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Thoughts on Exhibiting a Pende Mask

PETER BARBERIE

Art museums tend to neutralize the objects they exhibit. What was once a prop in life's rich parade—one object among many others, each lending the others context and meaning—is now solitary, divorced from any function other than contemplation. This manner of presenting and looking at art, problematic though it is, has become an integral part of the Western tradition. We like our artworks all by themselves, positioned far apart from one another, usually against a plain wall bathed in ethereal light.¹ African sculpture, prized above all else in the West for its formal qualities, is often exhibited in this fashion.

The elegant carving that is the subject of this brief essay (fig. 1), an early twentieth-century mask from Central Africa at The Art Museum, Princeton University, is presented in much this way. In its original context, it did not stand alone. It was part of an elaborate multimedia construction, a masquerade that involved dance, music, an audience, and several other elements of costume design (including a complex fiber suit, ruff and skirt, and foot rattles). Now, reflecting Euro-American approaches to the arts of Africa, it appears alone. Had it been collected with its accompanying costume, perhaps the situation would be different. Like so many works of sub-Saharan sculpture housed in Western museums, however, it was not—a reflection, once again, of Euro-American approaches, which, historically, have considered masks to be “art,” but costumes mere “craft.”

Absent the costume with which it once appeared, without the rhythms, song, and dance that once accompanied its performances, is it possible for viewers to understand the mask? How can it be presented so that it comes to life in its present home?

To these queries there is a range of possible answers. One solution is to provide visitors with information about ways in which the mask was exhibited in its original context: when and why it appeared and before what types of audiences. Another is to consider its origins: how did works of this kind come into being? Who carved them? By whom were they commissioned? Still another is to point out for viewers the difficulty of answering such questions. The most exhaustive study to date on masks of this genre was published two years ago.² Based on fieldwork undertaken in the 1980s, this seminal book by Zoe Strother underscores one

fundamental fact: historical events, before, during, and after the colonial period, have had a powerful effect on artistic production in the region of Central Africa from which The Art Museum's mask comes. What is true today was not necessarily true in the early 1900s. From the early years of the century, however, we have little information on which to draw. We must thus rely on recent data, but in doing so we must tread lightly.

Yet another approach is to encourage viewers to think about the history of the object before them. “How,” we can propose they ask themselves, “did this mask come to be here? How does the path it followed after it left its original owners impact the way it is exhibited and the way we look at it today?” This is the approach explored in the following pages.

How and why an object was collected (whether it is a seventeenth-century etching or an early-twentieth-century African mask) sheds light on the meanings that we, its contemporary audience, attach to it. For African art, however, we rarely possess such data. Few of the Westerners who acquired objects south of the Sahara during the colonial period bothered to record where, when, and from whom they did so. If such information *was* recorded, it has often been lost. The mask addressed here is something of an exception in this regard. Though we lack data about its origins, we do know who collected it, when, and under what circumstances.

The mask was acquired between 1919 and 1923 by Joyce Doyle (fig. 2). Mrs. Doyle was the wife of a Princeton graduate, Donald Doyle, who managed diamond mines for the Forminière Company in what was then the Belgian Congo. The Doyles lived in Tshikapa, a mining village built by the company along the Kasai River, in the country known today as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (fig. 3). Tshikapa was a crossroads. Europeans, Americans, and Africans lived there. Among the latter were men and women of Pende, Chokwe, Kuba, and Luba origin—peoples who had settled in the Kasai region prior to the colonial era. During her stay in Tshikapa, Joyce Doyle gathered works by Kasai artists. In 1953, in honor of her late husband, she gave them to Princeton University. Included in her gift was the mask that is the subject of this essay. Carved by a sculptor whose name regrettably Mrs. Doyle did not record, it is one of five Pende masks in the collection.³



Figure 1. *Fumu mbuyu* mask. Pende peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, before 1923. Wood, fiber, raffia, and pigment; h. 39.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Mrs. Donald B. Doyle in memory of her husband, Class of 1905 (y1953-140).



