



USE AND GENERAL HISTORY

The main regions where *asen* were made and used span between the Asante (Akan) of Ghana; the Adja and Ewe of Togo; the Fon, Hueda, and Ayizo of the Republic of Benin; and the Yoruba and Edo (Benin) kingdoms of Nigeria. At their most basic, *asen* constitute a kind of portable altar that is planted in the ground of the *asenxo* (*asen* house) where the deceased members of the family are memorialized and recalled in annual ceremonies, during which each is engaged. It is in front of the *asen* that the living will meet the dead, speak to them, interrogate them, and offer the sacrifices of propitiation. Many *asen*, including several featured in the exhibition, include a portrayal of a gourd container, or

FIG. 1 (left): *Asen* by the Master of the Curved-Horn Ram. Ouidah, Republic of Benin.

Mid-late 19th century.

Iron. H: 129 cm.

Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-69.

Seated here is a man in a top hat holding a knife. In front is a dead bird (a duck?) on a platter. On one side is a curved horn ram and on the other is a serpent grasping a frog. Around the perimeter are trees and a cross.

All object photography © Luis Lourenço, Musée Barbier-Mueller.

Forging Memory in Iron

ASEN ARTS OF DAHOMEY

By Suzanne Preston Blier

From November 21, 2018, until May 19, 2019, the Musée Barbier-Mueller in Geneva will present a special exhibition focused on the West African tradition of iron altars known as *asen*, specifically those of the former kingdom of Dahomey. Titled *Asen: Mémoires forgés à fer dans l'Art Vodun du Dahomey (Asen: Forged Memories of Iron in Dahomey Vodun Art)*, it will explore an array of issues important to our understanding of these striking sculptures. Key among these are artist hands, questions of use, the history of these arts, and how *asen* enhance our understanding of the broader regional history of the southern area of the Republic of Benin where they are found. This collection, representing some of the finest iron sculptures anywhere in Africa—or elsewhere—offers a unique occasion for close looking at these remarkable works. It is in the fine details of their construction and figural forms that the identity of each artist can be discerned.

calabash (fig. 1). Such containers hold food used in offerings to the deceased at the time the *asen* is first installed. This also recalls an alternative name for *asen* in this area in southern Republic of Benin and Togo, namely *sinuka* (calabash to drink water, the calabash being the receptacle that one uses ritually in libations for the ancestors). The tall pots shown in some *asen* (fig. 9) recall those used by women to carry fresh water from a nearby spring to the family compound for use in related rites. In some ways, the various *asen* motifs referencing the deceased help to recall the memory of these important figures. The *asen*, transformed through related offerings, in turn, becomes the means for further engagement with these critical ancestors.

Historically in this region, *asen* were also closely identified with healing, protection, and divination, as well as the transfer of knowledge from the spirit world to the earthly world in Vodun temples and other contexts (fig. 2). This function shifted toward a more specifically royal memorial use as the Da-





homey court grew in power from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the Dahomey (Fon) court in Abomey, each king and *kpojito* (the woman who personifies the ruler after his death) was identified with a distinct *asen*. The royal *asen* were brought out during annual “custom” rites (fig. 2). Historically they were positioned near the *djebo* (spirit house of the king) and were secured in the ground outside the structure, each initially covered with a cloth. Once the cloth is removed, the *asen* is given libations and other offerings, including yam, corn, and beans, from the *dadasi* (paternal aunt), as well as incantations or songs (fig. 4).

The majority of the works in the Barbier-Mueller collection and featured in the exhibition were created in the coastal port city of Ouidah, many dating to the mid to late nineteenth century and, as such, are earlier than those associated with the Dahomey court in Abomey, which were largely destroyed in the 1892–94 French colonial war. These were replaced by new forms commissioned by King

Agoli-Agbo between 1894 and 1900 from the royal guild of jewelers and smiths, the Hountondji family blacksmith guild.

ARTIST STYLES

The *asen* in the Barbier-Mueller collection can be divided into five unique artist groups. Three of these artists were situated in Ouidah and worked almost exclusively in iron. A fourth, in Abomey, produced not only from iron but also brass and, more rarely, silver. The works from Ouidah date to the mid to late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, while those from Abomey were produced in the twentieth century. Each of these artist groups has a distinctive style. While these differences vary and include certain subjects like long horned rams, rolled brimmed hats, long tunics, and gigantic plant forms, one of the most important distinguishing features of these artists is the way in which each attaches the iron pendants (*togbe*, or earrings) around the perimeter.

FIG. 2 (lower left): Vodun ceremony in Ouidah. Republic of Benin.

Photograph by Dana Rush, 2017. An *asen* featuring a stool and gong-form pendants appears in the corner.

FIG. 3 (above): Postcard showing *asen* for sale in the Abomey market, 1919–1920.

