

“Good *and* Beautiful”

Newly acquired Lega masterworks enhance the sub-Saharan African art collection

Constantine Petridis, Associate Curator of African Art

On June 6, 2005, the African art world was stunned when an anonymous buyer paid a record price of 2.4 million euros at a Paris auction for a 12-centimeter-high ivory mask made by a carver of the Lega people of eastern Congo. Until the records set at the Vérité auction in Paris on June 17 and 18, 2006, it was the highest price ever paid for an African mask at auction. At the same auction an ivory figurine (h. 16.5 cm) of the Lega fetched 350,000 euros against an estimate of 60,000 to 80,000 euros.¹

Earlier that same year the Cleveland Museum of Art acquired two major pieces of the same cultural origin: a standing female ivory figurine and a cowrie-covered man’s hat. These two new accessions complement a small but refined existing collection consisting of a Lega man’s hat that was purchased in 1995 on the recommendation of Margaret Young-Sánchez, then curator of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and three ivory Lega works donated by the late Katherine C. White in the 1970s.²

The museum’s newly acquired ivory figurine—whose face and body are decorated with dots and lines that imitate the scarification marks once worn by both men and women—is a true masterpiece of Lega sculpture that embodies the essential qualities of this artistic tradition. Belonging to a small number of formally closely related ivory carvings, to my knowledge it is one of only two sculptures of this particular style held in

a public collection in the United States.³ Before it entered the Cleveland collection it was one of the highlights of an exquisite monographic exhibition on Lega art held in Brussels in 2002. The Brussels exhibition was not the first one to focus on the extraordinary variety of Lega art. In 2001 the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, collaborated on an impressive exhibition featuring a selection of more than 300 Lega works from the renowned private collection of Dr. Jay T. Last, perhaps the most exhaustive private collection of Lega art, part of which has been gifted to the Fowler Museum. Whereas the Fowler Museum exhibition emphasized Lega art's cultural significance and rich contextual framework, the Brussels show celebrated its aesthetic excellence and artistic creativity.⁴

It is mainly thanks to Daniel Biebuyck's in-depth fieldwork in the Lega area from 1952 to 1953 and again during brief research periods in 1954 and 1957 that we know about the varied functions and layered meanings of Lega art and its place within the broader framework of Lega culture. Interestingly, during his field research Biebuyck also acquired a wide range of Lega works for the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Biebuyck's writings on the Lega are innumerable, and he remains the main primary source on the subject to date. One of the early proponents of the so-called contextual approach, Biebuyck strongly influenced the development of the field of African art studies. Aside from visiting professorships in different universities and a two-year appointment at the University of California, Los Angeles, after moving to the United States in 1961 he spent most of his academic career until his retirement in 1989 as a professor of anthropology at the University of Delaware.⁵

The Lega live in a densely forested area in the eastern Congo Basin, close to the equator. The natural environment, with its distinct flora and fauna, has profoundly influenced the Lega people's material and spiritual culture. Movement throughout the area has always been difficult, resulting in relative isolation. Despite their high degree of independence, the different Lega communities are internally related through kinship and rituals. The unifying institution for all Lega people, however, is an association called Bwami. As we will see, Bwami is also the name of a skullcap worn by all male society members. Bwami is a hierarchically structured institution with both male and female members. It is based on a progression of closed initiation rituals in which artworks, natural objects, and common artifacts play an important role. The association touches on every aspect of Lega life, assuming economic, social, political, religious, moral, and educational responsibilities, in addition to fulfilling a variety of aesthetic and artistic functions. In doing so, the association establishes connections within human society itself and between the living and the dead. Bwami's main purpose is to present to its members a moral philosophy that enhances solidarity and fosters harmony. The ultimate aspiration of Bwami is encapsulated in the Lega word *busoga*, referring to a concept that combines moral excellence and physical beauty.

