

Mask-Making

Lends Mystery to Crafts

Kay Monson divulges the secrets of an age-old art



Mask-making has developed into the more complex art of sculpturing.

THERE'S something about a mask that is strangely fascinating—even the masks from the ten cent store and the false faces you once made out of paper bags were intriguing.

The real thrill comes in creating a human-like face—and in wearing it; perhaps it's making a bond between the infinite and the present.

Masks are probably older than idols. They had religious significance before the time of god-image worship and were used in savage rites. Primitive people wore masks in wars to terrify the enemy. It was in Egypt that death masks and images were used to harbor the soul and make life after death possible. Fortunately this belief has helped to preserve much of the history of Egypt.

In Greek drama, masks were almost a necessity. By nature of the old Greek stage the players were a long distance from the audience, and by use of a mask a mood could be highly emphasized. The masks of comedy and tragedy became quite standardized on the Greek stage and are used today as symbols of drama. With the wearing of masks, metal bars or sounding material could be used to amplify the voice, for Greek theatres were open-air. The Latin words, "Dramatis Personae", found on play programs, are a hangover that became corrupt in the Renaissance. It formerly did not mean "cast of characters," but referred to the masks necessary for the play. These masks were arranged on a rack for convenience and a diagram was sketched at the end of the script. The Greek masks were most often constructed of papier-maché.

In Rome the masks were made of faience, metal and terra cotta. Some tribes of our North American Indians made great use of masks. Many of these were made of carved light weight wood and of leather.

Though historic background is remote, modern adaptations have been eagerly accepted. Variations in tiny mask symbols are making up designs of colorful materials. If masks have significance as face coverings, they are even more important in modern applications of the excellent design qualities, such as those on dress goods.

Perhaps you own one of those miniature wooden African native masks designed in Hollywood. On nearly every costume jewelry counter there are mask forms in buckles, buttons, pins and rings.

Masks are an integral part of festivals and celebrations such as the Mardi Gras. At the little town of Imst, in the Austrian Tyrol, the traditional masked ceremony to keep away evil spirits which hinder crop growth still persists.

Modern masks can't be dwelt upon without mention of Benda, a master in the craft. His masks have

such force of character and such beauty of design that they have achieved widespread significance.

Do you wish to capture varied emotions? You'll find lots of tricks there. It is fun to illustrate your favorite book personalities, and it is clever to represent different countries in your stylized rooms, and maybe, if you're very good, you'll make caricatures of famous people or of your friends.

We'll start from the ground up. Clay is the best medium for building the form. If the more expensive plasticine is used, a false form can be built of corrugated paper.

Be sure to view the face model from three dimensions. Don't forget the side view. The nose, the upper lip, the eyes are all in the round, you know. Above all, don't try to reproduce life exactly.

The most exact reproduction of the clay model can be made by a plaster-of-paris mould. The dry mould will break cleanly from the clay, and the clay may be used time and time again for different masks.

The plaster-of-paris mould is now greased with vaseline or soft soap and is ready for papier-maché, material from which the mask is made. This is made by tearing newspaper or paper toweling into small narrow strips. Glue water, or library paste mixed with water to a syrupy consistency, is necessary. The paper is soaked in this paste, and strips are pressed firmly, one at a time, into the concave plaster-of-paris mould. Care must be taken to fill all crevices and overlap edges carefully for a neat finished product. Cover the mould with four thicknesses of the treated paper.

When the paper has dried thoroughly, the rough mask may be moved from the mould. The plaster step can be omitted and the papier-mache made directly on the clay, but the features would not be as accurate and accentuated as the original clay model.

With the rough mask comes the fun of decorating. Oil or tempera paints may be applied. If the latter are used, a final coat of shellac or varnish will furnish a gloss.

In ancient masks, color had definite interpretation, such as red for strong emotion and purple for royalty. We are not bound by such restrictions today, but color does have a psychological effect.

Mask accessories are interesting. Hair, beards, hat effects and teeth afford lots of play for the imagination. Benda even suspends a green glass eye to swing behind one of his death masks. Masks are often made on human faces, using a gauze background upon which layers of gummed tape are carefully pasted.

Good luck to you in your masking! May you find it an intriguing hobby.