Fig. 1. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Female Figure from a Karan Wemba (Living Ancestress) Mask, sixteenth century, wood and iron, 27 x 7 x 7 1/2 inches. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, purchase through funds provided by the Richman Special Initiatives Endowment, Judy and Scott Lampert, Pamola and Guy Lescault, Barbara and Bert Levy, Barbara and Laurence Murphy, and Friends of African Art, 2016.205.
A Karan-Wemba Figure in the High Museum of Art

In 2016, the High Museum of Art acquired a female figure from a karan-wemba, or living ancestress, mask (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4). This Mossi sculpture has formed my secondary project for the Mellon Object-Centered Curatorial Research Fellowship, and with Carol Thompson, the High's Fred and Rita Richman Curator of African Art, and Renée Stein, Chief Conservator at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, I set several goals for the project at the start of the fellowship period. These objectives were of both a conservation-based and curatorial nature in order best to harness Mellon resources. The conservation-based objectives entailed the removal of several minute samples of wood from the sculpture to submit for different kinds of testing: radiocarbon dating, xylological analysis, and identification of surface-stratum colorant(s). The curatorial objective was to create an object file to be uploaded in TMS (The Museum System, a widely used collections management database) for the karan-wemba figure, including assemblage of comparanda in other collections and bibliography. This report will describe the steps taken to achieve these goals, present some initial conclusions and lingering questions stemming from my research, and include additional items to incorporate in the figure's TMS record (see appendices).

Two wood samples were taken in April to be submitted to the University of Georgia Center for Applied Isotope Studies and to the Center for Wood Anatomy Research of the USDA Forest Service for radiocarbon analysis and wood identification, respectively. A third sample was taken in October with the aim of identifying the dark, almost black substance used to execute the surface patterns on the sculpture. At writing, the most effective mode of surface substance identification is still being determined. The wood has been identified as belonging to the Burseraceae family, consistent with some species of Dacryodes, Canarium, and Aucoumea. The radiocarbon analysis was completed and findings reported to the High Museum (Appendix 1). It indicates as the median probability that the wood dates to 1563 CE, with the directive of the laboratory that, for samples with an age greater than fifty years, users round to the nearest ten-year period.

Scientific data can form one component of a carefully considered assessment of a work of art, and the potential for the radiocarbon test’s impact on our understanding of the karan-wemba sculpture is exciting. I considered two sculptures from other African art traditions whose wood also had been carbon-dated as possible models for proceeding with the Mossi piece. The first, a Gwan ritual figure of the Bamana peoples in Mali, was acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2013, and at the time of its acquisition, its wood was reported to be carbon-dated to between 1432 and 1644. A different date range, 1279–1395, has been published in its online record, and it is not clear where the discrepancy emerged. What does seem clear, though, is that a range given by radiocarbon analysis has been accepted as the date of the piece without consideration of other avenues of corroboration. A direct comparandum to the LACMA piece at The Metropolitan Museum of Art has not been carbon-dated but lists additional criteria in its online collection record. Citing parallel ornaments and weapons in terra-cotta figures from the twelfth through seventeenth centuries, in conjunction with conservation analyses of similar sculptures, the collection record articulates a multipronged argument for a dating of the piece early in its range, currently given as the fifteenth through twentieth centuries. The Metropolitan Museum...
of Art’s comprehensive approach serves as a useful model for proceeding with the High Museum’s Mossi figure.

The second African sculpture I considered is a Djenné figure of the Dogon peoples in the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. The range provided by its carbon-dating is the tenth through eleventh century. In this instance, further conservation-based tests were undertaken: the wood was identified, and the composition of the fatty bloom on the surface of the sculpture was analyzed. Conservators determined that the sculpture was made from the *Khaya senegalensis* tree, a species that is at present almost entirely extinct. The surface application was identified as a mixture of palm oil and stearic acid, a composition distinct from the surfaces of previously analyzed Dogon sculptures. These scientific data were coupled with compelling art-historical evidence, visual parallels for the Musée du Quai Branly figure’s coiffure, and scarification patterns in terra-cotta statues of the eleventh through seventeenth centuries of the Djenné region. The case for a date to the tenth through eleventh century, built from
the totality of scientific and art-historical evidence, is persuasive and balanced and, like The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s approach, provides a model for how the High Museum might continue to refine its determination of the Mossi sculpture’s date.

