

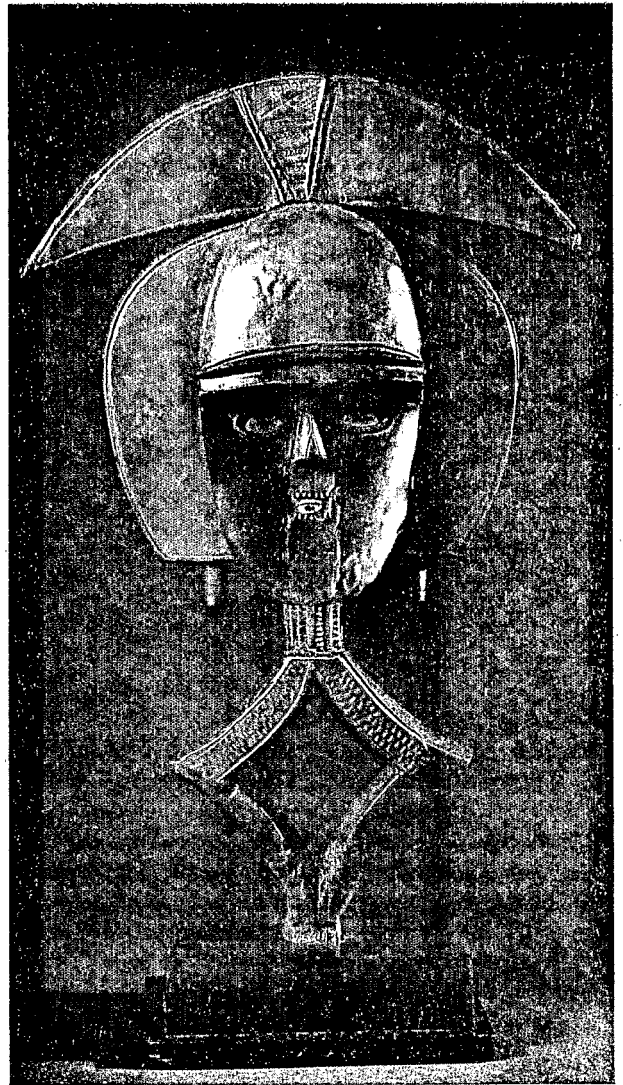
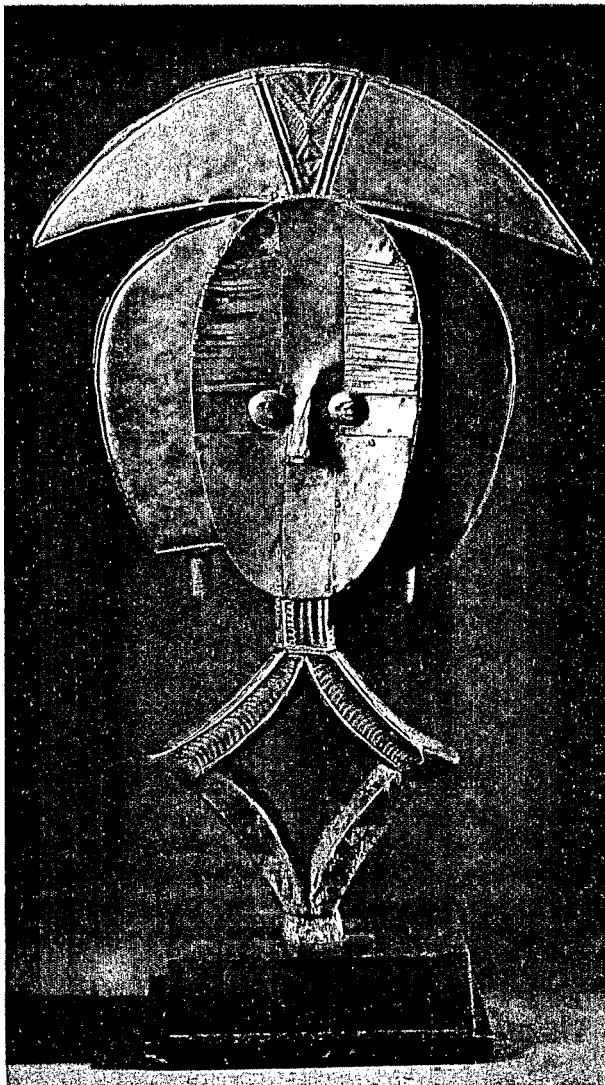
118. JANUS RELIQUARY FIGURE

