

SCULPTURES



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Montagut Gallery



"The hand sculpts what the mind conceives. Accepting this invitation means giving life to a form, giving shape to the invisible through one's hands." - B. Minguet

This phrase encapsulates the essence of African sculpture, born from the arid, ochre, and orange earth, cracked during droughts, and the vast expanses that humbly remind us of humanity's place on this soil. From this humility, from these infinite and sometimes desert-like expanses, where one becomes aware of their place and existence, belief is born and gives life to African sculpture, shaping and animating the sacred invisible. Sculpture becomes an intermediary between this earth and the sky, a supernatural link between two worlds, two entities.

The form emerges in the midst of these expanses where silence often resonates with the powerful echo of belief, a masterful witness to a plastic conception of beauty vibrating with ingenuity. From earth to sky, from sky to earth... this is the path of existence, the mystical, magical, and symbolic essence of the masks and sculptures of the African continent, created and shaped for beliefs, inveterate mediators between earth and sky.

Divine mediators from earth to sky: created and fashioned from and on the earth, through matter: wood, the root of everything. If we appreciate its surface, patina, weight, its origin, its very essence is just as important. Here lies the beauty of primal arts, from the aesthetic of the surface to the symbolism of depth.

Sacred mediators, symbols of beliefs governing communities, their existences, their reasons for being, mediators embodying the spiritual force in which they believed, to which they prayed for hope, to be heard, protected, around which they organized and lived.

These sculptures, giving life to the invisible, to which people turned in adversity, invoking health, rain for the land's fertility, protection, fertility for the continuity of generations, protection against malevolent spirits, constantly turning to them...

These sculptures, entities once animated, honored by sacred rituals, still today, undeniably inhabited by powerful, indescribable presences.

These sculptures, inveterate refuges of the invisible link between sky and earth, meant to honor, commemorate, protect, signify power, and invoke the supernatural, captivate us, move us, repel us, intrigue us, but never leave us indifferent, due to the strength of their essence and their expressive power.

Alive? Vibrant with humanity and universality, thanks to their volumes, their features, thanks to the strength, the power of expressiveness, the depth of their meaning.

Powerful witnesses, both symbolic and aesthetic, African sculpture carries within it genius.

To their beauty, their formal and structural ingenuity, responds their hidden supernatural meaning.

They come to life in the midst of aridity, fashioned with so few means, yet remarkably accomplished and sometimes subtly refined. Works of three-dimensional genius, they inhabit space and signify.

What power! What power? What power, without art history, drove them to conceive these plastic forms, in the midst of nature, the bush, the vegetation, the arid lands of Africa, with so few means, pushing creation to abstraction, where carving responds to imagination, and whose volumes, structure, and conception can only inspire fascination.

To the strength and respect of profound secular beliefs, inherent in their ideals and thought systems governing their society, responds their beauty, which you can explore here, created by African genius.

- Aurore Krier – Mariani

"Sculpture is the art of the intelligence"
Pablo Picasso

Proto - Dogon figure

Mali

11th Century / C14: 1051 AD –
1252 AD
54,5 cm
Wood

Provenance:

Michel Lequesne collection, Paris, France

Imposing aesthetic and symbolic mystery. A near-impenetrable enigma in its deep reason for existence, reinforced by the purity of its forms and barely suggested features. This enigma is accentuated by the complex history of population migrations from Mali to Burkina Faso and further amplified by its rarity.

Originating from a micro-corpus, listed by Olivier Castellano as only five works, it astonishes with its architectural form, structured refinement, and eroded raw wood. It bears no influence that can be easily identified, and due to its large size, it is not among those easily transported or honored in altars. Of the few documented examples, two were reportedly collected by Pierre Langlois between 1953 and 1954. Two others, seen alongside Jacques Kerchache in an old photograph, raise questions about their exact discovery date and location. These effigies, from the southern part of the Bandiagara escarpment in the Sangha region, all created by the same hand, share a resemblance and a particular attribute: their flattened, elongated faces, split and animated by a long nose connected to linear, horizontal eyebrow arches, beneath which carved wood hints at a gaze. They all share this powerful, intriguing, mysterious frontal expression that stands out remarkably.

For the Dogon, the world carries a “meaning,” a “word” placed by the Creator for humanity. This message, called *aduno* so (the word of the world), must be decoded through the observation and interpretation of signs revealed by the morphology or physiology of elements in the environment.

Reflecting codified mythical narratives, the sculptor's inventive power illustrates a desire for renewal, synonymous with adaptation to a new world.

Their statuary “possessed a power capable of influencing material life” (Leloup, p.152). According to this theory, there are two types of statues: “the most important ones embody chieftain power, ensuring protection, while others pertain to a *ginna* (lineage), or even an individual and their family” (Idem, p.153). This work, as attested by its monumentality and presence, illustrates and embodies protective power.

Its stylistic physiognomy, especially its face, presents characteristics comparable to the aesthetics of *imina na* or *sirige* masks, whose size and symbolic geometric construction make them essential actors in these ceremonies.

According to Hélène Leloup, this type of mask-bearer statue represents the founder of the *Dyongon Sérou* mask society, the primordial ancestor, explaining its rarity and stature due to its antiquity. *Sérou* is considered the first man created by the god *Amm*.

This supposition adds profound cultural significance to its singular aesthetics. In an unpublished letter to Michel Lequesne dated October 26, 2013, Hélène Leloup adds: “This type of very dry, tall statue, with arms not glued to the body and quite close to the Bamana style, who were installed in the western part of Senu, seems to have been used in the southern Dogon Plateau, extending towards Burkina Faso; these were sometimes small family groups that have almost disappeared today,” suggesting stylistic influences.

From its impassive stillness emerges its superiority and magnetism. The sobriety of its features and forms magnifies its attitude. Its angular shoulders and square torso demonstrate strength and austerity while revealing a certain pride. The dynamic balance between the wavy movement of the wood's striations and the emphasized verticality of its emaciated trunk and slender arms detached from the body. Its geometry and lines confer upon this masterpiece a touching, timeless universality.

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Hélène Leloup. *Chefs d'œuvres de la statuaire Dogon*. Somogy Editions, Paris, 2010

Liliane Prevost, Isabelle de Courtilles. *Guide des croyances et symboles, Afrique Bambara, Dogon, Peul*. Édition l'Harmattan, Paris, 2005

Marcel Griaule. *Dieu D'eau - Entretiens Avec Ogotemmêli*. Éditions Fayard, Paris, 1997

Michel Leiris. *L'Afrique fantôme - de Dakar à Djibouti, 1931-1933*. Édition Gallimard, Paris, 1934







Dogon pounder

Dogon people, Mali

17th Century or before

40 cm

Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Purchased from Sotheby's Parke-Bernet Galleries in 1968

Rosa & Aaron Eman collection, New York, USA

"These are not animals, nor fabulous creatures, nor spirits: in a certain way they resemble human beings more than they differ from them." (G. Baselitz, catalog of the exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum of Zurich, 1995).

If the ingenuity of Dogon sculpture is revealed as much through the prism of its stylistic diversity, symbolism, and hidden meanings to be uncovered, it also rises through the sophistication of its structural arrangement, as masterfully demonstrated by this work.

The superimposition of components based on deeply engraved circular, serrated forms, from which openwork characters with angular, sinuous, schematized forms emerge, confirms and reinforces, through its repetition, the high degree of sculptural technicality of Mali.

Even more surprising, the composition draws the eye to the details. First, to the details of the forms whose contours and surface vary infinitely due to the anointments, the material playing on the modeling by its thickness. Then it directs

the gaze to step back, to distance oneself, to then see a suggested form, that of a character with a long torso, on whose head an animal might be positioned. Its face turned to the sky, wouldn't its mouth be open? Speech among the Dogon is always to be interpreted as a symbolic sign, a sign of humanity, of spirituality.

The testimony of its high sculptural technique combined with its schematized geometric plastic conception resonates in this work, elevating Dogon art to a fabulous conceptual level.

