



Dance Mask (Kavat)

Date

mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Baining

Medium

Bark cloth, bamboo cane and pigment

Description

Fire dance helmet mask, also known as a kavat, is from the Baining people on the Gazelle Peninsula from East New Britain Province in Papua New Guinea, Melanesia. This object dates back to the twentieth century. This mask is specific to a night-dance ceremony and was worn by a man who would dance it around and through fire—

evidence of this can be seen on the underside of the mask blackened by smoke. Night dances were originally concerned with male activities and associations but, more recently are used in modern ceremonies such as the celebration of Papua New Guinea's Independence Day. More recently Baining dances and ceremonies, including the Fire Dance, are performed for tourists. The kavat is made of beige bark cloth sewn to a lightweight wooden frame made from bamboo canes. Most masks resemble duck's features; its lips are flat and pucker out and its eyes are wide and off to the side. There are geometric patterns in red and black between the eyes, forehead and along the top of the helmet. These colors are paired with each other, (black and red circles, black and red triangles and alternating bands) and are associated with maleness (red) and femaleness (black). The face represents a specific spirit, referring to that of a special leaf used by the Baining for ceremonial foods and believed to come from a tree that absorbs evil. The reverse pattern on the helmet is different from the front. There are also painted circles and a bamboo frame forming wide round eyes. Fragile dry leaves are attached around the opening at the rear.

Dimensions

54 x 45 x 36 in. (137.2 x 114.3 x 91.4 cm)