

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

# MASKS

On display in Gallery 33

Notes for teachers



## **MASKS**

Masks can be used at any level of ability and with every age range. They can be used as decorative objects, as aids to develop manipulative skills, to initiate learning about other cultures and to stimulate the imagination.

Multi-cultural education, geography, PSE, art, design technology, science (materials), maths (symmetry, estimating, etc.), English, drama, creative writing and language development can all be covered during the visit and through pre- and post- visit activities.

### **The Illusion of Masks**

Masks attract attention, fire the imagination and arouse emotions. A mask cancels out the wearer's personality and another human or spirit character comes alive inside the costume. The audience responds to the change. Masks should be seen in action: a vital part of the illusion is the use of special gestures, speech, music and dance. Both the maskers and the audience jointly make up the Masquerade.

### **The Power of Masks**

Many things can be said from behind a mask which would not otherwise be voiced. Masks are found in folklore, religious ceremonies and entertainments. Masks are used to frighten, to disguise identity and to make authority figures look impersonal. Masks also protect people at work and at play.

The space helmet, the doctor's mask and the terrorist's hood are powerful images of our time.

Masks have the power to attract, control, amuse, heal, disguise, protect, transform and define group identity.

## **BOOKING A GALLERY VISIT.**

**To book an visit, or to arrange a teaching session with the Schools Liaison teacher (Birmingham LEA schools) or Schools Support officer (non-Birmingham LEA schools) telephone 0121 303 3890**

Masks workshops are usually for 2 hours and are divided into two parts:

1. Gallery discussion. Includes an introduction to Gallery 33 'A Meeting Ground of Cultures', an opportunity to try the hand-held display masks and a discussion of the display of historic masks - their origins, folklore, national customs, materials, etc.
2. Classroom activity. Card mask-making: children are shown masks in different media: papier maché, wood, etc. There is a discussion of forms of decoration to use in post-visit work and a demonstration of card cutting/folding techniques. Children make masks to be completed at school.

### Masks from Sri Lanka (4, 5)

These masks would be seen in performances of elaborate dance dramas or rural operas known as Kolam. Numerous masks are used to represent a wide variety of characters or specific personalities that can be human, supernatural or animal.

Kolam performances take place at night and involve dance, gesture, mime, song and dialogue.

### A mask from Sri Lanka representing Gundu, a supernatural being.

Used in Kolam performances. The face represents an eagle; the cars and headdress depict cobras. Late 19th century.



### A Gara demon mask from Sri Lanka. (19<sup>th</sup> century)



### Masks from Sri Lanka representing comic human characters (6, 11)

Used in Kolam performances, Sanni ceremonies held to exorcise diseases and the Buddhist Festival of Parahesa. Both collected in 1886.



### **Hallowe'en mask from Birmingham, England. (7)**

Hallowe'en or All Hallows' Eve is celebrated on 31st October.

It precedes All Hallows Day on November 1<sup>st</sup> when the Martyrs and Saints of the Christian church are remembered and All Souls Day on November 2<sup>nd</sup> when the dead are remembered.

The Christian tradition started in the 7th century A.D. but it is thought to have replaced the much older pagan Celtic festival of Samhain that took place at much the same time. Hallowe'en is widely believed to be a time of intense supernatural activity when ghosts, fairies, demons, hobgoblins and witches are especially active. The skull mask reflects this tradition.



### **Human face mask from northern British Columbia, Canada. (12)**

The peoples of British Columbia are well known for the remarkable range and diversity of their masks which are amongst the most dramatic in the world.

The shapes, colours and designs used are all full of symbolic meaning. In this mask the red hook 'nose' about the human nose represents the dragonfly while the fur markings on the side of the face represent the otter. Masks were usually worn at winter religious dances or at great ceremonial feasts known as Potlatch. They would be seen at night, lit by firelight.



### **Tom kon mask from Ambrynn Island, Vanuatu (1)**

This mask was used in ceremonies which promoted men from one social class to the next. The design, colour, size and materials varied according to the class involved.



*Tom kon mask early 20th century*

### **Ouagadou style Antelope mask from the Mossi people of Burkino Faso, Western Sudan (8)**

The Mossi use animal head masks as emblems of their different clans. The masks also represent the clan ancestors and act as a link between the living and the dead.

The masks have several functions but they are most commonly seen at funerals. They act as witnesses for the ancestors and confirm that the deceased was an honoured member of the community and that his spirit is entitled to admission into the spirit world.



*Antelope mask collected in the 1930s.*

### **Gongoli mask from the Mende people of Sierra Leone (2)**

Its main purpose is to amuse and entertain crowds of spectators at communal ceremonies. The exaggerated features of the face are intended to be funny. Early 20th century.



*Gongoli mask*

**Kovave mask used by the western Elema people of Orokolo Bay in Papua New Guinea (13)**

The masks were worn by young boys undergoing initiation into adult status. They represent 'bush' spirits who inhabit the forest surrounding the villages along the seashore.



*Kovave mask, Papua New Guinea, 20<sup>th</sup> century*

**Four faced helmet mask from the Fang people, Gabon, West Africa (3)**

This mask is thought to represent the white spirit of a dead person.

It was collected by Monsieur Andre Terisse between 1926-1929 and is an early example of its type.

The portrayal of more than one face could also provide protection as it would effectively confuse and frighten an enemy.



*Four faced mask, Gabon*

**Model of a Roman theatre mask (15)**

Modern Western theatre developed from the theatre of Ancient Greece and Rome. In Classical theatre, masks were used extensively to represent common characters. Full size masks were fitted over the head. Model masks were made for household decoration and might, for instance, have hung in courtyard gardens.



*Model Roman theatre mask. Italy, 50BC – AD200*

### An 'Ugly' mask from the Alpine region of Western Europe (14)

The folk tradition of making and wearing masks has survived and is still strong in the Alpine areas of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The true origin and significance of these masks has long since been forgotten. Nowadays the masks tend to be called ugly or beautiful. Ugly masks represent Winter and are chased by the beautiful masks representing Spring.



### Tigre or jaguar mask from the State of Guerrero in south-west Mexico (10)

The jaguar has been an important animal in Mexico for hundreds of years. The Aztecs regarded it as Lord of the Animals and associated it with war, power and the god Tezcatlipoca.

Although the jaguar is now almost extinct in Mexico, the Tigre masks are still amongst the most popular. The mask appears in several different dances such as the Tecuani dance or the Tlacololeros dance. The main purpose of these dances is to protect the crops, domestic animals and fieldworkers threatened by the Tigre, to ensure crop fertility and abundance. Consequently the Tigre is chased, caught and killed time and time again.



*Jaguar mask, Mexico.  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century*

### **Malanggan mask from Papua New Guinea (9)**

This mask is believed to represent a female spirit or soul. Male dancers would have worn it and other types of mask at festive ceremonies to commemorate and honour the recently deceased.

This rare and unusual type of mask was collected in the 1870's by missionary George Brown

