



Chief's regalia (penannular armlet)

Not on display

Title/Description: Chief's regalia (penannular armlet)

Measurements: h. 39 x w. 92 x d. 98 mm

Accession Number: 927h

Historic Period: 16th-19th century

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1986

The exceptional group (927a-j) of cire perdue (lost wax) ornaments was purchased as being 'Dogon chief's regalia, Mali. Found in the lower falaise [cliff] of Bandiagara. Site - village of Irrele [?Tireli]'. There is no certainty that the ten pieces form a group, since they are an unmonitored find; in the absence of comparative material from scientific excavations their age and context cannot be established with any certainty.

The penannular armlet (h) is made with three integrally-cast seated figures. The band is made up of

two rows of three twisted cords with a wavy line between. The seated figures may be *nommo* or lineage ancestors. The central figure and that on the right have their arms at right angles to the body with their forearms raised vertically; the one on the left has its right arm similarly raised while holding a staff in the left hand. They seem to be bearded, to have crested caps of coiffures, and may wear bracelets. A figure with arms raised but separated can be read as beseeching Amma to stay near, 'like a child reaching out to his father'. The metal is a copper-rich alloy.

When a *hogon*, who is a priest of the Lébé, and a priest-ruler of the Dogon, dies, copper rings are put on his fingers and arms. These belong to Lébé, who is particularly associated with copper, a sort of life essence, and are later taken off and given to the next *hogon* but one. 'Every Hogon had had the rings in his possession while his predecessor held office. He is impregnated with copper. He is like copper...' (quoted in Griaule, 1965 : 120). While copper is the metal specifically named, perhaps it is to be read as copper alloy, and therefore many, if not all, of the ornaments in this assemblage may have belonged to a *hogon*; in such a context the symbolism detectable in design and decoration is wholly appropriate.

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) pp. 106-108.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Merton Simpson Gallery, New York on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1986 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
