



Carnival costume and masks

Introduction

Crucial to carnival arts are the ancient African traditions of parading and moving in circles through villages in costumes and masks. Circling villages was believed to bring good fortune, to heal problems, and calm down angry relatives who had died and passed into the next world. Carnival traditions also borrow from the African tradition of putting together natural objects (bones, grasses, beads, shells, fabric) to create a piece of sculpture, a mask, or costume with each object or combination of objects representing a certain idea or spiritual force.

Feathers were frequently used by Africans in their motherland on masks and headdresses as a symbol of ability to rise above, problems, pains, heartbreaks, illness and travel to another world to grow spiritually. Today, the tradition continues as we see feathers being used the same way in creating carnival costumes, masks and headdresses all over the world.

African dance and music traditions transformed the early carnival celebrations in the Americas, as African drum rhythms, large puppets, stick fighters and stilt dancers began to make their appearances in the carnival festivities.

Different cultures have different ways of creating and presenting carnival costumes and masks and in this fact sheet cannot cover all of them.

Costume making practicalities

Putting a carnival band (carnival club) together is time consuming and requires forward planning and in the case of large costumes, some financial backing. Getting costumes ready for the road involves welding, sewing, gluing, wire bending, batik techniques and silk-screening and of course plenty of community mobilization and patience.

If working in a group, the first thing is to agree on a theme or overall concept. The theme is utilised in the costumes for each section, king, queen, prince or princess and will be incorporated into the band's music and dance. A research phase will influence the designs and types of fabrics and materials required to make the costumes. Securing suitable space for creating the costumes will also be a high priority.

Costumes are sewn, decorated, and fitted to each individual carnivalist or dancer. All this creative activity takes place in a carnival workshop (mas camp as in Caribbean carnivals and creation centre in Europe) where teamwork and organisational skills are crucial to creating quality costumes.

The larger costumes are more demanding to design and build. They require construction of large frames created using wire bending skills or modern materials, which can be shaped to any chosen figure. Once the frames are done they will



need covering using paper mache, fabric, fiberglass or any material suitable for the structure. All this takes a lot of artistic endeavour to create the look of the finished product whilst ensuring that costumes are able to move freely during presentation or whilst dancing on the road. A well designed costume does not fall apart on the road and will be the one that mesmerises the carnival crowds.

Around the world there are carnival designers building large costumes incorporating new technology and materials and taking inspiration from other carnival practices, global fashion and artform practices.

Each continent has its own traditional carnival practices and characters of which some are known to the public whilst others are less common. In Trinidad, traditional characters such as the ones listed below form part of the Carnival competitions. The following are some of the traditional characters found in the Trinidad style carnival; Baby Dolls, Bats, Bookman, Burrokeet, Clowns, Bands, Cow, Dame Lorraine or Dame Lorine, Dragon, Blue Devils, Fancy Indians, Jab Jab, Jab Molassie, Midnight Robber, Minstrels, Moko Jumbie, Negue Jadin, Pierrot Grenade, Sailor Mas and Red Indian.

Many of the UK's established designers tend to visit Brazil and Trinidad to research costumes and seek inspiration. In addition, they tend to buy their materials there too; drums and percussion are cheaper in Brazil and fabrics and accessories are much cheaper in Trinidad. Observing the religious calendar, these international carnivals normally take place in February, a few months before the UK carnival season.

The Mask around the World

The art of creating a good mask lies not only in technique but also in the understanding of what is needed to produce a new face. A mask needs to have strong character traits, many expressive possibilities, and that elusive spark we could call a "soul".

The oldest surviving mask is the Sumerian mask of "Warka" now held in Iraq's National Museum. Known as the "Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia", the 20-centimetre high limestone sculpture dates from 3100BC and depicts the head of a woman.

Historians have documented the use of masks in celebrations, rituals, pageants and folk customs throughout time and across the world. In addition, the mask has featured in a variety of theatrical traditions and styles. The most ancient masks were used to represent supernatural spirits or as a means to contact higher beings. This spiritual use of masks is evident in some ancient African traditions and in many native tribes in North and West America.

In ancient Greece, the use of masks began with performances by masked actors. Masks were used to help the actors convey stories and traditions that included feasts in honour of Dionysius the god of wine and plants. Parades and masks are an important part of the carnival celebrations in most Spanish regions.



The wearing of costumes and masks for Halloween is thought to be derived from a Celtic ritual practised around harvest time in an attempt to ward off evil spirits. In Tibet, a masked “Cham” chases demons and evil spirits to usher in the New Year.

There is an ancient dance currently practiced in various regions of central Mexico, which is performed with a wooden mask that represents the Spirit of the Jaguar considered the king of the beasts in the Americas.

For the most part, people tend to associate the use of masks with ancient pagan rituals in order to placate or seek protection from evil spirits.

Mask making and mask style is very different across the world and can vary from intricate wooden masks depicting animals to the Commedia dell'Arte masks of Italy.