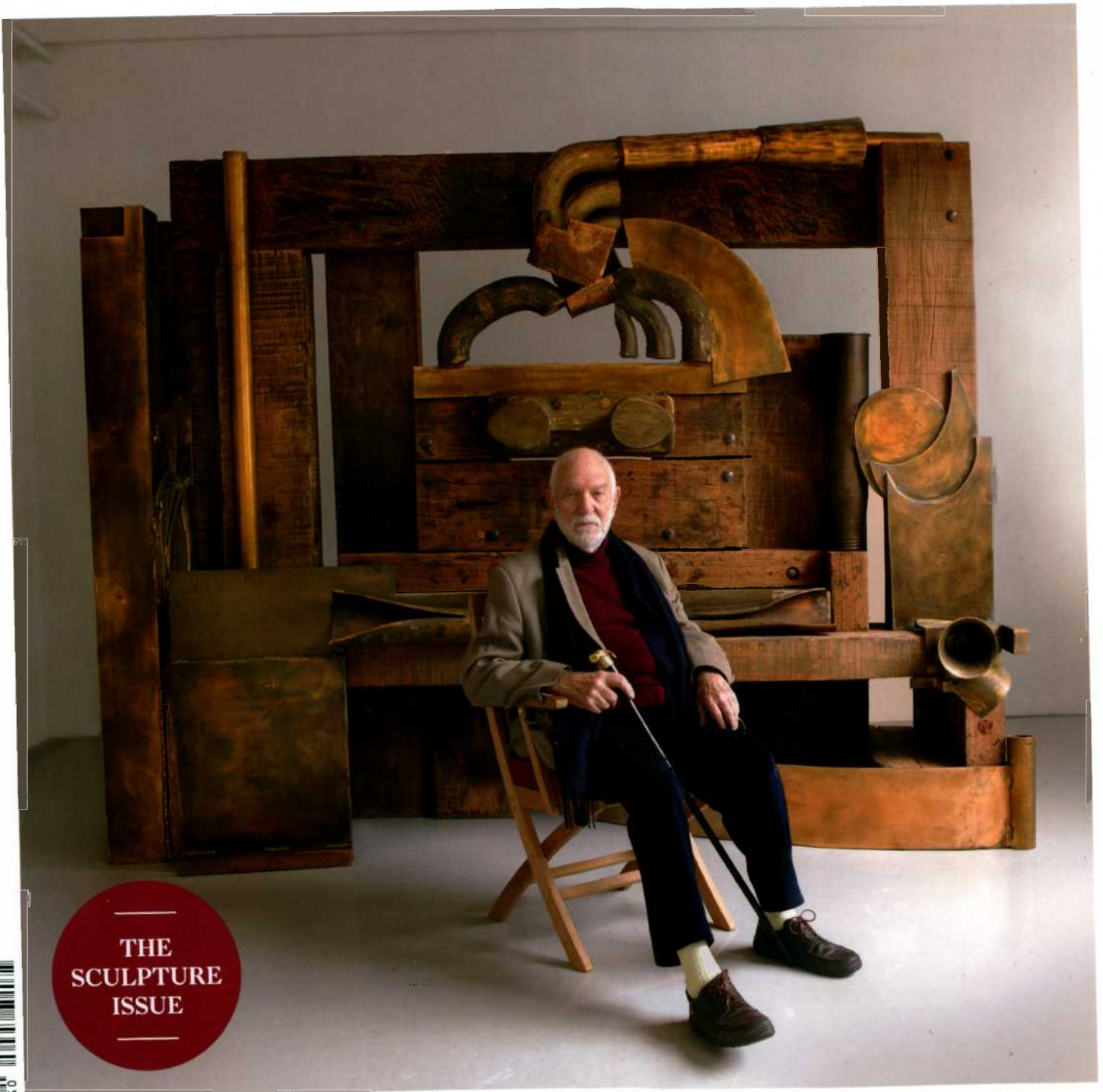


MAY 2011 £5.95

APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR COLLECTORS

Anthony Caro's Sculpture | The Lansdowne Diomedes
Picasso and Marie-Thérèse | The Art of Voodoo



