



Miniature head

Not on display

Title/Description: Miniature head

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Elephant ivory

Measurements: h. 57 x w. 27 x d. 34 mm

Accession Number: 241

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

Production Place: Africa, Gabon

Cultural Group: Fang

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Stylistically this miniature ivory head belongs to the Nzaman-Betsi group of the Fang, who live in the western part of Fang country: the exquisite detail of the hair, braided to a queue at the back, the concave face and 'cowrieshell' eyes are all characteristic. This style is, however, typically represented by wooden heads some 9-12 inches (22-30 cm) high or by whole figures, carved as guardians of bark boxes containing the bones of ancestors (see UEA 240), and this miniature head does not fit into that pattern.

In Gabon, miniature heads do in fact occur on the ends of fly-whisk handles, ceremonial iron gongs and ivory horns (Perrois, 1979: pls. 233-5). Perrois's plate 233, illustrating the end detail of an ivory horn from the Tsogho, who live to the south and south-west of Fang country, makes it almost certain that this head is the end of a similar oliphant from the Fang.

In the Gabon area, if a ritual object (such as this oliphant would have been) was damaged, it might be thrown away or burnt before its replacement with a fresh piece. Such a practice is at least one hypothesis to explain the fire-damaged condition of this head.

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. 172.

Provenance

Formerly belonging to Mariange Ciolkowski, Paris.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1950.

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