

Basic Detail Report



Yam Mask

Date

20th Century

Primary Maker

Abelam

Medium

Lygodium vine fiber, cassowary feather and pigments

Description

Yam masks are made by the Abelam people of northeast Papua New Guinea. To the Abelam, growing yams is of spiritual importance and is the purview of men. Two types of yams are grown, a small variety used as ordinary food (what you or I may think of as a typical yam we might find in the grocery store) and long yams, massive tubers that can be as much as twelve feet long. A man’s social status is determined largely by his success in growing long yams. Each man has a permanent exchange partner to whom he ceremonially presents his largest yams following the annual harvest, later receiving those of his rival in return. Men who are consistently able to give their partners longer yams than they receive gain great prestige. The yams are decorated for the presentation and exchange. The longest yams in particular are transformed to depict human figures. They are presented in full ceremonial attire. The tops or “heads” of the yams receive a special adornment known as a yam mask. Yam masks such as this one are made only for yams and are never worn by humans.

Dimensions

18 × 24 × 3 in. (45.7 × 61 × 7.6 cm)