

RUPA - PRATIRUPA

MAN & MASK

20th Feb.1998 - 12th Apr.1998
Matighar, IGNCA



The Exhibition *Rupa-Pratirupa*, Man and Mask, continues to explore the cosmic principles of the universe through multidisciplinary and cross-cultural programmes which the IGNCA has been initiating since its inception.

The IGNCA's five previous exhibitions, on Space (Kham), Time (Kala), Form (Akara), The Five elements (Prakriti), and Cosmic Order and Cycle of Seasons (Rtu-Ritu), focussed on the perennial processes of the universe. The next series of IGNCA exhibitions will explore the Person/ Self. Masks are the earliest creation of humans to establish a relationship with, as also replicate and re-create, the outer phenomenal world and the inner person. This is the first exhibition in the series.

Masks and their manifold forms of guises are a very significant mode of cultural expression. This is one of the many ways through which cultures have given voice to their powerful cognitions and most subtle emotions, to define their inner and outer realities. In modern urban societies, masks have been devalued and generally considered to be a cosmetic disguise, rarely used on the stage and often deprecated in metaphors of everyday speech. Whereas, in ancient cultures, the mask is regarded as an instrument of revelations, giving form to the formless and the ineffable, and building a bridge between the mundane world of everyday experience and the 'other' supersensible domain of gods, sacred entities, invisible powers of nature, and ancestral presences.



In this exhibition, the mask is not being viewed as an isolated object, but is explored in relation to the multivalent concept of the self/*Purusha*; that is, mask in the context of cultural process, framed in the past, present, and future, and mask as metaphor for understanding and re-evaluating personal and cultural histories. The exhibition presents a wide range of masks selected from the IGNCA's permanent collection from twenty-two countries. The exhibition, divided into seven sections, takes us through themes of the natural forces, emotions, narrative, the social world, celebration, and ritual. These themes, while they knit together universal ideas pertaining to masks, also introduce us to the spectacular differences in their artistic expression. As in previous years, this exhibition will be complemented by an international seminar on the theme: Man, Mind and Mask.

MASKS ACROSS THE WORLD

This section presents the worldwide diffusion, the antiquity, and the continuity of masks across nine regions of the world: South Asia; the Himalayan Range and Central Asia; East Asia; South-east Asia; Africa; Oceania and Caribbean and South America; and Northern America and the Arctic.

NATURAL POWERS

Man's perception of the phenomenal world which comprises the vegetal, animal, terrestrial, and celestial world manifests in a variety of masks. Some are purely imitative or representational, such as the jaguar mask from Mexico; the lion from Purulia; the jackal from Gambhira, Malda district, West Bengal; and the buffalo mask from Sikkim. While those from Brazil, Africa, Sikkim, Bhutan and Kalimantan, Indonesia, assume a symbolic form. Masks linked to the natural powers serve the community to strike a harmonious balance with the forces of nature and the spirit world.



EMOTIONS

This section displays the range of emotional states that lie in the hidden recesses of our psyche, and which are made visible through a variety of masks. Regardless of the cultures they come from, masks convey the essential emotions. They may evoke wrath and anger, such as in the mask of Nanging from Bhutan and the Mahishasura from Purulia, West Bengal; sadness, as in the mask from Korea and Saraikella, Orissa; joy and laughter, as shown vividly in the mask from Mexico; and disgust, as in the mask from Korea. Some, as in the case of masks from Bali, Indonesia and Africa, evoke a sense of peace and equanimity.



NARRATIVE

The thematic content of masked performances are drawn from the vast corpus of myths and ancient legends. Most popular among these are the age-old myths of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. A vast variety of specific forms and styles have evolved in different regions in India. Individual mask makers and directors have created their own genres. This section includes the theme of Shakti, as reflected in the personification of goddess Durga; the *Ramayana* in India and Southeast Asia; the *Krishnattam* of Kerala based on legends from the *Bhagavata Purana*; *Sahi Yatra* from Orissa; Christian masks depicting the birth of Christ in the *Pastorela* from Mexico; ancient Greek Drama; the Buddhist legend of the guru Padmasambhava, popular in Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim and Ladakh; and contemporary interpretations on Mahatma Gandhi.





SOCIAL WORLD

The mask is a very potent vehicle of popular and sophisticated theatrical form. Themes can range from exchanges between people situated in a socio-cultural context, human and social interaction often framed within a context in legends from the past. Such themes are reflected in the Noh masks from Japan; in the Ha-hae masks from Korea; in the characters of the Commedia dell'Arte in Italy; and the topeng masked dance from Bali, Indonesia; more often, they include satiric comments on social caricatures and comic figures who parody the austere power of authority. Head and face coverings of the contemporary urban society, while they may protect the wearer, also convey social fads of today.

CELEBRATIONS

Masked ceremonies are always held at specific times: at the beginning or end of the year, according to the dates calculated by the various ancient calendar systems, at the beginning or end of the cycle of seasons. Certain junctures of the seasonal passage, such as the intercalary days, have been considered a dangerous period. This is a period when the dark and dismal forces from the other world and the souls of the dead return to the earth to punish the misdeeds of the living, or to bring good luck. The festivities and celebrations that were developed were intended to ask the spirits' favour. Masked ceremonies played a key role in harnessing the world of mystery and threat. All over continental Europe, from the Balkans to England and into the Scandinavian countries, in Latin America, India, China and Southeast Asia, seasonal masked processions are a common feature. The collective celebration creates a neutral space where culturally constructed identities



disappear.



RITUAL

Masks are used as revelatory devices to connect the seen with the unseen, or as mirrors of the cosmic dimension of life. They give a concrete form to the formless and reach out to a realm beyond the immediate. Masks have different uses in the ritual context. There are masks which are worshipped, and sometimes even serve as a sacred object or a cult idol as they represent different deities and their attributes. Deities may be represented in the form of isolated heads. In Greece, Dionysos was often depicted by a bearded mask attached to a pole. In Himachal Pradesh, god Shiva and Goddess Durga are often personified by *repousse* metal masks mounted on wooden stakes. In Andhra Pradesh the Narasimha mask in the *Bhagavata Mela* is also worshipped as a deity. Masks are also widely used in initiation rites, life cycle ceremonies and in rites of exorcism and ritual healing, as in the *Suniya-yakuma* ritual in Sri Lanka.