



Akua'ba

Not on display

Title/Description: Akua'ba

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 264 x w. 100 x d. 50 mm

Accession Number: 631

Historic Period: Late 19th/early 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Ghana

Cultural Group: Asante

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

Akua'ba illustrates fertility and motherhood in Akanland, located in Ghana. According to the Akan legends, Akua'ba was coined from a mythical female legend named Akua. Akua suffered infertility, but as typical of every Akan woman, Akua craved to have her children. She sought help from a priest who told her to create a figurine of a small feminine image. The figurine must be made from wood. Akua should then carry the wooden image on her back like an actual child. Akua did as she was told and even looked after the figurine as if it were a real baby. She sometimes gifted the image with gifts such as trinkets and beads. Finding this action strange in their community, the village people around mocked her and called her figurine "Akua'ba", which means "Akua's child." After Akua's perseverance, she was blessed with a real girl child. Everyone was shocked to see the miracle. [1]

From then on, Akua set the pace for the adoption of Akua'ba figurines in the community among barren women and those seeking the fruits of the womb. The priests would bless the figurines and return them to the barren women, who must in turn care for the image as Akua did to hers. When their prayers were answered and they begot living children, they would take their Akua'bas to the priests as signs of gratitude to the gods.

Akua'ba is a female wooden figure or a doll with a completely abstract design. It consists of a disc attached to a rod. Akua'ba possesses a long neck and a round flat face with a high forehead and a small mouth. The eyes are placed on the nose bridge. The head is a powerhouse of knowledge about life and its intricacies. The full or half-moon eyes depict perfect eyesight, complemented by a narrow long nose. It has two incisions horizontally positioned under the eyes, and a tiny mouth fixed at the lower part of the face. Akua'ba doesn't have a chin. She has an elongated neck shaped in a ring form. Small, pointed breasts protrude from her chest and short arms hang down on either side of her

body. Her pointed belly button and small legs appear above her small bare feet firmly planted on the ground. [2]

Bolaji Owoseni, March 2023

[1] <https://www.imodara.com/discover/ghana-akan-akuaba-fertility-figure-ashante/> accessed 21/02/2023

[2] <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/ghana/a/akuaba-female-figure-akan-peoples> accessed 21/02/2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This is an extremely fine example of the much rarer form of *akua 'ba* with complete limbs. It has been suggested that such images are of later date; yet the quality of this piece does not suggest the decadence that often characterises stylistically late carvings. Malcolm McLeod (personal communication) has pointed out that a figure of this shape does not lend itself to being carried in a woman's waist band, and that it could well have been carved for a shrine. Some shrine *akua mma* are large; the modest size of this one may indicate that it belonged to a family shrine, perhaps that of an important family.

Until about thirty years ago, *akua mma* were virtually the only Asante wood carvings brought home by Europeans, although large numbers of excellent group carvings, some of considerable age, have subsequently appeared. The tiny red beads on the right leg suggest that this *akua 'ba* may be of nineteenth-century date.

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. 139.

Further Reading

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art of Oceania, Africa, and the Americas from the Museum of Primitive Art. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969, no. 346.

Cole, Herbert, and Doran H. Ross. The Arts of Ghana. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1977, p. 105, fig. 210.

Newton, Douglas, Julie Jones, and Kate Ezra. The Pacific Islands, Africa, and the Americas: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987, p. 81.

Mount, M. W. (1973), African Art, The Years Since 1920, USA: Indiana University Press.

Willett, F (1971), African Art, An introduction, Thames and Hudson: Spain.

Provenance

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