

Martin & Osa Johnson  
SAFARI MUSEUM

**The Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum has one of the largest public collections of Mende headpieces in the world. The 20 here are representative of ones that are included in our Traveling Exhibition Changing Faces, but the museum has over 50 headpieces in total. For more information on the full collection, or how to book our traveling exhibit please contact the museum at 001 620-431-2730 or email [osajohns@safarimuseum.com](mailto:osajohns@safarimuseum.com).**



17-426  
Mende Sande Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
16"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

This is a very old and patinated mask. A black dye made by grinding njui and/or njekoi leaves in a pestle and mortar and then boiling them with water for several days was applied over the years giving it a distinct luster. The hairstyle is covered with vertically oriented rows of palm leaf patterns that is surmounted by four spherical forms, the largest resting atop the center of the head. The upper portion of the forehead was once rimmed with a row of six Sierra Leonean coins, only one of which remains on the left. The lips are colored pink, representing the use of cross-cultural borrowing applied to an old mask. Two parallel vertical scarifications (ngaya maki) are present beneath each eye.



17-371  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
24"  
Sierra Leone

This Janus face mask has an elaborate hairstyle with a seated female figure atop the head. The hair is highly stylized into parallel braids with pyro-engraved striations. Raffia is attached to the base, five parallel rows under the rear face represent rolls of neck fat, and overall, the mask shows extensive use of patina.



17-385  
Mende Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
20.5"  
Sierra Leone

This mask has an extremely elaborate and highly stylized hairstyle that forms five almost vertical disk-like structures atop the head and has horn-like structures along left and right sides that might represent sebe and/or sebbeh, the Mende term for charms or amulets. Overall, the mask shows extensive use patina.



17-402  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
17"  
Sierra Leone

This mask has 22 sculpted Dik-dik horns. The Dik-dik is the smallest antelope in the world and they are named for the alarm calls of their females. These calls may alert other animals to predators and the horns here are likely symbolic of this characteristic. There is also a crocodile sculpted in relief on the back, which likely represents the animal spirits present in the Sande spirit's sacred riverine home.



17-364  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
14¼”  
Sierra Leone

This mask's intricately sculpted headdress is comprised of twelve vertical tresses covering the height of the head, plus two smaller ones over the forehead. It has a delicately carved face, three folds representing rolls of fat on the neck (considered a sign of health and attractiveness by the Mende), a conical structure atop the head and diagonal striations representing eyebrows. There is extensive use patina all over the mask, red vegetable dye has been applied to the lower lip and black raffia is attached to the base through carved holes along its rim.



17-427  
Mende Sande Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
16”x 9”  
Sierra Leone

This is a very old and patinated mask. A black dye made by grinding njui and/or njekoi leaves in a pestle and mortar and then boiling them with water for several days was applied over the years giving it a high luster. The hairstyle is dominated by four large vertically oriented buns. The central buns terminate in upward directed and incised cylindrical tresses. The front and back buns are connected by woven tresses on the side of the head. These parallel rows of geometricized forms rim the forehead on each side. These parallel vertical scarifications (ngaya maki) are present beneath the eyes and along the outer sides of the eyes. A line of rectangle forms in relief, representing scarifications and framed by four lines, is present in the center of the forehead. Black raffia is attached to the base through carved holes along its rim.



17-410  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
19”  
Sierra Leone

This Janus faced mask has a very elaborate coiffure ending in a large oval protuberance on top and its wood shows extensive use patina dating it to amongst our oldest mask holdings.



17-412  
Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
16”  
Sierra Leone

This extremely old mask has trace black patina, and a very elaborate coiffure. The hairstyle has numerous relief sculpted geometric designs representing animal claws and leather sack-like talismans, with a snake coiling around the base of the coiffure of 8 tresses, terminating in an oval protuberance on top.



17-377  
Mende Sande Society Bundu Helmet Mask (sowei)  
14"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

Elaborate coiffure terminates in three protuberances at the top. There are two roll-like circular forms at the base representing the neck and pyro-engraved lines near the lateral sides of the eyes. The two side protuberances have the back pieces cracked off. Multi-colored yarn is attached to the base.



17-425  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
Sierra Leone

Cowrie (kyoyo) shell carvings crown the forehead of this mask, and the hairstyle consists of incised geometric lines overall.