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Hélène Leloup. *Chefs d'œuvres de la statuaire Dogon*. Somogy Editions, Paris, 2010







Dogon statue

Dogon people, Mali

18th Century or before

24,7 cm

Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Jay C. Leff (1925-2000), Pennsylvania, USA

Publication:

African Sculpture from the Collection of Jay C. Leff. The Museum of Primitive Art, New York, 1964. III. 3

The Art of Black Africa: Collection of Jay C. Leff. Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1969. III. 10

Walter A. Fairervis Jr. *Exotic Art from Ancient and Primitive Civilizations, Collection of Jay C. Leff*. Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1960. III. 178

Exhibition:

Pittsburgh, PA, USA: "Exotic Art from Ancient and Primitive Civilizations, Collection of Jay C. Leff", Carnegie Institute, 15 October 1959 - 3 January 1960

New York, USA: "African Sculpture from the Collection of Jay C. Leff", The Museum of Primitive Art, 25 November 1964 - 7 February 1965

Pittsburgh, PA, USA: "The Art of Black Africa, Collection of Jay C. Leff", Carnegie Institute, 24 October 1969 - 18 January 1970

Nothing is left to chance among the Dogon; everything is visible if we can discern the hidden meaning of the details, perceive the keys, those of the hidden symbols to reveal the mysteries. Hélène Leloup wrote: "The slightest detail is a key to this universe, so we can look at them for a long time, reflect on their multiple layers, and search for a meaning." (Hélène Leloup, preface, in Agnès Pataux, Dogon, 2011).

Among the Dogon, the world carries meaning, a word translating a sign. Among the Dogon, through the complexity of their cosmogony, appears the complexity of the hidden symbols to be deciphered.

As Geneviève Calame-Griaule explains in *Ethnology and Language*, speech among the Dogon, "the organs being linked to particular psycho-physiological manifestations, the different types of

speech are in 'reserve' in the corresponding organs. There is a symbolic link between the organ, its role in the person's psychology, and the nature of the speech."

The head, of what is named the *duidy*, is charged with good words or discord. It is the seat of thought and consciousness, of life and death. The skull contains "the secret voice, the hidden voice" (idem, p.156).

Through this prostrated gesture, eminently symbolic, of the hands hiding the seat of his consciousness, the elongated figure reveals the weight of his conscience that he attempts to conceal. According to Jean Laude, this pose of the hands covering the face would identify the figure with *Dyongon Sérou*, the first man created by the god *Amma*, and would translate the memory of the original incest (Hélène Leloup).

The traits of his face hidden, as well as the outlines and clarity of his body's contours, covered with a thick fossilized ritual patina, reinforce the shame and regret that the figure seems to want to hide, which he seems deeply disturbed by.

Only cult objects possessed this thick, crusty, granular patina rendered by their "passage through fire, shea butter and oil" (Hélène Leloup, p.107), undeniably attesting that it was an altar statue, certainly venerated to not forget the sin while asking for forgiveness. Its burdened conscience seems to regret through this attitude.

Its iconography and structural formulation summarize the aesthetic strength among the Dogon. This captivating strength of creation, which from a resolutely bare outline, hidden under a thick patina, nevertheless moves intensely.

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Liliane Prevost, Isabelle de Courtillies. *Guide des croyances et symboles, Afrique Bambara, Dogon, Peul*. Édition l'Harmattan, Paris, 2005

Marcel Griaule. *Dieu D'eau - Entretiens Avec Ogotemmêli*. Éditions Fayard, Paris, 1997

Michel Leiris. *L'Afrique fantôme - de Dakar à Djibouti, 1931-1933*. Édition Gallimard, Paris, 1934







Dogon statue

Dogon people, Mali

18th Century or before
45 cm
Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Frédéric Megret collection, France
Javier Lentini collection, Spain

Publication:

África. *La Figura Imaginada*. Fundació LaCaixa, Barcelona, 2004, n°6, p.69

Each work of art is a story in itself, revealing through it its beliefs, its turmoils, its environment, and its past—leaving traces on the surface of its wood as on flesh, indicating the environment that inspired them. Each work speaks to us if we know how to listen.

Through its combined power and delicacy, its monumentality and gesture, its strength and its simultaneously massive and light musculature, and the softness of its curves contrasting with the angularity of its clearly marked and defined contours: it speaks to us.

Beautiful with all these harmoniously combined dualities, through its rhythmically silhouetted form alternating remarkably between sinuosity and curved shapes, formally echoing the aesthetics of the steep villages of N'Duleri-Sanabéri, where sinuous beauty resonates.

Between darkness and light, whispers and crashes, the Dogon tell the origin of the universe, the emergence of the first human creature, and the natural elements: air, wind, clouds, water, lightning, stars. The entire complexity of their cosmogony and beliefs is reflected through the history of their statuary, in a quest for spirituality and timelessness.

Mali, a land of many facets, witnessed the rise and fall of states and political and cultural powers over the centuries. Thus emerged the rare N'duleri statuary, resulting from encounters between immigrant populations and environmental necessities.

The entire body seems choreographed to respond to the rhythm of the history of the N'duleri population, its steep paths, and the fluid water like its curves, from the Yamé springs that allowed them to survive. It also embodies the influences of mixed populations contributing to the evolution of a representative new style of sculpture.

Influenced by the Djennenké, who sought refuge in the east, in the N'dureli-Sanabéri after the west of the plateau was ravaged, escaping the siege (January 1469) of Ali Songhay, deploying codes strictly forbidding human representation—antithetical to the artistic expression of the Islamized populations.

The country crossed by the Yamé N'dulé became less rugged, flat, and ideal for agricultural life. A new, more refined civilization then emerged, giving birth to the N'duleri style, alternately condensing the classical art of the North: realism and strength with suppleness and elegance.

Care and realism combined while exhibiting a form of avant-garde cubism that is disconcerting, summarizing it. It fascinates and amazes, its imposing presence, serenity, solemnity, and dignity as evident as its stature. The face split in two by an oily black patina attests to its past importance, of the anointments it would have been honored with, a black patina that magnifies its majesty.

It is one of the rare witnesses of this style that did not survive the flourishing, the multitude, the budding of artistic workshops that later subdivided, a rare witness, moreover, of the hand of the Master of the oblique eyes. Another known piece by the same hand belonged to Charles Ratton and Hubert Goldet, now in the Musée du Quai Branly (inventory 70.19999.9.2).

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Michel Leiris. *L'Afrique fantôme - de Dakar à Djibouti, 1931-1933*. Édition Gallimard, Paris, 1934







Dogon seated statue

Dogon people, Mali

18th Century

31 cm

Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Ernst Beyeler collection, Basel, Switzerland (1958)
Estate of Georges S. Mack, Greenwich, USA
Pace Primitive and Ancient Art, New York, USA

Publication:

Jean Dubuffet; E. Beyeler. *Art Negre - Negerplastik*. Galerie Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland, 1958. n°20

Exhibition:

Art Nègre - Negerplastik. Galerie Beyeler, Basel, February 1958

"Beauty comes from the balance between two and three dimensions, between abstraction and representation. I seek balance behind changing appearances. With abstraction, I have reached a form distilled to the essential." Henri Matisse.

Did Matisse define Dogon statuary in his words? The balance of geometric abstraction, summarizing form to the essential, thus offering it its timeless, universal dimension.

Wouldn't this abstraction of Dogon statuary be linked to its belief, to the awareness of the ephemeral nature of what is material, perishable, and temporal, thus summarizing to the essential, what is destined to disappear? To its will for evolution, timelessness, and the concept of *dege*?

In the Toro language, *dege* means, according to Geneviève Calame Griaule (1968, p.60), statuette, and in donno-so Kervran (1982, p.66) translates *dege* as "spirit," "genius," "endowing a simple piece of wood, once sculpted, with an allusive relationship to the invisible world," granting the object, once worked and carved, the possibility of entering into relation with the

geniuses and spirits. The sobriety alone would then suffice to animate it with this role, this power. From this, would Dogon abstraction not spring forth?

To summarize the consistency of its essence, its symbolism, its power, its role in all simplicity. Barely worked, merely with the intention to animate it, to make it a symbol or intermediary would suffice, so why strive for embellishments when simplicity would summarize the essential? Being fashioned soberly is sufficient according to the concept of *dege* to be able to connect with the supernatural and the invisible.

From this foundation, called *dege*, derive geometric compositions devoid of ornamentation, pure in their lines, pure in what they carry within them.

The cubist arrangement, between forms and voids, here resonates, in profile, in a scholarly repetition of openwork, triangular shapes, between bent legs and arms positioned on the knees. The lines and curves respond to each other, slender.

To the rigidity of the lower limbs, inscribed in rigorous lines, is delicately opposed the

slight curved forms of the spine and arms, subtly suggesting the support of the figure leaning forward on its knees.

