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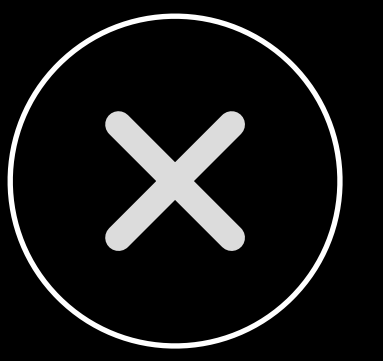
SKIRT

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EXPLORE MANGAAKA

# OVERVIEW



Artists and ritual priests in the Kongo have a long tradition of collaborating to create *minkisi*, or power figures. Kongo society used them to promote healing and punish those who harmed others.

In the late 19th century, they developed one of the most potent types, called *Mangaaka*, as a conduit for a particular force in the spirit realm. Such figures upheld the authority of Kongo chiefs and defended their communities against European colonizers.

Only 20 examples of *Mangaaka* are known to survive, all immediately identifiable by standardized attributes. Compare two figures here: at left, a figure now empty of its sacred material, at right, with empowering elements intact.

# BEARD



- On the figure at left, black lines on the jaw mark the location of a now-missing beard. The structure formed by two parallel rows of iron strips once held *bilongo*, sacred materials comprised of animal, vegetable, and mineral matter. At right, a figure with an intact beard.

# SKIRT



- The figure at left once wore a *makolo*, or skirt made of woven and tied raffia fibers. It concealed the waist, thighs, and buttocks. These areas appear lighter in color because they were never painted. At right, a figure wears an intact *makolo*.

# STOMACH



- On the figure at left, a *nganga*, or ritual priest, once filled the circular stomach cavity with bilongo, or sacred matter. Before European traders removed the figure from Central Africa, the *nganga* emptied such cavities to deactivate the figure's powers.
- The figure at right retains its original *bilongo* sealed under a thick dome of resin with a cowrie shell set on top. A *nganga* once activated the figure's powers by hammering in a single nail above this "power pack."

# HEAD



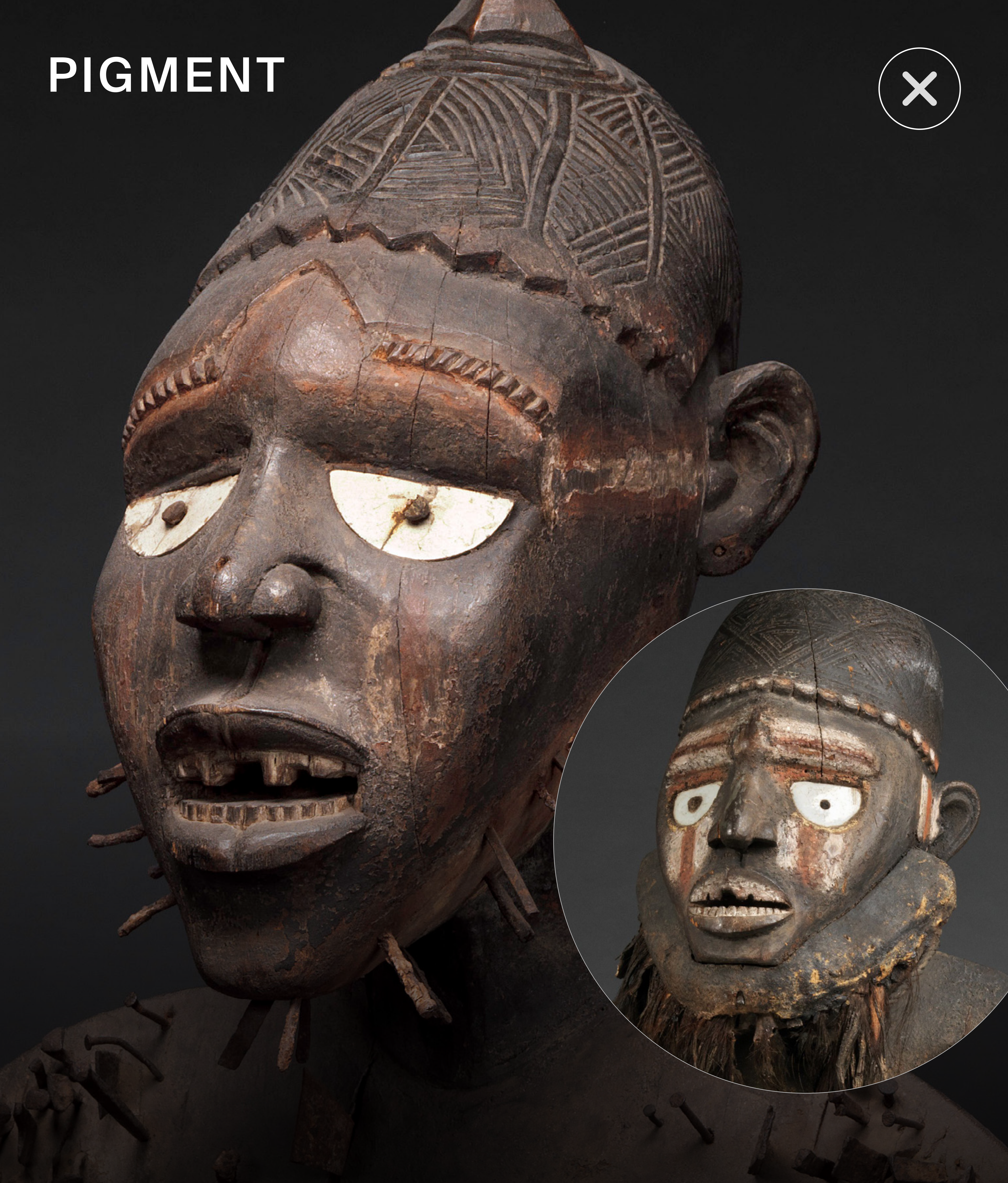
- The extra large proportion suggests the figure's heightened powers of perception.
- Incised lines on the top of the head represent a prestige cap known as *mpu*, worn by Kongo society's highest-ranking members. Such caps are made of fibers from raffia palm trees or pineapple plants, knotted into geometric designs.

# EYES



- The bright color and shine of semi-circular ceramic tile intensify the figure's intent gaze and suggest powers of perception that transcend the visible world.
- Carved cavities behind the eyes once held *bilongo*, or sacred materials. A *nganga*, or ritual priest, inserted and blessed these contents as part of a ritual to activate the figure with special powers.

# PIGMENT



- The figure at left has remnants of red ochre and white river clay at the cheeks, temples, teeth, eyes, eyebrows, and perimeter of the hat. At right, a figure with such pigments intact.



# MOUTH



- The open mouth and exposed teeth suggest the figure's aggressive character; and its willingness to defend its constituents.

# STANCE



- The figure leans forward, elbows out, and rests both hands on its hips. This posture, known as *pakala*, is a stance of readiness. It suggests that the figure is prepared to spring into action when presented with challenges.

# IRONWORK



Sear

- A *nganga*, or ritual priest activated the figure's power by embedding 380 sharpened pieces of iron into its surface. Each marks an oath sworn, or specific case brought before the figure.
- Most of the ironwork derives from tools associated with piercing or cutting, such as nails or blades. The sear, once part of the trigger mechanism of a European flintlock rifle, likely references the figure's power to unleash violent retaliation.