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Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Unknown Kongo, Kakongo artist

Arnold Lehman: Does this large figure with nails all over its body seem evil or harmful to you? This is a common Western misconception about how African power figures work. In fact, for the people of the Congo, this figure is a receptacle for spiritual powers, made to protect the community from harmful spirits or to resolve problems. It's called *nkisi*, which means "hunter."

William Siegmann: We know that this is a hunter because of the stance that he's taking. And he would be hunting evil. When there was a dispute in the community, in order to bring harmony back to the community, the people who were in dispute would often bring their case to the *nkisi*.

Arnold Lehman: Power sculptures may be owned by healers, political leaders, or individuals. But it is not the sculpture itself that contains power. It must be activated by a priest who places spiritual offerings inside it, breathes on those, and seals it with a mirror. This power figure has cavities in the stomach, the back, and in the crown of the head that can be filled with medicinal plants and clay from an ancestor's grave. The people using the power figure would awaken it by driving a nail or an iron blade into the wood.

When given to people outside the culture, a power figure must be deactivated, in this case by removing the "power bundle" of spiritual materials from the crown of the head. While power figures are still made in some areas, their use today has largely ended.

A contemporary interpretation from Deborah Willis, Professor of Photography at New York University:

Deborah Willis: The *nkisi* figure reminds me of my childhood game-playing, standing in this position, hands akimbo. My girlfriends and I were competitive and ready to outdo each other, whether in a friendly game of hopscotch or confronting an opponent from another neighborhood or street corner. The position of the hands and the general power that it represents in oath taking, the resolution of conflict, and the destruction of evil forces—all of this caused me to reconsider how African cultural elements are retained within African American culture. The interconnectedness of healing, a black female gesture of defiance, and girls playing are all found in this work.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org