

**1035**

*Linguist Staff with Cat and Mouse, unknown Akan, Fante artist*

**Arnold Lehman:** This staff, topped by a large cat with a mouse or rat on its back, is the visual representation of a well-known Akan proverb.

**William Siegmann:** The proverb that's associated with this is that it's only the foolish rat that crawls into the cat's bag. In other words, it's only a fool who meddles in the king's business.

**Arnold Lehman:** In a society with no formal written tradition, oral and visual storytelling were important ways to pass along cultural traditions or to convey messages from the king to his people. Anyone who saw this staff would get the message.

The staff was carried by a man called a linguist. Among the Akan people of Ghana it was regarded as improper for a person of great prestige, like the king, to speak loudly. So the linguist acted as a kind of spokesman or human megaphone, announcing in a loud voice the decisions of the king. Covered in gold leaf, the elegantly carved staff is a symbol of the linguist's right to speak on behalf of the king. Today, in every Akan community, you can still find linguists working for prominent individuals and carrying similar staffs.