

Relating Art Movements to Face Mask and Masking in the Age of COVID-19

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Abstract

At present, face masking is part of our qualification as global citizens. Many face masks that abound during COVID-19 pandemic are essentially and significantly art driven; needing novel, scholastic interrogations of their creativity generation, classification and contextual clearance. Most literature available on face mask art is new, peripheral, sensational and generalised. Most of these face masks and their masking styles luxuriantly utilise properties of all specialisations of the Visual arts. The artistic trends that all of these elicit, therefore, need adequate and systematic documentation, particularly in creativity repositories. This paper studied some face mask artforms through their characterisation in art movements. Collection of data was unstructured and samples were sourced from the internet, several media and direct photography from close associates. Twenty samples were used for multiple-case study and the content analysis was explorative. Qualitative methodology was adopted, while samples were grouped into ten categories of art movements, with two portraits representing each movement's philosophy and/or characteristics. Images were spread across race, material, design, functionality and purposefulness for study. The study showed that based on the creative and visual demonstrations and socio-psychological impacts of COVID-19 inspired face masks, there is need for multi-directional documentation in varied scholarly forms other than the medical sciences. Since there are over a thousand face masks already in public domains, nations need to document and possibly preserve their locally stylised face masks as part of the arts that are traditional to them.

Keywords: Art movements, COVID-19 (Coronavirus), Face mask, Mask, Portrait

Introduction

Mask everywhere! Anonymous faces here and there, and no one bothers about face presence anymore. Masking in public is no more security risk globally. In fact, it is a crime not to mask; this period is when humanity takes physical identity programming secondary, except when really necessary. As every part of

our physical and mental faculties is metaphorically masked, this scenario is the current state of our being in the year 2020 all over the world (Figure 1). In fact, the present medical situation around peoples of the world notwithstanding, Sivin is noted in “The Arts and the Mask” (n.d.) as saying that our face projects the story of our portrait and as such makes it an interesting companion for the artist to understand our “identity”, “thought and emotion”. Governments and citizens are talking of the importance of face masking at this crucial period of world’s pandemic called Coronavirus Disease 2019 or COVID-19 or simply Coronavirus.

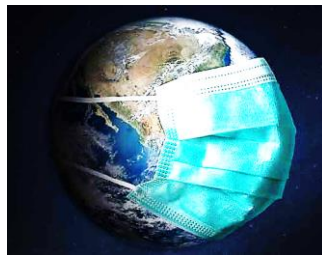


Fig. 1: A masked globe. Source: the-rheumatologist.org/maskedglobe.jpg, (517 x 403)

Aside from our current theatrical encasement as a robotic humanity, as things get worse, no other compulsive dress code will surpass the mask image in generic global citizenship in the next few years, if not decade. This may further signal the trend of the creative style for the series of international fashion fairs. Again, minus the fact that COVID-19 is the most reported tragic incident ever in recent years and, therefore, the most recurring words that signaled the beginning of 2020, the face mask is also the most physically engaging task during the same period. As at May 2020, COVID-19 is still recurring as the most affecting phenomenon in global activities: from health to governance, from politics to economy, from movement to environment, from architecture to manufacture, from arts to sports, from banking and finance to fraud and distrust, from chemical wars to biological wars, from design creation to investment generation. The list is endless of how this pandemic grossly affects the totality of mankind. In very few cases, it affects for the good and creativity in human beings; and in many cases, it affects for the worse and degeneration. Face mask and masking also affect us in these regards and in varying degrees. The virus and mask, nonetheless, evolve one after the other. Since COVID-19 becomes a dreaded word, face mask and masking have become its most needed visual item for its counteraction of spread.

As many people try to prevent themselves from this deadly virus in several ways, they never forget to also engage in distinguishing themselves through classic quality and designers’ face masks they use as one of these preventive measures

(Jacobs, 2020; Mitze, 2020; *The Guardian*, 2020). Some create funny, comical and dysfunctional masks. Accordingly, this shows that, irrespective of circumstance that human beings are in, they try to display their current stations in life (Ajzen, 2001; Kim & Hunter, 1993; Kraus, 1995). Many times also, this act of display is an unconscious one, but sometimes it is consciously done. This is an undeniable fact of our sociological and psychological make-ups. And whatever action we take, it goes round to affect a sector of our activities and living. So, for example, a political situation may drastically affect a community's socio-cultural system or its economic operations. We can therefore infer from the foregoing that, with the current health challenges which most nations around the world are facing, every aspect of our lives has also significantly been altered. The arts and design focus and discourse are not exempted from all of this in all ramifications. A novel event in this direction is the opening of an exhibition on face masks in the Czech Museum (Cerny, 2020).

