



Mblo portrait mask from Baule, Kami, Ivory Coast, c. 1900, wood, metal, and pigment

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1) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 141-144

Mblo masks, used in entertainment dances that are newly invented every couple of generations, are one of the oldest of Baule art forms. This refined human face mask, the prototypical Baule object in art collections, is usually a portrait of a particular known individual. Through most of the twentieth century these highly varied masks have been made in greater numbers than any other kind of Baule mask. The Baule believe that they have always existed; the Mamla claim to have brought this type of mask with them when their ancestors “emerged from the earth” or “descended from the sky,” and in non-Mamla villages they are believed to be so old that their origins can’t be uncovered. More than any other kind of mask, Mblo embody the core Baule sculpture style manifested in figures and decorated objects – spoons, combs, pulleys, and the like.

2) Dr. Peri Klemm, "Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (*Mblo*) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)," in *Smarthistory*, April 1, 2016, accessed January 1, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/owie-kimou-portrait-mask-mblo-of-moya-yanso-baule-peoples/>

In the village of Kami, the *Mblo* parodies and dances are referred to as *Gbagba*. When not in use, the *Gbagba* masks were kept out of sight so it is unusual that we get to see a mask displayed in this manner.

To the Baule, sculpture serves many functions and these can shift over time and within different contexts. What is known, however, is that masks like this one were not intended to be hung on a wall and appreciated, first and foremost, for their physical characteristics. Sculpture throughout West Africa has the power to act; to make things happen. A carving of a figure, for example, can be utilized by practitioners to communicate with ancestors and spirits. The physical presence of a mask can allow the invisible world to interact with and influence the visible world of humans. Scholar Susan Vogel mentions that *Gbagba* could bring social relief at the end of a long day and respite from everyday chores. It allowed residents to socialize, mourn, celebrate, feast, and even, court.

3) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 141-144

Lustrous curving surfaces, suggesting clean, healthy, well-fed skin, are set off by delicately textured zones representing coiffures, scarifications, and other ornaments. The idealized faces are introspective, with the high foreheads of intellectual enlightenment and the large downcast eyes of respectful presence in the world. Ornaments above the face – birds, combs, faces, and other decorative motifs- are chosen for their beauty, and have no iconographic significance; braided beards and fine scarifications and coiffures, denote personal beauty, refinement, and a desire to give pleasure to others. “Mblo” is the name of a performance category that uses face masks in skits and solo dances; it describes a structured form of performance (equivalent to a genre like “opera”, or “film noir”) that individuals have used to create many different “scripts” with different names. The basic pattern centers on a costumed but not masked figure (whose name is often given to the whole performance) and a series of human and animal face masks. For a perfunctory performance, the costumed figures, often called Ambomon, may appear alone without any masked dancers.

4) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. p. 155

Ambomon is an ambiguous trickster who clowns about and amuses the audience but also implies an undercurrent of danger and a reminder of death. Ambomon is an ambiguous figure in every respect, even in the minds of the Baule, who debate whether or not he is god- an amuin. Dancers must abstain from sexual intercourse before wearing his costume (a rule that applies to the sacred men’s masks, but not to the wooden Gbagba masks), and he is the only Mblo figure that women should not touch. (This restriction does not apply to women after menopause, and is in any case not strictly observed.) Ambomon is both disobedient and comical.

He shows a total lack of respect for possessions, rank, and decent behavior. He takes things from people, chases them, sits on the bare ground, and gets things dirty. But although he is threatening he never does any real damage. People find him an amusing nuisance, and take care to stay out of his way. His function is to keep the crowd dancing and singing, and to maintain their interest between the appearances of the masks.

5) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 137, 144

This mask was carved around 1913 by Owie Kimou, Kami’s most celebrated artist (d. 1948) on a commission from Moya Yanso’s new husband, a famous dancer who originally wore it. The mask was later danced by Yanso’s son, Soule and later still by Ndri (c. 1939-1995), and by his older brother, her husband’s two sons by another wife. Yanso continued to accompany the mask for many years, until she was no longer physically able. Later, her granddaughter accompanied it, in increasingly rare performances, until it was sold in the mid-1990s.

Today Mblo is considered old-fashioned, and while some villages are modernizing it, more often it is falling out of use. Mblo performances have always been “rescripted” every few generations, as an originating group of dancers and their successors aged and were depleted, and a new group of young men decided to create and name their own performance, rehearsing innovative dance steps, new music, and new mask personae.

6) Dr. Peri Klemm, "Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (*Mblo*) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)," in *Smarthistory*, April 1, 2016, accessed January 1, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/owie-kimou-portrait-mask-mblo-of-moya-yanso-baule-peoples/>

This mask is unusual. Most older African carving come into Western collections without information about the artist or subject, but in this case, both the carver and the sitter have been recorded. In the photograph below we see an older woman seated next to the portrait mask. She is Moya Yanso and this is her image carved by a well-known Baule artist, Owie Kimou. The man holding the mask is her stepson who danced this mask in a *Gbagba* performance. It was commissioned and originally worn by Kouame Ziarey, Moya Yanso’s husband and later his sons.

Revered as a great dancer, Moya Yanso accompanied the mask in performances throughout her adult life until she was no longer physically able. This portrait mask tradition came to end in the early 1980s with the decline of *Gbagba* and while entertainment masks continue, they are no longer carved to represent specific individuals.

