



Luba



THE LUBA EMPIRE WAS FOUNDED IN 1585, though archaeological research shows that the region of the Luba people had been occupied continuously since at least the 5th century CE. The emergence of the Luba and Lunda empires in the 17th century had a profound impact on political and artistic practices in the region. With the assistance of a court of notables, the Luba king reigned over a million people through clan kings. A secret society was responsible for preserving the oral history of the Luba people, binding the diverse populations together.

The Luba economy was based on a tribute system and a redistribution of resources. The divine rulers of the Luba Empire traced their ancestry to the mythic hero Kalala Ilunga, a prince credited with toppling the Luba's first ruler and laying the foundations of Luba civilization with the introduction of advanced techniques such as iron forging. The prestige attached to the lineage of these sacred kings was enormous and they became deities upon their deaths.

Rulers of small neighbouring chiefdoms were often eager to associate themselves with Luba culture. In return for tribute in goods and labour, these less powerful rulers were integrated into the royal lineage. Luba courtly traditions, including artistic styles and sculptural forms, were also passed on to client states. This resulted in a variety of stylistic variations, such as Luba-Hemba and Luba-Songye.

Luba artists created numerous objects relating to the royal court's activities. Central to these cherished sculptures is the female figure: standing, sitting straight-legged, squatting or kneeling. The prevalence of the female image in majestic Luba regalia, embellished with scarification patterns, visually expresses the important role played by women in royal expansion through intermarriage. Moreover, women were considered sources and protectors of life, nurturing the energies and powers of ancestral spirits. Indeed, according to the Luba, only a woman's body is strong enough to hold such a powerful spirit. Women were also secretly involved in the kingdom's political affairs and were charged with perpetuating the memory of its ancient kings. Luba court art proliferated in response to political and economic prosperity, but declined with the tumultuous events of the late 18th century.



Bowl figures

Bowl figures were owned both by chiefs and diviners to honour and commemorate the crucial role played by the first mythical diviner in the founding of the monarchy. The figures were kept together with a sacred white chalk associated with purity, renewal and the spirit world. Royal diviners often used bowl figures as oracles. Luba artists also carved kneeling or standing female figures called Mboko, which were usually depicted holding cups for divination purposes.