From Pater Erkens, “Onze Missien in Vogelvluch,” *De Katholieke Missiën*, vol. 45 (1919–1920), Hertogenbosch, Uden, Netherlands, p. 72.

Courtesy of the Ross Archive of African Images, Yale University.

1. Master of the Curved-Horn Ram: Ouidah. Mid to late nineteenth century (figs. 1, 5, and 6). This artist's animated animal portrayals (rams, chickens, serpents, crocodiles, turtles, fish, etc.) show his unique mastery of iron. The artist's striking portrayals of rams with long curved horns (fig. 1) are particularly distinctive. His human figures display larger-than-normal hands, often tightly curved with separated thumbs, and large flat feet that are set at a prominent angle to the shin. Physiognomies are carefully delineated, often with protruding sharp noses, outward rounded eyes, and outward flaring ears. A number of his *asen* are dedicated to women (fig. 5). These women, generally shown on elite stools rather than kneeling, display long, thin, cylindrical breasts. The iron stems of his female *asen* are notably shorter than those for men, and straight struts further distinguish the female *asen*, as opposed to the alternating zigzag iron struts characteristic of male *asen* forms. All his works show neat, clear compositions with the

principal figure positioned prominently in the center and each of the compositional elements—from plants to seats to animals—is clearly defined. Figures often are secured to the platform surface by direct soldering rather than by folded iron tabs used by other Ouidah smiths. The *togbe* pendants are neatly and evenly spaced around the perimeter and are secured to the full height of the rolled edge surface by embedded knobs. These pendants vary in subject matter, many referring to European trade (anchors, paddles). In the larger grouping of subject matter, we see references to Dahomey Kings Guezo (1818–58) and Glele (1858–89), as well as to French traders (flags) (fig. 6), reinforcing the likely mid-nineteenth-century dates of his oeuvre. Today his works are found in many important collections. Some of these represent the powerful minister known as the Yovogan, “Lord of the Whites,” the individual charged with European relations. Plausibly this artist is Akati (Eklependo Zomabodo Glenegbe), the same smith who in 1860 made the famous iron sculpture linked to Gu (Gou), the god of iron (fig. 7).

2. Master of the Rolled-Brim Hat: Ouidah. Mid to late nineteenth century (figs. 8 and 9). Many of this artist's male figures wear wide-brimmed hats, the edges of which curl upward. Women often wear headcloths and have thin, cylindrical breasts. Faces are flat with punched eyes and mouths, and the hands are curved with well-demarcated fingers. Some of his stools show sides with cut-out edges, a form that also is seen in crosses by this artist. Many of the animal and human figures are attached to the surface by folded tab-like additions soldered to the platform. The perimeter band sometimes bears a cut-iron border. In attaching the *togbe* pendants, small knobs secured neatly around the edge of the platform are employed. These pendants often are smaller than those of the Master of the Curved Horn Ram. Larger-than-usual stools are included in his works (compare fig. 10), sometimes with sides that terminate in spirals at the edges. These tall *djandemen*-style chief stools (a group drawn from Akan examples) are seen in all the *asen* examples illustrated in this essay. These are different from the shorter, round, three-foot-

FIG. 4 (below): Dedication of a new *asen* created by a member of the Hountondji guild of royal blacksmiths and jewelers by the Awesey family in Abomey.

Photo: S. P. Blier, 1986.



FIG. 5 (left): *Asen* by the Master of the Curved-Horn Ram. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Mid-late 19th century.

Iron. H: 114 cm.

Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-61.

A woman holding a calabash sits on an elite *djandemen* throne, her feet positioned on a smaller stool. Adjacent to her are two ceramic vessels of the type used to carry the spring water used in local ceremonies.



ed *katake* stools (fig. 11) usually used by queens, queen mothers, lesser chiefs, priests, diviners, and family heads.

