Covering Your Back! – Baule Slingshots

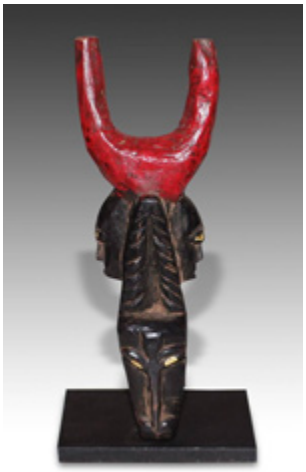
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Slingshot by the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, West Africa

Item #A0800-649

A hunter crouched silently behind a tree in the heart of Baule tribal territory in the Ivory Coast of West Africa. His eyes were fixed on a large bird perched on a low hanging branch. Slowly, he reached into a pouch hanging from his neck and removed a stone. Times had been hard for the last few years. Harvests had been bad and there was little game to hunt. Warriors like himself were forced to go further out into the bush in search of small game. Moving quietly he fitted the stone into his slingshot and with the smoothest of motions raised his arms and took aim. Suddenly, he froze; as if someone or *something* made him hesitate. His eyes caught the face carved on the handle of his slingshot. Years of use had smoothed some of its features, but the eyes were still watchful. They told him, in a way he couldn't explain, to look over his shoulder. When he did, his pulse began to race. A giant boar came through the bushes, lowered its tusks and scratched the ground, preparing to charge.



Baule slingshot depicting a bush spirit flanked by multiple faces

Item #A0800-650

Anyone who has come face to face with a giant boar knows the danger and fear these animals can create. Armed only with a slingshot, the hunter knew he was no match for the boar. Suddenly, the animal charged forward, and as it darted toward him he raced up the tree to the branch where his original prey now beckoned him to safety. When he arrived the bird took off, its wings waving goodbye, leaving him perched aloft with no safety net and a large fuming boar below. Yet, he didn't bother with the animal beneath him. Instead, he locked eyes with the face on his slingshot and gave thanks for the warning it had provided. He had no doubt the guardian spirit in the slingshot was active and alive.



Zoomorphic slingshot by the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, West Africa

Item #A0800-660

Stories like this are not uncommon among the tribal people of the Ivory Coast. To the Baule, slingshots were much more than a weapon. They were miniature works of art believed to hold talismanic powers. Baule society is marked by great individualism, dislike of strict political structures, age classes and even secret societies, so prevalent among other tribal cultures. Their artwork can feature subjects ranging from idealized figures to deities and bush spirits in the forms of masks, figurative sculptures and utilitarian objects such as the slingshot. Their art tends to conform to what can be called “Baule style,” often characterized by sturdy legs, a prominent nose, defined eyes, strong brows and distinctly styled tribal coiffures. However, because Baule artisans freely choose, as opposed to inheriting their occupation, it can also be said Baule art is defined by rugged individualism and a sense of artistic freedom rather than restraint. This is most evident in slingshots, which are extraordinarily diverse in what they illustrate.



Baule slingshot depicting a boar's head surrounded by multiple faces

Item #A0800-234

Slingshots, called *potomo waka*, share similarities to larger Baule sculptural works. In terms of posture, both slingshot and sculptural figures often have their hands resting on their midriff in a gesture of peacefulness and their faces reflect a sense of meditative composure. Sometimes, they depict partial or abstract figures, faces alone, animals and even other Baule works of art, such as masks. In addition to bringing good luck on hunts, it was believed the carvings on slingshots would protect the owner. For example, faces were thought to look out for danger from all directions; and some would even be carved upside down so the spirit in

the carving would be 'right side up' when the hunter held the slingshot for use. Animal motifs channeled the natural power and prowess of the animal being depicted while serving as a reminder about dangers in the wild.



Baule potomo waka, or slingshot depicting multiple faces

Item #A0800-645



Slingshot · Baule people · Ivory Coast, West Africa · 20th C. · Carved wood · 4 W x 2.5 D 7 H inches

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Baule fathers often commissioned slingshots for their sons to hunt small game such as birds and rabbits. It was a rite of passage for a young Baule boy to master his slingshot before becoming a “warrior,” but far from being toys, these weapons were considered objects of value and spiritual significance. They would continue to be carried long after childhood as a

form of protective amulet or good luck charm. As an art form they are as beautiful and beguiling as any other type of Baule artwork; and viewed collectively they may be considered a distinct collecting category displaying enormous diversity and uniqueness.

No doubt each slingshot has a thrilling story to tell. If they could speak, they would talk about growing up, parental guidance, courage, confidence, character, patience and stamina; and their stories would feature dangerous situations and predators including, of course, charging wild boars; and if the warriors could chime in, they would add – their slingshot always had their backs.



Two carved and painted Baule slingshots depicting a male and female
Item #A0800-646 & A0800-652