The sagittal crest headdress extending to the nape, embracing a beautiful arc contrasting and magnifying the angularity of the jaw, draws the eye to its expressiveness. The face with tight features, finely carved, softened by the patina of time and past prayers with which it has been honored, vibrates with hidden symbols. The body, called *godu*, is a component of personality, the visible part of its spiritual principles.

Its posture, distinctly different from the traditional corpus, presenting statuettes seated with arms bent, hands extending to the face, distinguishes it by its almost unique iconography, but also by its impassive calm, its tranquility reinforced by the sublime balance of its forms. It imposes itself with tranquil strength and elegance, an elegance that is both pure and rich in meaning.

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Hélène Leloup. *Chefs d'œuvres de la statuaire Dogon*. Somogy Editions, Paris, 2010
Marcel Griaule. *Dieu D'eau - Entretiens Avec Ogotemmêli*. Éditions Fayard, Paris, 1997







Satimbe mask

Dogon people, Mali

19th Century or before

98 cm

Wood, pigments, ritual patina

Provenance:

Jean Willy & Marthe Mestach collection, Brussels

Publication:

Evan M. Maurer. *The Intelligence of Forms. An artist Collects African Art*. The Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, 1991. n°68

Utotombo. Runst uit Zwart - Africa in Belgisch prive - bezit. Brussels, 1988

Willy Mestach. *L'intelligence des Formes*. Tribals Arts, Brussels, 2007

Exhibition:

Brussels, Belgium: "Utotombo. Kunst uit Zwart-Afrika in Belgisch prive-bezit", Palais des Beaux Arts, 25 March-5 June 1988

USA: "The Intelligence of Forms. An Artist Collects African Art":

· Kansas City, Missouri: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 5 October-24 November 1991

· Minneapolis, Minnesota: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 21 December 1991-22 March 1992

Brussels, Belgium: "L'intelligence des Formes", Salle des Beaux-Arts, 6-29 June 2007

The structural ingenuity with decidedly cubist forms of the mask among the dogon is as spectacular as its essential function, which consists of an element of conservation, but also of stabilization and evolution of religious and social life.

In 1931, when the Dakar-Djibouti mission left Paris, Marcel Griaule, who had the ambition to visit fifteen countries, first stopped at Sanga. He attended a masked dance organized on the occasion of a death, which marked the beginning of "a fascination for the Dogon country and culture" (Calame-Griaule, 1989, in *Les Masques Dogon*), leading to his thesis published in five volumes in 1938.

In Griaule's "gloss of myths," the creation and disputes of Amma and the Earth, which claimed to be older than him in this mythology, led to the anger of the God and numerous cataclysms causing the world's imbalances that Amma then repaired. In restoring the world, she endowed each being with an imperishable vital force named *nàma*. At death, the *nàma* is disturbed, the physical envelope disappears. As a vital, ineffable, invisible supernatural force, the *nàma* survives within the community. The masks are born and appear at this moment, during the *dama*, to restore the imbalance caused by the death of a member of society by

guiding their vital force, their *nàma*, their soul.

The examination of the myth related to the masks, highlighting the dialectic of order and disorder, reveals that in the Dogon universe, "disturbing social and earthly order seems to be a necessity to avoid the danger of immobility. The acceptance of dynamism." (Anne Doquet, p.174).

The balance of both aesthetic and symbolic dichotomies, and the dynamism in this work are brilliantly summarized. This Satimbe mask, embodying the first woman, unfolds in its grandeur, its formal conception, all the complexity and beauty of the Dogon mythological universe.

A dichotomy between these contrasts of patinas from the light of the raw wood eroded by time without flourishes or traces of anointing, to the deep dark intensifying the depth of the represented woman's features. Between these massive and emaciated forms. Between the pure immobility and the exacerbated movement in a dynamic both contained and euphoric, rendered by the half-raised arms, a metaphor for the perpetual evolution suggested.

The face of the rectangular mask contrasts by its simplicity with the

meticulous execution of the statuette.

Its schematized body with thin limbs, a more imposing torso from which a conical chest powerfully emerges, undeniably demonstrates both the talent of Dogon sculptors and their high degree of abstraction, undeniably attesting to their influence on our greatest modernists.

These opposing and complementary dichotomies that marry and combine between the man incarnated under the features of the mask and the woman embody this fundamental, primary, and essential duality for society's continuity. A balanced duality that, through its social role, also guides the vital force. This universal dichotomy here in balance is embodied to maintain harmony in Mali within its societies.

"Even if there remained only masks empty of meaning, misunderstood paintings, and purposeless dances in the cliffs... Among this people, behind all forms and rhythms, lies the will to endure... And the imprint left by the *awa* (the myth) on these forms and rhythms will still reveal that, by its origin, Dogon art is a struggle" (Griaule, *Masques Dogon*, p.819) a plastic aesthetic renewal, an art imbued with eternity.

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Marcel Griaule. *Masques Dogon*. Institut d'Ethnologie · Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 1938







Chi Wara

Bamana people, Mali

19th Century

28 cm

Wood, beads, ritual patina

Provenance:

Rosa & Aaron Esman, New York, USA

A divine being, half-human, half-animal, the ciwara, a mythical figure with almost magical power, brought prosperity to the Bamana community, ensuring its continuity by restoring the fertility of its lands.

Connected to the Tyiwara society, the headdresses were publicly used during ritual agricultural ceremonies. With their bodies concealed under substantial costumes, the male and female effigies adorned the heads of dancers. Always associated, in this inseparable and complementary duality, they symbolized elemental forces; the male headdress embodied the powerful Sun, while its gentler female counterpart represented the nurturing Earth.

The rhythmic and aerial boldness of the plastic solutions, combined with the symbolic concepts and principles governing the universe according to Bamana society, are magnificently encapsulated in this work.

The elegant stylization of the animals' bodies intensifies the movement, particularly through the subtle interplay of opposites, curves and counter-curves, arched and linear forms. The lines and undulations respond to and oppose each other, creating a fabulous harmony that imparts rhythm to the entire composition, faithful to the choreography for which it was intended. Danced, dedicated to elevating the community's wishes to the sky for the earth's fertility, it rises in a fabulous dynamic rendered by the skillful structured compositions of superimposed geometric shapes. Its openwork spaces magnificently enhance its lightness.

The flexed legs of the two subjects forming diamonds intensify the suggested leap. The body, inscribed in a sublime curved arc, displays all its grace and suppleness.

The back of the antelope, inscribed in an almost circular curve, decorated with engraved scarifications, whose form is sublimated by a serrated border, magnifies

the opposite movement of the horns raised towards the sky, evoking germination. Stretched and deployed, the importance of what they evoke is matched by the meticulous treatment of their deeply spiraled surface, elevating the fertility wishes, and sublimating them with beauty. Resting on an openwork oval base allowing attachment to a wicker carrying headdress, the stocky body of the aardvark - adorned with engraved scarifications - a burrowing mammal that, according to ancient tradition, taught the Bamana agricultural techniques.

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Jean-Paul Colley; Lorenz Homberger. *Ciwara: Chimères africaines* Broché. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, 2006







Bamana statue

Bamana people, Mali

19th century

48 cm

Wood, beads, ritual patina

Provenance:

Private collection, Germany

Olivier Castellano, Paris, France

Bamana art, particularly that of the Jo society located in southern Mali in an area bordered to the east by the Bagoé River, was appreciated aesthetically before it was understood symbolically. Emerging in the late 1950s on the art market in America and Europe, its bold forms, with their geometric purity and fascinating plastic conception, were celebrated in Robert Goldwater's Bambara Art exhibition at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York.

Shrouded in mystery upon their discovery, these pieces were received with great enthusiasm by researchers, scientists, and private and museum collections alike. Due to the lack of documentation and information, these feminine sculptures were interpreted by Goldwater in 1960 as visual representations and incarnations of queens, owing to their adornments, scarifications, and hairstyles.

Later, after their aesthetic value had been admired, their role and association with the Jo society were understood and revealed through the field research of Viviana Pâques and subsequently Kate Ezra in her doctoral thesis published in 1983. The Jo society, one of the most important Bamana societies, was unique in being accessible to both women and men. It involved the initiation of young people into community values, the transmission of knowledge, learning, and rites of passage.

