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# NOH MASKS

## History of the Noh theatre

In Japan masks belong to a highly developed theatrical tradition. Its purpose used to be strictly religious but this has long since changed. Of all the Japanese masks the Noh mask is said to be the most artistic one.

The origins of Noh theatre go back to the thirteenth century. At that time a very popular performance was 'Dengaku no Noh' which translates as 'Field-music Performance' and it had its root in rustic acrobatic and juggling exhibitions. By the fourteenth century, however, Noh had become a kind of opera in which the performers recited while sitting next to each other and then danced. As the fourteenth century went on, another type of Noh, Sarugaku, which used a lot of buffoonery, developed into a serious dramatic performance.

► Noh mask depicting an acolyte, Japan;  
1884.114.34

► Noh mask of a god incarnated as an old man,  
Japan; 1884.114.9



In 1647 the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (the Shogun was the Japanese military ruler) ordered that no variations were allowed in Noh performance.

At that time stage directions were written down, costumes and masks were clearly defined and actors were allocated fixed positions on stage.

## Masks and other stage accessories in Noh theatre

Elaborate costumes are a very important part of creating a striking performance. If a play begins rather slowly it is likely that the audience will get bored, therefore the Noh actors choose bright and colourful costumes. Costumes can also help to communicate a special context, so a broad-brimmed hat made of bamboo would suggest country life.



These expensive costumes were often gifts to a famous actor by his admirers, something that still happens today.

Stage props on the other hand were hardly needed at all. More important than the costume was the Noh mask. Masks are only worn by the main character, his mask would stylise the person it represents and show them in a truer light than reality could do by depicting only the absolutely essential traits of character. There are five categories of Noh masks: gods, demons, men, women and the elderly.

The masks used in Noh theatre generally show a neutral expression so it is up to the skill of the actor to bring the mask to life through his acting.



◀ **Horned Noh mask of Hannya an angry female spirit, Japan; 1884.114.56**

◀ **Carved and painted signature on the reverse of one of the masks.**

The parts are all acted by men, so the task of performing as a young woman is one of the most challenging for any actor. The masks are comparatively

small and they only cover the front of the face having only small holes for eyes, nostrils and mouth.

Gregory Irvine describes the dressing of an actor in his book as follows: "After donning his sumptuous costume the actor seats himself before a mirror and studies the mask, becoming one with the character he is about to perform. The mask is then tied onto his head, any wig or necessary headgear is put on and he stands before a full-length mirror letting the mask take over his own personality before he is led to the stage."

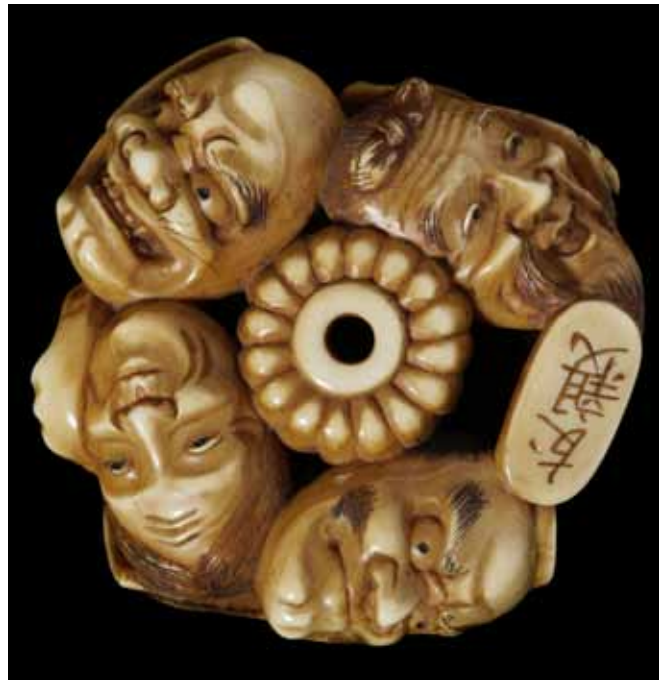


Noh masks have to be very light because they are worn throughout a performance that lasts for several hours. They are carved from one piece of cypress wood. After the mask has been carved to the desired thickness, holes for eyes, nose and mouth have been cut, it is then coated with layers of gesso mixed with glue. This coating is then sanded down, giving the mask its final shape. Finally it is painted in the colours prescribed for the particular character and some parts of it might be gilded. Some of the masks' eyes are inlaid with metal leaving a tiny hole. The hair and the outlines of the eyes are traced with black ink.

◀ **Lacquered reverse of a Noh mask of a thin old man. Extra wood has been carved from the nose area and dark blue fabric added on the right, possibly to improve the mask's fit for the wearer, Japan; 1884.114.24**

# Noh masks in the museum

The Pitt Rivers Museum has a complete set of 54 Noh masks (? are on display) from the North East of Japan, bought from a theatre in Tokyo probably in the 1870s. Buddhist priests made them in their leisure time. One of these was Zekan, who lived in the early Edo period, about 400 years ago. The masks in this collection are all from the Edo period (1600-1867), with singular masks dating from the early 17th until early 19th Century. The style of these masks has barely changed in several centuries.



▲ Japanese netsuke carved with masks, similar to the one above (1932.32.41), can be seen on the Lower Gallery (first floor).

▼ Detail of the Noh Mask display in the Court (ground floor) of the Museum.



## Further reading

Irvine, Gregory (1994) "Japanese Masks: Ritual and Drama". In: Mack, John (ed.) (1994) *Masks. The Art of Expression*. London: British Museum Press. pp.130-150.

Waley, Arthur (1921; 1965 4th impr.) *The No Plays of Japan*. [With letters by Oswald Sickert] London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor) – Case no. C3A – Masks

Lower Gallery (first floor) – Case nos. L91-96 B & C – Netsuke

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