

Studying the Role of Mask in Art and Culture

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Research Article

Abstract

Mask is one of the objects that date back to ancient times. Masks can have a magical or religious function. They may appear in "Tasharof" ritual or as makeup in a theatrical form or used to change a person's appearance in a ritual ceremony. The use of masks as a cover is seen in the native and old cultures of different countries. Considering the diversity and spread of masks all over the world, masks can be considered a cultural message that is mixed with local and regional art. In this article, it is concluded that mask in Iran represents the aspects of display and display, and in art, it represents an artistic tool by which the artist dissolves into another character.

Keywords: Mask; Art; Culture; Ritual

1. Introduction

Considering the variety and extent of masks all over the world, they can be considered a cultural message that is mixed with local and regional art. The small differences that we see in their details in neighboring regions show the cultural exchange of these regions, which has existed since ancient times between nations and tribes for various reasons such as war, trade, friendship, migration, etc. has taken place. In many cultures, masking is considered a part of ritual. Sometimes the mask gives superhuman strength to the person who wears it on his face, and according to his beliefs, he can communicate with his past. Changing the face by performing masks that originates from ritual masks can also be for the purpose of creating communication and increasing psychological power for political purposes and entertainment and happiness. But since these differences or changes have been made with the passage of many years of their history and have been adapted and harmonized with the art and religion of each region with great elegance, they have appeared as invisible

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changes. These changes can be seen not only in their appearance, but also in the functions and the way of performing the rituals associated with the mask. In the same way that the protruding eyes of a mask with the purpose of entertainment and laughter among a people, turns into a mask with hollow eyes of another ivory mask with the purpose of warding off evil in a neighboring area. Whatever the appearance of masks may be, it is obvious that masks are a valuable craft of the artists of each region, which are prepared with precision and a specific purpose. Mask is a cultural tool whose meaning has been forgotten and dates back to ancient times. One of the very important and unique points about it is that the emergence and making of the mask has also existed outside the scope of ancient civilizations, and probably in primitive cultures such as the culture of African tribes, it has had an interesting acceptance and evolution that even It has influenced the works of modernist artists such as Picasso.



Fig 1 African mask used in Picasso's painting

Over time, the word "mask" was applied to a person or a character who played a role in old plays with a mask on his face. At the beginning, this act was used during the religious rituals of the people of the past, and then it found a special place in Greek and Indian dramas, so that the masked person acted as if he was the goddess of life and death (Najafi Ayuki, 2011: 117).



Fig 2 Bronze mask discovered from Lorestan in Florida, USA

In our culture, masking and wearing a disguise means a kind of covering, changing the appearance, and maybe even deception, trickery, or pretense. In the sense that the mask wearer intends to change his position and play another role, wearing a disguise is a kind of personality change. This is while other cultures, for example the African culture of wearing a veil, do not have such meanings and the emphasis is on what is created rather than on what is covered. In Central Africa, "Makshy" is a common name for a group of masks and a show in which masking is part of its rules. In fact, Makshy ranges from funny shows to circumcision and the ceremony of resurrecting the dead soul. It works. In this last case, Makshy means the first spirit, and during this ceremony, they try to bring such spirits to the world of the living to fulfill the wishes of the living. Other meanings that are taken from Makshy refer to the spell, prayer, incantation and magical tools. In general, it can be said that verbal Makshy is considered a key to name a group of living forces, but in our culture, the word mask refers to non-living things (Yung, 1991: 154).



Fig 3 Ritual mask and African wooden mask

The variety and number of masks is a sign of the variety of their functions. Some masks are used for entertainment and creating enthusiasm among people and have a kind and friendly appearance, some are made for religious rituals and ceremonies and may have a scary appearance, some others are for honored guests and rituals are prepared, and those who convert to a particular society wear special masks and go through difficult and exhausting stages, changing their dignity and social status from childhood or adolescence to youth, from ordinary people to warrior people, and etc.

