The idealized human face is a subject of special attention for Baule (BOUGH-lay) sculptors. Among the most highly regarded Baule art forms are **stylized** portrait masks, called ndoma (nDOE-mah), a word meaning “double” or “namesake.” Such masks are considered by many Baule to be their culture’s greatest sculptural achievement. Throughout the 20th century, ndoma masks have been made in abundance, but their origins are believed to be much older. The masks appear in entertaining performances that are reinvented every couple of generations. The performances, which feature masks of domestic and wild animals as well as human beings, celebrate and satirize aspects of daily life.

Ndoma masks depict prominent members of a community. Subjects can be male or female, but masks usually depict women and are often **commissioned** by an admiring spouse or relative. Despite a high degree of stylization, the masks are considered to be true doubles of the person whom they depict and never appear in public unless accompanied by that person or her close relative. Likewise, a portrait mask cannot be made without the permission of the person being depicted. The masks are not portraits in the sense of a **realistic** depiction of a person’s physical features. Rather, they combine recognizable details of a specific individual, such as her hairstyle or **scarification** marks, with idealized facial features to create an evocative representation of her. Characteristic gestures of the person may also be reproduced in performance, and the mask’s human double may lend articles of clothing, scarves, and jewelry to complete the likeness.
Ideal beauty, as a physical and a moral quality, is evident in all aspects of these portraits. The delicate, gracefully shaped face of the Art Institute mask portrays a person of intelligence and purpose. Her small, almost-closed mouth and downcast eyes reflect respect and composure, qualities of reserve that are highly esteemed by the Baule. Facial scarification, depicted by raised dots and lines along the forehead and around the eyes and mouth, is an important embellishment. In the late 19th and early 20th century, when this mask was made, such scars were both fashionable and an important symbol of the social qualities that separate humans from animals. The three small lines at each corner of the mouth have a more specific meaning; they are protective scars that were once commonly given to a child whose siblings had died in infancy.

The elegant hairstyle on this mask, composed of neat conical bundles, is an important sign of beauty and prestige. Like scarification, an intricate hairstyle suggests social bonds, as one's hair is styled by close friends or family members. It also suggests the luxury of leisure time, as such hairstyles can take many hours to create.

The mask depicts a person in the prime of life, without wrinkles or other signs of age. In contrast to its youthful appearance, its performance would have suggested a dignified elder through slow, stately movements and accoutrements, like a flywhisk. Thus, this mask combines two Baule ideals: the physical beauty of youth and the wisdom and status of age.

**NDOMA MASKS IN PERFORMANCE**

Entertaining masquerade performances continue to be vital and jubilant highlights of Baule life, particularly in villages. They may be staged at various times, including days of rest, at the new year or new moon, or when an important official is welcomed to a community. Performances may also occur at the funerals of women and men who were closely associated with masquerade in their lifetimes. Ndoma masks have long been a part of a genre of entertainment masquerades called Mblo (mBLO). Mblo performances are multimedia events that include musicians playing drums, rattles, and iron gongs, attendants accompanying and assisting the masked performers, and a large, participatory audience that often breaks into impromptu singing and dancing. Although the dancers are young men, Mblo is called a woman’s genre of dance because its style is considered feminine and many of the other participants are female.

Typically, the ndoma mask is the last to appear—and then only for a few short moments—but its appearance is the central aspect of a masquerade event. The mask's costume (figure 16) consists of a raffia underskirt, a waist-length cloth that surrounds the face of the mask, and rattle anklets made of the hardened ribs of palm leaves or, today, old cans. Scarves and jewelry borrowed from the person the mask portrays may also be worn. The

![Illustration of a Baule Ndama mask in performance. Here, the performer is seen frontally, hunched over mid-dance.](image-url)
highly skilled dancer moves elegantly and slowly with refined and subtle steps. The woman portrayed by the ndoma mask is often a vital part of its performance. She accompanies the dancer, offering him money, laying down cloths upon which he steps, and dancing along beside him. She will accompany her portrait mask each time it is performed as long as she is physically able, often over several decades. When she becomes infirm or dies, a worthy female descendent—a daughter, granddaughter, or even great-granddaughter—may take her place, thus continuing a tradition of honor and distinction across generations.

