



Standing female figure

On display

Title/Description: Standing female figure

Born: 1900 c. - 1999 c.

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 510 x w. 120 x d. 110 mm

Accession Number: 571

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Côte d'Ivoire

Numbering about 1 million at the turn of the twentieth century, the Baule form part of the Akan group and occupy a part of the eastern Ivory Coast that is both forest and savanna. Some of the first African sculpture sought out by European collectors was produced by the Baule. The representation of exotic details, such as hairstyle, scarification pattern and the serenity of expression appealed to European taste. Moderation, balance, and positioning are significant aesthetic criteria for the Baule, idealising the human figure.

Standing on a circular base with legs slightly flexed, this female figure appears to be a Baule Spirit Spouse, or *Blole Bla* and has been designed with great care and attention. The cylindrical torso, patterns of raised elaborate scarification marks, full breasts, and large pelvic area are cultural indicators of beauty, and signify ability for childbirth. In Baule culture, large calf muscles have been acknowledged as a sign of beauty, as well as well-placed feet with straight toes. The downward-looking eyes demonstrate a sense of privacy. Generally portrayed in a standing position of formal calmness with arms close to the body, attention is focused upon the head with emphasis given to detailed face, neck scarification and elaborate coiffures, known as a Baule Tre, a typical tripartite arrangement. This figure also displays pierced ears, but with no evidence of earrings.

The scarification on this particular figure is extraordinarily elaborate and appears on the face, the front and back of the neck, breasts, and stomach. The mouth projects forwards and the hands rest on the stomach around the protruding navel, which is a sign of grace and peace. This gesture of hands on the navel has great meaning for the Baule, as the same gesture is 'made by certain spirits to show their respect or deference when they meet humans'. The navel or 'kotoa' is the symbol for life and when protruding indicates a carnal link. There appears to be stylised upper arm-bands on each arm.

The Baule believe that people are born into this world already married, and this spirit spouse can impact, for good and evil, upon all areas of life of the spouse on earth. After earthly marriage, one night of the week is set aside for sleeping with the spirit spouse and earthly spouses may not sleep together. The carvings are kept wrapped in cloth for protection from prying eyes and usually set up in a private shrine area within the owner's house. The owner tends to it, unwrapping it to feed it, oil it, and care for it to ensure it will not make trouble. This figure represents the marital bond shared between man and woman, however, ultimately the Baule Spirit spouse symbolises fertility and fecundity. Despite the privacy and secrecy with which these figures are afforded, the Baule are not reticent about acknowledging they have a spirit spouse, and sculptural form is unimportant to the efficacy of the shrine. As Vogel suggests the Baule, 'focused on the spiritual presence associated with the object, and were only marginally concerned with the physical form of the object' (Vogel, 1997: p17).

Helen Coleman

Entry written for VADs website (www.vads.ac.uk)

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Adrian Farquhar in 1974.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1989.
