The Mangbetu Art of Daily Life

The peoples of northeast Congo manufactured the most ordinary tools and utensils with skill and with an eye for beauty. Fine craftsmanship was valued in the construction of virtually all household objects, and modern informants tell us that the care given to the appearance of an object was to make it beautiful and to show the intelligence of the creator. Many useful objects served as ornaments when first made and as implements when they were older. The best brooms, for example, were used first in dances, where they were held in the air as wands, and later for sweeping. People demonstrated their wealth and position by the fine decoration on their utilitarian possessions. Spears, knives, and even shields were worn or held as ornaments. Toothbrushes and drinking straws were sometimes wrapped with ornamental copper wire. Fly whisks had carved wooden or ivory handles and, for high-status people, were wrapped with copper, brass, or iron wire.

The Art of Adornment

Many of the ethnographic objects collected by Lang and Chapin were designed for adorning the bodies of their owners. These objects include finely carved ivory and forged metal hairpins, woven and feathered hats, belts, and elaborately designed jewelry made of glass, plant and animal parts, iron, and copper. The Mangbetu also sometimes wore or carried bark cloth ornamented with free-flowing graphic designs and thicker back aprons made from banana leaves used to cover their buttocks. Each of these objects was made with great attention to quality as well as a keen awareness of style and aesthetic effect.

The art of adornment among the Mangbetu and related peoples is closely tied to notions of health and well-being, and it is difficult to describe many of the objects that people wear or apply to their bodies without discussing notions of human development and health. Although beauty was certainly of concern, most adornments were worn to protect the person, enhance some personal quality, or influence the outcome of an activity. The Mangbetu were known for their striking treatment of the body, particularly head elongation, body-painting, scarification, and the wearing of the decorative back apron, but these elements represented only a minor part of what was important to them. More than anything else, they were concerned with obtaining and wearing objects that protected and improved their lives.

Houses

In 1910, both mud-walled and reed houses were in fashion, and Lang commented on the great variety of reed patterns. The most spectacular reed building was a Great Hall that Lang himself commissioned a year before. Two other forms of house decoration were important at that time: sculptured house posts and murals. House posts often had geometric designs cut into them, and some of the surfaces were burnished or blackened with dark mud, forming the same pattern of alternating light and dark tones found on many implements throughout the region. Lang wrote of house poles:
They never have two poles alike in any house. Very often there are only two, sometimes four or more. They are nearly always split lengthwise [to support crossbeams]. The poles are cut only with the adze and no knife is used for carving any portion of them. Before they work on them they let the poles soak in water for one or two days. It takes an experienced worker about a day to finish a pole if it has been previously soaked and peeled.

At the turn of the century, mural painting was common throughout the Mangbetu region. The most spectacular Mangbetu mural painting was found north of the Bomokandi River, where many people decorated the exteriors of their houses with paintings of animals, people, and geometric designs. Mural painting may well have resulted from contact with grassland peoples such as the Matchaga and Bangba in the last half of the nineteenth century, when the shift from woven reed to mud walls began. Geometric designs in the nineteenth century may have been copies of earlier ones executed in raffia on walls and mats.

In many parts of the region, Lang photographed houses decorated with both representational paintings depicting encounters between Europeans and Africans and geometric designs. The houses in King Okondo's village that Lang photographed were decorated with fine geometric patterns, painted in red and black. The designs resemble the diamond and checker-board patterns found on many Mangbetu objects, from arrowheads to incised pottery, as well as the woven patterns of mats and baskets. Lang's fieldnotes and Chapin's watercolor sketches of the walls in Okondo's village noted the symmetry of the patterns. But Lang also photographed wall paintings in non-Mangbetu villages of the region. These photographs suggest that at this period of Zande and Makere wall designs were more free-flowing than the Mangbetu patterns.

**Tools**

Lang's colorful and detailed descriptions of productive technology are still applicable to Mangbetu life, despite the introduction of money and imported goods. Many of Lang's most detailed observations of technology were made in 1910-11 during his first period of serious ethnographic collecting. These notes (up to note number 804) were made among the Meje people living in villages near the government post of Medje. Although the decorative patterns on tools and finished objects varied among the different peoples of the region, their basic technology was similar.

