

{DanMasks panels ED.doc}

## Masks from the West African Dan People

### Dreaming a Mask

Masks are the most important art form of the Dan, a population of about five hundred thousand, who live in inland Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. Each mask with its headdress and costume, perceived to embody a particular forest spirit, is born in a dream, when the spirit announces to the wearer its desire to exist as a mask in the world of the living. Dreaming also inspires an artist in his craft. Even when sculptors acknowledge a master carver who taught them the technique of carving, they place greater emphasis on the power and ability gained through dreaming. Artistry is highly valued in traditional Dan society, and a number of past sculptors are still known by name today. Two of them are shown here, but it is not certain whether they made any of the masks on display.

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### A Variety of Styles

The scientific study of African art is a relatively new field in art history. For a long time, scholars operated under the assumption that each ethnic group has a single, identifiable style, different from those of neighboring groups. This "one tribe, one style" notion has been challenged in recent decades. Now it is being acknowledged that artists, styles, and ideas travel among neighbors and influence each other, and that within a single population a great diversity of styles may coexist. This exhibition illustrates the diversity by showing a variety of masks from the Dan people, including some that combine human and animal features to emphasize the supernatural qualities of the spirits they represent. Independent of stylistic differences, these masks played a role in entertainment, moral education, social control, or political and judicial matters.

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### The Career of a Mask

In most African cultures, the shape of a mask communicates what type it is and what function it has in society.

However, this is usually not the case for Dan masks. Two masks that look alike can have different characteristics and therefore different functions. One reason is that the form and function of a Dan mask depend on the instructions that the forest spirit, who wishes to inhabit the mask, gives the wearer in a dream. The individuality of the spirit influences how a mask looks and what it does. Another reason is that some Dan masks have long careers. As a mask grows older and gains prestige, it may climb up the hierarchical ladder, so to speak, changing its meaning and purpose over the years.

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