



# Mask

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Mask

**Materials:** Wood

**Accession Number:** 1028

**Historic Period:** 19th century

**Production Place:** Africa, Gabon

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1990

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The Fang inhabit a vast area covering the coastline of equatorial Africa, Cameroon, Guinea, and Gabon, incorporating eighty clans, but without any political unity. They are highly regarded for their woodcarvings and masks, which play a significant role in rituals. There is a distinct variation in Fang style from north to south, however common features include faces carved in concave planes, curves as opposed to angles and a general impression of meditation and serenity.

With this in mind, this unusual mask is not typically characteristic of the Fang style, although it displays the long sagitate nose and eroded patina, with possible traces of kaolin. Unlike typical Fang masks, which are generally lengthened and heart-shaped, this is very broad with a squaring of the jaw-line. The hard-set mouth may indicate this was used as policing mask to maintain social order and enforce obedience. White is associated with the spirit world in Fang culture, and therefore could be used by societies to illustrate a spiritual source of authority during the imposing of punishment or fines. As Vogel suggests, 'Masks used for policing ... may be given a form that deliberately breaks the accepted canons of beauty to awe and intimate the beholder' (Vogel, 1986: XI-XV11).

Stylistically this could also be typical of a Mvudi dance mask from the Franceville region of eastern Gabon. This type of mask is characterised by a forehead protruding over a rectilinear face, an enormous schematically carved nose, and a tiny mouth. This type of mask appears at all public celebrations, although the meaning seems lost. It emerges at dawn or twilight for funerals or initiations and performs acrobatic and grotesque dances.

Holes on either side of the mask below the ears, together with the two holes on the chin, may indicate that some accessory or regalia were attached. Interestingly, a small label attached to the inside of the mask describes it as 'Mask from New Ireland. Bt of Webster, Oxford'. Further research indicates this is not a typical mask from New Ireland or neighbouring islands in the Pacific, and the origin of this label is unknown.

Helen Coleman

Entry written for VADs website ([www.vads.ac.uk](http://www.vads.ac.uk))

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## **Provenance**

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from K. J. Hewett on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1990 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.

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