



Punu/Lumbu okuyi mask South Gabon, West Africa

Light wood and pigments (white, black and red)
Height : 31 cm



Abb. 1 Profile view of the mask © Sotheby's

Punu Mask South Gabon

Source

- Andreas Schlothauer, since 2000;
- Private collection, Berlin;
- DIM (Décoration Intérieure Moderne), Paris, approx. 1922-1925.

Brief Description

Punu or Lumbu mask, Southern Gabon

Local name: *okuyi* or *mukudj*

Wood: *Ricinodendron africanum* Muell. Arg. or *R. heudelotti* (?) - *Euphorbiaceae*.

Size: approx. 42 cm long x 27 cm wide x 31 cm high

DIM, Paris, before 1926

White Punu Mask

Realistic bleached clay masks known as Okuyi (also Mukudj or Mukuyi) have been used for more than two centuries by the Punu and Lumbu who live in Southern Gabon. These two groups of people came to Gabon in successive migrations

from the southern Congo lowlands and the Kingdom of Loango, from the 17th century onwards. Certain other related groups from the Ngounie and Nyanga regions, as well as from the Mayombe mountains (Shira, Varama, Ngove, Pindji, Tsangi) also made and used them. Actually Okuyi are a specific part of the Mwiri, a masculine initiation rite common throughout Southern Gabon.

The Okuyi masks can be seen during community rituals celebrating important events in the life of the village. Sometimes there are two of them, employed in socio-political or religious "palabres". Masked dancers on stilts, which can be longer or shorter depending on the region and the occasion (PERROIS 2008:48), and hidden by a cape, fight each other in a kind of joust, each supported by his own team. The aim of these simulated fights is to resolve inter-group conflicts through acrobatic competition. The audience decides who is the most skilful dancer and the community he represents thus wins the "contest".

Depending on the region and the village, some – but not all – “white” masks bear a series of lozenge-shaped or square protruding red scarifications on forehead and temples. These nine, or sometimes twelve, scale-like reliefs commemorate the mythical ancestors or tribal fathers, according to informants. Other masks, like this one, have no facial decoration. These “white” masks without the scale-like scarifications are considered to be “masculine” entities according to the tradition of the Lumbu from Tchibanga. Whether feminine or, occasionally, masculine, the Okuyi masks represent anthropomorphic supernatural beings. Therefore the carved wood is simply a visual representation of beings that the Mwiri or Okuyi initiates have seen in dreams.

Text: Louis Perrois (Excerpts from PERROIS 2014)

Description of the Mask

The mask is light brown in colour and of the light wood of the *Ricinodendron africanum* Muell. Arg. or *Ricinodendron heudelotti*, from the *Euphorbiaceae* family. Seen in profile it becomes clear how thick the mask is compared to other Punu masks (42 cm long x 31 cm high). Seen from the front the upper half of the face is almost round, while the area around the chin is oval. The hairdo is divided into three sections, the central part being quite high and triangular, with two smooth bulbous locks to either side of the face, distinctly separated from it and also in triangular form. The thick black hair is interspersed with fine satin patina ridges.



Abb. 2 Detail of the hairdo and eye region

The white face and black hair are separated by a thinly carved seam of red pigment which emphasises the semicircle of the upper part of the face, from ear to ear, by its colour. The eyebrow region consists of slight grooves that stand out thanks to black paint. Some red is still visible in the region of the lips. Originally the whole face was white. Grey and/or light shading, some of which shines like silk, is discernible. Therefore the bleach was not applied only once but, rather, repeatedly renewed, suggesting frequent usage.



Abb. 3 Front view of the mask

The eye section has slight rounded hollows and very marked eye slits. The nose is flat and triangular with symbolic nostrils reminiscent of Tsogo or Vuvi masks. Two half circles denote the ears. The lips are more realistic: The lower lip is almost straight and the upper lip consists of two arcs. They are slightly parted, separated from one another by a gap.



Abb. 4 Detail of nose and ears, wooden splint

Below the cheeks and chin the face is outlined by a groove. Outside the face area the wood was not bleached and is of a light brown colour. Several wooden splints and a few iron nails indicate that there was originally a cotton and raffia cape which hung on the lower half of the face.



Abb. 5 The back of the mask

The back of the mask, especially the bottom third and the sides at ear height – in other words, the parts which touch the dancer's face – have been smoothed down and painted a darker colour. The upper part is lighter coloured and carved less precisely. On either side there is a hole which was probably used to attach the mask to the dance costume.

