

Article

Divergent Connections: Unique Posts from Côte d'Ivoire, Tourist Art and the Implications for Ethical Display

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Abstract

The George Washington University holds a collection of African objects donated by a private collector in the 1970s, many of which are culturally misattributed. Among the objects are two large wooden posts cataloged as “house posts” from Côte d'Ivoire. These posts exhibit two distinct sections, each resembling material culture used in ceremonial traditions, but together have not been identified in existing museum collections or scholarly sources. This paper documents the findings of an investigation into the provenance and the cultural context of these posts through the analysis of the objects' materiality, stylistic characteristics, and possible market production to determine a framework for their ethical handling and restitution. What do the combined objects reveal about the interconnectedness of Western market demands and the creation of African tourist art from the 1970s? And what are the implications of these unique forms of African material culture in the conversation on museum reforms and ethical display? The research points to the blurred boundaries between authentic ritual objects and the fabrication of “authenticity” for Western consumption. The goal of this paper is to reveal the possible connections between carvers producing objects for the tourist market within the social and cultural environment of the Senufo workshop system. The paper argues that the objects in the George Washington University collection were adapted for a Western market and audience. Through a comparative analysis of cultural ideographs from surrounding cultures in the area, records of workshops and economic production, the paper concludes that the objects were not produced for sacred use but more likely for commercial purposes, and that their cultural value is not diminished. Instead, they represent another form of expression developed by carvers who adapted Indigenous forms to satisfy Western market demands.

Keywords: Africa; ethical display; restitution; tourist art; authenticity; Senufo; Ivory Coast; rhythm pounder; Kulibele; post



Academic Editors: Clement Akpang
and Andrew M. Nedd

Received: 30 June 2025

Revised: 10 December 2025

Accepted: 3 February 2026

Published: 9 February 2026

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1. Introduction

Within the collection of African material culture at The George Washington University (GWU) are two large wooden posts that exhibit two distinct sections, each associated with different types of tangible heritage used in Indigenous ceremonies, possibly among the Senufo in Côte d'Ivoire. Their combined form has not been identified in existing collections, museum holdings, or scholarly sources. By analyzing the objects' materials and styles, this research attempts to determine their possible cultures of origin by comparing them with well-known objects from Senufoland, especially those classified as originating from Côte d'Ivoire. Exploring the complexity of the local religions and material culture, as well as colonial and Western market influences, this paper will examine these posts as

examples of the adaptability of African artistic traditions to Western market demands and the negotiation between authenticity and tourist art. The findings of this research will determine how such objects, which are tourist art but bear Indigenous creative leitmotifs, can be ethically displayed in line with current debates on museum reforms.

Three private collectors donated the corpus of the GWU collection of African material culture in the 1970s. In conjunction with the Art History department, Professor Clement Akpang is leading a three-year project to research the provenance, cultural origins, sociocultural significance, spiritual symbology, and historical context of the objects in the collection. At the end of the project, each object in the collection will be displayed based on extensive research into each piece as a form of ethical restitution through anti-colonial display.

The traditional display of African tangible heritage in Western museums has followed frameworks established by colonial powers, in which both the ethnographic focus and Eurocentric conception of art obscure the cultural, spiritual, and political contexts from which these works originate. Far too often, Western institutions exhibit non-Western material culture removed from its original context. This continues to trivialize such cultures, their history, and peoples by framing them through the anthropological gaze (Sebastian 2015; Akpang 2024). Curators and researchers have a responsibility to uncover the cultural significance of tangible heritage through robust research, to be better equipped to exhibit them in ways that properly invoke their societal context as institutions like the Pitt Rivers Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, and the Cleveland Museum of Art have attempted. The debate over restitution, until recently, has centered on the return of objects to their source communities without sufficient consideration for reassessing a handful of harmful curatorial practices. Ethical restitution extends beyond repatriation considerations and should involve focused object research to identify the culture of origin, significance, and use of objects and their displays in ways that preserve and respect the object's original purpose. In this case, what are the ethical considerations when it comes to material culture that was produced expressly for commercial purposes?

The focus of this paper centers on two objects that combine two forms of material culture that are not commonly associated with objects used for traditional purposes in cultures within Côte d'Ivoire. Instead of fetishizing these novel forms, the research aims to contextualize them within their cultural tradition and highlight the role of the workshops and woodcarvers who created the combined forms and the influence of Western buyers' preferences in their production.

The case against colonial museumization is not limited to the de-contextualization of an object, but also to the conceptualization of exhibitions that obscure object meanings through misconstrued curatorial staging and narratives, especially the unnecessary sacralization of African objects as ritual specimens when they were created for tourist export. The expected outcome of the GWU project is to reexamine the exhibition criteria and proposed ethical framework for presenting African material culture that prioritizes their cultural context and Indigenous epistemes. This is because ethical restitution extends beyond repatriation considerations and should involve focused object research to identify the objects' culture(s) of origin, production methods, and cultural contexts. It is this goal of researching a collection as a strategy of ethical restitution that informs the detailed examination of the GWU collection's two large wooden objects identified as "house posts from Africa, West Africa, Ivory Coast." This research will reveal that the objects were created by woodcarvers who merged two forms of material culture within Côte d'Ivoire for Western museums. Despite being created for commercial purposes, the objects represent the output of carvers who produced a unique cultural blend using models of ceremonial figures and selected iconography from neighboring cultural groups. Relying on works by Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Till Förster, the question of authenticity and value of art

produced for commercial purposes is applied to the objects in the GWU collection to guide their ethical display.