**THE PURPOSE AND LIFE-SPAN OF ENTERTAINMENT MASQUERADES**

Mblo are, above all, a beloved form of entertainment for the Baule. However they also serve a serious purpose. They reflect a larger world view by contrasting the behavior of stereotyped characters. They also offer an occasion to honor and compliment members of a community. When performed for funerals, they relieve stress and grief and infuse a community with a feeling of pleasure that creates peace. Although the performances are secular rather than religious in nature, they make connections with larger forces in the world and universe and, in doing so, bring a sense of place and security to a village.

It is important to note that Mblo performances have changed over time, most often in response to the aging of a generation of dancers. Mblo are known to have existed in the 19th century and their origins are believed to date back even further. In the 1970s and 1980s, art historian Susan Vogel recorded the great variety of Mblo dances in the Baule region and found that most communities had modernized their performances. (See Teacher Bibliography.) As an older generation of dancers retired, new dancers with new steps, music, and mask personae took over and "re-scripted" the dance. Such changes continue today, and it can be speculated that creative adaptation has always been a part of the tradition.

**Beauty**

For the Baule, idealized beauty is also an important element in figural sculpture, as in the Figure of Wilderness Spirit or Other World Man, early/mid-20th century (Figure 17). Baule figures are called "wooden people" (waka san), and their beauty is meant to be pleasing to spirit forces. Like the portrait mask, this figure has a composed expression, elaborate hairstyle, and scarification markings. The male figure's strong neck shows him to be an individual of youth and health, able to work hard and carry heavy loads on his head. Full, rounded thighs and exaggerated calf muscles add to the figure's image of strength and stability.

**FIGURE 17**

Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Baule. Figure of Wilderness Spirit or Other World Man (Axe Usu or Mblo Bien), early/mid-20th century.

Wood, metal, and sacrificial materials; h. 22 3/4 in. (57.8 cm)

Edward A. Fryer Endowment in memory of Charles L. Hutchinson, 1960.802
MASK OWNERSHIP

An Ndoma mask is usually owned by the person it portrays or her replacement and not by the person who commissioned, sculpted, or performed wearing it. An Ndoma mask is usually kept wrapped in a protective cloth and hung in its owner’s house when not being performed. While it is not forbidden to view a mask outside the environment of a performance, they are considered private objects and it may evoke suspicion to ask to see one. In fact, even in performance, the mask’s constant motion prevents viewers from seeing its details clearly. Even though a mask is never viewed closely, audiences will immediately recognize who it represents by its distinctive gestures and costume, its repeated appearance over the course of decades, and its accompaniment by the person whom it doubles or one of her relatives. Private ownership explains the presence of Ndoma masks in museum collections. The owner of a mask is free to sell it if and when she chooses.

A Cameroon Mask

In other African cultures, masks and masquerades are performed for different purposes. The Mask (Mabu), early/mid-20th century (Figure 18) from the Fungom region of Cameroon, with its exaggerated human features, depicts the messenger who heralds the approach of more powerful masked beings. Such masks are prized for their expressive force, dramatic performance, and role in sustaining the social order.

FIGURE 18
Fungom Region, Northwest Province, Cameroon. Mask (Mabu), Early/mid-20th century. Wood, pigment; h. 13 1/8 in. (33.3 cm) African and American Purchase Fund, 1966.411
1. Cultural Ideals of Beauty
Baule masks were made to honor men and women within the community who were recognized for their great talents or exceptional beauty, ideals that are highly prized in the Baule. Ideals of beauty, however, are vastly different from one culture to the next. Looking at this particular mask, have students study and discuss the ways in which this Baule woman’s individual beauty is depicted in the mask (i.e., her scarification around the mouth and eyes, her distinctive hairstyle, and highly stylized facial features). Her features also hint at the kind of personal qualities she possessed that made her an important figure within society, such as her high forehead suggestive of great intelligence. Ask students to list other qualities they can infer about her personality from the mask.

Compare and contrast the Baule standard of beauty with common American images of beauty using images from popular magazines, catalogues, advertisements, or video clips. Have students consider ways that Americans honor and memorialize beauty. With younger students, read the picture book People by Peter Spier (see Related Picture Books), that discusses the earth’s cultural diversity. Using the Baule mask, this book, and other resources, students may design and produce a fashion show in which each student or group of students makes a mask or outfit representing a different culture.


2. Studying Symmetry
Symmetry, shape, and pattern are important elements in the design and decoration of the Baule mask. Help students identify the geometrical shapes in the mask and determine the line of symmetry. Have them construct their own symmetrical mask using basic geometric shapes and patterns similar to the ones portrayed in the Baule example.