Several scientific, literary and artistic researches, reports and exercises—including news, illustrations, tables, cartoons, performances, videos and multimedia displays—with regards to COVID-19 and allied/supplementary matters and information have been done and many are in private and public domains. But many of these are documented in World Health Organisation website (WHO, 2020). The documentation processes of coronavirus in all manner of forms are still ongoing and will continue a few years after the virus has been long subdued to its inconsequential state. The same may likely happen to the face mask phenomenon that goes with partially averting the virus. However, comprehensive studies and literatures on the design, colour, function, types and effectiveness, and implication for fashion trend and likely dressing futuristic mannerism associated with face mask and masking are likewise many. They also vary in their focus. A few of these literature, which discuss the aesthetic influence of, and in, face mask and its several making and masking styles, materials, techniques and implications are Barnes (2020), BBC News (2020), Cacho (2020), Devlin (2020), Ebert (2020), *GARDAWORLD* (2020), Gorman (2020), Jacobs (2020), Liubchenkova (2020), Mayo Clinic Staff (2020), Mitze *et al.* (2020), NCDC (2020), Petrarca (2020), Rabimov (2020), Randone (2020), *The Financial Times* (2020), *The Guardian* (2020), *Toledoblade* (2020), Wilson (2020), and Žižek (2020). The surge and diverse documentation in this area of study is understandable because the imprint which mask, masking and its marks have on the human psyche, and will continue to have on the physical posture of human beings around the world, is still unravelling.

This notwithstanding, these available research materials can readily kick-start several studies in different directions. This paper on masks and masking during COVID-19 experience is one of such early research responses in this new direction. But many of the existing literature have not pursued their discourse along some few angles along the point of view of world art movements' classification of face mask art, which this paper is devoted to.

This study is on the creative and artistic positioning of masks and masking into art movements as they originate from the COVID-19 aftermath. The several designs, styles, types, hues, materials, contents, contexts, and this art's current and future implications for global dressing, art movements' attributions, identity and meaning are addressed in this paper. The initial sample size was over four hundred and eighty (480) portraits, and these were sourced from the internet, social media and direct photography by the researcher and his close associates. Eventually, ninety per cent (90%) of the portraits used as illustration were sourced from the social media. Data collection was unstructured. A purposive sampling was further initiated and twenty (20) portraits were arrived at for a multiple case study approach and content analysis. Qualitative methodology was therefore adopted and analysis was explorative because of study's humanistic nature. Existing literatures on the subject were also consulted. The portraits were spread across race, material, design, functionality and purposefulness for study. This study goes further to re-present and navigate the artistic contexts that are extractable from the making, intention and usage of a face mask worn, particularly during this pandemic period. The samples are grouped into ten (10) categories of art movements. The periods of the movements did not necessary matter in this case-study. This is because only characteristics and moods of the movements were paired with mask types and styles. The ten movements rationalised with the face masks in alphabetical order are Art Nouveau (Grafton, 2016; De La Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick, 1991: 945-959; Selz, 1960: 8), Conceptual Art (Bailey, 2017: 1-36; Smith, 2001: 256-270), Cubism (Antliff & Leighten, 2001; Martin, 1998), Dadaism (Stavrinaki, 2016; Richter and White, 2016) and Expressionism (Norbet, 2001; Lynton, 2001: 30-49; Hajali, 2017: 312). Others are Pop Art (Lucie-Smith, 2001: 225-238), Postmodernism (Mahboob & Shariful, 2013; Reed, 2001: 271-294), Primitivism (Knap, 1986 & 1987: 366; Myers, 2006: 268-269, 272), Realism (Krzysztof, 2015: 147-150; Stromberg, 1968: xi) and Romanticism (Hannoosh, 2011: 450-460; Heath and Boreha, 1999: 3-6). These movements came after the Renaissance era. Generally, daily visual information and samples on social media still show that images of this nature, in

their varied types, will continue to surface and, in some cases, continue to amuse us.

