**Mende People**
The Mende people live in present day Sierra Leone, where they migrated during the 16th century from the north. Here they separated into clusters of chiefdoms throughout the territory. A family’s ranking in society depends on the amount of land they own and use. The primary food source of the Mende is rice and cocoa. As the Mende population has reached toward two million, they have become a major contributor to the rice economy of the country. Within Mende culture, the Sande Society, exclusively for women, remains very secretive about its activities. Bundu (another word for Sande) Masks hold significant power because they are only worn by women of the society. Bundu Masks are recognized and respected African mask forms.

**Media Description**
The masks convey Mende ideals of female morality and physical beauty. The masks are wiped down with palm oil before women wear them. The oiled surface of the mask signifies glowing shiny skin. The facial features showcase a full forehead, small features, and an elaborate hairstyle, which the Mende people deem attractive. A number of times during a girl’s "initiation into womanhood" ceremony, an elder will wear this mask with an attached raffia costume. Underneath she will wear heavy cotton garb and she will dance for up to two hours. Once the initiation is complete, the girls gather together in the village where they are the center of attention. The completion of Sande initiation means that the girls are now adult women and can marry.

The masks are made out of hardwood trees indigenous to the village area. The wood varies based on location of the tribe. The masks are completed with a finish, usually black pigment or palm oil. The mask represents Sowei, guardian of women, who rises from the water where she rests.

**Contextual Information**
The Bundu Masks are unique in sub-Saharan Africa. Usually, on ritual occasions, only men are allowed to wear masks. The Bundu masks, however, are exclusively worn by women of the Sande Society. The Sande society prepares young girls for adulthood by teaching them domestic skills, life lessons, and knowledge about being a woman. Contrary to many African cultures, Sande women traditionally held a great deal of power in their villages. During pre-colonial times a Sande woman often held the position of village chief. Until fairly recent times women politicians in the community used their Sande Society membership to further their careers.

**Glossary**

**Initiation:** formal acceptance into a club or organization.

**Indigenous:** originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country.

**Resources**

http://www.buyafricanantiques.com/bundu_mask.htm
http://www.hamillgallery.com/MENDE/MendeMasks/MendeMasks.html

Completed Summer 2009, Emmalee David
Session Activity: For the Mende People the Bundu mask represents beauty. During this session students will explore the idea of beauty within the African Mende culture and within American culture.

Objectives:
1. Students will assess key characteristics of the Bundu Mask.
2. Students will explore the mask as an emblem of the Mende aesthetic concept of beauty.
3. Through a discussion and production of a “visual essay” students will explore the American aesthetic concept of beauty.
4. Students will see differences in the aesthetic concept of beauty from person to person as well as from culture to culture.

Materials:
Paper, scissors, various magazines, glue

Activity Procedures: In the first part of the activity, students will look at images of the Bundu masks while noting their various characteristics or details. Each key characteristic/detail will be discussed as a significant contribution to the overall “beauty” of the mask. For each detail students will discuss such prompt questions as “What does this characteristic represent?” What makes this detail a symbol of beauty?” As the discussion continues, a general idea about the Mende idea of beauty may emerge. Summarize this aesthetic concept of Mende beauty. Next, discuss the American idea of beauty. After the discussion, each student will create a “visual essay” about his/her idea of beauty. Final products will vary according to each student’s perception. During the second part of the activity, have each student present his/her findings. After the presentations of the visual essays, emphasize an acceptance of differences in perception of beauty between students. Draw a parallel to an acceptance of difference in perception of beauty between Mende and American cultures.

Sunshine State Standard: K-5
Standard: Cultural and Historical Connections
Description: Student understands how artists have used visual languages and symbols through time and across cultures.

Sunshine State Standard: 6-12
Standard: Aesthetic and Critical Analysis
Description: Student understands critical and aesthetic statements in terms of historical reference while researching works of art.

Women in Art, Art History Lesson Plan: 6-12
Session Activity: Bundu masks represent aesthetic characteristics, and also represent characteristics of a desirable woman, according to Mende culture. For instance, the small mouth of the Bundu mask represents a woman’s obedience to her husband. Women have been represented in art throughout the centuries to show both aesthetic and behavior ideals for women in various cultures and societies. Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting Judith Decapitating Holofernes shows women portrayed in a different light than the Bundu Masks. The women in the painting represent strength. Uncharacteristic of a woman’s behavior in everyday life at the time, Judith’s actions in the painting portray the bravery of a biblical woman. Have students research/compare and contrast the ideals of womanhood represented in Judith Decapitating Holofernes and the ideals represented in the Bundu masks. Have each student report his/her findings to the class in writing or through powerpoint.

Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Decapitating Holofernes. 1615-1620. Oil on Canvas, 46 3/4 X 37 1/4 in.