State Learning Standards: 9B, 9C, 25A
3. Exploring West Africa
The Baule are from the Ivory Coast in West Africa. To learn more about the Baule people, have students study that region of the world using various reference materials art objects, music, photos, and information from local embassies (see Student Bibliography). Have students design a travel brochure for the Ivory Coast or an advertising campaign with the aim of convincing people to move to the Ivory Coast. These brochures should include information about major cities, language, travel accommodations, culture, economy, places to visit, and local activities.

As an extension, have students research other groups of Ivorian or West African people in the region to understand their interconnectedness, aesthetics, and how a different part of the world functions. Have students replicate some of the art objects from these various cultures and showcase them in a class exhibition that includes documents from their research.

State Learning Standards: 5A, 178, 25A, 26B, 278

4. Recreating the Marketplace
The economy in this region is decentralized and revolves around its outdoor markets and individually run businesses. Have students reconstruct a marketplace in the classroom. Students may trade and sell goods and services common to that area, such as native foods, fabrics, household goods, art objects, etc. To enhance the activity, students may learn a few phrases from a West African language (figure 19) and use the local currency of the African Financial Community, the CFA franc. This monetary system, used in former French colonies, is closely linked to the French franc (now the Euro). Students can practice converting dollars to CFA francs and then use them in the classroom marketplace. Currently the conversion rate is 298 CFA for every one U.S. dollar. (See Student Bibliography for up-to-date currency information.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</th>
<th>HAUSA PHRASE (PRONUNCIATION)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome!</td>
<td>Sannu da zuwa! (SAH-noo dah ZOO-wah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>Sannu (SAH-noo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you do?</td>
<td>Kana lafiya? (KAH-nah lah-FEE-yah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>E (eh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>A'aa (ah-ah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Don Allah (don AH-lah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Na gode (nah GO-day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Yaro (YAH-row)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Yarinya (yah-REE-nah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My name is...</td>
<td>Suna na ... (SOO-nah nah)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Examining Gender Roles

During the ceremony that accompanies the mask, a male will often play the role of a female, wearing her mask and taking on her characteristics and dress. Encourage students to use various reference materials to research and then discuss Baule gender roles, including the division of labor, political structure, and family life during the early 20th century when the mask was made. Compare and contrast the Baule gender roles with American notions of equality for men and women. Have students divide into groups and debate the pros and cons of each viewpoint and the reality of life for Baule women and American women. In which society do students think women really have more freedom, equality, and power? Alternatively, have students write a persuasive essay using these arguments. If students are really interested in the topic, they can extend their inquiry to look further at how gender equality has changed or evolved to the present time in both Baule and American societies.

In addition, consider the performance of female roles by males. How does this change the performance? How might it change the way men and women relate to one another in the larger society? Students may experiment with these ideas by choosing scenes or plays to re-enact using females to play male roles and vice versa.

6. Performing Personalities
Baule performances involve not only the aesthetics of masks and costumes, but also dance, music, and body language to convey the personalities, talents, and beauty of the people being honored. Working in pairs, have students determine how they want to portray each other in an admiring way. Suggest they interview each other to decide which qualities in the other person they want to highlight or honor. Instruct them to think of concrete examples of actions they can perform that exemplify someone’s personality. Remind them that the Baule mask is not an exact physical replica of a person’s face but uses the inner qualities to shape the way in which the person is portrayed outwardly. Students may create masks and costumes, add music and gesture to their performance of each other, and have a class celebration day during which students share their performances and appreciate each other’s talents.

For younger students, engage the class in a more general discussion of how mood, emotion, and character are portrayed through the arts. Study different types of emotions expressed through body language by having students act out character traits (brave, smart, charming, etc.). Listen to a variety of music and have students discuss their reactions in terms of how they feel or what types of characters these songs might personify. Examine how color affects the mood of a piece or symbolizes specific emotions, such as blue indicating sadness or green being a symbol for envy.


7. Representing Life Cycles
The mask is used in performance only when its double (the person for whom the mask was made) is present. If that person dies, the mask is passed on to a close relative of a younger generation or it falls into disuse. In this way, the mask is linked to the life cycle of the Baule and immortalizes a person at the peak of his or her life cycle. Have students study the cycle of life, discussing events and characteristics usually linked to various ages. Have them sketch their own cycle of life, predicting what they will look like at certain milestone ages in the future.

State Learning Standards: 12A, 27B, 26B