location at home or gift it to the family member who helped provide inspiration.



Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Anthropomorphic Headrest, 19th century

Wood, 6 ¹¹/₁₆ x 4 ³/₄ x 2 ³/₈ in.

Royal Museum for Central Africa (RG 23473)

Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©.



Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Anthropomorphic Headrest, 19th century
Wood, beads, 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 x 2 7/8 in.
Royal Museum for Central Africa (RG 1954.77.5)
Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R. Asselberghs, RMCA Tervuren ©.

Memory Board (*Lukasa*)

19th century, Luba, Katanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo

A LUKASA MEMORY BOARD IS A LIBRARY OF LUBA historical knowledge with encoded memories of the past to retell in the present. Luba people invented *lukasa* memory boards to protect, transmit, and sanctify the esoteric royal knowledge undergirding this great Central African kingdom. Luba describe memory as a string of beads documenting events, people, and places that can be restrung and reorganized in a myriad of ways. A *lukasa* fixes the beads in dynamic juxtapositions, and memories are then associated with their forms, colors, sizes, and configurations. A "man of memory" touches the surface of the wooden tablet and recalls information as he presents a narrative to a rapt audience. No two recitations are alike, for these court historians always perform memory in the present to meet the needs of a given audience in a particular moment. A *lukasa's* beads are like a code that can be read only by a few who know its secrets.

Visualizing History

What important story will you record for future generations, such as the history of your school, community, or family? Write a narrative version of this history in words, including important people, places, and events. How will you translate the written story into a visual representation? Create your own *lukasa* using recycled materials and clay. First, draft a list of source materials that you can appropriate from home, such as bottle caps, buttons, and thread. Gather the household materials and bring them to the classroom. Next, roll a lump of clay into a long rectangle (about one inch thick) to serve as the *lukasa* board. Play with the household items to create different configurations or sequences of your story, assigning a special meaning to each material. For example, bottle caps can symbolize people, buttons might symbolize places, while thread can represent the action that brings a person and place together. When you have reached a desired composition, firmly press each object into the clay and allow for drying time. When finished, share your unique history with a classmate by reciting the story depicted in your *lukasa*. Then, recount the same story to a friend in a different grade level, either older or younger. How do stories change with each retelling and according to a different audience?



Luba Peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Memory Board (Lukasa), 19th century
Wood, beads, and metal, H. 13 ³/₈ in.
Private Collection (EX250772), Photo © 2013 Museum Associates/LACMA.

Shaping Power: Luba Masterworks from the Royal Museum for Central Africa marks the inauguration of a gallery and educational program dedicated to the arts of Africa at LACMA. This exhibition was co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Royal Museum for Central Africa and was supported in part by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium.

This essay was adapted by Mary Lenihan from the book *Luba* (1997) by Mary Nooter Roberts. Curriculum materials were prepared by Jennifer Reid and Holly Gillette, and designed by Jenifer Shell. © 2013 Museum Associates/LACMA. All rights reserved.

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