In practice, Lega philosophy is transmitted during initiations through proverbs that are accompanied by music, song, dance, gesture, and objects. Most if not all Lega carvings, in human or animal form and produced in wood, ivory, bone, or other materials, are made and used within the context of Bwami initiation rituals and other society activities. The association is indeed the main sponsor of the arts among the Lega. Nevertheless, sculptures are reserved for the higher levels of membership, and their

exegesis is equally restricted. The Bwami association is divided into a set of parallel but complementary levels or grades for men and women. As a rule, the men's Bwami counts five levels, whereas the women's consists of three, each level having its own name and insignia. Although it is common knowledge who is a Bwami member, and some of Bwami's ceremonies are public in nature and incorporate an element of entertainment, the initiations themselves are secret and held in a closed space, open only to members of the grade in question or a higher one.

Initiations into the different grades and subgrades occur sequentially and become progressively more intensive, comprehensive, and lengthy. An initiation can last several days and generally comprises seven or eight performances. It is on these occasions that artworks are exhibited and manipulated by their owners or guardians in combination with music, dance, theater, and proverbs at the two highest levels. In return for the received wisdom the initiates distribute large quantities of food and goods. As a confirmation of the candidates' newly acquired rank within the association, the Bwami instructors give them a new set of insignia, including a hat, belt, and other objects. The reciprocity between the genders appears from the fact that a woman can join Bwami only if her husband is already a member, while men cannot marry until they have entered the association. A woman's membership rank in the Bwami hierarchy mirrors that of her husband, and her ascension to a higher level follows that of her spouse. Although the majority of men do climb beyond the lower levels, it is the ambition of all to reach the highest grade, called *kindi*, and more specifically the highest of the three sublevels within *kindi*, known as *lutumbo lwa kindi*. Aside from wisdom and enlightenment, access to this upper Bwami rank also brings prestige, wealth, authority, and fame.

Both the Bwami association and the artworks related to it have suffered severely from Central Africa's turbulent history. Before the Belgian colonial occupation of the region the infiltration of Islamicized Swahili traders had a detrimental effect on many of the native peoples' traditional customs and beliefs. The Belgian colonizers responded with even more hostility toward the association and its activities. Considered a subversive threat to Belgian rule, it was first outlawed in 1933 and finally abolished in 1948. Nevertheless, as testified by Daniel Biebuyck's work in the 1950s, despite vehement opposition from both administrators and missionaries Bwami remained in existence throughout the colonial period, albeit even more secretly and disguised. It was only when the Belgian Congo regained its independence in 1960 that Bwami was made legal again. However, in the wake of the region's most recent violent history of civil war and disruption, Bwami seems to continue its struggle for survival. Unfortunately, little is known about the current state of affairs. It cannot be confirmed whether the association has indeed remained in place or instead disappeared altogether. It is equally unclear whether artworks are still being produced and used in Lega society. One would be tempted to share the optimistic view expressed by art historian Elisabeth Cameron that "the Lega artistic sense has never died" and that "a new Lega art will soon come to light and flourish."⁶

As mentioned earlier, despite the secrecy of Bwami initiations and the vast majority of its artworks, insignia and paraphernalia of all sorts are the public markers of one's Bwami membership and rank. Hats of different types, sizes, and materials, such as the Cleveland Museum of Art's two recent acquisitions, are undoubtedly the most visible indicators of status within the Bwami association. Still, Bwami's dual secret and public

nature speaks to the fact that such elaborate hats always cover a small skullcap made of woven plant fiber. This headdress, also called Bwami, is the first hat a man receives when he enters the association. In the past, men wore their skullcap at any time, and it is said the caps were even buried with their owners.

