

Early 20th-Century West African Terracotta Cow Mask

£345



Description

A striking early 20th-century West African terracotta mask, modelled in the form of a cow or bovine head. Boldly hand-formed in clay, the mask has a strong sculptural presence, with its simplified animal features, tactile surface, and expressive modelling reflecting a powerful regional tradition of figural and ceremonial art.

Cattle have long held important symbolic associations across many West African societies, where they may signify prosperity, fertility, strength, social standing, or ancestral and spiritual connection. Bovine imagery appears in a wide range of artistic traditions, including masks, headpieces, ritual objects, and ceremonial sculpture. This example captures the enduring visual potency of the animal through a direct, characterful use of terracotta.

The hand-moulded construction and surface variation give the piece an appealing sense of individuality. Its earthy tones and weathered finish emphasise the material qualities of fired clay, while its graphic, sculptural form allows it to read equally well as an ethnographic object and as a compelling work of modern-looking decorative art.

Terracotta masks and animal figures of this kind were made across a broad geographical area, including parts of present-day Mali and Nigeria. Without a documented field provenance, a precise ethnic or regional attribution should remain open; however, the mask is firmly rooted in the visual language and material traditions of West African clay sculpture.

A distinctive object for collectors of African art, terracotta sculpture, and early 20th-century ethnographic works. Displayed alone or within a curated interior, it would bring remarkable texture, presence, and cultural resonance to a space.

Provenance: formerly in the collection of Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney Charles Edward Leith Lockyer-Nibbs (1898-1973), Royal Army Service Corps. Lockyer-Nibbs served during the mid-20th century and assembled a collection of ethnographic and tribal works, including objects from Africa and the Far East. This piece was acquired through his collection and retains a compelling connection to the history of British collecting in the first half of the 20th century.