Agricultural work was performed with simple tools, including a large assortment of iron tools and baskets. Most of the tools used for work were decorated, and some, especially knives, were worn as ornaments first and relegated to mundane work when they were older—after they were, literally, worn. Lang described one ordinary, general-purpose knife, called nede for women:

Most of the ever varying and difficult plantation work is done with these knives. They cut down brush, high grass, bananas, clear roads and work the soil, [the knife is] used specially for planting bananas, manioc, corn, etc. With these knives, they also dig holes into the ground out of which they take the moist soil to build the elevated platform of their huts. Women carry the better kind of these knives also during dances and visits, for show-purposes only, very often they exchange them on a friendly scale for a similar knife.
Some knives were specifically for men or women, but others could be used by both. Many tools had multiple uses. The hoe, called negede, was used, according to Lang, for plantation work, clearing roads, and building houses. The heavy knife (emodu), used by men for heavy plantation work such as putting young banana plants in newly established forest clearings, also served to cut grooves in the ivory or bone hammers that were used to beat bark for barkcloth. The axe (nombi) was used to cut trees to make clearings for new plantations, to chop firewood, and to cut trees, sticks, and grasses for building houses.

They use these axes with remarkable dexterity and they are much more efficient than the small axes of white men. The handle is called nambieme and is used for diverse purposes, especially as a pestle in their small wooden mortars, to crush cooked bananas. [It] is also used for hitting sticks [to remove the bark], to beat the ground to even it or harden the floor of huts, etc. The axe (iron piece) they also considered as some sort of money which is in common use.

Tools were so important to productive technology that they had the value of currency, here as elsewhere in central Africa. According to Lang, in 1910 a metal axe blade with a decorated wooden handle was equivalent to one heavy brass ring:

Iron and brass knives, spearheads, hatchets, etc. are much appreciated objects of wealth. They never are kept in their huts but hidden in the ground or in the brooks and rivers, these places being known only to their owners and after their death are in most cases lost.

Women went to the fields with large carrying baskets hung over their shoulders and from their foreheads, and came back laden with bananas and wild plants, including forest leaves, roots, tubers, and mushrooms, as well as termites and other insects. The collecting activities of men ranged further afield. Using many different kinds of traps they caught guinea fowl, pigeons, rails, thrushes, other small birds, and all kinds of rats. Lang writes: "Very often they clear a place in a plantation of four to eight yards square, put some food on the ground and lay out a number of traps until the whole place is covered. They may catch five to seven guinea fowls out of one flock."

Besides using traps, men hunted with snares, pitfalls, bows and arrows, spears, and nets. Much hunting was done at the beginning of the dry season, when the Mangbetu would set the tall grass on fire in deliberate patterns designed to draw animals into view. Whole herds of elephants were sometimes trapped in the flame and smoke. Men particularly enjoyed hunting in groups with nets and dogs, a technique the Mangbetu say they borrowed from the Azande in the nineteenth century. The men who owned the nets strung them end to end along a horse-shoe-shaped track. They hid with spears while a dog owner took his dog to the open end of the horseshoe. The dogs, of a barkless breed, wore a wooden bell around the neck and were specially trained to drive animals into the nets where the men could spear them. The largest portions of meat went to the owners of the dogs and nets, to the man who organized the hunt, and to the man who speared the animal.

Ornamentation was important on all kinds of tools, including the metal blades and wooden, ivory, or metal handles of knives, axes, hoes, and spears. Wooden arrow shafts had fine patterns cut into them that produced alternate facets of light and dark surfaces. There was also a great variety of metal points. Arrow shaft patterns seem to correlate with the purpose and design of arrow points.
The shaft decorations are incised, allowing the hunter to select the arrow he wants by feeling the pattern on the shaft.

*Ceramics*

Domestic pottery used for cooking and serving was made in a wide range of forms and patterns (See Schildkrout, Hellman, and Keim 1989). Most pots served multiple purposes. Lang writes:

The large pot (nembwo) serves general purposes, such as taking water from rivers to cook vegetable food, for toilet purposes, or as a receptacle for water. The water for cooking, drinking, and toilet purposes is usually taken in the middle of a river. Such work is performed only by women, who carry the pot on one of their shoulders. They rarely carry a jar on their head on account of the elaborate hairdress.

