



Art from the Congo in VMFA's collection

# Congo Gallery Guide

During our special exhibition *Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa*, we invite visitors to explore VMFA's own extensive collection of art from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), home to several hundred cultures and a diverse array of art forms. Expressing the vibrant spirit of the region, these Congolese works communicate social status and moral codes, address different stages of life, and enrich experiences.

This brochure provides a guide to a selection of Congolese works in the museum's African Art Galleries, including an object currently under study by curators and conservators as part of a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

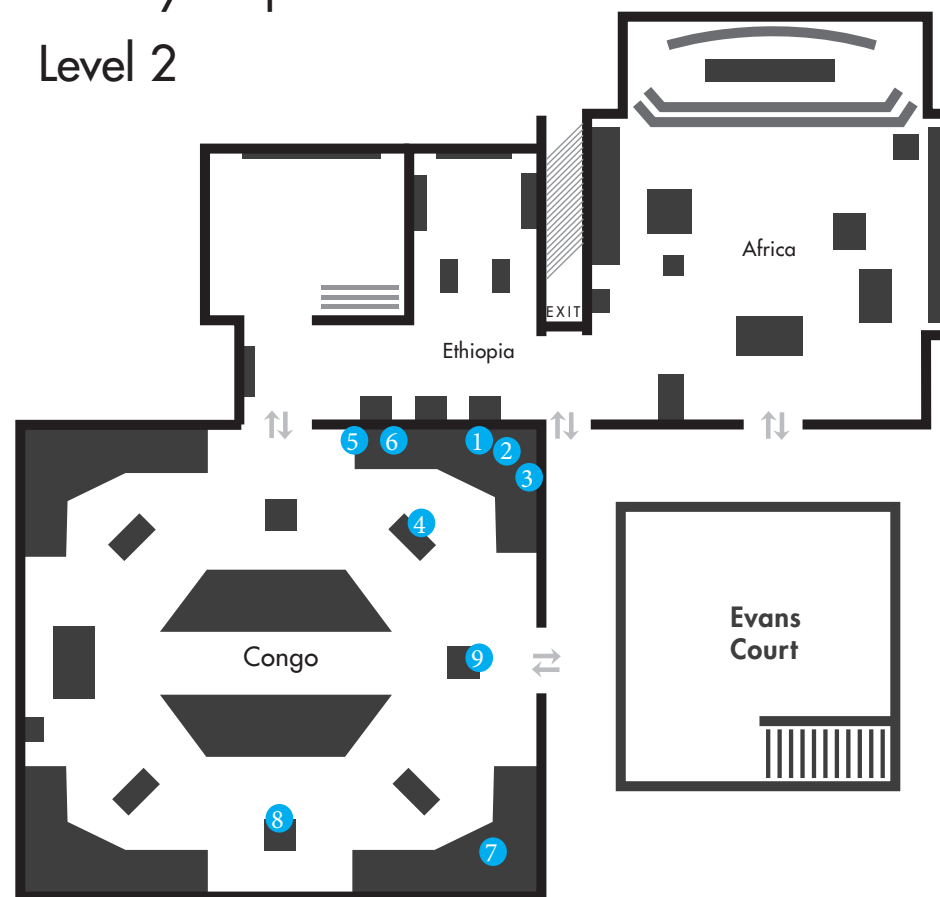
## Gallery Design

VMFA's African art collection includes many works from the Congo. These are displayed in the large room on the east side of Evans Court. The layout of this room derives from the *dikenga*, a symbol of the life cycle that figures prominently in the Kongo culture and related groups. Text panels in the gallery provide details about the symbol, and the large diamond emblems on the four perimeter walls mark these points.



## Gallery Map

### Level 2



Use this map to visit examples of works of art from the Congo in the gallery, and read about them in this guide and the gallery labels.

- |                      |                            |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Bwom Mask         | 6. Man's Bwami Hat         |
| 2. Moshambooy Mask   | 7. Divination Instrument   |
| 3. Ngady Amwash Mask | 8. Mother and Child        |
| 4. Royal Stool       | 9. Community <i>Nkishi</i> |
| 5. Woman's Bwami Hat | (Power Figure)             |



## Masking Traditions

VMFA's African art collection includes several masks from the Congolese region. Masks fill a variety of important roles, often representing local belief systems, histories, social structures, and aesthetics. They can depict humans, animals, or a combination of the two, as well as spirits and other entities. Masks can be active instruments of spirituality and storytelling, and in their original settings, masks are usually accompanied by full-body attire, handheld implements, music, and dancing.

The three masks displayed together in this case represent important characters in Kuba history and culture. They were worn during a performance in a masquerade to tell a story of Kuba origins.



1. **(Left) Bwom Mask**, 20th century  
Kuba Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Leather, copper, glass beads, cowrie shells  
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 77.13
2. **(Top) Moshambwooy Mask**, 19th–20th century  
Kuba Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Raffia cloth, glass beads, cowries, fur, wood, hide  
Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 2010.63
3. **(Right) Ngady Amwash Mask**, 19th–20th century  
Kuba Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Wood, paint, glass beads, cloth, cowrie shells, string, raffia cloth  
Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund, 87.83





## Leadership

Visual symbols of leadership and status are prominent throughout the Luba and Lega cultures of the DRC. Various regalia and art forms help remind people of the leaders' role in society and of the distinctions between different social classes.

