

COLNAGHI

BAULE ARTIST

Ivory Coast, late 19th–early 20th century

Standing monkey (Mbra)

Wood

h: 57.2 cm

22 ½ in.

Provenance

Ex collection Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York

Ex private collection, New York, acquired from the above in 1992

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI

This standing figure merges simian and anthropomorphic features. Its face presents the characteristics of a monkey, with a forward-projecting snout and straight elongated nose; the protruding crosshatched eyebrows sit above deep circular ocular cavities in which round bulging eyes with defined eyelids are positioned. The low cheek pouches frame the open mouth while the raised lips reveal the tongue and sharp teeth. The ears are defined by a distinctive c-shape. The addition of red and white natural pigments accentuate the areas of the teeth and eyes. The rest of the body by comparison is carved with fewer details. The sculptor even left clear adze marks, suggesting a deliberate unfinished effect. The shoulders slope directly into the arms, the elbows raised at a sharp angle. Both hands are lifted and cupped together in front of the chest, forming a receptacle. They are carefully defined and are, like the face, highlighted by white pigment. As a result, the sculpture's formal focal points are clearly the head and gesture. The torso narrows in at the waist, from which the bent legs extend downwards to the elongated toes. The figure's back is marked by two distinct features: circular projections on each buttock, which have been identified as the ischial callosities protrusions seen on baboons' buttocks, and the spine which is defined by two vertical rows of rectangular keloids, extending upward along the crest.

The details of the face, the figure's long bony fingers and toes, and the protrusions on its buttocks all reflect the artist's careful observation of nature. Contrasting these typical simian-like features, the figure's upright stance and flexed legs are rather anthropomorphic, and it cups its hands in front of its chest in a human gesture.

Such works are historically related to the traditional belief system of Baule peoples of Côte d'Ivoire according to which human experience evolves out of and remains inextricably linked to the ancestral spirit world, *bolo*, which controls and determines the fate of the living. This example belongs to a group of powerful objects known as *amuin*, a Baule term that encompasses masks and figures conceived to host particularly potent spiritual powers. Taking on zoomorphic features associated with the wilderness of the bush, such figures are physical representations of supernatural spirits and can act in a variety of functions or cults. Activated through the mediation of a diviner, or *amuinfwe*, they are instruments of social control used to punish anti-social behavior, while protecting against malevolent forces in the spiritual realm.

A context in which bowl-bearing figures are used is Mbra, an *amuin* at the center of a possession and divination cult that was called upon for solving individual as well as collective ailments. Such objects were so central to the divination practice that aspiring trance diviners would have to either commission or inherit the objects required by their particular spirit before they could begin to practice. Like all *amuin*, their creation and usage were shrouded in secrecy. In the case of these figures, the spiritual force is intimately tied with the sculpture that holds it. As such, only the most experienced carvers were in a position to create such objects, and would do so outside of the village, in secrecy. This practice allowed not only for the figure to remain away from sight, but also served to disassociate the sculpture from its maker: an essential process intended to distance the spiritual realm from the prosaic context of its manufacture. Once carved, they were seldom displayed openly and could not be seen by women.

COLNAGHI

A diviner, who was also the figure's caretaker, was then responsible for empowering and invigorating the work through sacrifices of blood and offerings of food, in particular eggs. The offered food was placed in the cupped hands, while the blood poured at the top of the figure's head made its way down the animal's muzzle and into the cup, a receptacle central to the power held by the figure. While the zoomorphic nature of these figures vary greatly and are not standardized, they all do hold a cup, or, as it is the case here, use their hands as a receptacle. As such, this central part of the sculpture and visual focus epitomizes the narrow connection between form and function. Altogether, it is the libations and food, as well as the aggressive zoomorphic shape they inhabit that are the sources of the bowl-bearer figures' power.

The figures' attributes and usage are opposed in every way to the notions of civilized space and beauty otherwise central to Baule society and visual expression. Their simian-shaped features associate them with the untamed spirits and the wilderness of the bush and this association stands in strong opposition to the civilized, controlled space of the village. Similarly, their features contrast sharply with the Baule's ideal of human beauty, which echo that of a socialized humanism. This example is formally admired for its vigorous lines, attention to anatomy, and refined carving. In Baule society, however, the bulging eyes, jutting mouth, sharp showing teeth are regarded by the Baule as "horrible" (*té*) and "dangerous" (*iléké, yolé yéla*). The epitome of anti-aesthetics within the Baule sculptural world, the visual attributes of this bowl-bearer and its ferocious features of a bush animal that takes a human stand are aligned with the work's function – that of hosting a powerful spirit whose forces can only be channeled through the skills of a trained carver and the experience of a Baule priest.

Yaëlle Biro, 2015

References

Bouloré, Vincent. 2000. "Cynocéphale portant une coupe (mbotumbo ?)", in *Sculptures Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques*. Paris : Musée du quai Branly, Réunion des Musées Nationaux

Boyer, Alain-Michel. 2008. *Visions of Africa : Baule*. Milan : 5 Continents Editions

Claessens, Bruno, and Jean-Louis Danis. 2016. *Baule Monkeys*. Brussels: Fonds Mercator

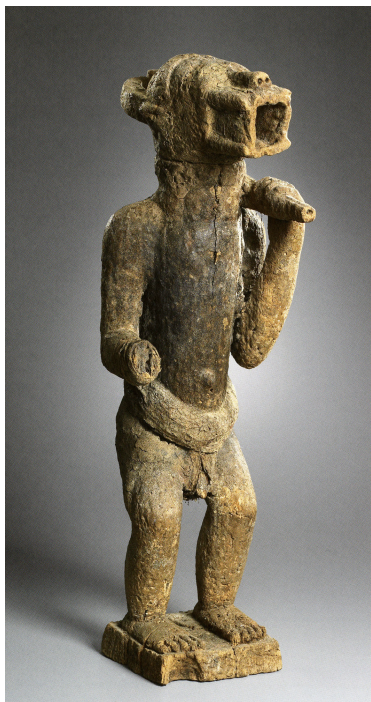
Vogel, Susan M. 1997. *African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press

COLNAGHI

Comparanda

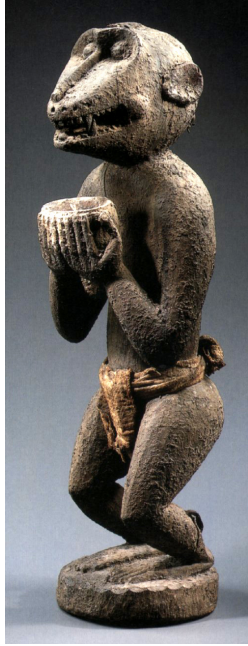


New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.468.



New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 2006.51.417.

COLNAGHI



Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, France

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

BRUSSELS

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI *London*

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Madrid*

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *New York*

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM-6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI *Brussels*

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com