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A Sherbro Female Figure

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SHERBRO (SOUTHERN BULLOM) ARTIST

Sierra Leone, late 19th–early 20th century

Female Figure

Wood, metal

h. 41 cm
16 1/8 in.

Provenance

Jef Vander Straete (1904–1985), Lasne, Belgium (1960);
Private collection, Belgium;
Rutger & Irene der Kinderen, Eersel, The Netherlands;
Private collection, Belgium.

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The present figure depicts a standing woman, with arms at her sides, hands touching her stomach. The face is defined by a heavy brow, under which are two carved eye holes, a wide, flat nose, and incised mouth. The ears are pierced and one original metal earring remains intact. The long slender neck has rolls of fat carved in relief, indicating abundance, and the breasts, stomach, and upper back feature a complex latticework of incisions indicating ritual scarification. A very close example is in the collection of the Hearst Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, California. These Sherbro figures have closely related parallels in the wider Mende culture, of which Sherbro (Southern Bullom) is a smaller, distinct group.

This is likely a Yassi figure, called *minsereh* in Bullom, a predominantly Sherbro and Mende society that has its own source of spiritual power, called *halei*, which it uses to diagnose various kinds of ritual pollution and to purify those who have wittingly or unwittingly incurred pollution. A symptom of such pollution is thought to be mental illness; Yassi is said to be specially empowered by its medicine to cure mental illness. It has both male and female members and corresponding male and female figures, which were important fixtures of purification rituals.



Figure 1: Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, California, Acc.3198.

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