Figure 2. Portrait of Joyce Kennedy Doyle, ca. 1919.

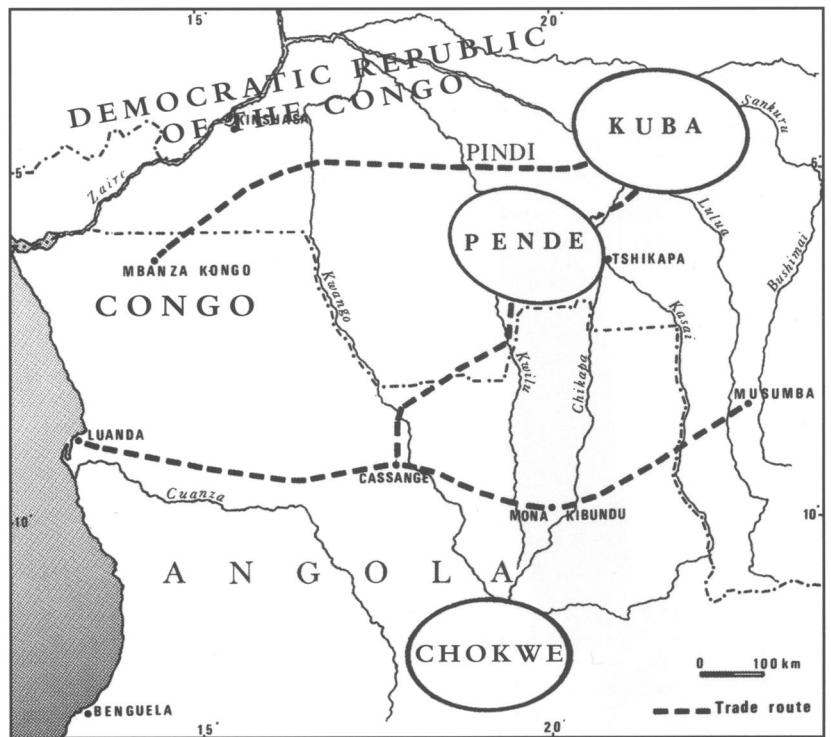


Figure 3. Map of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, indicating the location of Tshikapa, a mining village where Joyce and Donald Doyle lived from 1919 to 1923.

