Museum of Ancient Wonders

presents

FACES OF AFRICA
A Mystical View of Tribal Heritage
Celebrating the tradition of ritual and ceremony for more than 3,500 years, the mask is a sacred and revered object, honored and beloved in addition to being feared and dangerous. For the people of Africa, tribal masks and sculpture represent the invisible force assigned to it, which may be the spirit of a wise ancestor, a tutelary deity or any embodiment of supernatural power from the animal kingdom. Whoever wears a mask combines and unites their strength to the spirit associated with it, enhancing value and heightening power, creating a mystical empyreal bond between the past and present, the sacred living and the honored dead.

Faithfully recreated by award-winning artist Richard W. Jones, this critically acclaimed collection of authentic reproductions of ancient masks, murals, and sculptures celebrates 3,500 years of African tribal art and traditions.

From ancient Nok heads to the spectacular masks of Dogon dances and contemporary South African murals, the popular Faces of Africa is an intimate and mystical view of the tribal heritage.
1. Batetela Tribal Mask, Kinshasa, Congo

The Tetela or Batetela, in the plural, inhabit the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an ethnic subgroup of the larger Mongo tribe. Famous for their drum making, this tribe commonly subsists on farming, fishing, raising cassava, banana and kola nuts. Motetela, the name of their creator god means, "He, who laughs not" or "He, at whom one may not laugh."

Defended by tribal warriors, the Batetela suffered conflicts with other tribes, Belgians and Arabs particularly during the slave trade in the mid-1800s to early 1900s.

Deep and graceful lines of ritual scarification can be seen on the face of this warrior’s mask, crowned by the gilded images of four protective ancestors facing east, west, north and south above his helmet. His eyes reflect the color of the sky and a missing front tooth marks time spent in battle.
2. **Bobo Tribal Mask, Mali**

Dating back to 800 AD, the Bobo tribe, ruled by council elders of prominent families, occupy the Upper Volta region of Burkina Faso, Mali. An agrarian society famous for honey and beekeeping, their major food crops include maize, yams, red sorghum, and pearl millet. Cotton is also grown and sold to textile mills.

Displaying geometric designs and worn with a costume gown made of leaf and fiber, this mask is used to evoke the God of Nature, Wuro, to bring equilibrium and harmony to the cultivation of their crops and chase evil spirits from the community.

When placed over the faces of tribal dancers during funeral rites, those who wear the Bobo masks partake in a series of noisy rituals using drums and bells that direct the dead to the after world.
3. Yaure Tribal Mask, Central Ivory Coast

Inhabiting the central region of the Ivory Coast, the Yaure possess a strong sense of cultural identity with millennia of refined artistic abilities.

A radiant sun disc with sculpted facial features, this classical mask is held by a rod close to the face and worn for funerals and tribal purification. After death, masqueraders dance to restore the social order of the village, reestablish civic equilibrium and beseech the spirits of the deceased to act as protective, beneficent guides for the living.
4. Bakete Tribal Mask, Kinshasa, Congo

During French colonization, traditional Bakete ritual ceremonies were oppressed by colonial exploitation. By the early 20th century, the Bakete peoples gained their independence and their traditions flourished once again.

Raffia embroidered textiles, featuring exquisite geometric patterns, and decorated fabrics, the Bakete have been described as a people who cannot bear to leave a surface without ornament.

This mask employs a blue crown, earthen eyes and brows with cryptic channels of lighter shades of blue and white under the eyes and over the mouth to distinguish facial features. Palm leaf is woven and knotted into the base of the mask.

A call to the spirit world through divination imparts access to poignant knowledge the ancestors possess, rendering insight into social and physical ills affecting the descendants of the deceased.
5. Dan Tribal Mask, Liberia

Migrating from the Savannahs of the Ivory Coast to the high mountain forests of Liberia, the Dan dedicated the deep, sacred forest to the spirits of their ancestors to wander contently. In order to journey the boundary between the village and the forest, a talisman made of materials from both worlds provides a token of safe passage.

