

**KIMBELL ADDS A MASTERFUL KOTA RELIQUARY GUARDIAN FIGURE AND A RARE KWELE MASK TO ITS COLLECTION OF AFRICAN ART**

*The two sculptures, purchased from the esteemed Barbier-Mueller Collection, are the first works from Gabon to enter the Kimbell's collection.*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

November 18, 2025

FORT WORTH, TX— The Kimbell Art Museum announced today the acquisition of two significant African sculptural works from Gabon: a nineteenth-century Kota *Reliquary Guardian Figure (Mbulu Ngulu)* and a nineteenth- to early twentieth-century Kwele *Mask with Curved Horns*. Both works are of singular quality, noted for their fine craftsmanship and visual power. Beginning today, visitors can see these striking works among the Kimbell's collection of African art, on view in the museum's Louis I. Kahn Building.

"The Kota reliquary and Kwele mask are each exemplars of technical mastery and spiritual significance," said Eric M. Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum. "The reliquary figure stands out even among the vast and diverse corpus of Kota art in public and private collections, while the extremely rare and beautiful Kwele mask is made all the more special by being exceptional within a small group of similar sculptures. I am so grateful to the Barbier-Mueller family for making these works available to us."

**RELIQUARY GUARDIAN FIGURE (MBULU NGULU), NINETEENTH CENTURY, AFRICA, GABON, KOTA PEOPLES, OBAMBA OR MINDUMU GROUP**

The elegant reliquary guardian figure (*mbulu ngulu*) acquired by the Kimbell exemplifies the refined sculptural traditions of the Kota peoples of Gabon. Within the Kota society, reliquary guardian figures served as powerful spiritual and social objects, expressing respect for high-ranking ancestors within the ancestor cult known as *bwete*. Made from wood covered with hammered metal sheets, the figures were attached to baskets or bundles containing the bones or other relics of deceased ancestors. Only the figures' heads and shoulders were visible, while the lozenge-shaped bases were inserted into the baskets. The primary function of the figures was to protect and act as guardians for the ancestry relics housed in the containers below them. Maintained by extended families or clans and kept in small huts set apart from daily life, the figures were symbolic portraits expressing lineage, continuity, and spiritual protection. During rituals, these sculptures served as active participants, invoked through offerings and songs to mediate between the human and ancestral realms.



Characterized by its rhythmic balance of form, surface, and light, the Kimbell's elegant reliquary guardian figure presents a fluid composition framed by a horizontal arch-shaped crest, gently curved lateral extensions ending in pierced volutes, and a sharply pointed chin. The face—an oval field of faceted brass narrowing at the base—is marked by large circular eyes, a subtle hollow where the mouth is indicated, and the absence of a frontal ridge. These features create an abstract yet commanding visage that radiates balance and serenity.

The artist's technical mastery is evident in the sophisticated use of three distinct tones of metal. A luminous red copper—a rare and imported material obtained through trade with Europeans—defines the projecting pupils, upper lip, and delicate chin, reappearing along the crown in a diadem-like band that evokes an elaborate coiffure. Brass and other alloys create a dynamic play between recessed and raised elements, enhancing the sculpture's rhythmic composition. Kota reliquary figures are unique in African art for their combination of carved wooden forms covered in contrasting metal. The use of precious metals added to the figure's prestige. While the metal itself connoted both prosperity and power, the shining surface was symbolic, possibly mimicking water to represent the separation between the living and the dead or reflecting light to ward off evil spirits.

Within the history of African art, Kota is a classic and important artistic tradition comprised of diverse stylistic and geographic subsets. As such, it is almost impossible to reduce the Kota corpus to a single work. With its beautifully balanced proportions and overall harmony, however, the Kimbell's newly acquired reliquary figure can be considered iconic within Kota art—underscored by its impressive and extensive publication and exhibition records that confirm its appeal and status.

**MASK WITH CURVED HORNS, NINETEENTH–EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY, AFRICA, GABON, KWELE PEOPLES**

The Kwele are a forest-dwelling people of northeastern Gabon and northern Congo, whose arts and rituals center on the *beete* association, a male initiation and healing society dedicated to the belief that the well-being of the community depends on harmony between the living, the ancestors, and benevolent forest spirits, or *ekuk*. Historically, when conflict, illness, or misfortune threatened a village, ceremonies were held to restore equilibrium through ritual performance, dance, and the display of sacred masks.