1.1. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This paper is grounded in Heritage Context Retrieval Analysis (HeCRA), the contextual and methodological framework for the ethical handling of African Material Culture. Developed by African art historian and theorist Clement Akpang, HeCRA provides an anti-colonial, object-centered method for ethically studying, interpreting, and representing African artifacts in Western museum collections, with particular attention to works missing provenance or contextual data because they were taken from African under extractive and often troubling circumstances. HeCRA centers on the object as the primary source of inquiry to recover its historical, sociocultural, spiritual, and aesthetic significance through an examination of the African tangible heritage origin, symbolism, and use within communities of origin. By highlighting the object's contextual meanings, whether Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, creative ethos, HeCRA attempts to restore the agency of African material culture that has often been decontextualized, objectified, mummified, or fetishized through colonial museology and anthropological framings.

HeCRA uses multiple analytical frameworks and methodologies, several of which informs this study. The first is formal analysis, derived from Heinrich Wölfflin's methodology, which entails a close examination of an object's material and visual properties—its medium, construction techniques, patterns of wear, thematic content, subject matter, and stylistic features (Wölfflin [1915] 1950). In keeping with HeCRA's call for contextual breadth, this paper also employs comparative analysis as articulated by Elkins (1999), situating objects within a wider corpus of African material culture to identify origins and affinities by consulting studies of related works from specific regions.

HeCRA further emphasizes Indigenous contextual analysis, which involves interpreting objects within the cultural systems that produced them. This approach uses material culture as the entry point into African societies, drawing on stylistic configurations, materials, and functions to reestablish links to the communities with which the objects are historically associated. Central to this method is an attention to traditional beliefs, practices, symbolism, and cosmologies that shape an object's creation and significance (Akpang 2025).

Finally, this study incorporates iconographic analysis (Panofsky 1955), which interprets symbolic content of images, motifs, ideographs, and visual signs to explain cultural meanings embedded within them. This was especially helpful in situating these the posts within the Senufo style and cosmological worldview.

In this case, the formal and iconographic analyses are used to determine the posts origins, cultural symbolism, and meanings, and essentially assessing their purpose as either culturally activated heritage objects or as products of the tourist art market. The principal goal of using HeCRA in this study was to follow the framework and intersection of methodologies to identify to propose recommendations for the ethical handling of such African material culture at the George Washington University, aligned with current debates around museum decolonization and the evolving discourse on the restitution and repatriation (Akpang forthcoming).

1.2. A Case of Unique Objects: The GWU So-Called House Posts

The first step in the research was to examine how the objects arrived at the university, the conditions under which they were removed from Africa, and their original ownership. The two objects in the George Washington Collection are identified as "house posts from Western Africa, possibly Côte d'Ivoire," and their material is noted as "wood". The wooden posts have two recognizable forms of material culture: a standing female figure on a

thick, round base and a house post. The two objects were part of a 1975 donation to the university by a donor whose name has been withheld at the University's request. The donation, which included at least seventy-four objects from Africa, was given to several institutions, among them was The George Washington University (Rossetti Morosini 2002). Other recipients were the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida and the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, which later merged with Nova Southeastern University (NSU) (Alpert 1975). Except for the appraisal and shipping of the donations, there is no additional information available regarding the provenance of any of the objects. Worse still, these objects lack proper cultural attribution and contextual information about how they were used and why they were created or their exact source communities. The donor had formed a now-defunct corporation, called Primitive Arts, Inc., that traded in objects coming from different areas throughout West Africa (Primitive Arts, Inc. 1972, Sunbiz.org). There are no records of the donor having visited Africa; however, one of the partners did travel to Africa and at least one exhibit curated by him boasts 122 African art objects from 49 cultures and 14 countries (Green 1971). Despite the lack of provenance documentation, many of the objects donated to GWU have their origin in areas where armed conflicts were taking place and raises the possibility that some of the objects may have been stolen or looted and sold to the donor (Dunne 1988).

Unlike other objects in the GWU collection, the house posts cannot be identified conclusively solely based on their formal characteristics. The structure of the two objects does not appear in that combination across West African cultures or any museums worldwide. The French colonized and inhabited the region of Senufoland from 1895 until 1960, after which three post-independence nation-states—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire—were established. Although we can suggest their culture of origin as Senufo based on the comparative analysis and the stylistic configuration of the female figures, elongated faces, the facial and body markings, and the symbols carved on the posts above each head, as African Art Historian, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi explains, classification is a delicate matter that cannot be reduced to generalizations of style or appearance (personal communication, 27 September 2024)¹ It is essential to acknowledge that Senufo is an external classification that refers to a linguistic group of thirty related dialects that use their own names for their people and language. The Western designation of Senufo therefore encompasses areas within those nations, which remain diverse in culture, religion, and language (Gagliardi 2015, p. 42). For the purposes of this research, this designation guided the investigation on woodcarving practices, thereby culturally situating the objects in the GWU collection within their geographies of origin.

