



OCTOBER 2011

## A Hat for a Champion

Dan peoples, Liberia | *Champion Brush Cutter's Hat*



### VISIT THE BMA

and see the

*Champion Brush Cutter's Hat* in the special exhibition  
*Hand Held: Personal Arts from Africa.*

Dan peoples, Liberia. Detail, *Champion Brush Cutter's Hat*. Early 20th century. Plant fibers, feathers. Approximately 8½ x 9 x 9 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Catherine O'Carroll Bussell and Robert Bruce Bussell, Arlington, Virginia, BMA 1998.437. Photography by Mitro Hood

Everyone likes to be recognized for doing something especially well, perhaps with a fancy certificate, a blue ribbon, a gold medal, or a shiny trophy. But how about honoring a champion with a special hat?

The *Champion Brush Cutter's Hat*, made in the African country of Liberia, was worn by a man who excelled at clearing away trees and underbrush so that farmers could plant their crops of cassava, rice, and sweet potatoes. He was probably strong and energetic, and would have proved himself to be a successful leader of the men and women who helped him transform forests into fertile farmland. Because he worked faster and harder than all the others, he was awarded this hat to wear during special ceremonies.

The hat is like an upside-down basket, formed with a variety of plant fibers. At the bottom of the hat, light and dark reeds have been braided and arranged in alternating rows, some curved and some straight. A midsection of woven rattan (pliable palm stems) swoops up and down again below a band of dark bird feathers whose tips have been snipped off. On top, a tuft of densely-packed grasses stands up like a brush. At each side, shredded fibers form ear-like pompoms.

The Dan people of Liberia believe that all people, whether farmer, hunter, warrior, or craftsman, should aim for excellence in their work. By awarding this prestigious hat to the champion brush cutter, they acknowledged his important role in providing good farmland for his people, and insured that he would be treated with honor and respect by the community.

### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Can you run really fast? Outlast your classmates in a spelling bee? Bake a prize-winning pie? Draw a picture of yourself wearing a "champion's hat" that informs everybody about your special skill. Or design a champion's hat for a talented friend or classmate.

Create a hat out of materials that cost little or nothing such as twigs, vines, shells, boxes, plates, stiff paper, fabric, or even old gloves or socks. Experiment with ways to fold, bend, tie, braid, weave, cut, rip, sew, staple, tape, or otherwise attach your materials to make a hat that attracts attention and is fun to wear.

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**



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Dan peoples, Liberia. *Champion Brush Cutter's Hat.*

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