NKISI (power figure)
Democratic Republic of Congo
Date and creator unknown
Mixed media (wood, nails, rope, feathers, paint, glass, etc.)
Courtesy of the Karl Stirner Collection, Easton, PA

In the language of the Bakongo people in the Democratic Republic of Congo the word nkisi means "powerful objects," objects, which have the power both to heal and to harm. When Portuguese missionaries, seafarers, and diplomats started to write about Kongo from the late-fifteenth century onwards, nkisi became feticio ("objects made from hand"), which in turn informed the English word fetish. Just as the word spread and changed, so did the images depicting it.

Nkisi figures, like this one, are considered some of the most valuable pieces of any African art collection. Up to the 1960s they were often referred to as "nail fetishes." Unfortunately, we neither know the date nor the artist of the work. Based on similar figures with better documentation however, it might be fair to date this piece to the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century. The object conforms to the characteristic features of nkisi: a series of nails hammered into the wooden body of the sculpture, a web of strings worn around the body, and a rectangular box attached to the belly. What makes an nkisi is the power of its appearance not the age or "originality" of the form.

Traditionally, the actual nkisi, that is, the powerful substances that make the figure work, would have been stored inside a closed box, sealed by a mirror or another material. Thus, the source of the figure’s power was concealed. What grabbed the spectator’s attention was only the container of power not the power itself.

In fact, the dynamics of attention are key for the past and present history of nkisi figures. Originally, nkisi were only small unobtrusive bundles of diverse objects held together by fiber strings. Most likely, the anthropomorphic shape of the figure and the use of nails are informed by the Bakongo encounter with Catholic-Portuguese imagery, especially the depiction of Saint Sebastian as a martyr shot through with arrows by the soldiers of the Roman empire.

The nineteenth century was not only the time of colonialism but also the heyday of nkisi figures. Healers toured with them from village to village healing a wide range of afflictions. From the twentieth century onwards the use of nkisi declined. Many of them became abandoned, which could be one explanation for why the figure in the exhibition found its way to the U.S.

Nkisi figures from central Africa provide a striking example of the migration of images over time and cultures, representing a veritable "global flow" of cultural interactions and appropriations. Nkisi figures repeatedly changed their form and meaning in response to the larger historical, social, and political contexts of the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries—imperial expansion, slavery, colonialism, decolonization, and democratization. These meanings have ranged from instruments of healing and symbols of savagery to icons of identity and theaters of the unconscious.

—Peter Probst, Professor of African Art and Visual Culture, Tufts University