This object is a stool or throne made for a Luba king or chief. Rank and title are often indicated by the type of seat a person uses, from a simple woven mat to a sculpted wooden throne such as this. This stool was actually not made for sitting; rather, it served as a symbolic receptacle for the king's spirit. It was displayed only during special ceremonies like an enthronement or perhaps a funeral. Otherwise, it was wrapped in cloth and kept under the care of a guard.



---

*“The female figure literally holds the king above her head, bringing to life the Luba concept that the female body is a spiritual vessel supporting divine kingship.”*

---



Unlike the Luba, the Lega culture is not organized around centralized authorities such as kings or chiefs. Instead, cultural unity is maintained through Bwami, a semisecret, moral, and ethical society to which nearly all Lega men and women belong. Headdresses like the ones shown here are intended to identify a high-ranking member of Bwami. The teachings of the Bwami society are expressed in every aspect of Lega life, guiding the moral development of individuals and the community. In Bwami, husbands and wives share equal status, though they participate in different ceremonies and wear different types of headdresses.



---

4. (Left) **Royal Stool**, late 19th–early 20th century  
Luba Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Wood, glass beads, string  
From the Robert and Nancy Nooter Collection,  
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 2006.18

5. (Top) **Woman's Bwami Hat**, 19th–20th century  
Lega Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Natural and man-made materials  
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 88.119

---

6. (Right) **Man's Bwami Hat**, called *Sawamazembe*,  
19th–20th century  
Lega Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Wickerwork, fibers, polished mussel shells, buttons,  
glass beads  
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 88.123

## Religious Practice

Religious practitioners such as diviners and healers are particularly important individuals in most African communities, including the Pende and Kongo cultures from the DRC. The following two objects were used by religious specialists from these cultural groups to communicate with and serve their community.

Divination instruments such as this one, called a *galukoji*, were created in direct response to the extreme cultural changes experienced by the Pende people during colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century. A *galukoji* was made by a woodcarver and used by a diviner, a trained specialist who manipulates unseen forces to determine and address the causes of physical illness and social problems.



The instrument was held in the diviner's lap in a collapsed position during divining sessions. At the critical moment when an evil doer's identity is called out, the miniature mask suddenly extends out. This action is understood as a response to supernatural forces.

This mother and child sculpture is a power figure, or nkisi, since it contains symbolically important substances. Its use required the knowledge of a skilled practitioner known as an *nganga*. Such sculptures were hidden from public sight and brought out when needed to explore possible causes, and hopefully solutions, for a specific problem. This particular figure was used to help treat a child's illness.

The life-or-death situations that required the object's use are reinforced by the diamond-shaped design in raised scarification patterns on the mother's navel and both shoulders. This is a reference to the *dikenga*, the Kongo life cycle.



7. (Left) **Divination Instrument (Galukoji)**, ca. 1925–50  
Pende Culture (Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Wood, fiber, feathers  
Aldine S. Hartman Endowment Fund, 2012.283.

8. (Right) **Mother and Child**, ca. 19th century  
Kongo Culture, Vili Sub-Group (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Angola)  
Wood, glass, paint, kaolin, camwood powder  
Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 87.84



## Conservation & Materials

The Conservation Initiative in African Art, funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is a dynamic curator-conservator partnership bringing together technical analysis, curatorial research, and specialist consultation to examine methods of assembly, applied and embedded materials, and modifications with use. These studies contribute to a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the works in the VMFA collection and to the greater depth of knowledge about African art. To explore more about the Conservation Initiative at VMFA, visit: [www.vmfa.museum/collections](http://www.vmfa.museum/collections) and select African Art from the dropdown menu.



This power figure, or *nkishi*, represents a heroic ancestor of the Songye people. A trained ritual practitioner, *nganga*, would insert special “medicines,” or *bishimba*, into several cavities in the figure’s abdomen, hips, and shoulders, and beneath the horn on its head. These activating substances gave the sculpture potency, allowing the *nganga* to harness unseen forces and use them for the benefit of the community, assuring fertility, protecting against illness, and, in general,

*“Testing by VMFA conservators has confirmed that the holes are packed with animal bone.”*

keeping evil forces at bay. The special powers of each figure were determined by its *bishimba*, the composition of which only the *nganga* knew. Without its *bishimba*, the figure was considered an empty vessel, merely a piece of wood.

An x-ray image of this *nkishi* reveals five small opaque spots. They appear on the figure’s shoulders, outside thighs, and the navel area. Testing by VMFA conservators has confirmed that the holes are packed with animal bone.

An object such as this was likely kept in a special enclosure at a visible location—the center of the village or near the chief’s house. Cared for by a guardian, it was used during special ceremonies or possibly carried in a procession through the community. It was probably moved with the help of ropes tied at the armpits, as its potency rendered it untouchable.

9. **Community Nkishi (Power Figure)**, 19th–20th century  
Songye Culture (Miombe Village, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Wood, horn, iron, copper, brass tacks, glass beads, string, hide, raffia cloth, *bishimba*  
Wilkins C. Williams Fund, 89.27



## Discover More!

The objects explored in this brochure and in the exhibition *Congo Masks: Masterpieces from Central Africa* represent only a small window into the rich artistic traditions of this region in Africa. Please continue your journey of discovery both in the galleries and on our website at [VMFA.museum](http://VMFA.museum)