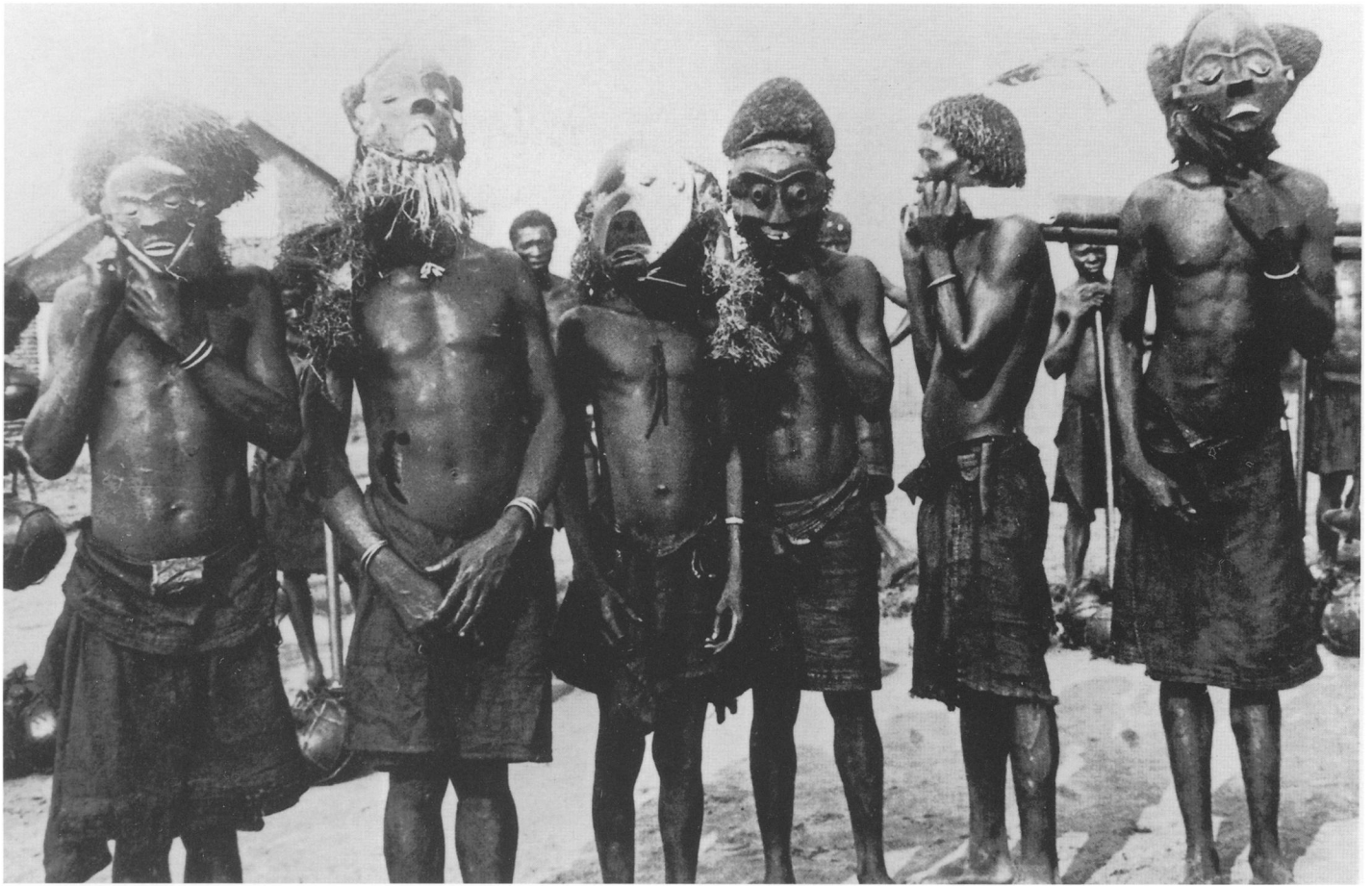


Figure 4. Group of young men modeling Pende masks acquired by Joyce Doyle. Tshikapa, ca. 1921.

Unlike many Europeans stationed in sub-Saharan Africa at the time, Mrs. Doyle showed considerable interest in the day-to-day activities of her community. She mastered Chiluba, one of the major languages of the Kasai region. This enabled her to take an active part in Tshikapa life: she ran a small clinic, acted as an arbiter in disputes between the village's African inhabitants, and organized a small group of women to plant Tshikapa's first vegetable garden.⁴ Mrs. Doyle's decision to set about collecting locally manufactured objects was closely linked to her interest in daily life. Although Western intellectuals of the period were beginning to regard African objects as expressive works rather than ethnological specimens—a fact of which we can presume Mrs. Doyle was aware, as she had attended the Slade

School of Art in London—it was the light that the objects she collected could shed on everyday existence in the Congo that concerned her. Function, it seems, was of far more interest to her than aesthetics: “Except for the Kuba cloth [she noted] none of these things were of any great beauty, but they were carefully made . . . and they reflected all that a Congolese possessed at the time.”⁵ A key focus for her, as well, was the need to document what she perceived to be a vanishing way of life.⁶

Undoubtedly Joyce Doyle bought many items for her collection herself, both in Tshikapa and on numerous trips she made throughout the Belgian Congo. But other items were acquired for her by friends and acquaintances, and this may have been the case with The Art Museum's mask, a piece that