This initiation, culminating every seven years, consisted of and was organized around trials that took place in April and May, during the rainy season. The statues, carefully preserved, were then brought

out of the sanctuary. Elders would present them while providing special care: washing, anointing with oil, dressing, and adorning them with beaded ornaments, thus honoring them. "These sculptures did not represent specific individuals, nor mythical or real characters," according to Kate Ezra, but the sum of their attributes connected them to figures endowed with strong, magical, and even supernatural powers.

Imbued with both delicacy and solemnity, this effigy is one of the most accomplished expressions of Bamana statuary, demonstrating its refinement, the power of its beliefs, and the transmission of values, transforming a young girl into a woman, ensuring the community's continuity and the perpetuation of its principles.

The slender, elongated silhouette is remarkably striking, with a skillful play of opposing attitudes combining suggested movement through slight flexions of its limbs with immobility. Thus vivified, its frozen stance seems ready to move with a contained and concentrated energy. From these opposing attitudes springs its vitality, symbolizing the transition of the young girl into her role as a woman, the evolution of the rite of passage.

The deep, black, oozing patina intensifies its modeling and forms, enhancing the finesse of its features. The body of this young woman, with curves not yet fully rounded, symbolizing fertility, its attentive expressiveness and attitude of restrained energy faithfully reflect her role and beautiful, transitional symbolism.

Contrasting the angular rigidity of the elbows and knees, the strict linearity of her limbs, arms, torso, and legs, and the firmness of her conical chest are the gentle curves of her shoulders, hips, and particularly sophisticated hairstyle. The meticulously sculpted, tense facial features seem to skillfully represent the youthful astonishment and attentiveness as she faces what is being passed on to her. Her remarkably crafted hairstyle, consisting of three thick braids falling and decorated with fine spiral engravings, leading up to two axial buns and an imposing sagittal crest representing braided hair, enhances the expressiveness of her face.

In Bamana culture, hairstyles signify status and clan affiliation. Here, it remarkably stands out from the classic corpus with its skillful and sublime elaboration, demonstrating the importance of the embodied young woman.

The beauty honored by the anointings, whose surface still shines powerfully, is reinforced by the scarifications above her navel and on her belly, the seat of life, continuity, and the survival of the community. Her attentive gaze, magnified by the metallic material, and the nose adorned with bright red beads, indicate the preciousness of the principles she embodied, her magic, and her power to reflect in the rite of passage the virtues endowed upon the generations she shaped.

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Turka statue

Turka people, Burkina Faso

19th Century

30 cm

Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Private collection, Germany

To see, the architecture of Upper Volta, the images of the villages, in particular of the interior of the village of Bobo Dioulasso, where other Turka sculptures have been found. To see, the purity of the simplified, geometric, structured linear shapes from which sometimes conical shapes emerge vertically so that the shapes respond to each other, corresponding to each other, that these architectural and sculptural creations echo each other, suggesting that the Turka statuary comes from somewhere around there, in this proximity, although the exact location and ethnicity remain undetermined.

Where does it come from exactly? The figure, so powerful in the rigor of its lines, its construction, its volumes arranged in a succession of planes, alternately straight and inclined, accentuate and sublime the hieratic nature of its pose and its force of presence.

Closely related and akin to the Senoufo, the Turka live between Banfora and Orodara, in the southwest of Burkina Faso. Not far from the borders of Mali and Ivory Coast, this vast region with a turbulent history has been inhabited by numerous populations, the Bobo, Karaboro, Toussian, Gouin, and Turka who have developed in relation to each other, following various territorial expansions, political threats, and migratory flows.

This proximity, these exchanges, and inter-influences, sow confusion regarding exact attributions and reveal both the similarity of artistic productions in the region. In 1935, in his work *Style Centers of African Negro Sculpture*, the Danish collector Carl Kjersmeier attributed a similar statuette to the Bobo-Fing. Later, according to his local informants, he learned that the Turka obtained their sculptures from their neighboring blacksmiths, the Karaboro. This supposed belonging, this attribution of these creations, aligns with the theory of Austrian anthropologist Herta Haselberger, who conducted field research there in 1960, linking this stylistic typology to the Karaboro or the Gouins (Carl Kjersmeier, 1935, p. 26).

To its mysterious belonging now commonly classified over time in the Turka style by experts and merchants, adds the questioning of its use. It could be linked to the practice of divination (GLAZE Anita, 1981, pp. 54-60). According to Roy and Wheelock, they would be private altar figures, kept out of sight, whose abstract forms would be the receptacle for bush spirits: "They are abstract because they are not human but spirits, and they vary in degrees of abstraction; the artist reminds us that [these effigies] are portraits of ethereal beings, not ancestors or other natural creatures." (Roy and Wheelock, *Burkina Faso Land of the Flying Masks. The Thomas G.B. Wheelock Collection*, 2007, p. 74).

Enigmatic, rare, and yet so imposing, its architectural body powerfully animates the space. The cubist rigor of its rhythmic construction responds to its expressive power, with geometric traits stretching across the entire surface of the face.

Its volumes, its inclined planes, confer upon its silhouette a dynamism and a striking magnitude. The shoulders, inscribed with angular rigor, reinforce its build, its stature conferring both pride and solemnity. Its femininity is exacerbated by the projection of its conical breasts, decorated with circular forms. Its belly, its stylized navel, bearing the characteristic scarifications of the region. To the strict linear rigor of the upper body, skillfully opposes the softness of its pelvis and its fully rounded thighs, giving its musculature remarkable firmness.

Its shiny black patina makes its lines shine while testifying to its past importance, with a resolutely cubist beauty, this work attests to the creative genius of the Turka. For a stylistically similar work acquired by André Soing, then donated by Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière to the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris (inv. 70.2017.66.2).

Resolutely cubist when admiring it, how can you not think of the work of the modernist André Derain, woman with arms outstretched.

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Limba statue

Limba people, Guinea

Late 19th - Early 20th Century
89 cm
Wood, metal, ritual patina

Provenance:

Marshall Mount collection
By descent, New York, USA
Private collection, New York, USA

The narrow corpus, summarized in only a few examples, combining both realism and originality, strength and ferocity, revolutionizes the traditional African sculptural language that often represents femininity with soft, delicate, and sometimes refined traits. This little-known statuary, through the power it exudes and the defiance it inspires, certainly testifies to the strong beliefs of the Limba people, their resilience, and their ability to reinvent their art and society. Driven and forced into exile from the 15th to the 18th century due to invasions by Islamized Fulani, the Limba, settled in scattered groups in the northern coastal region of Guinea, seem to find refuge and protection through these effigies of femininity with eyes charged with magical symbols, ensuring the perpetuation of their community.

The power, the tension, energetically enlivening the effigy with an almost nervous vigor, is masterfully conveyed by the curves and modeling, by the musculature of the arms, and the firmly clenched fists as if holding back a force ready to be unleashed with intensity.

Set on plump legs with an irregular patina, the surface showing signs of wear and tear, possibly indicating the roughness of time or perhaps due to ritual abrasion for protective magic as seen in neighboring ethnicities, these thick legs seem to signify her solidity, stability, and unwavering balance.

From its torso emerges a beautiful round pear-shaped or full ogive breast, nurturing, whose modeling and refined shape soften the astonishment, the hardness, and the almost ferocious expressiveness. A beautiful breast guaranteeing fertility, symbolizing the continuity of the community, reflecting the beauty of femininity and its paramount importance at the heart of these societies.

Its attributes indicate the status, magnifying its power: a square necklace delicately placed on the chest, a ringed neck, and a sophisticated hairstyle featuring lateral buns and a flattened sagittal crest extending to the forehead.

The realistic face, eloquently expressive, both formidable, threatening, and attentive, is rendered by a lifelike gaze, with a

prognathous jaw further revealing her open mouth with visible teeth, exuding violent monstrosity to protect the community by defying malevolent spirits. The eyes burst forth, fixed and unsettling, with their metallic whiteness contrasting with the brown wood, and their large, dilated black pupils.

Beauty, power, and ferocity are masterfully encapsulated here. The rarity of these mysterious protective effigies is explained by the adversities experienced by the Limba people to endure, and their forced migrations. This rare witness, among this limited corpus, of their artistic expression, is admirable both for its sculptural achievement and the power it exudes. Its captivating and disconcerting intensity, sublime and eloquent, radiates through its modeling.

