

Basic Detail Report



Guardian Lion

Date

not dated

Primary Maker

Fon people

Medium

wood and copper alloy

Description

King Glele (r. 1858-1889) of Dahomey was known by many "strong names" among which was kini kini kini, "lion of lions." Not surprisingly, the art associated with his reign

prominently features the image of a lion. This large display piece is typical of royal art in the extensive use of metal; here tooled sheets of brass cover the figure. Silver was the other favorite metal for royal use and there are also figures of lions known to have been covered in that metal as well. Many of these royal figures are not just impressive symbols of authority but also served as bocio, carvings activated by magical substances hidden inside. Bocio are protective or proactively aggressive against royal enemies. Commoners also use bocio but theirs are smaller and use simpler materials. The other major difference between royal and commoner bocio is that the royal ones are clearly defined forms kept clean of encrustations whereas the common bocio are obscured by cloth and other additions as well as layers of sacrificial residue. In terms of style, Fon art has a naive, rather whimsical appearance to the eyes of Westerners. This almost child-like quality belies its seriousness of purpose and deeply spiritual meaning. The open mouth with teeth and tongue visible conveys the potential power of speech to curse and to harm. For the Fon, materials, color, and symbolism are far more important than the actual physical form of the object. The lion is all about Glele's destiny and power. A convincingly like-like lion would detract from the metaphysical statement the figure makes about the king.

Dimensions

Overall: 24 3/4 x 26 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (62.9 x 67.3 x 24.1 cm)