



Male figure

On display

Title/Description: Male figure

Born: 1800 - 1999

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Brass, Wood

Measurements: h. 381 w. 77 x d. 99 mm Including Brass fixings: (h. 397 x w. 77 x d. 99 mm)

Accession Number: 215

Historic Period: 19th century, 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Côte d'Ivoire

Cultural Group: Baule

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Ancestor figures are never carved among the Baule; the ancestors, who are a powerful force, instead receive sacrifices on special stools and chairs. Figures (*waka sorta*, wooden persons) like this one are the *locus* for spirit spouses. The Baule believe that everyone had a spouse in the other world before they were born into this one (see Vogel, 1981: 73). Men would have a *blolo bla*, a 'spirit wife', while women have a *blolo bian*, a 'spirit husband'. The diviner may advise anyone who has difficulties with marriage, fertility etc., to commission a figure of a spirit spouse and set up a shrine for it, as such problems are attributed to a restive spirit spouse who must be appeased. The spirit itself may indicate to the diviner, the client and the carver the details of posture, scarification and coiffure, and even which tree should be used in making its figure.

This statuette, with cupped hands held loosely in front, is unusual in posture and proportions. Most Baule figures have the arms carved along the sides of the body, whether attached or free. The head is rather smaller than the Baule standard, and the body is considerably shorter than the legs. The slender build and exquisite finish give an impression of other-worldly beauty which is heightened by the naturalistic, yet serenely idealised head with its minimal tribal scarification. The coiffure is marvellously detailed; the long legs with muscular calves and astonishingly long feet may embody a canon of male beauty. The ears are shown as larger than the norm — perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that this spirit husband's pose was intended to convey an aura of receptive, even sympathetic attention.



A male figure, illustrated by Meauzé (1968: 68-9), may be by the same carver, since it too is unorthodox in attitude and proportions; if so, we have here one of only two known works by the hand of a Baule master.

An old split down the right side of the head and body has at some time been filled; this serves only to accentuate the original poignant twist to the head.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 130.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1960.

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