



*Sri Lankan  
Traditional  
masks*

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# *Introduction to Sri Lankan Masks*

Mask making originates from Sri Lankan folklore and have been used in rituals, dramas and healing rites since the 1800s. Crafted using a light wood called Kaduru, these handmade masks are carved into folktale characters that portray beautiful and emotional stories enacted by experienced dancers and actors.

These colourful and meticulously detailed masks are believed to cure physiological issues and are still known as Devil Dances to this day. Influenced by Kerala and Malabar mask making techniques, the art of Sri Lankan mask making incorporates a combination of a variety of decorative motifs and colour along with improved designs inspired by ancient Sri Lanka. Currently known as a family trade, mask making can be easily found around Ambalangoda, Wathugedara, Bentara and other cities along the Western coast. Known as ‘The heart of mask carving’, Ambalangoda is also home to a mask museum that includes a mask-making workshop, showroom, and various other educational and awareness exhibits.

# *Introduction to Sri Lankan Masks*

In Sri Lanka, masks transcend mere decoration, becoming vibrant expressions of a timeless legacy woven with diverse purposes. Imagine stepping back in time to witness fierce Raksha masks, their colors warding off evil spirits in ancient rituals. See Sanni masks, their grotesque expressions aiding in healing ceremonies.

Picture stages in open-air Kolam Maduwa theatres, alive with comedic characters brought to life by expressive masks. Feel the thrumming energy of festivals where the Gara Yaka, half-human, half-lion, symbolizes transformation and renewal.

Travel to the coastal town of Ambalangoda, where rhythmic taps of chisels sculpt vel kaduru wood into evocative faces, echoing the enduring tradition of mask making.



# *Introduction to Sri Lankan Masks*

While some ancient roles may have faded, these captivating faces remain. They stand as testaments to a rich heritage, inspiring contemporary artists and offering glimpses into a world where stories unfold not on pages, but on faces themselves. Each mask holds a distinct identity and purpose, a piece in the cultural tapestry of Sri Lanka. Delve deeper into the symbolism etched in their features, witness the artistry that breathes life into the wood, and discover the vibrant stories waiting to be unveiled.

Imagine the sun drying small logs of vel kaduru wood, its earthy scent mingling with the sharp tang of wood shavings. Feel the calloused hands of the artisan wielding the chisel, their brow furrowed in concentration as they transform the wood into a face. Hear the rhythmic tap-tap-tap of the mallet, each strike shaping the mask's character.

Unveil the stories each mask tells: the Raksha's fierce protection, the Sanni's grotesque healing power, the Gara Yaka's joyous symbol of renewal. Explore the comedic skits brought to life by masks in Kolam Maduwa, the vibrant colors and expressions adding depth to the performances. Witness the masks adorning homes, not just as souvenirs, but as reminders of a cultural legacy passed down through generations.

Let the world of Sri Lankan masks transport you to a realm where storytelling takes on a unique form, where faces whisper tales of the past, inspire the present, and offer glimpses into a future where tradition and artistry intertwine.

# *Making of sri lankan Masks*

Sri Lankan masks played an integral part in the ancient days as they were used for various purposes such as for healing rituals, comic plays, theatre, dance and festivals.

As these rituals of our ancestors are fast diminishing from our present society, these masks are now used for decorative purposes or kept as exhibits in private collections by both locals and foreigners.

Ambalangoda - a coastal town in the Southern Province is still well-known for traditional mask carving and mask performances.

Mask carving is quite a complex process which requires a great deal of skill and patience.

The timber used for the purpose is known as vel kaduru - a tree which is found close to paddy fields or marshy lands.

The manner in which a small tree log becomes a mask the process is quite brilliant. The process begins when the tree trunk is chopped into small logs - generally into four, six or eight inch logs, depending on the size of the mask. The wooden logs are then kept for drying in the sun for a couple of days to take the sap out.



