

**Important statue *Byeri*, Mvai,  
South Fang, North Gabon  
Late 19th Century**

## Important statue of *Byeri*, Mvai, South Fang, North Gabon Late 19th Century

Wood, dark patina

H. 17,32 inches (44 cm)

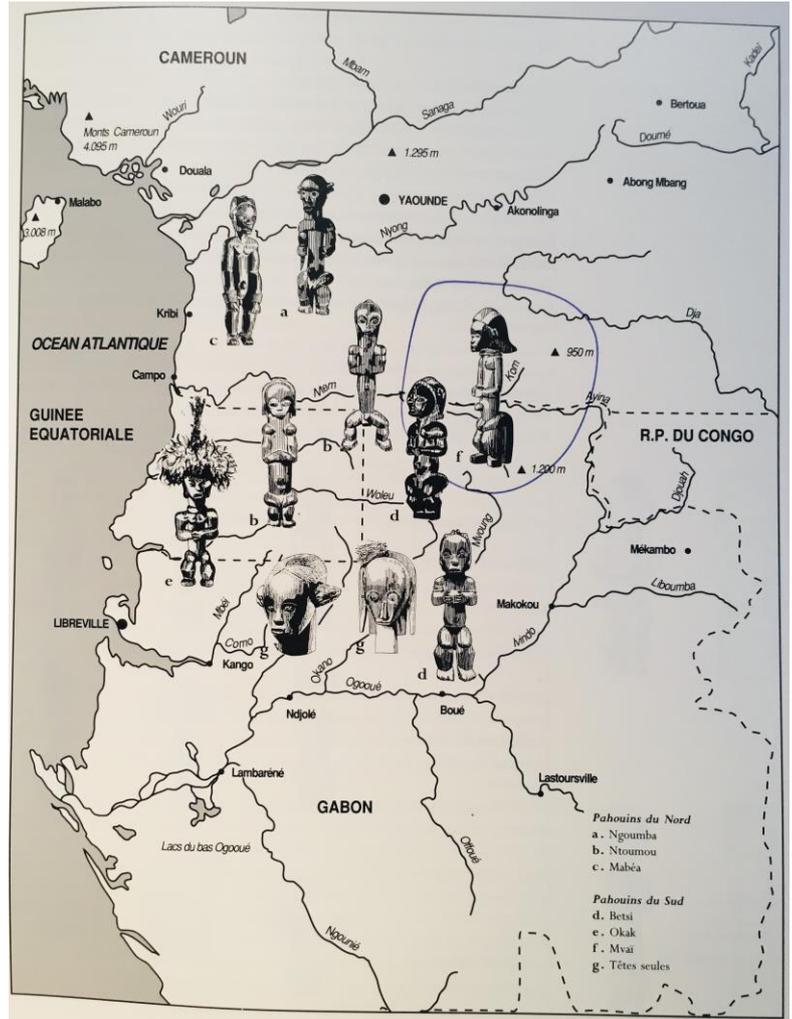
Provenance : Former Roberto Matta (Chilian painter) collection ; Former Raquel and Guillem Montagut collection, Barcelona ; Former Carlos Basso Collection by inheritance through descent ; Private Collection, Brussels—

### *Fang people*

The Fang live in southern Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon. Fang subgroups are Ntumu, Bulu, Betsi and Mvai. In the 19th century, the Fang follow a northeasterly and southwesterly direction in the forest zone. The Fang society is patrilineal and the authority is owned by the elder of the family. It is he who keeps the *byeri*. It is also he who decides the initiation ceremonies and distributes the property within the family.

Well-known sculptures in ancient African art lovers, the Fang ancestor statues are very recognizable and particularly impressive in their shapes and patina. These works from Equatorial Africa were called *eyema byeri* and were part of a set intended to preserve the relics (skulls) of the ancestors. This set therefore consists of statues carved in wood fixed in a basket of bark, receptacle of the relics of lineage ancestors. The carved part often has a support at the back to stabilize it in the basket of relics.

The stylistic knowledge of the Fang is heir to the origins of the objects during expeditions at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (German administrators and travelers) ; that is to say, South Cameroon largely. According to James W. Fernandez, specialist of the Fang, the Ntoumou area is the main center of dissemination of the entire Fang art. Because statistically, it would seem that more than a third of the known Fang objects come from the Ntoumou (having many clans and lineages). This statuary is marked by an exaggeration of different elements of the body: the trunk, the head, the forearms, the hands, the navel (prominent). Elements found among the Mvai, located east of the Ntoumou.









### ***Our statue***

In his classification of Fang styles, Louis Perrois notices that the Mvaï style is already highlighted by Günter Tessamnn in 1907 during his expedition to Gabon. In addition to the typical characteristic of the Southern Fang at the level of the headdress in the form of a helmet with three "shells" (three mats), the formal elements of the Mvaï are found in our *Byeri* statue.

*Byeri* Mvaï statues are marked by massiveness, compactness of volumes, shortening of proportions (legs, arms), an effect of power and solidity which refers to the function of *Byeri* ; make people aware that the ancestors are powerful and that their terrible occult strength must be respected. Also, the belly is rounded like an amphora with a bulge at the level of the navel, the legs are semi-flexed.