The fact that there are no records of objects like those in the GWU collection, as in many museums in Africa and the Global North, calls for a meticulous inspection of the individual forms that make up the posts. By comparing each section of the objects to a selection of works labeled as originating from Côte d'Ivoire in current scholarship and public collections worldwide, the identifiable iconography present in the figures indicates affinity to material culture associated with the Senufo cultural group, although we cannot rule out neighboring groups.

1.3. Form, Cultural Attribution, and Context

Made from the same type of wood and featuring a black finish, the objects consist of two distinct sections: a flat post above a female figure carved from one single block of wood. The flat top sections end in a U-shaped top and have reliefs of animal and geometric markings or ideographs on the front surface. The female figures on the bottom half of the posts have stylized facial features, including an elongated nose, closed eyes, and curved ears in relief on either side of the head. Their arms are extended on either side of the

torso, and their feet rest on thick, round wooden bases. Aside from the apparent size difference, the distinction between the female figures is worth noting. On Post 1, the head of a single snake is carved along the top post, ending just above the head of the slender female figure, whose breasts are pointed downward. The long torso is marked with bands of triangular ideographs, sunburst lines surround the navel, and a small incision indicates female genitalia (Figure 1). A pattern of three-lined triangles wraps the abdomen in eight bands. The arms are carved separately from the torso and connect to the shoulder and hips. The legs are long and end on feet that attach to a smaller base. The oval face is slightly concave, a simple line denotes the small, closed mouth; the eyes appear to be closed; the elongated nose ends at the brow; three diagonal marks on either cheek and chin, and three additional rows of parallel markings on the side of the head in between the edge of the eye and the ear mimic facial scarifications (Figure 2).

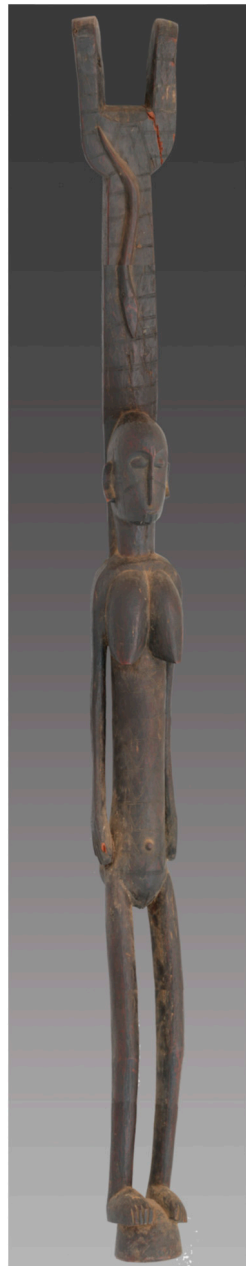


Figure 1. Once Known Kùlibèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 1), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 210 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.3. Photos by Peach Beckley. Donor: [upon request].



Figure 2. Once Known Kùlibèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 1 Head Detail), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 210 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.3. Photos by Peach Beckley.

Post 2 (Figure 3) has a longer, flat pillar with a female figure that is relatively shorter than its counterpart, standing at almost seven feet. The breasts are pointed forward; an incision is present, suggesting female genitalia. The arms extend on either side of the body, and the hands are indicated by four-line carvings that connect to the hips. Around the wrists are three-line markings that look like bracelets. The wide legs taper on stubby feet that connect to a thick, round base. The head and neck connect to the top post. The concave face has three scarification marks on the cheeks and additional carvings on the side of the head. The triangular pattern around the neck repeats around the top of the face and chin. The protruding navel is ornamented with markings shaped in a geometric, sunburst pattern. The carving of a cross below the breasts sits above a concentric pattern of squares (Figure 4).

Research on each of the distinct sections, resulted in possible connections with objects from Senufo and Bamana, where there are many sculpture genres. The female figure on the bottom half of both of the objects in the GWU collection have formal similarities to what Western scholars refer to as “rhythm pounders.” The concave faces are consistent with Senufo, where standing and seated female figures and masks were used by secret societies like the *Poro* for males and the *Sādo’o* for females. Members of each society commissioned sculptures for divinations and rituals. Figures varied by ritual, which also determined who could see them and when (Förster 2015, p. 90). Larger standing figures, between two and four feet, were used in burials and funerals (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Once Known Kùlibèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 2), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 243.84 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.2. Photos by Peach Beckley. Donor: [upon request].