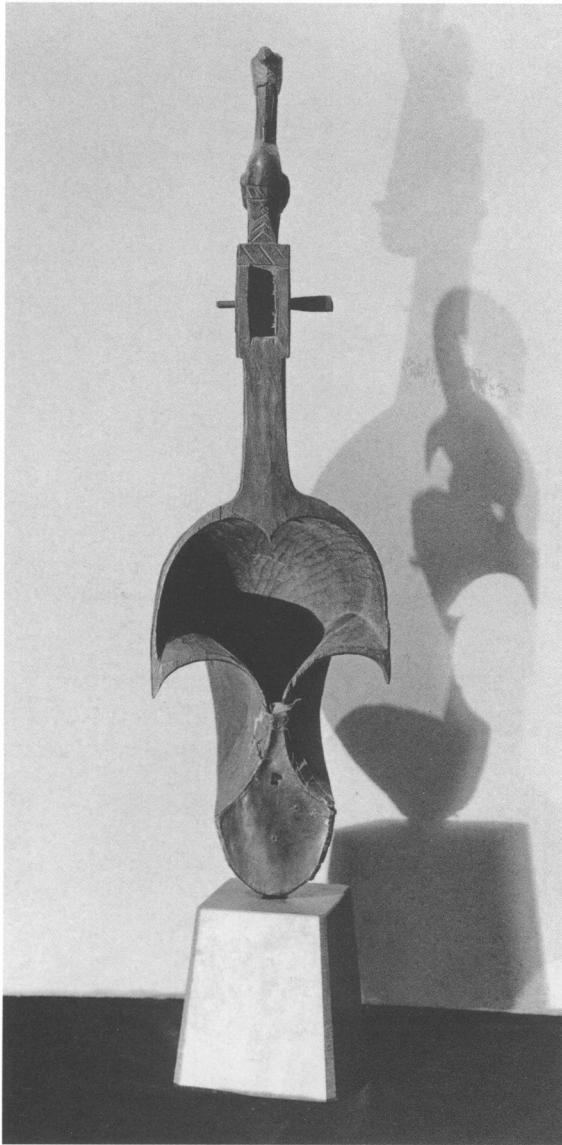


Figure 5. Charles Sheeler, American, 1883–1965. *African Musical Instrument*, 1917. Gelatin silver print; 25.4 x 20.3 cm. The Lane Collection, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

originated, stylistic analysis suggests, in Central Pendeland, quite a distance from the Kasai region. In 1976 Mrs. Doyle recalled: “Whenever a prospector went off into the bush I begged him to bring me things that the Africans made and had used. Curiously enough it was George Young—who hated *everything* African—who brought me the best of all. It

was he who brought the [Kuba] cloth, the drums and spears, the sleeping mats and most especially the masks”.⁷

In its original (central Pende) context, along with the costume that accompanied it and the performances in which it appeared, the Museum’s mask was probably seen as a tool facilitating ritual interaction with the community’s forebears—as a means of communicating with and honoring the ancestors.⁸ In Joyce Doyle’s hands, it underwent a radical transformation, from sacred implement to object of everyday life. On entering The Art Museum, it acquired yet another identity; now it became a work of art. The mask thus has a complex history. Knowledge of this history vastly enriches our encounter with it, underscoring the wealth of different, often disparate meanings a single object can accrue as it moves through time and space.

Still other meanings emerge when we consider ways in which this and related objects have been presented in one key medium: photography. The manner in which most Westerners have become familiar with Africa, and to a somewhat lesser extent with its arts, is through photography. Many travelers to Africa during the past century and a half—explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, and art historians—have taken field photographs, images intended to depict Africa “as it really is.” Joyce Doyle (or possibly someone she knew) took several such photographs, which she brought back with her from the Congo. These images present us with a set of interesting questions. Do they provide useful information about the works Mrs. Doyle collected? Should they be presented alongside the objects, and, if so, to what ends?

