



Dance mask representing a European

Not on display

Title/Description: Dance mask representing a European

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Leather, Textile, Wood

Measurements: h. 185 x w. 130 x d. 90 mm

Accession Number: 278

Production Place: Africa, Ibadan Onon-Shaki, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This mask commemorates the cultural beauty found in the entertainment industry of the Yoruba people, located in the southwestern region of Nigeria. The Yoruba consist of approximately ten million people, spread across the world, including the Republic of Benin and some parts of Brazil. Arts and craftsmanship have always been great strengths of this group for centuries, especially impressive carving in ivory and wood.

Among the Yorubas' carved works are dance masks, known as "the Egungun masks". The masks' carving is inspired by encounters with Europeans during trading and colonisation. This group communicates its perceptions about the white people through these masks, creating each one to resemble the foreigners. This image is made from a light woody material, unevenly carved. Punctured with tiny holes, the thread used to stitch everything together is still on display. Around its edges are rough fibres. The carving is a combination of ash, dark brown and patches of discolouration of gold crusts.

Egungun masks add colour to the traditional festivals that happen every year, often designed to pass subtle messages across about both locals and foreigners. Additions and new designs are introduced at each Egungun festival every year. The unique physical features of the masks that illustrate what Europeans look like traditionally fascinated spectators. For someone who has not seen Europeans before, watching the masks on display is a good way to get an idea of their facial characteristics without coming directly in contact with them. With the masks showcasing a briefly hooked, narrow, or elongated nose, and a calming expression, the carvers would have succeeded in demonstrating their opinions on the Europeans' appearances. Some of the Europeans traditionally picked as subjects of interest were merchants trading across the coast, the colonial masters who usually

inspected a guard of honour, as well as tourists who paid a visit to the Yoruba kings.

Coming close to this Yoruba dance mask in Africa is the Punu-Lumbo mask. Punu-Lumbo comes from the Ogooué River basin in Gabon, particularly common to the south in Ngounié Province. Punu-Lumbo masks have oval-shaped facial designs, complemented by narrow eyes, tiny ears, and well-crafted eyebrows. Both the male and the female genders have their masks, *Ikwar* for the males, and *mukudj* for the females. *Ikwar*s only come out at night while *mukudjs* show themselves during the day.

Bolaji Owoseni, March 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Nine to ten million Yoruba inhabit south-western Nigeria and the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey). As an ethnic group, the Yoruba of Nigeria are bound together by language, tradition and belief, and have been among the most prolific carvers in both wood and ivory in sub-Saharan Africa. The varied masking traditions resulted in a great diversity of mask forms, and craftsmen adapted traditional methods mediated by contact with the West. The Yoruba prize resemblance over portraiture, and the representation of foreigners is deemed satiric sculpture.

This has been characterised as an Egungun mask, to celebrate an annual festival. Elaborate masks were often carved to satirise both local people and Europeans alike. These would have been used each year with new layers of cloth added each year. The influence of missionaries and the changing social structure had widespread effects on the production of ritual objects, and these changes resulted in the assimilation and integration of cultural patterns. In Yoruba art there are forms adapting foreign or native themes for patrons, and the representation of Europeans were purchased by kings and priests of Yorubaland, as well as alien patrons. Sculptural realisations characterise Europeans with a long, narrow and slightly hooked nose and basic facial calm, which this particular example seems to portray.

By the middle of the 18th century, professional Yoruba artists had organised a travelling theatre. Among the multitude of characters portrayed, strangers were usually depicted in historical sketches and wore carved facemasks showing their distinguishing facial characteristics, such as Europeans. Sketches present such episodes as the early European trader on the coast, the colonial administrator inspecting a guard of honour and the new tourists visiting the Yoruba Oba, and this mask may have been used in Yoruba theatre representing a European.

This particular example is constructed of a very light wood and although appears well-crafted, the reverse is quite roughly carved. The inside of the mask displays a series of small holes with sewing thread still attached, and shows signs of having some form of material or fibre attached to the mask the entire way round. The colouring of the mask is very dark brown but closer study suggests evidence of a yellow or sandy colour, which may further indicate its function as representing a European.

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Helen Coleman

Entry written for VADS website (<https://vads.ac.uk>)

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from H. Reisser in 1968.

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