The mask has not been repaired and there are no noticeable dehydration cracks, showing that the sculptor chose the piece of wood with care. There is minor damage on the edges of the ears. Additionally, on the back a piece approximately one centimetre wide has broken off and been lost. About three centimetres from this spot there is a hole, which may have allowed the mask to be mounted on a rod.

Most white masks bear scarifications and those which do not are much rarer. According to Perrois and the available public sources (literature/databanks) at least another seven, or possibly ten, such items are known to exist. When compared with the published data, as far as we know this object is different from all other Punu masks in three ways. Firstly, it does not reproduce the contours or proportions of a human face but is, instead, a flat, almost round abstraction, with a nose that hardly protrudes at all. Secondly, the hairdo with its uncompromisingly triangular middle section and the two bulbous locks is not known to be similar to any other existing mask. Lastly, this also holds for the thickly painted black tar-like colour.

“In terms of its age the mask is clearly authentic and can be dated, thanks to its condition and especially due to its obvious patina use, at the time it was acquired around 1920, to the start of the 20th century, between 1900 and 1915” (PERROIS 2014).

Text : Audrey Peraldi, Andreas Schlothauer

Description of the Label



Abb.6 Label

On the back of the mask, about 3cm above the lower edge, an oval shaped label is affixed (approx. 3cm long x 1.5cm wide). In a few damaged places the paper is yellowish-white. Otherwise it is light or dark brown. This severe yellowing points to its having been produced between 1850 and 1950 and to the paper's having a high lignin content.

The following text is printed on the label:

Top: “*DIM*” (minor damage to the paper between the “D” and the “I”)

Bottom: “*19 Pl. De la Madeleine, PARIS*”, “*DIM*”

Roughly in the middle of the oval a yellowish label is affixed, with a hand-written “7” in black ink. On the left, above the oval label, three letters have been written on the wood but they are not easily decipherable. The final letter has been carved into the wood.

DIM - “19 Place de la Madeleine, PARIS”

The Place de la Madeleine is in the 8th Parisian Arrondissement and has been one of the city's most important business centres since the end of the 19th century.

In the *Bottin du commerce* (the business phone book) in the Paris city archives¹ a firm called “*Joubert et Richebourg, ameublements*” was registered from 1921 to 1922 at “*19 Place de la Madeleine*”. From 1923 to 1933 the Firm “*Dim*” was registered there. Then from 1930 the address “*r. du Colisée, 40*” was added next to “*11, Place de la Madeleine*”. From 1934 DIM no longer appears in the *bottin du commerce*².

In the file “*Registre du commerce*” (*Business Register*), “*Décoration Intérieure moderne ou DIM*” appears as number 201,664, with both entries in black. There is a blue stamp with the date 4 November 1922 and several entries in red, including the number “5911” followed by “29.1.1925”. The address “*19, Place de la Madeleine*” (in black writing) has been crossed out in red. Underneath this “*40, Rue du Colisée*” appears in red.

In the “*Registre analytique*” “*D.I.M (Décoration intérieure moderne)*” was registered under the number 201,664³ on 4th November 1922 (column 1). Column 3 lists five persons, along with their place and date of birth and position: René **Joubert** (“D?”=Directeur, “Ad?”), Jules Desagnat (“Pst”=Président), as well as Hubert Ganoy, Roger Lyon and

Jacques Viénot (“Ad”=Administration). In column 1 there are three numbers with dates. There are also entries in red in column 3 (persons), column 5 (changes of address) and column 9 (increases in capital)⁴. Entry number “5911” in the above mentioned file clearly shows that on “29.1.25” there was a change of company address, in so far as “19, Place de la Madeleine” is crossed out in red in column 5 and “40 Rue du Colisée” appears beneath it. In other words, on 29th January 1925 the shop moved from Place de la Madeleine to the Rue du Colisée⁵.

In the *Art Déco* literature one can read that the firm DIM had already been founded in 1918 (ALVAREZ 2010: 346)⁶ or 1919 (DUNCAN 2009: 366)⁷. Neither of these dates concurs with the date in the business register. Even KJELLBERG is imprecise about the date: “After the 1914-1918 war he (René Joubert) founded the firm D.I.M., *Décoration Intérieure Moderne*, together with Georges Mouveau” (KJELLBERG 1986: 133, 69). Although Joubert could already be traced to a furniture shop (“Joubert et Richebourg, ameublements”) at “19 Place de la Madeleine” in 1921, the firm DIM did not exist until 4.11.1922. Georges Mouveau, who is referred to as a business partner and DIM-founder, does not appear in the documentation in the city archives. Duncan mentions that Mouveau had already gone back to being a theatrical set designer (“*décorateur de théâtre*”) in 1923 and that Joubert⁸ was the main person at DIM (DUNCAN 2009: 366). He had trained as an architect before he began designing furniture and planned most of the salon installations for DIM or under his own name. From 1924 Philippe Petit, who had been trained at the École Bernard-Palissy, worked with him (DUNCAN 2009: 366f). Following the unexpected death of Joubert in the first half of 1931, Petit left the firm that same year (KJELLBERG 1986: 71) and notice of the firm’s dissolution appeared in the business register in 1933.

