



musée barbier-mueller

Asen: Forged Memories of Iron in Dahomey Vodun Art

Musée Barbier-Mueller

November 22, 2018 – May 26, 2019

From November 21, 2018 on, the Musée Barbier-Mueller will present an exhibition focused on *asen*, iron altars, specifically those of the former kingdom of Dahomey. It will explore an array of issues which will help us better understand these striking sculptures. Key among these are artist hands, questions of use, the history of these arts, and how *asen* enhance our understanding of the broader regional history of the southern area of the Republic of Benin where they are found.

At their most basic, *asen* constitute a kind of portable altar that is planted in the ground of the *asenxo* (*asen* house) where the deceased members of the family are memorialized and recalled in annual ceremonies. It is in front of the *asen* that the living will meet the dead, speak to them, interrogate them, and offer the sacrifices of propitiation. Many *asen*, including several featured in the exhibition, include a portrayal of a gourd container, or calabash. Such containers hold food used in offerings to the deceased at the time the *asen* is first installed. This also recalls an alternative name for *asen* in this area in southern Republic of Benin and Togo, namely *sinuka* (calabash to drink water, the calabash being the recipient that one uses ritually in libations for the ancestors).

Historically in this region, *asen* were also closely identified with healing, protection, and divination, as well as the transfer of knowledge from the spirit world to the earthly world in Vodun temples and other contexts. This function shifted toward a more specifically royal memorial use as the Dahomey court grew in power from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the Dahomey (Fon) court in Abomey, each king and the woman who personifies the ruler after his death was identified with a distinct *asen*. The royal *asen* were brought out during annual “custom” rites. Historically they were positioned near the *djebo* (spirit house of the king), and were secured in the ground outside the structure, each initially covered with a cloth. Once the cloth is removed, the *asen* is given libations and other offerings, including yam, corn, and beans, as well as incantations or songs.

The majority of the works in the Barbier-Mueller collection and featured in the exhibition were created in the coastal port city of Ouidah, many dating to the mid to late nineteenth century and, as such, earlier than those associated with the Dahomey court in Abomey, which were largely destroyed in the 1892–94 French colonial war. These were replaced by new forms commissioned by King Agoli Agbo between 1894 and 1900 from the royal guild of jewelers and smiths, the Hountondji family blacksmith guild.

A lecture on *asen* given by Dr Suzanne Preston Blier, author of the catalogue, will take place at the Musée Barbier-Mueller on November 21, at 6.15 pm before the exhibition opening. By registration only.

Two examples of *asen*:



Asen realized by a member of the Hountondji family guild. Abomey, Republic of Benin. After 1910. Iron and brass. H. 130 cm; diam. 28 cm. Inv. 1010-24. Musée Barbier-Mueller, photo Luis Lourenço.

In this scene we see a kneeling woman presenting a traditional closed gourd container (a calabash) to her husband or lineage head seated on a stool. Secured near her are a twisted cord, a cross, and a banana tree. Pendants include gongs (acoustic instruments used to communicate with humans and spirits) and overlapping squares (referencing *weke*, the cosmos, e.g. the four directions). The cords of braided or twisted metal allude to the honoree's lineage ties. According to some beliefs, it is in front of the *asen*, that the living meet the dead, speak to them, interrogate them, and offer the sacrifices of propitiation with actions of grace. The twisted cord here (referencing the umbilical cord), also speaks to the fact that each new infant embodies one or more individual from a previous generation, with this ancestor not only aiding in one's conception and birth but also throughout one's life. In some ways the various *asen* motifs referencing the deceased help to recall the memory of these important ancestors. The *asen*, transformed through related offerings in turn becomes the means for further engagement with these critical ancestors.



Asen by the Master of the wide brimmed Hat. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Mid-Late 19th century. Iron. H. 154 cm; diam. 41 cm. Inv. 1010-68. Musée Barbier-Mueller, photo Luis Lourenço.

A man wearing a hat with a wide brim curved at the edge and a large tunic, sits in a European seat smoking a long-stemmed pipe behind a cloth-covered table on which a liquor and two tumblers are placed. He is the Yovogan, a court minister who oversaw various interactions and whites (*yovo*). On his right a woman kneels and the left is a smaller male figure with a similar wide brimmed cloth and draped cloth. To the rear are tall poles that support covered calabashes; on other poles birds rest. Pendant forms include paddles, gongs, and paired sun and moon motifs.

Asen staffs historically are housed in family memorial shrines (*asenho*), in this case in the compound of the Yovogan. In color terms "*yovo*" references not white per se, but red (*vovo*), describing sunburnt skin. Liquor was important not only in interactions with Europeans (the honorific shared bottle of liquor accompanied most engagements) but also in annual celebrations honoring the ancestors. In this case, presumably, this included the late Yovogan, shared with the family's living descendants. Flags, including those painted red, white and blue, reinforce European connections – to the French, among others – as does the large cross at the rear. The ram and rooster allude to a forthcoming meal, associated either with the Yovogan's foreign clients or with the memorial service involving the *asen* itself.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Asen: Forged Memories of Iron in Dahomey Vodun Art

Musée Barbier-Mueller

Rue Jean Calvin, 10. 1204 Geneva / +41 22 312 02 70 / musee@barbier-mueller.ch

November 22, 2018 – May 26, 2019

Exhibition opening on November 21, from 7 pm to 9 pm.

- The Barbier-Mueller Museum is open 365 days a year from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Admission: Adults: 8 francs; students, seniors, the disabled, the unemployed, and groups: 5 francs; children under 12 and schools: FREE.
- Guided tours on request.
- The exhibition catalogue *Asen: Forged Memories of Iron in Dahomey Vodun Art* by Dr Suzanne Preston Blier will be on sale at the Museum bookshop and online from November 21, 2018.
- All books published or co-published by the museum are on sale at the Museum bookshop and online.
- The Association of the Friends of the Museum provides many benefits. For information, please contact musee@barbier-mueller.ch, +41 22 312 02 70.

For requests for high-definition visual materials, please contact

ajnardin@barbier-mueller.ch or +41 22 312 02 70