

# Basic Detail Report

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## Costume top

### Medium

Dried fruit halves, fiber, cowrie shells, beads, and a coin

### Description

Costume top with false breasts. A male blacksmith likely crafted this set of false breasts. These breasts are not carved wood, but two halves of the fruit of the baobab tree, held together with knotted fiber and adorned with cowrie shells, beads, and coin. The dried fruit halves (oro) were once silky-smooth, which lent to their intended sexual appeal. Several Dogon masquerades feature young

men performing as young women. The false breasts could have accompanied one of three or four different female characters. The most popular of these roles depicts a young Fulani (or Peul) woman. The Fulani are a nomadic people whose young women visit Dogon villages to sell milk from their herds. It is not uncommon for young Dogon men to have sexual encounters with these women, a practice which reinforces the physical appeal of young Fulani women. The complete costume would feature a fiber, rather than wood, bedé mask, which would be decorated with cowrie shells. If the breasts accompanied the Fulani woman masquerade, the mask would have featured an elegant braided coiffure in the form of a crest that runs from the forehead to the nape of the neck. The performer would also wear a short red fiber skirt and carry a milk jug and a flywhisk to complete the allusion to a Fulani woman. Before the introduction of European coin to Mali, cowrie shells served as currency. Like these shells, the dangling French franc (dated 1948) is both a representation of wealth and a bright ornament for the female costume. Fulani women have long been associated with the marketplace, a point of transition between nature and culture. The false breasts - a clear sign of nature - contrast with the French franc, cowries, and the masquerade itself which signify culture. Because Fulani women travel from one village to the next, Dogon people associate them with transitions; Fulani women were believed to serve as mentors to the souls of the deceased on the road to the spirit world. A Dogon funeral chant which describes the passage of the soul into the afterlife is referenced as "the straw hat of the Peul (Fulani)." Michael Foster '07 conducted research for this description. Suggested reading: Barbara DeMott, *Dogon Masks: A Structural Study of Form and Meaning*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.

### Dimensions

9 x 10 1/2 inches (22.9 x 26.7 cm)