

ARTS 2J Extra Credit Paper 2

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Animal Masks in National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC

In the third and fourth floor hallway of the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC, lies a set of “Window on Collections Exhibitions” (“Floor Plan and Guide.” 3). I visited this museum at the end of 2004 when it first opened (Doley) and visited it again on October 15, 2022 (Fig 1 & 2). The curator crams a lot of Native American artworks, from different sources, in this very limited display space. Many of them are masks. I found several interesting animal masks, from different tribes of American Indian, to illustrate the image of life inside the native habitats they co-existed with in their beautiful homeland.

The set up of this hallway exhibit windows are poorly done. The reflection of the window glasses prohibit the viewers to carefully observe the details of the artworks and take high quality photos. The labels of the artworks are nowhere to be found around the object but rather posted far away with tiny font size, making the study and identification of these artwork very difficult. I took a lot of photos but many of them are blurry or full of images and light reflected from the window glasses. I have to spend a long time searching their website to visually identify the objects in order to find out more detailed information. I understand the museum has much more artworks than the limited space they can utilize and therefore this exhibition is “crowded and busy”. I can sense the curator’s attempt to create a coherent exhibition. Unfortunately, it is only halfway done.

Despite my above dissatisfactions about this exhibition, I discovered several amusing masks that are highly esthetic, all illustrating the face of some wild animals which shared the nature world with the Native American for centuries: Two bear masks, two jaguar masks, a buffalo mask and a maskette which took the shape of a rabbit.

The Bear Hunter Mask (“Bear Hunter Mask.” and Fig 3 & 4) was buckeye wood carved, painted, and stained by Allen Long, an Eastern Band of Cherokee. The artist took a realistic approach to render the face of a black bear. The mask is in an upside down triangle shape with light gray blue color. The nose is long and covers the showing of most of its teeth from the frontal view. However, looking from the profile position, the bear is showing a lot of his white teeth while smiling to the viewers as greeting his happy meal. We sense a round furry bear as what we directly observe from the wild. In contrast, the Bear Mask from the Mad River Wiyot (“Bear Mask.” and Fig 5 & 7) took a very different artistic approach. The bear in this mask is highly decorated: a salmon is attached on top of its head; long strings of different hair-like materials attached around the head forming a rich furry look. The artist uses a thicker red line to emphasize the mouth and even thicker one to highlight the ears. Different textual patterns of light blue gray illustrate the direction of the fur on the nose and chick of the bear. The month of the bear is loosely attached and could be opened and closed. The Northern California Native American artist, Rick Bartow, utilized a much more complex and abstract approach to render bear in this work.

While we do not consider jaguars as a native animal in the United States today, they do live in Central America, in Mexico. We found two jaguar masks from Mexico in this collection: In the Mixtec jaguar mask (“Jaguar Mask.” and Fig. 7-10), the artist use thick red lines to outline the shape of the mouth, nose and ears, reminding us how Bartow render his Bear Mask. The

render the body with a triangle yellow over black pattern. The eyes are orange and the artist also takes a realistic approach to carve the shape of the head. The eye holes for the mask wearer to see through is the curved area on top of the iris that is hard to see in the photos I took (Fig. 9-12) but more obvious in the official museum posting page (“Jaguar Mask”). On the other hand, the Purepecha (Tarasco) Jaguar Mask (“Jaguar Mask.” and Fig. 11 & 12) look very different. At first, I thought that it was a boar mask but cannot find it from the museum search result. The museum page attributes it to a jaguar mask carved and painted by using “wood, pig/boar tooth/teeth/tusk, paint, boar bristles, and commercially tanned leather” (“Jaguar Mask”). Visually, the artist emphasizes the big red tongue, four white fangs, and a huge amount of whiskers. The height-width aspect of the mask is much taller. The body is covered by a thin black circle lined pattern over golden yellow fur. The mask, overall, is lighter, taller and bigger. The eyes are small circles and low, but there are two eye holes for the mask to see vertically between the eyes and the nicely curved eyebrows. The dark color eyebrows and nose line form a shape of cross pointing us to the sky. A large red square tongue and huge extended amount of whiskers attract all the attention of the viewers. These whiskers and fangs were made by boar bristles and tusks, however. It is interesting to see how the artist transforms the material they gathered from one kind of animal to illustrate another kind of animal.

Because my daughter is born in the year of ox and my son the year of rabbit, I also want to find a mask for each. Similar to the Bear Hunter Mask we discussed above, the Buffalo Mask (“Buffalo Mask” and Fig. 13 & 14) made by William Lossiah around 1937 is also an Eastern Band of Cherokee work and shows the evidence of the realistic approach of animal rendering. Lossiah created a very heavy looking mask by using “Wood, paint, imitation/faux fur, commercially tanned leather” (“Buffalo Mask”). The nose, horns and eyes are huge and the fur is

long. It could be very heavy to wear this work and I really hope the museum also has the weight information but they do not. I cannot find any rabbit mask but one Maskette in the shape of a rabbit (“Maskette.” and Fig. 15 & 16). I do not know why the museum staff granted it the title “Maskette” instead of “Rabbit Mask”. They attribute the work with a note that indicates it is probably Guerrero Nahua. The photo of the original entry card states “Copper mask of a rabbit head with wire features, painted yellow, and painted earrings.” (“Maskette.”). The mask is very colorful with a very complex pattern. The artist painted red, black, and white lines on the yellow copper surface to illustrate the face of the rabbit. White dots were added to render the mouth and the rabbit is wearing a pair of “earrings”, not on the ears of the rabbits, but rather, the position of the ears of the mask wearer. This additional unrealistic item makes the interpretation about this work more interesting than it needs to be. I love the two big ears and two front teeth of the rabbit. They are just cute.

In this paper, we discussed six different masks observed in the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC. They are not the most advertised exhibit inside the museum and got displayed in a very poor exhibit arrangement when I viewed them. However, I think they are more interesting than many other well-crafted, carefully orchestrated exhibits inside a bigger display hall next to them. I wish the museum could improve their exhibit quality and help the visitor to see the beauty of these works more directly and in a nicer setting so that we can freely observe them from all different viewing angles without any reflection blockage interfering with our vision and cameras. They show us how the Native American value the creatures that live alone side with them in their beloved mother nature.

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Illustrations



Left: Fig 1. The author posted outside the Washington DC building of the National Museum of the American Indian, filmed October 15, 2022.

Right: Fig 2. The top window of the museum and the multilayer round shape roof, with the circular lights naturally form a halo when the author took a selfie facing up toward the ceiling in the center of the museum.



Fig 3 & 4. The frontal and the left three quarter view of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Bear Hunter Mask.



Fig 5 & 6. The frontal and the left three quarter view of the Mad River Wiyot Bear Mask.



Fig 7, 8, 9, and 10. Various views of Mixtec Jaguar Mask.



Fig 11 & 12. The frontal and the left three quarter view of Purepecha (Tarasco) Jaguar Mask.



Fig 13 & 14. The frontal and the left three quarter view of Eastern Band of Cherokee Buffalo Mask.



Fig 15 & 16. The left and right three quarter views of Maskette, probably Guerrero Nahua.