

Masks from the West African Dan people

<G261a; June – October 2010>

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1945

Wood, cloth, metal, undetermined materials

Gift of Marion and John Andrus 91.109

The size of this mask is highly unusual. Unlikely to have been worn, it is probably a 'family mask' that was hung on the wall to protect the household. The four little pouches above the forehead are protective talismans. Characteristic of many Dan masks is the high forehead split by a vertical ridge, and the angle at eye level. The holes in the upper lip contained wooden or metal teeth.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1960

Wood

Private Collection, Saint Paul

Miniature masks, like the big masks, embody forest spirits. Although their main function is to protect their owners from harm, they may also be used in divination, or as sacred objects upon

which to swear an oath. Such a mask must be fed regularly to keep it strong: food may be set before it, or the offering, usually rice or oil, may be rubbed or poured onto it. Offerings on this example have formed a thick crust, almost obliterating its facial features.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1920

Wood

The Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund 2009.31

This mask is the oldest in the exhibition. Its age is revealed by the appearance of the wood, the rich surface crust, and the necessity of 'replacement holes' along the edges to which the costume used to be attached. The holes on the snout held a piece of fur, which would have intensified the animal-like look of the mask.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1940

Wood, metal, vegetal material

Private Collection, Minneapolis

This bird-like mask combines elements of the two nearby, namely the beak of the one and the tubular eyes of the other. Interestingly, the eyes of this mask are not carved in the wood. Instead, sections of pentagonal vegetal stems, probably okra, are inserted into the eye sockets. The headdress was fastened to the metal pin in the forehead.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1935

Wood

The Robert J. Ulrich Works of Art Purchase Fund 2009.32

The Dan often integrate bird and animal features in their face masks, including the hornbill beak visible in this and the adjacent mask. Here, rows of carved teeth line the beak. The small protrusions on the forehead represent antelope horns, which were often used as containers of protective medicines.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1930

Wood, metal, leather

Private Collection, Minneapolis

*The first mask to come to man in his dreams, said, "Make me, wear me; that will scare the enemies."* These words from the carver Dro (see photograph), recorded in 1960, pertain to ferocious masks, like this one. The dancer whips bystanders and throws sticks into the crowd, an aggressive behavior that may have excited past communities in preparation for battle. The oozing surface results from numerous palm oil offerings. In the West, this particular style, with its triangular cheekbones, has been called 'cubistic.'

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1955

Wood, resin, fiber

Private Collection, Saint Paul

The eyes of these three masks differ from each other, and denote different characteristics. The triangular eyes of the oily mask represent untamed mischief. The slit eyes of the braided mask express beauty and tranquility. The rounded eyeholes of this mask relate to the necessity of the wearer to have a wide field of vision. This type of mask, usually worn in running competitions, is known as a racer mask.

Dan

Liberia or Côte d'Ivoire

Mask, c. 1940

Wood, fibers, metal, bone, rope

Private Collection, Minneapolis

This face represents an idealized form of feminine beauty and grace to the Dan. The braided wig reproduces the traditional coiffure of Dan women. The brilliant, lacquer-like patina and deep black color were obtained by immersing the mask for several weeks in the mud of a pond.

<labels for insides of masks>

<general>

The inside of a mask generally remains invisible to the museum visitor. Yet this most intimate part of the mask, which comes into contact with the wearer's face (if it is a face mask, as most Dan masks are), may tell stories about its past history – both in the culture of origin and in Western collections. Take a close look at these insides, and then move around the case to see their fronts.

<MPLS private coll.; braided>

The carver left tool marks on the inside, but smoothed the front side by using an abrasive. Two small holes in the middle were made by a previous owner to mount the mask. Today, even private collectors tend to avoid this kind of irreversible change.

<MPLS private coll.; bird>

The wooden mount almost hides the inside of this mask, as if to tell us that only the front side deserves attention. Nevertheless, this is a very famous mount, from the hand of the Japanese mount maker Inagaki, who worked in Paris during the early decades of the 20th century. He was known for exquisitely crafted stands of African art: see how this one is built around the mask's damaged lower part. For collectors and dealers, an African object with an Inagaki mount possesses an aura of old age and authenticity.

<2009.31>

The inside reveals flat surfaces, for instance at the forehead, and more angular areas, between the eyes and around the nose.

<2009.32>

Museums no longer make irreversible changes to their objects. The MIA inventory number, in red acrylic, is encased between two layers of a plastic polymer that is soluble in acetone. Next to it is an older number in white from a previous owner, applied in what seems to be indelible ink.

<St. Paul private coll.; runner>

The lighter patches in the middle and on the edges indicate where the mask came into contact with the wearer. The mask had probably cracked and was sewn together by the Dan themselves.

<MPLS private coll.; cubist>

The inside shows a smooth surface, with oozing palm oil, and several labels that reveal part of the mask's history in Western collections.