Lega Bwami Society Mask



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There are approximately 150,000 Lega people who live in autonomous villages in the forests of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Their principal industries are fishing, farming & hunting. For the Lega, every work of art is associated with proverbs that, when part of a ritual combination of poetry, dance, art, and song, impart wisdom to the members of the society. Lega sculpture conveys the ethical, social, and political values of Lega culture.



Bwami Society Mask · Lega people · Republic of Congo · West Africa · 20th C. · Carved wood with pigments · 6.5 W x 5.25 D x 14.2 H inches

Item #A1400-021

Both men and women in Lega culture enter the centuries-old *Bwami* society to learn skills and wisdom for life that are taught to initiates through art. Comprising five levels for men and three for women, Bwami is a voluntary association open to all Lega and its influence is meant to encompass the breadth of a person's life. As the Lega say, "It is something that sticks and leaves a trace." Most men and women enter the beginning levels of Bwami, but few reach the highest rank, known as *Kindi.* Character, kinship support, and participation in initiations dictate one's advancement in Bwami. This lifelong educational process requires years of study with respected teachers and the successful completion of a series of initiatory rites that combine music, dance, gesture, proverbs, and the visual arts. As the initiate interprets a precise combination of these elements, their knowledge of Bwami truths is revealed and their achievements honored.

Most Lega masks are heart shaped with concave faces that feature a delicate mouth and eyes shaped like cowrie shells. White pigments are applied to the masks. Surprisingly, the masks are rarely worn on the face, but are attached to different parts of the body, hung on fences, held in the hand, or worn over the forehead with the beard draping over the face. The masks are most frequently used during initiation ceremonies.