

IMMA
PROJECT SPACES
15 APRIL 2023 – 11 JUNE 2023

Unseeing Traces: Artefacts from the Kingdom of Kongo



Introduction

Unseeing Traces is inspired by the private collection of Nasser Aidara. The artefacts in this exhibition are selected from hundreds of traditional pieces created in what was once the Kingdom of Kongo. The former Kingdom of Kongo (1300s – 1900s) was a large dominion covering present day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola, and the Congo Republic. Aidara comes from a family of antique dealers in the DRC. Over the course of 50 years, his father collected artefacts across the DRC and from other parts of central Africa. Aidara inherited these pieces after his father passed away in 2021.

Most of the works in *Unseeing Traces* date from the early to mid-20th century. The names of their individual creators are unknown. The artefacts are exhibited in the context of the rest of IMMA's exhibition programme and are in dialogue with other works that rely on activation to uncover their cultural significance. The artefacts and artworks share a relational quality. Their meanings emerge from everyday rituals or special ceremonies – each carry a trace of past performances which can be re-activated through an encounter.

FIRST ROOM

Here, a selection of books is available to read. The books relate to the artefacts on display, the wider IMMA exhibition and collection programme, connections between Congolese and Irish history, and topics such as displacement, colonialism, race, and representation. During the run of the exhibition, this space will be activated by various events and will screen a programme of films and Collection artworks.

For up-to-date details see:

<https://imma.ie/whats-on/unseen-traces/>

SECOND ROOM

Masks on the Tables and Blue Wall

The masks displayed here come from various peoples within the area of the former Kingdom of Kongo, including the Chokwe, the Luba, and the Songye. There are substantial differences in the appearance and style of the masks, but they all form part of the rituals, ceremonies, and traditions of the DRC, Angola, and the Congo Republic. Chokwe masks are notable for the distinctive cruciform symbol on their foreheads and the stylised scars running down or spotting the cheeks. The ornately carved chair in the corner of the room is also from the Chokwe. At the end of the shorter table, there is a Ndaka mask with sharp teeth, and a face covered by distinctive marks and surrounded by "hair." The Ndaka are from the north-eastern DRC. Suspended over this table is a Kifwebe (mask) of the Luba people which has strong Songye influence. The Luba and the Songye societies neighbour each other. On the blue wall, there are three different types of masks, from three peoples respectively: the Kwese, the Baboa (singular Boa), and the Metoko. For the Baboa, masks enhance a warrior's courage before battle and are used ceremonially to celebrate victories.

Small Figures on the Plinths

Over the first fireplace and on the six corner plinths, there are several figures displayed. There are two figures with "Janus" features (two or more faces) from the Lega and Holo peoples respectively. There are figurative statuettes with instantly recognisable images such as a mother nursing a child.

Other artefacts, such as Nkisi, are spirits or objects that spirits inhabit. The torso of the Nkisi displayed here is wrapped and the forehead and feet are inlaid with white cowry shells, representing money. Nkisi are made of a special black wood designated by a Nganga (high priest). Nkisi are used in divination, healing, and for success in trading. Divination seeks insight into a question or situation through calling on supernatural forces, such as ancestors or protective beings, by means of a standardised ritual or spiritual practice.

Oracles are used during divination rituals too; to contact the ancestors and to seek knowledge of the future. One of the oracles on display here, with its one-remaining earring and horse-shoe shaped limbs, is from the Songye people.

The cup displayed is beautifully carved in the shape of a head and originates in the Kuba kingdom. The most valued cups of this type were carved in royal workshops and used by the king to drink an exclusive palm wine.

Masks on the White Wall

A selection of Lega dance masks is displayed on the white wall. The Bwami society of the Lega people guides their social and political life through the power of the ancestors. In Bwami ceremonies, masks are attached to various parts of the body (rather than the face), displayed in stacks, on fences, or on the forehead with the beard over the face. When a mask is used, white clay is rubbed on it. Over time, it acquires a white patina through repetition.

