



Shrine figure of a mother and child

On display

Title/Description: Shrine figure of a mother and child

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Metal, Wood

Measurements: h. 800 x w. 200 x d. 210 mm

Accession Number: 598

Historic Period: Late 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria, Oshogbo

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

This superb shrine figure is from the immediate neighbourhood of Oshogbo, one of the finest of the Yoruba carving centres. A comparable figure, possibly by the same hand, is illustrated by Beier, and another is seen in the distance being carried on the head in the annual Festival of Images at Ilobu (Beier, 1957: pls. 26, 53). A great number of fine carvers flourished in Oshogbo itself and in Ilobu and Erin, the last perhaps the most important of all, being the seat of the principal carvers known to us by name, Maku (who died about 1915) and his son Toibo (neither of whom seems to have been the carver of this piece).

The excellent condition of the piece, seeming to belie its probable age (perhaps eighty years), suggests that, wherever it was carved, its home may have been at Ilobu. According to Beier, these images, none of which was privately owned but all kept in *orisha* houses, were devotedly cleaned and washed once in every four-day Yoruba week. Additionally, they were painted with indigo or camwood, both insect deterrents.

Orisha constitutes a religious concept that can be equivalent to a god, a deity or a saint. While the Yoruba believe in a Great God, he is too far from human understanding for direct worship, and thus has no shrines or sacrifices. Usually an *orisha* is an ancestor, hero or former king who manifests some aspect of divine power or is allied to a force of nature such as thunder, storm, or a river (see Fagg and Pemberton: 1982, 195-9). *Orisha* are rarely depicted in person; a carving will be of a priest or devotee. The carving itself is never worshipped; it is a symbol of the spiritual being and as such has no direct part in ceremonies, nor does it arouse awe. The figure illustrated by Beier is shown in a shrine to Oya, wife to Shango, also an *orisha* (see UEA 227); it is therefore likely that this carving too came from a shrine to Oya, and represents a female devotee with offering bowl.

The inclusion of a coiled mudfish in the design of the stool probably indicates that it is an acceptable sacrifice to the *orisha* (but apparently does not have a correlation with royalty, as it has at Benin).

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. 140.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Mathias Komor, New York, in 1975 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
