

**Senufo *Kafigeledjo* oracle figure, Metropolitan Museum, NYC**

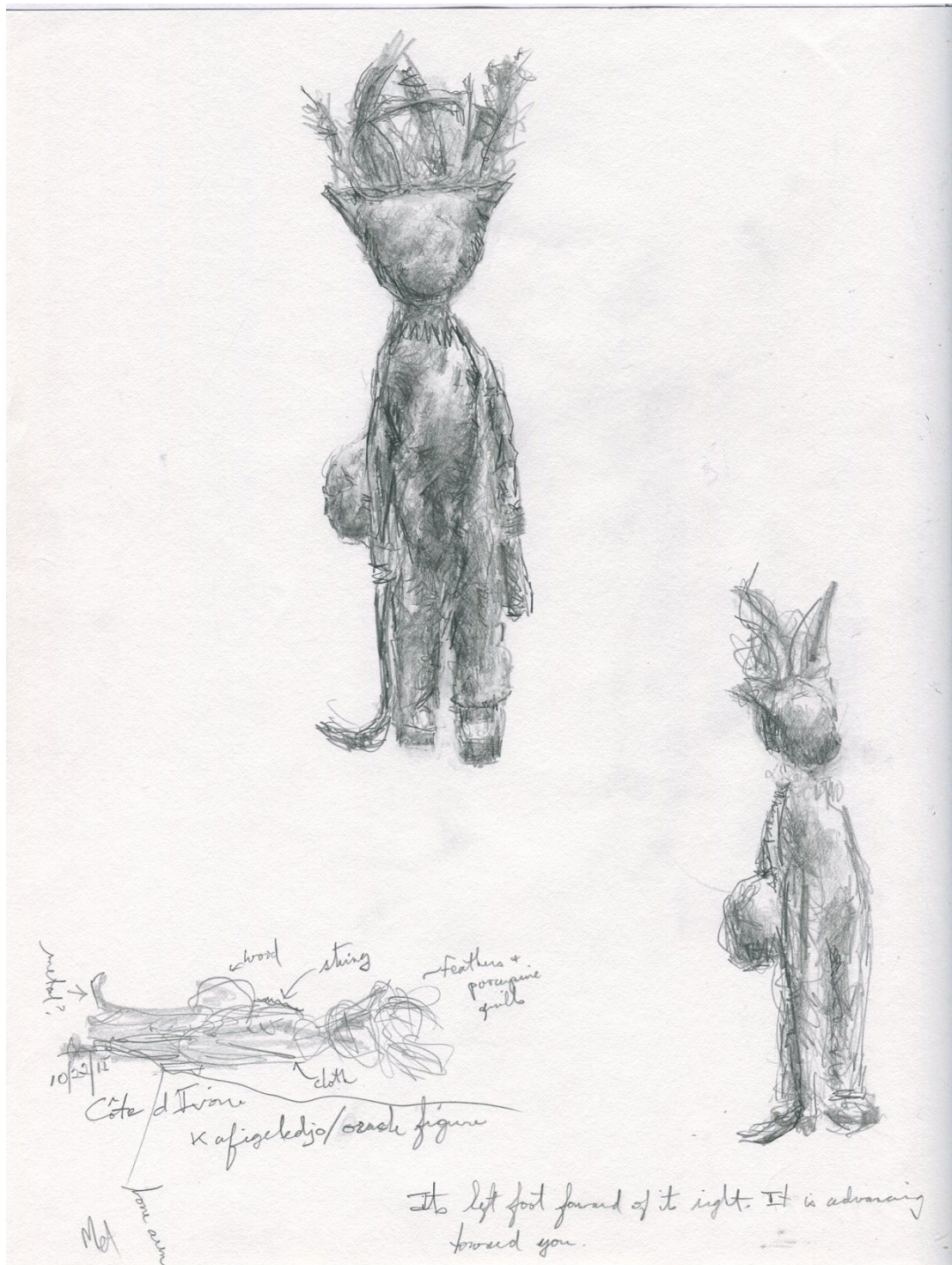
Wandering through the African section of the museum I stumble upon this extraordinary little figure. Phew! This is one powerful little object! He is quite a presence, quite awe inspiring, indeed quite fearsome. What is it about him? Why does this small thing have such an impact?