THE
SCULPTURE
ISSUE



JOHN KALDOR'S COLLECTION by Susan Moore | Gavin Stamp on SIR GILBERT SCOTT

The Art of Voodoo

The Fondation Cartier in Paris plays host until September to an array of spell-binding figures collected by the late Jacques Kerchache. These beguiling totems provide insight into the rituals and beliefs of the much-maligned Vodun religion, still practised in West Africa today

WRITER SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

In the late 1960s the African art collector and dealer Jacques Kerchache (1942–2001; Fig. 1) discovered a corpus of remarkable empowerment arts on his travels to southern Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin). He was one of the first to recognise the extraordinary aesthetic power and originality of Vodun statuary forms, and went on to assemble the most significant collection of these figural arts in the world. Now, on the 10th anniversary of his death, the Fondation Cartier in Paris is staging 'Vodun: African Voodoo' (5 April–25 September), an exhibition of around 100 of these rarely seen objects, including some that now belong to private collections.

I visited Kerchache's Paris gallery prior to my own research trip to Benin in the mid-1980s, and in this show are a number of

objects that he presented under the spotlight of his intimate salesroom. I would run across still more in the early 1990s when I was tracking down images for a book, among them an array of works from Ben Heller's collection, originating with Kerchache, which were up for auction. Many of these sculptures have also been reassembled in the exhibition.

Created by makers from the Fon, Ewe and other tribes living in the coastal regions of the Republic of Benin and adjacent Togo, it is believed Vodun has been practised in the region for around 6,000 years. We have our first known references to Vodun in a 1658 text called the *Doctrina Christiana*,¹ although most of the extant figures of this type probably date to the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Vodun (or Vodou, Vaudou, Vodù, Voodoo) religious traditions in this region signal the

primacy of action in a world marked by chaos, and the works in the Paris show bristle with tropes of energy, anxiety, power and danger. These are objects of conflict and countercharge that I have linked not only to forms of protection for personal difficulty, but also to the trauma and violence of centuries of slave trade on Africa's infamous 'Slave Coast'. The figures shown here are organic forms, created from wood and an array of ancillary materials.

Bocio works comprise a wealth of materials, including string, skeletal matter, locks, pegs, beads, cloth, organic materials from the plant and animal worlds, as well as metals. These elements serve both to empower the figures and convey key facets of their larger signification. In the Fon and adjacent areas of southern Benin and Togo, these totems functioned in part as religious



go-betweens, figures of mediation between the variant Vodun forces they reference – including deities, important ancestors, elements of the natural world such as mountains, lightning, whirlwinds and rainbows, and biological anomalies (albinos, still-born children, human deformities). Some *bocio* figures are positioned in front of the home or temple, or at a crossroads or a market place so they can be visible to all; others are kept inside a private shrine or bedroom.

The term *bocio* derives from the Fon language phonemes *cio* (corpse) and *bo* (empowering form), and the objects are perceived to take on and counter any danger or hostility. They are believed not only to help deflect problems – including death – from their patrons and users, but also to evoke the power of the dead (the ancestors) and the forces of Vodun to protect living family members. Protection comes not only from the empowering materials, but also from the accompanying invocations and offerings. In psychological terms, these works stand against the challenges and fears of the world – a world rife with unforeseen circumstances and unpredictable events. Referred to in the West by largely pejorative terms – fetish, idol, *gris-gris*, *marmouset*, *magot*, devil – *bocio* forms resonate with our deepest fears of the unknown. While the term *vodun* has been translated by scholars in many ways, my sources have suggested that its origins lie in the phrase ‘rest to draw the water’, from the Fon verbs *vo* (to rest) and *dun* (to draw water). According to Vodun philosophy, life is like a pool we find in the world into which we are born. Patience and calmness are necessary if we are to effectively draw from the pool of water that defines our lives.² In Vodun belief, one is encouraged to take time for reflection. Like the serene, straight-standing human figure that serves as the base and centre of *bocio*, one is encouraged to draw on one’s inner strength and serenity. The ethos of Vodun thus has meaning for all of us.

