

The origins of masks

[Art & Culture](#), [Dance](#)



There is evidence that masks have been under the eye of the world for at least 20, 000 years. There is evidence to prove this all over the world, which includes paintings on the walls of the insides of various different caves in Southern France, to images also painted or inscribed on the walls of pyramids in the Sahara desert of Egypt.

Although our own British culture is extremely different to that of many others around the world, we are becoming increasingly more aware of how and why masks were first invented and the repercussions of them all around the globe. This is due to television documentaries, internet pages, and books at all of our local libraries. It is this point alone which initially brought my attention to that of the African Tribal, Japanese Theatrical and the Viennese Ball masks.

Although these are all quite different types of masks, they all have similar reasons for existing, whether it is religious, celebratory, or even to shadow one's identity.

By today's standards, many people believe the creation and use of masks to be only that of historical value; however this could not be more wrong as there is in depth evidence all around us which proves otherwise.

African Tribal Mask.

Example of Bamileke High Priest Mask

taken from www.rebirth.co.za

For many centuries African Tribal masks, played a major role in rituals, celebrations, ceremonial and tribal initiations. Masking rituals are normally accompanied with prayer, music, song and or dance. After researching the masks of African Tribes people, it is clearly visible that the different types of masks in which they use/used, fit in to eight different categories.

However, the one that grasped my attention from the moment I set eyes upon it was the Bamileke Mask. When I first seen this mask I was immediately mesmerised by the fact that where it is reasonably bright and colourful, it becomes increasingly dull when the expressions of the face are observed. This fact initially led me to believe that this type of mask was created for funerary purposes; however this is merely the tip of the iceberg.

The Bamileke mask was always worn by the chief of a particular tribe and it was this character that would take up the role of high priest, or chief, enabling him to initiate new-born babies to the tribe, lead celebratory or funerary rituals, lead his army in expeditions of war, harvesting and planting of crops and many more. " It is believed that when the Tribe leader wore the mask, he was transformed into animal form, primarily elephant, lizard, or buffalo. This allowed him to create a link between the human and spirit realm to seek guidance from his ancestors" (1).

This is a prime example of the fact that the Bamileke mask was used for religious ceremonies, however from my own personal research, I think it would be unjust to declare that this mask is of purely religious qualities, because in this unique culture, everything which is done, whether it regards basic human survival techniques, or celebratory events, it is impossible to

determine where religious elements come into the equation as they treat everything they do with such high regard. Bamileke masks are always constructed of a mixture of different natural materials. Where most traditional tribal masks were made from clay or mud, which was molded into the shape to fit the wearers face, the Bamileke mask was carved directly from the trunk of a tree which had been blessed by one of the elders before hand. It was then that a mixture of mud and sand was added on top of the wood to allow a suitable surface for painting, adding beads and stones, and in some cases, decorative leaves.

Japanese Theatrical Mask.

Example of Shikami Mask

Taken from www.nohmask.com

Japanese theatrical and dance performance masks are known as Noh masks. " Each individual mask represents a certain person, hero, devil, ghost or legendary animal, depending on what the character is in the performance" 2.

Masks were first used in Japan, since the Jomon period of time. This period of time pned from 10, 000 B. C; to 300 B. C. Out of all the Japanese masks that I came across while researching them, there was one particular mask that stood out to me above all of the others, the Shikami mask.

These particular masks are used to represent a demon, (this can be taken literally or metaphorically, depending on the story line of the play). For example, if the certain play is centered on the afterlife or elements of a more

dark, or gothic nature, the Shikami mask would more often than not be taken literally. However if the play was focusing on more modern themes, for example adultery, or murder, the Shikami mask would probably be metaphorical for a person who is to be looked upon as being of a more evil or bad nature.

I believe that the way in which the Shikami mask is presented is extremely clever, as on many occasions, it would look like Satan or other dark or demonic characters as they would do so from a stereotypical point of view, in order to make the audience immediately scared or at least weary about them. A basic description which is used across many books and internet sources for a Shikami mask is, " Fierce scowling face, showing extreme agitation, used for demonic spirit. It expresses masculine rage. The Shikami mask features the application of dark red colour, to crow's-feet and temples of the head" 3.

Japanese masks are always made of materials such as clay, dry lacquer, cloth, paper, and wood. The Shikami mask in particular is handcrafted from wood, before it is painted in a shiny lacquer. This is done to make every element of the mask stand out. The main surface area of the Shikami mask was always painted bright red, in order to express the anger and ferocious nature of that particular characters aura. The eyes and teeth were always painted bright gold, in order to bring more attention to them rather than anywhere else on the mask, as it was these aspects of it which explained the theme of the mask in more detail.

Viennese Ball Mask.

Venetian Ball Masks originated from Venice in the 13th century, however the exact year in which they were invented is unclear. The first Carnival of Venice was recorded in 1268 and it was these events in which the masks were initially used.

Where as the African Tribal and Japanese theatrical masks are not only harder to come by, but are always a lot more expensive, Viennese Ball masks can be found as easily as looking through your everyday shop windows. The fact that they are always a lot more decorative and fancy in a sense, they are commonly used for public holidays, the most famous of which being Halloween.

Example of Renaissance

Long Nose mask taken

from [www. nohmask. com](http://www.nohmask.com)

Viennese masks were originally invented so that a certain person, usually who came from an upper class background, could participate in activities which they would not normally do so.

There are a wide range of different Viennese masks, some of which merely cover only the eyes, to others which cover the vast majority of the face, and some times even the hair or neck of the wearer. This allows them to engage in certain activities which they would not normally do so, and keeps their true identity hidden from the public eye. In modern day life, there have been many adaptations of the Viennese Ball mask to adequately obtain discretion,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-origins-of-masks-research-paper-samples/>

for example a balaclava. However this form of discretion has enabled many illegal activities to be completed more successfully, and nowadays they are commonly banned from sale at many major retailers in a bid to try and discourage these things from happening.

When they were first invented, Viennese Ball masks were more often than not made with papier machete. This was achieved by taking a mould direct from a person's face, and then building off that. In more modern situations however, plastic or latex was used, as it was simply easier to gain a more precise and accurate version of the design in which the person desired. On most occasions, a mold was created first, using the same techniques of the papier machete way; however melted plastic is then placed in to the mould, effectively making it quicker and in most cases cheaper to produce. A certain Viennese mask which I was drawn to, was the renaissance long nose mask. Considering the time period in which these masks were originally created, it astounds me to even consider how such a complex design was achieved with the tools that they would have had access to.

The initial idea of the long, pointed nose was almost a superstition as it was believed to be an imitation of the devise which was used to hold vinegar in around the time of the bubonic plague to hold off the disease, or at least the bad odors of the sick or dying.

Conclusion.

From the research which I have gathered about these three different masks, I have discovered that although they all originated in extremely different

circumstances, the reasons for their creations are not all that different. It is clear to me that whether the reason for the masks' being is to allow someone to transform into animal form in order to get in touch with their spiritual or ancestral roots, or simply just to shadow someone's everydaypersonality, they have been put their, in place in order to allow a person to change their usual form; almost a form of escapism. It ha also come to my attention that whether it regards masks, or any other aspect of a certain culture which is different to our own, they are most definitely not to be underestimated no matter what time period in which it derives from.