

Anthropomorphic box



- Democratic Republic of Congo, Uele
- Mangbetu
- Early 19th century
- Wood
- H. : 54,6 cm
- INV. 1026-469

Mangbetu bark boxes are originally used for keeping honey or personal effects, such as small body ornaments and jewellery, the best-known being their ivory hairpins. The most elaborate boxes are anthropomorphic, while others are merely cephalomorphic with a round base.

The low-density, very fine-grained wood, usually used, has a honey-coloured patina, which is perhaps not coincidental given their main use. The facial features are usually heightened with thin pyroengraved lines depicting either scarifications or the body paintings then in fashion. In most cases the back of the head is elongated and embellished with thin plaits, depicting

the cranial deformation once practiced for aesthetic purposes and arrived at by tightening cords around the head from birth.

The Boa, Zande and also the neighbouring Asua pygmies also made these boxes. Their most distinctive feature is the style of the sculpted part. Several individual styles can also be detected in utilitarian objects and artworks from the turn of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, especially in boxes, knives and the anthropomorphic man-woman couples that are among the greatest masterpieces of this ethnic group.

The best known are usually signed with pyroengraved Roman letters, notably by the Gataye and Songo sculptors, whose works were collected in the early twentieth century by explorers, missionaries and colonial agents of the Congo Free State. The name of the artist who sculpted this box could be Nabakenge.

Boris Wastiau, *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller*, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (éd.), 2007: p. 246.