



Janiform head

Not on display

Title/Description: Janiform head

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Elephant ivory

Measurements: h. 65 x w. 33 x d. 37 mm

Accession Number: 601

Historic Period: Late 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

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

This unusual piece can be immediately identified as Yoruba and is in all probability connected with snake worship, but little more information can be given about it. While snake worship may be found over most of Yorubaland, it is especially common along the western fringe, near the frontier between Nigeria and Bénin (formerly Dahomey), where Yoruba and Fon are in contact. The head does not appear to be a pendant, but rather to have come from the end of a staff, sceptre or fly-whisk handle. Both faces are carved with a labret or lip plug in the lower lip and thus both are probably female.

Small metal nails originally filled all the holes along the snake bodies and eyes, though most are now missing. The Yoruba fondness for interlacing is manifested in the pattern made by the intertwined snakes, which form inverted hearts at the sides, with a half knot above and below each face.

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. 147.

Provenance

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