Another fascinating aspect of the karan-wemba figure, in addition to questions of its date, is its rich surface patterning. The lines that cover the sculpture in diverse geometric patterns represent a Mossi practice that results in prominent cicatrices. In this context, a cicatrice refers to an intentionally created scar produced by interrupting the healing process by continued removal of any scabs that form, which occasions uniform keloids. Keloids are prominently raised scars that can be emphasized by rubbing a substance into the wound. This practice is not exclusive to the Mossi peoples, and the elements of their patterns are neither the most unusual nor the most basic amongst African peoples who carry out scarification rituals. On sculptures, cicatrices can be depicted with raised, incised, or pyro-engraved markings; on Mossi figures, it has been determined that these details were pyro-engraved. Pyro-engraving creates surface patterns by the placement of a thin, hot blade against wood to create an incised, black line, and I suspect that this was the mode of creating the patterns that cover the High Museum’s karan-wemba figure. It will be interesting to find out if conservation-based tests from the third sampling can confirm this hypothesis or if they determine the presence of additional materials and/or colorants on the surface of the sculpture.

It has been argued that the most essential function of the Mossi scarification ritual, which is carried out on young women between thirteen and eighteen years of age, is to prefigure the act of giving birth. The placement of the scars focuses the eye on a particular anatomical region, the pectoral-ventral area, and emphasizes fecundity and the future largeness of a pregnant woman’s abdomen. The process of creating the cicatrices, which involves the young woman, the practitioner, and an assistant, parallels the number and position of women involved in the later acts of labor and childbirth. This argument for connecting the Mossi rites to the eventual act of childbearing and the pregnant body as state of perfection complements the tradition of karan-wemba figures, which depict women at their most beautiful, after the birth of their children. It underscores the importance of childbearing in the conception of the role of a Mossi woman.

At the conclusion of this project, there remain several lingering questions and issues that invite further research and consideration:

1 In my own research, I have not found any evidence of the karan-wemba mask tradition being documented beyond twentieth-century accounts. What historical evidence exists, if any, for claims that this tradition extends back several centuries prior to the earliest figures, dated to the nineteenth or twentieth century? How would our understanding of the age of the karan-wemba sculpture change if we take into account the ritual possibly not dating until the nineteenth century? I question the possibility in particular for the distinctive traditional Mossi scarification patterns that adorn the surface of the High Museum’s figure to have emerged as early as the sixteenth century when the Mossi state itself only came into formation around that time.
2. Are there examples of wood sculptures from Africa, in addition to the LACMA and Musée du Quai Branly pieces, that have undergone radiocarbon dating, and if so, how have those results been understood? It is not unusual for extremely ancient organic materials to survive from markedly arid climates, such as that of Egypt. What is the general survival of wood objects from Burkina Faso? Given the clear dry and wet seasons of the country, what is the likelihood that a wood sculpture could survive for centuries with a surface like that of the High Museum’s figure?\(^\text{15}\)

3. In discussing the issues of dating African art, multiple authors have highlighted the impact of the Western art market on the creation of sculptures and the general difficulties of dating them.\(^\text{16}\) Moreover, it has been noted that a rich patina does not necessarily equate to an older dating but, rather, to extensive usage; a recently carved sculpture that has been used repeatedly can have a more developed patina than an older work that was seldom used ritually prior to entering a collection or the art market.\(^\text{17}\) What are potential relationships among the surface of the High Museum’s figure, its date of creation, and its ritual usage?

4. Given the totality of the evidence gathered and understood thus far, has the possibility been adequately explored that the High Museum’s *karan-wemba* mask figure was carved more recently, in the nineteenth or twentieth century, but from a much older piece of wood? These lines of inquiry may or may not be affected by results from the conservation analyses awaiting completion. Regardless of the outcome from those wood and surface substance identifications, the High Museum’s recently acquired Mossi sculpture clearly presents ample opportunity for continuing to push these issues in exciting, multifaceted directions with potentially very little precedent.
**Appendix 1: Radiocarbon Analysis Results, UGA Center for Applied Isotope Studies:**

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<td>Copyright 1986-2016 M Stuiver and PJ Reimer</td>
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Mossi kara wemba
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Mossi kara
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IntCal13 and MARINE13 radiocarbon age calibration curves 0-50000 years calBP Radiocarbon 55(4). DOI: 10.2458/arum_jr_rc.55.16947

Comments:
* This standard deviation (error) includes a laboratory error multiplier.
** 1 sigma = square root of (sample std. dev.2 + curve std. dev.2)
** 2 sigma = 2 x square root of (sample std. dev.2 + curve std. dev.2)
where "2 = quantity squared.
[
] = calibrated range impinging on end of calibration data set
0* represents a "negative" age BP
1955* or 1960* denote influence of nuclear testing C-14
NOTE: Cal ages and ranges are rounded to the nearest year which may be too precise in many instances. Users are advised to round results to the nearest 10 yr for samples with standard deviation in the radiocarbon age greater than 50 yr.
Appendix 2: Karan-Wemba Masks and Mask Figures in Other Collections

1. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 26 ¼ inches, University of Iowa Museum of Art, Stanley Collection, inv. no. X1986.475.

2. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 22 ¼ inches, Scheller Collection, formerly Pace Gallery.

3. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, ca. 1800–1900, Wood and metal, 29 ½ inches, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1979.206.84.

4. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 48 inches, Former Monti Collection (Italy); Alain de Monbrison, Paris.
5. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood and pigment, 42 1/2 inches, Donald and Adele Hall Collection of African Art, Kansas City.

6. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 51 3/4 inches, Kunin Collection, Minneapolis.

7. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 43 inches, Museum Rietberg, Zurich, inv. RAF 381.

8. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 34 1/4 inches, Private collection (sold at Sotheby’s ca. 2013).

9. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood and pigment, 42 1/2 inches, Donald and Adele Hall Collection of African Art, Kansas City.

10. Mossi Artist, Risiam Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, ca. 1800-1900, Wood and pigment, 54 inches, Seattle Art Museum, inv. no. 81.17.112.
11. Mossi Artist, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 41 ¼ inches, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, inv. no. EO.1964.1.2.

12. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, undated, Wood, 24 ½ inches, Barbier-Müller Collection.

13. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, early twentieth century, Wood, paint, and iron wire, 66 inches, Saint Louis Art Museum, inv. no. 103:1978.

14. Mossi Artist, Yatenga Culture, Burkina Faso, Karan-Wemba Mask Figure, Wood and fiber, 33 ½ inches, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, inv. no. 68-35-2.
Appendix 2: Select Annotated Bibliography:


This brief, bilingual catalogue was occasioned by the exhibition of the same title at the Galerie Ammad African Arts. Dagan provides a background overview of Burkina Faso’s linguistic groups, climate, and ethnic groups as well as some generalizations about the art generated by these groups, such as the dominating color scheme of black, white, and red. She then moves through the different categories of sculpture included in the exhibition; those pertinent to the Mossi are the ancestor figures and dolls. Toward the conclusion of the catalogue are two short but important sections critically addressing the difficulties in identifying the people within Burkina Faso who produced a particular sculpture and in accurately dating artworks. The former is complicated by an increasing cross-cultural influence of styles generated by interregional trade as well as festivals in common. The section on dating raises crucial lines of questioning that need to be taken into account when assessing the date of the High Museum’s acquisition in light of its recent carbon dating. The lack of any dates on the plates underscores the difficulties in dating these sculptures.


This volume publishes the Burkinabé sculpture collection of the Morat-Institut in Freiburg im Breisgau. Its authors strive to bring attention to the art traditions from this country, which have historically received less attention than African art traditions such as those from the Benin or Luba kingdoms. A historical overview is provided, along with critical discussion of problems that arise in the study of the art of Burkina Faso. These mainly pertain to ethnicities, style, naming, and dating. The authors stress the need to avoid equating an ethnicity with a style and further underscore that notions of style and workshop, which come from European frameworks of studying art history, often are applied to African works specifically with the intent of appealing to a Western buyer’s market. They also stress, like many other publications, that a rich patina does not equate automatically with the age of a sculpture but rather with repeated use. In their treatment of the Mossi masks, the authors break down which peoples inhabit which regions of Mossi country, which masks are typical of which peoples, and the historical relationships between the *karanga* masks of the *nyonyosé* and of the Korumba and masks of neighboring Dogon in the northwest. As is seemingly typical of African art catalogues, the plates are not accompanied by any dates.


This article outlines the process of receiving the traditional female Mossi scarification patterns, typically acquired between thirteen and eighteen years of age, and articulates an argument for the ritual’s symbolic significance as a pre-enactment of giving birth. Lallemand contextualizes the scarification procedure as but one in a sequence of physical alterations to the body from birth onwards: these also include ear piercing and female genital mutilation or circumcision. Lallemand also offers context about the Mossi patterns within a larger set of peoples who engage in his practice, including the Yoruba, Mamanga, and Tshokwe. The geometric patterns of the Mossi are neither the most striking and elaborate nor the most basic. Lallemand underscores the parallels between the scarification ritual and labor/childbirth: both entail a trio of women—namely, the woman at the center of these acts—the scarification practitioner or primary woman who supervises labor, and an assistant who occupies the same position (behind the central woman) in each set of circumstances. The placement of Mossi scarification draws attention to the pectoral and ventral areas of the body. Lallemand argues that the most essential message of the ritual is to prefigure birth, both by drawing attention to the changes that a body undergoes when a woman is pregnant in the placement of the patterns and in the physical pre-enactment of labor. The Mossi scarifications emphasize fecundity and, by focusing the eye on a particular anatomic region, present an idealized image of future largeness as the state of female perfection and ultimate beauty.

This is the online collection record for a Jo or Gwan ritual figure of the Bamana people in Mali and is a comparandum for the Gwan figure at LACMA that has undergone carbon dating analysis. While this sculpture has not been carbon-dated and is dated broadly to the fifteenth–twentieth centuries, its record crucially introduces additional contexts and evidence that could help solidify an argument for a date earlier in this range. Consideration of evidence such as similar ornaments and weapons in terra-cotta figures from the twelfth–seventeenth centuries, in conjunction with the conservation analyses, helps suggest a compelling potential for an earlier dating. This careful consideration, with multiple sources of evidence, serves as a model for proceeding with the High Museum's Mossi acquisition.


This lengthy volume aims to draw attention to the dramatically accumulative and constantly altering surfaces of African sculptures, a concept that contrasts with the Western notion that when a piece is finished being sculpted, it has entered its static and final form. While the more specific chapters analyzing case studies are not pertinent to the High Museum's acquisition, the more general background, overview, and compendium of substances are extremely helpful in raising issues that elucidate the Mossi figure. The authors tackle the concept of patina with a careful and critical approach: recognizing that a patina suggests to a Western audience a “pedigree of use,” they draw out the different kind of value the accumulated surface transformations have in their original contexts, “a value based on the contemplation of a group's history or an individual's personal experiences with the object.” While they sometimes slip into issuing generalizations about “African art,” the authors nevertheless give due diligence to the multiplicity of art traditions on the continent, with concrete and specific examples from different peoples cited numerously throughout the text.

A careful distinction is made between accumulated surface additions and accretions and a subtractive patina, the wearing down of surface through use and handling. This distinction is marked by the fact that a “patina proper,” or the subtractive type, is an incidental result of use rather than an intentional application. The authors also draw crucial attention to the issue of dating African wood sculptures, highlighting the sheer rarity of those surviving as early as the mid-nineteenth century, and note in fact that most in museum collections were made in the course of the twentieth century because as a Western buyer's market increased the demand for African sculptures, artists responded to the desires for signs of age and use by artificially aging new sculptures via processes “such as smoking and soaking pieces, placing them on termite nests, recoating them with pigments, rubbing them vigorously to create artificial patinas, artificially breaking them, and creating ‘indigenous’ repairs.” It should be noted that despite this judicious discussion of issues related to dating, none of the plates are themselves dated, speaking to the difficulties in this matter.

Some information that could shed light specifically on the rich surface patterning of the High Museum's Mossi figure concerns the mode of its production. Pyro-engraving, a manner of achieving surface patterns by placing a thin, hot blade against wood, results in an incised black line. Cicatrices, in this context intentionally created raised scars, are depicted on wood sculptures by raised, incised, or pyro-engraved marks. Christopher Roy is cited describing the cicatrices on Mossi wood figures as being created by pyro-engraving.


This study was prompted by an acquisition of the Musée du Quai Branly of a wood Djenné figure of the Dogon peoples. Radiocarbon analysis dates the wood to the tenth or eleventh century. The authors of the study were able to contextualize the sculpture given its affinities in depicting coiffure and scarification patterns to terra-cotta statues produced in the eleventh–seventeenth centuries in the Djenné region of Mali. They also acknowledged the practically unparalleled existence of a wood sculpture this old and that the other statues of this type date later. However, additional kinds of conservation analyses contributed to a compelling case for a date suggested by the range of the radiocarbon testing. Xylological analysis showed that the Djenné figure was made out of Khaya senegalensis, a tree species that is today almost entirely extinct. Moreover, composition analyses of the fatty bloom on the surface of the wood indicated a mixture of fatty acids, namely palm oil and stearic acid. This mixture is distinct in
composition from surface applications to Dogon sculptures the authors had previously studied and permitted the tracing of the development of applications to Dogon ritual sculptures. A holistic assessment of many pieces of evidence (carbon dating, xylology, historical contextualization, and comparanda in other media, etc.) allowed for the placement of the dating to the tenth or eleventh century. This careful conclusion provides an example of how to proceed interpreting the High Museum's Mossi acquisition.


