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Power Figure (Nkishi), unknown Songye artist

Arnold Lehman: This imposing power figure was made for a Songye community in the Congo region.

Although this figure makes an impressive sculpture, in fact, a container as ordinary as a beer bottle could have been used with just as powerful an effect. Its potency resides not in its physical form but in the materials inside that activate it. In this instance, the protruding belly was filled with herbs, bits of iron, and clay. Leather and metal strips, snakeskin necklaces, and other adornments all contribute to this figure's protective power. It was considered too powerful and dangerous to touch directly, and was carried on poles placed beneath the arms.

Although we may associate its swollen belly with a pregnant woman, or its aggressive appearance with a man, in fact, the spirits activated by power figures are considered to be without gender, and so are the figures themselves.

Large power figures were made to protect entire communities and were kept in a priest's house. In the display case on your left are six smaller power figures, used to protect individual households from evil spirits, natural disasters, and disease.