

## Behind the Mask

Contributed by Administrator  
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In our fast-paced world, we've lost many of our connections to our past and traditions. We have also lost our archetypical characters and heroes. Tragically, we've allowed our ancestors, with their ancient images and storytelling, to slide quietly into history... or so we believe, until we are in the presence of a mask.

The mask is a profoundly mysterious and ancient art form that has touched nearly every civilization in history. From culture to culture around the world, the mask's purpose has been amazingly similar: to hide the identity of the wearer while representing another person or being. It is a shared universal need for man to communicate stories, to connect to the supernatural or ancestral powers for wisdom and protection and to open a doorway into the mysteries of life and the subconscious.

Masks cross cultures and time. Masks have been worn in rituals of transformation and in ceremonial dance to communicate with the supernatural for thousands of years. Considered objects of tremendous power, the shaman or the elite of the society wore masks with noble prestige. Shamans used masks for exploring the subconscious realm and for healing the body or soul. Masks were the gateway to the spirit world. They were believed to provide the ability to call up supernatural forces, ancestors and animals, to draw in wisdom and guidance, and gain power and protection from the cosmos.

Masks celebrate life. Masks are created from a wide variety of natural materials, including wood, leather, gourds, leaves, metal and fabric, and are adorned with feathers, grasses, vines, twigs, shells, stones, beads, bones, animal skins and natural stains. Masks were worn to celebrate joy and sorrow in many events throughout the year, often accompanied by traditional songs, dance and musical instruments. Masks magnified the drama and added importance to the stories passed down through generations. They showed honour and gave credence to the rites of passage, initiation and fertility. They asked for blessings during crop planting and showed their gratitude during harvesting. And they have been solemnly marched and chanted through war preparations and funeral rituals around the world.

Ancestral masks were objects of family pride, honoured with ceremonies and gifts and passed down through generations. They were sometimes thought to contain the spirit they represented, or a portal through which the spirit could come and go from the earthly realm—usually through a dancer wearing the mask. The dancer in a mask was no longer himself, but rather the embodiment of his ancestor.

The earliest known suggestion of masks is found in the cave paintings of Lascaux, in Southern France, created around 20,000 BC, depicting a man masked in antlers and deer skin.

In the Caribbean, masks are believed to date back to 1000-1400AD, starting with the Arawak-Tainos Indians, who made beautiful masks from shells, wood and gourds. Over the years, the mask-making cultures of the islands incorporated many beliefs from the Indian tribes of South and Central America and beyond. This exquisite Caribbean mosaic of traditions grew with the arrival of the Europeans with their religious festivals and carnival, and the arrival of the Africans with their rich history of ceremonial masks that can be traced back to Paleolithic times. Mix in the immigrant workers like the Chinese, Indonesian and Indian cultures, all with their own ancient masked ceremonies and you have a wonderful Caribbean art form that is unique to the world.

Carnival by any name. Carnival, Mardi Gras, Junkanoo, J&rsquo;ouvert or Jouvay... these are the best places to see masks. You only need to visit Brazil, Trinidad, Barbados, Haiti, Cuba, Dominican Republic, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas or any island in between to realize that the power of the mask is still with us. You will discover that no two festivals are the same, and each island incorporates its own special blend of cultural heritage and mask making.

Carnival masks by contemporary artists and craftspeople may draw inspiration from our modern world or be redreamed from the past. Still, they have the ability to pull us into the beauty and mystery that our ancestors knew so well.

Masks do not need to be functional to add a fascinating decorative element to our homes. Historic or contemporary, masks usually evoke a feeling from the viewer. Even in our modern, technologically advanced times we sense the mystery and power behind them and possibly feel the connection to the ancient tribe of man and the shamanic drums of history. Masks can add a thought-provoking and attention-grabbing feature in the décor of our homes.

Special Note: This month, unique masks made in the BVI and inspired by the rich cultural heritage of the Caribbean are on exhibit at The Gallery located at 102 Main Street, Road Town, Tortola.

We meet ourselves time and again in a thousand disguises. - Carl Jung

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