Face Masks in Movements

Art Nouveau (meaning New Art), also known as Jugendstil, Stile Liberty, *Modernismo* and Modern Style, is popular with the decorative arts and architecture (LeBourdais, 2016; Gontar, 2006). It revolves around the skilful marriage of art and craft (National Gallery of Art, 2000: 5-6; Madsen, 2013). It is evident in Figures 4 and 5 that the elaborate design work and masks are tailored towards fashion, with little regards for effective virus protection. The heavy craft work with stones on Figure 4 will not allow the mask to cover the nose because of weight. Figure 5 is, however, a total wear with the headgear extended to shield the mouth and nose. The elaborateness are reminiscent of the highly decorative style of many art genres, furniture and architecture associated with the style. Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Antoni Gaudi (1852-1926), Victor Horta (1861-1947) and Louis Majorelie (1859-1926) are a few of the participants that easily come to mind. It is apparent that the two portraits are showcasing a likely fashion trend in this mood in the coming fairs.



Fig. 4: The Aso Ebi Jumpsuit with a Face Mask

Photography: Segun Adebayo

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/N1Tz4BNoPwadzkbU9>

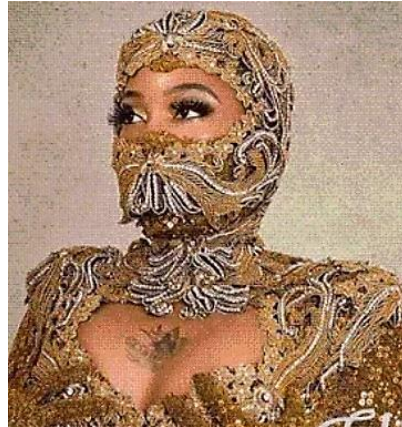


Fig. 5: Gorgeously Chic

Source: <https://shodamia.com/lets-take-you-through-fashion-mogul-toyin-lawanis-lookbook-as-she-releases-pre-wedding-photos/>

While Art Nouveau is more of artistic flamboyance, Conceptual art or Idea art and sometimes referred to as Conceptualism, is more concerned with idea generation (Alberro, 1999: xxvii; Buchloh, 1999: 514-537). In *Tate* (n.d.[1]), Sol LeWitt was quoted as saying in 1967 that,

In Conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.

What is more, the conceptual artist uses any material, in any form, to drive home their idea (*Tate*, n.d.[1]; *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017). As such, performance artists are classified as conceptual artists. From the various conceptual masks available from the sample, performances were chosen for study (Figures 6 and 7). The creative act of solving a puzzle is exploited by portrait in Figure 6: Where there is no face mask, create one with your bikini, briefs or boxer/shorts. The performance slides are expository and the mask, dramatic. Like many performances in its creative category, the tool and medium of performance are the same. Figure 7 shows slides of a mask put into active use, other than totally protective. It is an experimental art in performance. Creating an access/opening through a zipper makes the mask dual functional—partially protecting, partially a food and drink passage. The creativity is salutary, the short performance is also invigorating.



Fig.6: “No Mask? Do This” Slides from video clip

Source: WhatsApp Video



Fig. 7: “A dual function mask” Slides from video clip

Source: WhatsApp Video

For the two earlier face masks, ideas propel the performances. But for Figures 8 and 9, it is geometry—overlapping planes, which are the underlining characteristic of Cubism (Voyce, n.d.). As noted by Augustyn *et. al.* (eds., 2020), Cubists “are not bound to copying form, texture, colour, and space. Instead, they presented a new reality... that depicted radically fragmented objects”. In the portraits exemplifying cubism, it is the flatness of mask that creates the cubist’s atmosphere. The computer disk used as mask is an Antivirus disk (Figure 8). Since the face mask we put on now is primarily to protect against the virus, the image that Figure 8 has flattened the subject matter creatively and not medically. In this case, therefore, the portrait will never help to flatten the mathematical curve of infected citizens. Figure 9, however, used the simple tearing technique of paper collage cuttings to achieve her colourful mask. Collage is a development of the cubist technique (Farago, 2021). Even the coloured overlapping planes have brilliant intersections. Since Cubism is a complete deviation from nature, from real (Barr, Jnr., 1936: 30), these cubist figures exhibit such tendency.



