

# A MASK AND ITS MEANING

## *Gitenga Mask*



People everywhere feel the need to explore the connection between themselves and family members who came before them. Some research their ancestry and fill out family trees. The Pende ethnic group of the Democratic Republic of the Congo enjoyed a more immediate experience with ancestors.

The Pende believed that ancestors (*mvumbi*) were an active presence in the community, whether for good or ill. Ancestor spirits could help a person attain success in everyday life. But they could also cause a lot of trouble if they felt offended or neglected. For this reason, the Pende tried to stay on the good side of the ancestors by honoring their spirits in community celebrations and rituals. During these events, Pende ancestors emerged from their home in the forest in the form of masked dancers.

One of the dancers might have worn the mask of Gitenga, who was the kind, caring “grandfather” of all ancestors. Everything about his mask is circular like the sun. His enormous round eyes, set close together, are cylinders that protrude from his round face. A woven ring of wood strips, alternating brown and white, seems to spin around inside a band of raffia fringe. Spectacular bird feathers arranged in an arc imitate the sun’s rays. Gitenga’s striking eyes, painted white, suggest the sun’s brilliance, while his dark feathers recall the hours of night when light is absent. When Gitenga came out of the forest to dance in the village, he brought the assurance that light would follow darkness in all the days to come and that life would be renewed.

## VISIT THE BMA

and see *Gitenga Mask* in the exhibition *Beyond Flight: Birds in African Art* through June 17, 2018.

Artist unidentified. *Gitenga Mask*. Mid-20th century. Pende region, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Great Blue Turaco feathers, fiber, wood, pigment, paint. 33½ × 35½ × 19 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchased as the gift of Amy Gould and Matthew Polk, Gibson Island, Maryland, BMA 2015.148

## CHALLENGE

Watch a Gitenga masquerader perform his high-speed dance accompanied by drums and singing. See how he keeps the ruffs of raffia on his wrists and ankles in constant motion. [bit.ly/2CG7hwY](http://bit.ly/2CG7hwY)

Compare and contrast a variety of Gitenga masks at [bit.ly/2mfa36c](http://bit.ly/2mfa36c). Design a mask that represents your understanding of ideas about the sun.

The blue, green, and yellow feathers of the Gitenga Mask were plucked from the Great Blue Turaco, a bird that lives high in the trees of the Congolese rainforest. See and read about the beautiful bird at [bit.ly/2mdszvl](http://bit.ly/2mdszvl)

FRONT



BACK

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