



Female figure

Not on display**Title/Description:** Female figure**Born:** 1780 c.**Object Type:** Figure**Materials:** Wood**Measurements:** h. 662 mm**Accession Number:** 1094**Historic Period:** 18th century**Production Place:** Africa, Mali**Cultural Group:** Dogon**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1993

The Dogon have inhabited the Bandiagara cliff escarpment and plateau in southern Mali since the fifteenth century. The area has yielded a remarkable and significant number of carved wooden figures; attributable to both the favourable climatic conditions and the high esteem and reverence in which these figures are held.

This wooden figure has been dated to c.1780. The right arm has been broken, as have the right hand and the toes. The hands originally would have sat under the protruding stomach. Scarification patterning is visible on the breasts, stomach, neck, and above the ankles. The hair is styled in a braided or plaited effect. There are seven bracelets on the left arm and what appear to be ankle chains on both legs.

As a general characterisation, Dogon statues render the human body to a simplified form. The elongated and geometric forms suggests an impression of immobility, whilst conveying latent movement. She is well carved, reflecting Dogon ideals of figural proportion and aesthetic representation. The figure shares stylistic kinship with the highly 'Cubist' and abstract Toro sculpture of the southern cliff face. These sculptures are more schematic and less realistic than those of the north. They are distinguished by clean, sharp lines and defined geometric shapes. The facial features include an arrow-shaped nose and defined button-shaped eyes.

According to information collected by the Musee de l'Homme, figures of this type are called 'dege dal nda' which means 'sculptures of the terrace' and are stored in the house of the hogon, the religious leader of the region. She symbolises the reality of the past and the present, and must be considered in the context of the Dogon belief system, a world of dual but parallel realities. Used for display purposes, these figures seem different in function from those normally placed on the family ancestral altar to serve as supporters of the deceased person's soul. The relatively clean surface indicates no sacrificial coating, but similar figures are covered with a thin layer of varnish. It has

been suggested that the hands folded across the stomach indicate she is pregnant (Rubin. 1994) These statues were kept by women and belonged on women's altars, symbolising the feminine ancestor and used to ward off sterility and ensure a good pregnancy. Rubin suggests the loops of the nose, mouth, and ears symbolise weaving and these statues were used during the course of weaving where young women were taught the craft and during women's initiation ceremonies that ended with excision.

Helen Coleman

Entry from VADS website (<https://vads.ac.uk>)

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1993 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
