Presents

BEHIND THE MASKS
*Ancient African Traditions and Mysticism*

Helmut Mask (Maung), Ibo People, Nigeria
Curved Sword, Sengele People, Congo

*A Very Special Gift From*
Heather James Fine Art
From the continent of Africa, thirty-six ancient masks and sculpture from 2,000 years ago, to the mid-1800s, representing 12 central African countries and 27 indigenous communities are presented in the Museum of Ancient Wonders’ **Behind the Mask: Ancient African Traditions and Mysticism**, a very special gift from **Heather James Fine Art Gallery**.

From a Nok terracotta head of 100 C.E. (Current Era) to the beginning of the 19th Century, this diverse collection of masks and sculpture celebrates the ancient tradition of ritual and mysticism from time immemorial. These once used sacred and revered objects are honored and beloved in addition to being feared.

For the people of ancient civilization, 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 honored living and the sacred dead.
1. Pair of Male and Female Wood Ancestor Panels
Pende Tribe, Congo
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF281
Provenance: Jean-Pierre Hallet

This pair of wooden sculptures were once the property of a famous Belgian ethnologist, naturalist, author, and humanitarian, Jean-Pierre Hallet (1927 – 2004) best known for his extensive work with the Efê pygmies of the Ituri Rainforest. Representing a highly adventurous life, the majority of his Central African collection is now housed at the Museum of Cultural History at University of California Los Angeles.

The Pende people fled north from Angola in the 17th century to escape the slave trade. They found refuge in the bush savannah of modern-day south-central Zaire and reside there to this day. Recognizing that members may be either good or bad, depending on the manner in which they died, they also believe that neglecting the memory of the deceased can cause misfortune. The result may be sickness or hardship, requiring the commission of a wooden sculpture to appease the deceased with offerings.
2. Face Mask  
Bete People, Ivory Coast  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF254

The Bete carvers are well known for the Nyaba mask, used during funeral processions to instill fear in the living or detect unwanted disruptive spirits. These masks show a protruding forehead, large mouth, narrow eyes, and hornlike protuberances to protect the face behind the mask. The Bete tribe lives in the southwestern part of Cote d’Ivoire, maintaining a harmonious relationship between nature and their ancestors, believing in the spirit world to guide and protect them through daily life. These ancestral spirits are found in nature, including rivers, rocks, forests, and animals. Sacrifices of worldly possessions are made to the spirits to appease them especially during troubling times.

The Bete people are agriculturalists who only grow what is needed by the tribe and live under ancient ancestral authority. They have links to a small market economy by cultivating cocoa and coffee to generate income.
3. Face Mask  
**Burkina Faso Mossi Tribe, Ghana**  
Wood, vines, pigments, shells  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF219

The first Mossi Empire was founded by invaders from northern Ghana and marks the largest ethnic group living in Burkina Faso today. Famous for their polychrome masks, the farmers, “children of the earth” and descendants of the autochthones, still use huge masks; formerly, these masks were regarded as the apex of the spirit, representing the totemic animal of the clan. Created to aide communication between “appearances,” the masks remained on the family shrine where they received prayers and sacrifices for those members of the family who were in need and they aided communication with the ancestors.
4. Face Mask, Gunye Ge
Dan, Ivory Coast/Liberia
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF223

Dan farmers of the Ivory Coast used this mask to represent the spirit of nature, and to fulfill a variety of social, political, and religious functions. The dark patina of this mask is typical of the northern Dan as well as its high forehead, strongly protruding mouth and full lips. The circular eye holes permit full vision of the wearer and are characteristic of the racer mask (gunya ge) or fire mask (zakpei ge). The Gunye Ge hold weekly running contests in the dry season to test the prowess of young warriors. When warriors arrive to inspect cooking fires made by women, this mask displays a distinct expression of surprise, and is worn by a high-ranking member to chastise careless women with a switch and to levy fines.
5. Face Mask  
Dan, Ivory Coast/Liberia  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF248  

Depicting facial scarification, Dan masks are sacred objects used for protection and as a channel for communication with the spirit world. Dan members are known to carry a small 'passport mask' for personal protection when they are living away from home.  

