

Chokwe (Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa region)

Stool, 19th-20th century

Wood, brass tacks, beads

H. $5\frac{11}{16}$ inches x W. $8\frac{1}{8}$ inches x D. $7\frac{13}{16}$ inches

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Carroll, 2001.200.2

Key Ideas

This stool from the Chokwe [CHOK-way] people of central Africa was once used as a chief's throne. The figures on the stool are ancestors, who support the chief and give him strength. Used in ceremonies, the stool elevated the chief above others to show his authority in his village.

The Power of the Chief

Instead of recognizing one main leader, the Chokwe have local chiefs who inherit their positions from their maternal uncles. The Chokwe view their chiefs as representatives of god on earth, responsible for the well-being and success of the community. Chiefs also serve as the mediators between the world of humans and the realm of ancestral and wilderness spirits.

Honoring Ancestors

The Chokwe believe there is a realm beyond life where ancestors reside and watch over us in this life. Remembering and honoring ancestors is important because it ensures fertility, success, and stability. In order to stay in good favor, the Chokwe honor their ancestors by respecting tradition, holding special ceremonies, performing masquerades, and making offerings of food and drink. If ancestors are neglected, the Chokwe believe chaos and misfortune in the community will result.

The Symbol of the Stool

The figures in this stool are a pair of male and female ancestors holding their heads in sorrow. This pose is commonly used in Chokwe art to represent ancestral spirits. It means that they are worried that their descendants are not honoring ancestors as they should and fear that they will be punished because of it.

This stool was a container for the spirits of the chief's predecessors, who protect the chief's power. It would have been passed down over generations, along with the titles of the former owners. The ancestors symbolically support the chief, holding him up above others. This illustrates how the chief maintains his authority in the community — although the chief possesses power, he couldn't keep it without his ancestors' support.

This stool functioned as a chief's throne during special ceremonies, and as a sign of the chief's authority. Stools like this help establish hierarchy, elevating the chief above everyone else. During ceremonies, only the chief and possibly a council of elders would sit on carved stools or chairs, while those of a lesser status sit on the ground or stand.

To further emphasize the chief's status, the stool would be covered with the skin of an important animal.

The Ancestors Up Close

The representations of the ancestors, as with much of African art, are abstract. The female figure (wearing the bead necklace) represents the chief's female ancestry. Likewise, the male figure symbolizes the chief's male ancestry. They sit back to back, complimenting each other in a mirrored pose with their hands resting on their cheeks. Their long faces are composed and expressionless and their eyes, noses, and mouths are small in size. Their elongated chins, disproportionate with the rest of their bodies, emphasize their worry. Other features, like their carefully styled hair, would be considered signs of beauty and high status in Chokwe society.

The Importance of Stools

An old saying goes, "A man without a stool is a man without dignity." The stool, or chair, could be considered the most important type of furniture in traditional Africa. Although no longer true, in many African societies it used to be unheard of to let another person use your stool. Stools were status symbols, and the more money you had, the more elaborate your stool would be. On this stool, the brass tacks and beaded necklace tells us that it once belonged to a chief.

This stool, like most African stools, sits lower than the chairs commonly found in homes in the United States. Its short height (approximately six inches) corresponds with the squatting position popular in Africa, close to the ground where work is done. Stools are made entirely by hand, so no two stools are exactly alike.

The Making of the Stool

Traditionally, the role of carver is passed on from father to son, or from maternal uncle to nephew. The highly skilled carver who made this stool would have been considered very important in his community. He may have worked exclusively for the chief, and been given a court title.

The chief who first owned this stool would have decided its form and type. Like much African art, it is made of wood. It would have been made from a single piece of wood using an axe-like tool called an adze. Finer details, such as the facial features and fingers, would have been carved with a knife. The brass tacks and beads added to the seat help designate it as a chief's stool.

When carvers make important pieces, like ones for the royal court, they often go to a secret place, working alone or with only one or two apprentices. After the stool is complete, a court ritual specialist performs a ceremony with the stool so that the ancestors' spirits can inhabit it. Then the stool is presented to the chief. Only the chief, the ritual specialist, and a dignitary in charge of the court treasury would be allowed to touch the stool.

The Chokwe Today

Approximately one million Chokwe people live in southwestern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Angola, and Zambia. The lands they inhabit vary vastly—from the rain forests and woodlands of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the grasslands and flood plains of Angola and Zambia.

The Chokwe make money by farming and hunting. Crops include manioc, yams, peanuts, tobacco, and corn. They also raise livestock including sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens. Women do almost all of the farming for their communities.

The Chokwe are well-known for their art objects, particularly art that celebrates the royal court. These objects include ancestor portraits, stools, chairs, staffs, scepters, and spears. They also practice craftmaking, including basket-making, weaving, pottery, and blacksmithing.

LOOK CLOSELY

What do you think this object was used for? What do you see that makes you say that?

How are the ancestor figures' bodies positioned? What do their body language telling us?

How has the stool been decorated? What might this tell us about the person who used the stool?

What material do you think this stool is made from? What clues do you see that helps tell you that?

THINK BROADLY

How is this stool different from the chairs in your house? How is it similar?

What kinds of seats do important leaders in the United States use? In other countries?

This stool is supposed to remind the Chokwe people to honor their ancestors. How do we honor our ancestors?

At one time, stools were considered status symbols in some African societies. What objects are status symbols in our country?