



Head

Not on display**Title/Description:** Head**Object Type:** Figure, Head**Materials:** Hair, Metal, Skin, Tooth, Wood**Measurements:** h. 180 x w. 130 x d. 195 mm**Accession Number:** 602**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** Africa, Nigeria**Cultural Group:** Ejagham (or related tribe)**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

The Ejagham group of peoples, often referred to as the Ekoi, live on either side of the Nigeria/Cameroon border. Keith Nicklin (personal communication) has suggested that this head comes from the middle Cross River region, from either the Ogoja area or Obubra - probably the latter. Skin-covered heads could be used in two ways: as a surrogate head carried in men's warrior association dances, funeral ceremonies and masquerades, for example in the Yakö area; or as part of a cap mask.

Surrogate heads were made either of wood (like this one) or a human skull, covered with skin, normally antelope skin, and were carried in the hands. In former times, a man could only join a warrior's association after killing an enemy and taking his head. By the early twentieth century these warrior's societies became prestige associations open to those who could pay fees and complete initiation; the heads were those of sacrificed slaves or, later, made of wood and skin. The main purpose of such groups in the 1920s was to ensure that a man could have an elaborate second burial.

Here, however, since the skin does not cover the whole base, where there is a roughly circular bare patch ringed with peg holes, the head is more likely to have formed part of a cap, or head-dress mask, where a head or figure is mounted on a basketwork pedestal which the masker wears on his head (see Thompson in Vogel, 1981: 175-6).

While the use of skin to cover the heads undoubtedly enhances the realism, Thompson suggests that the pegging down of skin was a charm or symbolic indication of the embedding and controlling of the spirit in political contexts. He also refers to a skin-covered skull in the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, which was found to contain a variety of substances, making it a powerfully 'loaded' charm.

The scalp has numerous small incisions; these held tufts of human hair, of which a few traces remain; other similar masks use a piece of animal skin with its hair attached.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 163.

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Merton Simpson, New York, in 1975 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
