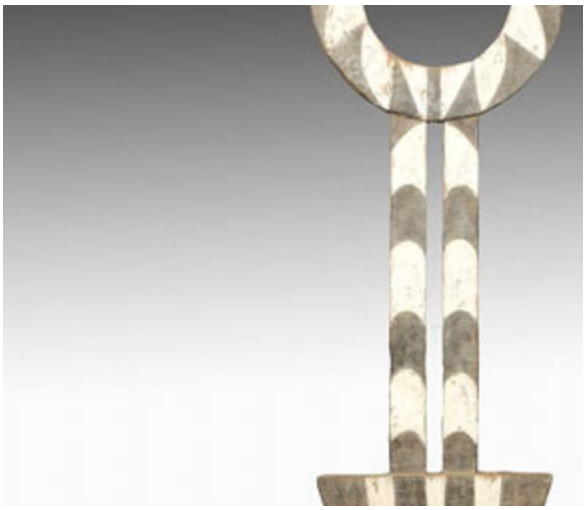
Bedu Mask or Bedu Plank Mask



Bedu mask dating from the early 20th century and stands over six feet tall (detail)

There are numerous masking traditions in West Africa and without question one of the most fascinating lies with the Bedu Association, an affiliation of elders among sub-groups of the Gurunsi people in the Ivory Coast. The Bedu Association only dates back to the 1930s at which time it spread throughout the Nafana, Degha, and Kulango groups.

Bedu is really a reference to a mythical wild animal. Legend states the Bedu was discovered in the bush by a father who had taken his sick child on a journey in search of medicinal roots. One day the Bedu appeared, touched the child who was instantly cured, and disappeared. Later, the Bedu reappeared and was domesticated for the benefit of the village, leaving two Bedus – the bush Bedu and the village Bedu. Both confer extraordinary benefits.



Bedu mask standing over six feet tall

The Bedu mask is one of the largest masks on the African continent. It is a flat plank-like form with a stylized head at the bottom and struts extended upwards to form horns or an open, circular form. The mask is generally danced once a year at New Year festivities. This type of performance is seen as the domestication of the bush Bedu into the village Bedu, thus conferring curative and fertilizing powers on women and children as well as granting authority to elders.

Bedu masks are also danced on other occasions. For example, they are danced by athletic young men at funeral rites and harvest festivals with the purpose of ridding the village of evil. Usually about five feet tall, these masks can be made as high as eight feet and weigh as much as one hundred pounds. Although they make strong abstract statements and have been compared to modern art, it is the overwhelmingly positive attributes of Bedu masks that make them so attractive to collectors and experts alike – the same attributes that make the masks important focal points in villages.