



Dance mask

On display

Title/Description: Dance mask

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 241 x w. 140 x d. 160 mm

Accession Number: 213

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

Production Place: Africa, Côte d'Ivoire

Cultural Group: Guro, Yaure

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This mask shares with the Fang reliquary head (240) the honour of being a founder-member of the African part of the Sainsbury collection. Both formerly belonged to Paul Guillaume, who for over twenty years had been in the first rank of French connoisseur-dealers in African art. Still among the most prized and beautiful carvings in the collection, they bear witness to Paul Guillaume's discernment.

Many Guro masks are demonstrably and, on the part of their sculptors, consciously made to be 'beautiful', and perhaps conform to a universal ideal of beauty — a view shared by André Malraux, who included this mask in his *Musée Imaginaire* (1952: 400).

Corroboration of Guro aspirations towards the beautiful may be sought among the numerous masks in which the human face is accompanied by animal representations, which in many cases appear to follow a different standard. A notable example is the beautiful human mask in the University Museum in Philadelphia (Fischer and Homberger, 1985: fig. 168), which is surmounted by a particularly ungainly white bird (perhaps a heron or egret). The work of Guro and Baule artists may, especially when influenced by European responses, tend too much towards self-consciously suave virtuosity to appeal to our contemporary taste. The fine pieces, however, while still within the smooth tribal style, have an underlying harmonious strength that allows Baule and Guro art to be counted among the great schools of African art.

Although generally ascribed to the Guro, this mask has features which associate it with the Yaure, a small group living east of Bouaflé who culturally and geographically are midway between the Guro and the Baule. Masks bearing horns, whether of ram or buffalo, or the figure of a cock, are linked with fecundity and may have been used in the men's secret society die. The die calendar, which follows the lunar Year, marks different phases of agricultural work; the dance masks sometimes incorporate an allegoric personage and tend to have feminine faces.

In addition to the bird's feet on the crown, the facial shape, with its slight fullness, and the ram's horns framing the top of the head, suggest Yaure influence if not a Yaure origin. Three perforations and a ridge are provided for the attachment of an occipital cap, head cloth and dance costume (Fischer and Homberger, 1985: 143).

The finish is exquisite; the silken outer surface has been darkened with vegetable stain; kaolin highlights the grooves of hairline, eyes and mouth. Inside, on the left-hand edge is written 'Zouénoula' (a place in central Ivory Coast), possibly in Guillaume's hand. The stand (not illustrated), precision-made of oak and darkened with a secret stain, bears the stamp of Inagaki, the renowned Japanese craftsman who worked in Paris in the 1930s.

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) p. 125.

Exhibitions

'Pablo Picasso: The Legacy of Youth', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/3/2022 - 17/7/2022

Provenance

Formerly belonging to Paul Guillaume, acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from his widow in 1935.

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