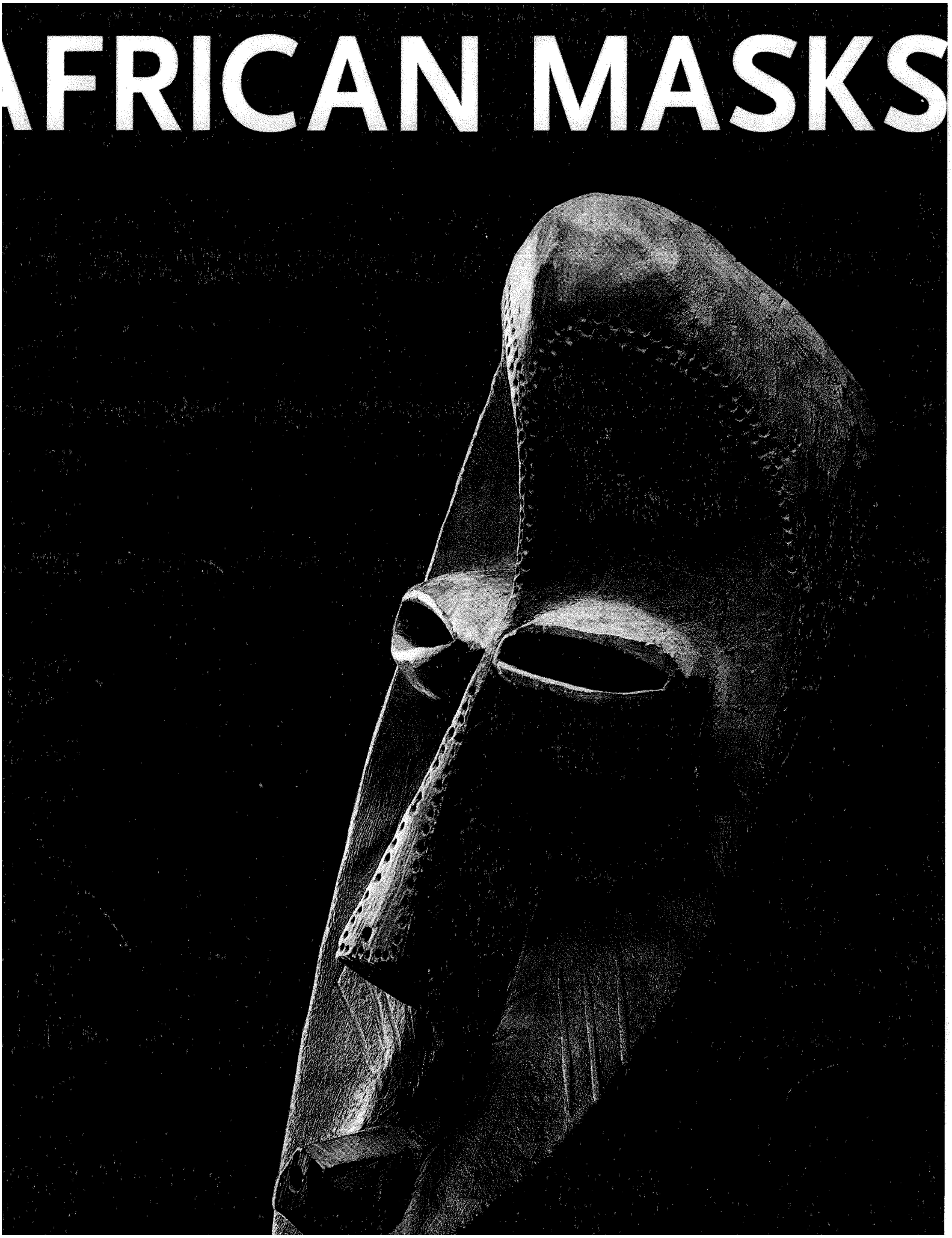
AFRICAN MASKS



"I AM NOT MYSELF"

by Maria Kecskési
and László Vajda

In 1891 Richard Andree, eminent pioneer of comparative ethnographic investigation, made one of the first attempts to sift and order the information contained in early travel reports about the masks of African peoples. The material available to him at the time was very scanty. Thus, the picture Andree projected was quite incomplete, to say the least. But what discomfits the contemporary reader even more is the total lack of understanding on the part of the nineteenth-century travelers quoted by Andree regarding the aesthetic quality and significance of African masks. Some observers, for instance, described them as "horrible, ugly, devil's grimaces," whose purpose was supposedly to ward off enemies and evil spirits.

