

DJENNE EQUESTRIAN FIGURE

83.168

Artist Unknown

10-13th C

Wood

Mali

This wood piece is one of the oldest known from sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the humid, tropical climates of much of Africa, few wooden pieces much over a hundred years old survive. This sculpture is one of only a small number of wood sculptures dating to the 16th C or earlier. Old wood sculptures were found in the cliffs of the Bandiagara escarpment, high above the inland Niger Delta region: preservation over the centuries allowed due to the relatively dry air of the cliffs.

Our equestrian figure is carved from a single piece of wood, as confirmed by x-ray. The wood is *Erythrophloeum africanum*, one of the hardest woods in Africa. Carbon dating confirms the date shown.

The figure on the horse has been said to represent an ancestral clan founder, hunter, or a ruler. The figure as hunter is indicated by his jewelry, weapons, and position on the horse. However, these are also the same attributes of a ruler. Detailed analysis of the figure along with knowledge about the Djenne society will confirm that this figure is not only a ruler, but is strongly associated with lawgiving and power:

1. The rider is considerably larger than the horse. This comparative size of the rider - greatly exaggerated - indicates his power and importance.
2. The figure is shown in greater detail: His head is elongated with broad protruding eyes and high cheekbones, full lips, trim beard that juts from his chin, and delicate scarification on both temples and around the eyes. He wears short pants with floral motif, skull cap strapped on under his chin, necklace made of hexagonal and larger circular beads, and pendant similar to bronze ones found in the Inland Niger Delta. He carries weapons on his left - a short bow in hand and dagger strapped to his arm; quiver fashioned between his shoulder blades by ropes around his chest.
3. Horses played an important role in West Africa society, adding to the prestige of their owners because of their rarity. They were not indigenous to Africa, having been brought down by Muslim tribes. Only those that could afford horses would own them, adding to their prestige, and a man physically and mentally strong enough to control a horse gained even greater respect in his community. The exaggeration of the rider's size in the sculpture relative to the horse illustrates his importance.
4. **It is known that some rulers even handed down legal decisions while on horseback!** The king would ride out into the city on his horse, and allow the common people to approach him and ask for help: with legal matters, civil disputes, or personal problems. The king could render his decision right there, on the horse. In this way our equestrian figure is associated with lawgiving and power.

More about the horse and prestige: In the ancient empires of West Africa, horses were associated with wealth, kingship, and prestige, and represented power in several realms: political military, legal, and mystical. Horses were rare in African empires south of the Sahara, and only kings and their cavalries were allowed to possess them. The

Muslims were primarily responsible for the introduction of the horse to Africa during their emigrations into that continent.

The Djenne culture was an early and sophisticated civilization in present-day Mali. Djenne was a large urban center. Muslim influence was present early, as indicated by the presence of writing early. Intense commerce along the routes of caravans that transported gold, ivory and other goods gave rise to many important trading towns, such as Djenne in the Niger Inland Delta. The delta, where the Niger and Bani rivers meander and interwine, important because of its rich fishing grounds and its great fertility due to the annual flooding. Around it are the barren natural cliffs previously mentioned, and humanmade tumuli.

QUESTIONS:

1. Some believe this figure might be a hunter or a king: describe characteristics you see that support him being a hunter and/or a king.
2. We know that horses are not native to this region of Africa. Knowing this one fact, what kinds of things come to mind when viewing this figure?

TOUR SUGGESTIONS:

Animals
Safari
Rulers
War and Conflict resolution
Distant influences on cultures...

BIBLIOGRAPHY/RESOURCES:

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