

African helmet masks

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Masks are one of the most spiritually important art forms developed in Africa. Among the masks many uses were; communicating with spirits and ancestors, serving as teaching aids in gender specific initiation ceremonies, tools for maintaining order, enhancements for reenacted stories and myths, symbols of rank and power, and a record for past leaders. I will be focussing on masks from the first three categories. The masks, which are all Helmet style masks from West and Central Africa, illustrate how artists from different tribes approached symbolism and visual storytelling.

They also show what was considered ideally beautiful for each clan. The first mask is from the Kuba (Bushongo) tribe in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Katanga, Kasai region. Referred to as “Helmet Mask” (inventory #5-6238) and dated about 1966 this mask is made out of wood with cloth, shell, and bead adornments as well as being painted. Originally part of a set of three royal masks, this is only one of more than twenty forms of Kuba masks. Although they would have been the property of the king he would choose someone to wear them for him. This type is a representation of the sister and wife of Woot (founder of the Kuba king dynasty), Ngady a mwash. Considered the embodiment of womanhood, she was prostituted by Woot to attract followers in the royal drama.

The yellow and white painted lines on her cheeks are tears symbolizing the hardships of women while the black and white painted triangles on her forehead, around her mouth, and on her chin refer to the hearth and domesticity. Another mask dealing with femininity is the “Helmet mask for woman’s secret society” (inventory #5-16500) created sometime before 1948 by the Mende people of Sierra Leone/Liberia. These masks were used in

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a secret female society on the Guinea coast known as the Bundo/Sande society. It gains its glossy black brown color from the river bottom mud it was crafted from. In order for girls to learn the ways of womanhood they were isolated and instructed by elder female members of their clan. During initiations a woman representing the main spirit of the society would wear the mask. Interpretation of the symbolism behind the mask varies, however the rings are thought to invoke both the ridges of a black moth chrysalis, representing a girl's transformation into a woman, and the ripples of water created as a leader rose from the water, the home of female spirits.

The masks elaborately braided hair and scarification also refer to the appearance of this leader and what was considered ideally beautiful. The expression on the face is to convey the wisdom, grace, and self control that the young women would hopefully inherit. The third mask also deals with a secret society. This carved wood "Helmet Mask" (inventory # 5-13259) is thought to be from the Bamileke society of Cameroon and is dated to about 1976. Used in a men's secret society known as the Kwifo ("night"), masks in this style disguised the members identities as they acted as a police force for the king. The Kwifo mediated conflicts, pronounced legal sentences, and carried out the resulting punishments. Different masks represented the various powers of the group and the carved headdress of this mask mirrors the prestige caps worn by elites and kings.

The intertwined "legs" represent the earth spider, which, because it lived underground was thought to unite the world of the ancestors and spirits, who live in the earth, with that of humans. Revered for its supernatural wisdom and power it is often consulted by diviners and is frequently used on

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prestigious items in association with the King. Despite originally being thought of as primitive by Western and European societies African masks and art have had huge influence and cultural importance in not only Africa but all parts of the world. Whether acting as spiritual guides, teaching moral lessons, or invoking connections with the world of ancestors and spirits masks are not only symbolic but beautiful. Although most African societies no longer use masks or masquerade ceremonies the historical, societal, and spiritual importance remains.