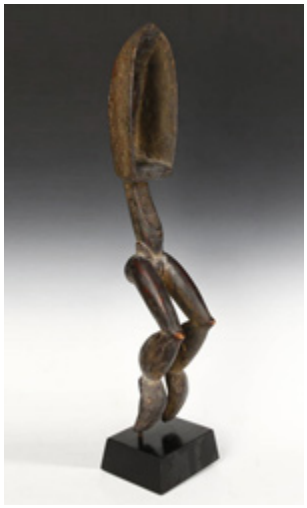
The Leading Lady – Dan Ceremonial Ladle



Everyone knows to stay out of the kitchen when the chef is preparing a feast!

By Misaki Imagawa

Just about all women from tribal cultures know what it feels like to prepare a massive feast. They start preparing weeks ahead of time. Meanwhile, the men go about their business, typically more concerned about how much meat will be served at the feast. Women will hammer out multi-course menus, hunt down ingredients, horde spices and herbs, stock up on drinks, count dishes and glasses, and fuss over last minute details; then several days before the feast, the cooking begins. You've most likely heard the kitchen being described as a war zone, and rightly so; when fires, stress and tempers flare the stovetop becomes a battlefield. May all godly forces have mercy on the poor soul who ventures into a kitchen during one of these moments in search of a snack. Just hope the head chef will smack you with the spoon in her hand and not the knife that just lopped off a chicken's head!



Wunkirmian spoon, or ladle by the Dan people of Liberia, West Africa

Item #A1300-331

Preparing a festive meal takes time, effort, organization, skill, stamina, and no small amount of dexterity. Anyone who manages to accomplish it successfully deserves a prize – and in fact, the Dan people of Liberia, West Africa, do just that. A large ceremonial ladle called *wunkirmian* is awarded to a woman who demonstrates exceptional cooking skills, generosity and hospitality in her village quarter. Yet unlike a gold medal that may end up gathering dust on a bookshelf, the wunkirmian is a highly valued piece of artwork that holds practical, ceremonial and spiritual significance and is carried everywhere by the woman as an item of honor and prestige.

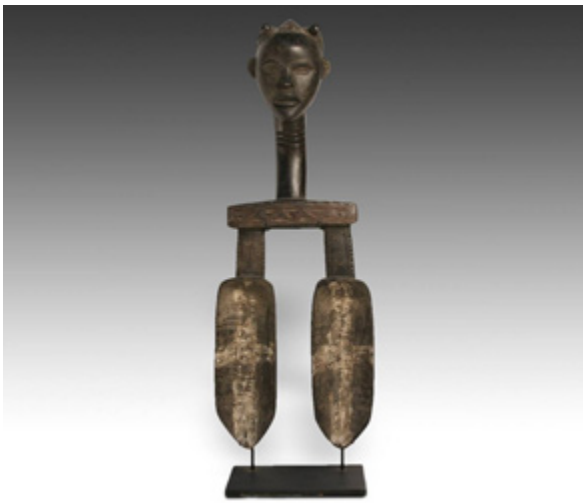


Highly stylized wunkirmian spoon, or ladle depicting a female form with breasts

Item #A0602-369

Roughly translated as ‘the spoon associated with feasts’ this large ladle is carved by a master craftsman from a single piece of wood and can range between one to two feet in length. Like many African artworks, the wunkirmian is engraved with its own unique visual language. The handle is carved as a human figure, most often female. Detailed attention is given to the hairstyle and scarification marks, emphasizing the beauty and strength of Dan women. The large concave round of the spoon has dual meaning – it is a literal representation of the large amounts of rice given in hospitality, but also is symbolic of the woman’s womb. She who wields the spoon in the community is the giver of food, and therefore life.

Those honored to possess the wunkirmian are seen as the ideal woman among the Dan people: hardworking, hospitable, and generous. Above all, she is a woman who has mastered the art of successfully organizing large feasts that accompany masquerade ceremonies – and anyone looking for a snack in *her* kitchen better beware of that wunkirmian! Once the feast is prepared and the ceremony is underway, the honored lady leads her assistants and distributes rice grains and coins to the children of the village. She will also lead the dance, singing with her ceremonial spoon in hand while tossing rice in front of the masquerading men in blessing.



Double wunkirmian spoon, or ladle with handle depicting an idealized female form

Item #A0800-369



Double Spoon · Dan people · Liberia, West Africa · 20th C. · Wood · 4.75 W x 4 D x 22 H inches
Item #A0800-369

The wumkirmian is also regarded as a spiritual object that embodies the spirit of *du*. Du is a mediator between humans and the almighty god, who no one can reach. The power of du can be harnessed through masquerades, divination, dreams, or most notably the wunkirmian. For men, masks are the spiritual medium to communicate with du, and for women it is the ceremonial feast ladle. In a culture governed largely by men's secret societies, the honor of carrying the wunkirmian gives women a distinctive title in the village. These leading ladies hold as much spiritual power as the men who dance masquerades. They are similar to the First Lady of the United States – having a great deal of power, responsibility and respect among their people.

Although it would be nice for all chefs to receive a prize as great and honorable as the wunkirmian, a prize may not be the greatest motivation when it comes to cooking. Be it man or woman, anyone who has endured weeks of preparations, days of cooking, and hours of thwarting snack-seekers, there is nothing quite as rewarding as simply seeing your guests enjoy the feast and proclaim it wonderful. There appears to be no greater reason to do it all over again. For the keeper of the wunkirmian, everyone who comes to her is welcomed and no group is too big for her to feed. Though her spoon may have a physical limit, the generosity of her heart is limitless – and therein lays the greatest beauty of all.



Anthropomorphic wunkirmian spoon, or ladle; PRIMITIVE ID's A1000-128