Emmett & White
ANTIQUES & INTERIORS

19th-Century Pende Mbuya Mask, Democratic Republic of the Congo

£250

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Description

A powerful and highly distinctive 19th-century Pende Mbuya mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Carved in wood and embellished with clay, cowrie shells, and a cloth head covering, this compelling object brings together sculpture, costume, and performance in the rich visual language of Pende masquerade.

The mask is shaped and worked by hand, its expressive features enhanced by clay detailing and carefully placed cowrie shells. The addition of the textile head covering gives the piece an especially strong sense of presence, recalling the complete costume in which such masks were worn and animated by a dancer. The interplay of carved wood, earthen clay, shell, and cloth creates a richly textured surface that has developed considerable character over time.

Within Pende artistic tradition, mbuya masks formed part of a broad repertoire of named characters. Through dance, theatre, music, and public performance, they could evoke recognisable social types and explore themes of authority, conduct, community life, and moral order. Rather than being static objects, masks such as this were created to be seen in motion, their visual impact heightened by costume and performance.

Now appreciated as a sculptural work in its own right, this example retains the immediacy and dramatic presence of its original ceremonial context. Its organic materials, expressive modelling, and time-softened surfaces make it a striking addition to a collection of African art, ritual objects, or 19th-century ethnographic works.

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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