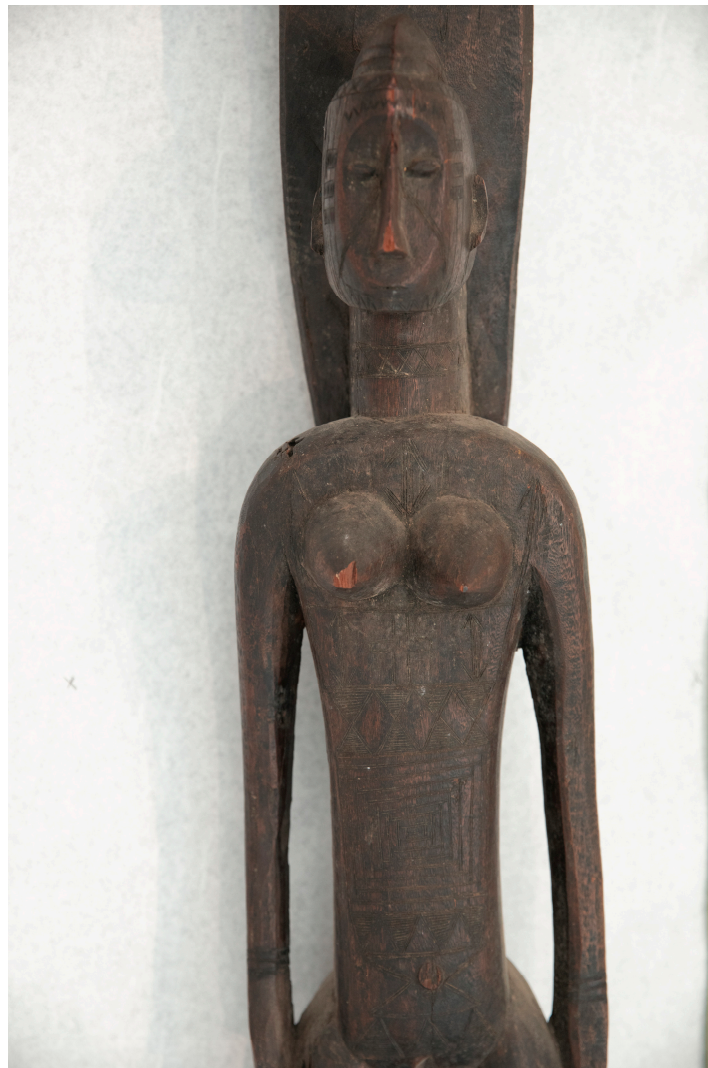


Figure 4. Once Known Kùlìbèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 2 Torso Detail), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 243.84 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.2. Photos by Peach Beckley.

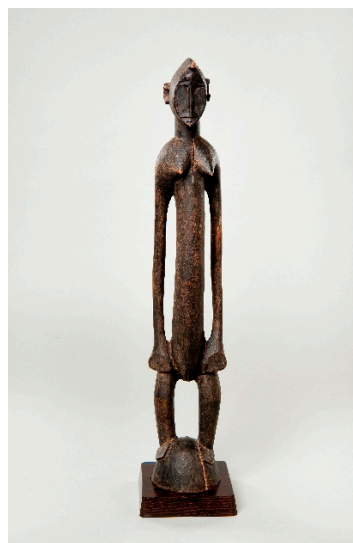


Figure 5. Unidentified artist. Kichizô Inagaki. Female Figure from a Standing Couple, Late 19th–early 20th century, Wood. The Barnes Foundation, A228. Image © Barnes Foundation.

Rhythm pounders are used in funerary ceremonies. Their ritual role implied that these figures were not to be seen by everyone and were displayed as static sculptures or animated in performance. The Senufo funeral is a final rite of passage that marks the completion of the spiritual and social formation of the person to depart the living world. Funeral ceremonies are rooted in the Senufo conception of death; the deceased's soul passes to the village of the dead, then it is added to the lineage of ancestors honored by the Poro (Bochet 1993, p. 68). At the end of the three-day ceremony, members of the Poro secret society carry the body of the deceased to the grave while the elders, carrying the rhythm pounders lead the way. The elders grab the tall wooden sculptures by the arms and pound them on the ground right in front of them, clearing the way. The belief is that the rhythm pounders lead the deceased into the land of the ancestors (Förster 2005a, p. 64).

The evidence for the top half of the post is less conclusive, as Senufo house posts are shorter and wider, not meant to be loadbearing as they would be leaned against the front of the house for protection (Figure 6). Dogon or Bamana house posts from neighboring Mali present a similar shape to the top of the objects in the GWU collection. These posts are about five and a half feet tall and hold the thatched roof of a *togu na* (great shelter), a meeting place for male elders of the community (Peek 1990, p. 82). Some of these posts have reliefs of female or male figures. Unlike a Dogon or Bamana house post, the top half of the posts in the GWU collection are decorated with animal carvings. Additionally, both the posts and bodies of the figures have geometric markings in the form of triangles and squares, all of which often appear in Senufo iconography, although not necessarily in the same manner.



Figure 6. Poteau d'abri de chef. Mossi, wood, Burkina Faso, 163.83 cm. Olivier Castellano.

Incorporated in the wood is the carving of a single snake that starts on the left side of the top of the post and ends a few inches above the female figure's head (Figure 7). The body of the snake has no markings, but the surface of the post is marked with sets of three parallel lines. Conversely, the long and flat top of Post 2 (Figure 3) features two smaller relief snakes, positioned at the top on either side of the post, that meet in the center. More reliefs of animals follow: a frog, facing directly at the head of the snakes; below it

is a tortoise, followed by a crocodile, and a goat. Finally, there is a smaller, thin, wiggly snake. The post itself has been marked with parallel lines in sets of three; they repeat in an irregular pattern in between and on the sides of the carved animals. The animals all show geometric patterns that evoke fur or skin.