This article accompanied a special exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art of the same name. It is of interest because it is one of the published references to LACMA's relatively recent acquisition of a Bamana sculpture used in rituals of Gwan, an institution related to aiding women in conceiving and bearing children. This sculpture was radiocarbon dated to ca. 1279–1395. Given the article's focus on the exhibition, it does not discuss the grounds for arriving at this date, which is unfortunate because it is one of the few pieces of African wood sculpture to have undergone carbon-dating analysis, and further discussion of additional criteria for this date would be helpful in assessing the High Museum's acquisition. It is noteworthy that all figures in the article are dated, which is not commonplace for publications concerning African art.


This article primarily addresses the political art of the Mossi peoples and thus does not pertain to karan-wemba mask figures. As in his later works, Roy offers a brief narration of the foundation of the Mossi kingdom, invasion of horsemen from the south, and division of society into the political elite, the nakomsé, and those subjugated, the nyonyosé or tengabisi. Useful, however, is the attestation from Roy's fieldwork that the surface details of traditional Mossi scarification patterns are burned into the wood with a hot metal blade. This would indicate that the surface patterning on the High Museum's figure was also made via pyro-engraving.


Roy's substantial study of the art of the peoples of the Upper Volta rivers introduces the geographic region in question, with treatment of the history and the climate, before delving into the traditions of the specific peoples who inhabit the region. He provides an overview of media that are often ignored in light of more detailed discussions of masks and sculptures, such as textiles, furniture, and metalwork. Roy devotes roughly 90 pages to discussing the Mossi's history, kingdom foundation myth, land, climate, and multiple styles in addition to their artistic outputs. The northern styles of Mossi masks, marked by a tall, thin vertical plank, belong to the ancient kingdoms of the Yatenga, Risiam, and Kaya, and it is clear from Roy's examples of karan-wemba figures from the Yatenga and Risiam peoples that the High Museum's acquisition is of the Yatenga. As is frustratingly typical of publications of African art, there is no discussion of dating, nor are any dates given on the plates.


Roy's contribution to the Visions of Africa series on the Mossi serves as a succinct but comprehensive introduction to the Mossi peoples and their arts. As a recent publication, it is written with more sensitivity to the heterogeneous nature of the multiple peoples who make up the Mossi. Roy draws attention to the significant distinction between political and spiritual art, the former taking the form of brass and wood figures controlled by the nakomsé political hierarchy and the latter taking the form of masks controlled by nyonyosé. In his introduction, Roy explains, often in a pedantic and repetitive manner, the Mooré language terms for the different constituents of Mossi society. Roy characterizes the karan-wemba masks, which are discussed in the context of religious art, as marked by a tall central ridge running from the front to back of head, representing the female coiffure known as gyonfo; this is clearly visible on the High Museum's piece. He also notes the Mossi ventral and facial scars present on the figures that imitate traditional scarification patterns. Roy contextualizes the rest of the outfit that is worn when a karan-wemba mask is danced: the costume consists of shirt and trousers, light fringed fiber skirt tied around waist, and cloth or fiber cap that helps to bind the mask to the wearer's face. While Roy's short text is very informative, its overly personal tone, with frequent use of the first person,
anecdotal asides, and subjective comments on the nature of individual works of art, detract from its impact as a piece of serious scholarship.


Segy, an African art dealer and historian, sets out as the purpose of this pamphlet-length study the publication of information about Mossi dolls, the establishment of a stylistic classification, and a morphological-phenomenological reading of the dolls, ultimately arguing for a phallic reading and use as fertility figures. He provides a background on the Mossi’s history and other art forms before addressing the dolls. Segy dismisses the dolls’ role as an educational toy because they are handled “… according to general animistic concept.” The study, which is not convincing, is full of language and conceptualizations of Mossi art (and “African art,” at large) that are not only not politically correct but that also lack a grasp of the subtleties, nuances, and individualities of the myriad art traditions that the continent of Africa encompasses. It is marked by an understanding of “Africa” as if it were a single, homogeneous country. The credentials of the author as an art dealer, not unique to this publication, underscore the newness of the field of African art history and the relatively low number of academically trained African art historians.

**Notes**


2. For further resources on the kinds of wood species used in African carvings, consult Appendix 2 in Donna Page et al., *Surfaces: Color, Substances, and Ritual Applications on African Sculpture*.

3. See NOTE at conclusion of report, Appendix 1.


6. “Mother and Child Figure for the Gwan Association.”


8. Ibid.


13. Ibid., 66.


15. Ibid., 90.