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Baule figure

Baule people, Ivory Coast

19th Century

40,5 cm

Wood

Provenance:

Galerie Olivier Le Corneur, Paris
Marceau Rivière collection, Paris, France
Alberto Costa Romero de Tejada, Barcelona, Spain
Javier Lentini collection, Barcelona, Spain

Publication:

África. *La Figura Imaginada*. Fundació LaCaixa, Barcelona, 2004. n°44, p. 9

Unique within the corpus, this masterpiece destabilizes, fascinates, and intrigues with its beauty and singularity. Its powerful serenity is magnified by its stature, refinement, gesture, and adornment. The sculpted forms, robust and vigorous due to its accentuated musculature, paradoxically suggest lightness, enhanced by its missing feet. The dignitary represented seems to be in weightlessness, in levitation, with its elevated presence remarkably imposing.

The ideal of beauty and perfection among the Baule, representing moral perfection through its traits, is embodied here. Prestige is revealed in its details. Animated by an allied energy and tranquility, its authority and dignity vibrate with admirable majesty.

The distinctly rounded shoulders reinforce its stature, symbolizing power, while the finely sculpted beard collar emphasizes wisdom and maturity (Boyer, 2008, no. 31, p. 151).

Emerging from the torso are two nascent, flattened circular breasts with a dark brown patina, giving an androgynous character to the represented figure, suggesting completeness through the union of both sexes (Joubert, 2016, p. 124).

The finesse of the minute details enhances its gesture and adornment. The surface of its emaciated torso is adorned with subtly

carved scarifications in slight relief, revealing or suggesting an armor, a necklace, an insignia of prestige and high rank.

With fluidity, its delicate gesture attracts and guides the eye to its slender fingers, which, on either side of the navel—slightly rounded, symbolizing wealth and high social status—would evoke a sign of welcome and esteem that spirits make when they encounter a diviner with whom they will form a future alliance (Boyer, 2008, pl. 22 and 29, p. 151 - Boyer in Barbier, 1993, Vol. I, p. 345). This gesture and the very particular treatment of its hands are unparalleled but can be closely associated in finesse with the treatment of the fingers of a work by the Master of Truth.

Framed in a gentle oval, the face of striking peacefulness is sublimated by its crusty patina and the subtle interplay of forms between concave curve and reliefs. Slightly hollowed, the impact of its traits, carefully and clearly drawn, is accentuated. Its fine nasal ridge extends in a gentle continuity to the curved brow arches, intensifying the contours of the hollowed eyes, enhancing the circular shape of the gaze, revealing both its closed eyelids and the depth of introspection and meditation.

The exceptional sophistication of its hairstyle, a testament to the Baoulé's sculptural finesse, contributes to this

quest for perfection. Treated with infinite meticulousness, it reveals ancient styles (Boyer, 2008, pl. 28, p. 151).

Comprising a conical structure at the top of the finely engraved skull, named ko glo, and a double bun, tre si koble, at the nape (Boyer in Joubert, p. 124). Finally, the small, almost imperceptible horns in the braided hair could evoke horns used to contain medicines or magical substances. Symbolically, according to Susan Vogel, elaborate hairstyles, "signs of the civilized person," expressed that "energies once wild and destructive would henceforth work for the benefit of their human host" (From Visible to Invisible, p. 237).

A high dignitary, whose stylistic characteristics are incomparable to any known to date, an intermediary between natural and supernatural forces, asie usu masculine, he majestically embodies the superior function dedicated to him, destined to: "overcome instinct, the irrational, surpass the disorder of the world to inscribe in clear plans, precise contours, a balance, dominate impulsiveness, immobilize the volatile spirit, impose on it the constraint of a measure, a musicality. [...] Impose on an unruly and turbulent being an architectonic, a density, harmonious, gently curved lines" (Boyer, Baulé, 2008, p. 33-34)

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Alain-Michel Boyer. *Baule*. 5 Continents Edition, Milan, 2008
Alain-Michel Boyer. « L'Afrique et la pérennité de l'immatériel » in *Arts & Cultures*. Geneva, 2017, pp. 115-116
Jean-Paul Barbier. *Arts de la Côte d'Ivoire dans les collections Barbier-Mueller*. Vol. I - Vol II. Geneva, 1993







Baule statue

Baule people, Ivory Coast

19th Century

60 cm

Wood, Gold, metal, ritual patina

Provenance:

André Blandin collection, Pairs, France
Lucien Van de Velde collection, Belgium
Marc Sherman collection, New York, USA
Pace Gallery, New York, USA
Patrick & Béatrice Caput collection, Paris, France

Publication:

Alain-Michel Boyer. « Miroirs de l'invisible : la statuaire baoulé » in *Arts d'Afrique Noire*, n°45, 1983
Expo Cat.: *Objetos - Signos de África*. Zaragoza, 2000
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Exhibition:

Objetos-Signos de Africa. Centro de exposiciones y Congresos. Zaragoza. 11 April - 24 June 2000

Could it, with the subtlety of its forms, the refinement of its details, and the deep tranquility that emanates from it, be the new Aphrodite? The Aphrodite of Africa?

Discovered by André Blandin during a population development program near the Bandama River, it has continuously sparked both curiosity and admiration. "Without a doubt, its charm could have satisfied all the demands of troubled and malevolent spirits, but to what homage was it reserved?" wonders Bertrand Goy. A sacred intermediary channeling the spirits and supernatural forces of the bush, or a beloved spouse from the beyond, cherished and carefully preserved by its husband?

Its striking "introspective reflection" (Vogel, *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*, 1997, p. 28) is complemented by its delicacy and suppleness. On the surface of its modeled form, on its body, the history, use, and meaning of this female figure resonate and shine. The shoulders, breasts, and lower abdomen have a dark, almost burnt-looking patina, with additional ritual unctions indicated by thickness. The area around the eyes, the forehead, and the scarifications retain a crusty patina, with some traces of kaolin.

The duality of patinas indicates that it was the spiritual and physical embodiment

of the ideal woman, known as blolo bla. A receptacle for the dark side of the person where the soul resides, an inverted double, honored privately with anointings, elevated to a true deity whose energy would bring peace, serenity, and contribute to the social, moral, and intellectual flourishing of the human being.

It vibrates with these qualities, both through its idealized beauty and the tranquility and gentleness it conveys in its expression, through the perfection of its modeled forms and embodied delicacy. The elaborate hairstyles, here consisting of fine rows of arched braids and incisions on its crown, as well as the refined scarifications animating its chest and belly, were, according to Susan Vogel, "signs of the civilized person," expressing that "the once wild and destructive energies will now work for the good of their human host." (From *the Visible to the Invisible*, p. 237).

A metaphor for its clairvoyance and constant attention to benevolently watch over its host, its large circular eyes, magnified by beautiful eyebrow arches, wide open, accentuate its role. The beauty responds to the strength of the symbolism; the more beautiful the statue, the more benevolent the spirit. Its forms complement and reflect each other in perfect harmony. The angular lines; the pointed and delicate

breasts, the bent knees and elbows, cleverly contrast with the softness of the oval face, with the roundness of its shoulders, and its accentuated waist.

Its frozen stature, its solemn demeanor, echoing the striking calm and tranquility it radiates. The richness of its ornamentation exalts its beauty to signify that of its spirituality. From this conception echoing its symbolism arises the dichotomy of the visible and the invisible, as a visual approach structure characterizing the Baoulé. While the aesthetics of masks and statuettes adhered to remarkable canons of beauty, they were truly secondary to their owners; what they signified in essence took precedence. The supernatural power, benevolent or malevolent, that inhabited the work was fundamental. As Kangah said, the sculptor inscribed and wrote "the address of the spirit," its envelope, its shell.

Its deep and mastered serenity seems capable of alone spreading the goodness and benevolence of the ideal soul incarnated here, its upright and fixed stature maintaining and guaranteeing harmony. Undoubtedly, it is this Aphrodite of Africa, this love of the husband for the woman with ideal aesthetic and moral qualities.

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Susan Vogel. *L'art baoulé, du visible et de l'invisible*. Éditions Adam Biro, Paris, 1997







Baule monkey statue

Baule people, Ivory Coast

19th Century or before

85 cm

Wood, metal, ritual patina

Provenance:

Furman Gallery, New York, USA

Private collection, New York, USA

At the border between bestiality and domesticated delicacy, the simian statues holding a cup, commonly called "gbèkrè," come from a singular corpus, showcasing the rich creative variety of the Baule. At the opposite end of their generally refined and delicate ideals of beauty, these cynocephalic statues strike with their power and their exacerbated wild force. Imbued with ferocity, they impose themselves with their build, their stature, and their facial features.