Figure 7. Once Known Kùlibèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 1 Detail), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 210 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.3. Photos by Peach Beckley.

The carved symbols on the posts in the GWU collection are associated with Senufo symbols. Motifs such as the hunter and his prey reflects the hunter's high status; crocodiles devouring a snake represent aggression, battles, or war. The animal carvings on the top of the posts represent three of the five primordial animals in Senufo iconography: a tortoise (gunugo), a crocodile (wotyon), and a python (fo) (the hornbill and chameleon are the other two). The last is a metaphor for the communication channel with the spirits. *Fo* is also the messenger of the spirits and the first in the hierarchy of symbols of power used by the diviner. These figures appear in other Senufo objects like doors, drums, and textiles (Figure 8). However, these symbols only point to a potential association in style. To come up with an accurate interpretation of visual signs, it would be necessary to understand the typological and contextual settings (literal and figurative) according to Senufo art, which is outside of the scope of this research (Glaze 1993, p. 131).



Figure 8. Female Caryatid Drum (Pinge). Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, 1930–1950, 122.68 × 49.02 cm, wood, hide and applied color. Art Institute of Chicago. 1990.137.

Many carved figures remain in private collections, although some examples of rhythm pounders can be found in museum and gallery collections in the West. *Piibele* like the one at Yale (Figure 9) or at the Barnes Foundation (Figure 5) are stylistically like the female figures in the objects at the George Washington University collection. Not only are they painted black, but they also do not show signs of damage. The fact that these figures do not show any wear and tear from the repeated use in *Poro* rituals, is a good indication that they were not created for traditional uses and are likely the products of tourist art by *Kùlìbèlè* as part of the expansion of their trade to cater for foreign collector's peevs, needs, or likes, and those of their audiences.

Unlike the objects at Yale or the Barnes, the two objects in the GWU collection are not easily categorized as Senufo or "rhythm pounders". There are two considerations, first the combined forms and second, the fact that the two objects are similar in structure but do not appear to have been carved by the same artist. The styles are different; Post 2 is larger and more detailed than Post 1. The head of the female figure on Post 2 has the characteristic Senufo concave face and sharp nose, a traditional headdress and includes a traditional Senufo headdress. Unlike objects identified in Western museums, the bodies of the female figures are not smooth, instead they have markings. Post 2 has elaborate carvings of concentric squares, triangles, and right under the breasts the carving of a cross flanked by two double-sided arrows (Figure 4). The pillar above is also heavily marked with geometric triangles and lines (Figure 10). These geometric designs are present in objects identified as Senufo. The exact patterns in the two posts reflect an individual's creative expression, just like the selection of symbols, their placement, and dimensions carved on the top of section of the figure.

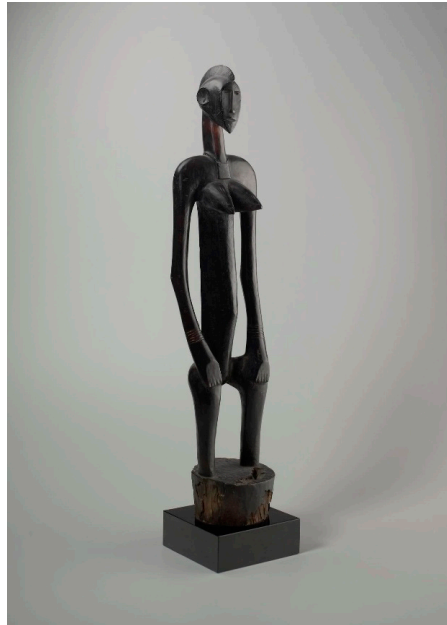


Figure 9. Doogele or Poro Piibele (Rhythm Pounder in the Shape of a Female Figure). Senufo, Kulibele subgroup, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, or Mali, late 19th–early 20th century, wood, 103.98 × 22.54 × 14.9 cm. Yale University Art Gallery. 2006.51.60.



Figure 10. Once Known Kulibèlè Wood carver, House Post and Female Figure (Post 2 Top post Detail), possibly Senufo, Côte d'Ivoire, n.d., wood and natural patina, 243.84 cm, George Washington University Collection, Washington, D.C. P.79.15.2. Photos by Peach Beckley.

While the two combined objects are made of the same type of wood and share stylistic similarities, they do not appear to be a pair. It may be possible that one may have served as a model and the other a copy. In addition to the marks and carvings that represent Senufo's iconography of primordial animals, the markings on the bodies and faces of the two female figures at the bottom of each post correspond to patterns used on textiles, body decorations, and scarifications (Glaze 1993, p. 126). However, the shape of the breasts on Post 2 could be compared to Bamana female figures. The question remained, given that the two sections of the objects do not seem to correspond to the same style, these divergent connections should be used cautiously since a cultural designation based purely on form would reinforce colonial assumptions (Gagliardi and Biro 2019). Even if we were able to conclusively identify the culture of origin of these objects the unique combination of forms, their style, similar structures and the fact that they are in remarkable condition were considerations to entertain that the objects were the product of the commodification of carvers' art.