# *Making of sri lankan Masks*

These are the ingredients and tools that are needed to make the masks. Kaduru wood, a vice, cross cut saw, hand axe, various types of chisels, a ruler, a mallet, a whet-stone, abrasive materials, A pair of compasses, an angle, a ruler and a plumb rule, Brushes, colours, resin, oil and clay.

At the beginning, the outline of the mask is drawn on the log using the hand axe. Afterwards they are kept on a stall by the fireplace for a few days for seasoning. This is important to keep the masks free of insect attacks. Carving of the mask begins afterwards. Carving is done using the chisel. During the carving process the log is transformed into an intricate design by the carver with various facial features and expressions to create the characters that come in folklore such as Nonchi akka and Lenchina, or the mask figures used for various healing rituals.





## *Making of sri lankan Masks*

Once this is done, the masks are kept in the sun for drying for a few days before smoothening its surface with sandpaper.

After this point on, the artists who are specialised in colouring/drawing the masks, take over. They first apply a base paint on the mask - mostly a yellow shade before painting the masks using various other colours to suit different characters.

The traditional Sri Lankan mask is hand carved by an edura, or exorcist, out of local wood and polished using certain plant leaves. Next it is painted with natural organic and mineral based pigments. Usually, white colour comes from clay, green from leaves, blue from fruits, yellow from yellow pepper, black from charred cotton and red from red bricks or clay. A sealant comprising of beeswax is then applied to protect the colours before the artisan makes the final touch ups.

# *Making of sri lankan Masks*

Facial hair is mimicked through the use of elephant hairs, and monkey skin is also sometimes used to give that authentic velvety skin-like feel. When not mass-produced, each mask is unique, intricately designed and evidence of incredible attention to detail.

After all this was accomplished, the mask was put close to the fireplace to let it dry. Then the face of the mask was smoothened with the skin of a seafish (thalapath) and later with a leaf with a rough surface (motadeliya). To provide a durable coat, a mixture of resin powder (dummala), a tree oil (dorana tel) and clay (alliyadu) was applied. This surface was smoothened with the spathe of the breadfruit flower ( del Saueran).

Ears of the masks are made separately and these are attached to the masks in the end.

Raksha masks are made from local Kaduru wood which grows in rice paddies and swamps.



# *Making of sri lankan Masks*

Kadura wood is transformed into a mask,

- Dry the wood in the sun.
- Chop and chisel the wood into the required shape.
- Cure the wood for seven days over a smoky hearth to protect it from insect attacks.
- Carefully smooth and craft the facial expressions of the characters in the wood.
- Apply brightly coloured paint and intricate patterns to create a theatrical masterpiece



# Making of sri lankan Masks

Given below the step by step guide on Mask making process.

- A good Kaduru tree (Strychnine tree, *Strychnos nux-vomica*, also known as poison nut. It has soft, easy to carve wood) is selected and felled.
- The trunk dried to drain the sap and then when completely dry measured and cut into pieces.
- The basic shapes of the masks are carved using a mallet, chisels and various other tools and in accordance to measurements in ancient scriptures
- The wood is then smoked on racks in a large hearth to prevent future damage from insects.
- The seasoned wood is carved into elaborate faces and expressions and smoothed.
- Afterward the masks are painted in colours as mentioned in the scriptures with paints treated in the traditional way for durability.



# Srilankan Mask meausium

## Ambalangoda, Sri Lanka

The area around Ambalangoda, about 25km up the coast from Galle, is well-known for the craft of mask production. The masks are worn in dances, and are also sold to the tourist trade and institutions for display. This private museum, for example, is also a commercial outfit, selling masks that are made by hand on the premises.

According to the museum's handout, there are three kinds of masked dances. Kolam masks are used in storytelling performances. Raksha (Demon) masks are apotropaic, used in processions and festivals. Sanni ("Devil Dance") masks are also apotropaic, used in curing ceremonies.

