



Zoomorphic mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Zoomorphic mask

Born: 1900 - 1999

Measurements: h. 390 x w. 300 x d. 300 mm

Accession Number: 239

Historic Period: 20th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This zoomorphic mask has been attributed to the Jompre people of Nigeria, although this appears to be an offensive name, probably given by the neighbouring Chamba, and meaning 'cannibals'. Alternative names for the Jompre include Kutep, Kuteb, Kutev, Mbarike and Zumper. They inhabit the Benue Valley, on the border of Nigeria and Cameroon, an area that is still relatively undocumented. They number approximately 15,000 and are divided into a number of clans, each associated with a particular mountain, and traditionally without a centralised authority. The masks

and sculptural forms of this small cultural group resemble those of the neighbouring Jukun and Chamba of western Cameroon.

One theme that pervades the arts of the Benue River Valley and indeed across Western Africa in general, is the horizontal helmet mask or headpiece often worn in ceremonial or ritual contexts. The arts of the Kutep are represented by only a small number of distinctive and exuberant bush-cow, antelope and other animal masks, (Lorenz. African Arts. Vol 20. No.4) which are layered with pitted resin and heavily encrusted with abrus precatarios seeds, that heightened its dramatic impact. This particular example is constructed of wood, palm leaf fibre, beeswax resin and abrus seeds, of which some are still a vibrant red. Often called the 'coral pea' these bright red and black seeds are c. 5mm in length and are highly poisonous, but have been widely used for decorative purposes throughout Africa. Due to their remarkable uniform weight, they were often used by goldsmiths of East Asia, for weighing gold and silver.

The visual similarities of horizontal masks across 3000 miles of West and Central Africa incorporating 78 ethnic groups suggests historical interaction and the probability of transmission through human agency and regional systems of exchange. (McNaughton. African Arts. Vol 25. no.2) Characteristically, these masks are of a tripartite construction and incorporate an 'eye' cut out where the mouth joins the helmet, through which the mask wearer sees. In the neighbouring Jukun, and indeed this example, the 'eye' is present but not functional. Figurative art of neighbouring people displays whitened rings as eyes, and this feature may be appropriated in this mask, using eyes in the front and back of the mask, perhaps indicating the power to be able to see into future as well as the past. The performer would have been hidden by a costume, probably constructed of fibre, and traces of this can be found on the cord beneath the fringe of the mask.

The Chamba, who live south of the Benue, near the Jukun people use masks that have two large backward sloping horns, worn during funerals, circumcision and inauguration ceremonies. The Koro, who settled north of the Niger and Benue rivers carve abstract headdresses embellished with abrus seeds which are thought to symbolise ancestor spirits. This reinforces McNaughton's suggestion of close stylistic kinship among horizontal masks, and the Kutep may have utilised existing features and styles to accommodate their own ideals. The function and symbolism of this particular mask is unknown, however, the abstract composition loses its sense of animal quality and results in a composite image, which McNaughton regards as important 'because it is a visual means to a conceptual end' (African Arts, 1991: Vol 24. no 2. P47).

Masks are associated with the control of the forces of nature and subsequently provide protection for both crops and man. They may also appear at important ceremonies such as installations, funerals of chiefs and secret society initiations. The general concept of the mask in this context is to place powerful and aggressive bush creatures at the service of human society, and to provide protection from the presence of non-human or supernatural forces. (Wittmer & Arnett, 1978)

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2002.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Alan Brandt in 1972.

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