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Staff with Female Figure, unknown Luba artist

Arnold Lehman: These three wooden staffs belonged to male rulers of the Luba people of Central Africa. On all of them, the predominant figure is a woman. As you face the case, look at the staff to your right.

The woman on this staff holds her hands to her breasts, symbolizing fertility, the nurturing role of women, and the idea that the women in the community hold the secrets of power within them. In Luba culture, ancestry was often traced through a woman's lineage. But the staffs also represent the king.

William Siegmann: It is not the reigning king, but the spirit of the king's predecessor which is represented here. The idea here is that the spirit of a deceased king would take up residence in the body of another person, who would serve as a means through which he could communicate with the living. But in order to do this, the spirit has to be housed in a living body, and it's impossible for a man's body to hold two spirits at the same time, whereas a woman's body is regarded as being capable of doing this, since a woman can possess two spirits at once every time she's pregnant.

New York University Professor of Photography Deborah Willis's contemporary interpretation of this staff:

Deborah Willis: I am intrigued about the use of the female figure here. She's often handled for strength and pleasure. It's tactile. She's holding her breasts, her hair, the style is ornate, so I'm really interested in how the female figure tells a different story when it's used in this society. The staff also reminds me of the walking sticks used by older Southern men in America on Sunday mornings.

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