The Dan believe that their world is split into two domains: the human domain is represented by the village and its people, and the spiritual domain is illustrated by the forest and its spirits, including the dead. Some dancers perform masked rituals on stilts. Dan masks, each of which has a distinct use during rituals or festivals including initiation rites of young men into adulthood, play an important role in tribal rites while others are simply for entertainment.
Standing figures represent the numerous Igbo Alusi deities. They are grouped together in symbolic families and are kept in special houses where they are revered. During annual festivities, these figures are taken out and paraded through the village. During other ceremonies, women wear large metal anklets decorated with geometric motifs. Terracotta figures produced by the woman symbolize divination spirits. They are usually designed as Janus figures and are kept on domestic alters.
7. Water Jug
Wood and Leather
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF125
Bete carvers are renowned for one particular type of face mask, the gre or nyabwa, which has exaggerated, grimacing distorted features – a large protruding mouth, facial protuberances, bulging forehead, elongated nose with nostrils sometimes extending to each side of the face, and globular or bulging slit eyes set beneath a high-domed forehead carved with a medium ridge. In earlier days, this mask presided over the ceremony held when peace was restored after armed conflicts, and it participated in sessions of customary justice. This type of mask was also worn to prepare men for war, the masks offered magical protection by instilling fear and terror in potential enemies. Nowadays, it is worn for a variety of ceremonies, including entertainment dances.
9. Face Mask with Hair
Guere Tribe, Ivory Coast
Wood, hair, pigment
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF250

The art of Guere and Wobe people is stylistically connected and both groups are often collectively referred to as We, meaning “men who easily forgive.” Like the Dan, the We use a wide variety of masquerades, which hold important regulatory position within their small, egalitarian communities. Masks are owned by families and used by individual lineage members in contexts of social control, boys’ circumcision camps, and entertainment. Most We masks were created to frighten with the gaping jaws and tubular eyes. We people produce a variety of masks often characterized by enlarged triangular nose, an open mouth and tubular eyes.
10. Goli Forehead Mask  
**Baule People, Ivory Coast**  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 365A

Goli is the day-long spectacle that normally involves the whole village and includes the appearance of four pairs of masks and music played on special instruments. The very characteristic, round-shaped “lunar” goli is surmounted by two horns. Celebrating peace and joy, they would sing, dance and drink palm wine. In the procession, the goli preceded the four groups of dancers, representing young adolescents. The goli would be used on the occasion of the new harvest, the visit of dignitaries, or at the funerals of notables.
11. Deformation Face Mask  
**Pende People, Congo**  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF 277  
Provenance: Morton Dimondstein Collection, Los Angeles

The Pende carve numerous types of masks, most of which are associated with education and initiation rituals. Wooden figures are sculpted in the northwest part of the territory. Carved stools, staffs, chairs, and swords are used by chiefs and other important people to signify their power. Pende masks, made in a Cubist style, are among the most dramatic works of all African art. Like the Yaka, small Pende masks fit over the head, helmet-style. Representing the mysterious powers to which boys are introduced at initiation, Pende masks are worn in comic entertainments performed during the ceremonies.
12. Ibeji (Twins)
Yoruba People, Nigeria
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 355

The most widely distributed cult is twins, ibeji, whose birth among the Yoruba is unusually frequent. An ibeji statuette is to be made, if one twin died; this ibeji remained with the surviving twin and was treated, fed, and washed as a living child. Their effigies, made on the instruction of the oracle, are among the most numerous of all classes of African sculpture.

The term Yoruba describes a number of semi-independent peoples loosely linked by geography, language, history, and religion. The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria and neighboring Benin and Togo number over 15 million people. Most live within the borders of the tropical forest belt, but the remnants of the powerful Oyo kingdom include groups that live in the fringes of the northern savanna grasslands.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Yoruba may have lived in this same general area of Africa since prehistoric times. In the mid-18th century, the slave trade to the Americas dramatically affected all of West Africa. Slaves of Yoruba descent were resettled in Cuba and Brazil, where elements of Yoruba culture and language can still be found.
13. Terracotta Female Head
Nok, Nigeria, c 100 CE
Terracotta
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF360
Provenance: Pierre Loos, Paris
ASA Termoluminescence test #TL 709.309 confirms the dating of this piece.

The discovery of the Nok Culture was made during a tin mining expedition and was subsequently published in 1928. Bernard Fagg, British colonial administrator with a degree in archaeology, became aware of the archaeological significance of what he came to call “Nok Culture”, a name derived from a small village on the Jos Plateau. Throughout ancient Africa people have worn signs of their social status, and in Nok statuary the coiffure is very important as much in volume as in its complexity. The coiffure of this female head indicates a woman of high social status.
14. Female Figure  
**Kulango People, Ivory Coast**  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 366

Kulango statuary is rare, and often presented as derived from and strongly influenced by Lobi art. The figures, associated with the dead, are beings that are somewhere between spirits and people and may represent the dead, or ghost, or bush spirit. The figures preside over foundation rites, essential for obtaining protection for new homes. They were also used by soothsayers and by the leaders of the family cult.

