



Shield

Date

mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Maasai

Medium

Leather, wood and pigment

Description

This is a shield made by the Maasai from Kenya sometime in the mid 20th century. Maasai shields are made from buffalo hide stretched over a wooden frame. The black dye is created from the burnt skins of gourds and the red is made from mixing blood or the sap of *solanum campylae* with clay. The designs hold great importance to the Maasai of Southern Kenya. Collectively called *sirata*, they denote a lineage system which has since fallen into disuse, not unlike a coat of arms. Each of these has different names and meanings—black and white stripes

could symbolize a zebra, for example. Age has somewhat warped the shape of this design, but the elliptical shape still seen on the proper left side of the shield was a common design of a now unknown name. In addition to hunting and warfare, shields also played an important cultural role in Maasai society as objects used in rites of passage. The use of red pigment was reserved for proven warriors.

Dimensions

42 × 18 1/4 × 4 in. (106.7 × 46.4 × 10.2 cm)