

Excerpted from *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire*, pp. 16 - 17, by Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, AMNH and University of Washington Press, 1990.

### **The Congo Expedition's Ethnographic Collection**

The American Museum of Natural History's Congo Expedition collection, made by Herbert Lang and James Chapin between 1909 and 1915, offers an extraordinary opportunity to study the cultures and art history of northeastern Congo (formerly Zaire) in the early colonial period. These two zoologists went to Africa specifically to study the biological diversity of this little-known region, but they also had instructions to collect for all the departments of the American Museum. Being scientists, they conducted their anthropological investigations with attention to the same fastidious detail that they applied to collecting plants, birds, and beetles: recording observations, measurements, and informants' accounts on a daily basis for five years. Lang, although not formally trained in anthropology, wrote the field catalog for the ethnographic collection and collected material ranging from grain samples to head measurements, household items, and finally, at the end of his stay, works of commissioned art. Because these two men were the only outsiders on a very long expedition, they depended on local people to help prepare specimens and to serve as porters, cooks, field guides, hunters, translators, and informants. Neither Lang nor Chapin was immune to the typical colonial stereotypes and prejudices of the day. Nevertheless, Lang's commitment to empirical observation led him to collect masses of information about material culture and the people who produced it.

Although the Lang-Chapin ethnographic collections include objects from regions all along the expedition's route, the largest and most important part of their collection is from the Mangbetu, a people who live near the watershed between the Nile and Congo rivers.

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