

Ere Ibeji (Twin Figure)

circa 1925-1940

Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

carved wood, plastic beads, blue pigment, and metal

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Displayed is an *ere ibeji*, a wooden figurine steeped in the rich tradition of the Yoruba culture. Yorubaland, which encompasses the countries of Nigeria, Togo, and Benin, boasts one of the highest twinning rates in the world. An astounding 45 out of 1000 live births result in twins. Resulting from this abnormally high twinning rate is a large infant mortality rate, sometimes resulting in the death of one or both twins. The Yoruba believe that twins are two bodies connected by the same spirit.

The *ere ibeji* – “*ibeji*” meaning deceased twin and “*ere*” being the Yoruba word for figure - is carved to encapsulate the spirit of one or both deceased twins. The mother will care for these *ibeji* figures as if they were her own living child: washing, bathing, feeding, and even toting the *ibeji* wherever she goes.

The village priest, or *babalawo*, is tasked with delicately carving these *ibeji*, carefully adding distinct motifs and pigments that carry a special significance. In this figure, the indigo dye applied to the figure’s dome-shaped head represents a certain coolness or serenity called *itutu*.

Though carved by hand through the first half of the 20th century, it is more commonplace today for these *ibeji* to be plastic dolls. This observation complicates the stereotype of a timeless Africa, as the *ere ibeji* practice has been adapted to the 21st century. These synthetic dolls are still embodied by the spirit of the deceased twin –they are merely a modern extension of a centuries old tradition.

written by **Christopher Litts**