



# Akua'ba

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Akua'ba

**Born:** 1850 - 1950

**Measurements:** h. 400 x w. 135 x d. 60 mm

**Accession Number:** 226


**Historic Period:** 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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*Akua 'ba* (plural *akua mma*) dolls, fill a multiple role since they may at the same time be a girl's plaything, a fertility aid for a barren woman, or a charm carried by a pregnant woman in the hope of a beautiful girl-baby (Cole and Ross, 1977 : 103-7). A myth tells of the woman Akua who was barren; a priest advised her to commission a carver to make her a small wooden child (*dua ba*). She was told to care for it in every way and carry it on her back tucked into her waist cloth as if it were a real baby. Even though the other women mocked her, she did these things and eventually had a beautiful daughter.

The characteristic features of these dolls are: flat round head, female sex and ringed neck. The round head embodies the Asante ideal of a high forehead slightly flattened by moulding the skull during infancy. The dolls are female because Akua's first child was a girl, and in matrilineal Asante society a daughter will carry on the family name; mothers may also prefer daughters, who will help with chores and the younger children. Male *akua mma* figures are a rare form. The ringed neck is a convention for depicting rolls of fat, a sign of beauty and prosperity. An *akua 'ba* should be consecrated by a priest to be an effective charm against barrenness.

An Asante woman when pregnant takes care to avoid looking at anything ugly or deformed lest it affect the foetus, thus the dolls embody an ideal of beauty. The small scars on the face are a prophylaxis  against infantile convulsions. There is a panel of engraved designs on the back of the head which have been explained as a device against witchcraft; they are found on about a fifth of *akua mma* and may be related to somewhat similar symbols on *Mossi biiga* dolls from the Upper Volta (see UEA 573 and Roy, 1981 : 47-50). The tiny blue beads may be the kind that were made in the early years of the nineteenth century, but were soon afterwards discontinued, as their small size made them too difficult to thread.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Hooper, Steven (ed.) *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American art*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press in association with University of East Anglia, 1997, cat no. 92, p.138.

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## **Provenance**

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1965.

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

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