Contrary to popular opinion, the mask is not a false face, but a tool that creates a new identity with new traits and characteristics and makes this identity believable. Therefore, it can be considered a tool of transformation. Using a mask allows the wearer to appear in a situation that may not be possible for him in reality, so the appearance of this new character is possible with the magic of the mask (Bedouin, 2003a; 28). In many cultures, wearing a mask is a part of a ritual. For example, we can mention the healing dances of the primitive peoples of Oceania, which are performed with special masks (Figure 4). In such ceremonies, the mask acts as an intermediary between the higher powers (healing gods) and their main selves, and is even considered sacred, although sometimes this form of mask gives way to makeup in such ceremonies (Bedouin, 2003d: 36).



Fig 4 A boy dancing with a mask

2. Discussion

According to the topics mentioned, masks can be divided into different categories:

2.1. Mask of the Dead

The very common custom of burying the dead with a masked face, of course, is closely related to the cult of the dead, which, according to different cultures, either complements embalming techniques or replaces mummy. This is done in such a way that after preparation, they only cover the skull with it, or the whole head is separated from the body and preserved with a mask, so that in case the body rots, it is a protection for his soul and spirit. In the city of Jericho, Jordan, a number of prehistoric figures of a man's head with a piercing appearance belonging to the 7th and 8th millennium BC have been found. The faces of these real skulls are reconstructed with plaster and a piece of shell is installed in the place of the eyes. In fact, these were the founders of the face-making tradition (Figure 5) (Johnson, 1913: 16). The mask of death reveals one of the basic functions of the mask. "Louis Bedouin", one of the researchers in this chapter, says that it clarifies the role of the intermediary between the two conflicting worlds of life and death, the visible and the invisible. But, of course, it can play this role because it is basically a means to realize metamorphosis (Bedouin, 2003b: 34).



Fig 5 Plaster skull from the Neolithic age belonging to the old city of Jericho in Jordan

2.2. Mask of the Figures

Statues of gods in ancient Egypt and Mexico before the time of "Columbus", and probably the land of "Gaule" were sometimes masked. It is assumed that a mask with the shape of a jackal's head, which is kept in the Museum of Lore, belongs to one of the figures of a famous speaker. Sahagun writes in his book that in the month of "Izcalli", they made a doll of the fire god (Xiuhteucali), and on his face was an embroidered mask. They were tied with pieces of turquoise stone and rows of green stones called "Chalchuihuatl", which was very beautiful and bright. It is thought that the masks made with bronze sheets, which were obtained in the archaeological excavations of the Land of Flowers, may have belonged to the statues or dolls of the gods (Yung, 1993: 57). (Figure 6 middle).



Fig 6 Nigerian mask (left), African wooden mask (middle), Talisman mask (right)

2.3. Small and Spells Mask

The spread and dispersion of these objects, geographically and culturally, is not subject to a well-thought-out order. However, two types of masks can be distinguished: first, small masks used by dancers with special magical or decorative use, and second, the finger masks of the Alaskan Eskimos, which is an extraordinary mask. The small masks of "Don" (Ivory Coast) have a kind of handle that the dancer holds with his hand while dancing. In finger masks, this mask was installed on two rings that Eskimo women wear on their fingers. The artists of the former kingdom of Benin (Nigeria) used such masks a lot (Yung, 1997: 63) (Figure 6 left and right).

Carl Gustav Yung, one of Freud's students, classifies the mask into two categories; The first category is a mask that a person puts on his face and shows himself as he is not. The second category includes unreal ideas and fantasies that prevent the growth and development of his true self. Yung believes that the personality in their lives, they are under the domination of the archetype of the mask, like the actors in the plays. That is, the actors of the plays play the roles by wearing a mask on the stage of the play (Yung, 2000: 270).

