

Face mask



- Igbo, Uzouwani and south-western Nsukka region, Nigeria.
- Soft wood with traces of white and red paint.
- H. : 68,2 cm.
- INV. 1014-92.

Numerous types of mask have been recorded among Igbo, who are divided into small territorial groups that inhabit Southeastern Nigeria. Their forms range from quite realistic to schematic to completely abstract, with regional differences in style.

The abstract yam knife masks (*mma ji*) with sickle-shaped superstructures and striking colour schemes, used by the Afikpo of the eastern Igbo region have become particularly well known. The present example, in contrast, originated in the extreme of the north Igbo region, either from Uzouwani or from the adjacent south-western Nsukka area.

This mask is marked by a lucid, geometric composition. The central cone, worn over the face, is framed by a flat, rectangular shape into which triangular openings have been cut. Its zigzag motif

is repeated in the tall vertical plank rising from the base of the face-cone.

Though detailed information about the function and meaning of such masks is not yet available, some have been observed in performances held during celebrations to mark the conferring of men's titles. Such titles, acquired by payment of high fees, are hierarchically ranked and determine the prestige and status of their bearers in the community. Beyond this, we may assume that masks of this type are danced in the context of harvest rites and funeral ceremonies, as they are in other Igbo groups.

Iris Hahner, *Nigerian Arts revisited*, Musée Barbier-Mueller & Somogy Editions d'Arts, 2015, catalogue p. 98.