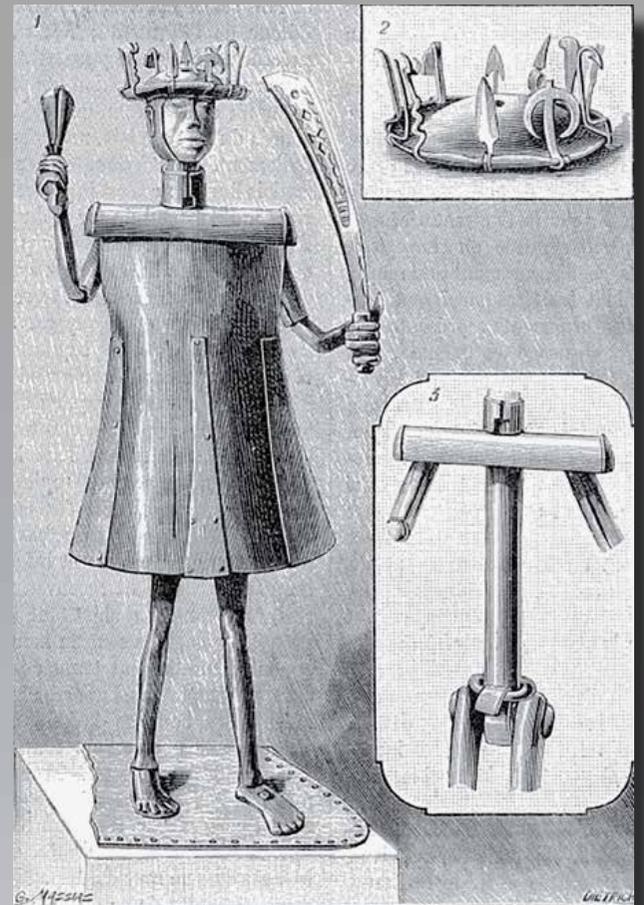
3. Master of the Long Tunic: Ouidah. Late nineteenth century (figs. 12 and 13). This artist's oeuvre is distinguished by his use of thin metal sheets to form his figures, struts, and platforms. Key details often show the dramatic cutting and folding of iron sheeting in a manner that sometimes resembles paper. Tunics and cloth wrappers often extend to the ground (hence this feature in the artist's designation), forms that often flare outward at the base. The figures have flat paddle-like hands. The artist affords little emphasis on physiognomy other than thin incised lines for the eyes and mouth. If crosses

FIG. 6 (below left): *Asen* by the Master of the Curved-Horn Ram. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Mid-late 19th century.

Iron. H: 170 cm. Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey, inv. 89.33. *A pipe-smoking man in a top hat and tunic sits on a tall djandemen-style throne. Behind him, a woman holds an umbrella and a man holds a parasol (important status markers). Two other individuals kneel nearby. Around the periphery are a crocodile, a fish, and a large object on a traditional wooden carrier.*

FIG. 7 (right): Drawing of an iron sculpture of Gu (Gou), the Dahomey god of iron, war, and creativity.

From Maurice Delafosse, "Une statue dahoméenne en fonte," *La Nature*, 1894, no. 1105: 145-147. *The subject of this drawing was created by the artist Ekplékendo Zomabodo Glenegbe Akati (also known as Akati Akpele Kendo) in 1860 under the patronage of King Glele (1858-89) for the memorial rites honoring his father, Cuezo (1818-58). The original sculpture is in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (inv. 71.1894.32.1).*



are included, they often flare at the edges in the style of Maltese crosses. His compositions range from sparse works with few figures to stunningly busy ones. His pendants are small and are attached with small holes evenly spaced at the periphery of the platform, generally secured to the edge with wire. Gong-form pendants are almost exclusively used by this artist.

4. Master of the Gargantuan Imagery: Ouidah. Early twentieth century (figs. 14, 15, and 16). This artist's plant and other forms are notably tall and flamboyant. Animal and human figures are sometimes both outsized in scale and generic in form. Faces show tight compositions of eyes, nose, and mouth against a slightly concave surface. The hands are small, sometimes incised with lines to delineate the fingers. Thin sheets of metal are often draped dramatically over the figures. Compositions are crowded and busy, and green, yellow, and other pigments are often added to the surface. The thin iron platforms are turned at an angle, creating a long edge to which neat pierced holes support small pendants secured with wire loops.





FIG. 8 (left): *Asen* by the Master of the Rolled-Brimmed Hat. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Mid-late 19th century.

Iron. H: 88.5 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-25.

A man in a cap and cape sits on a throne. In front is a closed calabash gourd positioned on a spiral-footed support. On each side are cut iron crosses and to the rear is a banana tree.

FIG. 9 (below): *Asen* by the Master of the Rolled-Brimmed Hat. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Mid-late 19th century.

Iron. H: 134 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-52.

A man in a rolled brimmed hat and with a cloth draped over his shoulder sits on a djandemen throne. In one hand he holds a long, curving pipe and in the other a chain. A rooster and a chicken flank him and a large closed vessel is positioned in front.

One of his *asen* features a crab (fig. 16), an important motif in Ouidah that references a local Hueda man named Kpate (or Kpase) who, prior to 1671, saw the first European ships offshore and invited them to town. He was gathering crabs on the shore when, on recognizing a sailing vessel on the horizon, he attached a cloth to a pole to get their attention. Kapate is celebrated today as the hero who brought European trade.

