This female bush-spirit mask incorporates many empowering materials that both illustrate and support its supernatural force. While it is stylistically similar to those produced by the Dan, Bassa, and Mano of eastern Liberia and the western Ivory Coast, the convex eyes, curved cheek marks, and bold carving decisively link the work to the Wee.

The rice-farming Wee use many masks to embody forest spirits, which they believe contact human beings through dreams. In these dreams the spirits demand to be physically manifested as masks, choosing either male or female forms. The Oberlin mask represents a female spirit. Her humanlike features, housed within an oval face, include kaolin-covered slit eyes, a narrow forehead, and a full mouth. Traces of blue paint are visible on the lower lips and chin. Brass tacks ornament the ridged forehead, while the neck is covered with European blue glass beads, braided human hair, eighteen brass bells, and numerous crotals. A small piece of cloth hides the metal hook on the forehead, while the hair and bells cover similar hooks along the mask's lower edge. A conical, cloth-covered headdress would have been originally attached to the piece through the holes drilled around its perimeter. The full costume would have included a raffia (or palm fiber) skirt covering the dancer's upper legs.

The Alfred Muller Collection of St. Gratien, France, includes a similar female mask. While it lacks the Oberlin mask's narrow forehead, its intact reddish sacrificial material (probably camwood and chewed kola nuts), and heavy belled collar are comparable. The female spirit mask in the Disney-Tishman Collection shares the plaited hair, bells, and brass studs of the Oberlin mask, but lacks its delicacy and serenity, while the female mask in the Max and Berthe Kofler-Erni Collection, Basel, has far more exaggerated features. The latter, however, bears the same traces of blue paint, forehead tacks, and iron hooks. Contemporary Wee masks are often painted with enamel colors.

Wee female spirit masks are considered beautiful, and are compared to young women who have just completed their initiations at women's excision camps. Kaolin-decorated eyes are a consistent feature of initiation painting, and were formerly part of a daily cosmetic routine. The inset pointed metal teeth (also found on many Dan works) refer to the now-abandoned beautification practice of chipping incisors. The vertical forehead mark is a common scarification pattern for both Wee men and women, but the curved cheek mark is exclusively female. The imported blue glass beads embedded at the neck add status and femininity to the mask. While hair at the jaw and chin would normally be considered a beard, this hair (which is quite long) is plaited, emphasizing the female association. The attachment of human hair is relatively rare in African art.

After the annual rice harvest, Wee masqueraders from many towns gather for festivals meant to secure future prosperity. Wealthy families also hire masqueraders to dance at burials or funerals. Female mask wearers primarily function as singing entertainers, or, formerly, as performers during boys' seclusion in circumcision camps. Wee masks have a strict hierarchy; female masks generally have less status than their male counterparts, although all masks have the ability to detect and deflect sorcery. However, mask types have no fixed functions. They can undergo "promotions" or functional shifts during their lifetime, moving from entertainment to judicial or other roles.

George Schwab, a missionary and anthropologist, spent eight months in eastern Liberia in 1928. His description of Gio (or Dan) women calls to mind not only the sight but also the sounds of neighboring Wee female spirit masquerades: "The Gio are aglitter from head to foot. Theirs seems to be an exuberant spirit, bursting forth in tinkling bells and clanging brass. With neck, arms, legs, fingers, toes, so loaded with massive..."
brass and iron ornaments that [she] can hardly walk with the weight of them, a grand head woman in Gio presents a dazzling spectacle."

Dating of the Oberlin mask is uncertain. The patina evident on lips, forehead, and nose ridge indicates considerable use, and suggests that the mask was probably made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

K. Curnow

Biography
None.

Provenance
Collection Camille Bondy, southern France

With J. J. Klejman, New York, from whom purchased in 1955

Exhibitions
Philadelphia, University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1956. African Tribal Sculpture. Spring - Fall. Cat. no. 8B.


Literature


Technical Data
Artists primarily use the adze to carve masks, although chisels and knives may be used in the finishing stages. The final surface is achieved by rubbing the work with coarse leaves, then staining it with a particular plant’s sap. The mask is in excellent condition with minor problems. Its earrings are missing, as are three of the forehead tacks; several of the latter show corrosion at the edge. At the back, two sections of the mask’s rim have chipped off. Flaking of the kaolin in the eye area has occurred, and most of the reddish material applied to the cheeks (probably a mixture of camwood and chewed kola nut) has disappeared. Only traces of blue paint appear on the lower lip and chin. Some bells have lost their clappers, but others were made to be clapperless. The small piece of handwoven fabric which remains on the top of the head is discolored, its edges twisted and knotted. Through handling, a natural patina has developed on the lips, forehead, and nose ridge.

Footnotes

2. Also called Wè, Kran, Ngere, Gere, and Guéré.

3. The better known male spirit masks tend to be highly abstract and geometric; their components--tusks, teeth, horns, and bullet cartridges--symbolize and reinforce aggression and protection.


7. See the field photo of a We female spirit dancer in full costume published in Monni Adams, "Women and Masks among the Western Wè of Ivory Coast," African Arts 19, no. 2 (1986), p. 49, fig. 8.

8. Young women are isolated from their families and communities in a female equivalent to circumcision camps, also common in the African subregion. They are excised, an operation which socially marks their transition from girl to woman, then begin traditional education in
household management, medicine, and ritual matters. After completing these studies, the women return to the community with intricately painted faces, and are displayed to admirers. See Monni Adams, "Women's Art as Gender Strategy among the Wè of Canton Boo," *African Arts* 26, no. 4 (1993), pp. 32-43.


10. Because of common beliefs that hair can be used by sorcerers, even barbers are careful about its disposal.


13. The Oberlin mask was not used by the Poro society, as has formerly been stated (*Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 16, no. 2 [1959], p. 105). The Poro male initiation society is found among many peoples in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Ivory Coast, but not among the Wee, Dan, or Mano. See Eberhard Fischer and Hans Himmelheber, *The Arts of the Dan in West Africa* (*exh. cat.* Museum Rietberg, Zurich, 1984), p. 103.

