

Basic Detail Report



Currency

Date
19th Century

Primary Maker
Mbole

Medium
Bronze

Description

The Mbole society is located in equatorial Zaire along the Lomami River. The Mbole are patriarchal and the society is stratified according to the people’s roles within or outside of the Lilwa society. The Lilwa society educated members on morality and religion with four levels of membership. A likomela are the young boys, and on rare occasion privileged girls, who are being initiated into the Lilwa. The Lumongo are the women joined into the Lilwa and they are only allowed to marry the highest ranking official of the Lilwa, the Yeni. The Yeni control most of the power of the village, offering a fortunate lifestyle to the Lumongo. The Kanga are the medicine men of the society, assisting in governing the tribe as the second highest in command. Lastly, the third level of within the society is reserved for men who play special roles within the society: the Tuli are the blacksmiths, Opinga are craftsman or sculptors, Iknoykoy are performers who sing and the Onanga are officiates. Mbole life is governed by the way of the Lilwa and those who betray it are severely punished. The Ofika are statuettes of individuals who have been punished by hanging for breaking traditions or betraying the Lilwa during time served as Likomela. It is believed that the figures carry the soul of the traitor and only those part of the Lilwa are allowed to view them. All other individuals must flee when the Ofika are present until they are safely returned to a hidden location surrounding the village. The stratified society of the Mbole reflect the need for wealth depositories such as this bronze ingot. The stepping stone to coins, ingots served as reserves of currency that would not decay like other forms of currency such as cattle, textiles, or vegetation. Ingots could also be reshaped to useful or wearable forms such as bracelets and bullets. Throughout the 19th century, West Africa used ingots as currency in many forms. The Mbole arch as one example of the West African blacksmith’s craftsmanship in creating currencies.

Dimensions

Overall: 4 5/8 x 3 1/4 x 7 3/4 in. (11.7 x 8.3 x 19.7 cm)