

MASKS: Transformation, Transmission and Trickery

Essay by Joseph G. Gerena

For the exhibition, MASK, I have made a selection from my collection of tribal, ancient and utilitarian masks whose origins are far reaching – Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. The process of choosing these works, knowing that they would be included among contemporary art, was intriguing and led me to examine my collection anew. This selection aims to demonstrate the breadth of human endeavor that has gone into the making and wearing of masks; a practice developed early in human history and one that remains vital to artistic practice today. From the earliest rituals, where masks are representations of the supernatural, to their mythic ability to transform the wearer into animals or spirits of nature – rocks, trees and water – to their most utilitarian purpose as a protective covering, masks are passkeys into other realms of reality.

Funerary masks are among some of the earliest uses of masking. The primary function of the death mask is to transport the deceased into the next realm with the idealized face represented on the mask. If a person were powerful in this life, his funerary mask would indicate this power. High status individuals would wear luxurious masks of precious metals or stones to assure their status in the next life.

Masks were used to reinforce social mores. The Pende people of the Congo used a *mbangu* or sickness mask for just such a purpose. This mask represents a highly regarded hunter stricken with facial paralysis, demonstrating the fragility of health, and the democratic nature of disease, striking those in all positions of society equally. The *mbangu* is

danced with a whole cast of characters from all walks of life who teach the rewards of good behavior and what potentially await those who transgress against society's rules. The black and white variation represents the scars of someone who fell into fire due to epilepsy.ⁱ

The Japanese Shinto mask of *Ononokomachi* represents a well-known tale from the 9th century, Heian period, Japan. A poetess, who was a stunning beauty in her youth, refused marriage to several suitors and, as time passed, lost her looks and fell into poverty. In the *Ononokomachi* mask, the poetess is portrayed as an old hag, an illustration of the dangers of going against the reigning social mores regarding marriage.

In Medieval Western Europe, the *brank*, or *scold's bridle*, was used to punish women who were labeled as scolds or gossips. This torture device for women resembles an iron mask that has a curb projecting into the mouth that rests atop the tongue. Some examples of scold's bridles covered the head entirely. Designs ranged from those that served to only inhibit the victim from speaking to those that actually mutilated the tongue with a spike-festooned bit. Generally, the tortured women were locked into the masks and confined to the town square for public humiliation.

Masks were also used to celebrate the passage from childhood to adulthood. Among the Elema people of the Papuan Gulf of New Guinea specific masks are used during the *kovave* male initiation ceremonies. The *kovave* are ancient mythical spirits from the time of Creation. During the *kovave* ceremony, the spirits are lured out of the forest where they live, to initiate boys into adulthood. The boys are led into the forest by an uncle, where adult members of the tribe surprise them and put masks on young initiates in an ambush. The boys then make their formal ceremonial entrance into the village on the next day. They patrol the beach for a month in their masks, and are presented with pigs by the villagers to kill with their bows and arrows. At the end of the ceremony the *kovave* boys return to the forest, destroy their masks and emerge again as adults.ⁱⁱ



Yup'ik Caribou/Walrus Transformation Mask, 19th Century, Yukon region, United States, polychromed wood, 9 x 9 x 14 inches

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As man developed and agriculture and societies became more complex, masks were used in rituals to insure fertility both of people and of crops. For the Makonde people of Mozambique and Southern Tanzania, sexual initiation is one of their most important rituals. Adolescents of both sexes must undergo a period of seclusion. Through the learning of songs and dances, they are taught about sex and the rights and obligation of married life. The celebrations that accompany the coming-out ceremonies involve feasting, dance and masquerades. These masqueraders are called *midimu* (sing. *Ndimu*) spirit makers. The female body mask was intended to represent a pregnant woman and was always worn by a male masquerader with a matching female face mask.ⁱⁱⁱ



Japanese Shishi-Gashira (Lion Dance) Mask, Edo Period, ca. 18th century, polychromed wood, 8 x 9 ¾ x 10 inches

Early masks were not merely representations of the spirits but were considered the spirits in themselves. Gathering at night, tribal people witnessed the shaman's masked performance of trance, music, and sleights of hand. These spectacles served not only a spiritual function but also as primary diversions for the tribe, making dramatic use of masks as tools of transformation. Performing stories with dance and music, shamans transformed themselves into animals and spirits. For the *Nunivak* people, shamans adorn masks that portray human faces and enact travels to unseen worlds above and below to intercede on their behalf.

