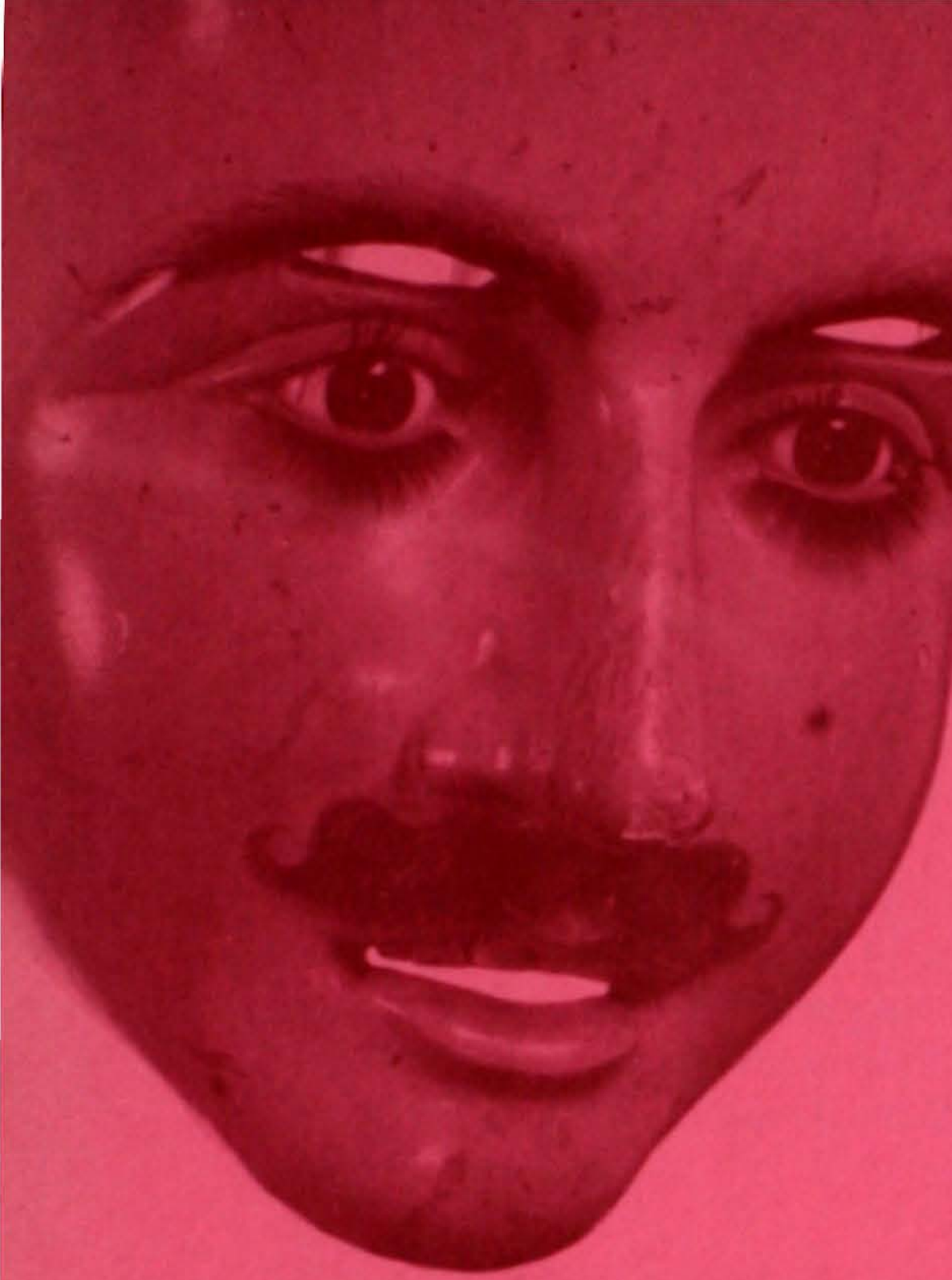


MEXICAN FESTIVAL AND CEREMONIAL MASKS

An Exhibition of masks from the Victor José Moya Collection, presented at the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, and the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco. Co-sponsored by the Government of Mexico and the Center for Folk Art and Contemporary Crafts, San Francisco, in honor of the U.S. Bicentennial.

