

Sande Society Helmet Mask (Sowo)

early 20th century

Mende peoples, Sierra Leone

wood

1997/1.300

This piece, donated by Dr. James and Vivian Curtis, is an example of a *sowe*i mask, also called a Sande society helmet mask. The Sande is a secret, educational society for the women of the Mende community of southeastern Sierra Leone.

When a young girl reaches puberty, she is initiated into the Sande society via a masquerade. During these masquerades, the mask is worn by a Sande woman who holds the highest rank of *sowe*i, representing the spirit guarding the society. To distinguish her from others with this rank, she is also called *ndoli jowe*i, meaning the *sowe*i who dances. When she dances, she embodies the Sande spirit; her body is concealed with raffia fibers and her face is concealed by the mask.

Although the mask wearers are female, they are carved by men from an *Apocynaceae* tree. The carvings represent the goal of the Sande: to help young women become beautiful in the physical and spiritual realms. Achievement of these traits is seen as the purpose of a woman's life. These ideals are reflected through the neck rolls on the mask which represent physical beauty and fertility. Further, the scar marks, the downward-pointing eyes, and the hair represent dignity and composure, or spiritual beauty.

Made in the early 20th century by an unknown carver, this *sowe*i mask is unique because it provides one of the few examples across Africa in which masks are made for women to wear during masquerades. In many other cultures, only men are allowed to wear ceremonial masks. These masks represent the importance of women to Mende society and the idea that cultural practices differ across the African continent.

written by **Paige Baal**