



Divination Head

Date

20th century

Primary Maker

Bassa people

Medium

wood and stain

Description

The Bassa and other people in the Liberia and Sierra Leone area have medicine associations that have female leaders and that use a type of divination or medicine guardian head or figure with idealized female features. This divination head was meant to be set in the middle of a terra cotta or wooden bowl. In Africa, individual identity is usually subordinate to social identity. But this Bassa head does probably, in fact, refer to a specific woman. It refers to her because she was considered exemplary of qualities held in high regard by Bassa society. Women in the Guinea Coast area are admired for their leadership qualities, abilities as a hostess and participation in ritual activities as well as for their excellence in fulfilling family responsibilities. Physical beauty and a serene composure are closely linked to spiritual values. In spite of the life-like quality of this head, it also displays characteristics of

Bassa style, seen most clearly in their face masks: the jutting forehead over almost closed eyes, the emphatic jaw line and the typical hairstyle of rows of bulging braids sweeping back from the hairline and ending in plaits terminating in balls of hair. Unlike masks, however, rice ladles, full-length figures honoring certain women, and medicine heads like this one can evoke portrait-like qualities. But even these objects should be sufficiently stylized so that they will not be mistaken for a real person, living or dead. To create an exact likeness would be too frightening for all involved.

Dimensions

Overall: 7 7/8 x 4 3/4 x 6 in. (20 x 12.1 x 15.2 cm)