15. Diviner’s Wood Figure  
**Attie People, Cameroon**  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 278

Standing and seated statues with bulbous arms and legs produced by the Attie show strong Baule influence, but they are very marked by their distinctive style. Often the hairdo is geometric. What is unusual is that the relief scarification marks are achieved by insertion of small wooden plugs into the carving. Representing the forces of female fecundity, these statues were used in rituals to make these forces work. This type of statue was known under the tribal name of alangua.
The Chokwe people are members of a large cultural group living today in central Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Chokwe masks are used for dance at the introduction of a new chief, at funerals and fertility rituals, and during public entertainment. During the performance, masked individuals dance in pairs, male and female. Representing the positive attributes of the ideal woman, the dancer of the female mask, Mwansa Pwo, expresses through her elegant gestures, a means of educating Chokwe woman to act in a graceful manner and serve as a role model for the Chokwe people.
Ngoin helmet masks form the Grasslands of Cameroon, which are so highly esteemed in the west, are the possessions of family associations. These masks never have eye holes, as they are worn atop the head. The hairstyle is reminiscent of a style reserved only for queens. This three-dimensional Ngoin mask is worn on top of the head of a male dancer who’s face is concealed by a thin cloth. Ngoin masks are one of several types that appear in memorial ceremonies held for important deceased persons in the kingdoms of the Cameroon grasslands. They are danced before the entire community, who view the masks with awe and reverence. They are often sculpted with different types of coiffures such as buns or spider motifs or, this this case, carved faces.
18. Face Mask
Yaka People, Congo
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF 345
Literature: Segy, Masks of Black Africa, 1976, III.218

The eastern Yaka mask is called kakunga, the chief, and is considered one of the most important masks in the circumcision ceremony. The mask is generally surmounted by a richly ornamented, abstract construction – sometimes resembling a Thailand pagoda; sometimes in animal shapes, made of twigs, covered with fiber cloth, and finally painted. A variant is the broad-nosed polychrome mask, with round protruding eyes and square, block-like ears. These two types of masks were used in initiation ceremonies of the mukanda or nkanda societies. At the conclusion of the initiation, the masks were held in front of the faces of the dancers. The masks fulfill several functions; some serve as protection against evil forces, others ensure the fertility of the young initiate. Their role consists in frightening the public, healing the sick, and casting spells. After undergoing various trials in more or less secret camps, the initiates appear in the village, dancing and wearing masks prepared for this purpose.
19. Face Mask  
Dan, Ivory Coast/Liberia  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF299

Dan farmers of the Ivory Coast used this mask to represent the spirit of the bush, and to fulfill a variety of social, political and religious functions. The dark patina of this mask is typical of the northern Dan as well as its high forehead and strongly protruding mouth and full lips. The circular eye holes permit full vision of the wearer.
20. Prestige Stool  
Afikpo People, Nigeria  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 326

The Afikpo are a small subgroup of the Igbo people in Nigeria. The lack of overall centralization among the Igbo-speaking peoples has been conducive to the development of a great variety of art styles and cultural practices as seen in this stool with etched pyramidal shapes etched into the seat. Simple but sturdy, Ibo sculpture is subject to rather strict rules; the figures are generally frontal, symmetrical, and upright, with legs slightly spread, arms held away from the body, and hands stretched forward, palms open. Proportions are true to those of the human body, with the exception of the neck, which is more elongated. The objects give the impression of balance and stability yet lack the degree of refinement and precision.
21. Female Stool Base
Nigeria
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF159
22. Face Mask (Gunye Ge)
Dan, Ivory Coast/Liberia
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 364

Gunye Ge hold weekly running contests during the dry season. These contests test the prowess of young warriors. The Gunye Ge, or racing mask is worn by a dancer who is chased by an unmasked runner. If caught, the pursuer wears the mask and is, in turn, pursued. During the dry season, Gunye Ge masks appear in the village every day in the afternoon to protect the village from the danger of fires. The Gunye Ge mask’s mission is to punish any woman who does not extinguish her fireplace. The large circular eyeholes permit unhindered visibility for the wearer.
23. **Helmet Mask (Maung)**  
**Ibo People, Nigeria**  
Wood and Pigments  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF 303  
Provenance: The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, de Young Art Trust: #71.8.1  

Igbo masks are numerous and are used for initiation ceremonies and entertainment. They typically display a central crest and an elongated face. The Igbo-Izi people live in the North-Eastern part of the Igbo territory and carve an elephant spirit mask, called Ogbodo, which has tucks and an apotropaic function.