For Bwami members the materials used for these headdresses have important symbolical meanings. At the same time, they allude to the blending of male and female gender traits proper to higher Bwami ranks. Thus, the *sawamazembe* hat worn by men at the *kindi* level imitates a woman's hairstyle known as *mazembe*.⁷ A hidden reference to the waxing moon, the mussel shell attached to the hat's front signals the high rank of its wearer. Potent animals constitute an important element in Bwami symbolism and insignia. The elephant tail adorning the *nkumbu nza nsembe* hat—also simply called *mukuba*—exclusively worn by the highest initiatory level of *lutumbo lwa kindi* alludes to their power and prominence. Lega proverbs compare all Bwami members to the elephant, and *kindi* members are specifically referred to as “people of the elephant tail.” In more recent years, the white cowrie shells covering the surface of this particular type of Bwami hat have been replaced by white or colored buttons. In addition to the special value assigned to these and other added materials, constructed Lega hats like the museum's also attest to the fact that high-ranking Bwami members are keen on the surprising, the unusual, and the funny.

Like all other Bwami objects in general, and figurative carvings in wood and ivory in particular, hats are also considered sacred. Identified as “heavy things,” *masengo* (sing. *usengo*), all these objects are believed to be infused with an intrinsic mysterious and transcendental force. As a result every Bwami object is thought to have the power to

either heal or harm. Thus, if no other medicinal remedy proves effective, small bits taken from any type of *usengo* are mixed with water and given to a sick person to drink. A common way to remove particles from a wooden or ivory Bwami figurine is to scrape or rub its surface with rough leaves that act like sandpaper. The most coveted initiation objects, large ivory figurines that possess the highest degree of inherent sacred power, often show traces of this kind of action. This is also the case for the standing statuette that Katherine C. White donated to the museum in 1978.

From the bottom to the top of the initiation sequence hundreds of *masengo* objects are shown and explained to the initiates by designated “teachers.” In the Bwami teachings offered during the complex and lengthy initiation process into the different grades and subgrades, all these objects are used to illustrate visually what is expressed orally through proverbs. When objects and proverbs are combined they create metaphors that provide an ethical and behavioral code. The proverbs and the objects that accompany them, either man-made or “found,” are usually part of a performance that includes song, movement, and theater. The transfer of wisdom becomes ever more complicated as one gradually advances to the higher levels of Bwami. In the final initiation ritual into the highest grade the artworks are no longer interpreted or explained but simply contemplated by the initiate. At the culmination point of the initiation every member of the *lutumbo lwa kindi* must empty his hunter’s bag and place his objects in front of the seated initiate, who looks at them in utmost silence. Whereas at lower levels each initiation object carries multiple meanings and provokes different complementary or contradictory readings, carvings at the *kindi* level are simply exhibited, stripped of their metaphorical

connotations. Thanks to the wisdom accumulated before reaching this stage the initiate will be able to infer meaning directly from them through revelation.

The variety in materials, size, volume, decoration, and finish of anthropomorphic carvings is astounding. Because they are carefully preserved and inherited from one initiate to the next, such figurines have been collected in large numbers. With the intention to aggrandize his prestige and reputation a *kindi* member will also try to possess more than one figurine. However, with the exception of masks, materials have no bearing on the further categorization of Lega sculptures. Thus, in its broad application the term *iginga* encompasses any anthropomorphic sculpture. In its secondary meaning, however, it is reserved for a select category of larger-size and mostly ivory figurines such as the two examples now belonging to the museum.⁸ Because objects are secretly stored in a bag or basket, or hidden inside a house or in the hollow of a tree, much Lega sculpture is small in scale and easily transportable. These properties also facilitate their manipulation during performances and dances. The general stylized and even abstracted appearance of Lega artworks enhances their cryptic character; Bwami-related objects conceal multiple and often contradictory and ambiguous meanings that are hard to decipher even for those who have firsthand knowledge. To the uninitiated, whether or not he or she is a member of the Lega culture, and outside the Bwami context it is as a rule simply impossible to understand or interpret the meaning of a Lega artwork. With some notable exceptions, one cannot determine the name or meaning of a Lega figurine if it has been extracted from its context without this information being recorded. The only sculptures for which such primary contextual data are available are those collected by Biebuyck in the 1950s for the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren.

