

Behind the Mask

Contributed by Savanna Redman
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Looking Behind the Mask: Part II

Carnival is just around the corner

Watch for beautiful carnival masks decorated with elaborate feathers. Feathers are an ancient African symbol of our abilities as humans to rise above our problems, sickness, pain and heartache, and represent the ability to travel to another realm of spirituality. The Caribbean carnival masks reveal a rich blend of cultures, festivals and symbolism that make them unique in the world.

Masks are an ancient art form that has touched nearly every society in history

In Mesoamerica, masks of ancestors and animals provide links to the gods and the other world. The jaguar and dog were two of the most common ceremonial animal masks—the former for its power and strength, and the latter because it was believed they could lead the way through the treacherous underworld. Like the Egyptians, Maya and Aztec cultures created funeral masks for those with the most important social standing—most commonly their high priests and kings. They believed the individual would continue to exist for eternity if their needs were provided for. By creating a portrait mask, they believed the beauty of the face would be preserved for the journey through the underworld. Many masks of Mesoamerica were inlaid with jade (jadeite was the most precious rock or mineral in Mesoamerica), seashells and semiprecious stones like quartz and obsidian.

For story and dance rituals, the Northwest Coast Indians carved detailed double masks of cedar. These masks opened at a place in the story to reveal a second face carved inside the first, representing a shadow ego or change in qualities of the character.

The Eskimo people believed that every living creature had a double existence and could change from animal to human being and back at will, so their masks had two faces, one of the animal spirit and one of the human.

As cultures evolve, the mask evolves with them

This may be a reason for the revival of the Life Mask offered in healing spas and holistic centres as a “personal journey into discovery” We all have a “public face,” sometimes enhanced by a well-tailored suit, sunglasses or jewellery that we feel reflects our character. We all believe we know what we look like to others, but unless we have a twin, most likely we’ve only seen ourselves in a mirror or in a photograph. Life masks offer an incredibly detailed portrait. The details of our faces are a map created over the years, showing our history, genealogy, life’s sorrows and happiness. Unlike a photograph or sculpture, a life mask captures the likeness down to the finest lines and texture of the skin. For decorative purposes (not for wearing), these masks can be created in plaster or bronze and be passed down through generations as a piece of family history, as a beautiful artefact of our ancestral past.

Sometimes people carry to such perfection the mask they have assumed that in due course they actually become the person they seem.

— W. Somerset Maugham

Enjoy the Carnival! Wear a mask and show your animal or devilish spirit.

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