



Cap mask (Egungun)

Medium

Wood with red and white polychrome

Description

Large mask with red face surmounted by figures, birds, and reptiles. This well-carved and balanced mask was likely introduced into the art market due to its condition - termites consumed large amounts of the sculpture.

Because cleanliness and a neat appearance is fundamental to Yoruba sculpture, the owners apparently decided to sell this piece and make another, rather than attempt to repair the damage. Rather than serve as a mask that conceals a masquerade performer, the Egungun mask rests on top of the performer's head, attached to a leather cap that holds it in place. The

performer's face is wrapped in a mesh covering. The Egungun costume form varies, but most cover the performer with layers of brightly colored fabric panels. A popular movement calls for the dancer to twirl in space, lifting and flapping the panels in a multicolored whirlwind. The Yoruba hold annual or biennial celebrations called Odun Egungun to honor the ancestors, deceased individuals who nonetheless play a role in everyday Yoruba life. The dominance of the color red, particularly on the mask's red face, suggests that this mask refers to, but does not depict Shango. Egungun masquerades are often associated with rituals conducted for this powerful deity. Male and female figures that flank a "mating couple," each hold a double-headed axe symbolizing the thundergod, Shango. Easily infuriated, Shango hurls thunderbolts at humans who anger him. Evidence of these thunderbolts appears in the form of triangular-shaped stones, or celts, that Yoruba people find in the forest. The axe heads have also been associated with Shango's swift, yet balanced judgment. The red figures also hold a cudgel or pestle. Because the Egungun masquerade often incorporates humor in its performances and iconography, this object may be a visual pun referring to the phallus, or may literally depict the cudgel (ogo) carried by devotees of Shango. The "mating couple" in the center of the sculpture may be interpreted in several ways: to ridicule sexual promiscuity; to highlight the importance of procreation; and to express concerns regarding impotence and barrenness. Suggested reading: Henry John Drewel et al., *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1989.

Dimensions

19 3/4 × 13 × 13 1/2 inches (50.2 × 33 × 34.3 cm)