Pots were made by the coil method and fired over an open fire. Surface designs were applied with the hands or with small tools, including shell scrapers and wooden roulettes. The incised patterns, the depressions worked into surface design, and the baskets made to fit around pots were functional as well as decorative; they prevented pots without handles from slipping. Pots with handles and long necks held liquids that were drunk through straws. Lang collected a wide assortment of pottery-making tools and described how Meje women made pottery:

All women know how to make the ordinary jars, but the more elaborate ones are made by women who are experts in this line. The decorations of the ordinary pots and jars are made by a mechanical device. The negative of the desired pattern is cut in such a manner into a piece of wood, that rolling it over the white soft clay it produces a pattern. Other devices are regular dies into the end of which the pattern is cut; or fibers are strung together in such a way that in rolling them over the still soft clay they leave the desired decoration. Much of this work is done by hand or has to be adjusted afterwards. They are blackened afterwards over the fire. The Mangbetu have an abundance and attach a small value to the ordinary kind.

Utilitarian pots found throughout the region were decorated, more or less elaborately. Pottery styles spread throughout the area, with the highly burnished complex forms of the north spreading southward from Niangara. Mangbetu, Zande, and Barambo pots of this period had many similarities in form and surface design, suggesting that styles, potters, or the pottery itself were spreading throughout the region. Lang collected pots from all these peoples with similar multi-chambered forms and highly burnished black surfaces, textured by incising and finger pressure.

What Lang described as "art pottery"--a category that undoubtedly included anthropomorphic pottery--was found, in his day, mostly in the region around Niangara, where there was a great deal of interethnic contact. The cosmopolitanism of Niangara, along with the impact of the new [European] patrons, contributed to the efflorescence of anthropomorphic potters that occurred in this period. Others found a great elaboration of pottery shapes among the Mangbetu in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but it was not until Lang's time that Mangbetu anthropomorphic pottery was described or collected. The anthropomorphic pots that Lang collected, first in Niangara (1910) and later in Medje (1914), included examples that were virtually identical in shape and
surface design to the long-necked water jars made at the same time, and probably earlier, suggesting that the head was added as an embellishment to an already accepted form.

_Fiber and Gourd Objects_

The Mangbetu widely exploited their environment to obtain an array of fabrication materials that when subjected to their inventive technical expertise yielded items of utility and beauty. The types of plants collected for basketry objects included grasses from swamp areas, fibers from food crops such as sorghum, millet, and bananas, the fibers from oil and raffia palm plants, rattan, papyrus, and vines. All parts of the plants were used. For example, the bark of the fig tree was used to make barkcloth; split leaf sections, particularly of the raffia and oil palms, were used to make baskets and cordage; mid-ribs of oil palm leaves were used as instrument strings; palm stalks, whole or in sections, were used to make furniture; split stem materials of all kinds had wide use as binding, tying, and wrapping materials, as well as serving as foundation elements for basketry of all types. The Mangbetu used these plant parts in their natural color and also dyed them red or black.

Woven basketry techniques were used to create baskets, mats, hats, shields, rattles, and cordage. The primary techniques used were plaing and twining. An incredible variety of patterns was possible using these two basic weaves. With twill plaing (a weaving technique in which all fibers are active elements) diamond, checkerboard, cross, striped, lozenge, and zigzag designs were achieved. Twining (a technique employing stationary warp and active weft elements) was commonly used to make basket and hat rims, rattles, and, by the Azande, sturdy shields. Floated fibers were utilized within a plaied ground to add further design variation, particularly in creating motifs that stand out from the overall field. Combinations of dyed and undyed fibers further enhanced pattern variations. Placement of the fiber's glossy cuticle layer facing up or facing down was another artistic choice for augmenting an object's visual effect. Both regular and asymmetric designs were achieved using all of the above techniques.

Supplementary fibers were used to elaborate the designs of woven structures. Wrapped loops on hats and edgings on hat rims were constructed of elements that were not essential to the integrity of the woven structure. The sides of baskets often had nonstructural fibers inserted through the plaied foundation. These additions, as well as being decorative, may provide extra strength to a basket, allowing it to hold heavier items without sagging. Supplemental overlays of fibers--on quivers, for example--may also have served as reinforcement, but they were clearly applied in such a way as to also create a decorative effect.

