



## Mask (Kanaga)

**Date:** 20th century

**Geography:** Mali

**Culture:** Dogon peoples

<b>Medium:</b>	Wood, fiber, hide, pigment
<b>Dimensions:</b>	H. 21 1/8 x W. 38 1/4 x D. 6 1/4 in. (53.6 x 97.2 x 15.9 cm)
<b>Classification:</b>	Wood-Sculpture
<b>Credit Line:</b>	Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1987
<b>Accession Number:</b>	1987.74i

📍 On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in **Gallery 350**

One of the most popular types of masks in the Sanga region is the type known as kanaga. Like other Dogon masks, kanaga masks are worn at rituals called dama, whose goal is to transport the souls of deceased family members away from the village and to enhance the prestige of the deceased and his descendants by magnificent masked performances and generous displays of hospitality. In 1935, French anthropologist Marcel Griaule witnessed a dama ritual in which twenty-nine out of a total of seventy-four masks were of the kanaga type. These masks are characterized by a wooden superstructure in the form of a double-barred cross with short vertical elements projecting from the tips of each horizontal bar.

This kanaga mask was collected in Mali by Lester Wunderman, complete with its costume elements (see 1987.74a through 1987.74i). When the mask is worn, the back of the dancer's head is covered with a hood of plaited fiber fringe at the bottom edge. The dancer wears a vest made of black strip-woven cloth and red broadcloth strips embroidered with white cowrie-shells; strands of glass and plastic beads dangle from its edges. The kanaga dancer also wears a pair of trousers made of indigo-dyed, strip-woven cotton cloth, over which he ties a long skirt of curly, loosely strung, black-dyed sanseveria fibers and short overskirts of straight red and yellow fibers. For a traditional dama, the preparation and dyeing of the fibers are undertaken with as much secrecy and ritual as the carving of the wooden mask.

During the time spent by Griaule among the Dogon studying their complex belief system, he was initially told that the kanaga mask represents a bird with white wings and black forehead, but he later came to see this literal interpretation as characteristic of the first level of knowledge, that of the uninitiated. The deeper meaning of the kanaga mask apparently

pertains both to God, the crossbars being his arms and legs, and to the arrangement of the universe, with the upper crossbar representing the sky and the lower one the earth. The disparity between these two interpretations illustrates the gaps in our understanding of Dogon art.

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## Provenance

Lester Wunderman, New York, until 1987

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## References

Ezra, Kate.

New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988, no. 25, p. 68–69.

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## Timeline of Art History

### **Timelines**

[Western and Central Sudan, 1900 A.D.-present](#)

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## MetPublications

[Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection](#)

[The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators](#)

Department

**Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (12,030)**

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Artist / Maker / Culture

**Dogon (159)**

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Object Type / Material

**Hide (372)**

**Sculpture (25,872)**

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Geographic Location

**Africa (34,907)**

**Mali (397)**

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Date / Era

**A.D. 1900–present (117,262)**

## Related Objects

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### **Double Plank Figure with Raised Arms**

Artist: Date: 16th–19th century (?)

Accession Number: 1979.541.1

Date: 16th–19th century (?)

Medium: Wood, sacrificial materials

Accession: 1979.541.1

On view in: Gallery 350

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**Masquerade Vest (Kanaga)**

Artist: Date: 20th century

Accession Number: 1987.74a

Date: 20th century

Medium: Cotton, cowrie shells, glass beads, plastic beads

Accession: 1987.74a

On view in: Not on view

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**Male Figure with Raised Arms**

Artist: Date: 14th–17th century

Accession Number: 1978.412.322

Date: 14th–17th century

Medium: Wood, patina

Accession: 1978.412.322

On view in: Gallery 350

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**Figure: Seated Couple**

Artist: Date: 18th–early 19th century

Accession Number: 1977.394.15

Date: 18th–early 19th century

Medium: Wood, metal

Accession: 1977.394.15

On view in: Gallery 350

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**Ritual Vessel: Horse with Figures (Aduno Koro)**

Artist: Date: 16th–19th century  
Accession Number: 1979.206.255

Date: 16th–19th century

Medium: Wood

Accession: 1979.206.255

On view in: Gallery 350

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