DIM, Art Déco and African Art

According to Kjellberg, a notable characteristic of DIM furniture was its “simple solid composition and minimal decoration”. On the one hand DIM produced mini-series of five to six pieces, aimed price-wise at a broader clientele. But at the same time they produced luxurious one-offs in exotic indigenous wood (KJELLBERG 1986: 69). Additionally they made lamps, mirrors, tapestries and textiles. DIM also decorated the interior of airplanes and one of the six luxury apartments on the passenger ship *Atlantique*. At the 1925 pioneering international *Art Déco* exhibition, *L’Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris, at the Pont Alexandre III, DIM was represented by two boutiques (numbers 37 and 39), as well as being involved in installing a pavillon which was to be the design for a French embassy (DUNCAN 2009: 368, BRÉON 2013: 115).

Architect Germain Olivier was commissioned to organise the *Pavillon de L’Afrique Occidentale, Équatoriale et de Madagascar*. According to Antony GOISSAUD in the 1925 exhibition catalogue, “the walls are covered in masks, spears, throwing knives, utensils and fabrics which have been assembled very tastefully and with real expertise in the indigenous arts. The exhibit cases feature noteworthy ceramics, jewellery, ivory artefacts, trinkets and statues, assembled with the same flair into an incomparable whole which would not disappoint even the most difficult collectors or experts. *What wonderful works for fans of Art Nègre, which is currently so fashionable*” (GOISSAUD 1925: S.129). Paul Guillaume expressed it in his 1926 Barnes Foundation lecture as follows: “in the important 1925 exhibition of *Arts Décoratifs* in Paris the dominant theme amongst those decorative

developments that were genuinely new and distinctive was African art” (cited in BRÉON 2013: 60). From the 1920s *Art Déco* was dominated by geometric forms. The white masks’ clear minimalistic forms suited the prevailing aesthetic. One fine example of this influence is a 1929 painting by the artist Gabriel Moiselet, whose focus is a Punu-Mask that his wife is holding.



Abb. 7 Gabriel Moiselet (1885-1961), *Le Masque nègre*, 1929, Collection H. Gros, © Marc Guermeur

The popularity of African art at the time of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale* and the fact that DIM took part suggest that our mask may have been exhibited there. It is highly likely that DIM offered this mask for sale between 1922 and 1925. Moreover it is possible that labels with the address “Place de la Madeleine” were still being used until 1931, after the firm’s move to “40 Rue du Colisée”.

Text : Audrey Peraldi, Andreas Schlothauer

Translation : Thomas Hawes

Notes

¹ Archives de Paris, 18 boulevard Sérurier, 75019 Paris

² In 1923 recorded as “*Dim, decorateur*”, in 1925 as “*Dim, decorateur (magasin)*” and from 1930 at the latest “*Dim (Entreprise G^{le} de Décoration, Intérieure Moderne, décorateurs)*”.

³ Page 200 of vol. “201048 à 201841”

⁴ Since new owners could not have been registered before Joubert’s death, the correction in red, in column 3, probably dates from 10th July 1931 and corresponds to entry “40841 10.7.31” in column 1. The firm’s dissolution is recorded on 16th October 1933, in column 13: “53315 16.10.33 Dissolution”.

⁵ The move is also mentioned by DUNCAN and KJELLBERG. The former cites 6th November 1926 as the inauguration date: “*Au milieu des années vingt, DIM déménage au 40, rue du Colisée où l’exposition inaugurale ouvre ses portes le 6 novembre 1926*” (DUNCAN 2009: 368). “*D’abord établie 19, place de la Madeleine, la société ouvre, cette même un magasin 40, rue du Colisée*” (KJELLBERG 1986: 71).

⁶ “*(Décoration d’intérieurs moderne), qui démarre son activité en 1918 et qui regroupe les artistes René Joubert, Georges Mouveau et Philippe Petit.*”

⁷ “*L’agence de Décoration intérieure moderne (DIM) est fondée en 1919 par Renée Joubert (mort en 1931) et Georges Mouveau au 19, place de la Madeleine à Paris.*”

⁸ Born 9th April 1878 in Laval, Pays de la Loire; died in the first half of 1931.

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