Religious beliefs in many cultures became more complex, therefore, ritual dramas enacted by masked dancers were developed to transmit and reinforce social beliefs. For example, the Buddhists of Bhutan believed that it took forty-nine days (known as the *Bardo* period) for the spirit to travel from the deceased earthly body to their spiritual body. To aid in this transition they performed the *Bardo Chham*, a ritual dance in which masks were worn to represent the deities or energies the deceased would encounter during their *Bardo*.

The Alaskan Yup'ik thanked animal spirits in ritual ceremonies performed in their dimly lit *Kazguqs* (community houses). Wearing masks of the animals they hunted, the spirits were invoked and their deaths appeased – deaths that provided the nutrition that enabled the people to survive.

In war, masks are worn both for protection and psychological intimidation. In the 1st century AD, during the triumphal parades upon the return of Claudius's Calvary to Rome, the frozen visage of the Roman centurion appeared godlike to the cheering crowds.

In Feudal Japan, the sight of a mounted samurai descending upon his enemies wearing the *menpo* (golden armor) of a *Tengu* was a terrifying spectacle. The *Tengu* were mythological, playful demons that were half man, half bird, which inhabited remote mountain forests. They were known to impart secret martial arts techniques to those who were brave enough to confront them and win them over. Equally, they would wreak havoc on their enemies. Thus, a samurai wearing a *Tengu* mask was perceived as being one of the chosen few who could wreak the same supernatural havoc as the demon he impersonated.

With growth in population and the subsequent growth of specialized talents, masks evolved into protective devices used in various applications. IN 1891 Willis V. Vajen patented the Vajen-Bader Smoke Mask, a self-contained breathing apparatus to protect firefighters from smoke inhalation. The mask supplied cooler, breathable air from a compressed air cylinder on the back of the helmet, with enough air to sustain for over 60 minutes. Comprised of thick leather, fleece lining and pierced resonator ear covers with caged eye guards, the helmet also included small knob-operated windshield wiper blades to clear interior condensation and an interior whistle to call for help or signal to other firefighters. In the mid-20th century, a Russian Submariner's mask could provide protection from the temperatures in the submerged vessel that could reach freezing temperatures. Hunting on Alaska's frozen tundra, where the landscape is nearly featureless and blindingly white, a hunter requires protection against snow blindness. Small eye slits in snow goggle bar the entrance of most light. The Eskimo Snow Goggles included in this exhibition

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have small ivory amulets representing foxes, added to bestow extra power to the hunter and success in locating the game disguised in their winter white fur.

The sacred meaning of masks was slowly overtaken by people's need to be entertained. As ritual became more secular, masks were employed in new ways and thus are found the origins of theater. *Shishi-mai* dances, or the Lion dance, were introduced to Japan from China and/or Korea in the 7th or 8th century AD, during the same period as Buddhism's transmission to Japan. Thereafter, the *shishi-mai* dance became widespread as folk tradition, both as a form of festival entertainment and as a means to ward off evil spirits and to pray for peace, bountiful harvests, and good health. Performers adorn a headdress symbolic of the Lion with several people in one costume, one holding the lion mask and manipulating its mouth, the others acting as the hind legs and maneuvering the body under a length of cloth. Although the use of masks remains widespread, their ritual meanings become less clear. Eventually, freed from their magical functions, masks find use as disguises in non-sacred contexts.

Though most people have only the vaguest notion of the original use of the mask, donning one continues to bestow the sense of empowerment and liberation that comes from concealing one's true identity. Masks can heighten expressions or suppress them. Masks liberate the wearer from the tedium of the status quo and sanction taboo behavior. On Halloween or All Saint's Day Eve, the most staid and unimaginative of us can transform into the mythical Trickster, revealing a temporary persona. Today as avatars on the Internet, more and more people don masks composed of 0s and 1s – binary full-body masks – shielding their actual identities to live out their lives in virtual reality. Around the world today, the masking tradition is still alive in its traditional sense and is ever more prevalent. Through their makeup, uniforms and fashion, people transform into idealized version of themselves and thus proclaim their acceptance in a desired social group. The pre-modern spiritual component may be absent, but the transformative and protective contexts remain vividly present.

ⁱ See *To Cure and Protect, Sickness and Health in African Art*, by Frank Herreman, The Museum for African Art, NY, 1977.

ⁱⁱ *Oceanic Art*, by Anthony J.P. Meyer, Knickerbocker Press, 1996, p.127.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Africa, The Art of a Continent*, by Zachary Kingdon, 1996, p.175.