Case 6-Afr-Gabon-Fang-Reliquary Guardian Figure-Wood-Mid-20th c



Case no.: 6

Accession Number:

Formal Label: Gabon-Fang-Figure-Wood-Mid-20th c

Display Description:

The Fang (Fãn or Pahouin) are a Central African Bantu-speaking people in Equatorial Guinea, northern Gabon, and southern Cameroon. They number 800,000 and constitute a vast mosaic of village communities, established in a large equatorial zone of Africa comprising Cameroon, Guinea and nearly the whole north of Gabon, on the right bank of the Ogowe River.

This Fang figure from the Gabon area of Western Africa stands on large feet with hands held to the stomach. A woven fiber waist wrap is secured with iron nails. Nails are also used for the eyes. These types of "Bieri" figures are among the most desirable of all African sculptures. A fine example showing signs of tribal use and aged patina.

Wooden sculptures, known as reliquary guardian figures, were attached to the boxes containing the bones. Some believe that the figures are an abstract portrait of the deceased individual, while others argue that they serve to protect the spirit of the deceased from evil. It must be remembered, however, that it was the bones themselves that were sacred, not the wooden figures, thus there is no apparent contradiction in individuals selling what in effect was the tombstone of their ancestors for considerable profit to art dealers. During migrations the relics were brought along, but the reliquaries were often left behind.

“Fang reliquary heads are the archaic form of the full figures (Tessman (1913: II, 117). These heads were thrust down into bark reliquary barrels and took, as it were, the bark barrel as a body. The power of the heads was shared, by association, with the power of the skulls which reposed beneath them. Later, the heads evolved into full figures that sat atop the reliquary. Subsequently, under colonial pressures, the reliquaries and the skulls they contained were abandoned, leaving the figures themselves as the only repositories of ancestral power. For several hundred years before the stabilization of the colonial period, the Fang, originally a savanna people, migrated into and throughout the equatorial forest. While a migratory style of life prohibited the use of the earth-anchored ancestral shrines so common in the savanna of West Africa, the bark reliquaries of skulls were perfectly transportable shrines. Heads like this one were also very transportable— much more so than the later full figures. This head, then, may well have been carved somewhere in Cameroon and transported, after several removes of migratory villages, into Gabon, where it was collected. One remarks the relentless gaze, particularly of heads that, like this one, employed brass eye disks. These heads were intended to sit in dark corners of the men’s sleeping quarters in vigilant protection of the reliquaries from the uninitiated mainly women and children. This was the case even though the skulls of especially powerful women might be kept in the reliquary, and even though the reliquary figure itself might be female, as is the case here. Since both the figures and the reliquary were black, they could hardly be made out in their corner. But the flash of the brass eye disks, they were often kept polished—was sufficient to drive away intruders.

Offerings of food were periodically set before the reliquary, which is to say before the ancestors. At such times, the reliquary head was cleansed with palm- or other tree oil, giving it its characteristic luster. Such cleansing restored the figure’s power of intercession with the skulls in the reliquary and, by

extension, with the ancestors, for the Fang talked to the head, and not to the skulls themselves. It is appropriate that the word “power” has recurred in my comments, for Fang art is elemental yet immensely powerful.”

james Fernandez

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104 (ill.).

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**LC Classification: DT546.142 .F12**

**Date or Time Horizon:** 19th c

**Geographical Area: Moyen-Ogooué,** Gabon

**Map:**



**Map of Gabon showing Moyen-Ogooué, after https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3c/Gabon\_-\_Moyen-Ogoou%C3%A9.svg/375px-Gabon\_-\_Moyen-Ogoou%C3%A9.svg.png**

**GPS coordinates:** [0°30′S 10°30′E](https://tools.wmflabs.org/geohack/geohack.php?pagename=Moyen-Ogoou%C3%A9_Province&params=0_30_S_10_30_E_type:adm1st_region:GA)

**Cultural Affiliation:** Fang

**Medium:** wood

**Dimensions:** H 23 in

**Weight:**

**Condition:** Condition is good. Both legs have been reattached. Minor insect damage, surface scrapes and erosion consistent with age and exposure to the elements.

