



Male head

On display

Title/Description: Male head

Born: 1400 - 1599

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Steatite

Measurements: h. 280 x w. 190 x d. 280 mm

Accession Number: 205

Historic Period: 15th century, 16th century

Production Place: Africa, Sierra Leone

Cultural Group: Sherbro

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The most striking feature of this majestic head is its pronounced horizontality. The neck is a centred pedestal with cranium and jaw projecting laterally on opposite sides. As can be seen from the two illustrations, the distortion of angles and surfaces, so noticeable when the head is seen at shoulder level, virtually disappears if it is viewed at ground level from a standing position, and the face becomes a seemingly naturalistic portrait. The sculptor can thus be credited with a sophisticated handling of form and mass to achieve the desired effect.

Steatite heads of this sort are not *nomoli* (see UEA 204), though the earliest group of *nomoli* as classified by Tagliaferri and Hammacher (1974) have similarly hooded eyes. They are locally called *mahen yafe* (the chief's devil), are rarer than *nomoli*, and when owned by local chiefs or the Poro Society they are much venerated and kept hidden. Originally they may have been effigy heads, even portraits, set on the ground or on low altars to commemorate deceased chiefs of the Sapi confederacy (the early Sherbro and Temne people of southern Sierra Leone), since the details of coiffure, beard, filed teeth and ornaments illuminate the descriptions of contemporary writers. The Portuguese d'Almada wrote in 1594 of how the dead nobility were buried, 'with the gold ornaments they used to carry in their ears, around their arms [see UEA 204] and through the nose'. Finch in 1607 described coiffures, 'cut into allyes and crosse patches . . . [and other] foolish formes' (both quoted in Tagliaferri and Hammacher, 1974: 18-19).

The more recent role of these heads has been somewhat different from that of the *nomoli*, in that the village 'medicine man' would appeal to the spirit in the head to bring about good fortune or avert disaster, to grant wishes or work revenge. Smaller heads may also be called *mahen yafe*, but the neck may show that some of these have broken off from *nomoli* figures.

Margaret Carey, 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) pp. 98-99.

Provenance

Note in the Sainsbury Centre archives suggesting the object was excavated at Bo, southern Sierra Leone.

Formerly belonging to Mariange Ciolkowski, Paris.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1959.

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