

## ***Divination Tray***

Date unrecorded

Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

wood

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This wooden divination tray, *opon ifa*, is one of the objects used by a diviner in Yoruba culture to communicate with the spiritual world. A diviner, called a *babalawo*, is well respected as a source of spiritual wisdom and healing by the Yoruba. A diviner mediates between *Orunmila*, one of the gods in the Yoruba worldview, and the human community through the divination process known as *ifa*.

Contrary to other forms of divination in the Nigerian region, Yoruba diviners are not individuals with oracular powers. Rather, they undergo years of training to memorize the sacred signs and verses believed to contain the secrets of the universe. Some of these verses are repeated throughout the divination process. The *babalawo* sprinkles wood dust on the tray, throws palm nuts to reveal signs, then draws signs on the tray that correspond with a verse in Yoruba oral literature in order to reveal truths to clients.

The surface of the divination tray is covered in pigment, appearing well-worn as a result of its frequent use. The face at the top of the tray's border is meant to represent *Eshu*, the messenger between the gods and humans in Yoruba culture. Various motifs around the rest of the border are usually chosen by the carver.

The divination tray is a tangible example of an historical object, a symbol of spirituality that continues to be passed down over time. It is evidence of a continent with both long-ago origins *and* present-day relevance in art history.

written by **Erin Drabicki**