Gela Mask or Guere War Mask



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Among the Guere and Wè people of Liberia and the Ivory Coast, individuals sponsor festivals that take place annually during the dry season, which lasts from November to February. These festivals feature dancing and performances focused on the figure of the *gela.* The term *gela* refers to the animated being comprised of face mask, costume, and the wearer beneath. *Gela* masks are given a variety of identities that, rather than describing their physical appearance, are linked to the powers associated with the mask persona. This *gela* mask is known as “The Ancient One,” suggesting that the style has persisted for multiple generations. Many people commonly refer to this type of mask as a “Guere War Mask.”



View of the back shows how the horn and cloth are sewn into the wood

As is true with many African mask forms, *gela* masks consist of distorted features that blend animal and human elements. In the case of “The Ancient One,” features are taken to an extreme – the mask seems to erupt in horns and tusks. *Gela* can use their power and strength for both destructive and beneficial ends. Older *gela*, for instance, are thought to be able to cause thunder and foul weather. Any *gela*, on the other hand, can be called upon to reconcile problems within a community. The feral aspect of the *gela* acts as a counterexample to humans, who are, by contrast, encouraged to embrace order and civilization. It is believed the *gela* can gather up the ill will and negative feelings plaguing a community and deposit them back into the forest, where the untamed forces of nature prevail.

The forest plays a central role in the lives of the Guere and We people, whose villages are surrounded by the bush. Both peoples are known as healers for their skilled used of forest plants with medicinal value. These same plants provide leaves that are pounded, mixed with water, and applied to the *gela* mask in a ritual of activation. The mask is, thus, invested with the spiritual power and vital energy of the forest.



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