5. Hountondji Royal Guild members: Abomey. Late nineteenth to twentieth century (figs. 4, 17, and 18). This royal Abomey court guild was responsible for works of jewelry, scepters, and other arts made in part from precious import metals—silver and copper. Among its production are *asen* of the sort commissioned by King Agoli-Agbo between 1894 and 1900 and those created for royal and other families in the decades that followed. After 1910, the Hountondji Royal Guild artists also began fashioning *asen* scenes of brass made through lost-wax casting, a tradition that owes its

roots to another talented smith, Tahozangbe's son, Gnassounou Hountondji, who attended the Colonial Exposition in Marseilles in 1906 and learned this art form there. He likely created several of the works in this exhibition and also passed this skill on to successors in this guild (figs. 17 and 18).

In the years following the French colonial takeover of Dahomey in 1892–94, the local patronage system for *asen* changed considerably. Once the prerogative of Dahomey's kings, increasingly they were made available to other families, including the many princely descendants of Kings Glele, Gbenzin, and Agoli-Agbo, for family *asenxo* honoring important ancestors. The Hountondji guild members not only worked on private commissions for these and other families but also sold more generic *asen* forms in the Abomey market there (fig. 3). The sales of *asen* sculptures through this means is consistent with other sales for art objects such as carved wooden *bocio* power figures and *hohovi* twin sculptures. Only when *asen* and these other arts receive the requisite offerings and sanctifying prayers are they considered to hold sacred power. Once such offerings are stopped, the *asen* lose their



efficacy as objects that bring the power of the ancestors to bear on their living descendants.

This exhibition offers African art lovers a unique opportunity for close looking at an extraordinary group of artworks that, for the most part, have never before been exhibited. Much as Dahomey art scholar Gaëlle Beaujean-Baltzer addressed the unique artist styles of Dahomey court arts in her 2009 work, *Artistes d'Abomey: Dialogue sur un royaume africain*, so too here we see the unique ways in which each artist addresses works in this genre and the stunning ways that they individually handle iron, a notably difficult material to fashion.

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FIG. 12 (above): *Asen* by the Master of the Long Tunic. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Late 19th–early 20th century.

Iron and cuprous alloy. H: 114 cm.

Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-54.

A man in a long tunic sits on a wide-armed stool holding a staff. In front is a twisted cord, a reference to family filiation. On one side is a blacksmith's anvil and on the other is a snake grasping a frog. A Maltese-form cross stands at the rear.



FIG. 10 (left): Royal *djandemen* throne. Dahomey, Republic of Benin.

Wood. H: 76 cm.

Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-19.

Stools of this type were used by kings and elite ministers.



FIG. 11 (above): Stool, *katake*. Dahomey, Republic of Benin.

Wood. H: 19 cm.

Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-17.

Stools of this type were used by queens, queen mothers, chiefs, priests, and diviners.



FIG. 13 (left): *Asen* by the Master of the Long Tunic. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Late 19th–early 20th century.

Iron. Height: 134 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva,
inv. 1010-52.

A man in a long tunic and wide-brimmed hat sits on a wide-armed stool while holding a large key. Around the perimeter of the scene are a twisted cord, a cross, a hand with a knife, a cord (?), and a bird.

FIG. 14 (below): *Asen* by the Master of the Gargantuan Imagery. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Early 20th century.

Iron, cuprous alloy. H: 117 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva,
inv. 1010-30.

A man in a tunic sits on a wide-armed stool. In front kneels a woman holding before him a closed calabash. Around the perimeter are chameleons, a rooster, a twisted cord, a turtle, and various plants.

FIG. 15 (right): *Asen* by the Master of the Gargantuan Imagery. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Early 20th century.

Iron. H: 144 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva,
inv. 1010-71.

A man wearing a dramatic outward-flaring cloth stands facing a closed calabash. Around the perimeter are a chameleon, a serpent, a tree, and a bird.

FIG. 16 (below right): *Asen* by the Master of the Gargantuan Imagery. Ouidah, Republic of Benin. Early–mid 20th century.

Iron. H: 145 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva,
inv. 1010-50.

A man holding a cane stands behind a large gourd with a crab. Around the perimeter are a banana tree, a branching form, and a chicken (?). The crab appears to reference an Ouidah resident, a Hueda man named Kpate (or Kpase), who first saw European sailing ships offshore.





FIG. 17 (right): Asen by the Hountondji Royal Guild. Abomey, Republic of Benin. Early-mid 20th century.

Iron, brass. H: 139 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-66.
A man in a cloth waister sits on a tall djandemen-style stool as his wife presents him with a bowl, perhaps containing food. Around the perimeter are a palm tree, a bird, a chameleon, and a cross.



FIG. 18 (below): Asen by the Hountondji Royal Guild. Abomey, Republic of Benin. Early-mid 20th century.

Iron, brass. H: 130 cm.
Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, inv. 1010-24.
A woman kneels to present a closed calabash gourd to a man wearing a long, draped cloth and cap who is seated on a stool. Around the perimeter are a cross, a palm tree, and a twisted cord.