24. **Sengele People, Congo**  
**Iron and Wood Knife**  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF128

The Sengele people are one of the approximately 200 ethnic groups of the DRC. They are one of the biggest Bantu-speaking tribes categorized under the name of Mongo, named after a man from whom they claim descent. Along with the Kongo, the Luba and the Mangbetu-Azande, the Mongo comprise one of the four principal tribes of the DRC. With an estimated population of 20,000, Sengele speakers reside mainly in Bandundu, one of the country’s ten provinces. They are found west of Lake Mai-Ndombe.
25. Face Mask
Kran People, Liberia
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 369

The Kran are a Dan sub-group of Cote d’Ivoire and Liberia and are closely related to the We tribe. Female masks are rounded or oval, with narrow eyes and finely delicate, non-challenging features, whereas the male mask is larger in size, more robust in proportions, with an open and challenging mouth with teeth, tube-like eyes, fur, and raffia. Referring to the forces of nature, the energy and powers of this female mask add to the authority of the spirit represented. Whereas female masks appear to entertain, male masks exercise social control, punishing wrongdoers, settling disputes, declaring wars, and proclaiming peace.
The Mbuti Tribe is from the Ituri Rain Forest of Zaire, and has some of the smallest pygmies, with an average height of under 4’6”. The Mbuti are nomadic hunters and gatherers, originating from equatorial Africa, and their weapons range from the bows and arrows of a relative tribe, the Efe, to spears and nets. Mbuti Tribes have no chief or any specific person or persons to settle their disputes; they simply have discussions and work out their differences. They celebrate important occasions such as birth, death, the maturity of boys and girls, and marriage with music, mime, and dance. No archeological evidence as of yet has been found of the history of this tribe, but early records by the Egyptians show they were known 4,500 years ago.
27. Lobi Statue  
Burkina Faso, Ghana  
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF220

The Lobi do not use masks but create male and female spirit figures called bateba and heads sculpted on top of posts planted in the ground. Bateba are considered to be living beings and may see, communicate, and intervene on behalf of the spirit it represents.

Lobi figures are between 2” and 35” high. Shrines are built to house these spirits’ statues under the instructions of a shaman and are filled with a variety of wooden statues together with an assortment of clay sculptures, iron staffs, bottles and pots. Frequent sacrifices of food and talismans are made at these shrines to ensure the goodwill of the ancestors, and to avoid illness and misfortune.
The Asante are famous for their ceremonial stools carved with an arched seat with carved figures referring to a proverb or a symbol of wisdom. They are usually made for a chief when he takes office and are adorned with glass beads or copper nails. In rare cases, when the chief is of the highest standing, the stool is placed in a special room following his death to commemorate his memory. Asante chairs are based on 17th century European models, and unlike typical African stools, they are used as prestige objects by revered chieftains during festivities or significant gatherings.
Pende masks were almost always associated with the Mukanda or men’s fraternity. A new class of initiates is taught every 10 to 15 years and its members are considered a generation. Each generation takes a specific name to identify itself and create solidarity within the group. Members of the Mukanda generally perform masquerades during the initiation period. Masquerades tend to take place when the village must pull together for the common good or to meet a challenge. The masquerader’s purpose is to achieve a communion between the living and the dead. While the ritual context of masquerades still exists for the eastern Pende this is no longer true for the other Pende groups. For them, masquerades have become a means for men to attain social distinction and status within their communities.
30. Portrait Mask  
Baule People, Ivory Coast
Wood  
Gift of Heather James Fine Art – AF 371
Provenance: David Ackley

Mblo masks are known as portrait masks and each example is unique. A mask of this kind is sculpted in the image of a person admired for their stark beauty and the quality of their dance. Worn exclusively by men, this object would have been used in a type of performance known as Mblo, which uses face masks in skits and solo dances. While not sacred, a Mblo mask is still regarded as powerful and is treated with great care and respect. When not in use, this mask would be wrapped in a cotton cloth and hung in the dancer’s sleeping room to oversee his dreams.
31. Face Mask with a Beard (Gunye Ge)
Dan, Ivory Coast/Liberia
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art - AF 376

Dan farmers of the Ivory Coast used this delicate mask to represent the ancient spirit of the bush (nature), and to fulfill a variety of social, political, and religious functions. The dark patina of this mask is typical of the northern Dan, as is its high forehead and strongly protruding mouth and full lips. The circular eye holes permit full vision of the wearer.
32. Spirit Figure
Baule People, Ivory Coast
Wood
Gift of Heather James Fine Art
AF 339

According to the Baule, all people have a spirit spouse who they married in the spiritual world (blolo) before being born into the physical world. A female spirit spouse is called blolo bla while the male spirit spouse is termed blolo bian. The spouse follows the person into the physical realm when they are born and can greatly impact the life of their spouse on earth, as well as spread good fortune to his or her children. Ultimately, the spirit spouse and its figurative representations reflect the beauty of the marital bond between a man and a woman, and also represent fertility and fecundity.

These figures are carved with the purpose of pleasing the individual’s spouse in the spirit world, and often a diviner will prescribe a figure to be commissioned and a shrine to be set up if difficulties have arisen in an individual’s life. Once it is determined that a person should have a spirit spouse figure commissioned, a local artist is called in to carve the figure. Spirit spouse figures can range from quite basic to extremely detailed and elaborate, depending on the amount of money one wishes to spend.