Negotiating Beauty, Ugliness, and Authenticity: Evidence of Repair and Transformation in Collections of Sowei Masks

The aesthetically distinctive, helmet-style sowei masks danced by the women of West Africa’s Sande (or Bundu) society have become fixtures in many museum and private collections. Scholarly research has yielded important insights into the beautiful, standard aesthetic markers of sowei that materialize symbolic and cultural values, making the sowei the quintessential icon of feminine power and beauty in African arts and cultures. The sowei is often described as a manifestation of idealized beauty and perfection in contrast with the damaged and comically ugly masked gonde figure. However, close examination of sowei and gonde masks in diverse museum and private collections reveals instances of intervention and repair over time on the majority of the masks. The physical evidence of these actions not only indicates the continuous process of making these masks, but also illustrates the active negotiation of a continuum between beauty and ugliness by artists and traders to reinforce, construct, or re-define authenticity.