In the community where it was originally used, the Pende mask Mrs. Doyle collected would have been worn by an initiated man (one who had reached a certain rank in his village’s age-grade system).⁹ In a set of photographs taken in Tshikapa, the five Pende masks Joyce Doyle acquired are worn by a group of bare-chested young men (fig. 4). “Normally,” notes art historian Sarah Brett-Smith, commenting on these images, “such mask[s] would never be worn without a completely enveloping costume. The nudity of the . . . wearer[s] suggests that [they were] photographed while performing for the Doyles at Tshikapa, a nonritual occasion where the rules of costume could be altered.”¹⁰ Indeed, the maskers who appear in the pho-



Figure 6. Charles Sheeler, American, 1883–1965. *Six West African Figures*, 1916–17. Gelatin silver print; 22.2 x 18.4 cm. The Lane Collection, courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

tographs may not have been Pende at all. The images thus provide more information about the Doyles and about collecting practices during the colonial period than they do about the carvings pictured. Such information, as we have seen, can, however, prove of great interest. While it fails to illuminate key aspects of the masks' significance, it highlights important concerns about the nature and the history of Western attitudes toward Africa.

Much the same is true of another genre of photography that has played a crucial role in shaping European and American perceptions of African art: a body of highly formalized images produced, during the same period as the Doyle photographs, by Western artists. One such artist was

Charles Sheeler. About 1917 Sheeler photographed a group of sub-Saharan carvings on view at the Marius de Zayus Modern Gallery in New York City. Sheeler's beautiful images were accompanied by almost no information. One object, its complex form producing multiple shadows under stage lighting, was identified merely as an African musical instrument (fig. 5). A group of figures shown deep in shadow against a white wall was called (erroneously) *Six West African Figures* (fig. 6). As these titles suggest, context and meaning were of little concern to Sheeler. What interested him were the formal qualities and the expressive power of African art. With this in mind, he presented the pieces as he would exhibit works of modern art: as objects of contem-



Figure 7. Walker Evans, *American*, 1903–1975. African pendant in the form of a mask, ca 1933. Gelatin silver print; h. 12.5 cm., w. 8.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, gift of Robert Goldwater, 1961 and 1962 (1978.412.2229).

plation. A decade and a half later, Walker Evans followed a similar course. In 1933 Evans photographed a number of African objects for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In one image he depicted an ivory maskette carved by a Pende sculptor (fig. 7). Works of this kind (*ikhoko*) are miniature replicas of the type of mask in the Doyle collection; widely traded within and along the periphery of Pendeland, they were worn around the neck (fig. 8).¹¹ The *ikhoko* in Evans's now famous photograph is shown against an inky background. The image is cropped so that the object seems to be floating in space. As a result, all notion of size is

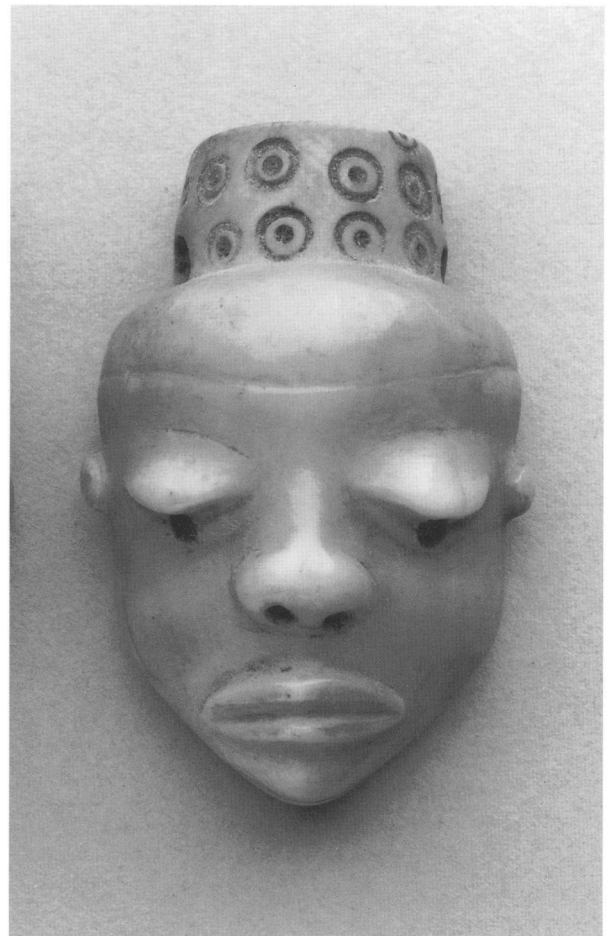


Figure 8. Pendant in the form of a miniature mask. Pende peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–20th centuries. Ivory; h. 4.2 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Perry E.H. Smith, Class of 1957 (y1992-56).