In terms of the objects themselves, *bocio* figures are collaborative works – the product not only of the carver and other makers, but



2

All images reproduced are courtesy of the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris. © Yuji Ono

- 1 Jacques Kerchache, Benin, late 1960s
Photo: Archives Jacques Kerchache
- 2 Fon *bocio* figure, Benin
Wood, ht 135cm
Anne and Jacques Kerchache collection
- 3 Nago and Fon Vodun sculpture, Benin
Wood, rope, shells, metal, cloth, clay, feathers, plants, bones, sacrificial patina
Various dimensions
Anne and Jacques Kerchache collection
- 4 Nago Vodun sculpture, Benin
Wood, rope, animal bones, duck skull, terracotta pots, plants, feathers, cotton threads, shells, cloth, hair, beads, metal chain
30×18×17cm
Michel Propper collection
- 5 Fon Vodun sculpture, Benin
Bronze, rope, padlock, key, beads, clay, sacrificial patina
19×7,5×6cm
Anne and Jacques Kerchache collection



3

also significantly, the user. A close bond develops between user and the various makers and ‘activators’ of the objects, reinforced by the risk incurred in the process of creating and empowering these objects. Each user’s relationship to a given work is different, based on his or her personal connection to it and the myriad issues involved. Some sculptures offer a sense of security in the face of real or potential danger; other objects carry associations with fear, concern, and mystery.

Some *bocio* works, specifically those comprising a pointed base, are secured into the earth in front of or near buildings to safeguard those living or worshipping inside (Fig. 2). They serve as ‘dummy’ harbours of



over other people, circumstances, and events.³ These works resonated with long-standing European idioms and fears – around sorcery, for example. Wooden religious sculptures were quickly banned, and so these *garde-corps* took the form of textile figures that found ready (and pejorative) reference in the Americas as ‘voodoo dolls’.

In the mid-1980s when I first began studying these arts in the Abomey area of Benin, the ancient capital of the Dahomey kingdom, *bocio* figural arts still held remarkable primacy, and were identified with altering the course of life for both positive and negative ends. These objects serve as potent forms of personal and societal protection, encouraging success in one’s efforts (at work, for example, or in the context of love), and in helping to prevent sickness or secure property from theft. They are also seen to promote human, animal and plant fertility, as well as other desired outcomes, ranging from successful court cases to excellent results at school. They were often created following a Fa (Ifá) divination session which focused on a specific problem or concern, and the binding, knotting and piercing of the materials employed in these textile figures might be seen to reference some of the more horrifying aspects of slaving violence in these regions. *Kannumon*, or ‘thing in cords’, is the Fon term for slaves and prisoners of war – and many *bocio* figures are bound with string, cloth, chains and padlocks (Figs. 3, 5 and 8).

Furthermore, a peg – *so* (which in the Fon language references ‘obstacle’, ‘load’ and ‘power’) is inserted into the figure’s core, securing medicines within. Sometimes more than one peg is applied, to address a particular problem. Positioned in the stomach (Fig. 6), the peg is said to reference fears of sorcery or death. The hole (*do*) so formed suggests that the root of the problem is being reached. This particular *bocio* carving incorporates an iron point at the base which not only helps to protect the wood when it is embedded in the soil, but also brings into play the ritual potency of iron (linked to Gu, the Vodun god of iron) to convey ideas of strength,

harm, anthropomorphic surrogates that may also commemorate ancient family members or priests. Associated works form part of a *kudio bocio* ‘death-exchanging’ sub-grouping. These offer protection and security by substituting a carved figure for a living individual – a piece of clothing from someone in the house or temple identifies and redirects the sculpture’s dynamic power.

