

m'boom Headdress Mask or Bwoon
Purchase 1974
#4254.1

Africa, Zaire
Kuba People

Our mask is the male
mask of the
trilogy

Background and Subject:

The Kuba people of Zaire (Congo), live in the fertile lands of equatorial Africa between the Kasai and Sankuru Rivers. The Kuba kingdom is made up of eighteen distinct ethnic groups each having a history and identity of its own. These groups have been an organized kingdom since the 17th century but have lived in S. Central Zaire much longer. Their unity is a consequence of a common culture and the domination by the Bushong group, which has the largest population of all. The Bushong, led by their king formed the Kuba ruling elite. The groups are ruled through a system of clan councils and chiefs. The greatest of the Kuba kings was Shyaam aMbul a Ngoong, who ruled in 1600-1620. It is this king who is credited with the introduction of manioc, palm oil, tobacco, raffia weaving and embroidery. Artistically the Kuba surround themselves with a sophisticated 'vocabulary' of elaborate decorative patterns which are found in architecture, basketry, carved objects such as the Academy's vast collection of boxes, and also in female body scarification and textiles. The stories and legends of the Kuba people describe the creation and organization of the world. The three most important types of masks produced by the Kuba appear together to tell the story of the founding of the Kuba nation. The principal character is **Woot, the first man/founding ancestor** credited with the establishment of the royal lineage. He is represented by a mask called mosh'ambooy mu shall (mask of plumes). The king may actually wear this mask at celebrations. It is a way of establishing an identity of authority between royalty and ancestral origins.

The second mask is the female counterpart of the royal mosh'ambooy and is called ngady amwaash. It represents **Mweel, the incestuous sister/wife of Woot**, the mythical founder. Their incestuous union created the people.

The third mask is like the Academy's m'boom headdress. It also is called **bwoom**. This last member of the royal mask trinity is the commoner who defies the authority of the chief, mosh'ambooy and competes for the favors of Ngady a mwaash. If you look at the Academy mask, you can see a bulging forehead which may symbolize the pigmy people whom the Bushongo recognize as the original owners of their land. The mask is wooden and beads and shells are sewed to panels of cloth and sewed right onto the wood.

The masks appear at different kinds of public ceremonies, initiations and funerals. They recount the original story of the Kuba people and portray the struggle for love as well as power. Each mask is done in a distinctive style and has a characteristic range of behavior associated with it. They do not normally appear as a group.

Resources: Africa, Art of the Continent, Tom Phillips, 1996
Stanley Collection Database, Univ of Iowa
www.tiac.net

Materials and Technique: Wood, copper, cowries, beads, Kaolin, skin, cotton fabric and raffia.

Style: The m'boom mask is very large and dramatic, wondrously decorated with shells, bead and copper. It is a central attraction in the African gallery.

The beaded patterns one can sometimes see at the back of the head...represent over 100 recognized designs that have names associated with the names of the kings in whose reigns they originated.

Instructional Aid: What kind of story do you think this mask portrays? How does it compare to other masks in the African galleries. What is the function of this particular mask-why is it important to the Kuba people?

The following is taken from: Jensen, James F. "Honolulu Academy of Arts, Sculptures of the Americas, Africa and Oceania" IN Apollo, Vol.CIX, No 204, February, 1979, p59-60.

"A Kuba helmet mask from Zaire shows an approach to the human face and head very different from the naturalism of the Dan mask. Both masks belong to well-established traditions in which basic form and style idioms had been predetermined and culturally-approved (but within which there was still room for the personal expression

of the makers through their skills and talents in controlling visual elements by manipulating tools and materials). While the Dan mask is consciously rooted in specific norms of womanly beauty, the Kuba mask emerges from legend and imagination and represents M'boom, a mythical Character frequently appearing in ceremonies and initiation rites of the Babende secret society. Thus, the visualization of M'boom's appearance was not constrained by naturalistic requirements. The human head served as the basic form for the mask, but individual characteristics such as the bulging forehead throwing the eyes into shadow, the large nose with flaring nostrils and the jutting jaw have been greatly exaggerated. The use of fabric, metal sheathing, pigment, beads and shells reinforces this phantasmal conception and provides a visual and tactile richness which heightened the mask's dramatic impact when it appeared at public functions.

M'boom impersonates an aboriginal ancestor of low status, perhaps a pygmy, and in rituals, is the rival of another mask, Mwaash a mbooy, which represents Woot, the primal Kuba cultural hero and founder of the ruling Kuba group. By extension, therefore, M'boom may be seen as representing those of common birth and his opposition to Mwaash a mbooy as symbolic of their relationship to the king or chiefs in the dichotomous Kuba social organization."

NOTE: THE HAA MASK IS M'BOOM. COMMON MAN