3. Protective Masks

These masks are responsible for protecting the identity or health of the person. This protection and protection from the mask is not necessarily material but can be spiritual depending on their magical power. (Bedouin, 2003: c; 41) The mask of thieves to change their face or the mask used by warlords to disguise their identity against the enemy are also of this type.

4. Ritual Masks

Ritual masks are, by definition, made due to ritual needs and necessities. They have often been mediators between gods and humans. By performing magic and creating works that we call works of art today, early man tried to seek help from the gods to achieve success in hunting or war. Also, warding off demons and gaining the satisfaction of good spirits is one of his other goals in making ritual masks, which we see continuing today in the icons of spell books. In fact, the mask that man wore on his face in ancient times was a medium between supernatural gods and his audience (people or his enemies). In fact, in ancient times, we are faced with the issue that political positions had religious powers. Egyptian gods were actually masked people who tried to embody those gods with masks. For example, "Sobek" was a god with a crocodile head in ancient Egypt who ate the hearts of dead people who did not meet the desired weight (Hall, 2001: 41).



Fig 7 Ritual mask of Switzerland (left), Ritual mask of Bulgaria (middle), Ritual mask of Amazonian people (right)

5. Demonstration Masks

The origin and principle of ancient Greek theater can be found in the ceremony held in praise of Dionysus, the god of joy, movement and fertility. This ceremony was performed with music, singing, dancing, colorful clothes, various masks with the role of goats, devils, etc. The celebration was held in March and lasted for six days. During this time, all the people of Athens were happy and dancing. The cleric who played the role of Dionysus puts a smiley on his face. Since, six centuries BC, the face has had a high place in the ancient Greek theater. "Thspis" is known as the founder of the tragedy show and the innovator of face painting. At first, he decorated simple masks with white water, later he used more subtlety in this work and used plant color to paint on the face, then he made linen masks on which he drew lines with grape sediments. After "Thspis", "Phrynichus" made different masks for men and women. During this period, the actors were all men and the show was performed in a large space where the distance between the audience and the actors was very far. In female roles, white linen masks were used, and in male roles, a darker mask was used (Mihan, 2010: 5).

6. Mask in Human Cultures

Covering the face with a mask as a tradition, ritual or social behavior has long existed for humans. In order to respond to material and spiritual needs and to deal with the hardships and problems of his primitive life, primitive man had to adapt and influence his surroundings. Such a need was ultimately to turn to behaviors and rituals that could connect him with unseen forces and powers and belief in magic, healing spirits, saviors, powerful and holy ancestors, gods of goodness and benevolence, and gods of evil. In the meantime, putting a mask on the face or covering the head and body with a different cover in some of these rituals was considered a powerful tool in the hands of magicians and magic doctors and tribal chiefs. By using these masks, they became a mysterious and powerful person who was able to answer questions. This power and transformation has remained as a secret until today (Razi, 1992: 30).

The remains of carvings and stone inscriptions, mostly inside the caves, show the prehistoric use of the mask with more religious functions. The history of using the mask as a cultural-religious ritual dates back to the 8th century BC, which was considered a part of religious ceremonies and functions at that time. But there are also signs that indicate that the use of the mask is older and more rooted among primitive peoples. For example, we can refer to the carvings discovered in the "Trois-Fros" cave in the highlands of southern France, where a carved image belonging to the previous ice age was discovered. According to "Aleksandra Marshak", this image belongs to "witchcraft" (Figure 8), a mask with an owl-like face with animal ears and round eyes, wearing a skin similar to animal skin. The Indians carved their masks on a living tree, then cut it from the tree and put it on while it was still alive (Bates, 1996: 101).



Fig 8 Witchcraft mask

In the mysterious and ancient ritual of "Mitra", it has been common to use special masks in celebrations and different stages of people's lives. This kind of imitating their screams and shouts, imitating their jumps along with showing their movements and dances are actually surviving and symbolic shows of primitive customs whose effects have remained in the form of shows in carnivals and celebrations until now (Razi, 1992: 21).

