



Soweï helmet mask, also known as Bundu mask

Date

c. 1970

Primary Maker

Unidentified maker

Medium

Stained wood with rafia

Description

This cylindrical helmet mask is carved from wood and stained black. It has one protruding bun at the top of an elaborate coiffure. There are four neck folds in the back going to two in the front. It is thought that neck folds were a sign of maturity and fertility. The mask has a broad forehead. The eyes are looking down or closed, thought to indicate dignity and seriousness. The mouth is pursed, another sign of seriousness. There are three vertical lines on the cheeks, typical of Soweï masks. The three starburst lines to the outside of each eye suggest the Sherbro/Mende mixed area where this mask came from. There is a set of three horizontal lines of raised squares on each cheek, possibly a bit of original adornment created by this craftsman. The overall effect of the mask is one of beauty and poise, thought to be an idealized

version of womanhood. The inside of the mask is smoothed and stained black. There are holes around the bottom neck fold for the attachment of rafia. These features suggest that this mask was used in ceremonies and wasn't simply created for sale. The ceremonial helmet mask is used during initiation of girls into adulthood, to greet visitors to the community and during funeral services for high-ranking Sande society members. The mask embodies the Mende ideals of beauty. Girls of a certain age are initiated into the Sande Society. They go into the "bush" for an extended time with female leaders to be educated in the morals and expectations for women in the Mende society. At the end of this educational period, there is a ceremony in which the new initiates are brought back into the village. The female leader (called Soweï) wears the helmet mask and rafia so that she cannot be recognized. The ceremony includes dancing and singing. (The Mende have several masks for different ceremonies. Usually, the masked individual is a man. The Soweï mask is notable as the only mask worn by a female).

Dimensions

Overall (mask only): 16 × 8 1/2 × 10 in. (40.6 × 21.6 × 25.4 cm)