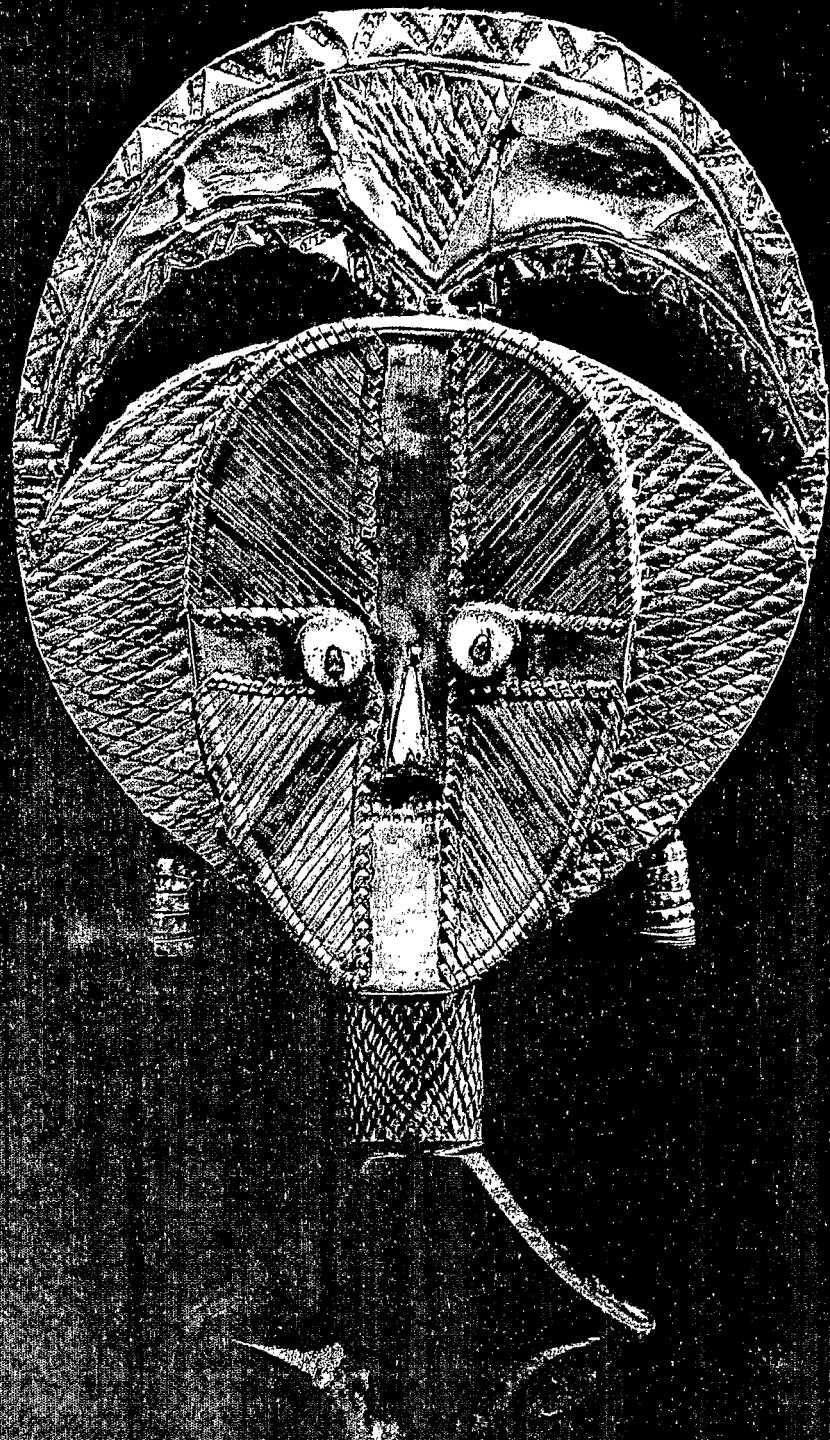
*Gabon, Kota**Wood, brass, H. 24¼ in. (61.6 cm.)**19th–20th century*

This large double-faced figure (*ngulu* or *nguru*) is typical of one Kota substyle. Its size alone attests to its great ritual importance as guardian of a basket of relics belonging to an extensive lineage group. It has two ovoid faces, one concave (here decorated with strips of brass on the forehead reminiscent of the ornamentation used by groups north of the Sebe River), and the other a combination of concave and convex, with an overhanging brow cutting straight across the face. (The latter recalls the form of Mvudi masks of the Ndjabi and Aduma people.) The sharp crescent-shaped crest is wide, as are the sides

of the coiffure with their cylindrical eardrops. The decoration consists entirely of brass and copper plaques. Identifying emblems appear on front and back of the crest. Is this a symbolically male and female object? No evidence supports this hypothesis.