Female Dan masks are identified by their oval shape, large forehead, squinting eyes of disapproval, with a half-opened mouth portraying dismay in a maternal fashion. Showing a grave and sedate expression, the mask is worn for traditional rituals designed to mediate disagreements within the community, to keep children safe from any harm or disease, correct unfair rules and control miscreant behavior.
6. Boat Mask, Bakonga Tribe, Angola

In transit to death or while in the process of life, the deceased ancestor, the unborn and the living are all interconnected in the ritualized world of the Bakonga tribe.

Known for their ancient legends and oral histories, proverbs, fables, legends or other imaginatively recounted stories, some are used to illustrate human weakness, mistakes committed and, finally, successful resolution to amuse and instruct children and lead adolescents into adulthood.

Hung on a colorful wall inside the home, this mask in the shape of a boat represents a custodial spirit, whose purpose is to guard the fishermen while they pursue a lavish harvest for the families of the village.
7. Ngere Tribal Mask, Congo

A subgroup of the Dan tribal complex, the Ngere, created spirit masks from wood with naturally sculpted generic facial features to act as intermediaries for the transmission of petitions or offerings of respect to the gods.

Ancestral spirits demand the creation of ceremonial masks in their honor by appearing in vivid dreams and visions in the minds of the living. Believing that spirits of the dead dwell in nature, the individual donning the mask becomes an emissary bestowing fertility upon those who witness the dance or peacefully resolving a difficult situation for all concerned within the tribal community. The mask and the entranced individual transmit spiritual power in ritual ceremony.

Living in the Upper Volta region of Burkina Faso and Mali and regulated by a council of elders from all lineages, their homes are shared with generations of family members. The head of the household or father of the house is known as the “Wakoma.” The spirits of the masks are used to chase evil from their community and to purify the land for successful planting. Lasting for three days before the season and after harvest, dances are held to bring nature’s equilibrium and harmony to crops and preserve the health of cattle with drums and bells.
9. Bwani Tribal Mask, Zaire

Living near the lush African Great Lake, Tanganyika, spreading out “like a plain,” the Bwani, a warlike society of the Lega tribe, in ancient days, fiercely divided and conquered tribes who shared the region. Their culture was assimilated and continues to influence the population of today.

Bwani society is patrilineal, stratified in accordance with lineage hierarchies and political power. The leader of the lineage inherits his position to pass on secrets and traditions, ritual activities and oral histories associated with the masks, including dances, songs and care of sacred objects. Initiates must immerse themselves in this knowledge in order to gain prominence in a society whose concerns includes administering to the dead.

Simple in design with a single connecting brow, bean-sized eyes and raffia beard, this wooden mask with a smooth surface arouses an ancestral spirit to participate in an impending decision pivotal for the well-being of the clan.
10. Kifwebe Mask, Basonga Tribe, Congo

The Basonga are related to a larger tribe known as the Luba and live in the savannah and forest land on the River Lualaba in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kifwebe masks are distinguished by gender, social status and age of the masquerader by the size and height of the sagittal comb/crest. Male Kifwebe crests are more pronounced than females while junior masks have a smaller, diminutive crest to indicate their lesser degree of social power. This mask is worn by an adult female.

The individual who acquires a Kifwebe mask has potent, mystical powers that are said to derive from spirits of the dead. For males of the tribe, these spirits assist in rituals to provide means of controlling social behavior, neutralizing disruptive elements within the tribe, rituals involving the death of a chieftain, initiation rites of young men as well as a whole range of occasions that include public punishment.
Occupying East Central Nigeria for at least a thousand years, the Igbira are well known for being skilled weavers and farmers. Agrarians, the crops comprise rice, millet, cow peas and groundnuts. Goats, sheep, cows and pigs are raised for local consumption.

