

Ibeji Yoruba Twin Figures

Nigeria, Yoruba people

#5367.1 & 5367.2 Academy Purchase, 1972

Twins with no numbers: Gift of Valerie Franklin in honor of George Ellis

Subject: Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder is said to have fathered the first pair of Yoruban twins. Maybe for this reason twins are thought to have the power of thunder. The Yoruba have the highest twin birthrate worldwide: 45 out of every 1000 births. Since the power of Sango is associated with twins, a twin birth is believed to bring good fortune to its parents. However, twins births are biologically more difficult for the mother and the children, so twin mortality rate is pretty high. If one or both of the twins die, the parents consult a diviner who names an artist to carve the ibeji. The mother sends gifts to the carver during the process. When the carver has finished, he calls the spirit of the dead child by immersing the figure in water and crushed leaves, and then rubbing it with palm oil and shea butter. After the figures become alive in the sense that they are now the mother's perception of her child once again, the figures are cared for. If neglected by the mother, the twin's spirit has the power to cause a life of misery for the parents. The figures are bathed and their heads are rubbed with indigo (associated with a persons destiny), and they are anointed with camwood and oils. The mother may dress the ibeji in beaded necklaces or bracelets. Everything done for a live child is done for the ibeji. Regular sacrifices are also made to it in an attempt to prevent the soul of the deceased from harming the living twin or the mother. The carrying of the ibeji also is believed to prevent the mother from becoming infertile.

Resources: MIA website, *Africa, Art of the Continent* and FAMSF website

Medium and Techniques: Carved wood with indigo and camwood.

Style: Twin figures are carved according to different regional styles. These twins are a male and a female figure. The head is about one third the size of the body, because the head is associated with a person's destiny or "inner head" (self-confidence and composure); all of which determine success and failure in life. The conical form of the heads and/or headdress, signify a connection to the cosmos and usually also to the Thunder god Sango. Artistic emphasis is placed on human resemblance but not photographic likeness. The ibeji appear as adults even though they were carved for children, perhaps to emphasize their physical power as well as their poise and balance. The facial features are stylized but carefully and definitively carved. Other aesthetic qualities are relative straightness, good composition, youthful appearance and clarity of line. Generally speaking Yoruba carvings are easily recognizable. They have a very specific idea about how a piece of art should be carved...how it should look. It must be well done but not too beautiful and not too ugly: not too old or too young: not too abstract but not too realistic.

Instructional Aids: Are there twins in your family or do you have friends that are twins? Older group: How is it possible that more twins are born in Yoruba society than in any other group? Why do you think that twins are considered very special in Yoruba Society? Are twins considered pretty special in our society as well? Do you know any twins?

PICTURE OF IBEJI TWINS FROM N.Y. MUSEUM