A stellar embodiment of the idiosyncratic Kwele style, the masterfully carved mask acquired by the Kimbell ranks among the most elaborate works of its kind, combining refined sculptural form with deep symbolic resonance. Formally, Kwele masks distill human and animal attributes into a language of abstraction and restraint. In this example, a concave, heart-shaped face—its surface covered in white kaolin clay symbolizing purity, light, and the power to repel evil—is framed by long, arched horns that curve gracefully toward the chin, forming an inverted omega. These horns, carved in alternating black

and white octagonal planes, echo the rhythm of the figure's brows and emphasize the mask's striking symmetry. Two small faces carved near the horn tips mirror the central visage, creating a triadic composition of subtle balance and mystery.

Although most surviving masks were not worn but displayed within cult houses, some examples—like the mask acquired by the Kimbell—were pierced for vision and were likely danced in processions marking initiations or the end of mourning. Each mask's serene abstraction and rhythmic composition reflected the Kwele ideal of inner purity and social harmony, values that extended from art into every aspect of life. Kwele masks such as this personify *ekuk*, summoned to restore harmony during times of mourning, epidemic, or communal strife. Their presence affirmed collective renewal and moral clarity.

Kwele masks are rare, and the Kimbell's newly acquired mask is not only one of the most striking and compelling among a small corpus, but also recognized for its exceptional quality, as evidenced through its extensive publication and exhibition history.

#### **PROVENANCE**

*Kota Reliquary Guardian Figure*: In the collection of Paul Guyot, before 1890; purchased by Olivier Le Corneur (Art dealer), Paris, France, around 1890; purchased by Alain Monbrison [b. 1947] of Galerie Monbrison, Paris and Geneva; purchased by Jean Paul Barbier-Müller [1930–2016], April 12, 1984; by inheritance to his heirs and related entities; Barbier-Mueller Collection, Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, Switzerland; purchased from (Solothurn Investments LLC., Switzerland, an affiliate of The Barbier-Mueller Collection) by Kimbell Art Foundation, Fort Worth, 2025.

*Kwele Mask with Curved Horns*: Collected by Aristide Courtois (French Civil Officer) [1883–1962], before 1930; purchased by Charles Vignier [1863–1934], Paris, before 1930; purchased by Josef Müller [1887–1977], Switzerland, before 1939; by inheritance to his heirs and related entities; Barbier-Mueller Collection, Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, Switzerland; purchased from (Solothurn Investments LLC., Switzerland, an affiliate of The Barbier-Mueller Collection) by Kimbell Art Foundation, Fort Worth, 2025.

#### **VISITOR INFORMATION**

Admission to the museum's permanent collection is always free. Admission to special exhibitions is half-price all day on Tuesdays and after 5 p.m. on Fridays.

The Kimbell Art Museum is open Tuesdays through Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Fridays, noon–8 p.m.; Sundays, noon–5 p.m.; closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Juneteenth, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For general information, call 817-332-8451.

#### **ABOUT THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM**

The Kimbell Art Museum, owned and operated by the Kimbell Art Foundation, is internationally renowned for both its collections and its architecture. The Kimbell's collections range in period from antiquity to the twentieth century and include European paintings and sculptures by artists such as

Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi, Bernini, Velázquez, Gainsborough, Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, as well as important examples of Egyptian and classical antiquities. Also included are significant works of Asian art from China, Japan, the Himalayas, and South and Southeast Asia; notable African sculptures primarily from West and Central Africa; and a wide range of ancient American art representing cultures across Mexico and Central and South America.

The museum's 1972 building, designed by the American architect Louis I. Kahn, is widely regarded as one of the outstanding architectural achievements of the modern era. A second building, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, opened in 2013 and now provides space for special exhibitions, dedicated classrooms, and a 289-seat auditorium with excellent acoustics for music. For more information, visit [kimbellart.org](http://kimbellart.org).

Promotional support for the Kimbell Art Museum and its exhibitions is provided by American Airlines, NBC 5, and Fort Worth Report. Additional support is provided by Arts Fort Worth and the Texas Commission on the Arts.

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**PRESS IMAGES**

[Download the press images here.](#)

**IMAGE CAPTIONS**

*Reliquary Guardian Figure (Mbulu Ngulu)*, Kota peoples, Obamba or Mindumu group, Gabon, Africa, 19th century, wood, copper, and brass. Kimbell Art Museum

*Mask with Curved Horns*, Kwele peoples, Gabon, Africa, 19th–early 20th century, wood, pigments, and white kaolin. Kimbell Art Museum

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