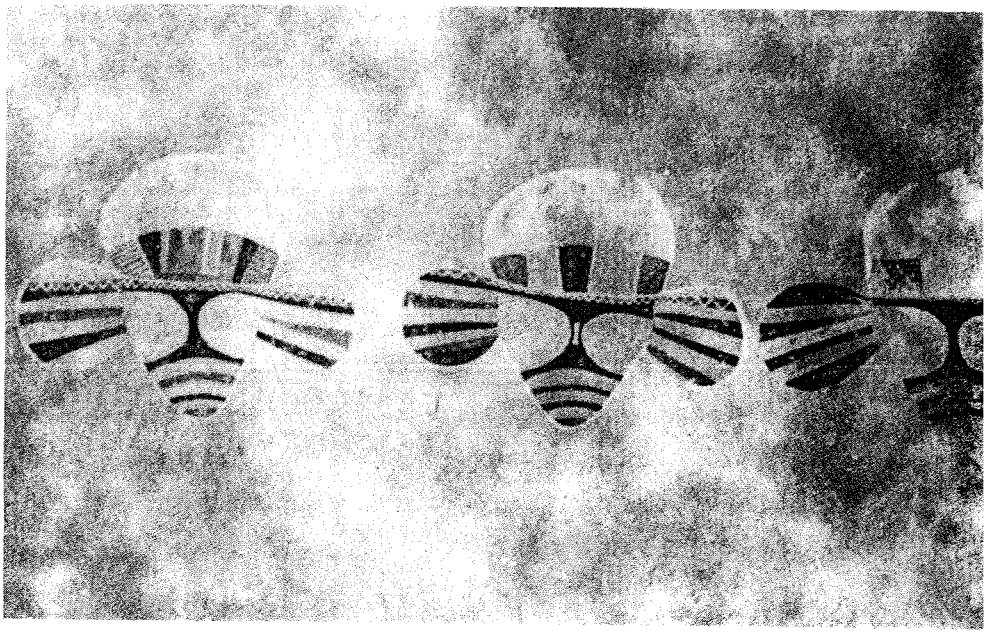
The final years of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, however, saw a radical change in European views of African art. The initiative came from two quarters: from the fledgling science of ethnology, and from the field of visual art. The ethnologists realized that Africans (like the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific, Australia, America, and the Arctic) possessed an art that deserved to be taken seriously, and that conveyed culturally specific significance. Ernst Grosse[1] did not hesitate to emphasize the validity of this insight, which many now take for granted, and to apply it to European art: "Every work of art is basically just a fragment," Grosse wrote. "The artist's depiction, to become complete, requires the viewer's imagination. Only in this way is the whole engendered which the artist set out to create."

Twenty-year-old Leo Frobenius, in his 1893 monograph on African masks, set forth what he knew — or assumed — about the rich cultural background of masquerading. Almost concurrently Europe was undergoing an artistic and cultural revolution. Avant-garde painters and sculptors seeking to break the fetters of tradition discovered the works of African art that slumbered in many an ethnographical museum. Previously considered little more than curiosities, these objects were seen to embody a unique approach to the subject-matter depicted which completely diverged from European norms, and which possessed an expressiveness often achieved by means of concision and

Face mask of the Do society, Dyula, Ivory Coast.

1

Human figures with animal masks. Rock art at Melikane, Maluti Mountains, Lesotho. Drawing by J. F. Thackeray after J. Orpen and P. Vinnicombe.



2

Mask faces. Tassili n'Ajjer, Station de Sefar, Algeria.

formal reduction.[2] The "grimacing devils" attracted increasing interest and admiration. This was reflected, among other things, in the thousands of African objects, including masks, which entered European and American museums and private collections in the course of the twentieth century. Among the latter, the Barbier-Mueller collection of Geneva, whose treasures are presented in this volume, is among the most significant.[3]

The majority of these collections defined the topic of African art very liberally. In addition to covering the textbook genres of fine art, they extended to works that even today are still sometimes classified under the unsatisfactory rubrics of "arts and crafts" or "applied arts." The present project is thematically limited to a single aspect of sculpture: the art of masks. In terms of quantity, variety, and poignancy, African masks are matched nowhere else in the world — except perhaps in Melanesia.

The road from demoniacal curios to highly valued works of art was studded with misunderstandings. Many of these have since been largely redressed. Aesthetic systems at first incomprehensible to Western eyes gradually began to be better understood. The composition and proportions of African sculptures began to be seen as a carefully considered distillation of forms. Regions with similar traditions and stylistic groupings began to be distinguished. The existence of esteemed masters who created identifiable bodies of work and who passed techniques and forms down to their pupils began to disrupt the assumption of naive spontaneity. However, this insight itself has led to another misconception: that the making of masks is not generally a creative artistic activity but merely an unimaginative copying of conventional models. This is just as mistaken as the opposing school of thought, which tends one-sidedly to emphasize the

autonomy of artistic personalities. Yet as exhaustive case-studies and comparative investigations have shown, mask forms, as so many other genres, are characterized by a dialectical interplay of tradition and innovation — that suspenseful relationship between old and new which in fact is one key to an understanding of the history of art in general.

3
Initiation mask from Gambia. Engraving in François Froger's report on his travels in western Africa (1695–97), detail.

Very little evidence, in contrast, has been advanced to support most speculations about the age and the early forms of mask-making and masquerading in Africa. The opinion that the forms (as opposed to the objects) known to us are "very ancient," is quite untenable. Though rock paintings, vaguely described as prehistoric, discovered in various regions of the continent show figures which might be hybrid creatures or masked humans (figs. 1, 2), their dating is in most cases highly insecure. But regardless whether these images are a few hundred or a few thousand years old, their supposed representations of masks provide no solid basis on which to determine the age of the known nineteenth and twentieth-century forms. An insufficient similarity apart, they give no indication of a continuity between old and new. Also, the earliest written documents stem from a much later period.

