

Box 951549, Los Angeles, California 90095-1549
phone 310/825.4288
fax 310/206.7007
www.fowler.ucla.edu

Department of Marketing and Communications

Stacey Ravel Abarbanel
staceyra@arts.ucla.edu
310/825.4288

Stacey Ravel Abarbanel, staceyra@arts.ucla.edu
310/825-4288

For Immediate Use
June 3, 2009

Fowler in Focus: The Art of Women's Masquerades in Sierra Leone Opens Dec 9 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA

For many generations, the women's Sande association of the Mende peoples of Sierra Leone prepared young women for adulthood, marriage, motherhood, and leadership roles in society. Masquerade performances featuring carved wooden masks, music, dance, and theater signaled the ongoing stages of initiation to the community and celebrated the achievements of the initiates. See twenty-six beautiful and highly symbolic masks dating from the 19th-early 20th century in "Fowler in Focus: The Art of Women's Masquerades in Sierra Leone," on display at the Museum from Dec. 9, 2007–Apr. 27, 2008. Also on display are several examples of deliberately grotesque masks for beloved "clowns" that serve as comic counterparts during Sande initiations.

Sande is a rare example of an African masquerade performed by women. In the aftermath of the brutal war that took place in Sierra Leone during the 1990s, however, it is not clear whether Sande masquerades continue. The masks on view pay tribute to a rich legacy of artistry that fuses spirituality and femininity with deep reservoirs of knowledge and power.

Sande masks are called soweï—a name also given to the highest-ranked woman in Sande—and they display a wide range of motifs within a fixed stylistic framework. There is no limit to innovation, so long as the mask is a helmet form with a gleaming black surface, an elegant coiffure, and an expression of inner spiritual concentration. Remarkable creativity characterizes the superstructures, facial features, and adornment of the masks.

In counterpoint to the beauty and refinement of Sande soweï masks, other masquerades are characterized by satire, parody, and humor. These men's gongoli masquerades overturn conventional decorum and mock other maskers to the amusement and laughter of the audience. Four such masks are on display in this exhibition, with characteristic huge ears, gaping mouths, and other comical features.

"Fowler in Focus: The Art of Women's Masquerades in Sierra Leone" will be on view in the Fowler in Focus gallery, the central space within "Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives." Fowler in Focus is dedicated to rotating installations of new acquisitions, sub-collections, and particular artistic genres in the Fowler's permanent holdings. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is

free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$8 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

-UCLA-