**Provenance:** African Art Museum

**Discussion:**

Historically the Fang were itinerant, and it is relatively recently that they have settled into this broad area. The migratory existence of the Fang prohibited the creation of ancestral shrines at gravesites. Instead, the remains of the important dead, in the form of the skull and other bones, were carried from place to place in a cylindrical bark box. The great rain forest region where the Fang settled is a plateau of middle altitude, cut by innumerable waters with falls and rapids rendering navigation for the most part impossible, and with a climate typically equatorial. Fang are principally hunters but also agriculturists. Their social structure is based on a clan, a group of individuals with a common ancestor, and on the family.

The ensemble of Fang peoples practice a cult devoted to ancestor lineages, the *bieri*, whose aim is to both protect themselves from the deceased and to recruit their aid in matters of daily life. This familial cult does not monopolize the Fang’s religious universe, for it coexists with other beliefs and rituals of a more collective character. It is the bieri, or ancestor sculpture, which has most obviously given rise to the making of remarkable wooden sculpture. The statuary of the Fang can be classified into three main groups: heads on long necks, half-figures and full figures, standing or seated. Carved with great simplicity, at the same time they exhibit a high degree of sophistication in the coordination of bulbous forms. The neck is often a massive cylindrical form. The arms have various positions: hands clasped in front of the body (sometimes holding an object); held in front of the chest or attached to it; hands resting on the knees in the seated figures. The navel is often exaggerated into a cylindrical form. Legs are short, stunted. Usually there is a domed, wide forehead and the eyebrows often form arcs with the nose. The eyes are often made of metal roundlets. The bieri would be consulted when the village was to change location, when a new crop was planted, during a palaver, or before going hunting, fishing, or to war. But once separated from the reliquary chest, the sculpted object would lose its sacred value and could be destroyed. The ritual consisted of prayers, libations, and sacrifices offered to the ancestor, whose scull would be rubbed with powder and paint each time. With its large head, long body, and short extremities, the Fang bieri had the proportion of a newborn, thus emphasizing the group’s continuity with its ancestor and with the three classes of the society: the “not-yet-born,” the living, and the dead. The relics were essentially skull fragments, or sometimes complete skulls, jawbones, teeth and small bones. The bieri also served for therapeutic rituals and, above all, for the initiation of young males during the great so festival.

The Fang used masks in their secret societies. The ngil (gorilla) masks were worn by members of a male society of the same name during the initiation of new members and the persecution of wrong-doers. Masqueraders, clad in raffia costumes and attended by helpers, would materialize in the village after dark, illuminated by flickering torchlight. Fang masks, such as those worn by itinerant troubadours and for hunting and punishing sorcerers, are painted white with facial features outlined in black. Typical are large, elongated masks covered with kaolin and featuring a face that was usually heart-shaped with a long, fine nose. Apparently it has been linked with the dead and ancestors, since white is their color. The ngontang dance society also used white masks, sometimes in the form of a four-sided helmet-mask with bulging forehead and eyebrows in heart-shaped arcs. The ngontang mask symbolizes a ‘young white girl’. The so, or red antelope was connected with an initiation that lasted several months; these masks sport long horns.

Musical instruments – like the harp, its ends sculpted into lovely figurines – allowed communication with the hereafter. Blacksmiths bellows, many quite beautiful, were sculpted in the shape of figures; there are also small metal disks featuring heads, called “passport-masks”, the Fang attached these to their arms.

Special spoons were carved and used to administer magically sustaining nourishment as part of traditional initiation rites. An individual man’s spoon was a preciously guarded possession that was carried on his person in a shoulder bag when he traveled and was placed on his tomb when he passed away.

Traditional Fang religion centers on ancestors who are believed to wield power in the afterlife as they did as living leaders of the community. The skulls and long bones of these men were believed to retain power and to have control over the well-being of the family. Usually the relics were kept hidden away from the uninitiated and women.

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**Appendix:**

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