

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Known and Unknown in Senufo Sculpture

In Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Senufo-speaking peoples rely on otherworldly entities to help them maintain health, achieve success, and negotiate social and professional relationships. Diviners and related experts serve as intermediaries to the spirit world and prescribe particular remedies, relying on their extensive knowledge of flora and fauna for both healing and harm. According to art historian Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, the organic substances that specialists use—and that compose the layered surfaces of the two Senufo objects on view in this exhibition—are not always intended to be fully known by outside observers. The specific materials, the reasons for their use, and the processes with which they are collected and applied have been and continue to be the purview of experts.

Senufo specialists—usually members of West African organizations known as power associations—commission a wide variety of sculptures from local artists, depending on particular spirits' preferences, artists' interpretations of them, and the diviner's judgment. For example, this shrouded *kafigeledjo* figure and the striking horned headdress were probably carved by artists whom the diviner paid for their work. Once a sculpture was complete, the specialist would identify the appropriate materials for the object's social purpose and then apply the materials to its surface for performance or divinatory use.

We can speculate about the nature of some of these materials based on close observation and an understanding of local practices; however, the ambiguity





and aesthetic complexity of these Senufo works remain palpable and intentional. For example, the headdress—worn in secret initiations and healing rites of *Nyikaryi*, the elite Senufo society of healers—reveals a smooth, smoky gray surface that may be the accumulation of soot from its storage near cooking fires; it could also be a layered composite of plant matter applied over time. The visually enigmatic

kafigeledjo figure, used by diviners for truth-telling, wears a fabric jumpsuit encrusted with organic materials as well as a headpiece to which ostrich feathers were likely attached by the specialist. The composition of this and other power associations' accumulative practices is an area of new research.

For Senufo-speaking peoples, an expert's way of using natural and social environments is considered potent and protected knowledge. The layers of organic matter added to an object over time and the specific amounts, strengths, and modes of application are both tools and information that specialists draw on to help their clients and to distinguish themselves from rival specialists. Forming, resurfacing, and working with these objects is a creative process of concealing and revealing that underscores the deep cultural connection between material accumulation and the negotiation of power and knowledge.

FRONT: Senufo artist (Ivory Coast or Burkina Faso), *Oracle figure (kafigeledjo)*, 20th century. Wood, cotton cloth, ostrich feathers, vegetal fiber, and organic material. Promised Museum acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

ABOVE: Senufo (possibly Bamana) artist (Ivory Coast or southern Mali), *Headdress*, 20th century. Wood, hide, metal, string, feathers, and smoke patina or other organic material. Promised Museum acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

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