Between 1710 and 1810, ships carried over a million captured individuals from the ‘Slave Coast’ of Africa to Haiti and other sites in the Americas. New prototypes in the form of figural *gardes-corps* constructed of wood or stone started to emerge around this time – objects seen to help individuals gain power



power, and durability. Since iron and Gu are also associated with tools (for agriculture, making art and war) this work also conveys qualities of protective aggression. Additionally, the different colours of the pigments applied to the two heads call on different Vodun powers.

Janus sculptures (Fig. 8) draw on the doubling of sensory power – eyes especially – in their protective powers. The four eyes also serve as a potent reference to sorcery and the damage that malevolence can bring to bear on both individuals and societies. *Janus* works are often paradoxical in nature, integrating potentially dangerous attributes. Here we see the four-eye associations of sorcery, in a context closely identified with protection – the added ability of guardianship is evinced by the presence of an extra set of eyes. The eyes are made of cowrie shells, the traditional currency of this area. As such they indicate the primacy of money – both the root of nefarious deeds and a symbol of plenty – as a medium of exchange. The associations of cowries with the history of the slave trade (the Europeans used cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean to buy slaves) has resonance for these objects as well, because it was in part as protection against the dangers of slaving wars that these *bocio* once had a central role.

All these concerns are enhanced by the unique material properties of each work. The wood selected for the figural carving, for example, is important to the object's functioning – whether it is a tree that grows near a temple or road, part of the root of an ancient tree, or a branch from a tree that was struck by lightning. The species of tree is important too; iroko adds qualities of hardness and durability, while red karité carries not only associations with strength but also has protective medicinal qualities. The types of cord, cloth or animal skins used to bind the work or attach other materials to it are similarly chosen with care. Fibre made from a weed growing near a fireplace suggests strength in the face of flames; a fragment of cloth worn by someone now deceased suggests contact with the world of the



6

ancestors. These and other materials add to the dynamic at play in transforming the natural and spiritual powers in the universe.

Bocio objects serve as visual encyclopedias about the world and its elements. The selection of animal parts such as bones, fur, feathers and blood are informed by a complex variety of metaphoric and other properties. These underscore the meaning of these works, bringing to them a variety of attributes, and transforming them from simple representations to objects deemed capable of action in their own right. While each work is unique, and ultimately 'unknowable' to those outside, the inclusion of certain animal parts provide an understanding of some of the broader themes at play.

Features from chickens and goats are the most common applied forms (feathers, fur, skulls), elements that signal that inaugurating



7

- 6 Fon Vodun sculpture, Benin
Wood and rope, 34×6.5×9.5cm
Anne and Jacques Kerchache collection
- 7 Fon Vodun sculpture, Benin
Wood, sacrificial patina, 43×14×11cm
Courtesy Robert T. Wall Family
- 8 Fon Vodun sculpture, Benin
Wood, duck beak, padlock with keys,
cloth, feathers, clay, sacrificial patina,
3.5×12×5cm
Anne and Jacques Kerchache collection

rites have been completed. These also serve as reminders of the specific future offerings required. Not only do chickens serve as a basic offering, but hens, linked to family ancestors, help sweep bad things from the house. The rooster, in announcing the inception of each day, is identified with human life and its perpetuation. Parts from goats are generally included when more difficult problems are involved, and as such are also identified with severe or recurring headaches. Other mammals are also introduced frequently into *bocio*, drawing on both physical and metaphoric properties to enhance the power of a given work. Dog bones are seen to wake one up whenever danger is present; cats, although often linked to sorcery, help one succeed in quarrels. Monkeys protect hunters, pregnant women, and children from danger, consistent with the relatively long life spans