lost: one has no sense at all that the carving is a mere two inches long.

Though they knew little of the cultural contexts of the objects they were photographing, Sheeler and Evans were aware that many were ritual implements. Their images reflect this. The stark backgrounds and dramatic lighting create an aura of monumental presence. Undoubtedly, both artists believed they were providing appropriate settings for what they understood to be sacred objects. These settings, however sensitively chosen, are of virtually no use in understanding the original meanings of the objects depicted; they

do, however, provide a rich body of information about Western approaches to African art in general and, more specifically, suggest the many complexities of addressing the mask collected by Joyce Doyle. Sheeler's photographs were taken two years before the Doyles arrived in Tshikapa, Evans's ten years after they returned to England. Of the same era yet suggestive of a fundamentally different approach to the arts of Africa from that exhibited by Mrs. Doyle, they provide a fascinating backdrop against which to consider the choices she made as a collector. They also offer useful insight into the way in which modern Western viewers approach African art. The elegant settings, white walls, and spotlights employed by European and American museums to present African carvings today are similar to those seen in the images produced by Sheeler and Evans. They belong to the same tradition and ultimately present the same problems.

A field photograph such as the one taken of the five Doyle masks in Tshikapa; an *ikhoko* as depicted by Walker Evans; a turn-of-the-century Pende mask elegantly hung against a white wall in an art museum: all three are Western inventions. All three abstract the objects they present from the contexts in which they were originally intended to appear. In this regard they are deeply problematic. At the same time, all three have their strengths. What makes them

problematic, paradoxically, is also what makes them interesting. Doyle's photographs highlight and cause us to reflect on the complexities of the colonial experience, its power structures, and the uneasy relationships these fostered. The dramatic lighting and reified presentation in a Walker Evans photograph, like those encountered in many art museums, draw our attention to Western preconceptions about African art. Certainly, many of the objects we see in galleries and museums *were* meant to function as ritual objects. In this sense, one might argue, the attempt to create awe-inspiring settings for the objects may in part be justified. That such settings, however, all too often fall short of expressing the wealth and variety of African belief systems underscores fundamental shortcomings of the Western approach to African art. Ritual objects, after all, are but one of many genres produced by Africa's many artists.

The intention of this essay is not to discredit the ways of presenting African art that are discussed above. Its goal is to prompt reflection—to question and problemize ways in which works like the Doyle Pende mask have been presented and viewed in the twentieth century in the West. Ultimately, perhaps, whether as curators or viewers, we should not seek or claim to fully understand the works of African art we encounter but instead contemplate the ways in which we may fail to do so.

NOTES

1. The literature on this subject is voluminous. See, for example, Douglas Crimp, "The End of Art and the Origin of the Museum," *Art Journal* 46, no. 2 (1987), 261–66; and Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, 1986).
2. Zoe Strother, *Inventing Masks: Agency and History in the Art of the Central Pende* (Chicago, 1998).
3. For a complete inventory of objects collected by Mrs. Doyle, see *Record of The Art Museum, Princeton University* 42, no. 2 (1983).
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. Joyce Doyle, personal correspondence, 1976. Registrar's files, The Art Museum, Princeton University.
8. Strother, *Inventing Masks*, 23–44 ff.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Record of The Art Museum*, 23.
11. Léon de Sousberghe, *L'art pende, Mémoires* 9, no. 2 (Brussels, 1958), 73–79.