

COLNAGHI



A Senufo Seated Female Figure

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SENUFO ARTIST

Ivory Coast, late 19th–early 20th century

Seated Female Figure

Wood, metal, pigments

h. 17cm

7 in.

Provenance

Charles Ratton (1895-1986), Paris, France;

Private Collection, Belgium, acquired from the above ca. 1972;

Roberta & Lance Entwistle, Paris / London, France / United Kingdom;

Private Collection, California, USA.

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The present sculpture depicts a female figure seated on a stool with her hands in her lap. The head is rendered in an expressionistic manner, with large eyes, a long nose, dramatically sloping cheeks, and a crest-like coiffure. The face is adorned with linear incisions on the cheekbones, corresponding to scarification marks made on Senufo women after having reached puberty. Further scarification is represented on both breasts, the stomach, the backs of the arms, the fronts of the shins, and the posterior, indicating a woman of high social status and considerable wealth, further emphasized by the metal earrings which hang from the pierced earholes. The pointed breasts and extended belly represent female fertility. The surface of the figure is finished in a lustrous sticky patina, indicating the frequent application of oils as spiritual libations, but also to preserve the piece. A close parallel can be found in the Brooklyn Museum (Figure 1).

The Senufo peoples form a complex network comprising more than thirty subgroups with many local variations of language and custom. They occupy a large area of West Africa that spans the national boundaries of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Senufo society is patriarchal; inheritance, however, is traced through the matrilineal line. Consequently, the primacy placed on women and their essential maternal role is often reflected in Senufo artistic traditions like this sculpture. Senufo women are bound by membership in a large social organization known as Sandogo. Membership in Sandogo is limited to female members of the Senufo community. Senufo life revolves around the Sandogo society and its counterpart, the all-male Poro society. These institutions cut across kinship lines and household ties, creating a social cohesiveness that extends throughout the community.



Figure 1: Brooklyn Museum, New York, 22.1092.

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