

AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Agbonbiofe Adesina

House Post for Efon Alaiye

Early twentieth century

Wood, paint

56 × 10¼ × 7½ in. (142.2 × 26 × 19.1 cm)

Gift of Rod McGalliard

1993.12.11

This house post originally supported the roof of the royal palace in Efon Alaiye in Ekiti state, southwestern Nigeria. The carving depicts a kneeling woman with a covered offering bowl above the head of a bearded male, who symbolizes kingship. The female figure, graceful and dignified with her head erect and her offering bowl in hand as she kneels, embodies the notion of humility, appropriate in the presence of royals and deities. The Yoruba canonical rendering of the disproportionately large head draws attention to the head as the site where human wisdom and divine guidance converge. The Yoruba conception of the outer head as a reflection of the inner head, or *ori inu*, imbued by the deities with one's individual potential, is clearly expressed in the woman's facial features and accoutrements. The bold, carefully balanced symmetry of the facial features and finely rendered crested hairdo accentuates the head, allowing recognition that these outward signs of beauty and composure are generated by the woman's inner being. Her presence is also a reminder of the importance of the queen mother, who must sanction her son's right to rule. Overall, the post, with its male and female figures, reinforces the Yoruba concept of gendered powers as a reflection of the true order of the cosmos that is manifested in the institution of divine kingship.

The carver of the post, Agbonbiofe Adesina, was a member of a noted family of artists that included carvers and beadworkers who were commissioned by the king, or *oba*, to embellish the palace and royal regalia. This post was probably made sometime in the middle of Agbonbiofe's career, and certainly it exemplifies his and the Adesina family workshop's contribution to Efon Alaiye's reputation as a center of carving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two photographs of the palace, one by Frank Willett in 1958 and another view by William Fagg, show the Harn post as well as other posts carved by the Adesina family in situ. The signs of weathering and insect damage on the posts in these photographs indicate that they were installed at a much earlier date.

