



Female figure with child

On display

Title/Description: Female figure with child

Born: 1900 c. - 1999 c.

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 457 x w. 142 x d. 148 mm

Accession Number: 572

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Western Africa

Cultural Group: Baule

This type of mother and child figure is found among the sculpture of many African tribes such as the Guinea Coast, Congo and even Cote d'Ivoire. It is a carving that is pre-Christian in most areas but was influenced by early Christian missions. It is one of the very few African carvings of this subject that suggests an emotional active response between mother and child.

Over two centuries ago, Baule originated from Akan in southern Ghana before a secession occurred and the people relocated to Côte d'Ivoire. Sculpting is among the beautiful cultural legacies of the Baule tribe. Among these legacies is this spectacular maternity figurine that symbolises a mother and her child. Putting well-detailed carving into consideration, the maternity figurine represents the ingenuity of a Baule carver. The art depicts the physical and emotional connection between a mother and her offspring. The mother carries her baby while comfortably seated on a stool. The figure is a fine work of art carved out of wood, exhibiting the true love of a mother for her child. Resting the baby's bottom on her lap, she holds the child safely with her left hand by the back of its head while resting her right-hand fingers on its thighs. Her pointed breasts face downward, giving access to the baby who sucks her left breast.

Hanging from her neck and resting between her bosoms is a necklace, showing the impeccable fashion sense of a typical African woman. From the follicles of her head to the soles of her feet, she exhumes simplicity that displays her personality as she nurses her child. Protruding from the front part of her head is an arch-like mound, a hairstyle that befits her face and pointed jawline. Her eyebrow forms an "m" shaped zigzag that beautifies her face, revealing the creativity embedded in her makeup. Uniquely designed scarifications are seen on her forehead, close to her right ear, and under her eye. On her feet she wears a pair of flat-soled flip-flops. Dots protrude from several parts of her upper body, six across her chest, three on her right-side temple, three on the neck, and nine that run down her right arm. Dangling on her right wrist are two bangles, and three big rings on both ankles.

The figure illustrates the importance of fertility in a woman's life. It generally represents women who are either nursing or holding a child, and themes linked to married women and their roles in assuring continuity in the lineage.

Bolaji Owoseni, March 2023

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Adrian Farquhar in 1974.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1989.