Straps for baskets, stools, shields, musical instruments, and pots were made using a single-element looping technique. Plaited overlays were added to wooded or ceramic objects, such as the plain weave bands used on the borders of rectangular wooden shields and the open-latticework basketry constructed over jars. Such plaing was used for reinforcement, to provide a grip, as a repair, or for decoration. Further embellishment of plaied objects was common. Various decorations, often signifying status, were attached to hats. Animal hides were used not only for straps but were also attached to shields as talismans.

Fine baskets were treasured and upper-class women had better ones than other women. A bride's family gave her decorated household items, especially pots and baskets, when she moved to her
husband's compound. In addition to these items, household furnishings included carved wooden bowls, made with or without covers and with or without handles; stools carved from a single piece of wood, used by women; stools and beds made from palm stalks; bamboo drinking straws, sometimes decorated with brass or copper wire; and by the early colonial period, steamer chairs, used mainly outside the house by important men.

**Wood Carving and Metalwork**

In many cases carvers were also blacksmiths, for in addition to making the blades of knives, adzes, axes, spears, and hoes, they fashioned the wood handles that held them. Lang wrote in his fieldnotes that the "famous stools (nobarra)," carved from a single piece of wood, used by the Mangbetu women were made by special artists who enjoy a wide reputation. They sign their work on the lower end by a mark deeply cut into the wood and rubbed, usually with redwood powder, which is an expression of good wishes for a future owner. These stools accompany their owners (women only), on their visits and voyages and wherever they go. The strap fastened through the hole (in the rear) is laid over the forehead, the stool hanging down the back, the seat against the skin. Sometimes also the strap is laid upon the right or left shoulder, the stool hanging down the side. Important chiefs' women have a special woman to carry the stool behind them. They are surprisingly light.

Only the stools of the most important women were decorated with metal studs, but all the women attached to a chief's household, including the chief's mother, wives, sisters, and daughters, had finely carved stools. They were an integral part of one court dance in which the women, seated in a great circle on their stools, with their knees together and their feet apart, moved up and down with the rhythm of the drums. Although men did not sit on the small blackened stools made for women, several Mangbetu chiefs had a large double version that enabled the seated chief to remain taller than his female attendants. Today stools are rare and wood carving in general seems to have declined for all but the most necessary implements like axe and adze handles.

Two items of furniture were especially important for chiefs. One was a bench made from the midribs of palm fronds with slats of slit bamboo. German botanist Georg Schweinfurth's drawing of Mbunza shows him seated on just such a bench. These benches were made in many sizes; some had long extensions so that they could serve as litters, like the one Lang collected and photographed with Chief Okondo's wife, Nenzima, upon it. The other item of furniture was the backrest placed behind the bench and decorated with brass studs or copper wire.

The Mangbetu were well known in the region for their skill as blacksmiths and carvers, and the best carvers were often also smiths. Iron in the form of tools and weapons or in chunks directly from the smelting furnace was highly prized, and anyone who worked with iron had a special status. Smiths often became rich men because families would bring them their daughters to marry with the expectation of receiving iron and ironworking services as bridewealth.

Smelters were distinct from smiths. According to modern informants the ritual of smelting excluded women and in the case of the king's double bell [a court instrument and key symbol of a chief's authority involved human sacrifice and cannibalism. Mangbetu bellows were made of wood covered with banana leaves and were used in sets of four (Zande bellows were covered with hide).
Smelters had to abstain from sexual intercourse before beginning to smelt and were assisted by a naando practitioner, who would chew the naando root and sing the sacred songs that would ensure a successful result.

Blacksmiths made spear blades, harpoon points, arrow points, adzes, axes, hammers in many sizes, as well as metal ornaments. Originally working only in iron, wood, and ivory they extended their repertoire in the nineteenth century to include brass and copper. The fact that the same artisans were working in many materials accounts in part for the variety of substances used to produce very similar objects. Hairpins were made of ivory, wood, iron, and copper; boxes with almost identical heads--almost certainly made by the same carver--were made of bark, ivory, and wood; knife and spear handles were made most often of wood but sometimes of iron; and pendants were made in copper, brass, and iron in the form of canine teeth. In the early colonial period the idea of rendering an object in a novel material was applied to traditional objects, like hunting bows, and to new kinds of objects, like European forks and spoons. These nonfunctional objects were made purely for the purpose of being admired as art.


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