



Hunting whistle or flute

Not on display

Title/Description: Hunting whistle or flute

Born: 1900 - 1999

Object Type: Musical instrument

Materials: Leather, Wood

Measurements: h. 390 x w. 75 x d. 35 mm

Accession Number: 200

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Burkina Faso

Cultural Group: Gurisi

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

One of many 'anthropomorphic' style whistles found in an area stretching from Mali to Northern Ghana, this whistle is of wood and partly bound in leather. The protective leather strap-binding begins under the embouchure, round the 'neck', crossing down the 'body' ending in a crossover below the 'arms'. A knot midway between the 'shoulders' prevents unravelling. The leather is very worn, especially around the embouchure where the uncovered wood is darker than that showing through the worn leather. This is probably due to age, wear and exposure to sunlight. Wear on the 'body' of the whistle suggests regular use and constant rubbing when worn against skin. A leather holding strap, now missing, would have threaded through two holes at the end of the whistle. Smaller whistles were worn around the neck and larger ones across the shoulder. Held vertically when played and, with lips touching, the whistle is blown across the top of the mouth-opening. A hole in the side of one 'arm' allows a second tone to be played. Wooden objects in Africa can suffer from damp, humid conditions and woodworm; although this whistle is thought to be over one hundred years old its reasonable condition suggests it may have been a collector's item for some time.

The hunting whistle was used for sending messages using locally agreed signals, similar to the use of drums elsewhere. Though limited in tone, coded signals could convey numerous types of messages to the fields, the forest, another village, the market, a funeral or a dance, or report a fight. The time of day, arrivals and departures of friends or enemies could all be signalled. A Gurunsi hunter, equipped with bows, arrows, quivers and whistle might join groups of men and women from other villages for both hunting and fishing. Hunting was easy as there was plenty of game around.

This Gurunsi whistle implies an anthropomorphic form while retaining the shape of the utilitarian whistle. There are numerous variations on this particular style in which the basic form remains while the angle and shape of the 'arms' and 'shoulders' vary from strong geometric lines to gentle curves. The 'head' or embouchure also varies in size and form. On some whistles a carved human head is the only human feature on an otherwise geometric body. The geometric outlines of the whistles are repeated on many aspects of everyday life amongst the Gurunsi peoples; for the Nankani the distinctive angular and straight-lined designs symbolise women as childbearers and nurturers. The symbolism is emphasised by using the designs on a range of domestic surfaces such as the pottery, basketwork, internal wall and furniture decorations. Similar designs are used for women's scarification. Decorative art is thus used as a means of reinforcing cultural beliefs and local ethnic identity.

The Gurunsi, one of the older populations who live in the vast plain of the three Volta rivers, are made up of four different groups, among them, the Sissala, Kasena, Nunumi and Nankani. Each has their own Gur dialect but there is no common language. They live east of the Upper Volta where agriculture predominates, growing crops of sorgham, rice, maize, tobacco and cotton, millet and peanuts, amongst others. In some parts during the winter months (May-September) rainfall can be extremely high, over 1,000 mm in 66 days has been recorded in the Leo area. The type of wood used for the whistle is unknown. Species found in forest areas include tamarind, acacia, Baobab and African rosewood. The fruit, leaves, bark and wood provide food and materials, as well as extracts for ritual use and medicinal purposes.

Barbara Milton

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

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from H. Reisser in 1972.

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