Several features allow us to group this piece with a number of others: the base with its elegantly pointed "shoulders"; the eyes (coffee-bean shape with slits or nailheads for pupils); and the mouth on the concave-convex face (decorated with a cowrie shell and incised teeth in the manner of Mvudi masks). It is





possible that the entire group is the work of a single school—some even of a single artist, who unfortunately remains unknown.¹

Several early illustrations (de Brazza 1887) show these figures arranged on large baskets (*mbulu*, *musuku*, or *nsuwu*) containing relics of ancestors. All the reliquaries in a village were grouped together under a small shelter away from the houses, in a sort of sanctuary for ancestors. In contrast to the Fang, whose Byeri cult became a family concern at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kota—especially those in the south (Obamba, Mindumu, Mindassa, Bawumbu)—practiced a more communal cult in conjunction with initiation societies (*ngoye*) and on the village level.

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1. Similar examples are in the British Museum, Musée de l'Homme, Musée d'Angoulême, and collections of Pierre Verité, Schoffel, Van Bussel, and I. Päiles.

References: Andersson 1953, 1974; Perrois 1979.

119. RELIQUARY FIGURE

Gabon, Kota

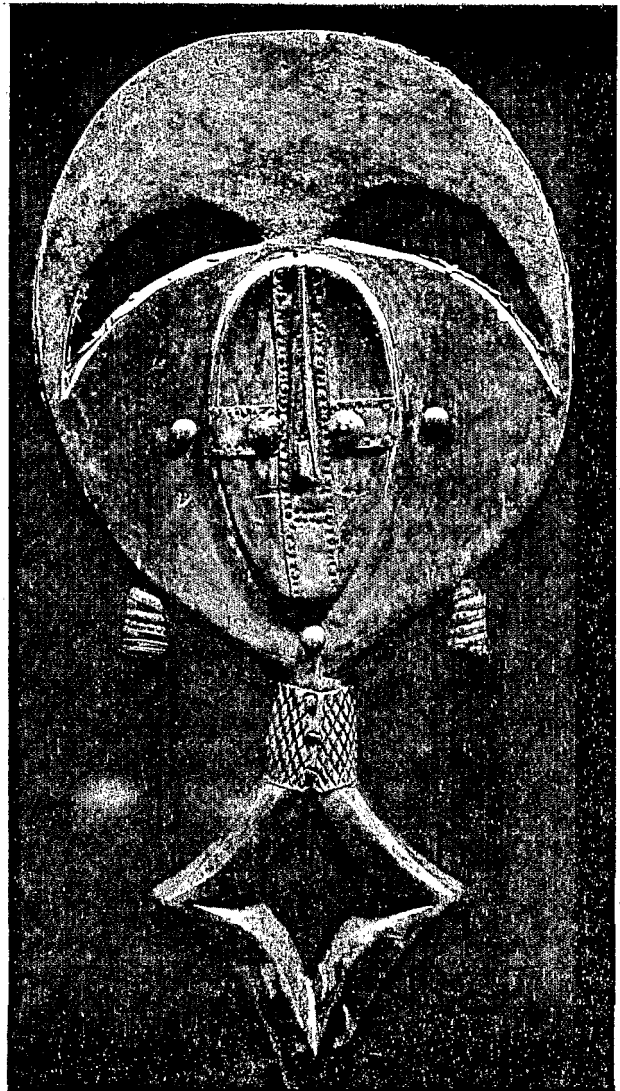
Wood, brass, copper, bone, H. 20 in. (50.8 cm.)

19th–20th century

The Kota of equatorial Africa live in adjacent parts of Gabon (Upper Ogowe region) and the People's Republic of the Congo (Bouenza-Louesse region). They are divided into several groups, which are more or less closely related, depending upon their proximity to one another during the migrations that took place from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth. These travels took the Kota from the valley of the Sangha River to the source of the Ogowe River.

The northern Kota have developed a unique style of sculpture, abstract and two-dimensional in form, using brass or copper sheets almost exclusively. The southern Kota, while retaining this preference for two-dimensionality, have varied their forms and created many substyles, which can be classified with some certainty as to date and place of origin.

The object shown here belongs to a style characterized by the dominance of thin metal strips in the decoration and by a type of coiffure with curved sides. This group, whose forms resemble certain of those in the Mahongwe and Shamaye substyles, is made only in Gabon, in the valleys of the Sebe and upper Ogowe rivers. Distinctive features are the transverse crest of the coiffure, whose tips are joined to the side pieces; the concave oval face decorated with narrow bands of brass



arranged obliquely around the eyes and nose; the curved side pieces covered by crosshatched metal sheets; and the cylindrical eardrops hanging vertically rather than diagonally. These features place this remarkable object in my classification type I₄ (Perrois 1979: fig. 25).

The object's uniqueness, however, lies in the small face on the reverse, fashioned in high relief and decorated only by two bands of metal crossing at the eyes and nose. This second face may indicate a concern for the ritual efficacy of the figure; perhaps it was considered better able to guard the relics it surmounted and protected if it had more than one pair of eyes. It should also be noted that both faces are concave; in no. 118, a concave face is opposed to a concave-convex one with an overhanging brow.

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