Fig. 8: Norton Antivirus CD face mask

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/63hSfzyicVH7g7r8>



Fig. 9: Spaghetti face mask

Source: <https://twitter.com/halimahillow/status/1250463664358002690/photo/1>

The Dada Art movement, which was formed in Zurich, Switzerland, around World War I, was basically an anti-authoritarianism and modern capitalist structure (Krishmen-Breen, 2017). The outburst of the movement was against the untruth of governments towards the citizens and the way to show this was to go anti-conventional in the arts, anti-war and anti-government in all forms (Artland, n.d.; Trachtman, 2006). That is, using art to go against art as a form of protest: “They banded together under the battle cry of DADA!!!!” (Artfactory, 2020). Such is the audacity in Figures 10 and 11. The maskers are also plainly anti-mask. Max Siedentopf, a German-Namibian artist and designer is reported to support this bizarre, but creative, attitude (Frearson, 2020). Will padlocking below the nose and in front of the mouth prevent a disease in any form? Or will the unpleasant odour of the insole repel a virus? These representations are basically contemptuous and anti-sensibility. They make mockery of the whole pandemic—they are satire, figuratively bullshitting everything related to COVID-19. In these images masking is contextually approached defiantly, with totally nonconventional materials used in derogatory forms. They are clear examples of

Dadaists, not giving a damn about its anti-creative creativity (Richter and White, 2016).



Fig. 10: Man with padlock as face mask

Source: https://twitter.com/bello_aliyuu/status/1242945614310227969?s=08



Fig. 11: How to survive a deadly global virus

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/fr32zU5cdWxhY8ve6>

Most of the portraits studied are very expressive of the feeling of the sitter or stander. But when reality is intentionally distorted in order to satisfy an inner feeling or craving, then the artist or person tends towards Expressionism (De La Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick, 1991: 968-974; *Tate*, n.d.[2]). Figures 12 and 13 are expressionistic. Even though there are several 3D types of face mask, Figures 12 and 13 evolve from maskers' personal convictions and the researcher's judgment of the masks' creativity. The stylistic formulae are also unique in material, hue and expressivity—Figure 12 is a polymer product and monochromatic, the other (Figure 13) is paper and metal, and polychromatic—though they are both 3 dimensional, with the same contextual and formal values.



Fig. 12: Man with plastic cut to form a face mask

Source: Oduntan Stephen (2020), <https://www.sirstevemedia.com/2020/05/mad-on-man-made-exclusive-face-mask-with-plastic-keg-see>



Fig. 13: John Adenle with his mixed media face mask

Source: John Adenle, WhatsApp profile

The Pop art movement started around the 1950s in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) (*Britannica*, n.d.; *MoMA Learning*, n.d.). Artistic avantgardism drew a lot of inspiration from “Hollywood movies, advertising, product packaging, pop music and comic books” (*Tate*, n.d.[3]). Some moments during this pandemic period show that we can extend our perceptions on things around and over us, and also go to the extent of making them manifest unapologetically. Such is a major pulse of the socio-cultural engagements of many Pop artists. The introduction of face mask to animals (Farber, 2020), statues (Cacho and Mondon, 2020) (also see Figure 15) and inanimate objects (see Figure 1) to illustrate images is also an interesting engagement when viewed holistically with narratives of COVID-19 and human social sensibility. Some of them end up being satirical compositions; they are unavoidable games with the other side of our lives. Figures 14 and 15 show mask worn on other images by someone else. But what is the intention of the artist masking images in Figure 14 and the person(s) that masked Figure 15? While the images become laughable, they have turned images of contextualisation that need deconstructing. Such are mostly the encounter with objects of Pop art—looking

ordinary and everyday-like, but having other emotional and socio-cultural importance to the artist and the audience. If a person consents to help mask another person, it primarily suggests a positive inclination and vibration. But for someone to mask another without their consent is repressive and therefore negative. Contextually, when a public image is mocked during crisis, that image is gagged and debased. But can this be said of these images in the two figures?



