

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MASKS

Mask is the essence of drama. The act of putting on a false face and becoming someone (or something) else for a moment has not been changed by time. The history of masks predates the history of drama and dance. Face decoration is at least as old as music and has been a part of storytelling since language development began on earth.

Masks are used by people to communicate with others. Primal humans don animal masks or ghost masks and express their world. The 16th-century nobleman revels in the *commedia dell'arte* with its masked characters mocking his lifestyle. A clown strolls down the street in a parade able to delight young and old, who accept him as a jovial friend because of his clown face. Mask triggers what Coleridge called “willing suspension of disbelief” in theatre better than any other device. Chinese audiences recognize immediately the characters of lords and warriors whose elaborate, painted-on masks convey a long history of cultural tradition.

NON-REALISTIC THEATRE

There are a number of cultural and psychological factors converging in the experience of the mask. When someone covers up their own identity with a mask they become an abstract animation. If the mask conveys a symbolic meaning that we can *read*, we may be instantly aware of complex layers of meaning, or we may respond emotionally to the signals in the mask even beyond our conscious reasoning. The mask makes the actor into someone else, and we immediately accept them in their new role. Somehow, masks make us believe comfortably and safely in the illusion, the way a child believes in a cartoon character. Realistic plays with realistic make-up cause us to forget that a play is an illusion. It is ironic that masks, which are highly unrealistic, also make us forget that a play is an illusion.

LIMITS AND USES OF MASKS

Masks do not work well in film, which relies heavily on the close-up. They require the perspective of space in the theatre where the actor's whole body can be taken in or “read” by the eye of the audience. Masks also require the emotional involvement of the actor if they are to “come to life” on stage. They challenge actors to be precise in their crafting of gesture and physical expression while maintaining their own “willing suspension of disbelief” to create a genuinely emotional performance.

MASK AS ART AND ICON

Almost every culture represents human and animal faces in some kind of mask. Greek masks stylized the perfect human features in a realistic way. Unfortunately, Europeans used Greek idealism as a measure of great art. As a result, many of the symbolic masks from the cultures of Africa, Asia and the Americas were deemed somehow *less* than great. Symbolic uses of colours and exaggerated facial features were often seen through racist eyes and declared “primitive.” The term “primal” is more useful because it refers to people who have not completely severed their connection with the cycles of nature. When a Native North American carves a mask out of a living tree first, then removes the finished carving for use in ceremony, one understands that for many cultures, masks are religious items, not merely theatrical devices.

MASK AS SIGNAL

Masks function as a form of signal to the audience about the character being presented. In a crude form, the Hallowe'en mask serves this function by signalling to those who see it that the wearer's true identity is hidden and the character of the mask (although not *performed*) is represented through the mask. The exaggerated facial features and colours of masks in the theatre *signal* to the audience that a certain personality type exists within the character. The red nose of the drinker or the unshaven face of the hobo are evident in the traditional masks of clowns. The hooked nose and tilted eyebrows of *Pantalone* suggest the inner life of this stereotypical *commedia dell'arte* character without the need for elaborate scenes to establish character. Indeed, the half masks of the *commedia dell'arte* allow for both signal and verbal performance.

TYPES OF MASKS

1. Fixed Focus Masks:

These are characterized by decoration, painted features, and facial detail. Only one narrow range of emotions can be performed in these masks. They often symbolize or represent a single, known character within a cultural tradition (including pop-cultural icons or politicians). Example: Hallowe'en masks, ritual masks. Their theatrical expression is nil because they are created to show one attitude only. They are used symbolically as icons or signs in rituals and primal customs.

2. Half-Masks (or *commedia dell'arte* masks):

These are characterized by having the mouth free to speak. These are often one colour with exaggerated nose and eye structure. Made of leather or wood, they reveal the eyeballs and mouth leading to animated and interesting illusions. The characters of the *commedia* are recognizable to the audience familiar with the form. The Lone Ranger and Zorro wore simplified versions of the half-mask as a form of disguise, but not for expressive purposes.

3. Full Masks (sometimes called Rehearsal Masks):

These are characterized by being one colour (often white) and texture to allow theatre light and shadow to help animate the features. There are wide ranges of emotion possible with these masks. There are two types:

- a) Neutral Masks show no facial expression. They are designed to teach acting through "Neutral Man" and "Neutral Woman," presenting a challenge to actors who must create expressiveness in spite of a neutral facial expression.
- b) Expression Masks emphasize certain character features, yet are abstract enough to perform a range of emotions. The challenge is to work with them to discover the mask's best feature or focus.