In ancient Greece, the word "mask" was a derivative of concepts such as individual, human, essence, person and identity. In general terms, a mask is a preparation for covering all or part of a

person's face, his nature and his inner being that reveals it. Therefore, the mask can be an opportunity to hide one's identity for a moment and play a role that the appearance of the mask allows. The mask has the power of concealment and has the ability to change or distort the character hidden behind it. Wearing a mask allows a person to play the role of a legendary, ancient or invincible hero, even for a short period of time. The mask of death has always existed in the tombs of Egyptian mummies. This device allowed the spirit of the deceased to recognize and find his body when returning to his grave in the evening. Aztecs, Mayans, tribes from Central America, Incas and other Andean civilizations also used masks in their rituals. Indians, Japanese, and Chinese, along with Greek and Roman artists, used masks in theater and stage performances.

The Roman Church also did not underestimate the power of the mask, and by using it in religious ceremonies, it tried to make spiritual use of this device. However, the real life of mask among the common people flourished with the establishment of carnivals and seasonal festivals. With the emergence of "Del arte" (comedy theater) during the Renaissance, mask had the opportunity to once again appear in local and popular traditions (Ruh al-Amini, 1997: 61) (Figure 9).



Fig 9 The mask used in Del arte's comedy

7. Mask in Performing Rituals of Iran

Cultural rituals are woven in the depth of human life and have formed a part of his beliefs, convictions and outlook. Most of these social rites and customs have been created under the direct influence and through a set of different social, political, cultural, religious and historical factors, and many factors have played a role in their formation, survival and development. Among cultural rituals, there are traditional performances that are closely related to rituals and create ritual performances. These ritual performances contain a treasure of rituals, language, behaviors, moral standards, tastes, thoughts and religious beliefs. The mask was created to embody another being. The ability to show different characters and concepts along with social and historical conditions has created different functions for mask. In the position of fertility idols and charms, the mask finds a ritual effect that has a dramatic aspect in the show and theater and is powerful in terms of psychological messaging. Masks are effective in manifesting the creative power of the mind and harmonizing mental ideas with physical performance. A simple mask in the show as a raw material is able to actualize the creative power of its actor. Performance traditions and rituals always have powerful performance aspects and have common and sometimes unique characteristics in every culture. These traditions and customs are sometimes rooted in deep beliefs and thoughts, and sometimes they are in interaction and conflict with other ethnic beliefs and have entered the customs and traditions of the target nation over the centuries. Performance traditions have a close

connection with rituals and are among the most dynamic and powerful elements of various cultures. Ritual performances contain a treasure of rituals, language, behaviors, moral standards, tastes, thoughts, jokes and religious beliefs. Therefore, they are rooted in people's beliefs and beliefs.

8. Conclusion

In different lands and cultures and in more or less distant eras, the ritual role of the veil has not always had the same importance and meaning. Mask, which has been absolutely necessary for the religious life of some ethnic groups, on the contrary, in the religious life of other ethnic groups, it is considered as a secondary necessity of rituals and ceremonies. With the exception of theater and carnival masks, it can be said that all masks are fused with cultural life. Ritual masks have been mediators between Gods and humans and messengers of Gods, including the mask of spells and magic, and the mask of death, which was one of the basic uses of masks in the past. This device allowed the soul of the deceased to recognize and find his body when returning to his grave. Mask has long been associated with the most sensitive thoughts and beliefs of mankind, and their wide impact on the psyche of the audience is another aspect of this. How a mask psychologically causes a person to acquire a habit of behavior or a phenomenon of change of procedure and attitude is an indication of the updating of its ritual function. Mask is an opportunity to hide one's identity. The mask allows a person to play the role of a legendary, ancient or invincible hero, even for a short time. Some Masks are meant for fun and rhythmic movements, but it seems that the communication between supernatural forces sometimes takes place through fun and entertainment and brings everyday life into religious ceremonies.

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