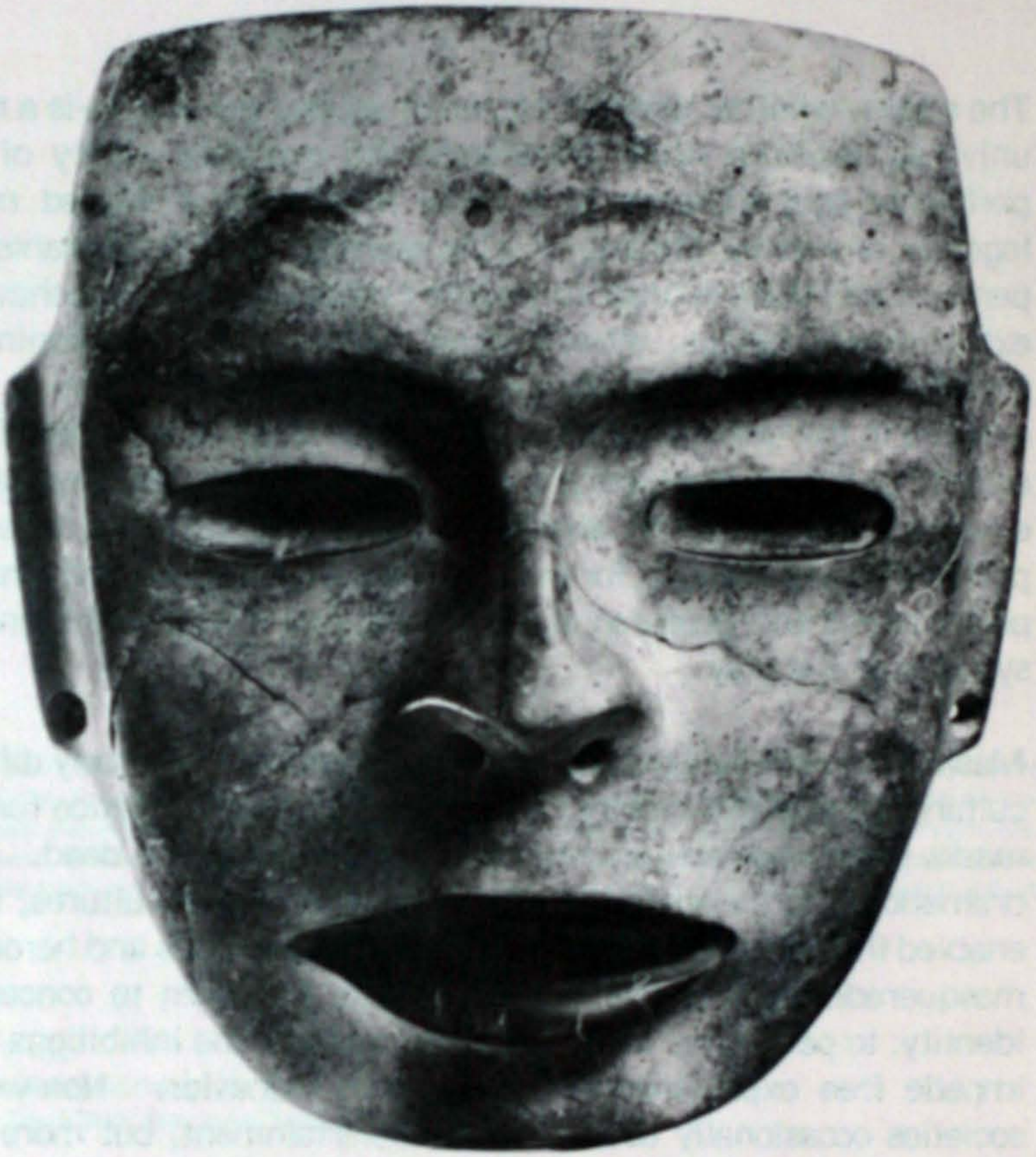
Cordial thanks are extended to the Mexican Government for underwriting shipment and insurance costs of the exhibition from Mexico. In addition to Ing. Victor José Moya, the collector and lender of the masks, gratitude is here expressed to Lic. Alberto Becerra Sierra, Consul-General of Mexico, San Francisco, and to Professor Nelson Graburn, University of California, Berkeley and Ms. Margery Anneberg, President of the Board of Directors and Director, respectively, of the Center of Folk Art and Contemporary Crafts, for aid in arranging the exhibition and in production of this booklet.

Cover Photo:
Ayacahuite wood mask with glass eyes and natural eyelashes. Dance of the Cuadrillas; San Juan Totolac, Tlaxcala. (EP)

INTRODUCTION

The mask—whether used for sacred or secular purposes—is a nearly universal medium which transforms the everyday reality of both performer and audience in a ritual enactment of shared myths, legends, or events. Through this transformation all participants shed personal identities in order to assume the appearance and behavior of extraordinary beings, often imbued with archetypal meanings of immense symbolic significance. In the trancelike state of mind induced in the masked performer, the restricted movements of daily activity give way to exuberant kinetic expressions; the physical and emotional discharge of energies produces a cathartic effect on performers and viewers, for in these spectacles all enter fully into the personalities and gestures of the actors, and into the allusions and symbols of the play.