In the fourteenth century, for instance, the great Arabian traveler Ibn Battuta reported having seen singers and jugglers masked as birds.[4] François Forger's description of his travels in western Africa (1695–97) contained an illustration representing a man from Gambia — presumably a participant in a youth initiation rite — wearing a horned mask (fig. 3) similar to those used by the Diola group in today's Senegal (plate 20).[5] Such documents, if frequently imprecise, are valuable, though it is by no means certain that earlier reports are relevant for more recent periods. Masks and the performances of maskers belong in many countries and among many ethnic groups of Africa to the most vital and variable cultural practices. Cases are known in which, for whatever reason, these activities were abandoned and forgotten, and other cases of ethnic groups that had no masking tradition but have recently developed one or adopted one from other groups. Among many groups, several different types of mask exist concurrently, and each of them has its own, unique history.

Where field researchers have succeeded in reconstructing the development

of certain recent mask types with the aid of information provided by group elders, an abrupt "change-of-fashion" has also been observed. Take, for instance, one of the best-known of all African art forms, the graceful Chi Wara masks of the Bamana, headdresses with a striking, abstract antelope design (plate 3). Amazingly, these configurations emerged only just over a century ago. Originally the mask consisted of a cap made of wickerwork, with two small antelope horns and a facepiece of leather or fabric.[6]

Despite the volumes of research published on African art, one still hears the occasional, inconclusive discussion about whether or not masks (and other works of African art) should be viewed within their social and cultural context.[7] Many a connoisseur and collector is satisfied with the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from such objects — l'art pour l'art. This attitude would be entirely legitimate were it not that many who hold it have raised it to an absolute. At least in one key respect their view has carried the day. Many masks now in museums and private collections have been, as it were, mutilated, only the aesthetically appealing face or head portion having been saved. Missing are the costume made of raffia, textiles, animal hides or pelts, feathers or leaves, as well as the masker's paraphernalia (staff, stilts, dagger, whip, fly whisk, bull-roarer, rattle, etc.), despite the fact that all of these often play a salient role in mask dances.[8]

Instead of art for art's sake, our presentation is based on the ethnological view that each individual mask — like perhaps any other work of art — represents part of a larger cultural ethos. It should be viewed not as an isolated thing but as a component of a social, intellectual, and, not lastly, an artistic whole. We should recall that the objects that sometimes seem to lie so lifelessly in their museum display cases were conceived for an entirely different setting and atmosphere. The masks were worn by men in exuberant dances, or stridden slowly and with dignity. Accompanied by music and song, gestures and rhythms were determined by the type and purpose of the masquerade. Some masks were intended to shock or horrify, others to astonish or to make audiences laugh. Even the most mystifying of masks, as we now know, had a meaning or a message to convey (cf. fig. 4). A thorough knowledge of the role played by masks in the life of African peoples past and present need not diminish our appreciation of them as works of art. On the contrary: to ignore their non-aesthetic aspects would diminish our appreciation of and sensitivity towards the broad range of effects and nuances of meaning of African masks.

4
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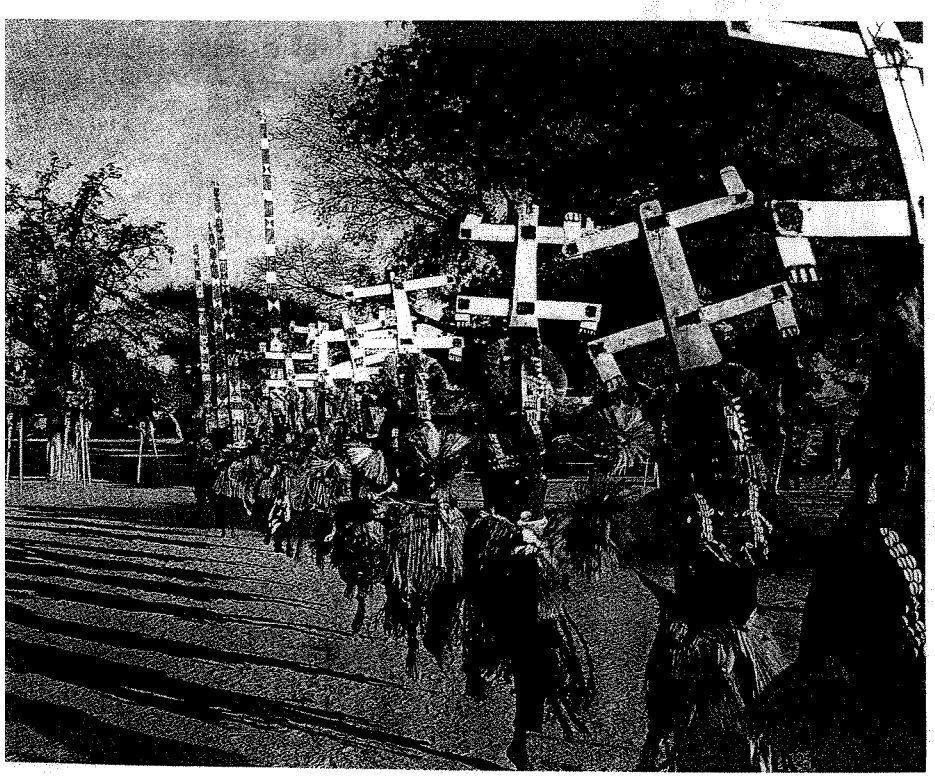


