

Twin **ibeji** Figures

Yoruba People, Nigeria

20th Century

Wood, pigment, glass beads and ivory

Loaned by Richard Hunt

H95.30. 1&2

Looking at this pair of carved figures, as at any object of indigenous art or craft, I am reminded that aboriginal objects exist for one of three reasons: **utilitarian** (e.g. a cooking pot or child's plaything); **symbolic** (e.g. a religious idol to be worshipped, a spirit effigy, or a ritual object); or **commercial** ("airport" art produced to be sold to tourists and collectors). Only recently have "fine" arts for exhibition evolved from many ancient traditional cultures.

As a frequent visitor to museums and native markets I have seen many objects of all three types, some of which fulfill more than one purpose, and collected a few that appealed to me. Also, I am aware that it is often difficult to determine the age, function and value of an object unless its provenance can be documented.

These carved figures display the stylized characterization, traditional details and standardized workmanship typical of 19th and 20th century Yoruba carving. They also show evidence of age and handling suggesting ritual use. Although each native carver had his own style, he always adhered closely to traditional technique, varying only facial scarring, beading, and other specific family markings. Form and details are always exaggerated (heads and feet are large, legs are short, shoulders and arms are thick and long; adult gender-specific details are realistically explicit, but not intended to be pornographic.

To some Yoruba people even today, Ibeji are sacred images intended to house the spirits of departed twins, who are believed to have supernatural power to protect their parents' household and to bring them good fortune. For generations twin births have been much more frequent among the Yoruba than in the general population, and until recently infant mortality was around fifty per cent. So when one or both twins died, the grieving parents would commission a respected traditional carver to ritually prepare the necessary wooden caricatures. Although the twins probably would have died in infancy, the carvings always depict adult features and tribal markings as though the spirits of the children were grown-up guardians of the family.

If both twins died, the mother would initially carry both ibeji on her back, as she would have carried her real babies; if one twin survived, he or she would be tucked into its mother's wrapper in back, and the lone ibeji would ride in front. Eventually the ibeji would reside in a shrine in the mother's bedroom, where she might caress, anoint, feed, and dress it (them) as a living infant.