Masks of diverse functions and forms are known from many different cultures throughout history. In Ancient Egypt and Mexico funerary masks preserved forever the physical presence of the dead. In the dramatic performances of ancient Greece and other cultures, masks enabled the actors to assume the personalities of gods and heroes. In masquerades and at the carnival, masks are worn to conceal the identity: to permit the individual to act without the inhibitions which impede free expression in normal daily behavior. Non-western societies occasionally use masks for entertainment, but more often they are employed for the education of the young, and for reenactment of symbolic rituals which regulate the order of society and of the larger cosmos. We recognize all these functions in the masks and masked performances of the ancient and modern Mexicans.



Serpentine mask carved in the Toltec style. Guerrero. (EP)

BEGINNINGS:

When the Spaniards conquered Mexico early in the 16th century, a tradition of masked dances and ceremonials was fully developed among the diverse native kingdoms which comprised Mesoamerican civilization. Early chroniclers enthusiastically described the gorgeously attired priests and warrior-dancers, ornamented with gold and clad in jeweled and feathered vestments, who performed sacred rituals of war, the hunt, and propitiation of the gods for the Aztec court and community. Masks—of wood and stone, mosaics and precious metals—were integral to these ceremonies, for they transformed the performers from human beings into vessels possessed by the gods, shifted momentarily onto an otherworldly plane. Each deity had a mask specifically associated with him, and the making of these holy objects was entrusted only to the most skilled and devout craftsmen.

With the Spanish conquest the old religions were destroyed, and the old masks disappeared or fell into disuse. The missionaries, however, zealous for converts to Christianity and with a clever eye for preserving traditional behavior if it could be used to propagate the new faith, realized that the native love for dramatic ceremonies could easily be turned to good account: let the people resume their dances and plays, but substitute Christian characters and events in place of the pagan myths and gods. Thus, through the medium of the priests, the masked dances of modern Mexico were born, somewhat similar in outward trappings to the "heathen" ceremonies, but in substance transformed into European folk dramas. Only in remote rural areas, where the influence of the priests and army was weak, did ancient forms survive. Here, for example, one can still find grotesque animal masks and dances which reflect ancient agricultural ceremonies.

Devil's mask of wood, leather, and horn. Unidentified dance; Guerrero. (EP)

Gourd mask with maguey fiber hair. Dance of the Hortelanos; Barrio de la Magdalena, Uruapan, Michoacán. (JO)

MATERIALS

The realization of a mask requires imagination, manual skill, and appropriate construction materials; from this point of view, the masks of Mexico show at least as great a variety as can be seen anywhere in the world. Although archaeological discoveries have only yielded masks made of clay, stone, and precious metals, it can be assumed that ancient craftsmen used other materials as well. We know from the Spanish chronicles that masks of wood and animal hides were common; often the entire costume consisted of the skin of a jaguar or other animal worn over the dancer's body, with the head serving as a mask. Modern mask makers use whatever available material they find suitable for their ideas. In addition to the traditional stone, wood, metal, hide and feather constructions, more recently introduced stuffs such as mirror glass, papier-mâché, wire screening cloth, beads, and ribbons are used, often to enhance brilliantly lacquered surfaces. Horsehair and cactus fibers, bits of leather, animal teeth and other substances may be used to add details. Only the craftsman's wishes or the demands of patrons limit the materials of a composite mask.

FORMS

Unlike many of the exotic masks of Africa and Melanesia, which frequently depict creatures seen only in the imagination, most Mexican masks are limited to one basic form—the human face. This is true of the bulk of ancient masks unearthed by archaeologists, and it is true also of the modern products. Working within this limitation, Mexican craftsmen lavish the products of their fertile imaginations to create an incredible assortment of grim, fantastic, humorous, and whimsical moods, each appropriate to a specific character or drama. The masks may be male or female, simple or ornate, of crude workmanship or slickly sophisticated. A number of Indian groups (the Seri, Cora, Mayo, Yaqui, and Huichol) still make traditional masks little influenced by the mainstream Mexican style. Within this style, most human depictions clearly derive from European models although occasionally a character can be interpreted as Indian. (Oddly enough, masks were almost completely absent from Spanish folk dramas; their use in the Mexican versions of these plays seems to have been an adaptation to Mexican custom.) The forms seem to stem from European pre-Lenten carnival masks, and many are used for this purpose. Some masks, though used in dramas with Spanish subject matter, reflect style traditions which antedate the Spanish conquest. Even those masks which are clearly based on European models show their Mexican character in expression and ornamentation.