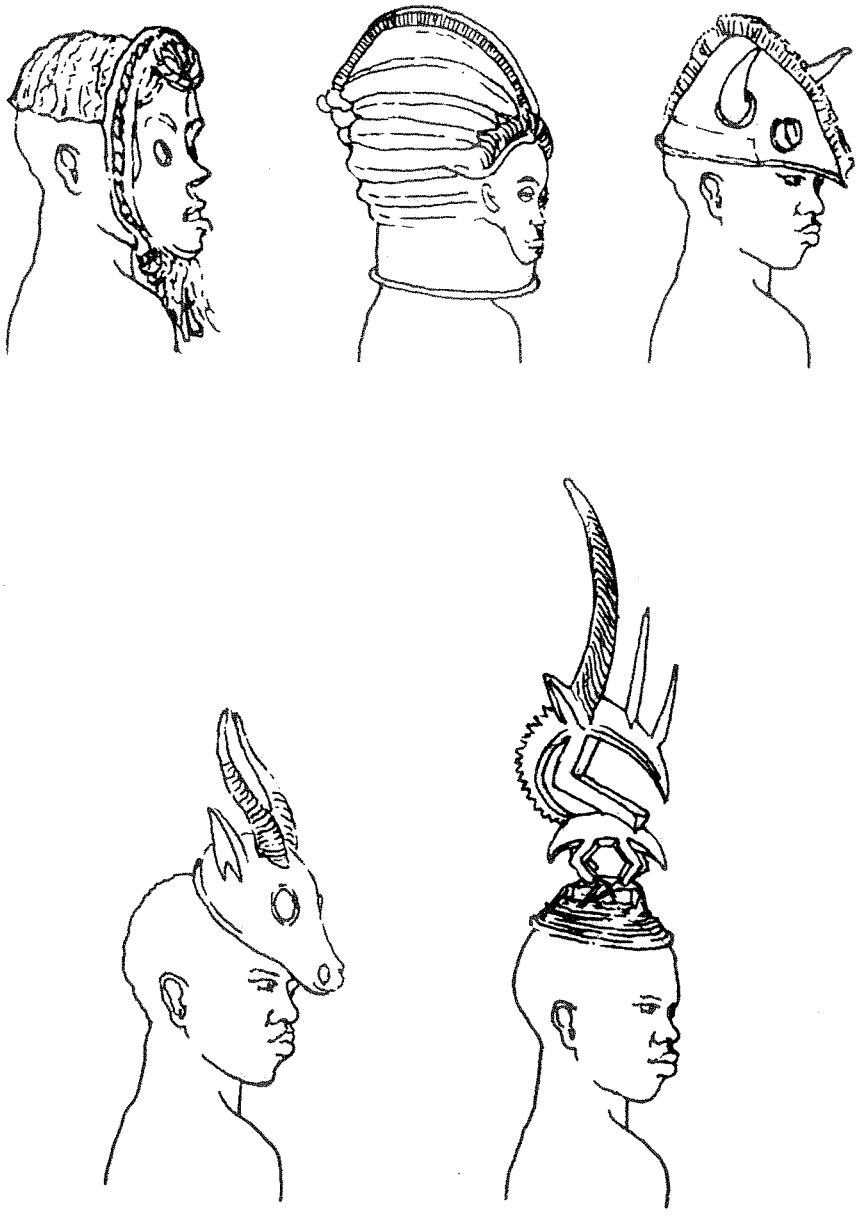
1 Diola
2 Bidjogo
3 Baga
4 Nalu
5 Landuman
6 Malinke
7 Temne
8 Mende
9 Gola
10 Bassa
11 Grebo
12 Dan
13 Toma (Loma)
14 Bamana
15 Dogon
16 Bwa
17 Marka / Dafing
18 Mossi
19 Nununa
20 Winiama
21 Nuna
22 Sisala
23 Bobo
24 Bolon
25 Tusyan
26 Senufo
27 Dyula
28 Kulango
29 Hwela
30 Bondoukou region
31 Nafana
32 Ligbi
33 Baule
34 Yaure
35 Guro
36 Mau
37 Wobe
38 Nyabwa
39 Bete
40 We
41 Fante
42 Fon
43 Yoruba
44 Owo
45 Edo
46 Benin
47 Bini
48 Urhobo
49 Ijo
50 Ogoni
51 Ibibio
52 Anang
53 Ejagham
54 Igbo
55 Idoma
56 Boki
57 Kutep
58 Yukuben
59 Mambila
60 Western Grasslands
61 Bangwa
62 Duala
63 Fang
64 Galoa
65 Vuvi
66 Punu / Lumbo
67 Tsangui
68 Vili
69 Teke-Tsaayi
70 Pomo
71 Kwele
72 Mahongwe
73 Ngare
74 Yaka
75 Suku
76 Kwese
77 Pende
78 Chokwe
79 Kuba
80 Bena Biombo
81 Luluwa
82 Salampasu
83 Lwalwa (Lwalu)
84 Lwena
85 Mbunda
86 Songye
87 Tempa Songye
88 Hemba
89 Kumu (Komo)
90 Ziba
91 Lega (Rega)
92 Bembe
93 Tabwa
94 Sukuma
95 Iraqw
96 Luguru
97 Chewa
98 Marawi (Niafa, Zimba etc.)
99 Lomwe
100 Andonde
101 Makonde