This bearded ritual mask is wrapped with a turban the color of soil and a complexion reflecting the sparkling waters of the Niger River establishing the wearer as a chieftain of the harvest festival. In his mouth, in paternal fashion, he holds millet seed gathered from the crop.

Many of their ritual celebrations are held in an effort to achieve a balance between the spirits of the dead and the spirits of the living, to pay homage to their creator god, and endow the living with an abundant, successful harvest.
12. N’Tomo Mask, Bamana, Mali

One of largest West African states in Mali established by dynasties of tribesmen dating before the 15th century, the Bamana peoples and federations of other related clansmen established a vast and powerful empire.

N’tomo secret initiation societies are designed to furnish instruction in all aspects of life including marriage, death and coming of age.

The number of vertical rods that crown the head of this ritual mask equates a person of eminence, someone well-versed in the spirit world and its rituals. Symbols of wealth and position, each rod is decorated with cowry shells. Males traditionally carry three or six rods, females, four or eight rods and the androgynous, two, five or seven. This mask carries 9.

Applied on the faces of mature males to serve as protection for young boys during their initiation cycle before circumcision, the ritual dance fortifies them in their transition to adulthood.
13. Igbo Tribal Terra Cotta Clay Mask, Nigeria

An ancient trade route in southeastern Nigeria, Igboland is geographically divided into two sections by the fertile Niger River providing access of communication and securely joining the indigenous Igbo natives on both sides of the river banks culturally and linguistically. One of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, they speak Igbo, which includes various Igboi languages and dialects. Today, a majority of them speak English alongside Igbo as a result of British colonialism.

Known for masquerades associated with the harvest festival and dating as far back as 900 AD, this terra cotta maiden spirit mask represents the beauty and peacefulness of womankind. Employed for sacred fertility rituals including ornate costumes, musical instruments, song, dynamic dance and participation from the entire village, the public celebrations create a unique carnival atmosphere.
Originally from the land known today as the Republic of Uganda, where Swahili and English are employed as official languages, the Ziba, before the turn of the 17th Century, were organized into small, but highly centralized kingdoms, each presided over by a king.

Believing that the souls of the noble dead inhabit the diverse wildlife in the region, Ziba masks incorporate teeth, fur, claws and bone fragments to unite the natural and spiritual world in worshiping those who came before them.
Migration from present day Angola to the region known today as the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the early 17th century, led to a critical mass of familial clans forging the larger Pende tribe. Divided into two distinctive cultural groups between East and West, they share the same ethnicity and are not governed by a centralized political authority. Preferring to rely on organized extended families, each clan entrusts a chief mediator to communicate with the spirit world of the ancestors. Praised for their popular music and ritual dance, the Pende include the distinguished Kwilu and Kasai tribes as their brethren.

Expert farmers, producing millet, maize, plantain and peanuts, women are traditionally in charge of cultivation and market while men clear fields, hunt in lush savannahs and fish in numerous tributaries.

Initiation rituals include painful circumcision as a rite of passage. It is a cultural tradition to strengthen youth for future marriage, children and the responsibilities associated with adulthood. Surviving the event, the individual establishes status in the community and a bond to tribal spirit ancestors. This classical Kwilu mask is geometric and colorful, the head is triangular, the eyes and mouth circular, ennobled by two horns, it is a symbol of power and maturity.
Songye people are a Bantu ethnic group who share common rituals, ceremonial festivities and principles of craftsmanship with the Luba tribe from the Southeastern region of the Congo, known as Zaire.

With pronounced ears and a protruding crest, this bat-like spirit mask is worn by a male Songye tribesman of prominent status to confer success, wealth, good health and fertility on boys preparing for rites of passage rituals. Ancestral spirits are called upon to protect the boys during their transition into tribal warriors and future patriarchs of the clan.
17. Bete Mask, Dan-Ngere Tribe, Liberia

Serving as a totem, this Bete mask is a spirit being. It is a sacred object that serves as the emblem or crest of a group of people, such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe.

