



## Janus Figure (Nkisi)

### Date

20th Century

### Primary Maker

Yaka

### Medium

Wood

### Description

This is a nkisi figure from the Yaka people. Nkisi figures, the former meaning medicine, are containers presented as sculptures, filled with empowering or supernatural materials called bilongo. The bilongo may be blood, vegetable, animal or mineral matter. The substance gives power to the sculpture and allows contact between an ancestral being and the devotee or individual. The deposits for the bilongo are usually situated on the head, stomach or back to activate the material in areas which people of the Congo believe to be of significance. The

medicine in the figures is often tended to or fixed by the nganga, or doctor. There are four types of nkisi and all have different purposes. The mbula protect against witchcraft, na moganga protect against dangerous spirits and sickness, npezo represent general evil and nkondi represent ill omens and are considered the most evil. Additionally, the na moganga aid hunters in foraging and warriors in battle. Most nkisi are sculpted in a humanoid form, but can also be monkeys or janus-styled animals. The Yaka also utilize the Janus-style sculpture for instruments, specifically drums. The Bayaka, or Yaka, whose name means "strong people", live in the forest and savannah of Northern Angola and the Bandundu region of Zaire. Art and the artist hold a high position of respect in the society, and traditionally the task of carving fetishes, statuettes and the masks used in annual nkanda (circumcision/initiation) ceremonies falls into the hands of the kalaveni, or sculptor, whose distinguished occupation has been passed down to him through his father. Fetishes, which are used to honor ancestors and enlist their supernatural support in assuring material well-being on this earth, are sometimes carved by the fetisher himself (known as nganga ngombe), instead of the kalaveni. The legs are often bent in the fetish figures, suggesting a dance posture, but the stiffness of the stance belies the seriousness of the fetishes purpose. When the fetisher dies, all of his fetishes are left in his home, and the house abandoned by the villagers, never to be set foot in again. With time, the structure is destroyed or decays, and the fetishers remains, along with his fetishes, are buried and forgotten.

**Dimensions**

Overall: 10 5/8 x 3 1/2 x 4 3/4 in. (27 x 8.9 x 12.1 cm)