MAP OF ETHNIC GROUPS

BASIC FORMS, TYPES, AND STYLISTIC GROUPINGS

In order to bring some sort of order into the variety of African masks, it is perhaps helpful to classify them in terms of a number of basic types. At this point only their physical characteristics will be taken as distinguishing traits. Based on the form of the main part of the mask, six types may be distinguished:

1. Face masks (fig. 5a), which occur almost everywhere in Africa where masks are used.
2. Helmet masks (fig. 5b), which are carved out of a section of tree trunk and hollowed to fit over the wearer's entire head. This type, too, is widely disseminated. In some regions — as with the Mende in Sierra Leone and the Suku in the Democratic Republic of Congo — it appears to be the sole form of mask.
3. Helmet crests (fig. 5c). This type differs from the helmet mask in that it does not cover the wearer's entire head, but is worn like a cap, leaving the face free. Helmet crests are a type commonly used by the Kwifon association in the Grasslands of Cameroon and by the Gelede association of the Yoruba, in southern Nigeria.
4. Cap crests or forehead masks (fig. 5d). Like the face mask, this type consists only of a half-face. But it is worn horizontally, stabilized on the wearer's head by a circular ridge. In the case of anthropomorphic varieties (such as those of the Cameroon Grasslands), the wearer bends forward and lowers his head to direct the mask's gaze towards the spectators (cf. plate 59). In the case of zoomorphic forehead and helmet crests, this stooping posture is unnecessary (cf. plates 60, 63). Both this and the previously mentioned form leave the wearer's face free; to complete the masquerade, his face is concealed with a piece of cloth, a translucent veil, or some similar material.
5. Headdress masks (fig. 5e). These consist of representations of human or animal heads or figures, rising above a small base that rests on top of the wearer's head.



5
Typology of masks — basic forms
Face mask: Dan, Liberia
Helmet mask: Bassa, Liberia
Helmet crest: Diola, Senegal
Cap crest or forehead mask: Guro, Ivory Coast
Headdress mask: Bamana, Mali

6

Typology of masks — special forms

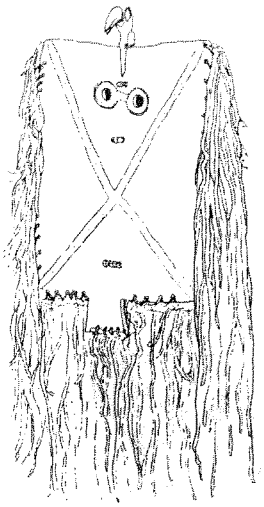
Vertical plank mask: Bobo/Bwa, Burkina Faso

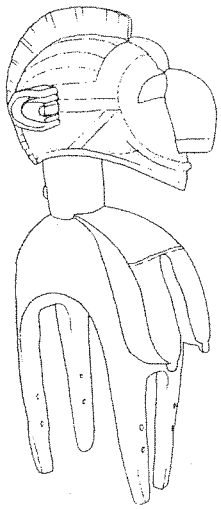
Plank mask: Tusyan, Burkina Faso

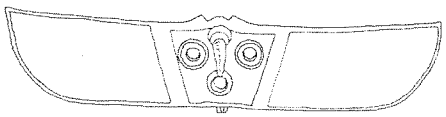
Horizontal plank mask: Bobo/Bwa, Burkina Faso