The African totem is often carved from ebony or other hard woods, designed with graceful lines and showing a highly polished surface. Worn in preparation of war or tribal conflict, the spirit mask is offered as powerful magical protection against death or severe injury by instilling fear, insecurity and terror in tyrannical enemies. The Bete totem spirit will be used to preside over victory ceremonies when peace is restored and disheartened spirits have been appeased.
The Makonde of East Africa live in a vast wilderness containing the Serengeti and Kilimanjaro National Parks which are populated by great apes, elephant, lion, leopard, buffalo and rhino. Upon colonization by the Portuguese, the Makonde tribal masks became very popular in Europe. Decorated with buffalo hair and carved from wood, this mask was used by tribal members long before contact with Catholic missionaries in the nineteenth century. Worn to invite and provoke deceased ancestral spirits to share in coming-of-age rituals and joyful festivities, the mask furnishes a bond between the ancestors and nature.
Since prehistory, archaeologists attest to human presence in the southern portion of the Cameroon, where rich fertile soils and humid rainforest bestow sanctuary to many inhabitants, including Pygmies who lived in the region for centuries as hunter-gatherers. Discovered in 1472 by Portuguese explorers near the modern port city of Douala, their encounter with a “river of prawns” gave rise to its name: Cameroon.

This Ngumba mask portrays the spirit of adolescence in transition to adulthood displaying three tasseled horns (male), a simple and naive expression with a youthful blue and white pattern. It is worn in ritual dance to invite the young to attain power and wisdom from ancient ancestors in order to form a strong and reliant tribal network.
20. Ibibio Tribal Mask, Nigeria

Skilled in the art of mask making, the Ibibio tribes people created secret societies to sacredly house and administer their use in rituals to commemorate the deceased. These societies impact political, legislative, judiciary and religious doctrine in the village.

Representing the unhappy, tortured spirit of an ancestor left to wander aimlessly, this mask inspires dread, fear and vexation for a life not well lived and for which paradise will remain eternally elusive.
21. Bafo Tribal Mask, Cameroon

Settling along the Atlantic coast during the Neolithic Era in present day Cameroon, “Africa in miniature,” the longest continuous population of inhabitants were tribes such as the Baka, Bamileke, Bamoun, Bassa, Douala, Ewondo, Bafo, Bulu and Baka, popularly known as the Pygmies, to mention a few out of the more than 250 ethnicities residing in geological and cultural diversity.

Living by the sea in the lush tropical rain forests gave rise to music and dance, fundamental elements associated with ceremonies, festivals and traditional storytelling. A chorus of singers echoes the soloist while dancers wear bells and play an array of percussive instruments, flutes, horns, whistles, harp and xylophones.

Wearing a double crown of blue beads, solar rays emitting from the lower jaw and a veil of netting, this spirit of the sea takes an oath to indulge the fishermen with a generous yield and a safeguarded return to shore.
22. Yoruba Tribal Mask, Nigeria

Developing out of Mesolithic populations and into the ancient kingdom of Ile-Ife, the Yoruba, one of the largest and most ancient ethnological tribes of Africa, created a refined and naturalistic sculptural tradition in terracotta, stone, copper, brass and bronze.

Worn during funeral processions and rites of passage, this mask features a protective helmet and large round eyes to supervise all life and death transitions.

Having evoked the spirit of the mask through dance, it is enshrined afterwards for daily offerings of prayer and libations to influence the living and preserve the power of the ancestors on the Earth.
23. Ibibio Tribal Mask, Nigeria

Prior to British colonial rule, the Ibibio people were self-governed and well established in the area known as Coastal Southeastern Nigeria. The palm tree and the oil extracted is a staple of the region.

This blue-black Ibibio ritual mask represents the humanly corrupt, amoral, ugly and evil souls sentenced at death to a perpetual ghost-hood. Costumed in unruly coils of black-dyed raffia, tribesmen who don the mask dance erratically, at times shouting deliberately with wild and aggressive movements to inspire horrifying terror in those they encounter.
A long history of the ancient Kongo kingdom unites the Bakongo people in tradition, ceremony and language. However, in the early fifteenth century and throughout the early nineteenth century, invasions from Portugal, British, Dutch and French slave ships displaced 13 million persons to the New World.

