

(→Museum der Kulturen. Basel.)

Devil, death & harlequin. Carnival revels & mask dances

13 February - au 29 August 2004

Whether masks trigger fear in order to appeal to our moral standards; whether masks conceal in order to render their wearer anonymous, or whether masks are worn to make the invisible visible – the power of transformation turns the mask into an object of mystery all over the world. Whether in religious dances or at the theatre; whether in the cult of death or at initiation rituals; whether at winter festivities or during carnival – the moment of donning a mask always marks the transition from the everyday into another world.

The exhibition begins with face masks from every part of the globe. They provide an insight into how various cultures treat masks and their many shapes and sizes. Appearances by traditional masked figures also play key roles in European customs during the winter months. The second part of the exhibition passes on to costumes and disguises worn by masked revellers in various parts of Europe. They tell of the annual cycle of the dance of masks and also feature the wooden masks so characteristic of the Alps as well as the traditional figures appearing in the Alemannic carnival.

Evocatively displayed in authentic historic rooms, the third and final part of the exhibition presents a cross-section of Basel Fasnacht (carnival): figures, masks, ancient documents and a “Fasnachtbeiz” (carnival restaurant) recreate the colourful irreverent atmosphere that pervades an urban society.

1. First part of the exhibition:

Face masks from every part of the globe

Eyes, nose, mouth and ears – these can be arranged to produce a smiling face or an enraged scowl. Everything that makes up a human being is concentrated in the face. We know from the way people look at us whether or not they like us. Sometimes we feel a need to conceal our emotions behind a mask. Every face, every mask conceals (or reveals) a story of its own.

On the ground floor, visitors encounter these second faces. Surrounded by them, they can communicate with them eye-to-eye. If they even look behind the masks, they will discover many – partly unexpected – levels of meaning. Together with the statements and thoughts of Basel citizens about masks, this sound selection of face masks from the collection of the Museum der Kulturen shows various points-of-view of a fascinating human phenomenon. Masks from India, Sri Lanka, Japan, Egypt, Gabon, Cameroon, Canada, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Switzerland and other countries focus on subjects such as mythology, exorcism, meditation, transformation, resurrection, beauty and power.

2. Second part of the exhibition: Costumes and disguises worn by masked revellers in various parts of Europe

In Europe, masks and the customs associated with them are amongst the most puzzling and mysterious of the phenomena surrounding folk life. Masks are more likely to be used during the winter half of the year. Why do masked people appear specifically during the Advent and Christmas periods, around New Year or at carnival time, shouting, running wild, scaring and annoying people? We just do not know, despite all our attempts to answer to these questions. And yet, is it not the weird and the inexplicable in particular that we find so fascinating about masks?

The foyer before the main exhibition room shows impressive traditional figurines of the Basel graphic designer and clique artist Max Sulzbachner, and the main exhibition hall shows in a clockwise-arrangement how the mask tradition developed over the years.

Right at the outset, masks from Switzerland, Italy and Austria show displays of death and the devil, which we encounter regularly, inter alia, in religious people's theatres. In Christian-dominated Europe, the devil is *the* demon and the main representative of vice; demon masks emerge primarily around St. Nicholas' Day. Individual masks as well as a Christmas crib document Polish examples of masks relating to Christmas and New Year's Eve, which are joined by animal figures and, amongst others, the devil and death as well as "strangers" such as Jews and Gypsies. They are joined by masked figures from the Slovenian carnival, who announce their arrival from afar by jingling bells and chains. In the Balkans, masks are widespread and are normally half human, half animal, also using parts of animals for the disguise.

Carnival masks ("Fasnachtslarven") from various Swiss cantons include the "Schnabelgeiss" – a widespread old masked demonic figure, which can appear both as a figure that gives or takes. "Tschäggätä" (= the spotted one) originates in people's theatre in the Swiss Lötschental valley, which is one of Switzerland's most famous and significant regions where wooden masks are made, together with the Sarganserland and Innerschweiz. The wooden masks of Albert Anton Willi from Grisons are original creations that remind us of expressionist art and non-European mask traditions. A selection of masks based on the appearance of village inhabitants documents the variety of individual masked faces that are typical for the Sarganserland.

Foreign carnival traditions are referred to at the "Imster Schemenlaufen", which involves female and male dancing with magical head decorations. (It is possible to look towards Belgium with the standing "Gilles" figure outside this hall on the ground floor in front of the stairs to the first floor. The Gilles figure has a wax mask and a ostrich-feather hat – a tradition that clearly shows the interrelationships with the carnival traditions of South Germany.)

However, Ash Wednesday is by no means the end of the European mask tradition. Many of the various annual festivals occurring between spring and autumn involve masks that are characterised by the use of plant materials. They are represented by straw figures from France, as well as the Swiss cantons Aargau and Nidwalden: the "Schneggehüsler" and a pair of masks.

Around the column in the centre of the hall, there are masks and figures of the Swabian-Allemanic "Fasnet" festival, as well as further demons and a classic Fasnacht witch. They are supplemented by an insight into the strange-morbid world of the rebellious Basel Fasnacht (carnival) society "Kuttlebutzer".

3. Third part of the exhibition: Cross-section of Basel Fasnacht (carnival).

Basel's 'Fasnacht', or carnival, is a huge festival of sound and colour, of dreams and imagination. In its current form, it is the result of a process which began about a hundred years ago and to which local artists have always made a substantial contribution. In its capacity as a high holiday celebrated by an urban society, it gives participants a safety valve: an opportunity to depart from conventional forms of behaviour and to seek out active contrasts. For three days a year, Basel lives in a topsy-turvy world.

In atmospheric rooms for the 18th and 19th centuries, there is mainly a historic overview of the Basler Fasnacht (Basel carnival), which introduces visitors to this unique festival of the city's people and artists.

Visitors stroll past back-lit parts of traditional lanterns to the first room, which shows some history of this Basel carnival, interesting facts on the poetry and music, as well as documents on "Schnitzelbank" – satirical commentaries on local events. From here (and, in particular, from the next room) it is possible to look into a lovingly designed Fasnachtsbeiz (Basel carnival restaurant), during a performance of the Schnitzelbank artists by the name of "Kaffimihli".

Individual masks, clique masks and heads for the Tambourmajor (the most prominent figure of a clique) are shown in the next room. Most works are from the second half of the 20th century. In the third room, we go back in time to the earliest days of masks in Basel, where first masks also used metal, wood and - - primarily - wax. Here, visitors can discover a beautiful selection of wax-cloth masks. Opposite this presentation there is a selection of very early papier mâché masks made in Basel, as well as so-called artists' masks from the workshop of Adolf Tschudin. Frequently, the same manufacturers also produce the costumes and paint the lanterns: The display of a mask workshop ("Larvenateliers") in the next room concludes the presentation on the Basler Fasnacht.