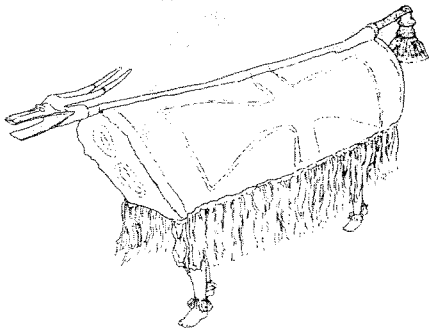
Shoulder mask: Baga, Guinea

Multi-wearer mask: Senufo, Ivory Coast



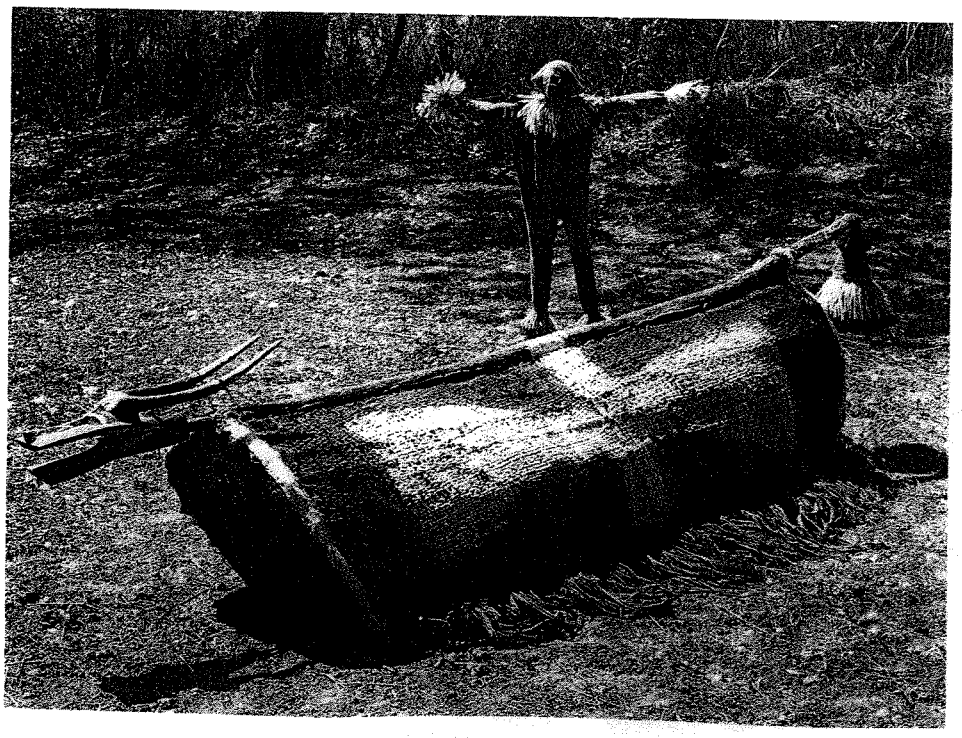






7

Nasolo multi-wearer mask, Poro society, Senufo, Ivory Coast, 1969.



Examples are found in the art of various ethnic groups in the area of the Cross River in Nigeria (cat. 154), and among the Bamana in Mali (plate 2).

6. Shoulder masks (fig. 6d). These are large, very heavy busts designed to rest on the wearer's shoulders, with a small opening or peepholes to see through. In the literature, the characteristic mask form of the Waja (Nigeria) and the Baga (Guinea) is often described as a shoulder mask. This may involve a misunderstanding, because the hollow of these masks is not large enough to receive the dancer's upper body. They probably represent a special variety of headdress mask.

A number of special forms were developed by modifying details of and making additions to the basic types mentioned.

Examples are the vertically or laterally extended plank masks (figs. 6a, b, c), which exist in numerous local variants. These include the types described by Annemarie Schweeger-Hefel[9] as stele and sword masks, in use among the Kurumba/Nyonyosi in Burkina Faso. Other special variants are characterized by proliferation, such as the multi-story mask (fig. 8) or that with long lateral extensions (fig. 9). Still others are gigantic in size and made of composite materials (fig. 10), or are designed to be worn by several persons at once (figs. 7, 6e).

Occasionally masks are simply painted designs. Among the Ubi (Ivory Coast), the colorful patterns applied to the face of young women in preparation for a ritual dance (fig. 11) probably represent an imitation of certain face masks common in the region.[10]

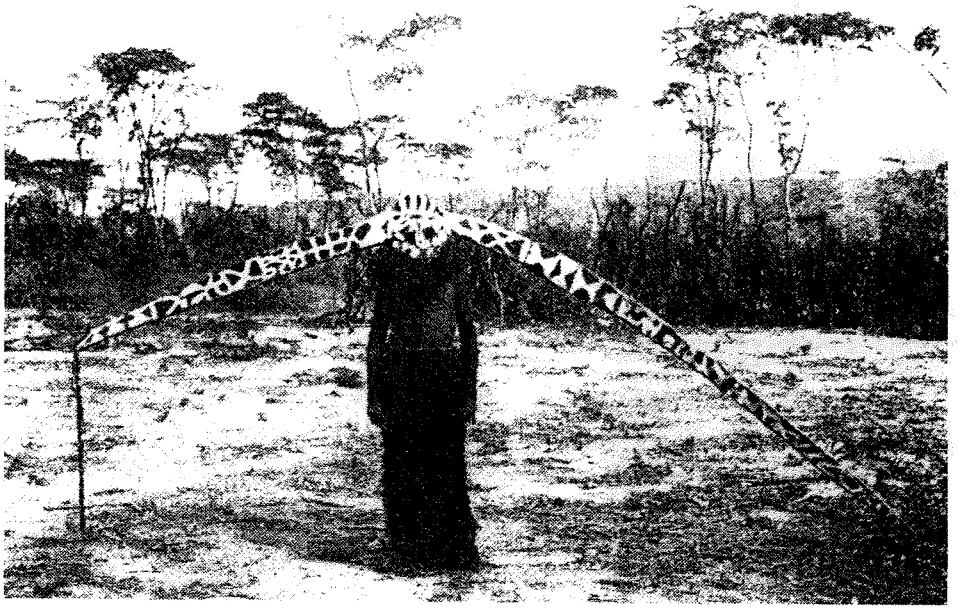
For the sake of completeness, mention should be made of the quite frequent use of mask forms as ornament on vessels, house walls, doors, door-posts, the bows or sterns of boats, shields, knives, drums, chairs, headrests, staffs, bracelets, necklaces, and rings (figs. 12–16). Miniature masks, or maskettes, of wood, bone, ivory, or metal, worn as necklace pendants, as brooches, on a belt or at the elbow (figs. 14–16), also serve as amulets or as signs of successfully

8

Performance of multi-story *sirige* masks in the village of Ireli. Dogon, Mali, 1976–77.

