

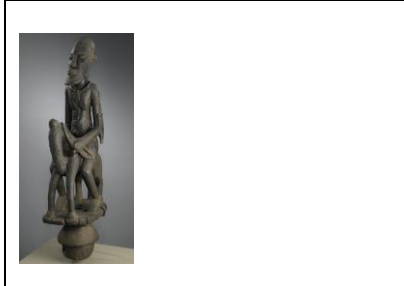
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## Title of Object

Equestrian Figure

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## Photo of Object (optional)



## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Country:** Mali

**Date of Object:** 15<sup>th</sup> century

**File Created:** 4/24/2016

**Accession Number:** 83.168

**Author of File:** Janelle Christensen and Joan Gilmore

**Material/Medium:** Wood sculpture

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Art of Africa

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 7/5/2016

**Culture:** Malian

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## Tour Topics

Group 1 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, cultural encounters/exchanges, fashion/dress, gender roles, leaders, power, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

From Janelle:

1. What do you see? What strikes you about this sculpture?
2. Who is this guy? What about him makes him seem important?
3. How do we see horses today? What do they represent in our American culture?
4. If you had a sculpture made of you, what would you include to communicate a quality you think is important?

From Joan:

What do you notice first about this horse and rider sculpture? What do you wonder about?

What role might this man have played in society? What kind of a man do you think he is?

Why do you think this man is bigger than his horse?

How is the horse different from horses you have seen? Why might this be?

What other equestrian figures have you seen in museums or public parks? How does this compare or contrast with those other equestrian figures?

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### **Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

This figure is carved from a single piece of wood. Wood is rare for this time and culture. Often we see sculptures of this type in clay, but this is indeed special because few wooden sculptures that are this old have survived.

Comes from the inner Niger Delta in Mali. 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. The wood is *Erythrophloeum africanum*, one of the hardest woods in Africa.

The sculpture is of a figure on a horse, the figure is adorned with a beard, facial tattoos, jewelry, and weapons. Typical of Djenne's (Malian) equestrian figures made of clay from the same time period, this depicts a figure with elongated head, with long tubular limbs. The horse is smaller than the man, and also has long tubular limbs. The man is depicted as a figure of means and authority. The figure is not realistically proportional to the horse beneath him.

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### **Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)**

Djenne culture was in present-day Mali, and part of the historic Mali Empire. Djenne was large urban center for trading. Exports were gold and ivory. At its height in the fourteenth century C.E. the Mali Empire covered an area greater than 24,000 square kilometers (9000 square miles), and it influenced, through trade connections, an even larger portion of West Africa for several centuries.

It has been estimated that during the time of the Mali Empire, West Africa produced and supplied almost two-thirds of the world's gold. At its height, the Mali Empire covered much of West Africa and incorporated into one polity hunters, herders, nomads, merchants and farmers from many different language groups. The income that the Malian acquired from their trade allowed them to acquire more horses for military might but also for status.

Horses were not common to the region. To own a horse meant that you were an individual of extreme wealth or political power. Only royalty and the wealthy had horses. Horses were likely introduced to West Africa from North of the Sahara around 1000CE by travelers from Carthage and Libya. The travelers were Muslims going across the Sahara to establish trade routes and convert people to Islam. This may have been a Berber or Barb horse, native to North Africa. These were small, strong horses, rarely more than 56" at the shoulder.

To sit atop a horse and give out decrees and create laws was a visual representation of the power that the individual held within the Malian society. To sit on such an exotic creature and tower over those standing on the ground gave weight and prestige to the royal and their laws. When the king was out on

horseback the people had the right to approach him regarding judgements. He would make his decision right then and there atop the horse.

Horses also represent military power, in the Savanna areas of West Africa. They were particularly representational of the powerful cavalry of invaders who dominated the region for centuries. The men of Mali's royal lineage were horsemen, who rode, raided, and defended on horseback.

The figure on the horse has been said to represent an ancestral clan founder, hunter, or a ruler. However, detailed analysis of the figure along with knowledge about the Djenne (Malian) society may confirm that this figure is not only a ruler, but is strongly associated with lawgiving and power.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Real or fake? That question has dogged this unique wooden horse rider since it first appeared on the art market. In 1980, X-ray testing and radiocarbon dating of the object indicated that it was carved from a single piece of wood dating from between 1250 and 1450, making it one of the oldest known Sub-Saharan sculptures. Further CT-scanning in 2012 confirmed this and showed no evidence of recent restoration.

The sculpture is from the Inner Niger Delta in Mali and fuses human dignity with animal strength. Horses were introduced from north of the Sahara to West Africa around 1000 CE and soon became prestigious possessions associated with political power and wealth.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, "Trade, Transport, Temples, and Tribute: The Economics of Power," in *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 231–45.

Donald R. Wright, "The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, The Gambia" (Routledge, 2015), 56-57

<https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/peoples/show/Djenné> (The People of Djenne)

The city of Djenne, a UNESCO Heritage site: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/116>

Link to Creative Connections, with photo of Berber Horse:



on artsmia: <http://new.artsmia.org/creativeconnections/equestrian-figure/>