First mentioned in 1900 by Maurice Delafosse, these works belong to one of the oldest sculptural traditions in Ivory Coast (Danis et Claessens, *Singes baulé*, 2016, p. 31), encapsulating within their features the beliefs in a dreaded supernatural entity.

According to Baoulé conception, no distinction exists between the visible and invisible worlds; these two poles interfere, respond to, and correspond with each other. The visible world, inhabited by humans, is animated by the invisible world where numerous powers intervene in the lives of men. Beneficial or malevolent, these supernatural powers, which cannot be controlled, require "the creation of objects intended for them so that they can be localized and contacted."

The amium, thus named, is this invisible supernatural force that, through the prism of a material support sculpted into

a concrete form, becomes accessible, appears, and comes to life, like this Baoulé monkey, an object of power. Its striking features distinguish it from all inferior powers, demanding offerings, as evidenced by its patina. Its power is signified by its aggressive forms, its bestiality revealing its superiority and authority. This threatening force, thus materialized, allowed for warning the initiates or the community of external dangers it might face (Bouloré in RMN, 2000: 107-108 and Vogel, 1997: 221-230).

Feared: formidable receptacles of supernatural forces, these monkey works were fashioned only by the bravest sculptors, whose knowledge of the invisible world was sufficiently significant and mastered. Rare were those who accepted such a commission, for "the more power at stake in a cult object, the greater the risks incurred by its maker in case of failure, if the effigies produced proved ineffective." (Bouloré, RMN, *Sculptures, Africa, Asia, Oceania, America*, 2000, p. 221-230).

This work magnificently testifies to the union of these two visible and invisible worlds, summarizing within itself these divisions and oppositions, from the malevolent ferocity of supernatural forces to the domesticated, civilized propriety symbolized by the cup, characterizing the balance of the visible world, of society. A remarkably hybrid association, dictated to the sculptor by the diviner amuinfwé, of an

anthropomorphic body and a zoomorphic head.

The ambivalent and uncontrollable force inherent to the supernatural power is here personified. Its bestiality contrasts with the infinite delicacy of its gesture, magnified by the fineness of the treatment of its hands, its fingers holding the cup preciously against its chest. A bestial and sublime offering, fierce and educated, the duality of these two worlds here combined.

Its presence and dynamic are signified by the flexions of its limbs. The expressionist power of its simian head is reinforced by its open, angular mouth with sharp teeth and its piercing gaze marked by deep orbits.

The fineness of the modeling, the vigor of the lines, the fluidity of the curves, the attention to anatomical details, and the elongation of the anthropomorphic body connect this work to style 2, called "elegant," of the morphological classification of Baoulé statues holding a cup established by Borremans-Batist in 1975.

The contrast of the patinas between the lower and upper body, from light brown with mahogany hues to a thick, crusty, dark material, attesting to the offerings once poured, accentuates the importance and beauty of this entity.

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Yoruba Oshe Shango ritual staff

Yoruba people, Nigeria

19th Century

58 x 17 x 9 cm

Wood, ritual patina

Provenance:

Alain de Monbrison, Paris, France

Joan Ferrer Miserol collection, Palma de Mallorca, Spain

David & Mercedes Serra, Barcelona, Spain

Javier Lentini collection, Barcelona, Spain

Publication:

Expo cat.: *África: magia y poder. 2500 años de arte en Nigeria*. Barcelona: Fundación LaCaixa. 1998. p.158. Ill. 141

Xavier Richer; Hélène Joubert. *Dance avec/Dance with Shango, Dieu du Tonnerre/God of Thunder*. Somogy Editions, Paris, 2018. p. 94-95

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Exhibition:

África: magia y poder. 2500 años de arte en Nigeria. Barcelona: Centre Cultural de la Fundació LaCaixa. 23 September - 13 December 1998.

An indispensable icon of Yoruba art, this remarkable Orisha Shango stands out in the pantheon of the most famous works in its corpus.

A sacred intermediary between the supreme being named Olodumare and humans, the Orisha Shango, associated with thunder and lightning, embodies justice and motherhood in turn. Brandished during dances at the annual festival or during weekly ceremonies dedicated to the deity, it conveys, through its sensitivity, the softness of its lines, the fullness of its curves, the beauty of its meticulously sculpted features, and the delicacy of its gestures, the importance of the prayers it carried and the symbolism it embodied.

Linked to motherhood, it was commonly presented on the heads of priests and priestesses and also referenced the trance of its devotees, possessed by the spirit of the supreme being.

Adorned with the stylized double axe adu ara symbolizing the deity Shango, the dignified kneeling figure adopts the characteristic posture "of respect, courtesy, and supplication" (Lawal, Yoruba, 2012, p. 33). The velvety beauty of its curved forms,

the finesse of its modeling exalted by the shine of its patina—a fascinating patina with varying textures, sometimes smooth and shiny, sometimes clear and thick—magnifying each part of its body while testifying to the care it received in the past. The roundness of its knees bent to the ground echoes the shape of its generous, full breasts that it supports delicately, seemingly presenting and offering them simultaneously, a dual and touching devotion.

The elaboration of its adornment signifying the importance of its status can be appreciated throughout its entirety; a belt encircling its hips, magnifying its belly with a shiny mahogany patina on the navel, as if it had been caressed numerous times. Its wrists adorned with a series of bracelets accentuate the gesture of the hands holding the breasts, heavy with nourishing milk, promising a certain future of fertility. Its torso is ennobled by a necklace with a triangular pendant, somewhat faded with time, as if it now impregnated its flesh. Higher up, heralding the characteristic axe of symbolic justice, its long, slender conical headdress is decorated with fine rows of regular linear scarifications across its surface.

Its face, set in a beautiful oval, is endowed with sublime expressiveness, the gaze magnified by its almond-shaped, wide-open eyes, its slightly open, plump lips. The subtle finesse of the nose's contours, extending in a discreet linear continuity to the arched eyebrows, is remarkably meticulous and likely inspired Amedeo Modigliani's blue caryatid work.

Its deep patina, presenting both opaque, thick residues and a shiny smoothness in other areas, with variations in tones from dark brown to mahogany, to brown, yellow, and orange, contrasts and reveals the splendor of its contours, curves, and modeling.

Delicate, imploring, prostrated in complete humility, it nonetheless imposes itself through harmonious and balanced power, between the verticality of the woman, continuity of the community, and the horizontality of the axe of justice intended to guarantee the balance of society. The strength of its symbolism corresponds to the beauty of this masterpiece.

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Jukun statue

Jukun people, Nigeria

16th Century / C14: 1512 - 1601

95,9 cm

Wood, metal, ritual patina

Provenance:

Roger Azar collection, France

By descent

Private collection, New York, USA

Adrian Schlag, Brussels, Belgium

Private collection, Viena, Austria

Publication:

Liliana Albertazzi. *Roger Azar*. *Galleries Magazine*, n°30, April - May 1989, p.129

Kevin Conru. *Anonymous Collectors*. Brussels, 2007

Expo cat.: *Suintante*. Adrian Schlag, Brussels, 2015

The Jukun people reside in the Benue River Valley in Nigeria, near the Mumuye. They are known for their figurative, imaginative sculptures that exhibit significant geometric abstraction. These sculptures are characterized by exaggerated movements, elongated limbs, distinctive gaps between the arms and torso, pronounced waists, overall asymmetry, and reimagined proportions, all showcasing their inventive prowess.

This rare male statue, embodying the confluence of northeastern Nigerian styles and attesting to the interaction and mutual influence between the Jukun and Mumuye, stands as a testament to the exceptional formal invention of this stylistic area and is notable for its rarity.

Initially overlooked, the first sculpture of this style entered the British Museum in the early 20th century and was stylistically attributed to the Ashanti. It wasn't until 1931, with Mack's pioneering study on Jukun

ethnography, that the symbolism and societal role of this statuary were explored. Initially linked to representations of ancestors, wives, and servants, it took field studies by Rubin in the 1960s (Rubin, 1969) to associate these statues with the fertility cult of Mam, as well as their therapeutic and divinatory virtues, endowed with powerful energies. According to Richard Fardon (in Nigeria, 2012, p. 75), these statues were specifically "ambulatory sculptures" since Jukun masks and figures were both used in processions.

