

COLNAGHI



A Pende Mbangi Mask

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PENDE ARTIST

Democratic Republic of the Congo
Late 19th–early 20th century

Mask

Wood, brass
h: 29.3 cm; 11 ½ in.

Provenance

Ex collection Jef Vander Straete, Belgium
Ex collection Ms. Syma Rubin, New York, acquired from the above in 1960
Ex private collection, Michigan, acquired from the above in 2016



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One of the most recognizable Central Pende masks is the black-and-white Mbangu, which represents a male disfigured by bewitchment. Since the Pende worldview ascribes almost all illness and personal misfortune to the malice of others, in reality the Mbangu represents someone disfigured by chronic illness or disability.

The black-and-white colour scheme is richly symbolic and the most important element of these masks. This striking consistency across examples makes clear the importance of recognition of the Mbangu for the Pende audience as well as the artists' reverence for the creation of this character. White can have several meanings, but the most common comes through its association with the white kaolin clay used in all healing rites, while black represents sorcery and illness.

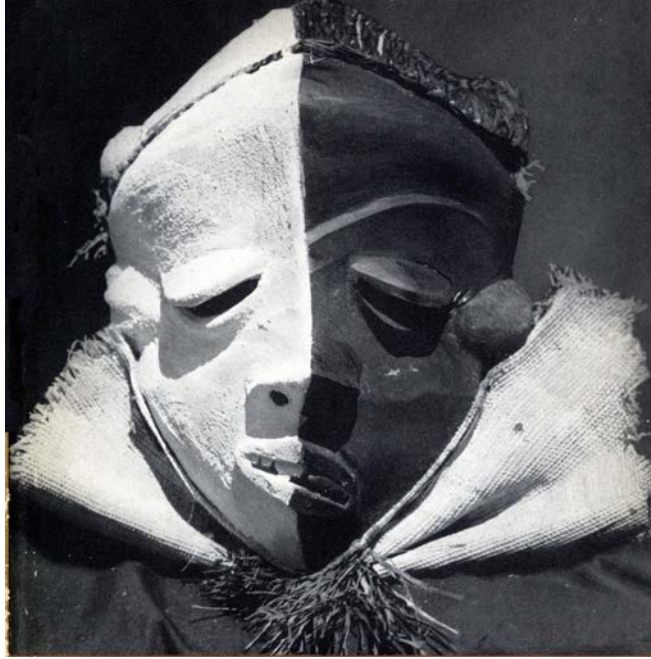
Along these lines, typically visual markers of illness are relegated to the black side: the face is often warped, representing facial paralysis brought on by epilepsy among other causes, and the brow is sometimes decorated, as with the brass rivets on the present mask, with traces of smallpox. The bifurcation of the face and the juxtaposition of symbolic pigments place the Mbangu at the crossroads of illness and healing.

Comparanda



Private Collection, exhibited in "African form and imagery. Detroit collects", Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1996:69, #41

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Italiaander (Rolf), "Nue Kunst in Afrika", Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1957:
cover

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