My first thoughts, noted in my sketchbook as I study this thing:

- Face is very, very indistinct, ghostlike, frightening.
- He is carrying a bundle, contents unknown.
- Weapon.
- Headdress makes him of Nature, one with Nature. He is connected to the natural world in a way we cannot be.

In an effort to understand, I did several detailed drawings, trying to see, try to understand what this thing is, how it is doing what it is doing.



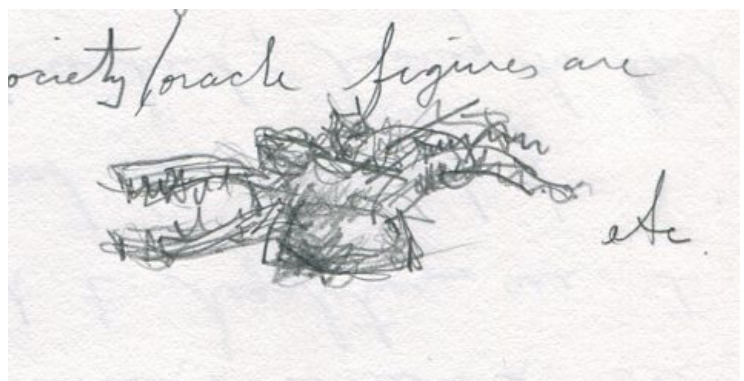




As I was finishing a group of very young school children, maybe five-year olds, came up to the cases where I was. As they approached, one of them said, "I'm scared." In addition to the figure I was studying, there were several other powerful figures and masks in the cases, like this one below.

Their teacher started talking to them in a soft voice. The little voice came again, interrupting: "I'm scared." This is exactly what these objects/figures are supposed to make you feel — fear.

Phew!



The Met label tells us this is an oracle figure from the Senufo people of Ivory Coast. This sort of figure is called *kafigeledjo*, which translates as “he who speaks the truth”. The figure is used in divination rites, to uncover/extract the truth of a situation. The figure “gives visual representation to an invisible bush spirit”. It has the power “to tell the truth”, “to uncover misdeeds, false testimony, and culpability.” The fear that it engenders, that I felt and that the little boy felt, is intentional. Its features are hidden under a cloth which covers not only its body but its face. It is masked, hidden from us. It is threatening.



Metropolitan Museum of Art

The casualness with which he holds his very lethal looking weapon is paramount. As is the casualness of his entire stance – legs together, left foot very slightly forward, advancing, arms at sides at rest. And the slight tilt of the head to his right and back. What terrific use of body language!

Add to that a terrific use of color – black, brown, tan, flashes of white.

And then the material – the grimy, dirty cloth, which, in spite of its grime, does not diminish his threat or his sense of power.

The slightly protruding belly, the pack hanging casually on his back — containing what?



Metropolitan Museum of Art

And the nonchalance of the bizarre but beautiful feather arrangement on his head.



He is only about 20” tall, but if this little creature walked up to you — on the street, in the woods, anywhere — with this attitude, you would be very, very afraid. “I’m scared.”



Looking up other examples of *kafigeledjo* afterward, I find a number of them, all very similar — small figures, clothed in grimy cloth, faces covered by the cloth, head an inverted triangle shape, feathers protruding from the top of the head. This is a wonderful example of the difference between functional tribal art and our own non-functional Western art. Our art is intended to be looked at. Theirs was intended to *do* something. Since the Renaissance, our artists have sought to be “original”. Here, the artists making *kafigeledjo* figures have no thought of being original. Rather, the goal is to follow the established template, to make one of those things like the others of that thing, to make it just like this because — it works.