

Sande Society Helmet Mask (Sowo)

early 20th century

Mende peoples, Sierra Leone

wood

1997/1.300

This helmet-style mask is the only documented mask in Africa worn and performed exclusively by women. It is danced in an accompanying costume of blackened raffia fibers and represents the Sande society's concept of the sublime and ideal feminine beauty. Performed in masquerades by senior members of the Sande society, its dancer is referred to as *sowei*. The Sande society of the Mende and related peoples of Sierra Leone are an initiation organization responsible for the education of young girls. The organization teaches culturally-held attitudes regarding sexual relations, marriage, and childbearing within the Mende community. This society is highly influential in Mende politics and community relations.

The divinity of the *Sande* transcends human form, for this reason the Sande masks are highly stylized and stray from realism. Rather, certain features highlight symbolism within the Sande society. The forehead is prominent and exaggerated because it is believed to be the residing place of an individual's character and personality. A broad forehead indicates poise and success. Carving the eyes as slits and minimizing the facial features prevents the wearer from being seen behind the mask. This eliminates the individuality of the wearer and emphasizes the mask's representation as a divinity. Marks carved around the eyes and on the cheeks mirror scarification marks traditionally made by a mother to her daughter shortly after birth as a protective blessing. Neck rings indicate beauty, good fortune, health, and fertility. The smooth, gleaming, black surface of the mask is meant to appear as healthy, glowing skin.

written by **Emily Legleitner**