

AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Beembe people, Democratic Republic of Congo

Male Ancestral Figure

Twentieth century

Wood, shell

7 ⁷/₈ × 2 ³/₄ × 2 ¹/₈ in. (20 × 7 × 5.4 cm)

Museum purchase, funds provided by museum visitors

1998.19

Striking miniature ancestral effigy figures are among some of the most notable art forms of the Beembe people of southwestern Congo. The Beembe believe ancestors are a source of vital power, and effigy figures are a means of channeling their power to their descendants.

While each effigy is made as a flattering image of the deceased, it bears both iconic and idealized features, conveying strength and beauty. The Harn example, depicting a male ancestor, is typical of the style sometimes identified as the “classic” style centered in the largest Beembe city, Mouyondzi. Consistent with Mouyondzi style are an ovoid head and sharply elongated beard, a thick cylindrical neck, thrown-back shoulders with short arms bent at the elbow, an elongated and slightly curved torso, short, flexed legs, and large feet. Effigy figures are distinctive in the elaborate relief patterns that typically take the form of symmetrical configurations on the abdomen, sides, and back. These patterns mimic keloidal scarification patterns that are thought to enhance the beauty of the body and add a tactile sensuality. The pattern of three distinct designs arranged in vertical columns on the Harn example is typical of Mouyondzi-style figures. The gesture of holding implements at chest level is common to many effigy figures. Implements such as horns, gourds, knives, rifles, bells, and flywhisks are signs of an individual’s role in life. The Harn effigy holds a knife in his right hand and a gourd-bottle in his left. The stoppered bottle, used for medicine, and the machete, a symbol of political or military power, suggest that the figure represents a man who was either a leader or a healer, or perhaps both. A similarly equipped figure in Stockholm’s Etnografiska Museet is identified as a noble.