In addition to the generic name *iginga*, ivory figurines are associated with many different individual names, some of which are very specific or even unique. As mentioned earlier, only rarely does a particular form indicate a certain meaning. To complicate matters even further, from a Lega perspective full figurines and heads are interchangeable. In some cases, however, a special attitude or physical trait does reveal a common meaning. A good example of this can be found in the figurine with four faces that Katherine C. White donated in 1977. Regardless of the number of faces or whether a full figurine or only a bust or head, such sculptures are invariably called “Many-Heads” or “Many-Faces” by the Lega. These figurative carvings are often related to a proverb about the fact that high-ranking Bwami members can see in different directions simultaneously, and that they are generally wise and fair. The lack of sexual traits on this and many other ivory carvings indicates the idea of gender role blending.

Whereas natural objects—sometimes slightly modified—are used at every level of the Bwami initiation, manufactured objects such as carved figurines and masks are the prerogatives of the highest levels, *yananio* and *kindi*, and their subgrades. With the exception of spoons, other ivory carvings are owned primarily by members of the *kindi* grade. Calling themselves “owners of ivory,” only *kindi* members are allowed to use elephant products in sculpture and dress. Anthropomorphic ivory figurines like the one recently acquired by the museum are individually owned by the *lutumbo lwa kindi* subgrade, the highest initiation level into Bwami. Although they necessarily occur at any initiation level, they are only displayed at the initiation into the highest *kindi* level. Initiation objects are generally transferred to other members when their owners move on to a higher grade. However, when a member who has reached the top grade of *lutumbo*

lwa kindi dies, his figurine and other accessories are placed on his tomb until transmitted to his successor. Using the figurines as temporary grave-markers of deceased Bwami members stresses the relationship between the living and their ancestors.⁹

Lega carvings fulfill several overlapping or complementary functions. They are emblems of Bwami rank that symbolize complex philosophical concepts; they are sacred objects that contain power and can be used as medicine; they are funerary devices that allude to the link between the living and the dead; and they are memory aids that are associated with specific names and proverbs. But perhaps most importantly, all the figurines used in the Bwami context exemplify the virtues the *kindi* ultimately strive for. This is especially true of large ivory figurines like the one the Cleveland Museum of Art recently added to its collection. When investigating indigenous Lega criteria for judging the quality of art, Daniel Biebuyck discovered that objects that had been used in the Bwami initiation context were by definition considered to be intrinsically good and beautiful at the same time.¹⁰

“Good *and* beautiful” is in fact also the translation of the term *busoga*, which is generally used to qualify a valuable initiation object. As mentioned earlier, the idea of *busoga* is a core concept in Lega philosophy and the foundation of Bwami ethics. A sculpture’s aesthetic quality is assessed on the basis of certain formal features, including size, medium, and, most notably, patina. Ranging from honey-colored to deep reddish brown resulting from the continuous application of oils, plant juices, ashes, ochre, and wood powder, the smooth surface of an ivory figurine is considered to be the hallmark of a great work of art. The result of the work’s tactile nature, the glossy patina suggests the conflation of formal and contextual qualities. It is indeed because the object has been

used that it has accumulated power and gained irresistible appeal. Interestingly, the Lega associate an ivory figurine's smooth patina both conceptually and literally with an initiate's oiled and anointed body in the course of his initiation into Bwami. The glossy surface of the sculpture and the shiny skin of the individual are physical signs of a high rank and the wisdom that successive initiations entail. Just like the initiate washes and beautifies his body before embarking on an initiation, so are sculptures pertaining to it rubbed with a mixture of oils and other substances. Just like the initiate climbs up the Bwami ladder with dignity and pride, so are many figurative carvings rendered with the ideal physical features of a Lega man or woman: high forehead, shaved hair, scarification marks on the face and the body, and straight posture.

