



Mask

On display

Title/Description: Mask

Born: 1850 - 1999

Measurements: h. 250 x w. 280 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 246

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

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This mask's heart-shaped facial plane, its sharply cut nose, sweeping brow and narrow almond-shaped eyes indicate its origin in the densely forested region of the Congo River basin, today encompassed within the nation-states of Gabon, the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although such stylistic patterns are evident among carvers throughout this region, the huge variety of highly localised and changing forms makes this work's attribution to a specific group within the wider region difficult.

Due to its similarity to other masks and its distinctive use of silhouette and negative space, it has been suggested that this work was made and used by the Kwele (or Kwele) people of modern-day eastern Gabon, western Republic of the Congo or southern Cameroon - whose ancestral lands lie between the Dja and Ivindo rivers [1]. If originating with this community, the mask would likely have formed part of a *Be'ete* masquerade performance - in which sculpted masks symbolising spiritual creatures of the forest (known as *ekuk*) were paraded before locals as part of ceremonies devised to ward off evil and placate tensions between communities. Though this mask is relatively simple in form, other Kwele masks have elaborate antler-like projections or protruding trunks to represent specific creatures of the forest [2]. As in this example, masks were rubbed with white powder from riverbeds to add potency. An alternative possible origin for this mask is with the Lega people of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, who used similar carving techniques but for whom masks acted as mnemonic devices for recalling proverbs associated with the Bwami philosophical system [3].

Despite the geographical distance between the two cultures, both the Kwele and Lega people regarded masks such as these as elusive and highly sacred objects whose display and possession were circumscribed by strict social regulations. However, when such objects were taken out of Central Africa by Europeans in huge numbers during the twentieth century to become part of museum collections across Europe and North America, they took on a new non-religious meaning: becoming sources of inspiration for modernist artists such as Henry Moore - whose early figurative works drew heavily on the aesthetics of several Lega masks he encountered at the British Museum in London [4].

Theo Weiss, December 2021

[1] Steven Hooper [ed], *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue. Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), UEA 246

[2] Alisa LaGamma, 'Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary.' *African Arts*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2007) 39

[3] Elisabeth Cameron, 'Art of the Lega: Meaning and Metaphor in Central Africa.' *African Arts*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2002) 44-92

[4] Max Alfert, 'Relationships between African Tribal Art and Modern Western Art.' *Art Journal* 31.4 (1972) 391-2

Exhibitions

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

Further Reading

Elisabeth Cameron, *Art of the Lega: Meaning and Metaphor in Central Africa* (Fowler Museum, 2001)

Leon Siroto, *African Spirit Images and Identities* (Catalogue of an Exhibition Held April 24-May 29) (Pace Editions, 1976)

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1969.

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