1.4. Senufo Workshops: The Intersection of Economic Gains and Cultural Negotiations

African Art Historians Sidney Kasfir, Till Förster, and curator Lorenz Homberger, among other scholars, have long studied the specialized trade groups, including wood carvers, that comprise Senufo communities. Senufo are primarily agricultural societies. Woodcarvers as a group are known as *kùlibèlè* and they live in separate quarters within a Senufo village (Homberger 2014, p. 152). Woodcarvers like other artisans are an integral part of the community; they produce many other objects for ceremonial and household use. *Kùlibèlè* are a distinct ethnic group; they retain their sense of identity and serve various villages and societies in what Förster identifies as a colony. Each colony has no more than 25 carvers who work on two or three circular structures with thatched roofs and no walls called *vogo* (Förster 2013a, p. 330). *Kùlibèlè* are concentrated in different areas in Ivory Coast both rural and urban locations; the largest population is found in Korhogo, despite a redevelopment program in the mid-1960s (Richter 1980, p. 18). Elders or old carvers were responsible for communication between *Kùlibèlè* carvers and visitors since the 1920s, making the elders intermediaries as well (Förster 2015, p. 78).

Kùlibèlè produced different figures, including large anthropomorphic statues, almost exclusively for the *Poro* secret society. Large figure sculptures were used in funerary ceremonies (Förster 2005b). Whether commissioned as a pair, a male and female representing the primordial couple, or a single form, figures vary in size and style according to their regions of origin in Senufoland. Statues can range from six inches tall to six feet tall. Those used as rhythm pounders were medium sized and could be handled by the elders who carry the figures during the funeral ceremony. *Kùlibèlè* used hard and durable wood, as large as a tree trunk to outline the proportions of the figure using an adze, then carving the detailed features of the face and body with a small blade (Homberger 2014, p. 153). The surface of the figure is sanded by rubbing rough-surfaced leaves onto it and then the sculpture is dyed black, which is consistent with the appearance of both objects in the GWU collection. The Yale University Art Gallery and The Brooklyn Museum use different terms to refer to the figures: *Madebele*, *Siibele*, *Doogele*, or *Poro Piibele* (Figure 9). The meaning ranges from "little spirit" to sons of *Poro*. However, these examples are all smaller than the GWU collection, which by size and weight alone would make it impossible to be carried as rhythm pounders. *Kùlibèlè* produced other sculptures, like divination figures. A seated female figure carrying a load on her head is associated with the *Sandogo*, a Senufo women society. Woodcarvers also produced other objects, like the *Caryatid* drums, which display Senufo iconography of animals (Glaze 1993, p. 119).

Workshops in Senufoland served as centers for education and learning; these are spaces where carvers can have access to tools, and where old carvers pass on techniques and styles to apprentices. Young carvers work together in these shared spaces, where they cooperate, learn the style and genres iterated within the workshop, and develop relationships with other carvers. The workshop was a collaborative space where the transmission of skills could be done through demonstration, the scaffolding method or guiding by hand, or by shadowing an old carver through repetition. Since carving is a group activity, cooperation and communication are fundamental within these workspaces. Whether experience carvers teach by example or share equipment with younger ones, the constant characteristic is the interactive flow of information in the form of traditions, styles, or carving methods. (Förster 2013b, pp. 333–34). Workshops functioned as a mediator of style and genre, albeit with some distance from market demands. (Förster 2013b, pp. 350–51). Given that woodcarving is a social activity, the collaboration within the workshop allowed for some level of uniformity of styles but it also became a stage in which to learn about new forms. In fact, how their interplay shapes the reproduction of style, genre, and iconography is the question at the heart of the creation of the combined objects in the GWU collection.

The elder carvers mediated the negotiation between the client and the artists, and were responsible for interacting with intermediaries to accept commissions, set prices, and modes of payment. The only instance where carvers created objects for profit, was when producing for the tourist market, which presented a new economic opportunity (Kasfir 1992, p. 41). Commercial awareness did not reduce the value of the art being produced.

Kùlìbèlè were used to working for groups other than their own, so producing for tourists was entirely plausible. Starting in the 1940s, the demand for African carvings had increased in Europe and the United States. Carvers would test forms and iconographies to determine which ones would sell better than others. As carvers became familiar with the aesthetic preferences of the Western market, they started producing objects that were not considered initiated and, therefore, were acceptable for sale (Förster 2015, p. 80). According to Anthropologist Dolores Richter, not all *Kùlìbèlè* carve for the traditional market, but they all carve for the tourist one. Richter defines three categories of carvers based on skill. “Hack” carvers are limited to household-type items in the traditional art market and produce fast and inexpensive, albeit low-quality work, which satisfies the demand for “souvenir” art. In the second category are skilled carvers who lack originality but produce steady, high-quality masks and statues for both local and international markets. The third category is the group that creates for the *Poro* society; their work adheres to the high-quality standards prescribed by Senufo aesthetics (Richter 1980, pp. 67–69).

The tourist market allowed carvers to work full-time. Carvers would continue to improve their skills and expand their range of motifs, allowing their work to command the highest prices. Without the need to adhere to a single style, *kùlìbèlè* followed consistent aesthetic qualities associated with Senufo cultures, such as head shape, face carving, and breast design. Each artisan had agency to create work using their ideas to distinguish themselves from others, especially given the carver’s level of experience.

