



Dan Mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Dan Mask

Born: 1900 - 1999

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Metal, Wood

Measurements: h. 285 x w. 95 x d. 52 mm

Accession Number: 210

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Africa, Guinea Coast (west), Niger Basin

Cultural Group: Dan

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

For the Dan — an ethno-linguistic group which is concentrated in Côte d'Ivoire, the neighbouring areas of Liberia and Guinea coasts — a mask, or a masked performer, is more than just the representative of a spirit world. In some cases, it is the very manifestation of the supreme being or a supernatural force called *Gle* (or *Ge*, as referenced by the northern Dan). [1]

Reed (2003) has claimed no one person can “succeed in finding a total single definition” of *Gle* because it encompasses a history, a system and a philosophy in Dan thought. Therefore, only aspects of its practices are easily understood, most readily the masked performances. [2]

Johnson (1986) has divided *Gle* masks into two broad categories: the *dean gle* and the *bu gle*. Variations of *dean gle* are reserved for initiations and entertainment, while the different types of *bu gle* masks are associated with warriors and leadership. [3] According to Reed (2003), the importance of a *Gle* is determined by the specific *yinannu* (translation) ascribed to it, each of which is further subdivided by three sets of *yinannu* (plural: *yinan*): one to inspire joy and dance, a second to enable reading a person's destiny, and a third to ensure success at war. One *Gle* called *Kong* is presided solely by women and is responsible for initiation, excision, childbirth and other such matters traditionally assumed to be the remit of women. [4]

This object is likely a *dean gle*, varieties of which are characterised by an oval head, slit rectangular eyes, metal strips for teeth, a jutting lower lip, which combined form an “idealised Dan form of beauty”. [5] A small bell strung to two metal clappers hangs just below the jawline, which is defined by an incised line with holes to which accoutrements such as feathers and/or cowries could be attached.

A musical accompaniment — in addition to wearing a mask (wooden or metallic) and the clothing (variously made of raffia, furs and feathers) — is fundamental to the manifestation of *Gle*. This could include percussionists, dancers, singers, and “power” objects, all of which activates the performance, thereby transforming the human embodiment into both masquerade and a spirit. [6]

Sabo Kpade, April 2023

[1] Barbara C. Johnson, *Four Dan Sculptors: Continuity and Change* (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986), p.12.

[2] Daniel B. Reed, *Dan Ge Performance: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire*. African Expressive Cultures (Indiana University Press, 2003).

[3] Johnson, p.12.

[4] Reed, p.79.

[5] Johnson, p.7.

[6] Reed, p. 87.

Further Reading

Fischer, Eberhard, and Hans Himmelheber. 2014. *Dan Artists : The Sculptors Tame, Si, Tompieme and Sõn : Their Personalities and Work*. Scheidegger & Spiess.

Johnson, Barbara C. 1986. *Four Dan Sculptors : Continuity and Change*. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Reed, Daniel B. 2003. *Dan Ge Performance : Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire*. African Expressive Cultures. Indiana University Press.

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Herbert F. Rieser in 1970.

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