

1025

Ndoli Jowei Helmet Mask for Sande Society, unknown Mende artist

Arnold Lehman: Though crafted by men, all three of the masks in this display case were worn by women.

William Siegmann: This is the only place in all of Africa where women actually perform with wooden carved masks. And the masks are made to be used by the principal leaders of the Sande society. They represent the guardian spirits of the society, the *ndoli jowei*.

Arnold Lehman: The Sande society, found in southern Sierra Leone and western Liberia, is a secret ritual society for women that's more than six hundred years old.

William Siegmann: The Sande is in some ways a little bit like a sorority, in the sense that it binds all of the women in a particular community together. But it empowers them in a very real sense as well, because it gives them, through their collective action, a kind of balancing power to the power of men in society.

Arnold Lehman: Look at the mask on the middle shelf. The rings of flesh around the neck indicate the corpulence and robustness of a healthy woman—quite different from contemporary Western standards of beauty. The small lines beneath the eyes are not “tears,” as they are often called, but scarification marks, meant to symbolize beauty and civility.

William Siegmann: At the very top of this mask is an unusual feature, which actually represents a parasol. Parasols were imported products from Europe. And the mere possession of a parasol indicated a person's status.

Arnold Lehman: The mask fits over the head, with the dancer seeing out the narrow slits in the eyes. The holes around the bottom are attached to a costume of black cloth and raffia that covers the dancer's entire body. The effect is to remove all evidence of a human performer from the dance. The initiation of girls into the Sande society is described by historian and artist Myrah Brown Green:

Myrah Brown Green: The young girls are taken out of the village and are taken into the Sande society. They would put them through a rite of passage, teaching them all about their culture, what their responsibilities are to their society, what their responsibilities are to becoming a woman. It's said that they cover them in a white substance which symbolizes the death of that past life. And then they clean them up and do their hair in these wonderful elaborate hairstyles to take them back, to present them back into the village.

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