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MASKS AT THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

Introduction

The Pitt Rivers Museum has a range of masks from a variety of cultures including those in Africa, North America and Papua New Guinea, as well as theatre masks from Japan, Korea, Borneo and Tibet.

Today, in Western industrialized countries, people usually encounter masks in completely different contexts to those in which the masks on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum were originally designed. We use them for protection: such as those worn by surgeons, welders or ice-hockey players; in times of war by soldiers; as means of disguise, as worn by burglars, terrorists or participants in a mask-ball or carnival; we even consider make-up as a form of masking, particularly in pantomime, or the circus. We have also used them as part of local folklore traditions.



▲ **Wooden mask worn during carnival, afterwards used to protect hay. Aosta, Italy, Europe; 1914.22.12**

In other cultures masks may be worn for religious or spiritual occasions, or as part of theatrical or ceremonial events, themselves often integral to the cultural life of the people who make and use them.

Such masks might represent other humans, or gods or spirits in human or animal form. However they are not always simply hollow representations worn over the face. They might be worn on top the head with a

costume attached to it like some of the dance-masks from New Guinea, where the head of the mask, often crowned by an enormous superstructure, is sitting above the dancer's own head.



▲ Painted cane-work and bark mask, Papua New Guinea, Oceania; 1906.74.1

They can also be worn on the hips or the neck as status symbols, like the so-called pendant masks from the African Kingdom of Benin.



▲ Metal hip ornament, Benin, Africa; 1900.39.6

Other masks were not worn but instead put on display, like some of the Malanggan masks of New Ireland and or Sri Lanka.

So the act of masking is not simply about disguise. It can be the creation of a different person altogether. An actor in ancient Greek, Roman or traditional Japanese theatre would strive to bring the mask he was wearing to life by acting in the way that character prescribed him to, becoming rather than interpreting the part.

► Large painted carving representing demons. This would have been prominently displayed during exorcisms. Sri Lanka, Asia; 1899.88.1



To a certain extent this is also true of some of the African, North American or Melanesian masks in the Museum. In many parts of the world the mask symbolizes an ancestor or other spirit that has come back to life with the help of the masker, who lends his body to this spirit who performs through him. Quite often the mask is regarded as a very powerful thing which might even, through a single performance, have become too powerful to ever be worn or touched again without causing harm. In many societies masks are discarded or destroyed after they have been used once. It might even be considered a taboo, something so sacred or powerful, or both, that the uninitiated are not allowed to see it and live, or at least remain unpunished. In other cultures the mask may require nourishment and care even when not in active use.



▲ Mask used in traditional Noh theatre, Japan, Asia; 1884.114.56



▲ Haida transformation mask in the form of a raven, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada; 1891.49.8

Such occasions for masked performances are closely linked to religious rituals and initiation ceremonies and not merely intended to be entertaining. In many African cultures, mask-making, understanding their function and also learning how to perform with them, is often part of the socialisation of the young men in the community.

► **Idoma black and white painted mask, Nigeria, Africa; 1932.33.4**



How then are we to fully grasp the meaning of such an object if we have to view it in a completely new context, without the costume and dance associated with it, and with little understanding of the beliefs, traditions and emotional significance attached to its performance? In the Pitt Rivers objects are usually grouped according to their 'type' or function, meaning that many masks are brought together in one case, where differences and similarities can be studied. Unfortunately, at the time these objects were acquired or bought, often by travelers or colonial officers, it was not always thought necessary to record much detail about the way they were

used, although much work has been done more recently to rediscover this context, often through direct contact with the communities from which they originally came.

However many of these masks were created by master craftsmen, bringing generations of skill and design to their task of mask-making. This means the objects still excite the imagination with their power and other-worldly gaze. They provoke questions about the cultures they came from and in that way act as ambassadors, arousing curiosity, admiration and respect.

Further information

Irvine, Gregory (1994) “*Japanese Masks: Ritual and Drama*”. In: Mack, John (ed.) (1994) *Masks. The Art of Expression*. London: British Museum Press. pp.130-150.

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Lommel, Andreas (1970; 1972 transl.) *Masks. Their Meaning and Function*. London: Paul Elek.

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Starzecka, Dorotea Czarkowska (1994) “*Masks in Oceania*”. In: Mack, John (ed.) (1994) *Masks. The Art of Expression*. London: British Museum Press. pp. 56-82.

Waley, Arthur (1921; 1965 4th impr.) *The No Plays of Japan*. [With letters by Oswald Sickert] London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)

Case no. C2A and C3A – Masks

Case no. C13A – West African Masks and Carvings

Case no. C59B – Masks (visible storage case)

Case no. C156A – Human Form in Art

Lower Gallery (first floor)

Case no. L26A – Court Art of Benin

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