



Doll

Not on display

Title/Description: Doll

Born: 1930 c. - 1970

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 290 x w. 60 x d. 86 mm

Accession Number: 573

Historic Period: 20th century - Mid

Production Place: Africa, Burkina Faso

Cultural Group: Mossi

As far back as antiquity, dolls have been employed to ensure safety or good fortune for young women. Greek girls of marriageable age dedicated their dolls to protective deities such as Artemis, Aphrodite, Athena and Demeter. [1] On the African continent, the use of dolls to enable fertility, preparation for childbirth and womanhood is widespread. The numerous examples include: the clay dolls given to Tabwa girls (the Democratic Republic of the Congo); the “wood child” of the Zaramo (Tanzania); the family doll given by the mother of an Ambo bride (Angola); the beaded doll given to an aspirant Sotho bride (Lesotho); elsewhere in southern Africa, a Tsonga woman could repurpose the beads of a doll into beaded ornaments for her newborn; among the Vendas, the new husband is expected to “learn the laws” of a doll which, in effect, are codes of conduct in a marriage; for the Fali (Cameroon and North Nigeria), a used doll is kept as a heirloom; among the Ashantis (Ghana), such dolls, whether or not they have led to successful birth, could be kept at a priest’s shrine; and, among the Mossi (Burkina Faso), a larger doll could be commissioned as a replacement for one used in a failed pregnancy. [2]

Like many such dolls, the Mossi variant has two main functions: for use as playthings and as an “aid to conception.” [3] This figure closely resembles one doll discussed by Roy (1981) which he designates as “Boulsa style”, after the region in Burkina Faso from where father and son, Zimwomdya and Somyogede Koudougou, known carvers, hail from. Its form is that of idealised beauty, with certain features exaggerated for emphasis. An impressively coiffed hair is primed along the sagittal plane from the forehead to the base at the back of the head and defined by closely packed shallow grooves that replicate the intricacies of the braids. The coif is further emphasised over the ears and down to the jawline which forms a straight horizontal plane that is perpendicular to the long, vertical neck.

The smooth, cylindrical neck is devoid of any markings — whether to define forms or replicate cicatrices — and is of similar height (but not width) with the length of the figure’s body. A string of yellow, blue and coral beads around the doll’s neck sits on a semi-circular base, which continues into two elongated protuberances that are the breast, so fashioned as the “desirable symbol of motherhood.” [4] The line decorations on the breast and stomach recreate the cicatrices made on girls at puberty, according to Roy. Based on their simplicity and placement around the curve of the stomach and its four cardinal points, the lines may simply be a continuation of the design complex, employed for the hair and used to define its form. Similar lines, with no fidelity to proportionality, are used to demarcate the doll’s face. Added to the absence of hands, sex or age, the round base which acts as a sturdier replacement for the doll’s legs are all “superfluous” suggests Roy.

Sabo Kpade, April 2023

[1] Kate McK Elderkin, “Jointed Dolls in Antiquity.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 34, no. 4 (1930): 455. <https://doi.org/10.2307/498710>

[2] Elisabeth L. Cameron, “In Search of Children: Dolls and Agency in Africa.” *African Arts* 30, no. 2 (1997): 31–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337419>.

[3] Christopher D. Roy, “Mossi Dolls.” *African Arts* 14, no. 4 (1981): 49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3335760>.

[4] Roy, p.48.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Christopher Roy's illuminating article on Mossi dolls (*biiga*) allows us to ascribe this doll to the Boulsa kingdom in eastern Mossi country, and to the hand of Zimwomdya Koudougou or his son Somyogede Koudougou (Roy, 1981: fig. 9), who works in the Logda smith neighbourhood of Bonam village, some fourteen kilometres north of Boulsa town.

The dolls were first described by a missionary writing in 1921; young girls play with them and carry them tucked in the waistband of their skirts. They are all female and have the long breasts that are a desirable symbol of motherhood. A bride will take her doll along when she leaves for the home of her new husband, to help her to become pregnant. If she has a baby of her own as a result, she tends the doll for a while, since it will prevent harm to the baby.

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. 114.

Further Reading

Cameron, Elisabeth L. "In Search of Children: Dolls and Agency in Africa." *African Arts* 30, no. 2 (1997): 18-93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337419>.

Elderkin, Kate McK. "Jointed Dolls in Antiquity." *American Journal of Archaeology* 34, no. 4 (1930): 455-79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/498710>

Roy, Christopher D. "Mossi Dolls." *African Arts* 14, no. 4 (1981): 47-88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3335760>.

Provenance

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

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 2000.
