

## *Art and Power in the Central African Savanna*

### Exhibition of African Figure Sculptures -- U. S. Premiere

**Lecture by exhibition curator Constantine Petridis: September 23, 7:30 pm**  
**Exhibition Preview: September 25, 2008, 6:30 – 8:30 pm**

On view at The Menil Collection September 26, 2008 - January 4, 2009

**Houston, August 7, 2008** — Organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), The Menil Collection presents *Art and Power in the Central African Savanna*, an original exhibition that explores the political and religious power of nearly 60 sculptures created by artists of four Central African cultures: the Luba, Songye, Chokwe, and Luluwa. Carved primarily from wood, these power figures act as containers for magical organic ingredients and serve purposes both religious and political. According to traditional beliefs, the figures mediate between the human and spirit worlds to ensure a healthy birth, successful hunt, or triumph over an enemy. The exhibition explores the aesthetic complexity and the mysterious potency of these diverse objects. The exhibition will be on view at the Menil through January 4, 2009 before traveling to the CMA (March 1 – June 7, 2009) and to the de Young Museum in San Francisco (June 27 – October 11, 2009).

*“Art and Power* demonstrates how certain works traditionally perceived by Western scholars as religious in nature also embody references to the political sphere—and vice-versa,” said Constantine Petridis, the CMA curator of African art who conceived and organized the exhibition. *“This exhibition attempts to introduce a sense of history and time into the discussion of African art, by linking developments in artistic styles with corresponding changes in Luba, Songye, Chokwe and Luluwa political organizations and structures.*

Many of the featured objects combine “power” in both a religious and a political sense, countering the usual divisions made by scholars of African art between “sacred” art, framed by beliefs in the supernatural, and “secular” art, connected with the exercise of leadership. Indeed, this exhibition contains power figures that signal rank, wealth and status while simultaneously possessing the power to cure, protect, or harm. Although the four artistic traditions explored in *Art and Power* have each been the subject of in-depth monographic studies, this is the first exhibition to focus on the shared concepts and ideas between four visually distinct cultures.