



Reliquary figure (nlo bieri). Fang peoples (southern Cameroon), c. 19th to 20th century CE, Wood

1) Berzock, Kathleen Bickford. "Reliquary Head." *Art Institute of Chicago Studies*, 2008.

Communion with the ancestral deceased is an important focus of art and ritual for the Fang people, who extend across southern Cameroon to the Ogowe Valley of Gabon. This large, beautiful head was made to sit with its extended neck inserted into the lid of a bark reliquary box that held the selected remains, most often skull fragments, of an honored ancestor.

The head and the box were symbiotic: the box was likened to a person's belly or stomach, the seat of his or her inherent power, while the head was the tool that allowed this energy to be directed. Kept in a dark corner of a man's sleeping room, the reliquary protected the remains and embodied the deceased, keeping his or her force available to the living.

2) Berzock, Kathleen Bickford. "Reliquary Head." *Art Institute of Chicago Studies*, 2008.

The sleek and refined features include a high domed forehead that sweeps downward to a jutting chin and an elongated nose that is visually balanced by a plaited coiffure; these highlight classic qualities of Fang abstraction that likewise embody opposition. These stylistic elements had a strong influence on the work of early twentieth-century artists such as Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso.

3) Perani, Judith and Fred T. Smith. *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power, and life Cycle Rituals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998. p. 218

The Fang perceived reliquary figures as sanctioning ancestral benevolence. In precolonial Fang ancestral ceremonies, the reliquaries were carried to a sacred spot in the forest where the ancestral skulls were washed and displayed to their male descendants.

4) Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.412.441>

The carved head or figure mounted on top of the reliquary box guards the sacred contents against the forbidden gaze of women and uninitiated boys. It appears that the full figures, as opposed to the heads, are also used as puppets in theatrical initiation rituals associated with the bieri in which young male initiates are presented to deceased ancestors.



5) Perani, Judith and Fred T. Smith. *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power, and life Cycle Rituals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 218

The migratory history of the Fang has made it difficult to sort out stylistic groups. Individual artists moved from place to place, and styles were transmitted and absorbed easily. Moreover, reliquary figures collected from the region early in the 20th century were routinely attributed to the Fang, even though they may have been created and used by other groups. Nevertheless, a northern and a southern Fang style are easily discernible.

The imposing head with its ornate hairdo shown here is typical of the southern style. Standing over 18 inches tall, it is the largest such head known. The hairline across the top emphasizes a broad forehead. The hairdo recalls the wig-like headdress called ekuma worn by Fang warriors in the 19th century. Disks of metal are attached for the eyes.

6) Visona, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poyner, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Arts in Africa*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2007. p. 340

The lustrous dark brown and black surface, typical of the southern Fang style, is the result of regular anointing with palm oil and copal resin. The long neck was originally attached to the lid of a bark container for relics, which would have been understood as the torso.

Stylistic evidence suggests that the figure originated among the Betsi people, a southern Fang group located along the Ogowe River in central Gabon. The style of the object is very much like that of the heads of figures and half figures used for the same purpose in the region.

The remains of the important dead, in the form of the skull and other bones, were carried from place to place in a cylindrical box, the basis of a transportable ancestral shrine called nsek-bieri. Within the container were represented a family's illustrious dead. Skulls were the most important, and the number of skulls in a box was a tangible reference to the antiquity of the lineage and the power it manipulated.

7) Visona, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Arts in Africa*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2007. p. 340

The projecting stem and the flexed-knee pose allow the sculptured guardian figures to be set atop these nsek-bieri.

Nsek-bieri were consulted before any important undertaking. An old man considered close to the ancestors was in charge of the assemblage of relics and officiated at consultations. Such rituals usually took three to four days.

The relics were taken out and covered with a substance to activate them. The nsek-bieri had to be fed to increase its strength and to stimulate fate when it was consulted. Animals were sacrificed to the ancestors and their blood smeared on the skulls.

8) Berzock, Kathleen Bickford. "Reliquary Head." *Art Institute of Chicago Studies*, 2008.

The reliquary's head's almond-shaped eyes were embellished with copper alloy inserts- one now missing- that would have reflected light in a startling fashion, adding to the work's mysterious aura. According to anthropologist James Fernandez, this wide-eyed stare also lent an infantile quality to the ancestral likeness that was appreciated by the Fang. Within their worldview, the balance of opposing elements – infant and ancestor, birth and death- is considered a fundamental aspect of human existence.

9) Visona, Monica Blackmun, Robin Poynor, Herbert M. Cole, and Michael D. Harris. *A History of Arts in Africa*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2007. p. 341

Fang artists from the north carved only full standing figures as reliquary guardians. The beautiful female figure shown here may once have been accompanied by a companion male figure on a second reliquary. It was created among the Mabea, who live on the southern coast of Cameroon and in neighboring parts of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. The Mabea are part of a group of peoples who arrived in this part of Cameroon and Gabon before the Fang. Though linguistically unrelated to the Fang, they have nevertheless become Fang in culture.

The very accomplished work is typical of the Mabea substyle of Fang sculpture, in which the head is less than one-fourth the height of the elongated figure.

10) Perani, Judith and Fred T. Smith. *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power, and life Cycle Rituals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 218

The reliquary declared to them that ultimately... it was men, and mainly mature and elderly men, that were the ordering principals and pillars of the social order." In comparison to the actual

skulls, the carved reliquary figures were treated with less gravity- they were carried and danced above bark screens to entertain the audience.



11) Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1978.412.441>

Bieri reliquary figures, such as the one seen here, embody the qualities that the Fang admire most in people—namely, tranquility, vitality, and the ability to hold opposites in balance. These qualities are conveyed in this figure through the juxtaposition of an infant's large head with the developed body of an adult, and the contrast of a static, symmetrical pose and passive, expressionless face with the tension of bulging muscles on the arms and legs.

Bieri figures are often embellished with elaborate coiffures, facial scarification, jewelry, horns, and other emblems of spiritual power. This one has been adorned with metal bangles around the neck, ankles, and wrist. Its lustrous surface is a result of repeated ritual purifying applications of palm oil. Many Fang sculptures continue to exude the oil long after their original treatment.
