



Elephant (aka) Mask (mbap mteng)

Date

Mid 20th Century AD

Medium

Cotton and beads woven onto plastic and burlap

Description

A headdress with large circular ears and holes for the eyes is made up primarily of two parallel panels (front and back) which hang approximately one yard below the shoulders. Multicolored beads have been stitched on and form star patterns. There are appliqued fabric balls at the crown; colors are black, blue, red, white, yellow, green;

made of cotton, beads, plastic, burlap; techniques are beaded embroidery and applique. This Bamileke elephant mask (mbap mteng), originating from the Grassfields region of Cameroon, exemplifies the sophisticated beadwork and textile artistry characteristic of the Bamileke people. The mask is composed of a beaded fabric panel extending downward to resemble an elephant's trunk, flanked by two large, circular ear-like projections. These formal elements, along with the geometric motifs rendered in red, green, yellow, and white beads against a black background, signify power, wisdom, and prestige. The placement of the eye openings, integrated within the stylized facial design, suggests the functional aspect of the mask as a wearable ceremonial object. The mask's structural edges are accentuated with red fabric trim, reinforcing its visibility and aesthetic impact in performance contexts. Constructed from fabric, glass beads, and occasionally cowrie shells, this type of mask is associated with the Kuosi society, a hierarchical elite group composed of warriors and noblemen who serve as custodians of royal authority. The intricate beadwork, historically a symbol of wealth and status, reflects the mask's role in reinforcing sociopolitical structures within Bamileke society. During public ceremonies and royal festivities, these masks were worn with elaborate costumes and headdresses to project an imposing and authoritative presence. The performative aspect of the mask, when combined with dance and movement, transforms it into a dynamic emblem of power, reinforcing the legitimacy of Bamileke leadership and the continuity of cultural traditions.

Dimensions

45 x 20 x 4 1/2 in. (114.3 x 50.8 x 11.43 cm)