

# MASK HISTORY

## THE ANCIENT WORLD

According to the book Maskmaking by Carole Sivin, the history of masks spans time as early as prehistory where cave wall images of humans sometimes showed humans wearing masks of animals.

As early as 2000 B.C., the Egyptians used burial masks that resembled the deceased.

In Ancient Greece, many different masks were worn by one actor in plays as he performed many roles.

Deathmasks of Mycenae, Peru, Manchuria, Korea and Egypt were made of material that preserved facial features of the deceased.

## THE EAST

### **Japanese Mask Drama**

Noh drama (noh means talent) is about 500 years old. Like Greek dramas, they used masks, a chorus, poetry and song. Noh masks are carved from cypress, a lightweight wood with a fine grain. Also, the masks are smaller than the actor's face and are always worn by men. The maskmaker follows rigid procedures established long ago. The actor must give the mask life through movement and tilts of the head that can show radiance or grief. The masked characters represented in the Noh drama are the female, old people, the warrior and demons.

Kyogen are short skits used to break up the length of a long Noh drama. Bugaku and Gigaku dances used masks also, but tend to be larger. Kabuki is a drama that is most famous in Japan and usually the actors use face makeup instead of masks.

### **China**

During the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) masks were first used in Chinese opera. Later, elaborate face painting replaced them. Certain colors stood to represent particular attributes. For example: Red stood for loyalty, white for treachery, gold and silver for supernatural beings. Two straight eyebrows indicated an upright (honest and respectful) person. Uneven facial features depicted cunning.

### **Korea**

Early masks were primarily used in religious rites, for dispelling evil spirits, curing illness, promoting a good harvest. Actors use masks during festivals and celebrations. Here a character's colors matter: black means evil and red means power. Often a cloth hood is used to tie on the mask to the back of the head.

### **Bali**

Masks represent kings, minstrels, old men and buffoons. Many are carved from wood from the Cinchona tree. Each actor plays several roles and changes masks when he performs a different character. Half-masks are worn by narrators. Masks are greatly revered in Bali. An offering to the gods is given before each performance.

## AFRICA

The area between Senegal and Angola is known for its artistic activity. The most common material used is wood, but other materials are clay, ivory, metal and bone. Even before the carver of the mask begins making the mask, an offering or prayer is given. The masks are used in initiation ceremonies, cult rituals, celebration of harvest, judgment of prisoners, exorcism of evil spirits, and in entertainment. Dogon masks are large wooden masks representing mythical ancestors, or crocodiles, antelopes, ostriches and lions. Some of these are very tall. White masks from Bagon are painted with Kaolin, and long slits for eyes. Most have scarification patterns carved in relief on cheeks or forehead. Each represents a dead woman who has returned from the dead and lives in the mask.

(Africa continued) Dancers usually wear them while they wear raffia and dance on stilts. Bamileke tribe cover their masks with beads and cowrie shells. Each mask has a spirit that takes over the dancer while they wear the mask. Masks of Africa have influenced many 20<sup>th</sup> century painters and sculptors.

## THE WESTERN WORLD

### **Mystery and Morality**

Medieval mystery plays were used in the 6<sup>th</sup> century within the church to tell the story of church liturgy. Morality plays evolved from these mystery plays. Masks were worn by characters such as the devil and death, in plays that focused on the struggle between good and evil.

The masked carnival was a time to shed inhibitions and social distinctions and rejoice. Mostly it was humorous and comical. Haunting old Swiss and German masks are on display in museums like Berlin and Munich. Santa Claus and nature spirits are some of those. At annual carnivals these masks are given life and usually include large ears and noses. Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Breugel the Elder, (Flemish artists) also showed good and evil in their paintings. They showed masked figures, demoniacal creatures and carnival scenes in the paintings. This showed how they got many of their ideas from local folklore and celebrations of the common people.

### **Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries**

In the mid-sixteenth century in Italy, improvised popular comedy arose where it lasted 200 years. Actors wore half-masks made of leather and lined with linen. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these masks were popular among European noblewomen. The masks concealed their identity indoors at the theatre and protected their complexion outdoors. Some men also wore them. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, some silk masks were held by a handle or held in place by a button which was clenched between the teeth. Artists Tiepolo and Watteau used masked figures in their paintings.

### **Native Americans**

The spectacular dual masks of the Kwakiutl could be opened and closed by the dancer wearing them. Many parts of the mask could move. These large dance masks were made of cedar. There were portrait masks of the Tsimshian, Haida and Tlingit. Inuit (Eskimo) masks commemorated Shamans' journeys to the spirit world. Men usually wore the face masks while women danced and used intricate finger masks. Southwestern Indian tribes (Hopi, Zuni, Navajo and Apache) made masks that were carved, painted or made of leather, pumpkins or cloth.

### **To the Present**

Artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were influenced by masks and their use in ceremonial rituals. They incorporated them symbolically into their paintings. Pablo Picasso's painting, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les\\_Demoiselles\\_D%E2%80%99Avignon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Demoiselles_D%E2%80%99Avignon) shows mask influence. During World War I, artists used masks in art and plays to depict the horrors of war. Today, artists create masks often influenced by the past, whether used in theater or simply hung on the wall. They continue to communicate messages of cultures worldwide.

According to the videotape, the three basic purposes for masks are: Disguise, Concealment and Transformation.



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Some masks were half-masks made of leather and lined with linen. These masks became popular among European noblewomen. The masks concealed their identity indoors at the theatre and protected their complexion outdoors.

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#### AFRICA

Dogon masks are large wooden masks representing mythical ancestors, or crocodiles, antelopes, ostriches and lions. Some of these are very tall.

WHEN A MASK IS DESIGNED TO REPRESENT A KNOWN CHARACTER OR ANIMAL, WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

AFRICA

DISGUISE

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THIS PURPOSE FOR A MASK IS DESIGNED MOSTLY TO HIDE THE WEARER'S FACE.

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WHEN A MASK IS DESIGNED SO THAT A WEARER WILL BEHAVE IN A PARTICULAR WAY (LIKE DURING A CEREMONIAL DANCE), OR IT HAS MOVEABLE PARTS THAT CHANGE WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

CONCEALMENT

TRANSFORMATION

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