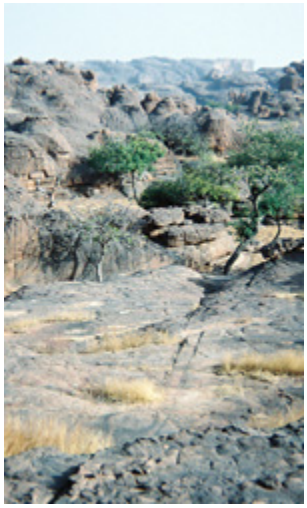
A Walk Down Memory Lane – Dogon Ladders



Collection of Dogon ladders, toguna posts and · other west African items quickly becoming scarce

By Glen Joffe

While sifting through the PRIMITIVE Warehouse preparing for the SPRING WAREHOUSE SALE, I find myself uncovering pieces that have left an imprint on me over many years of dealing with cultural objects. It’s funny how a particular item can transport you to a different time and place, as if the object itself is a portal into history.



Bandiagarra Escarpment · in Malil, West Africa

In the south corner of the warehouse stands a group of carved ladders from the Dogon People who live along the Bandiagarra Escarpment, a long cliff in the center of Mali in West Africa. Immediately I think of Africa – the sights, sounds, and smells. These particular objects have been collectible for years – treasures placed in exceptionally fine and interesting homes by designers and aficionados alike. Now, they are getting scarce, but we still have an extraordinary collection. My thoughts turn back to the Dogon. According to oral tradition, the Dogon are one of the oldest surviving African Cultures. Daily life for them is not much different today than it was hundreds of years ago, due in part to where they live. The Bandiagarra Cliffs are isolated, making the Dogon geographically secluded. Yet, where they live is less relevant to this conversation than their creation myth, the story they tell about how they came to be a people – more specifically, how they came to earth.



Above: · View from above the Dogon village, along with the ladder used to reach the rooftop



One of the ladders used to reach the rooftop

Google “Dogon creation myth” and you’ll get almost 19,000 hits telling their story. According to Dogon legend, they are descended from a group of space travelers – aliens – called Nommo who came from a star system obscured by the brightest star in the night sky, Sirius. The Dogon have been telling this story for centuries, and although it sounds farfetched, they even had advanced astronomical knowledge of this system – a rather remarkable feat for a people with very few math skills. The story looks like a headline you might see in a tabloid while standing in line at the grocery store – “African tribe really aliens in disguise.” It belongs right up there with stories about Bigfoot – except in 1976 scientific evidence was presented proving the Dogon had accurate knowledge about the location of this other star system, lending credibility to their bold claim.



Dogon woman with ladder leading to rooftop

While many Dogon objects and artifacts reference the stars above, one that more subtly connects earth and heaven is the ladder. Dogon ladders are used today just as they were hundreds of years ago – to access the the roofs of huts, high granary doors and cliff dwellings. Carved from a solid piece of wood with a series of notched footholds, they seem to always split at the top in an appealing "Y" form. They are everyday utilitarian, functional objects, old yet surprisingly modern in form and feeling. Tall or short, they are visually compelling works of art – powerful icons of ascension whether you are climbing in this world or beyond.