As Jules-Rosette states, analyzing tourist art cannot be limited to the semiotics of the forms, the context in which objects were produced have a direct impact on the forms and what they communicate. (Jules-Rosette 1986, pp. 56–57). This context encompasses the carvers, the mediators, situated within a historical time.

The two objects in the GWU collection may may not be a pair but the combination of the post and the female figure repeats. Post 1 is shorter, only one relief of a smooth-body snake, repeating three-line pattern, and a longer female figure (Figure 1). The proportions on Post 2 are reversed to the first one; the post is longer, the reliefs of animals are on top of a more elaborate geometric pattern, and the female figure exhibits more intricate decorations

on the body, including the single cross below the breasts (Figure 3). The markings may also be evidence of carvers adapting iconographies to satisfy the aesthetic preferences of Western buyers. The variations may be explained by the workshop model, where carvers would learn about styles and techniques. A comparison of door and drum bas-reliefs reveals similarities with the reliefs on the two objects from the GWU collection. We cannot conclude if this distinction is a reflection of the carver's skill or a deliberate choice. The similarities in artistic composition of the two objects in the collection may be the result of two carvers working side-by-side; alternatively, one of them may be the work of an elder carver and a younger carver may have been following the demonstration of the elder. We can speculate the two were iterations made not by one but many carvers. The workshop structure obscured the identity of the carvers working on a specific request or commission. The elder served as the intermediary with the client and at the same time he would be the one who passed on the assignment to a carver (Homburger 2014, p. 156). This is not to say that there have not been efforts to identify individual carvers by style, but the question here is about the seeming iteration of forms and iconography that was adapted from neighboring cultures. The result were not just objects created as commodities but an instance of the negotiation between artistic tradition and innovation as a result of market demand.

1.5. The Value of Tourist Art and the Matter of Display Ethics in 21st Century Museums

While the research did not uncover information that can provide conclusive answers about their makers, the two objects in the GWU collection can explain the creative and collaborative process in a workshop. The communication of motifs is represented in different levels of detail on each object, but executed differently. The fact that the tourist market allowed carvers to work full-time also allowed for them to continue to improve their skills and expand their range of motifs, allowing their work to command the highest prices. Carvers were free to create works with a selection of motifs and variations. Each artist could experiment with new ideas to distinguish themselves from others. Homburger writes that working within the workshop meant a carver could copy the work of a neighbor or come up with a different idea to differentiate himself from his teachers and models (Homburger 2014, p. 177).

The earliest demand and interest in African art were rooted in colonialism, where the imbalance of power stems not only from the extraction of material culture from their originating communities but also from their objectification and decontextualization, which reduces these objects to curiosities or fetishizes them as "authentic art" in Western conceptions. In 1992, Kasfir wrote about the problematic Western concept of authenticity in African art. For an object to be "authentic" the art had to be created before colonialism; anything created in response to market demands not just from the new African elite, but missionaries, colonial administrators, and tourists alike was then deemed inauthentic. If the institutional measure for authenticity is uniqueness, cultural relevance, and use for ceremonial purposes, then any tourist art would be considered inauthentic. The Western concept of "authenticity" also relies on anonymity, which was conveniently facilitated by the structure of workshops that obscured the identity of the artist(s) who produce the work. Carving is a profession. Förster documents how *kùlibèlè* were aware of the Western expectation of "tradition" for sculptures and masks, so they produced masks with no ritual function allowing them the freedom to experiment with iconography (Förster 2015, p. 80). Carvers needed to produce works that would sell. The practice of copying or imitating a model is seen as paying homage to the carver's teacher or predecessor (Kasfir 1992, pp. 44–56). The implication that tourist art is low quality because it is mass-produced is also misleading since wood carvers worked by hand. While the quality may very well vary, the selection of specific

styles or iconography is still an expression of the carver and its cultural framework or as Jules-Rosette defines it “the collective memory and consciousness” (Kasfir 1992, p. 50). Besides the objects bearing marks of rigorous creative dexterity, they also stylistically invoke traditional creative idioms, which makes labelling them as inauthentic by Western standards more problematic.

While these unique objects in the collection may not be found in Côte d’Ivoire cultural groups, whether Senufo, Bamana, Dogon, Baule, or Guru, cultural initiated tangible heritage in their combined form, they convey the carver’s creative output. The workshop was a place for communication about culture and style, the works produced bear the cultural and artistic expression, and meaning, even if not embedded with ceremonial purpose, as a collective answer to market demand. Although we may not have records of the provenance of the two objects in the GWU collection, their unique combination, style, and iconography point to objects created for commercial purposes, specifically for Western audiences. Nonetheless, tourist art serves as a way of communication between the producers and their audience. These were not mass-produced, low-quality figures, even if they were sold as “souvenirs”. The intentional selection of carvings, iconography employed, and the connection of the female figures to rhythm pounders seem to be good evidence of carvers attempting to satisfy the demands of an international buyer.