Low Plinth at Fireplace

There is a selection of artefacts related to more ordinary day-to-day life in front of the fireplace. There are two sanzanas, or thumb pianos, here. Sanzanas have been used to make music throughout Africa for millennia. These sanzanas come from the Bapende (plural of Pende), a Bantu people of Central Africa. Carved spoons are used in initiation ceremonies. There is a Pende spoon, from the 1950s, displayed here with its figurative handle. There are three headrests, originating from the largest ethnic group in the DR Congo, the Luba. These headrests are used to elevate the head during sleep and protect the sleeper's elaborate hairstyle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unseeing Traces is a collaboration with New Communities Partnership, Ireland's largest independent migrant-led national network and is generously supported by Ecclesiastical Insurance's Movement for Good Awards, as part of the Benefact Group. *Unseeing Traces* builds on IMMA's contribution to SPICE, a European-funded research project (May 2020-April 2023). SPICE developed methods of Citizen Curation to support minoritised or under-served communities sharing their perspectives through selecting and interpreting works of art.

PROJECT PARTNERS

IMMA connects audiences and art, providing an extraordinary space where contemporary life and contemporary art connect, challenge and inspire one another. We share, develop and conserve the Irish National Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art for now and for the future.

Nasser Aidara is a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He has worked as a community development worker and human rights activist since coming to Ireland in 1997. He was a Chairperson of the African Refugee Network (ARN) and non-executive director of the Irish Refugee Council (IRC). His vision is to introduce African art to the Irish public. Although wrongly called tribal or primitive art, he believes that African art can have an open dialogue with European art, finding a common ground to mend a difficult cultural relationship, particularly in the light of past colonial practices of looting African artworks and sending them to museums across Europe. He is currently working as a Coordinator of the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) with New Communities Partnership in Dublin.

New Communities Partnership is Ireland's largest independent migrant-led national network of more than 150 immigrant-led groups comprising 65 nationalities. Its membership includes community and voluntary groups from Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, European, the Caribbean, South American and African backgrounds. New Communities Partnership enables migrant communities to engage with all aspects of Irish social, political and cultural life on an equal footing, thereby maximising the leadership capacity within new communities in Ireland.

Benefact Group, Movement for Good Awards

Overseen and owned by Benefact Trust, Benefact Group is a diverse family of specialist financial services businesses, united by a common purpose to give all available profits to charity and good causes. As one member of the Benefact Group family, Ecclesiastical Insurance runs the Movement for Good Awards programme, giving millions of pounds to charitable causes in the areas of community, education & skills, environment & climate, and heritage & arts since its inception across the United Kingdom and Ireland. Since 2019, they have donated over €5.4 million to more than 2,200 charities through the Movement for Good Awards.

PROJECT TEAM

IMMA

Mark Maguire, Assistant Curator: Schools and Families

Adam Stoneman, SPICE Project Researcher

Johanne Mullan, Curator: Collections

Claire Walshe, Assistant Curator: Collections

Jennifer Phelan, Programme Production Co-ordinator

Cillian Hayes, Technical Supervisor

Lisa Fitzsimons, Interim Head of Audiences and Development

Imogen Kavanagh, Development Fellow

New Communities Partnership

Nasser Aidara, Community Development Co-ordinator

Laura Kersulyte, Finance and HR Manager

Special thanks to the members of the IMMA Technical Team and Security Department for their support during this installation.

IMMA is funded by:



An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir,
Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán
Department of Tourism, Culture,
Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

This exhibition is supported by:



ÁRAS NUA-EALAÍNE
NA hÉIREANN
IRISH MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

Ospidéal Rioga
Cill Mhaighneán
Baile Átha Cliath 8
D08 FW31, Éire

Royal Hospital
Kilmainham
Dublin 8
D08 FW31, Ireland

+353 1 612 9900
imma.ie / info@imma.ie

