



Dance mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Dance mask

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 240 x w. 158 x d. 90 mm

Accession Number: 208

Historic Period: 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia

Cultural Group: Dan

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Fischer and Himmelheber, in their authoritative study of Dan art (1984), stress that the variations in form and function of Dan masquerades are too confusing to allow any clear-cut classification, since masks often change their roles during their careers. If a mask has been divorced from its original context it is often not feasible to assign to it a definite status x although it may be possible to fit it within a broad category. Among the Dan, narrow eyes are a sign of feminine beauty. In this mask, such eyes, together with the oval beardless face, indicate that it is a *gle mu*, a 'gentle' mask, and since it has eyes, it is probably a *tankagle* rather than the similar *deangle*.

Tankagle is a 'dancing, miming masquerade' and may be accompanied by an orchestra and chorus. The masker usually wears leg-rattles, carries a calabash rattle and may be dressed in a fabric cape and enormous fibre skirt. Holes around the rim of the mask are for a bonnet-like head-dress (*komo*) with 85 cowrie-shell decoration; the head-dress is important in defining the role of the mask.

Tankagle masks usually have attractive feminine faces; the vertical cicatrization scar on the forehead and nose is a feature of the southern and western Dan, and emphasises bilateral symmetry, admired in Dan beauty. Inside, the smoothly carved interior has hollows just below the eyes with a median trough which seem clearly designed to accommodate the nose and cheekbones of the masker.

The men who wear the masks are called *zo* (master); to become a *gle zo* (performer of the

masquerade) he must have had a dream sent to him by the mask-spirit. While the actual mask may be handed down through generations by inheritance, the masquerade itself depends on the dream - an 'acknowledgement' by the mask. A mask may thus spend as much as a generation 'resting' until a new zo is visited by a dream. Its re-emergence may be accompanied by a different masquerade - costume, movements and musical accompaniment - as dictated in the dream.

Margaret Carey, 1997

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 114.

Provenance

Formerly belonging to James Keggie.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Berkeley Galleries in 1949.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
