

# AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

Yoruba people, Nigeria, Owo

**Ritual Axe**

Late nineteenth–early twentieth century

Wood, iron, pigment

20 × 29/16 × 113/16 in. (50.8 × 6.5 × 28.4 cm)

Gift of Rod McGalliard

1993.12.5

Axe forms are prevalent symbols for the Yoruba, particularly the double axe form that is the sign of the fiery god of thunder, Shango in western Yoruba societies. In the eastern region of Yoruba country in the area of Owo, the single axe is associated with Ogun, the god who controls the art of metalworking and the use of all metal objects. As the master of metal, Ogun is venerated by those who create and use weapons and farming tools. Healers who need tools to harvest plants for medicines also revere Ogun, and thus he is allied with the god of healing, Osanyin.

The alliance of the two deities is subtly represented in the Harn example: the carved wooden handle for the single axe blade, the sign of Ogun, features a male figure holding a double gourd medicine vessel in each hand, clearly referencing Osanyin. The refinement and symmetrical balance of this figure express both order and calm, requisites of healing. The large ovoid head with rounded, bulging eyes and softly rounded features is distinctive of Owo figural style. The interlace pattern on the shaft indicates the continuity of divine power. The two intricately carved flanges that project from the chest and back of the figure form two loops that may have been designed to hold a strip of cloth. The lustrous patina and wear on this axe handle reveal that it was a cherished and long-used ritual object. A photograph by William Fagg in 1949 of a shrine in Owo with two similar axes beside an altar suggests that the Harn axe was made at least sometime prior to that date, perhaps as early as the late nineteenth century.

