



Face Mask

Date

20th century

Primary Maker

Dan people

Medium

wood, pigment, human hair, raffia and encrustation

Description

Dan is a term applied to a number of independent peoples in the mountains of Liberia and the Ivory Coast. Their masks represent a variety of personae, from warriors to clowns, and can be masculine or feminine. Masks are born when they appear to their future owner in a dream, asking to be carved and allowed to dance. As they age they undergo changes such as additions to their surface or headdress. They acquire status over years, sometimes generations, of successful use. Their use, too, can change over time, from entertaining to leading war parties or

settling disputes. Eventually, when they reach the status of Great Mask, they appear rarely and only for occasions of great importance. Without specific data, one can only guess at this mask's original function. The hair appears to be that of a female, but the round eyes are associated with aggression. The unkempt, matted appearance of the braids is often used to suggest spirit possession or contact with dangerous, mysterious forces. Characteristically, the face is elegantly curved and serene in expression, as befits the common explanation that Dan carvers are inspired by certain particularly beautiful women, regardless of the function of the mask they are carving. Since this mask lacks metal we may assume it is not associated with warriors, and since it lacks red cloth or cowries it is apparently not a prestigious Great Mask.

Dimensions

Overall: 20 x 10 1/2 x 10 1/4 in. (50.8 x 26.7 x 26 cm)