Inhabiting a narrow corridor south of the Congo River and along the Atlantic coast, fishing provides a livelihood for many of the Bakongo people. This mask of a seagull carrying a fish between its beaks is worn to ensure the safety of the fisherman and a fruitful harvest from the river and sea.
25. Dogon Tribal Mask, Mali

With a lineage dating back to ancient Egypt, The Dogon are recognized for their cosmological insight, believing that Sirius, in the constellation Canis Major, one of the brightest stars in the night sky due to its proximity to Earth, is part of a binary star system. In addition, the Dogon were certain of the rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter long before the invention of the telescope.

The Kanaga mask is characterized by a wooden superstructure in the form of a double-barred cross with short vertical elements projecting from the tips of each horizontal bar representing the arms and legs of a creator deity or as the arrangement of the universe depicting Earth and sky. Worn for rituals called Dama, tribesmen dance to transport the soul of the deceased family members from the village to the world of the afterlife, enhancing the prestige of the deceased. It is incumbent upon the descendants to perform this ritual and show generous displays of hospitality to all who have gathered to say farewell.
26. Dogon Dance Sculpture, Mali

Captured in motion wearing the Kanaga mask, this wax figure holding a tasseled staff, performs the ritual dance associated with the death and transfiguration of the deceased.
27. Dogon Tribal Mask, Mali

Through the worship of ancestral spirits, there are three primary cults associated with the Dogon performance of complex rituals and ceremonies. The Awa is a cult of the dead, whose purpose is to coax the deceased to their final resting place. The agricultural cycle is overseen by Lebe, God of Earth, to encourage natural forces to provide good crops, and finally, the cult of Binu, leagued with sacred places, spirit communication, ancestor worship, agricultural sacrifices and festivities.

Sparing the decline of a well-used boat paddle, it is transformed into a funerary mask to be worn while dancing the deceased into a life in the afterworld.
The Sokoto Empire developed as a result of the Fulani jihads (holy wars) which took place in the first decade of the 19th Century across what is now Northern Nigeria. Predominantly Muslim in faith, Sokoto is a city located near the confluence of the Sokoto and Rima Rivers and the seat of the caliphate.

Sultans ruled over one of the largest empires in Africa during the early 19th Century. The caliphate was the center of politics, religion and economics in the region until it fell to French and British colonial armies in the early 20th century.

This sculptural manifestation or avatar of the sultan traveled to remote villages to officiate over rituals and sacred festivities when, he, himself was not available to attend in person.
29. Sokoto Tribal Somba Sculpture, Nigeria

Unlike the overall abstractions of most African mask making, the faces of Sokoto figures are more natural and often seem to be portraits of actual people, as opposed to idealized images.

This realistic sculpture of a Somba maiden depicts her during a rite of passage ritual where she is presented to eligible tribesmen in the spirit of an antelope. Upon releasing her into the wilderness, the tribesmen are invited to chase, track and hunt the maiden, symbolically killing her with a spear. Upon capture, she is returned to the village unharmed and, if encouraged, enters into the state of matrimony.
Using sacred medicines for divine intervention from evil spirits are central to the rituals of the Bantu Tribe who are believed to have migrated into the region roughly 2,000 years ago from western and central Africa. Their iron-age weaponry and pastoralist way of life enabled them to dominate and displace the original inhabitants of the region, the stone-age hunter-foragers.

This Nkonde Nail Fetish is a protective figure used by individuals, families, or whole communities to destroy or weaken evil spirits, prevent or cure illnesses, repel bad deeds, solemnize contracts or oath-taking and decide arguments and treaties.

