



# Spoon

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Spoon

**Born:** 1850 - 1950

**Object Type:** spoon

**Materials:** Wood

**Measurements:** h. 472 x w. 110 x d. 55 mm

**Accession Number:** 206

**Historic Period:** 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia

**Cultural Group:** Dan

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Among the Dan people of the Guinea Coast region of what is now Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, ceremonial spoons such as this are known as *wunkirmian* or *wake-mia* (roughly translated as 'feast spoon'). Carved with great skill and precision and produced in great numbers across the region until the mid-twentieth century, these large spoons served a principally symbolic rather than practical function within past Dan communities – where they were awarded to the local woman deemed the chief hostess within a particular village quarter [1]. This honorary position, the bearer of which assumed the title of *wunkirle* and was entrusted with their village quarter's *wunkirmian* spoon, was endowed with much social status but also assumed great responsibility within their local community – organising and overseeing feast days as well as hosting outsiders, especially during religious festival seasons.

*Wunkirmian* spoons were also considered a source of great spiritual power. Consequently, the creation of a new spoon was marked by a series of prescribed sacrifices and *wunkirmian* appeared alongside other important sacred objects in masquerade performances – during which the nominated *wunkirle* would parade her spoon throughout her village quarter while distributing gifts and grains to local people [2]. In their ability to link the social to the religious via the medium of feasting, *wunkirmian* spoons therefore acted as a reminder that a *wunkirle*'s hosting responsibility extended not just to her community's worldly inhabitants but to the spiritual realm present alongside it.

Like many *wunkirmian*, this example blends human anatomical components with abstracted forms to

create a loosely anthropomorphic figure [3]. While most extant *wunkirmian* spoons incorporate human heads within their handle sections, some Dan carvers used anatomically detailed human legs to form the spoon's handle. This *wunkirmian* includes both the head and torso of a slender female figure with prominent calves supporting a crucible above, which is carved on its reverse with herringbone-style patterning. According to some local accounts, a carver's decision to use legs was, aside from allowing them an opportunity to demonstrate their artistry, meant to evoke the crowds of people who come on foot to be fed from the bountiful stores of their local *wunkirle*.

Theo Weiss, July 2021

[1] Susan Vogel [ed.], *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 70-71

[2] Steven Hooper [ed.], *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue. Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), UEA 206

[3] Barbara Johnson, *Four Dan Sculptors: Continuity and Change* (San Francisco State University Press, 1987), 20

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## Further Reading

Eberhard Fischer & Hans Himmelheber, 'Spoons of the Dan (Liberia/Ivory Coast),' in Homberger [ed.], *Looking, Serving, Eating - Emblems of Abundance*, Museum Rietberg (1991).

Alexander Ives Bortolot & Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers [eds.], *Visions from the Forests: The Art of Liberia and Sierra Leone*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (2014).

Ernst Winizki, *Afrikanische Löffel /African Spoons*, Museum Rietberg (1990).

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## Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett on 21st May 1970.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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