Emmett & White
ANTIQUES & INTERIORS

19th-Century Abelam Carved Wood Yam Mask, Papua New Guinea

£225

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REF: 5067

Height: 52 cm (20.5")

Width: 20 cm (7.9")

Depth: 8 cm (3.1")

Description

A striking 19th-century carved wood yam mask attributed to the Abelam peoples of the East Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. Boldly carved with an expressive face and strong, sculptural form, this powerful object belongs to one of the most celebrated artistic traditions of Melanesia.

Among the Abelam, the cultivation, ceremonial presentation, and exchange of exceptionally large long yams formed an important expression of status, reciprocity, and ancestral connection. At harvest, the finest yams were richly adorned with feathers, shells, foliage, and specially made masks such as this example. Rather than being worn, the mask was affixed to the head of the yam, transforming it into a ceremonial image associated with ancestral presence and the achievement of its grower.

The carved face would have formed the focal point of this presentation, its stylised features carrying both visual authority and spiritual resonance. The modelling of the wood, traces of pigment, and irregularities acquired through age and use give the piece a compelling, tactile surface and reinforce its original role as a ceremonial object rather than a purely decorative carving.

Now appreciated as a work of sculptural art in its own right, this yam mask offers a direct connection to the rich visual culture of the Abelam. It would make a distinguished addition to a collection of Oceanic art, tribal art, or 19th-century ethnographic objects, and provides a striking focal point in a carefully considered interior.

Originally acquired by Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney C. Lockyer-Nibbs during his service across the British Empire in the early to mid-20th century. Over this period, he assembled a notable collection of tribal art and ethnographic objects from Africa and the Far East.

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