



Miniature mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Miniature mask

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 150 x w. 87 x d. 42 mm

Accession Number: 209

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 have given, in their exhaustive work on the Dan (1984), a very useful account of the miniature masks, from which it is clear that they are best named not for the purposes to which they are applied, for these are many, but for their morphology. Thus, not 'passport' masks, etc. but small (or miniature) heads (in Dan, *ma go*).

Anyone who is an important mask-owner may commission a miniature of it, and make sacrifices to it, for example, when travelling. Ownership of such a miniature is somewhat equivalent to having a passport, since it identifies the holder as the warden of an important mask even when he is outside his district. Women, who are not permitted full-size masks, may commission a miniature mask of their choice and may benefit from the association, for behind all masks, large or small (though in the case of the latter at one remove), is a mask-spirit.

We may infer that this is almost certainly a miniature of a famous full-size mask, judging from the quality of the carving. The mask depicts an attractive feminine type as shown by the oval face, narrow eyes, central ridge scar, crisply carved nostrils and full upper lip.

The absence of ears suggests that this may be a *deangle* miniature rather than the similar *tankagle* (see UEA 208). *Deangle* means 'joking or laughing masquerade', and is the mask associated with the circumcision camp; the masker, who is without music or dance accompaniment, asks the women to give food for the men and boys secluded in the camp. A miniature mask can play a part in the camp as a witness to the operation; the circumciser passes his knife over the mask as it is laid on the ground to achieve a 'spiritual sterilisation'. Hence many miniature masks have knife-marks on the forehead or face edge, and faint traces of such lines may be seen on the left-hand temple of this one.

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. 119.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1967.

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