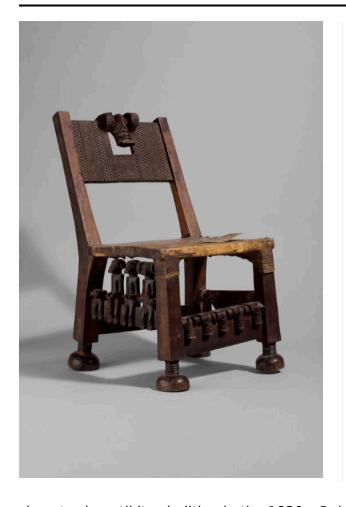# Basic Detail Report

Chair (Ngundja)

Date
early 20th Century

Primary Maker
Chokwe

Medium
Wood, metal and leather

Description
This is an early 20th century chair made of wood, metal and leather. This type of chair is called a Ngundja, the vernacular term for the chairs of the Chokwe people, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia. Beginning in the 17th Century and intensifying over the latter half of the 18th Century, Portuguese traders began entering Chokwe territories in Angola by way of caravans. The history of the two peoples was a complicated one. As with so many of the other inland groups of west Africa, the Chokwe were ravaged by slavers working in the Atlantic slave trade until its abolition in the 1830s. Relations normalized thereafter as the Chokwe became suppliers of ivory, rubber, and wax for Portugal, but the tension never truly dissipated. What the Chokwe did take from their interactions with westerners was their designs—not the least of which was from the chairs the Portuguese brought with them. Like many other Sub-Saharan groups, the Chokwe had previously used low wooden stools, often decorated with caryatids, for seating. The European style chairs were seen as a marked improvement and were quickly adopted by the tribal chiefs who could afford to commission them from wood carvers. They also served as prestige objects, which would show others the importance of the owner. The iconography of these chairs tends to speak to the aspirations and daily sights of a chief, and the importance of the individual figures depicted rises hierarchically as they approach the top of the chair. Typical figures resting atop the rungs of ngundja were generally engaged in some activity of daily Chokwe life: court figures dancing, musicians playing instruments, blacksmiths working bellows. Guardian caryatids may support the seat as chair legs. The backs of the chair tend to be unique combinations of geometric designs composed of individual designs which each bear names.

Dimensions
19 1/2 × 10 1/2 × 13 in. (49.5 × 26.7 × 33 cm)