



# Mask

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Mask

**Born:** 1800 - 1950

**Object Type:** Mask

**Materials:** Wood

**Measurements:** h. 333 x w. 147 x d. 70 mm

**Accession Number:** 165

**Historic Period:** 19th century, 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** Lower Sepik River, New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Masks in Papua New Guinea are mainly used during traditional ceremonies like *sing sing* or festivals and shows. These masks have mainly a decorative purpose, such as hiding the face while taking part in traditional dances. However, masks from Sepik and a few other provinces are believed to be powerful and are used for performing magic. This mask was collected back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> /early 20<sup>th</sup> century by early explorers. It is highly distinctive in its design compared to many contemporary masks being produced in the Sepik region.

The artist of this particular mask would have practised a traditional method of carving that differs from that of contemporary artists. The sculptor would have been more limited in the range of tools available to him. Compared to today's sculptors, traditional carvers did not have chisels and hammers, and instead used sharp, axe-like stones, found naturally in rivers, to create shapes, lines and spaces in sections of the wood to achieve highly accurate designs.

The holes that were created in the mask served specific purposes. For example, the hole on the top right-hand part at the end could be used for putting ropes through, to hold the mask on someone's face during performance. Holes were also used for hanging masks on walls before or after a performance. The other holes represent the eyes and mouth, which play important roles during a performance. Before using the mask, it would be preserved in a special place in the *hausman* (men's house), and men would sing and impart magic into the mask for a number of days, weeks or even months, to make it more powerful when used.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Despite erosion and damage the finely sculpted features of this mask remain impressive. Its cultural attribution is uncertain, but characteristic elements like the eye, nose and mouth form indicate an origin in the Lower Sepik or adjacent regions. The mask was formerly part of a complete dance costume which covered the body of the wearer and was attached through the holes around the rim, many of which are now broken. Feathers and shell pendants may also have been attached.

Danced masquerades were performed throughout the Sepik area as an integral part of a range of rituals conducted to secure ancestral favour, promote abundance and initiate young men into the closely guarded secrets of the men's cult. Masquerades often celebrated the activities of the primary ancestors and were also ritual re-enactments of important myths concerned with fertility and the origins of society. The mask is thin and fragile, with a dished inner surface. The hooked nose is pierced, the cheeks are slightly raised, and there are traces of red pigment over the whole surface.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 48.

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## **Provenance**

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1969. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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