The rounded form in the center of this mask's hairstyle may represent charms or amulets (*sebe* and/or *sebbeh*). The four antelope horns likely symbolize "good medicine" called *hale nyande* or they may have been a sign of office as horns have a history as symbols of Mende chieftaincy and elder status.



17-419  
Mende Bundu Society Mask (sowei)  
Sierra Leone

The coiffure of this mask features several geometric elements crested by two carved bird figures. The birds are seemingly intertwined, with one facing forward and the other backward. Birds are often depicted as symbols of a woman's intuition by the Mende, but more universally across many African cultures, they are portrayed as messengers between spirits and humans.



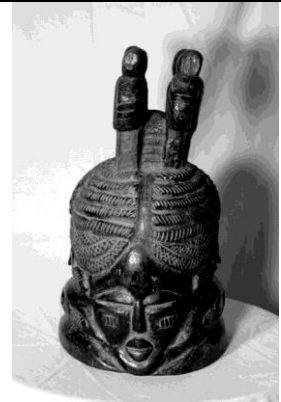
17-380  
Mende Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
17"  
Gola, Liberia

This mask is multi-faceted and bears a full carved bust atop the coiffure. The hairstyle is very elaborately carved and there are fine examples of traditional scarification all over it. The swooping lines around the side faces seem serpentine in origin.



17-393  
Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
19"  
Sierra Leone

The coiffure of this mask is intricate, with three broad tresses surmounted by an oval structure. The back of the hairstyle is richly sculpted with 12 oblong abstract structures and a central rectangle. There is black use patina over the entire mask.



17-422  
Mende Sande Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
Sierra Leone

Four birds surrounding a house exemplify the symmetry that is the root of the ideal Mende mask. The Janus double-face aspect represents the power the Sande spirit (Ngafu) has by seeing everything. The fish carved on the sides are symbolic of the Ngafu's riverine home and the secrets of her power. The bottom of the mask has been smoothed, perhaps for resale after retirement, but it still shows the remnants of the original bore holes from that originally held the black raffia dance costume.



17-400  
Mende Sande Society Bundu Helmet Mask (sowei)  
14"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

This mask is quite old and still bears trace elements of white kaolin on its face. Its hairstyle includes a carved comb on either side and three concentric rolls at the base and sculpted layers that end with braids on top. It was collected in 1970.



17-417  
Mende Sande Society Bundu Helmet Mask (sowei)  
18"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

This mask is unique in that the carved coiffure has a percussion aspect. The small ball carved within the top of the coiffure makes a distinctive rattle when the mask is swayed back and forth.





17-424  
Mende Sande Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
17"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

The coiffure of this well patinated mask is surmounted and dominated by a seated female figure with an infant on her back. This figure, depicted with neck rolls, has stylized European military epaulets on the shoulders, representing a cross-cultural borrowing of a symbol of power and authority. The presence of the infant symbolizes a central value of the Sande Society, namely motherhood. Cowrie (kypoyo) designs are present on either side of the base of the coiffure and Three vertical striations (ngaya maki) are present beneath each eye.



17-421  
Mende Sande Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
15.5"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

This old mask is surmounted by a round mortar and a circular rim atop 12 vertical medicine (hale) horns. Three large rectangle-like flaps dominate the two sides and the rear of the coiffure. Five sets of four cowrie (kyoyo) shells encircle the base of the coiffure at the rear and vertically incised geometric designs cover the remainder of the coiffure. The patination suggests repeated applications of jui solution.



17-353  
Mende Sande Society Bundu Helmet Mask (sowei)  
15"x 9"  
Sierra Leone

This exceptionally old mask is surmounted by an elaborate coiffure with delicately incised decorations, topped by a carved bird. The patina on the old wood has really held the intense color of black that is the ideal covering for these masks.



17-368  
Mende Bundu Society Helmet Mask (sowei)  
Sierra Leone

This complex coiffure is configured into 13 parallel rows running from front to back and 3 parallel rows at the base in the back and sides ending in 7 vertical configurations in the rear. What is the bottom of the mask today would have once been the neck roll that contained holes to attach the raffia costume. The serrations are where the holes were and where the mask likely snapped and the costume portion broke away, either before and leading to or post-retirement.