Wisdom as an expression of *busoga*, the ideal combination of moral integrity and physical beauty, can be reflected in a person's character by a range of virtues, including moderation, restraint, nonviolence, equanimity, generosity, solidarity, and a general willingness to help others. He who possesses these qualities is perceived by the Lega as a genuine leader and referred to with praise names such as *musangano*, "The Central Power Around Whom Others Assemble in Joy and Peace." Still, even though Bwami encourages moderation in words and actions, the Bwami member does not live an ascetic life. He likes good food and the pleasure of human company. He uses oils, perfumes, hats, and all kinds of other accessories to beautify his body during initiations and the festivities that accompany them. And, most importantly, he treasures the beauty of Bwami insignia and initiation objects in general, and of anthropomorphic ivory carvings exclusive to the *kindi* grade in particular.

NOTES

1. Organized by the auction house Fraysse & Associés, the Paris sale at which these ivory Lega works were sold took place at the Hôtel Drouot on June 6, 2005; see Fraysse & Associés (Paris), *Bijoux Antiques, Art Préhispanique, Art Primitif*, sale cat. (6 June 2005). In addition to the mask and the figurine, represented in the sale's catalogue under lot numbers 57 and 60, the sale also included an ivory Lega head that was sold for 456,000 euros (no. 58). All three Lega works stemmed from a mysterious private collection referred to with the initials "B. H." Both the head and the mask were included in the landmark 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a reduced traveling version of which was presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art that same year.
2. The two hats in the Cleveland collection were both offered to the museum by art dealer and collector Jacques Hautelet (La Jolla, California). The most recently acquired hat (2005.56) was included in two important exhibitions at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History and reproduced in their companion catalogues; see Doran H. Ross, ed., *Elephant: The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture* (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1992), fig. 14.1; and Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer, eds., *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head* (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1995), fig. 8.16. The newly acquired Lega figurine (2005.3) is said to have been consecutively owned by the illustrious African art dealers Charles Ratton, Guy Ladrière, and Pierre Darteville before it became part

of the Vranken-Hoet Collection in Belgium. It is reproduced in Marie-Louise Bastin et al., *Utotombo: L'art d'Afrique noire dans les collections privées belges*, exh. cat. (Brussels: Société des Expositions, 1988), no. 246; Joseph Cornet, *Zaire: Peuples, Art, Culture* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1989), p. 120; and Daniel P. Biebuyck, *Lega: Ethique et beauté au coeur de l'Afrique*, exh. cat. (Brussels: KBC Banque & Assurance, 2002), no. 99. The three Katherine C. White donations are all illustrated in William Fagg's book *African Tribal Images: The Katherine White Reswick Collection*, exh. cat. (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1968), nos. 270, 273, and 278. The multi-headed figurine (1976.182) had been acquired by White from Mathias Komor, the figurine (1977.192) from J. J. Klejman, and the spoon (1976.186)—once also owned by Charles Ratton—from Werner Muensterberger.

3. The other figure in the same style, of much smaller dimensions, is in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art. It should be stressed, however, that it remains an open question whether these stylistically similar sculptures were made by the same hand or in the same workshop. One such work was acquired in 1948 by the Royal Museum for Central Africa; see Viviane Baeke et al., *Treasures from the Africa-Museum, Tervuren*, exh. cat. (Tervuren, Belgium: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 1995), cat. 218. Located in a suburb of Brussels, the Tervuren Museum holds the most important collection of Lega art in the world.
4. The Brussels exhibition was accompanied by the above-mentioned catalogue written by Daniel Biebuyck; Elisabeth L. Cameron wrote the catalogue on the Jay Last collection, *Art of the Lega*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Regents of the University

of California, 2001). Both catalogues contain a number of statuettes very similar in style to the one the Cleveland Museum of Art recently acquired. In fact, one of these is also featured on the cover of the Last catalogue. I have relied heavily on both these recent sources for the present article. Biebuyck also authored the catalogue in conjunction with a 1994 sales exhibition of Lega art at the gallery of Hélène and Philippe Leloup in Paris; *La Sculpture des Lega*, trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck and Mihaela Bacou, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Leloup, 1994). In 2001 Belgian art dealer Bernard de Grunne organized a small but refined exhibition in his Brussels gallery of a corpus of Lega ivories once in the collection of Béla Hein; *Béla Hein: Grand initié des ivoires lega*, exh. cat. (Paris: Adam Biro, 2001). Most recently, Emile-Alexandre Georges published *Les Lega et leur art: Sur les traces d'un rêveur égaré au Congoland* (Tervuren, Belgium: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2005).

