



OBJECT of the **month** *September 2021*

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hello, I am Violette-Anne, a Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute. Our talk today will focus on a female mask made in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by the Chokwe people in the early 20th century.

Looking at this art piece, what aspects drive your feelings toward it? For me, the balance of

contrasts pulls me in. Notice the concave and convex features, the black designs on the red background, the metal emerging from the fibers.

This type of mask used to be called *Pwo*, a word for a woman who has given birth. More recently, the words *Mwana Pwo*, which translates as “young woman”, have been favored to stress its youthful beauty. It represents the female ancestors, spirits of great importance as the Chokwe society is matrilineal.

The mask is made of wood, with metal for the earrings and tassel, bone for the buttons on the forehead, vegetable fiber for the headdress, and tukula, which is a fine red powder obtained by rubbing pieces of heartwood from tropical trees and then mixing it with palm oil covering the headdress.

The Chokwe people live in northeastern Angola, southern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and northwestern Zambia. Masks play an important role in Chokwe society because they are believed to reincarnate spirits of ancestors who can act for the village as protectors, providers of abundance, and educators. They are all worn by men, regardless of the gender portrayed by the mask, and fall in three categories. First, sacred masks: the most important of which is the powerful Chikunga worn only by chiefs during ceremonies. Second, masks related to initiations; they are made out of rattan, bark, fiber, and resin, and are destroyed at the end of each initiation. And third, dance masks. Carved of wood usually dyed red, these are danced by itinerant professional performers.

Pwo is one of the most popular dancing masks among the Chokwe. It honors the founding female ancestor of the lineage and symbolizes fecundity. Notice the high forehead with a headband, the eyes in large concave sockets with barely-opened slits for eyes, the tota hairstyle, which are short tresses covered in red clay, the mouth with filed teeth, and the scarifications, (these last two being part of the

DAYTON ART INSTITUTE

female beauty canon for the Chokwe). The scarifications in the mask presented here with the straight lines under the eyes are representing tears, leading to solar discs on the cheeks.

The *Pwo* dancer is dressed as a woman in a costume of braided fiber and wooden breasts, holding a rattle and a flywhisk. He dances with measured steps and graceful gestures to mimic how a woman should behave in their culture. The joint dance of *Pwo* and her male counterpart *Chihongo*, a spirit whose mask symbolizes power and wealth, is believed to bring fertility and prosperity to the community. You can admire this elegant *Pwo* in the Bonbright gallery of African Art of the Dayton Art Institute, Gallery 101. Thank you for enjoying art with us!

END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) to access the video presentation.

ARTWORKS FEATURED IN VIDEO*

Approximate geographical distribution of Chokwe people ethnic group in Africa. [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org) via Ms Sarah Welch Physical Map of the World's Continents via nationsonline.org Chokwe via llaunabiker.com
A group of Chokwe initiates preparing to leave their camp and be welcomed back into society via pressbooks.ulib.csuohio.edu. Photo courtesy DIAMANG, Angola
Central African Ethnic Group, Chokwe, via sancara.org
Cikungo Mask Worn by Mwanangana from the Region of Chinguvo. Archives of the Museu Do Dundo, via "Ritual Masks of the Chokwe", Marie-Louise Bastin, 1984. jstor.org/stable/3336156
Artist unidentified (Chokwe people, Zambia) *Chokwe Chikunza*, about 1990s, burlap, wood, pigments and string. Museum of Cultural Masks
Chokwe Chikunza mask via masksoftheworld.com
Chokwe artist (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola), *Face Mask*, early 20th century, wood, plant fiber, pigment, copper alloy. Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. 85-15-20

Chokwe, *Mask (Mwana Pwo)*, 19th century, wood. Brooklyn Museum, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John McDonald, 69.168.2
Field photo from a 1920's post card featuring a Lwena Pwevo/Pwo performer holding a flywhisk and hand rattle made from a tin can. The mask dances with the women who clap and sing to musically accompany the performer. Via randafricanart.com
Pwo Mask Dancer from the Chokwe people, near Gungu, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1970, ©Eliot Elisofon via pinterest.com
Luvale, *Likishi Dance Costume Shirt and Head Cover with Pwo Mask*, late 19th or early 20th century, fiber, wood, seedpods, hide. Brooklyn Museum, New York. Museum Collection Fund, 36.548.
"Mwana Pwo." *YouTube*, uploaded by mutambiorg, November 6 2012, <https://youtu.be/nn2S1EBagOE>
Chokwe people, *Chihongo Mask*, late 19th–early 20th century, wood, basketry, fiber, feathers, tukula, kaolin and iron. Dallas Museum of Art, TX. African Collection Fund, 2008.38.1. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art

MEDIA CREDITS*

wikipedia.org
nationsonline.org
llaunabiker.com
pressbooks.ulib.csuohio.edu
sancara.org
jstor.org
art-africain-traditionnel.com
maskmuseum.org

masksoftheworld.com
africa.si.edu
brooklynmuseum.org
randafricanart.com
pinterest.com
brooklynmuseum.org
youtube.com
dma.org

**Images used for educational purposes only*

QUESTIONS?
edu@daytonart.org