The Mask and the Task

by Robert Lewis (April 2024)

Squelette arrêtant masques (James Ensor, 1891)

> *A mask tells us more than a face.* —Oscar Wilde
>
> *Personality is the mask you believe in.* —Robert J. White
>
> *Give us this day our daily mask.* —Tom Stoppard

Man has always been fascinated by masks. The first mask, repurposed from an animal head, was worn with the expectation of acquiring traits or attributes the wearer wanted as his own. Unhappy with himself 'as is' but wanting to improve himself, the wearer believed that, by donning a mask, the gods would endow him with the animal's exceptional abilities (strength, speed), thereby allowing him to more efficaciously

perform a given task: hunting prey, healing the hurting. The mask became the conduit—the short cut—to a superior self.

The origin of the word dates back to the 15th century: *masque* from French and *machera* from Italian. In the word mask we find mascara and masquerade. In Arabic, *maskharah* means buffoon.

We distinguish between the masks worn by primitive man, which served a narrow purpose, from the multiplicity of uses in the present age.

In the past, to more effectively or directly communicate with the gods or spirits, masks were incorporated in tribal ceremonies and rituals. Masks were used in war, to communicate with the dead, and in daily life, through fear and intimidation, to inculcate community values and set the wayward straight.

Closer to the present, surgical masks are worn to prevent the spreading of viruses and to self-protect against allergies, pollution and inclement weather (snow storm, sand storm).

It wasn't until the emergence of Greek theater in 6th century B.C. that mask wearing and especially mask making came into their own. By slipping into a mask, which was designed to amplify the voice, an actor could mimic the anatomical features of persons from faraway places and cultures. Until women were allowed to participate in theater in the 17th century, men played their parts by wearing masks, wigs and women's clothing.

In the late 17th century in aristocratic France, masquerade balls became *de rigueur*. As a sophisticated form of social entertainment, the occasion required that the invitees wear masks, and they would have to wait until midnight to reveal their true identity. The masquerade's popularity was directly related to the anonymity provided by the mask, the freedom and

giddiness experienced by the emboldened wearer who assumed the personality and mannerisms of persons they would otherwise have to refuse. Thus a high society lady could pose as a lascivious tramp and the baron's in-bred idiot bastard son could masquerade as Voltaire.

However varied have been the uses of masks throughout history, in chiefly Africa, the impulse that united all the original wearers was the desire to correct and improve upon human competence by fitting themselves into a severed animal's head and taking on the beasts most conspicuous superiorities: speed, strength, agility and fearsomeness, and, by extension or supernatural cause and effect, become equal to whatever prey their sights were set on. As such, every mask donning was a critique of the self, an admission to a flaw or deficit the mask wearer aspired to overcome. In primitive societies the mask was the vital link between the gods and the terrifying animal world the wearer wished to better understand. Among the beasts of prey that had to be subdued were mammoths, buffalos, giraffes and rhinos, which left Homo sapiens, a dwarf species by comparison, open to all options,

The first record of mask wearing dates back to 9000 B.C.

The early masks were theriomorphic—having animal form. After big game had been leveled and the head hollowed out and reconstituted as a mask, the alpha male or the tribal shaman would don the head with the expectation of assuming the animal's desired characteristics. It is only recently in man's history that masks became anthropomorphic, having human features, which came about as a concomitant of the demands of theater.

In response to the universal longing to break free from being one's self, most societies dedicate a much anticipated time slot for festivals or fiestas, often religious, that incorporate mask wearing into their rites and celebration. Among the most cherished of these quasi-bacchanalias are

Carnival, Mardi Gras, and Day of the Dead, where the participants, either out of envy or curiosity, but wanting to get out of their skins, dress up in masks in order to temporarily appropriate the identity of someone they are not.

Masks also serve pragmatic (preservational) ends. In totalitarian regimes, hiding behind a metaphorical mask is a necessity as it concerns expressing views that run contrary to the official party line. Even in democratic nations whose constitutions allow for free assembly, a certain percentage of protestors will 'disappear' their identity under a real mask for fear of losing, for example, their employment if identified with a particular cause.

In the present age, despite the juggernaut of feminist revolutions and reconfiguration of the power differential between the genders, masking up in the public domain is a cultural constant. When a woman does herself up, usually at the behest of an insinuating (bullying) marketing strategy conceived to make her self-loathe in her natural state, she is convinced that by hiding her face beneath a mask of cosmetics she will be more likeable and more likely to find approval from the male gaze.

Plastic surgery provides a permanent mask, with the wearer usually masquerading as someone younger, more attractive, permanently relieved of the embarrassments associated with aging: wrinkles, age spots and loose skin. As one would expect, permanent masks are significantly more costly than removable ones.

In respect to group behaviour, masks can be symbolic. Franz Fanon, author of *Black Skin, White Mask* observes: "The divided self-perception of a Black Subject who has lost his native cultural origin, and embraced the culture of the Mother Country, produces an inferior sense of self in the Black Man. The Black Man will try to appropriate and imitate the culture of the colonizer—donning the "white masks" of the book's

title."

In *Black Like Me* (1961), white man John Griffin undergoes radical pigmentation therapy to turn his skin black. The black mask he wears is the lie which enables him to discover the truth about racism in America.

If in the West, masks are worn by women to make themselves more sexually attractive, in Islam, the burqa as mask is employed to keep under wraps that very same quality. And it matters not whether the mask is donned by choice (in the West) or is enforced (in Islam) since mask wearing among women in both cultures enjoys a long history. When a Muslim woman, risking the opprobrium attendant to apostasy, disaffects from Islam to West, it could be argued that she is simply trading one mask for another.

In the public domain, men do not traditionally mask up, however among those who don't like the shape of their mouths or facial features, a certain percentage of them will grow beards and mustaches, which is consistent with the first principle of masking: to correct and/or improve upon.

Despite the myriad shapes and colours of the world's masks, the constancy of mask wearing is guaranteed by a jealously protected stratagem of inducing, especially in women, self-loathing and envy, with the mask serving as the transcendent from one's natural self to one's wished for self, the materials of which the barons of industry are only too happy to supply. The global market for lipstick is 10.4 billion dollars. The cosmetic surgery industry was valued at 57 billion in 2023.

Which is to say, so long as the mask, as disposable cultural artifact, continues to serve as a corrective for perceived physical defects or shortcomings, the daily rite of masking up is assured of a robust future; and more and more men are stepping up to the mirror. According to Ipsos, 15% of American

men between 18 and 65 use cosmetics and make up.

As to the growing number of disposable faces at our disposal, both the tea leaf and crystal ball readers are on the same page: if you can pay your way, there's room and a mirror and a cosmetologist for everyone at Vanity Fair.

Table of Contents

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