5. After receiving a master's degree in classical philology from Ghent University, Belgium, Biebuyck obtained a doctorate in 1954 with a dissertation on the social institutions of the Bembe people, neighbors of the Lega, among whom he had conducted extensive fieldwork since 1949. For an autobiographical account of Biebuyck's studies with Frans Olbrechts and his involvement with the nascent field of anthropology in Belgium, see his contribution in *Frans M. Olbrechts (1899–1958): In Search of Art in Africa*, ed. Constantine Petridis, exh. cat. (Antwerp: Ethnographic Museum, 2001), pp. 102–114.
6. Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, p. 223. Nevertheless, in the preface to the recent book *Les Lega et leur art* by Georges, Viviane Baeke (p. 10) refers to an oral

communication of Mr. Lunanga to confirm that Bwami has retained its essential role in 21st-century Lega life.

7. The Bwami association shows a high degree of variation throughout the Lega region. Thus, among the eastern Lega the Bwami is more centralized than in other areas, high Bwami positions being reserved for members of certain clans. Here, the name of the association, Bwami bwa Lusembe or “Bwami of the Shell,” refers to the shell attached to the front of the hats of the highest-ranking members who act as leaders. This type of hat is closely similar to the *sawamazembe* hat acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1995.
8. Aside from the category of *iginga* the Lega also know a category of small anthropomorphic figurines in either ivory or bone, which they call *kalimbangoma*. In fact, the same name is also given to small zoomorphic figures, miniature sculptures, and assemblages of other objects. Members of the higher sublevels of the *yananio* grade and the lower sublevel of the *kindi* grade owned such a human *kalimbangoma* figurine. Elisabeth Cameron points out that it is not clear from the literature if *iginga* is entirely different from *kalimbangoma* or if both categories overlap; Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, pp. 120 and 228 n. 3. However, in Biebuyck’s most recent publication the two categories are firmly separated; *Lega*, pp. 166–167 and 174–180. Occasionally, women who have attained the *kanyamwa* rank—the highest Bwami level for women and the equivalent of the male *kindi*—own small versions of these *maginga* (plural of *iginga*) figurines; see Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, p. 131.

9. Very little is known about Lega artists. Even when artists' names have been preserved they are rarely related to specific works. Because a person's reputation is largely determined by her or his status within the Bwami association, the Lega attach much more importance to the owners of Bwami artworks than to their makers.
10. Although Biebuyck never heard any verbalized aesthetic criticisms during his field investigations, he regularly noticed favorable and pleasant nonverbal reactions to a well-carved and beautiful figurine; Biebuyck, *Lega*, pp. 64–67 and idem, *La Sculpture des Lega*, pp. 44–46; see also Cameron, *Art of the Lega*, pp. 65–67.
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Standing Female Figurine (iging). Lega people, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Ivory, h. 17.5 cm. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 2005.3



Man's Hat (sawamazembe). Lega people, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Plant fibers, shells, seed pod, buttons, h. 39.7 cm. John L. Severance Fund 1995.211



Man's Hat (nkumbu nza nsembe or mukuba). Lega people, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Plant fibers, cowrie shells, beads, elephant tail, h. 55.9 cm. Norman O. Stone and Ella A. Stone Memorial Fund 2005.56





Above: Three ivory carvings formerly in the Katherine C. White collection (from left): *Multi-Headed Figurine* (“Sakimatwematwe,” h. 14.6 cm, 1977.182), *Spoon* (*kalukili* or *kakili*, l. 14.6 cm, 1976.186), and *Standing Female Janus Figurine* (*iginga*, h. 17.8 cm, 1976.192). Lega people, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Gift of Katherine C. White

