



Mask (with a fibre beard attached)

Not on display

Title/Description: Mask (with a fibre beard attached)

Born: 1900 - 1999

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Fibre, Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 310 x w. 75 x d. 35 mm

Accession Number: 270

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Cultural Group: Lega

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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 [1]. 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.

This mask, with its distinctive almond-shaped eyelets and protruding brow, is known as an “idimu” mask among Bwami initiates and worn on the face or the back of the head. Unlike smaller *lukwakongo* masks, which are displayed on the body or hung on walls to represent ancestors, *idimu* masks can only be worn by *Yananio* and *Kindi*, the highest-ranking members of the Bwami society.

Theo Weiss, December 2021

[1] Mary Nooter Roberts, ‘The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts’, *African Arts*, 50.1 (2017), 68–9

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

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

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from H. Reisser in 1961.

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