9

Mask with lateral appendages, wooden stick frameworks covered with bark cloth. Katoko, Angola, before 1923.

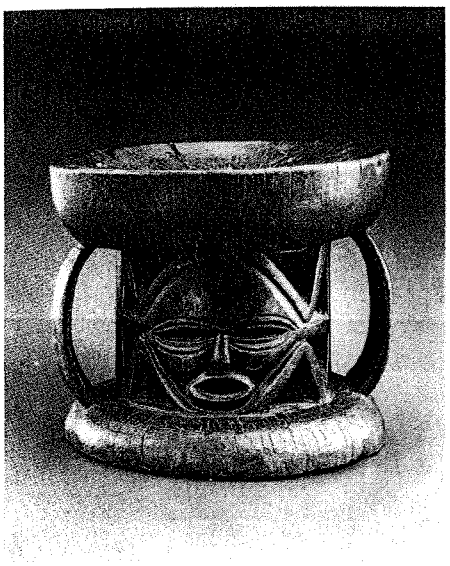


manner.[13] The multiple-wearer mask which is an especially striking element of the procession of initiates among the Senufo (Ivory Coast), has only one head, though the creature's body, fashioned of mats and wooden slats, is generally carried by two people (fig. 7). A similar construction is found in many of the animal masks used in memorial services by the Chipeta in Malawi[14] and by the Chewa in Zambia.[15]

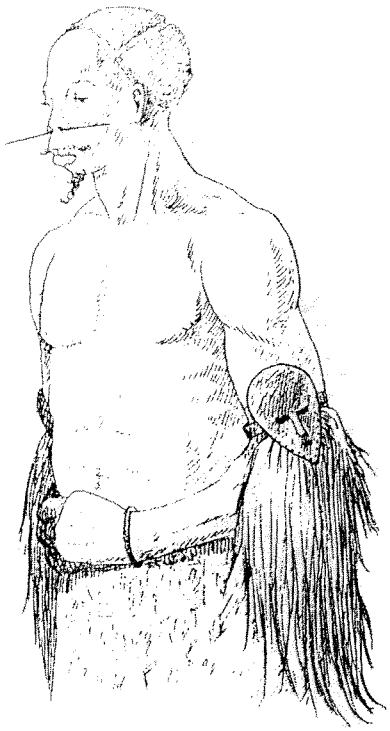
The themes and motifs employed alone or in combination in African masks range from more or less clearly recognizable human features or busts (male, female, but only very rarely hermaphroditic) to the heads of animals (antelope, steer, elephant, leopard, monkey, crocodile, fish, bird, etc.). There are also combinations of the two, including horned humans and hybrid creatures with human and animal features or with traits typical of various animal species (cf. plate 25). Within all of these thematic groupings, especially characteristic traits can appear: the heart-shaped face (cf. plate 71), the double, or so-called Janus face (cf. plates 12, 64), multiple heads (cf. plate 41), multiple-figure compositions, such as birds or human heads surmounting the mask (cf. plates 6, 39), human figures on an animal's head (cf. plate 9), or a leather covering (cf. cat. 154).

The morphological characteristics listed above do not suffice, by themselves, to permit a definition of styles, or rather, stylistic groupings. These emerge from a comparison of individual objects which evince similarities close enough to justify speaking of a relative continuity of form or combination of forms. With the necessary caution, historical reality may be ascribed to these groupings, for the complexes of features they share in common reflect formal traditions — conventions, in other words, which were followed by generations of artists in a particular region and which to some extent were even binding.

One key to stylistic definition is the position a sculpture occupies within a range extending from figurative at the one extreme toward abstract at the other. Though completely abstract masks are rare (cf. plate 56, cat. 90), in some cases the tendency toward



13
Headrest with mask decor. Lwena-Mbundo. Angola.



14
Mask worn at elbow. Gabon. Drawing by Pater Grébert, 1917–19.

15
Finger ring with buffalo head. Senufo, Ivory Coast.

16
Bronze relief of a sword bearer with belt decoration in the form of a mask. Benin, Nigeria, 16th/17th century. National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.

abstraction is very marked, as in the masks of the Dogon (plate 7) and the Igbo (cat. 161). A close scrutiny of seemingly unimportant details can also be typologically revealing. The contour of a mask, the proportions of the features, the use of convex or concave surfaces, the shape of the eyes and eyebrows (cf. fig. 17), nose and nostrils, mouth and corners of the mouth, of ears, teeth, hairdo, scarification patterns, and finally painting — all are useful aids to stylistic classification.[16]

The sum of similarities can define a stylistic grouping. But before going on, we should note that the term "style," borrowed from European art history, has different connotations in the context of African art. When we speak of stylistic groupings, we are dealing almost without exception with works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which means that stylistic determinations have little chronological depth. Thus terms such as "Dan style," "Chokwe style," or "Kuba style," even though they may be accurate, imply no chronological determination.