The mask seen here is Kolam, worn during performance of a tantri tale (folktale) in which a treacherous princess gives up her husband for a rival king, who then rejects her. The moral of the story is that the princess is like a greedy fox, who drops a piece of meat to grab for a fish instead, but loses both the meat and the fish in the process.

# Different types of Mask

## Raksha Masks

Perhaps the most colourful and fearful looking of the traditional Sri Lankan masks the Raksha Marks or the Demon Masks as they are widely known are commonly featured in Raksha dance rituals and also used to ward off evil spirits in households. Most commonly employed in dance performances in the Kolam Maduwa Raksha Masks include 24 individual masks used to represent various demons according to myth and local folklore. Sri Lanka was believed to have been occupied by members of the Raksha race in ancient times with King Ravana of Ramayana fame serving as the monarch. There are five main varieties of Raksha masks used in Kolam dance sessions today. They are the Naga Raksha Mask or Cobra Mask, the Gurulu Raksha Mask, Maru Raksha Mask (associated with Death), Purnaka Raksha Mask and the Rathnakuta Raksha.



# Different types of Mask

## Makara Mask

This Kolam mask uses a makara arch to symbolize the Karava people, who are ethnic fisherfolk. The female figure standing under the arch can "juggle" the spheres in her hands -- they move up and down on the wires as the mask is wiggled. It is seen, on this and the following mask, that Hindu religious iconography has been coopted to serve the cultural requirements of the villagers who carve and dance the masks.

The masks displayed here are modern, carved from a soft wood that is similar to balsa wood.



# Different types of Mask

## Garuda Mask

This mask impersonates Garuda, the solar bird who is the vehicle of Vishnu. It is used in a Raksha Dance (Demon Dance) to frighten away the Cobra Demon. Garuda is decorated with enemy snakes, as if they were a sort of trophy. The dance is apotropaic, its purpose being to magically avert the real danger that snakebite poses to the villagers.



# Differend types of Mask

## Maha Kola Mask

Maha Kola is the boss of 18 demons of illness that are represented in the Sanni Dance ("Devil Dance"). Holding victims in his hands and mouth, Maha Kola is surrounded by snakes and by the 18 Sanniyas - the demons of blindness, cholera, boils, and other pestilences, each of whom is given its own mask. As the curing ceremony proceeds, a ritual specialist propitiates the appropriate demon(s) on behalf of the patient and his family. When done, the demons are dismissed and the area is ritually cleansed of any lingering bad influences.



# Differend types of Mask

## Kolam Masks

Used in conventional works of theatre, Kolam performances are in fact a variety of plays that are employed not only to entertain but also to re-enact various mythologies and folk beliefs of villagers.

Kolam mask manufacturers are few and far between in this day and age although the Ariyapala Wijesuriya clan still produces masks and performs Kolam dance rituals to this day. The history of the Kolam masks dates back to the era of King Maha Sammatha.

Legend states that his wife, the queen felt the urge to see a masked dance performance during pregnancy although such dance forms were unknown to the local populace during the period. The deities Sakra and Vishvakarma (the patron god of craftsmen) it is said are believed to have joined forces to create the masks and the songs and dance rituals known as Kolam today to entertain her majesty. Humorous in appearance and context Kolam mask varieties include popular folk characters the likes of Nonchi akka, Mudali, Panikkala, Lenchina, Hewa and Jasaya.



# Different types of Mask

## Sanni Mask

Primarily used to cure illness Sanni masks come in 18 varieties which each mask serving as the representative mask for various physical ailments ranging from small pox to fits and fevers. The cause of these ailments is thus attributed to a specific demon that is represented at the Sanni performance as a masked dancer. The patient is made to witness the dispelling of these disease causing demons or Sannis in the performance to alleviate not only the physical symptoms of the disease but also the physiological stronghold the illness has on the patient.



# Resources

Videos:

- Traditional Mask making from Sri Lanka (Wesmuhunu): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC6LNeC9YUw>
- Sri Lanka Traditional Mask Making | Ambalangoda: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKuKDygfHAU>





Thank You