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*A Senoufo Janiform
Deble Figure*

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SENUFO ARTIST

Ivory Coast

Late 19th-early 20th century

Janiform Figure, deble

Wood

h. 118 cm

46 1/2 in.

Provenance

Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), Chile & Paris, France;

Robert Hendrickx (1900-1965), Brussels, Belgium, by 1963;

Sotheby's London, "African, Oceanic, Pre-Columbian and American Indian Works of Art", 30 April 1982, lot no. 140;

Baron Frédéric "Freddy" Rolin (1919-2001), Brussels, Belgium/New York, USA;

Loudmer, Paris, "Arts Primitifs", 8-10 December 1990. lot no. 229;

Rafael Roux, Paris, France;

Private collection, Belgium.

AHDRC Archive #0072397

Publications

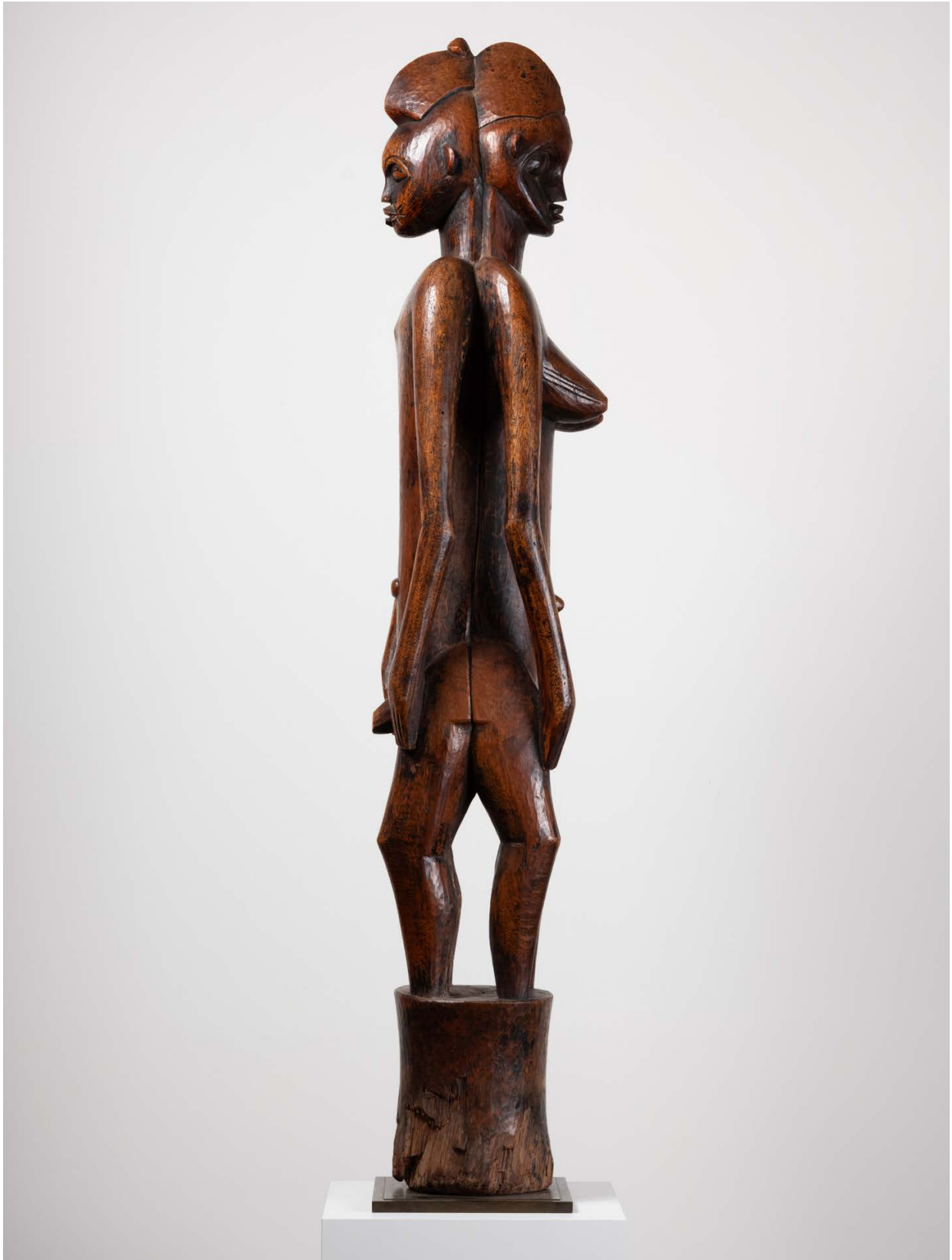
'Masques en étain Sénoufo.' *Art Afrique Noir*, Nr.16, 1975.

Expo cat.: "Art d'Afrique dans les collections belges", by Albert Maesen & Huguette Van Geluwe, Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 1963:42, #237 (not illustrated)

Exhibitions

Tervuren, Belgium: "Art d'Afrique dans les collections belges", Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 29 June-30 October 1963

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Scattered across the Ivory Coast, Mali, and Burkina Faso, the Senufo tribespeople principally lived off the fruits of agriculture and occasionally hunting. They inhabited tribal villages governed by a council of elders, who in turn are led by a chief elected from their number. Tribal cohesion was reinforced by the rituals of the *Poro* society, who initiated and educated men from the age of seven onwards. Senufo theology is based on Koulotiolo, a powerful god, and Katieleo, a goddess mother who through the rituals of *Poro* society regenerates the world.

Senufo art varies a great deal: among statuary there are many types of masks and figures, widely ranging in size and use. Among the most important for the Senufo, and the most famous statues of all African Art, are the *Pomibele*, meaning 'those who give birth.' *Pomibele* are sometimes referred to as 'rhythm pounders,' due to their use among some southern Senufo tribes during ceremonies in which they are carried and then pounded on the ground, providing rhythm for dancers. This term, however, only provides one narrow context in which these statues were active in Senufo life and culture.

Pomibele come in both male and female form (and this rare Janiform type, to be discussed below) and were usually carved as pairs. The couple represents the ideal social unit, the 'reborn' initiated man and woman as the ideal standard of social, moral, and intellectual formation, the reverence for the ancestral lineages of *Poro* graduates who have 'suffered' for the group during their lifetime. They were displayed at memorial ceremonies for ranking elders of both sexes and occasionally at coming-of-age rites. Sometimes, initiates carried them and struck them on the ground and swayed them from side to side to mark the rhythm of the dances at which they were shown. At other times the figures would simply stand as witnesses to the ceremonies.

These figures have long been admired outside of Africa because they adhere to universal aesthetic principles. They are beautifully balanced, elegant in their gracefully elongated forms and quietly commanding in their confident expressions. They gain additional significance from the way in which they express the values of the Senufo culture itself. Certain African human masks and figure sculptures were made as tangible expressions of the values of tradition and permanence and the benefits of civilized society. They exude authority, wisdom, and experience but at the same time burst with youth and spiritual vitality. These faces and figures represent beings who are in the prime of life. Their appearance reinforces their cultural function in transmitting these philosophies to the people who believe in them. The corpus of rhythm pounders can be ranked as among the most successful of African sculptures in achieving this end.

This Janiform figure is of an extremely rare type. A comparable figure came to auction at Christie's Paris in 2002, and is reproduced below.

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Comparanda



Christie's, Paris, *Arts Primitifs - Collection d'un Amateur*,
15 June 2002, lot no. 249

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