



# Mask

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On display

**Title/Description:** Mask

**Born:** 1900 - 1950

**Object Type:** Mask

**Materials:** Elephant ivory

**Measurements:** h. 172 x w. 130 x d. 40 mm

**Accession Number:** 269

**Historic Period:** 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

**Cultural Group:** Lega

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

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Up until the late twentieth century, carvings produced among the Lega people of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo were made almost exclusively for use in the Bwami Society - a semi-secret group of initiates which existed in villages across the region in lieu of any centralised political authority. These circles of initiates included both men and women and were considered central to the preservation of a specific Lega communities' moral order. Within Bwami society, carvings such as this one played an important role in ritual of solidarity and enrichment since they served as visual prompts (or mnemonic devices) among initiates - used for recalling proverbs circulated orally between members and passed down between higher and lower-ranking initiates. These proverbs related to the proper moral conduct of Bwami members and of the community at large, covering everything from personal decorum to collective religious customs to interpersonal economic relations.

As the custodians of higher moral truths and greater social responsibilities, higher ranking members of the Bwami society had access to the most powerful sets of carved artworks, made of local ivory rather than wood. Such precious items were generally kept in shrines hidden away from the wider community. More recent and lower-ranking initiates, however, took charge of wooden artworks, which were used in public performances and were more readily visible. As one anthropologist described in the 1970s (following the revival of Bwami among the Lega in the post-independence period following its criminalisation in 1948, a selection of around 58 distinctive characters were portrayed in Bwami society carvings - each embodying different virtues and expressing different moral messages in their individual forms and through their interaction with other characters. [1]

Ivory masks such as this are known as *Iukungu* (roughly translated as 'skull') and are used by the highest-ranking members of the Bwami society during the initiation ceremony into *Kindi*, the society's highest grade [2]. Generally made of either ivory or elephant bone and often with a raffia beard (as this one previously had attached through its lower holes), they are said to represent the skulls of ancestors and to symbolise continuity across generations. During induction into *Kindi*, *Iukungu* masks such as this were prepared with special oils before being hung on a small fence from where the proverbs and convey moral meanings contained in each could be projected outwards [3].

Theo Weiss, December 2021

[1] Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture; Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy Among a Central African People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 218-20

[2] Mary Nooter Roberts, 'The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts', *African Arts*, 50.1 (2017), 68-9

[3] Daniel Biebuyck, *Lega Culture; Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy Among a Central African People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 38-9

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## Further Reading

Daniel Biebuyck, 'Sculpture from the Eastern Zaïre Forest Regions.' *African Arts*, 9.2 (1976) 8-80

Elisabeth Cameron, 'Art of the Lega: Meaning and Metaphor in Central Africa.' *African Arts*, Vol. 35.2 (2002) 44-92

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## Provenance

Formerly in the collection of the Director of the Ethnographical Museum, Brussels.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1953.

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

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