

OCEANIC ART COLLECTION

Abelam people, Papua New Guinea, Maprik region

Pig Spirit Mask (*baba*)

Twentieth century

Raffia, pigment

14½ × 11 ⅛ × 16 in. (36.8 × 28.3 × 40.6 cm)

Gift of Dr. Samuel Spring and Marion D. Jorgensen

S85-SPNG-G8

Helmet-style wickerwork masks are used to adorn both long yams for harvest ceremony displays and dancers in initiation ceremonies. The masked figures are thought to be manifestations of piglike beings (*baba*) associated with each clan who mediate between humans and the supernatural world and are considered envoys of the ancestral realm. In traditional initiation ceremonies they appear as menacing beings whose role is to alert novices about the omnipresence and awesome power of the ancestors. The appearance of the *baba* is indeed fantastic—the mask is worn with a green palm-leaf body covering and a collar of orange seeds. At the beginning of the yam cycle the *baba* are called upon to ensure an abundant crop. The masks are displayed in the storeroom for the yams in the hope that they will attract the ancestral spirits who have the power to make the yam seedlings strong.

More recently, the *baba* are likely to appear in the context of a variety of communal events. No two *baba* masks are the same, but common motifs are large bulging eyes surrounded by concentric circles, and tubular projections. The masks are both male and female. A tassel on the top may represent a lock of hair, indicating a female *baba*; painted stripes and dots also indicate gender. Those with fan-shaped crests on the back recall the same ornaments on long yams and the headcrests of ceremonial dancers.