This research indicates that the two objects in the GWU collection are examples of tourist art; therefore, any consideration for restitution should focus on the proper display of the objects with near-cultural fidelity. Regardless of the commercial intention behind their production, the two forms are valid cultural expressions on their own. As Jules-Rosette writes, regardless of the commercial nature of the objects, they hold valuable historical information that speaks to the transitional period in Africa (Jules-Rosette 1987, p. 96). These objects shed light on the workshop structure, the interaction between carvers, the role of the elder carvers as intermediaries, the role of creativity, and the personal expression of carvers to experiment with different forms to increase their appeal.

To counteract the fetishization of these objects, a proposal for ethical display was tested in a recent exhibition titled “ONCE KNOWN” (May–June 2025) held in Gallery 102, at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. This experimental exhibition, which featured fifteen 3D facsimiles of objects under research, served as a model for the final three-year project exhibit in the fall of 2026. For the two combined forms, the design was guided by the scale of the posts at 7 and 8 feet high, respectively. The display featured high-resolution images of each figure, accompanied by enlarged images of the carving details on the posts and the torso of each figure. The recommendation for the final exhibition is to place the two structures side-by-side away from the wall so that viewers can walk around to view the carvings in the round. To properly contextualize the individual forms of the post and female figure, the recommendation is to include additional photographs of related objects (Figures 5, 6, 8 and 9), alongside wall text explaining the role of workshops, carvers, and the importance of tourist art as an authentic form of cultural expression. The exhibition ONCE KNOWN materialized these suggestions as a form of ethical restitution and anti-colonial museology.

2. Conclusions

This research into the cultural origin, use, and purpose of the two posts in the GWU collection produced crucial results. First, it exposed a unique combination of forms not found in Côte d’Ivoire cultural traditions; second, it revealed that the reliefs on the top of the wooden posts borrowed from Senufo iconography, while the pillars were adapted from Bamana or Dogon examples; and third, that the female figures were modeled on traditional statues used in *Poro* rituals in Senufoland. The combination of the two forms,

the additional markings and incisions, and the style of carvings make up for unique objects that do not exist in any one culture in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, or Burkina Faso. If the objects cannot conclusively be designated to one cultural group, it follows that they were created as commodities. This fact does not diminish the value of tourist art as a visual negotiation between local woodcarving tradition, cultural expression, and Western expectations of "African spirituality". Denying their value is a form of perpetuating the colonizing mentality.

Ethical display of tourist art should recognize woodcarvers as active participants in the continuation of West African art. The iterative process may have started with imitation, but woodcarvers were innovating by negotiating between market demands, visual language, and artistic tradition.

The conditions of production require additional consideration, as there is no indication of the specific woodcarver, community of origin, or date of creation. It is unlikely that the two posts in the GWU collection were produced as a pair. Their formal composition may be proof of the collaboration of carvers in a workshop; however, further research is required to identify the artists. For now, we can conclude that the posts were intended to be sold in the market. Considering that the figures did not have a ritualistic function, the recommendation for the two objects in the George Washington Collection is to ethically exhibit them with proper contextualization of their production by *Kùlibèlè* within the workshop as both an economic, cultural, and social institution. Recognizing that the combination of forms and incorporation of local iconography may have been the woodcarver's strategy to appeal to collectors by synthesizing multiple objects, the post and the female figure, and symbols, animals and markings, into a combined structure.

This research demonstrates that tourist art functioned not merely as a commercial by-product of cross-cultural exchange but also as a significant economic catalyst, enabling carvers to participate actively in a growing market while experimenting with new forms and selectively adapting African artistic traditions. Far from being diminished, these works continued to embody and communicate cultural meaning, challenging reductive notions of "authenticity" that privilege ceremonial objects over those made for sale. Recognizing this complexity is essential for meaningful museum reform in the 21st century. African material culture—whether created for ritual, daily use, or commercial purposes—demands equitable, contextually informed stewardship. As art historians, museum curators, and researchers, we must foreground the makers themselves: their selected visual language, cultural frameworks, and motivations. Only by situating objects within the full spectrum of their creation, circulation, and reception can we expand our understanding of African material culture, which is often hidden in plain sight, and communicate these richer narratives to museumgoers through rigorous and reflective scholarship and curatorship.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the author.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Olivia Kohler-Maga, Assistant Director of the Luther Brady Gallery at The George Washington University for the generous access to the George Washington University African Art collection and associated resources that are the foundation for my research. The three-year project would not be possible without the unwavering support of Lauren Onkey, Director of the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design, who understood the vision of this three-year, student-led research project since the start. I would like to thank the librarian at the Warren M. Robbins Library in the National Museum of African Art for his invaluable help locating materials and navigating the collection. I am in debt to Robert Fernandez for sharing his research on the GWU donors. The high-resolution photos were possible thanks to the talented Peach Beckley; her photographic skills

ensured the final composite image could be printed to scale. My gratitude to my colleague and friend, Deirdre Lafferty for her feedback and support. Special thanks to Clement Akpang, whose passion and pioneering framework on cultural contextualization and museum decoloniality not only guided the direction of my research but ignited my own curiosity and enthusiasm.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

GWU George Washington University

Note

- ¹ 27 September 2024, discussion with Professor Susan Gagliardi after Visiting Artists and Scholars Committee lecture at George Washington University.

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