



Herbalist's staff (opa Osanyin)

Medium

Iron

Description

Iron staff topped with ring of birds and bird finial. Has stand. This staff is named after Osanyin, the Yoruba god of curative powers, from whom Yoruba diviners gain their strength. Osanyin is believed to have only one eye, arm, and leg as well as a small voice; these imperfections allow him to identify with the plight of mortal man. His crippled state also causes him to rely on diviners to collect medicinal leaves. The staff rod may stand for the rest of Osanyin's broken body. With this symbolic leg and the assistance of a loyal diviner, Osanyin is able to "outrun the most fleet." The many birds stand for the leaves of the forest, the source of medicine. Yoruba medicines not only address physical health, they also tend to spiritual well-being and fortune. The birds on the staff carry an important significance in this respect. The large bird that dominates the many smaller birds references the power of

the Osanyin diviner to subjugate "Our Mothers" - female ancestral spirits who carry out evil works at night while assuming bird form. The larger, central bird on the staff thus represents the diviner rising in triumph over the other, vanquished birds. Alternatively, since "Our Mothers" are understood as embodying both positive and negative qualities, the staff may simply pay homage to them and their vast powers. The large central bird may represent not the Osanyin god, but a grandmother bird, in whom great power and wisdom resides. The iron from which the staff is made points to the relationship between herbalists and the iron tools used to cut trees, and the consequent long-standing relationship between blacksmiths and healers. Diviners place Osayin staffs outside their home to both signify their status and safeguard their homes. Staffs may also be carried in public processions to signal an impending divination, or to mark a significant occasion such as the initiation of a new priest. The rod of this staff is broken and may explain its presence in a museum collection. African objects that contain power in their original state, when broken, are often discarded as useless. Kathleen McDermott '09 conducted research for this description.

Dimensions

Overall: 25 3/4 x 9 inches (65.4 x 22.9 cm)