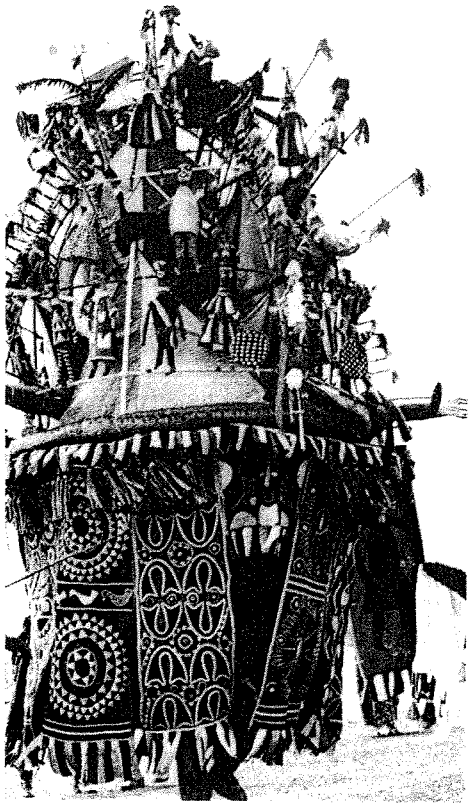
As regards the naming of stylistic groupings by ethnic group, common in mask collections, this goes back to ingrained European notions of the communal character of African art, and of the "tribe" as something akin to a primordial group. If these notions were correct, every ethnic group would possess a culture (including art) distinct from that of every other, and its members would adhere to a common artistic style. In reality, tribalism belongs to the phenomena of the colonial era: ethnic sensibilities in Africa are variable, and ethnic identities often shift and blur.[17] Several different styles may flourish within one and the same "tribe" (as with the Dogon, Bamana, Senufo, Bobo, Dan, Baule, Yoruba, Igbo, Fang, Chokwe, and many more), and the dissemination area of individual stylistic groupings is determined not by ethnicity but by economic and political ties, shared institutions (kingship, men's associations, rituals), religious movements — in other words, by communities of exchange.[18]

THE ARTISTS

The African masks of the past, and some of those of the present day, are still described as works of anonymous artists. Yet even as early as the end of the last century Frobenius thought it necessary to record the name of the carver of a Yoruba mask he purchased. In 1927 Franz Boas demanded that future ethnological art research take into account the "action and attitude of the artist." In the 1930s Hans Himmelheber began to interview individual artists in Liberia and the Ivory Coast, to observe them at work, and to discuss their creative role.[19] The past few decades have produced a considerable series of reports whose authors describe the personality, working methods, and social status of individual artists in various African societies.[20]

The present discussion will be limited to woodcarvers, for the great majority of masks in Western collections were made by these artists. Woodcarvers are without exception men; even the masks of the Sande women's association in Sierra Leone are the work of male artists. Many of them come of families of woodcarvers, though they were under no obligation to continue the family tradition. The situation is different in those areas of the western Sudan where, as among the Senufo, an attenuated caste system still exists. The separate crafts still occupy certain strata here, and the son of a woodcarver is, at least theoretically, obliged and entitled to adopt his father's vocation.[21] Finally there are examples of boys who voluntarily decide to train as woodcarvers, without being influenced by family or caste tradition. The story of precocious talent early recognized, so common in European artists' biographies, seems rare in the life histories of African artists, and if referred to at all, it is only vaguely. As reasons for adopting an artistic vocation, most tend to mention a supplementary income (in addition to farming), or social prestige.

The apprentice's training is conducted by his father, if the father is a woodcarver. But even then the young man might absolve an apprenticeship of several years in the workshop of an experienced master, who,



10

Dancer in giant composite *ijele* mask. Igbo, Nigeria, c. 1975.

11

"Living masks": dancers with face painting. Ubi. Ivory Coast.

12

Boat prow adorned with steer mask. Bidjogo. Guinea-Bissau, 1931.

completed initiation (cf. plate 44). Their forms and characteristic details are similar to those of the other masks of the region in question.

As far as the mode of wearing is concerned, face masks are tied with bands either directly to the head or are held in place by a scarf or a raffia wig. All have holes drilled in the edge for the purpose of securing them. Some masks are fitted on the back, or inside, with a horizontal stick which the wearer grips between his teeth. The members of the Bwami association among the Lega (northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo) employ their face masks in unusual ways. Expressive of a complex symbolism, the masks are worn not only on the face but at the temples, on the back of the head, on the upper arm, and on the knee — even held in the hand, laid on the ground, or suspended on special frameworks (cf. plates 94, 95).[11] Among the highland Bangwa of Cameroon, the members of the night association (Troh) carry their helmet masks (plate 64) on their shoulders rather than wearing them, perhaps due to the dangerous forces associated with them, against which not even association members are immune.[12] The shoulder masks of the Limba in Sierra Leone, which are made of copper plates and worn during the funeral of a chief, are worn in a similar