

# BENEATH THE SURFACE

## X-raying a Kongo *Nkisi*

Early in 2016, Art Museum conservator Norman Muller produced an X-ray of the newly acquired Kongo power figure (*nkisi*; pl. *minkisi*). By exposing a phosphor sheet for two minutes at 70 kilovolts, he created an image in which the sculpture's underlying wooden figure is clearly visible. While much is already known about the ways Kongo people relied on *minkisi* to solve social, political, and bodily problems, X-ray examination provides new information about this figure's internal structure, shedding light on the relationship between the artist's original carving and the later additions by a ritual specialist.

Among the Kongo peoples of West Central Africa, ritual specialists (*banganga*; sing. *nganga*) turned a range of objects and sculptures into containers for spirits from the land of the dead and the potent substances (*bilongo*) that empowered them. Although the use of similar objects has been recorded among the Kongo people since the sixteenth century, most surviving *minkisi* were created in the nineteenth or the early twentieth century, and new forms of the practice continue today.

Individual clients would engage a ritual specialist to compose the materials according to their needs. The specialist would first commission a sculpture from an artist and then affix to it materials—ranging from seeds and animal matter to feathers and metal nails—that functioned as metaphorical or spiritual medicines. Once the *nkisi* was composed, it was ritually activated in a ceremony that





clarified its purpose to the public. Still, the symbolic details of the *bilongo*—where every attachment, color, and form had meaning and efficacy—were known only to the *nganga*.

While an X-ray cannot reveal the precise nature of the medicines or their purpose, it does permit us to differentiate the work of the Kongo artist from that of the ritual specialist: the artist's original sculpture—the seated figure with hands held to his mouth—is clearly visible, while the whiter areas reveal the additions of the ritual specialist.

An examination of this radiograph suggests that the *nganga* filled small

cavities behind the eyes, a cavity in the belly, and a protruding pack on the head with empowering materials. A small gourd secured between the shoulder blades holds a small round object, most likely a seed or bead. A mirror whose reflective surface would have helped the ritual specialist reveal the sources of clients' problems covers the figure's sealed belly. Resin, probably from a local tree, affixes the calabash and mirror and builds up the projection over the dome-shaped head. The resin obscures other added materials, but screws—invisible to the eye but distinct on the X-ray—secure the belly pack. We anticipate that future examination—visual and scientific—of this object will offer rich insight into the materiality and process of empowering this *nkisi*.

**FRONT:** Kongo artist (Democratic Republic of the Congo), *Nkisi*, early 20th century. Wood, mirror, beads, glass, metal, calabash, and string. Promised Museum acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

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