7) Dr. Peri Klemm, "Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (*Mblo*) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)," in *Smarthistory*, April 1, 2016, accessed January 1, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/owie-kimou-portrait-mask-mblo-of-moya-yanso-baule-peoples/>

Portrait masks characteristically have an oval face with an elongated nose, small, open mouth, downcast slit eyes with projecting pieces that extend beyond the crest to suggest animal horns. Most also have scarification patterns at the temple and a high gloss patina. These stylistic attributes are actually a visual vocabulary that suggests what it means to be a good, honorable, respected, and beautiful person in Baule society. The half slit eyes and high forehead suggest modesty and wisdom respectively. The nasolabial fold depicted as a line between the sides of the nose to the outsides of the mouth and the beard-like projecting triangular patterns that extends from the bottom of the ears to the chin, suggest age. The triangular brass additions heighten the lustrous patina when danced in the sunlight, a suggestion of health.

Notice that Moya Yanso’s portrait mask is in the hands of her stepson in the photograph. The performers and makers of masks as well as those who commission them are always men.

8) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. p. 144

People in Kami still talk about a fantastic coming together of talents sometime around 1920, when Kami’s famous sculptor Owie Kimoh carved a portrait mask of Moya Yanso. The mask’s commissioner was Yanso’s new husband, Kouame Ziarey, himself a great dancer, who wore the mask and accompanied his wife on occasions of surpassing beauty. All three artists- the sculptor and both dancers- are still remembered, although Ziarey died at least forty years ago.



9) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 145-8

In 1986, a new Mblo dance with a new name – Kpan Kpan- and new music was commissioned and presented in Kami. Like its predecessor, Kpan Kpan featured portrait masks and group and solo dancing. It was to be performed on the same kinds of occasions as Gbagba was, and as in Gbagba, the masks were concealed in a cloth enclosure before they made a dramatic entrance. Kpan Kpan repeated an ancient pattern of generational innovation within the inherited structure, and introduced novelties not present in the old Gbagba.

Most of the masks represented not individuals but somewhat abstract, topical, overtly political ideas: a ram “to praise the President”; a woman’s face with an elephant on top, “representing Ivory Coast”; another with a dove, representing “peace”; and a third with a male figure presenting “Union, with which much can be accomplished,” as the dance’s originator explained. One of the new attractions of the performance was that a figure was displayed, and another novelty was that it had few secrets, if any; women were allowed to know who was wearing the mask, and the dancer could even remove the mask or open the cloth during a performance. The otherwise stringent and universal taboo against a mask-wearer revealing his identity- or, even worse, his face- was lifted in this dance; in 1993. On the occasion I watched it, in fact, the young dancers seemed to enjoy exposing themselves deliberately.

10) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. pp. 148-9

The circumstances leading to the creation of a new dance are specific to each case, but broadly speaking there must have been periods when a given village was ripe for the renewal or abandonment of its Mblo dances simply as a result of the aging of a generation of dancers. Typically, this cornerstone of Baule art could be introduced to the village by anyone, man or woman, with the charisma and force of character to rally others around the idea.

They didn’t have to be good dancers or sculptors, or to be wealthy, or from any particular family. Probably, though, they would be of the generation of young married men and women that made up the village’s strongest singers, dancers, and drummers. Innovations would be: new songs and novel

instruments; new dance steps; particular costumes, characters, or skits; the sequence of masks; and the name of the dance itself, which would last as long as they and their children's generation kept dancing it.

11) Vogel, Susan Mullin. *Baule African Art Western Eyes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. p. 149

In the past, villages might have over a dozen Mblo portrait and animal masks, which did not necessarily all perform at every dance. The greater importance of the portrait masks, the need for the best dancers to wear them, and the requirement that the portrait's subject also be available and willing to dance made them more rarely performed than the lower-prestige animal masks, which could be worn by young, relatively inexperienced dancers.

This meant that main Ggagba performances, for example, included only the costumed Ambomon figure, perhaps an animal mask, and none or few of the portrait masks, which were reserved for the most significant occasions.

12) Perani, Judith and Fred T. Smith. *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, Power, and Life Cycle Rituals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989. pp. 101-2

Baule figurative sculpture represents two categories of spirits, spirit spouses and nature spirits. Without specific contextual data, it is difficult to tell the function of a carved figure because the same style of carving is used to represent both types of spirits. The first category of figures, known as Blolo bian (male) and Blolo bla (female), represents spirit spouses.

Each man and woman is believed to have a spirit spouse that resides in the other world. When a person's spirit spouse becomes jealous or angry, the human spouse is advised to commission a carving to represent it and to receive offerings. Human owners communicate with their otherworld spouses through dreams. The owner also oils, clothes, and adorns the carving with jewelry in order to appease a jealous spirit spouse.

Because the Baule believe that beauty is necessary for effectiveness in assisting the human owner with marital or fertility problems, the figures have elaborate coiffures and are intricately incised with textured designs representing scarification. The majority of carvings are characterized by polished rounded forms, hands placed on the abdomen, and thick muscular calves. The tradition of spirit spouses offers the Baule an effective way of dealing with marital problems.

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