In addition to depicting the human face, the Mexicans make two other categories of masks: animal and devil. For the most part, animal masks are made and used in relatively isolated areas, where Indian

traditions are stronger and where religious concern with animals typical of pre-Conquest religion survives to some extent. Two kinds of devil masks appear. The first is very like the stereotyped European Satan, with leering mouth, pointed horns, and generally "devilish" demeanor. The second kind, found mostly in Guerrero, reminds one of pre-Columbian carvings of demons and monsters. These differences in forms are mirrored by distinctive functions; the European-type devils are clowns who amuse and threaten the audience during the Spanish/Catholic dance festivals, while the devils of Guerrero are specific characters in an Indian drama, the "Dance of the Devils."

Lacquered wood mask decorated with mirrors, silk flowers, gilded paper, and lamb's skin. Dance of the Negritos; Uruapan, Michoacán. (JO)

Wood carnival mask, called bigoton, "the big mustache". Cuetzalán, Puebla. (EP)

Wood mask of.a devil, Dance of the Devils; Guerrero. (JO)

CARNIVAL MASKS

The Carnival, a fiesta immediately preceding the fasting season of Lent in the Catholic calendar, was another element brought to the New World by the Spanish. During Carnival, practically everyone indulges in a riot of eating and drinking, dancing, and all varieties of debauchery. Class distinctions become temporarily meaningless, men dress as women and women as men, and people try to outdo one another in the color, variety, and outrageousness of their costumes. Tradition makes this extraordinary behavior permissible, and the wearing of masks makes people bold. Almost without exception carnival masks are based on European forms; generally they are simpler than masks for the dance-drama; and the range of individualized expression is relatively narrow, since their purpose is not to tell a story but temporarily to help transcend mundane existence in an orgy of play.

Ceramic mask with maguey fiber hair. Dance of the Viejitos; Isla de Janitzio, Pátzcuaro, Michoacan. (JO)

THE DANCE DRAMAS

The most interesting use of masks in Mexico derives from their role in the many dance dramas which have evolved from the replacement of aboriginal mythological dances with ones portraying European and Christian subjects. Two of these, Moros y Cristianos (Dance of the Moors and Christians) and la Conquista (Dance of the Conquest) are widespread throughout the heavily-populated central and southern sections of Mexico, where they are known in several variants. Other dances, such as those of the Tigre complex, are concentrated in Guerrero state and adjacent regions; these preserve many aboriginal features.

In spite of the apparent profusion of dances bearing different names, the actual number can be reduced if dances which are merely varieties of one another are lumped together. Furthermore, many named characters (such as Pilatos, la Malinche) are found in totally unrelated dances. This may possibly be due to the confusion of the Indians when first confronted with a bewildering array of new ideas and legends. In any event, research has shed little light on the internal relationships of the dances to one another; the overlapping of characters and motifs remains confusing and difficult to sort out.

Although the total number of dances may run into the hundreds, several stand out both for their wide distribution and for the easily demonstrable manner in which they can be described as complexes, that is, as groups of related dances.

MOROS Y CRISTIANOS—
The Dance of the Moors and Christians

The Dance of the Moors and Christians, with its variants, was transplanted in its entirety to Mexico and other parts of Latin America after the Conquest. This dance developed in Spain during the Middle Ages as a ritual reënactment of the centuries-long struggle of Moslem Moors and Christian Spaniards for control of the Iberian peninsula. Basically, the dance depicts a combat between the opposing forces of good (Christians) and evil (Moors). Groups representing the armies are drawn up in ranks opposite one another, and rhetorical discussions between ambassadors for the two sides take place. After these fail, the armies clash; at first the Christians are beaten back, but at a crucial point divine intervention (in the person of Saint James or of an angel) turns the tide in favor of the Christians. The Moors are vanquished and, impressed by the evidence of superior Christian spiritual aid, accept the victorious faith. Sometimes the dance concludes with a replica of a Moorish castle exploding in a brilliant fireworks display.

The final reconquest of Spain from the Moslems (1492) coincided with the discovery of a New World filled with heathen races, and this dance was a ready-made device for instructing the natives in the power of the new religion. By 1539, only 20 years after Cortés landed in Mexico, the dance was being performed expertly by all-Indian groups. Soon the dance became adapted to colonial conditions, and changes appeared which suited local situations better. Moors and Christians sometimes became pagan and Christian Mexicans, Spanish conquistadors and Aztecs, or (in the mid-nineteenth century) patriotic Mexicans and French invaders.

