Emmett & White
ANTIQUES & INTERIORS

Early 20th-Century West African Terracotta Cow Mask

£345

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REF: 5082

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.

Originally acquired by Lieutenant-Colonel Sydney C. Lockyer-Nibbs during his service across the British Empire in the early to mid-20th century. Over this period, he assembled a notable collection of tribal art and ethnographic objects from Africa and the Far East.

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