



Helmet mask (Sowo)

Medium

Wood

Description

Helmet mask with neck rolls, scarifications, elaborate coiffure surmounted by a seated figure and bird, and with a blackened surface. The Sande Society is an age-grade, society of women whose purpose is to teach young girls cultural traditions, codes of social conduct, and roles within the community. According to myth, over 200 years ago a woman named Sande Jo dreamed of the necessity of such an organization. All Mende females are expected to join. Initiation begins at puberty or earlier and can continue for several years. The principal function of the Sande masquerade is to visually represent and exemplify religious, personal and social values important to daily

life. Such values include but are not limited to modesty, diligence and respect, as well as beauty, elegance, sumptuousness and seriousness. Middle- and upper-class Sande women commission masks, called soweï or sowo, and dance them four or five times a year. Each mask represents a unique water spirit that only the dancer, called Soweï, is able to evoke. Male carvers typically use soft wood or bombax wood for the masks. The completed sculpted mask is rubbed and polished with palm oil frequently in order to maintain a smooth and reflective surface that is highly valued for its beauty. Sculptors achieve the mask's shimmering black hue by applying on the surface several layers of vegetable dye, called njekoi. Sande masks are designed to be as light weight as possible; heavy masks signals incompetence. The complete costume consists of black clothes beneath a full-body covering of blackened palm fiber with hidden amulets and charms to enhance the dancer's powers. The mouth of a sowo mask is small; the solemn and pursed mouth alludes to the value of silence, speaking appropriately, and keeping one's composure. Similarly, diminished size of the nose alludes to the Mende understanding of the sense of smell as the most base of the senses - it connects humans to animals. Hearing and sight are the most valued senses. Ears facilitate learning and are believed to exist both before birth and after death. Sande masks feature closed ears because it is said this will keep out any sentiments of ill-will and prevent persuasion. Eyes, the "seed of the head," are downcast to signify modesty, serenity, contemplation, and femininity. Not surprisingly, they also convey a sense of allure. Scarification alongside the eyes emphasizes this facial feature. A large, smooth forehead represents beauty, nobility, sensitivity, and purity. The rings of flesh at the neck indicate wealth and vitality; being well-fed is considered sexually attractive to men. A sign of God-given beauty and luck, they are exaggerated on the masks to denote the divinity of the water spirits.

Finally, the rings recall the waves that result from the heads of Sowos, or water spirits, which break the water's surface. Neck rings remind members that the Sande spirits emerged from the water. Although white is the color of the Sande society, deep black skin is considered rare and alluring. The color of deep water, the black mask visually links the masquerade to the Sowos creation myth. The coiffure indicates that the wearer was likely a member of the ligba, a middle-level woman in the Sande society. Arranged to resemble horns, perhaps of a sheep, bull or antelope, horns are thought to hold the life force of an animal. Because horns enable an animal to defend itself, they are believed to hold protective powers for the masker. A small Sande woman embellishes the top of the hair. Further back a bird also decorates the head. The bird, the common animal incorporated into Sande mask designs, represents communication between the human and the spirit world, and thus indicates clairvoyance. Natalie Koscal '09 conducted research for this description. Suggested reading: Ruth B. Phillips, *Representing Women: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995.

Dimensions

18 3/4 x 8 x 10 inches (47.6 x 20.3 x 25.4 cm)