The sculpture's dynamism, aimed more at exalting power than movement, is marked by a suggested asymmetry. Positioned on small, widely spaced legs, the figure's broad pelvis breaks its verticality, accentuated by its hands framing the torso, which initially appear as a belt due to the missing arms—a sign of its antiquity and the turbulent history of the Jukun people. The long torso extends harmoniously in a regular linear continuity up to the neck. The small,

stylized, flattened abstract face features a mouth and jaw stretched and elongated towards the ground. Its metallic circular pupils give it a unique expressiveness, suggesting astonishment, curiosity, as well as discernment. The distended earlobes, lateralized, accentuate the nearly tapered lower face. A sagittal crest-shaped headdress, finely engraved, crowns the face.

The damages (missing parts of the headdress and surface chips) along with the burnt patina on the torso reveal its complex and tumultuous history, reflecting the chaos caused by the Ibo Civil War in southern Nigeria during the 1960s, and the subsequent political and religious upheavals that led to the abandonment of the cults and their material supports.

The deep, oily black patina, indicative of past anointments, highlights the statue's silhouette, prestige, and the power it was endowed with and honored for.

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Kota - Ndumu reliquary figure

Kota people, Gabon

18th Century

44 cm

Wood, copper, bronze

Provenance:

M. Gabirault collection, 1930's, France
Alain Bovis, Paris, France

Publication:

Les Forêts natales, Arts d'Afrique équatoriale atlantique. Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2017. III 232

Kota: Digital Excavations in African Art. Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Misuri, 2015
New Light. Tribal Art Magazine Hors Série n°5, 2015. p. 71

Exhibition:

Paris, France: "Les Forêts natales, Arts d'Afrique équatoriale atlantique", Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, 3 October 2017 - 21 January 2018
San Luis, Misuri. "Kota: Digital Excavations in African Art", Pulitzer Arts Foundation, October 16, 2015 – March 19, 2016

The intelligence of forms, the alliance of materials, the stylistic audacity of rearrangement and schematization of the body in a fabulous abstraction, shine here through this reliquary, an unwavering guardian of the spirits of the ancestors. Its material, an undeniable sign of wealth, requiring the most accomplished skill and mastery, with the reflections of its brilliance, was intended to ward off malevolent spirits.

"A visual marker of a world where the ancestors continue to watch over their descendants," says Louis Perrois. Its symbolism and spiritual role are matched by its refinement and the grandeur of its composition, showcasing a technical genius, the most eloquent of the primitive arts. Upon their discovery in 1880 at the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum of the University of Oxford, they no longer shone on baskets of bones but on the modernists, infusing them with the impetus for new inspirations.

Belonging to the Ndumu stylistic canon, this reliquary figure stands out remarkably within the corpus for the expression it emanates.

All the naturalism of the human figure is gracefully removed to transform into a minimal and scholarly composition of geometric forms, profoundly cubist. The face, thus transformed, reduced, and gathered under its most elementary features, results in an inventive two-dimensional representation of forms.

This formal, dimensional play of the statuary, skillfully responding to its symbolism, positions the Kota at the border between two interpenetrating worlds: the spiritual world, the cult of ancestors, and the "political world that asserts its authority through the prestige of history," as noted by Frédéric Cloth.

A nervous and rigorous sculpture, surprisingly dynamic due to the slightly openwork base that elevates the schematized legs with an impulse. The ringed neck offers it sophisticated elegance. The lateral parts forming small arms bestow the reliquary with a very singular presence. The interplay of planes, superpositions, volumes, and materials magnifies the face. Diamond-shaped, the face is bisected by two median lines forming a cross, meeting

at the small protruding nose treated horizontally.

The impact of the gaze is accentuated by a play of material and forms, the almond-shaped eyes, with pupils set off by two darker circular beads. Topped with a beautiful flattened crest, crescent-shaped, rhythmically divided by a curved median ridge, connected to the face at its extremities. This technical prowess, playing on shapes and materials, is complemented by the meticulous detail of the fine engravings that adorn it.

An iconic symbol of the primitive arts, tending towards abstraction, this reliquary stands out from the corpus with its intriguing, surprising, and singular expressiveness.

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Kongo fetish

Kongo people, Democratic Republic of the Congo

19th Century

36 cm

Wood, pigments, metal,
ritual patina

Provenance:

Private collection, Florida, USA

Discovered at the end of the 17th century by Olfert Dapper (Dapper, Dictionary of Africa, 1686, p.336), the essential, famous, and astonishingly powerful Kongo statuery demonstrates the full force and inventiveness of African sculptural art. Revealed to the public in the 1930s through the first exhibitions: Art Nègre (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1930), the Exhibition of African and Oceanic Art (Galerie du Théâtre Pigalle, Paris, 1930), and African Negro Art (MoMA, New York, 1935), it continuously captivated, frightened, intrigued, and inspired modern and contemporary artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Embodied as a powerful spirit, used during oath-taking or vow-making, intended for the protection of the clan or lineage (Felix, M.L., *Art & Kongos*, Brussels, 1995, p. 105), this type of object was used by the traditional specialist, the nganga, the only person in society authorized to handle it. At the request of consultants, it was used to cast and break spells. Filled with magic and created by the blacksmith-sorcerer, it served as an intermediary between the visible and invisible worlds, between the living and the ancestors. Its glass eyes attest to this visual acuity discerning these two worlds, clearly expressed here. A request was sealed through its intermediary with the nkisi spirit it embodied, activating its power to formalize a request for help or healing.

Its body has a unique, attractive light patina with different rough textures in yellow, brown, black, and orange hues, creating a bewildering irregularity across its surface, contrasting with the smoothness of its oval face, rounded shoulders, wavy arms, and the circular area where the abdominal charge once was. The power and magic of this area shine through its imposing width and the gaping void it left, yet fully measured, overflowing, imposing, magnifying both its absence and the reverberating power of its past presence.

Its long, elongated face features the idealized criteria of Kongo beauty: its plump mouth with delicately curled lips, slightly parted over carved teeth, seems to murmur, speak, express—an attitude interpreted by Raoul Lehuard as a gesture of lamentation or supplication.

Its finely arched and engraved eyebrows attest to the meticulous execution it received, revealing the intense and disconcerting paradox of this statuery. It alternates between bewildering defiance, reverential fear warding off malevolent spirits, and fine delicacy. In this superbly achieved contrast between the embodiment of power and beauty, it expresses the full complexity of these nkonde statues, “ambivalent and multifunctional objects that attack as they protect and heal” (Felix, *Art & Kongos*, 1995, p. 67).

Its pose, with a firmly extended hand brandishing an attribute now lost, called telema lwimbanganga, faithfully corresponds to a sacred attitude adopted by Kongo nobility and diviners—a distinctive sign of absolute authority, accentuated by the oversized right arm once holding a weapon.

According to Robert Farris Thompson (Falgayrettes-Leveau, *The Kongo Gesture*, 2002, p. 55), the standing position, firmly anchored on small, tightly stretched legs called fwokama, is a sign of life. It respectfully expresses a dynamic, sustained, firm, and determined request, conveyed by the entire body, potentially associated with healing and divination rites.

The authority of these signified vows, their power, and prestige are here augmented by the plethora of magical charges forming a necklace: the neck is wrapped with numerous braided attachments, accentuating the power of its speech and the vow made.

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Olfert Dappe. *Dictionnaire de l'Afrique*, 1686







Songye fetish

Songye people, Democratic Republic of the Congo

19th century or before

46,5 cm

Wood, metal, lizard skin, leather, ritual charges, animal hairs & fibers, ritual patina

Provenance:

Collection Joseph (1923-2012) & Doris (1926-2007) Gerofsky, New York, USA, until 1999 John Giltsoff (1947-2014), London/New York/Girona, 1999
Dr. Jörg Rumpf, Colonia, Germany
Galerie Lucas Ratton, Paris, France
Private collection, The Netherlands, 2020-2024

Publication:

Irwin Hersey. *Primitive Art Newsletter*. Vol.2. 1979. n°9
Werner Schmalenbach. *Afrikanische Kunst aus Kölner Privatsammlungen*. Cologne, 2004. p. 7

Inhabited by a force, a power, an unmatched breath, the Songye statuery, as fascinating in its form as formidable in its beauty associated with magical-religious beliefs, evoked distrust, fear, and admiration during its first encounters with Europeans. From the 19th century, artists such as Paul Gauguin and Georges Braque began to appreciate its extraordinary creativity combined with formal power.

