These two images, front and back, are of a Bondu (or Bundu) helmet mask associated with the Sande Society, a woman’s educational society of the Mende peoples of West Africa.

The Sande Society (also referred to as the Bondu Society) is the female educational society of the Mende, while the male counterpart is the Poro Society. The Sande Society is open to all women in the community but some of the activities are hidden from uninitiated girls and from men. These Bondu masks are found among several neighboring ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and western Liberia. Women use them during initiation ceremonies for girls and in religious ceremonies.

While male ceremonial masks are found in many parts of Africa, these Bondu masks are the only ones used by women in ceremonies. In many African communities women hold powerful religious roles and often act as intermediaries between the spirit world and humans. These Bondu helmet masks, considered to be among the finest works of art of West Africa, are the only known examples of women using masks.

Before reading about the masks and answering the questions that follow, go the following websites for two additional examples of these masks:
The Artist and the Masks
Each aspect of the mask has meaning and is carved to please the spirits. The artist-carver is always a man and the carving of the mask is considered an act of worship. The artist may suggest creative inventions for each mask, but officials of the Sande Society who commission the mask must approve even small differences or deviations from traditional forms. Some of the rules the artist must follow include:

- The mouth must be a tiny “bow.”
- The chin will be tiny—making a triangular face.
- Rings of fat circle the neck.
- The forehead is high and prominent.
- Hairstyles are elaborate—the artist may carve them as he pleases as long as they are hairstyles that the women of the community actually use.
- The mask is dyed black after the surface is polished.

Uses and Symbols

- Women of the Sande Society wear the masks during initiation ceremonies.
- The masks represent a divinity, spirit, or supernatural being.
- They are carved according to strict artistic rules.
- The spirits are thought to occupy masks that correctly show their character or attributes.
- The rings of fat around the mask represent wealth, health, and womanhood.
- To attain a state of spiritual and physical beauty are the supreme goals of Mende women. The small mouth, stylized hair, and polished surface of the mask are symbols of these goals.
- Horns (included on some masks) represent power.
- African masks, including the Bondu masks of the Sande Society, are sacred objects, kept in special places such as a shrine, particular forest grove, or cave. In the past, if damaged they were abandoned. Now they are considered highly valuable works of art and the masks are usually sold to collectors after use.
Points to Consider

1. Although men carved the Bondu helmet masks, list specific ways that the Mende women controlled the production of the masks.

2. Why was it so important to the Sande Society that the artists carefully observed the rules for proper mask carving? Why might an artist try to change or “stretch” these rules?

3. Why do you think the Sande Society members were not interested in the masks looking like recognizable human beings?

4. What did they feel was important about these masks?

5. Why might participants in ceremonies use masks to disguise their appearance?

6. For Mende women, rolls of fat represented or symbolized health and wealth, and a small chin and mouth represented beauty. What things in our society are considered to represent wealth, health, and beauty for women? For men? How does the Mende view of beauty compare to advertisements in the modern media?

Sources


Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

San Jose State University, San Jose, California, African Art and Culture
[http://gallery.sjsu.edu/exhibits/african/africaexhibit/imageswitharrows/mendemask.html](http://gallery.sjsu.edu/exhibits/african/africaexhibit/imageswitharrows/mendemask.html)

University of Iowa, Art and Life in Africa
[http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart](http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart)