

THE DOGON



Kanaga Mask,
n.d., wood, 33 3/4 x 20 x 7 3/4 in., 1997.6.5

Masks function as a critical component in the ritual process. Masks transform their wearers into the animals and spirits they represent, enabling them to act as mediators between the human and the spiritual world where they communicate knowledge, legitimize laws, and enforce social order. The mask is only part of the costume, which usually includes a full body garment and other attributes. Only members of the *Awa* society, a select group of initiated males, are permitted to wear masks and use them in ceremonies. The Dogon craft several different types of masks, each representing a different force. The *kanaga* mask is worn during funeral dances, such as the *dama*, which restores stability to the community and counteracts the negative forces of death. The hyena mask threatens the spectators through the negative behavior associated with this scavenger, while the hunter mask vanquishes harmful forces, such as the hyena, and restores order through dancing. Dogon masks also



Granary Door Lock, n.d., wood and metal,
11 3/4 x 13 1/4 x 1 1/2 in., 1997.6.8.a,b,c

The Dogon live in the central plateau region of Mali, West Africa, where they have resided since the fifteenth century. They settled along the cliffs of the Bandiagara after they encountered and displaced another ethnic group, the Tellem. Like many African cultures, the Dogon developed a system of beliefs to interpret their world, which is infused with the sacred power of ancestral and spiritual forces. The objects in this exhibition illustrate how the Dogon's system of beliefs shapes the imagery associated with the essential facets of their life: religious rituals, social organization, ancestral worship, food production, and fertility.

In the Dogon religion, masks function as a



Ring, n.d., bronze,
2 1/2 x 1 1/4 x 1/4 in., 1997.6.18

represent reptiles, birds, healers, ancestors, blacksmiths, foreigners, and the religious and political leader of the community—the *hogon*.

In the patrilineal society of the Dogon, the *hogon* represents the ruling authority. Of the many symbols of his privileged status, he often wears jewelry with images that reinforce his prestige, such as a ring with an equestrian motif. In addition to such

jewelry, the *hogon* also displays personal items, including a headrest and a ceremonial stool which further identify his status. Often the base of the stool features representations of paired figures that support the seat of the stool, and by implication, the ruler himself. These figures symbolize the immortal ancestors, or *nummo*, who appear as male-female couples. *Nummo* also represent the primordial twins who were born of the interaction between the god *Amma* and earth. The Dogon recognize the significance of the *nummo* and their elevated status since they possess *nyama*, the spiritual force of life that is responsible for prosperity and fertility.

The *nummo* assist the Dogon in the production and protection of food, which represent another aspect of Dogon life where spiritual forces play an active role in society. The Dogon store their crops in granaries, which are indispensable for survival during the dry season and central to their socioeconomic organization. A single family may possess multiple granaries, one for each wife and the rest belonging to the husband. The granaries are protected by doors and locks with representations of ancestral figures who bless their owners and secure their grain from evil forces. Some locks feature images of women with accentuated breasts, which emphasize the association of fertility and prosperity with food production and sustenance.

Fertility is central to food production and supply, but it is also associated with women and their role in society. In addition to bearing and raising children, Dogon women also take care of the domestic labor inside and outside their households. One of these activities includes food preparation for the living and also for the ancestors. Wooden figures of women with exaggerated breasts function literally and symbolically as altars on which to serve blood or millet porridge, the ritual sustenance offered to the ancestors. Over time, such ritual offerings gradually accumulate on the surfaces of these figures, making them a sacred depository of sacrificial material. Through these feedings, the Dogon insure that the ancestral spirits bring blessings among the living.

Through the use of masks, stools, granary door locks, and maternity figures, the Dogon connect the supernatural world with that of the humans, the ancestors with the living. In all aspects of Dogon life, be it rituals, social and political organization, food production, or fertility, the spiritual forces are always in action.

Maternity Figure on a Stool with Four Caryatids,
n.d., wood, 25 1/4 x 3 1/4 in., 1975.2.4