Living on a vast territory between the Sankuru in the west and the Lualaba in the east, the largest concentration of Songye is found in the present-day province of Kasai Oriental, also occupying parts of the provinces of Katanga and Kivu. The Songye do not constitute a homogeneous sociocultural entity, subdividing into several linguistic and cultural groups, they are essentially organized around chiefdoms.

Believing in the links between the world of humans and that of spirits, through the mystical power of the chiefdom (Daniel Bieduyck, 1992, p.27), animated by magical-religious ideals, they shape a statuery that serves both as an effigy of power with attributes of kings and as an intermediary between these two poles.

Of a religious nature and bearing political references, this statuery with supernatural connotations through its form and ornaments allowed humans to maintain a connection with the spiritual world.

The large Songye statues, like this one, were intended to serve an entire community, an entire village, and were associated with procreation, protection

against diseases, witchcraft, war, and the preservation of territorial claims (Hersak, 1986, p.120).

Their real power derived from the *bishima*, hidden substances composed of ingredients "that provide the aggressive content capable of neutralizing the source of malevolent action." (Hersak, 1995, pp. 345-347). This remarkable example of a resonant presence shines with its black, deep, oozing patina, so brilliant attesting to its power, demonstrating its ability to ward off malevolent spirits.

Invariably handled by an experienced sorcerer, it is richly adorned with characteristic attributes of chiefs, warriors, or hunters, three highly respected social ranks essential to the survival of the community. Its face is animated with circular metal nails, its neck with a necklace, the bust presents a charge in snake skin, a symbol of renewal, life, and death combined, the lower body encircled by finely braided vegetal fibers.

To its imposing, fixed stature, whose volumes projected into space, in reliefs, accentuate its presence, responds its striking and destabilizing expressiveness. Its angular forms, drawing the rigidity of its build, the flattened hands with fingers signified by fine engravings, skillfully contrast while magnifying the circular forms of the prominent navel and the oval face.

The grandeur of its almond-shaped, half-closed eyes, seemingly suggesting the interiority and acuity it is animated with,

that of perceiving, seeing, and probing these two earthly and spiritual worlds intensifies this power. The triangular nose reveals a wide-open mouth from which a cry, a scream, symbolically and probably to ward off evil, seems to emerge.

As Neyt indicates, reveals, and explains, each symbol, each trait, each gesture is not a coincidence or a formal liberty born from the sculptor's imagination. Each form, each detail holds meaning. The gesture of communication, the gaze, and the speech carry a translated symbolic meaning. "The half-closed eyes recall the moments of transition between day and night when spirits and ancestors return. A gaze of vigilance mixed with serenity." Of interiority and discernment mixed.

The face like this one, with a wide-open mouth from which teeth seem to appear deep inside, testifies to aggressiveness. Here, according to the classification, it would belong to type 2, representing only twenty percent of the statuery. The weight of earthly energies revealed in its neck and shoulders, here massive and angular, attests to and reinforces its strength and hardness.

This work vibrates with force, power; it testifies through its expressiveness to the disconcerting and learned creative genius of the Songye, in all its complexity and diversity, and to their spirituality.

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Viviane Baeke. *La Force. Statuaire rituelle Songye*. Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, 2004. P. 13 – 37







Songye statue

Songye people, Democratic Republic of the Congo

19th Century

21 cm

Wood, metal, ritual patina

Provenance:

Private collection, Detroit, USA

The contortion of the body with simplified, schematized forms reduced to the essential, and the head with meticulously worked, expressive features, imparts a remarkable and singular strangeness to the work. Breaking symmetry, reinventing rhythm and classical representations, the face turned to the side is a stylistic characteristic attributed, according to Neyt (2004: 308), to Songye figures from the Milembwe and Belande regions.

The significance of the gesture and attitude remains enigmatic. Was it a way to guard against evil spirits, suggesting that the character's attention and acuity were directed in all directions? A protective and beneficial stance, a warning against malevolent forces? Their powers, however, are undeniable.

The Nkisi, magical and sacred signs, are inhabited by cosmic forces that renew during new moons. They protected their

owners, the clan, the community. Whether collective or individual, this type of nkisi was reserved for family or personal use.

Deeply original canon unique to the Milembwe, demonstrating their inventiveness. The wood is covered with a dark brown, shiny patina, slightly oozing, revealing that this nkisi had been regularly nourished to protect the people or families it belonged to.

Resting on a circular pedestal base, elevating its importance and power, the body is represented by a solid, diamond shape, split on one side, with an angled cut signifying both the flexion of the legs and the belly. The torso, guessed and suggested, tapers, revealing the face inscribed in an oval shape. The strict linearity of the body contrasting with the roundness of its head, sublimates this particular distortion. The simplicity of the body opposes the meticulous detail of the

facial features, giving them more power and expressiveness. The closed eyes, in relief with sunken outlines, intensify the sensation of serenity. The flat, triangular nose and the incised, smiling curved mouth suggest its benevolent nature.

Its silhouette, animated by a unique and particular momentum, its complete distortion from which nonetheless emerge balance and elegance, makes this work unsettling for both the viewer and malevolent spirits alike.

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François Neyt. *Songye: La redoutable statuaire Songye d'Afrique Centrale*. Fonds Mercator, Brussels, 2009







Chokwe statue

Chokwe people, Muzamba Region, Angola

19th Century

38 cm

Wood, pigments

Provenance:

Private collection, New York, USA
Cesar Lucien Scaff, Cleveland, USA
By descent
Montagut Gallery, Barcelona
Private collection, Belgium

Publication:

François Neyt. *Sculptures et formes d'Afrique | African Sculptures and Forms. 5 Continents*, 2018. p. 58

The power of Chokwe royalty is matched by the strength of its art. This extraordinary and emblematic sculptural tradition flourished from the 18th to the early 19th century, particularly through the art of the court.

The genius of this style was aptly summarized in the early 20th century by Fonseca Cardoso: “the suppleness of forms, dynamism, realism, fine details, and powerfully modeled musculature.”

The fullness of the forms, executed with the most sublime finish, testifies to the mastery of Chokwe art, the importance of the chief, the dignitary represented, aiming through the prism of art to make his prestige and power shine. This is reflected in the brilliance of its patina, highlighting its smooth surface and exalting its forms.

The contained, solid, and powerful force is manifested through its robust musculature. Resting on feet whose particularly detailed toes and thickness metaphorically suggest stability, support, and certain maintenance, the character represented demonstrates that his position as a dignitary is unmovable. His posture

suggests a contained movement, indicated by his bent knees, his arms angled slightly backward, counterbalancing the movement. This attitude does not seem to reflect violent ferocity, although his imposing build might suggest it, but rather a skilled, alert, and spontaneous defiance, ready to spring into action. The infinite splendor of his silhouette alternates harmoniously between sinuous lines, on which the eye glides, and angular ones, on which it pauses.

The remarkable fineness and care of the details attest to the sculptor's talent, a Chokwe genius. From the finely crafted fingers and nails, the finely engraved scarifications enhancing his torso and hips, to the supple and airy rendering of his coiffure, every detail highlights the technical prowess, giving this masterpiece its strength and refinement.

The full and oval face, with finely sculpted features, lights up with a hint of a smile, “witnessing the courteous atmosphere of the court” (Art and Mythologies, Figures Tshokwe, p.54). His sumptuous coiffure, *mutwe wa kayanda*, perfects his appearance, ennobles his personality, and

completes the rhythmic harmony of his body. Through its deeply curved shapes, it fluidly integrates the composition, imparting a remarkable lightness to the massive body. In profile, it skillfully plays with concave and convex forms between its outline and the two round buns at the back of the character's head, amplifying and announcing the rhythmic movement of the shoulders, arms, and hips.

His shiny patina, in dark brown tones, with mahogany highlights—particularly on the belly, chin, and top of the forehead—makes the chief “naked in his sacred dignity, evoked as a revered ancestor, calm and peaceful as disembodied spirits are.” (Art and Mythologies, Figures Tshokwe, p.54).

According to Marie-Louise Bastin, Chokwe statuary combines “plastic balance, inventive forms, and meticulous craftsmanship.” This masterpiece prodigiously illustrates the power and strength of both Chokwe royalty and art.

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