A chief diviner or holy person activates the statute by using magical substances or medicines. Each nail constitutes a problem solved or amends made by a guilty party. Rather than committing to protracted unhappiness within the community, a nail is hammered through the neck or temple of the fetish sculpture to alleviate tensions, satisfy revenge and bring about resolutions to the spirits involved in the provocation.
31. Benin Bronze, Benin, West Africa

Dating to the eleventh century, Benin is among the oldest and highly developed states in the coastal region of West Africa with Nigeria. The progenitors of the Benin Empire were ruled by “Kings of the Sky”, a dynasty with driving influence and popular among the people ushering a golden age of art.

Bronze plaques and sculpture were used to decorate the royal palaces of the Kings of Benin. Hundreds of artisans lived in the palace forming guilds of specialists including leopard hunters, astrologers, drummers and craftspeople, producing brass, ivory, wood sculptures, embroidered textiles and leather fans for the king, his chiefs and priests.

Supporting a royal crown with the greatest number of rings encircling his neck, this gilded sculpture portrays a beloved king who wields the balance of power between the living and the spirits of the dead.
In Nigeria, Nok tradition of producing sculpture made of terracotta clay was well established over a thousand years ago. Created by an early Iron Age civilization, this sculpture illustrates the portrayal of an ancestor, grave marker, or charm to prevent crop failure, infertility, and illness. Some of these sculptures are believed to be architectural finials for the roofs of lost structures. The Nok culture provides archaeological evidence of a venerable artistic past, modern and ancient, detailed and refined shaped from alluvial mud by the hands of a human spirit.
33. Habe Warrior Tribesman Sculpture, Nigeria.
34. Habe Tribeswoman Sculpture, Nigeria.
35. Habe Tribal Boy Sculpture, Nigeria.
Woman of the Habe tribe have been threshing millet in dried calabash bowls for millennia while tribesman hunt with spear and sons follow in tradition. Throughout the 11th and 12th centuries, they were ruled by fierce warrior queens. The Habe are part of a large conglomerate of tribes who inhabit the nation Republic of Nigeria along with its rich and diverse resources, cultures, rituals and traditions.

Wood is the natural material for carving and is still very much a living tradition amongst the artisans of Africa. Examples from the 19th century have been preserved in reasonable number, but earlier work has crumbled irretrievably, eaten by ants and termites while rotting in damp ground. It does suggest how much has been lost.

Many sculptures were made to represent a sacred ancestor and placed in a decorated shrine to give thanks for having lived and to serve as protection against evil spirits. A mask was used by a tribesman possessed of a spirit to commemorate an event through dance. A totem was designed to bring attention to the eminence of a person or family; a chair elaborately carved for a popular chieftain. In all, these artistic artifacts give us a mystical view into the heritage of an ancient civilization whose rituals, ceremonies and traditions live on today in the descendants of those who came before them.
37. Warrior Sand Painting, No. 2 (Dead), Congolese Design.

Warrior Sand Painting No. 1, (Alive), Congolese Design
Warrior Sand Painting No. 2, (Dead), Congolese Design

Archeological evidence indicates that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the oldest places inhabited by humans and the home of empires, kingdoms, and small village communities prior to European colonization. Sand painting in Africa is as old a tradition as the recounting of oral histories and the performance of sacred rituals.

Displayed in these two paintings, a simple before and after story of the warriors engaged emerges in the first panel as having once been alive, and due to the consequences of battle are now dead in the second panel. Identical elaborate headdresses are worn by three warriors standing in preparation. In the second painting, a single sharpened javelin is pierced through all three warriors as they lay on the ground in agony. Displayed in a sacred shrine to commemorate a battle, sand paintings were also created to honor deceased warrior ancestors and mark events in tribal history; as old a tradition as the recounting of oral histories and the performance of sacred rituals.
38. Contemporary shutter detail symbolizing tribal unity, Congolese design.

Painted on weathered window shutters, an age-old message emerges. Emanating from a row of diamond shapes, black and white ribbons create a mosaic in the center signifying unity for all mankind.