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#colognefineartanddesign

## COLOGNE FINE ART & DESIGN 2021

### Special event: TEKE- RITUAL FIGURES - Magical Figures of the Congo

The 51st COLOGNE FINE ART & DESIGN from 17 to 21 November 2021 in Cologne encompasses a unique variety of art and arts and crafts from early times to the modern era with its high-quality offering and simultaneously covers all eras, genres and cultural regions. With the unique "TEKE - RITUAL FIGURES" special event, the art fair this year builds a bridge to Africa and the Congo. The special exhibition, with its more than 40 pieces, is a cooperation project of Koelnmesse with Galerie Simonis in Düsseldorf, which specialises in the art of Africa.

The magical figures from the lower course of the Congo that can be seen in the context of the special event have their roots deep in the religious world of old Africa. The creators of these works originate from the Teke people, the descendants of one of the great, long-defunct kingdoms of Central Africa. The ritual figures, often packed in a bundle with magical material, are meant to enable direct access to another world: they once embodied the power of the ancestors and of the nature spirits. Long appreciated by collectors worldwide as works of art in all their diversity, they today make an unmistakable contribution to the wealth of cultures of Africa.

The Teke believed, in keeping with the tradition of most African peoples, in a single supreme being, the favour of which can be gained with the help of protective spirits. The Teke generally saw themselves as dependent upon both the power of these spirits and the efficacy of the ancestors. The spirits demanded ritual veneration, because they can effectuate good and evil.

The power of the ancestors also demanded respect, because they ensure the well-being of the descendants, but also punish them in the event of the breach of societal rules. African ancestors thus offer a possibility for dealing with the everyday duality of well-being or misfortune. This ritual practice makes the close interlocking of the social and religious significance of the ancestor cult clearly evident.

The statues are representatives of the deceased, and at the same time vessels for their souls. Their barrel-shaped or spherical, magical charge therefore often contains physical remains from them, like hair or fingernails; while added white kaolin symbolises the bones of the ancestors. The healer/priest is the one who places the magical mass of vegetable, animal and mineral ingredients in the long cavity in the belly of the figure or affixes it to it with a ball of clay to activate the ritual effect.

However, figures that did not provide the hoped for aid from illness, hunting accidents and other misfortune were also destroyed or discarded without much



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respect, as field researchers report. Not a few specimens thus found their way into the trade in this way, and ultimately ended up in European or American collections.

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The carved works with a wooden body in a cylindrical basic form are consistently created in a strict frontal orientation: the carver divides the wood into three approximately equally sized segments for the head, torso and legs and starts with the face, with its protruding mouth and angular beard-chin section. Even when only looked at fleetingly, the dense tattooing of parallel scars, which reproduces the facial ornamentation of the men already carved into the faces of children, is immediately conspicuous, along with the compact packets containing the magical charge.

The beard is the symbol of male authority and wisdom; it emphasises the powerful charisma of the Teke sculptures. Because the body is in any case almost entirely concealed beneath the medicine packet, the carver forms the arms somewhat negligently, if at all. Conspicuous are the artful hairstyles emulating the hairstyle of the ruling elites still worn today on special occasions. They have the form of a comb or a sickle or bear a resemblance to a cap worn on the back of the head.

The contrast between the highly expressive, carefully carved heads and the rough medicine packet, which first makes the figure a ritual object animated with the effective power of the ancestors and the nature spirits, constitutes the tension of the carving as a visually convincing representation of non-earthly powers. The mysterious materials, thickly clad in clay and fabric, transform the almost monstrously deformed sculptures into veritable assemblages, which are only comprehensible with difficulty for Western eyes.

The art of Africa has generally left traces in the painting, graphic works and sculpture of European modernity: clear, particular references to the stylistic of the Teke heads, with their Cubist-seeming forms and the "hatchings" of the facial scars, are especially noticeable in the Expressionist "Brücke" artists. They were successful in merging the specific aesthetic of the Teke figures with their own revolutionary language of form in a time of upheaval in European art.

Photo:

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