



Bell Currency (Ngke)

Date

19th Century

Primary Maker

Yoruba

Medium

Iron and fibrous rope

Description

This is bell currency from the Congo. In the late 19th century, bells called “Ngke” were used as currency in the Congo around the Ubangi bend. Ordinary objects such as hoes, swords and bracelets were frequently given monetary value and were exchanged as goods. The Ngke reflected this as these musical instruments were used in commercial transactions during ceremonial rituals, for conveying messages, and as an insignia of leadership in African societies. Ngke came in several forms, with varying degrees of roundness and were either single or

paired. The double gonged bells were connected by a rigid piece of curved iron which was covered by a fiber rope. The concave shape of the waist of the bells highlighted the height of the currency while the convex shape of the base offered a crooked platform. Ngke did not contain a clapper and were beaten with rubber-headed wooden or iron sticks to produce sound. The sound of the instrument announced deaths, marriages and births. Though these currency items were musical instruments and did accompany ceremonies and dance, they also were symbols of power. Additionally, the Musee Royal de L’Afrique in Tervuren, Brussels documents bells being used for expensive acquisitions of slaves, marriage compensations and daily purchase of food in the 1900s.

Dimensions

32 1/8 x 18 1/2 x 5 in. (81.6 x 47 x 12.7 cm)