

1005

Kanaga Mask in Three Pieces, unknown Dogon artist

Arnold Lehman: This wooden *kanaga* mask comes from the Dogon people of Mali. Each mask like this one is crafted by an individual artist and is often worn by that same person. Like most masks made in Africa, it is worn only by men. The mask may represent a bird with outstretched wings and legs. But according to William Siegmann, Curator of the Arts of Africa, that's not the only way to understand this mask.

William Siegmann: There's another interpretation for this mask, and that is the representation of a crocodile, which carried the original ancestors across a river into the area which they now live in.

Arnold Lehman: Ancestors play an important role in the daily lives of many Africans and are thought to participate actively in family life. Masks are central to traditional ceremonial life, serving as a bridge between the human and spirit worlds.

William Siegmann: When an individual puts on the mask, it's not simply putting on a costume, but rather actually having the spirit in a sense ride that person. The spirit actually possesses the individual who wears it.

Arnold Lehman: *Kanaga* masks are used in huge public ceremonies to honor the dead. The video to your right shows the incredible dynamism of a *kanaga* performance. The dancers swing the masks in great sweeping gestures that just skim the surface of the ground. The dance is so vigorous that many of these types of masks are broken during performances. As you can see, ours is intact.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org