The Dance of the Moors and Christians takes place during fiestas to the patron saints. The dancers are accompanied by brass bands, or sometimes fife and drums.

Other variants of this dance are called Los Santiagos (The Dance of Saint James), Los Moros Chinos (The Dance of the Chinese Moors), La Morisma (The Dance of the Moorish Multitude), and Los Pilatos (The Dance of Pilate).

Wood mask representing Pontius Pilate. Dance of the Moors and Christians; Tlacuitlapa, Guerrero. (JO)

LA CONQUISTA—
Dance of the Conquest

The Dance of the Conquest (also called Dance of the Aztecs, Dance of the Chichimecs, Dance of the Concheros) apparently evolved from the Dance of Moors and Christians sometime between the 17th and 19th centuries. So many new elements were added that it has become a completely new dance in all essentials. Many thousands of Mexicans belong to the various organizations which perform this dance, most popular in the area around Mexico City. Traditionally the dance originated to commemorate Spanish victories over the savage Chichimec tribes of the state of Querétaro. As in the Dance of Moors and Christians, supposedly divine intervention convinced the Chichimecs to convert to Christianity; the new converts became the first dancers of la Conquista.

Unlike orthodox Catholicism, Conchero doctrine includes veneration of patron saints and worship of the dead Conquerors; the Concheros also practice magical rites and use magical methods for medical treatment. Some of their songs are to Aztec deities and heroes and they are obligated to "conquer" the non-Conchero Catholics to their version of this religion. The Dance of the Concheros usually includes only one masked character, a devil or clown who helps keep the audience away from the dancers.

The variants of la Conquista also include masked cycles surrounding the exploits of Cortés (the Dance of the Marqués), the Conquistadors (the Dance of the Gachupines), and Doña Marina, Indian consort of Cortés (the Dance of La Malinche).

Membership in the semi-professional Conchero societies is hereditary, and periodically initiations are performed to enroll new members. The society has well-disciplined local chapters directed by "generals", and serves many social functions, including the

punishment of members who have broken the rules of the group. The Concheros derive their name from the armadillo shell (concha) guitars which they play in this dance.

The Dance of the Conquest is most often held during the fiesta of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint. The dancers, dressed in costumes copied from ancient Aztec garb, are accompanied by orchestras of guitars, drums, and seed rattles.

Wood mask of a servant. Dance of la Malinche; Zitlala, Guerrero. (EP)

Wood mask of a Spaniard. Dance of the Marques, Tenerias, Mexico (State). (EP)

Leather "tiger" mask with pasteboard teeth and glass eyes. Dance of the Tigre; Costalillo, Oaxaca. (JO)

DANZA DEL TIGRE—
Dance of the Tiger

The Dance of the Tiger (with variants called Dance of the Tecuanes and Dance of the Tlacololeros) is concentrated in the state of Guerrero. These dances mainly derive from the semi-pagan animal dances which were confined to remote rural regions after the Conquest. The variants of the dances are roughly similar, and are probably only local versions of the same drama.

The theme of the tiger dances centers on the difficulties of agricultural laborers in protecting their fields and animals from the depredations of the wild cats which live in the uncleared wilderness areas. The "tiger" of the dance's name is really a jaguar or ocelot. A "boss" gathers together a group of peasants with sticks and ropes; everyone sets off to hunt the tiger who, after several adventures, is finally caught, brought back to the hacienda, and skinned. Occasionally extra characters—such as a hunting dog and some women—are added. In the Dance of the Tlacololeros the drama ends with the burning of the fields (tlacolotl is a native word for agricultural fields) and the comic whipping of the participants.

This dance has no religious associations; it is usually closely tied to the festivities of the Christmas season, however, especially Christmas Eve. The dancers are accompanied by reed flutes and drums.

Biographical Note

Ingeniero Victor José Moya, the owner of the masks shown in this exhibition, is a noted and respected civil engineer. In addition to his technical interests, Señor Moya has been involved for many years in preserving and encouraging Mexican folk arts and crafts. This exhibition, selected from Señor Moya's collection of over 700 masks, demonstrates the depth and wide geographical range of his attachment to the masks and their makers. His generosity in permitting the loan of the collection to European and American museums will allow non-Mexicans an opportunity to appreciate at first hand this little-known art.

Text by Michael Stephens, booklet designed by Alex Nicoloff, both of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology. Photography by Eugene Prince (EP) of the Lowie Museum, and John Orem (JO).

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