

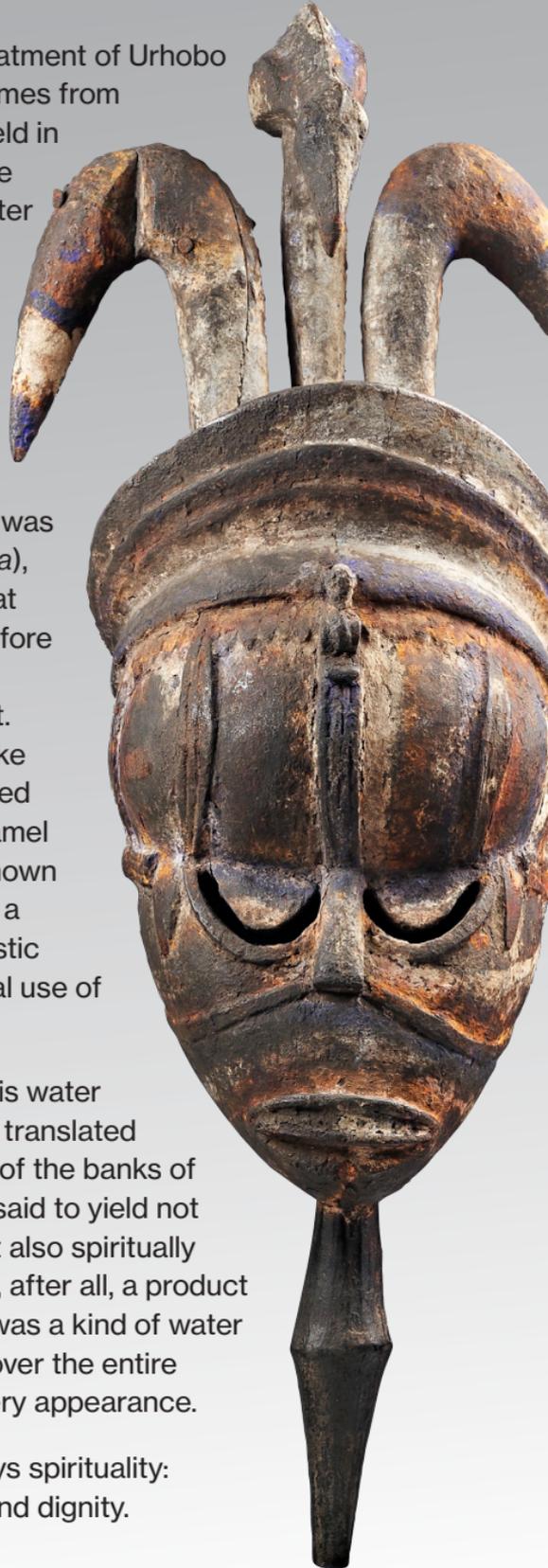
# BENEATH THE SURFACE

## Innovative Pigmentation on an Urhobo Mask

Insight into the surface treatment of Urhobo masks such as this one comes from extended conversations held in the early 1970s with Oviede Aki (ca. 1920–1980), a master artist, performer, and ritual expert associated with the *Ohworu* water-spirit society, in the community of Ewureni in southern Nigeria. When Aki was an apprentice, the traditional surface on *Ohworu* masks was a yellow kaolin clay (*enakpa*), associated with beauty, that was reapplied to masks before each performance—along with red and black pigment. But Oviede, wanting to make his surfaces last longer, used bright yellow oil-based enamel paint. The Urhobo mask shown here similarly reflects both a continuation of and an artistic innovation on the traditional use of pigments for masks.

The white substance on this water spirit mask is called *oorhe*, translated as chalk or kaolin, dug out of the banks of rivers. Specific sites were said to yield not only copious quantities but also spiritually efficacious material. It was, after all, a product of the river and as such it was a kind of water spirit itself. It was applied over the entire mask and recoated for every appearance.

For the Urhobo, red conveys spirituality: mystery and fear, beauty and dignity.





Its pigment is derived from the camwood tree, usually ground into a paste with palm oil, water, or liquefied chalk, producing various shades and hues. It is applied to the bodies of young women at marriage and painted on shrines and masks.

The blue pigment on the mask is unusual among the Urhobo but resembles a blue that is quite

common in Yoruba sculpture in southwest Nigeria, an extremely intense dye that was manufactured in England and exported to colonies by the mid-nineteenth century: Reckitt's Laundry Blue, a cheaper replacement of local indigo.

These layers of pigment would have been applied through the years by generations of the family who owned the mask. While the white is mandated by tradition for each performance, the family could have changed the other colors as they wished to create a new—and innovative—image. New colors would be applied over old, with little effort to remove the earlier ones. The underlayers may have spiritual value because they represent an earlier incarnation of the mask.

Masquerade performance is indeed all about novelty. It's where great younger dancers get to strut their stuff, where new dances, costumes, and songs are developed. Within Urhobo performance, there are some masks that must adhere to old styles, but many others invite innovation.

—Perkins Foss, Professor Emeritus, Penn State University

**FRONT:** Urhobo artist (Nigeria), *Mask*, late 19th–20th century. Wood, kaolin, Reckitt's Laundry Blue or indigo, camwood, and metal. Promised Museum acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

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