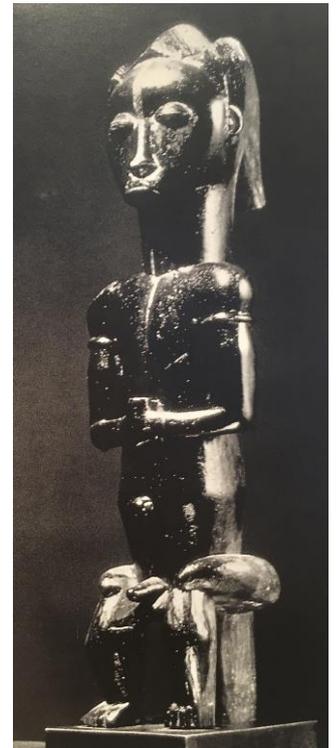
The shoulders and the mass of the arms are attached to the torso. The chest is underlined with vigor, in the continuity of the massive and solid ensemble. The hands meet at the end of the five fingers, in general, it is to hold a cup against the chest. Elements of body decoration are also evoked at the level of the upper arm, with a sculpted outline that evokes the copper bracelet, then, the scarifications on the belly and on the back. It should be noted that our statue does not have a support element under the buttocks like the other statues of *Byeri*.



The head of our statue presents softer and less schematic elements than the statues of *Byeri* Mvaï in general, without losing the characteristic signs. The head is large, in proportion to the body, it is approximately spherical. She has a high, rounded forehead. The facial features are carefully shaped. The eyes are half coffee beans, the nose descends from the forehead to the mouth in the sinuous movement of the convex face, and finally the thin mouth presents a pout typical of the Mvai. The hairstyle is emphasized by aligned nails, instead of streaks traced in the wood. The headdress falls at the bottom of the neck, to form a movement opposite to that of the face. The volumes and the sinuosity of the legs starting from the buttocks are drawn with a schematism which contrasts with the realistic tendency of the face, while being most harmonious. This schematism evokes sculptures by avant-garde artists such as Modigliani, Brancusi or Henry Moore.

### ***Comparison***

These two illustrations show one of the *Byeri* statues donated by **P. Guerre to the Museum of African, Oceanian and Amerindian Arts in Marseille.**



On this statue, we can see the almost spherical face which ends in a pouting mouth. As for our statue.



**Statue *Byeri* from the Master of Ntem, c. 1800-1860, Dallas Museum of Art.**

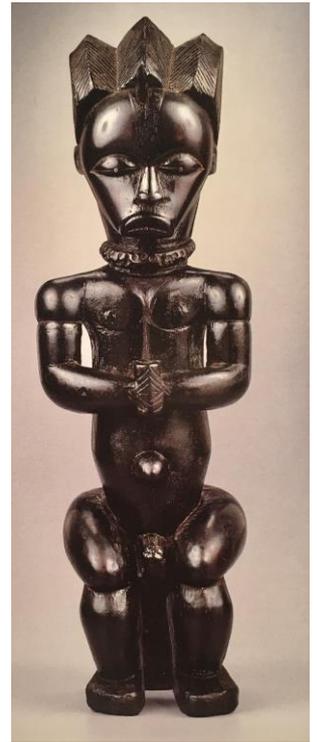
We find the characteristic elements as described for our statue. The difference here is that the face is more aggressive by the features of the face and the size of the mouth.



The scarifications and the position of the hands are as encountered on our statue

**Statue *Byeri* from the Master of Ntem, c. 1750-1860, Private Collection, New York.**

This statue is somewhat closer to ours at the level of the face, by the softness in the rounding of the forehead, the eyes.



***The worship of the byeri*** has links with the cult of the ancestors. The *byeri* represents the whole of the object : the carved figure, the basket in bark and the relics (skulls of the ancestors). The *byeri* is consulted on different occasions : when moving from the village, to create a new plantation, before hunting, during a palaver or earlier, to go to war. It is forbidden for women and children to see the *byeri*. Only men who have passed the initiation of *sô* and have at least one son can be initiated into this cult. The *melan*, the initiation, refers to the hallucinogenic plant, *alan*, which is consumed during the rite to get in touch with the ancestors. This rite occurs between men of the same family. If there are several *byeri* in the same family, it is because there was segmentation within it, where a son wanted to found his own village. Some ancient reliquaries can hold up to eight skulls. Owning a *byeri* ensures strength and prosperity.

***Condition report***

Good condition

**Carlos Basso (1947-2020)** was a great Spanish architect and collector, graduated from Barcelona School of Architecture in 1969.

***Coryse Mwape Dolin***  
***Art Historian, African Arts***

### ***Bibliography***

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### ***Illustrations***

**Map :** L. Perrois 1992, 43.

*Byeri* statue, Museum of African, Oceanian and Amerindian Arts in Marseille : L. Perrois 1991, 15

Statue *Byeri* from the Master of Ntem, Dallas Museum of Art : de Grunne 2001, 137

Statue *Byeri* from the Master of Ntem, Private Collection New York : de Grunne 2001, 136

**in situ :** drawing from Fernand Grébert, in Perrois n.d. - « Sacrifice sanglant sur les crânes des ancêtres (byeri) sortis de leur boîte en écorce (...) ».