



→ THE "WOLF DANCE" OF THE KAVIAGAMUTES. ←
 → THE ALASKA ESKIMO IN CEREMONIAL DANCE COSTUME. ←

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 NOME, ALASKA
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Painted wooden Haida mask in the form of a wolf, early twentieth century.

Second Identities

The power of cultural masks

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

WHILE WE MAY THINK OF MASKS AS CONCEALMENT, they can expose substantial truths. In northern Native societies, people met the numinous most often in its animal guises. Some Inupiat believed that in times before humans had fallen from grace, animals wanting to talk to them simply pushed their beaks or muzzles aside, like a helmet's visor. A face resembling a person would show—the *inua* (Inupiaq) or *yua* (Yup'ik)—an expression of sentient nature. Transformation masks with mobile parts revealing hidden features hewed to such encounters. Correspondingly, the *inua* could appear as a tiny chiseled face peering out of one of a mask's eyeholes. On the flip side of metamorphosis, dancers and healers donning animal masks assumed animal characteristics.

The form and function of these dramatic props varied even within the same linguistic group. Carved of whalebone or wood (driftwood in tundra regions), masks incorporated other materials: copper,

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Rare Tlingit "young raven" mask, late nineteenth century.

abalone shell, walrus ivory, fur, feathers, teeth, tendon, hair, even Chinese coins. They were colored with soot, ochre, root or bark sap or ashes, or berry juice. Ranging from realistic to abstract, from plain to elaborate, they represented humans, deities, or monsters whose toothy grins split fearsome visages. Yup'ik examples sported stylized hands or constellations of tokens attached to concentric hoops. Miens could be cartoonish, distorted, or lopsided, implying movement, emotion; it's no surprise Yup'ik creations inspired Surrealist sculptors and painters in 1930s Paris.

In the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, mask making, mostly by men, had flourished for generations, but when missionaries arrived in the late nineteenth century, they banned dancing and destroyed many masks that to them depicted "false idols." Traditionally, masks enlivened ceremonies such as the midwinter hunting festivals, which featured dancing and storytelling in a *qasgiq*, the men's workshop and council house. They might only cover the forehead, or be finger "maskettes"—highlighting a dancer's hand moves, or completely screen performers standing behind masks hanging from the rafters. King Island Inupiat also displayed masks in their homes to deter spiteful ghosts, or placed them with the dead. Shamans who incarnated their spirit aides and instructed carvers about their masks' specific designs wore them on trance journeys or in curing rites. Secular masks provided comic relief in the presence of volatile forces. Most supernaturally charged masks were burned or put up away from settlements after being used once, but local traders sold discarded ones to museums and private collectors. Long suppressed, the tradition was revived at Hooper Bay in 1946 for a Disney documentary about Eskimo life. Villagers sculpted over 25 dance



Man wearing a ceremonial Yup'ik mask of the Nunivak style in 1927, by Edward S Curtis.

masks based on instructions by an ex-shaman then in his seventies.

In the Panhandle, that southeast Alaska ceremonial hotbed, masked Tlingit dancers re-enacted quests of clan-founding hero-ancestors and mythological holy beings. The rights to these dances, linked to inherited masks, were passed down in families. Ritual experts here, too, cured the sick, brought benign weather, and ensured bountiful salmon runs. With a special mask and task for each incorporeal helper, a shaman might call on the powers of several—they included "The Weeping Man," "The Controller of Tides," and "The Wealth-Bringing Sea Monster."

Modern artists revitalize the craft, sometimes in new, provocative contexts. There's a haloed 2008 take on John McCain's countenance and a "punk" polar bear mask built from scrap metal and kitchen utensils. The Yup'ik-Inupiaq carver Drew Michael and the Alutiiq artist Elizabeth Ellis smartly translated storytelling and healing with masks into the twenty-first century. Eerie but beautiful, 10 brightly painted, five-foot-tall faces on which they collaborated embodied diseases like cancer, HIV, and fetal alcohol syndrome. After a procession, they burned the effigies as was formerly done, a communal catharsis and purification. 🐻

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Yup'ik shaman and a sick boy in northern Bristol Bay, ca. 1890.

