



Standing female figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Standing female figure

Born: 1900 - 1950

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Brass, Wood

Measurements: h. 380 x w. 120 x d. 90 mm

Accession Number: 198

Historic Period: 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Africa, Mali, Ségou

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This figure is an admirable product of the Ségou school of carving; some forty-five carvings are recognised as belonging to this group, including eight standing female figures, of which this is perhaps the finest. An initial study by Allen Wardwell (1966) identified the carver of this figure as the creator of some other pieces of the Ségou *oeuvre*. Later, Ezio Bassani (1978) reviewed the whole body of known Ségou pieces and concluded that the hands of three master carvers could be detected. He has suggested that the three carvers should be named: the Master of the Antelopes, the Master of the Slender Figure and the Master of the Aquiline Profile.

As far as can be conjectured from the known history of Ségou carvings, they fall into three periods : the first around 1906 (the date of the Mission Desplagnes, when a *N'tomo* mask was collected and the celebrated photograph of Bambara antelope maskers was taken by Delafosse), the second about 1919-23 and the third in the 1930s. Of these, the Master of the Slender Figure, the carver of the present piece, was active during the second period.

The Ségou style, with its characteristic head profile, may well be of several centuries' standing, since there is a terracotta head in the Museum of Mankind (1972 Af 29-3), which, though undocumented, is clearly from the cemeteries near Konodimini and Barouéli, between Ségou and Bamako. This matches the heads of the modern Ségou-style wood carvings sufficiently well to give this hypothesis credence.

These cemeteries date to about AD 1200-1500, the period between the apogee and the decline of the empire of Mali. The Bambara (more correctly Barnana) came from the east to their present area in

about the 16th century, and founded Kaarta and Ségou, two important states of Mali.

Among the Bambara, carvers belong to the blacksmith caste; they carve utilitarian objects such as hoe-handles as well as the masks and figures that interest us. The figure is typically Bambara, with its angular features and conical breasts; the carver's artistry is manifest in the dynamic, balanced angles of the profiled head and body contrasting with the narrow, almost angelfish-like frontal view of the head and the robust hands and feet. The surface enrichment of cicatrizations shown as chip-carved rows of triangles is not a rendering of Bambara body decoration.

Masks of the *N'tomo* society, which relates to the progressive stages of a boy's life and which holds its main festival at harvest time, chiefly come from the region to the south-east of Ségou; some of these masks are surmounted by female figures closely resembling the present one. They are said to represent the twin of the ancestor who invented agriculture and stole seeds from the sky in an attempt to conquer the world. The separately carved figures may have been placed around or near to altars.

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. 110-111.

Provenance

Formerly belonging to Paul Elsas.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Paul Elsas through Mme. Simone Collinet in 1953.

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