

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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AFRICAN SCULPTURE EXHIBITION OPENS AUGUST 30

WASHINGTON, D. C. July 31, 1981. The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds, the first exhibition to focus upon the funerary art of the Central African civilization of Kongo, opens in the National Gallery of Art's East Building August 30. In addition to powerful sculpture in stone, wood and cloth, the exhibition offers richly incised terra-cotta grave markers never before presented in North America. It will continue through January 17, 1982.

The art of the Kongo civilization was created to transmit information and express, through emblems and human gestures, its ideas concerning moral continuity and rebirth, healing, justice, and the splendor of an ideal, perfect city. According to Kongo beliefs, the counterpart of that ideal city is the cemetery, which is considered a mediatory point between the worlds of the living and the dead. The sun circumscribes both worlds, wheeling with them, disappearing and reappearing, through space and time. The four principal points of the sun's cosmic journey -- dawn, noon, sunset, and midnight (when the sun is shining on the kingdom of the dead) -- comprise the prime Kongo emblem denoting spiritual continuity and rebirth. This cosmic emblem, or sign, has been encoded as a cross, a quartered circle, a diamond, a spiral, or a special cross with small circles at each ending. In addition to being a potent, self-contained message and design element, it serves as the source and illumination of many other important iconographic features found in Kongo art.

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The Four Moments of the Sun offers 58 examples of Kongo sculpture bearing this cosmic emblem, and gestures and symbols related to it. Included are images in stone and terra cotta from Kongo territory in Bas-Zaïre, as well as cloth-covered mannequins, wood statuary, and life-sized sculpture used as funeral trumpets from more northern Kongo territory. Also on view are other mediatory objects, such as a large wooden figure embedded with blades and nails, thought to derive their power from the noble dead and designed to memorialize important worldly decisions and vows.

The objects are complemented by photomurals and texts interpreting the signs, postures and gestures through which Kongo art fulfills its role as the conveyer of moral inspiration and authority between the worlds of the living and the dead. The photomurals and text also suggest the extensions and transformations of this rich symbolic vocabulary in Kongo-influenced areas of the Western Hemisphere, particularly Haiti and the United States.

Public collections lending objects to the exhibition include the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre, Kinshasa; the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium; the Museum Rietberg, Zurich, Switzerland; the Musées d'Histoire Naturelle et d'Ethnographie de la Rochelle, La Rochelle, France; Etnografiska Museet, Göteborg, Sweden; The Detroit Institute of Arts; and The Brooklyn Museum.

The exhibition was organized by Robert Farris Thompson, Professor of the History of Art and Afro-American Studies at Yale University, and Frère Joseph Cornet, Délégué Général in Zaïre and Director of the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre.

A fully illustrated catalogue with essays and entries by Dr. Thompson and Frère Cornet will be published in conjunction with the exhibition. A symposium under the aegis of the Gallery's Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts will take place in the fall in addition to a series of public lectures beginning

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with one by Dr. Thompson entitled "The Great Atlantic World of Kongo Art" at 4 p.m. on Sunday, September 6, in the East Building auditorium.

Historically and culturally among the most important civilizations of the Black Atlantic world, the original Kingdom of Kongo dates from the 1300s. This Central African kingdom once extended from the Kwilu-Nyari river north of the Atlantic port of Loango to the River Loje in northern Angola, and from the Atlantic coast to the inland valley of the Kwango. Parts of this territory are now within the modern states of Zaïre, Congo-Brazzaville and Angola. The kingdom and its civilization (designated by the initial letter K) transcend the colonial and more recent political entities which have incorporated its name (designated by the initial letter C).

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer) or Mary Dyer, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, area code 202, 737-4215 ext. 511.