Fig. 14: Images on N1000 note masked through graphical illustration

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/kohsm6q9y9Yf.jpta6>

On the contrary, Mai-Bornu and Dr. Isong on the N1000 Nigerian currency are satirically protected because the Naira note is the highest currency value of Nigeria. During this pandemic, the currency is hoped to be alive, with its images protected with face masks! Another probable variant to this proposition is that it could be economically motivated to mock the Nigerian government and the Nigerian Central Bank on the devaluation of the Naira in March 2020. This latter possibility is more Popish and contextually deeper than the former proposition. However, the comic and advertorial negative dimension to have this art piece in the internet exhibits the damning posture usually displayed by Pop artists. Such art gains faster publicity, attention and interrogation.

The idea behind the goddess *Iya Àla* (Figure 15) may be a reason why one should not consider the image as been mocked. Rather, it has been venerated and protected. Gbile Oshadipe, a historian scholar from Ilaro, narrated the historic-mythical experience behind the veneration of *Iya Àla* by the traditional community of Ilaro. He said, during the Dahomey-Egbado war, there was a consultation with the *Ífa* oracle on how Ilaro could repel Dahomey warriors from overrunning the town. *Ífa* revealed to them that a specially prepared beans sacrifice be prepared and placed on all four cardinal points of Ilaro to wade off this invasion. It was *Iya Àla* that prepared the offerings and in appreciation of her efforts, the community eventually turned her into a goddess of Ilaro and she is worshipped by devotees. With this background, the mask worn on her is approved by the traditional community, it is a symbolic reminder of her deeds as an

elevated supernatural protector. Masking this image, therefore, is positive and a re-livening of her potency during this pandemic invasion. Notwithstanding the importance of the spiritual symbolism of *Iya Àla*, her masked appearance turns it to a frozen pop performer.



Fig. 15: *Iya Àla*, Library Junction, Ilaro, Ogun State
Photography: Olusola Ogunfuwa

The next set of portraits exhibits Postmodernistic outlook. In order to understand Postmodernism in art, it is necessary to know what modernism in arts is, because it also has literary adherents of its philosophical approach (De La Croix, Tansey & Kirkpatrick, 1991: 1076-1081). Modernism is a departure from artistic past with a focus on “new form of expression” (Kulper, n.d.). But an important question is, how can we equitably depart from the past? It is why scholarly discourse of modernism, modernity and even postmodernism continues to dilute (Delanty, 2000). It is important to say that postmodernism is not a total departure from modernism (Best and Kellner, 1991; *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015), which is why it is usually difficult to categorically define postmodernism. However, *Tate* (n.d.[4]) notes:

While modernism was based on idealism and reason, postmodernism was born of skepticism and a suspicion of reason... While the modernists championed clarity and simplicity; postmodernism embraced complex and often contradictory layers of meanings.

Thus, it is apparent that the whole ideas behind most of the portraits used in this study oscillate between modernistic and postmodernistic values. But by their other unique characteristics, it has been possible for them to be classified under different movements. Likewise, Figures 16 and 17 have been distinguished as postmodernist portraits. On the instance of Figure 16, postmodernism is traced to the colourful abstract painting made on a simple face mask as if it were a painting surface. As the mask protects therefore, it also serves as a painting on mobile display. But on the instance of Figure 17, postmodernistic traits are suggestive of

the hyperbolised quality of the face mask material and type needed at this period. What is emphasised in these figures is difference and emotional narrative.



Fig. 16: Ayo Akinyemi wearing his hand painted face mask

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/akinyemi.a.ayo>



Fig. 17: A Nigerian legislator wearing dust/gas mask

Source: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2899340353448886&id=100001188480209

A comment on *Facebook* about the portrait on Figure 18 is, “The Government should be clear on the type of masks”. It is most likely that the masker was creating a comedy, it could also be ignorance. Thinking widely about the impulse of the primitivist artist, one would accept the portrait as a good primitive art. The term Primitivism, Anika (2015) opined, emerged in the 20th century and qualified folk and naïve artists. She said further that primitivist artists got “inspiration outside of the conventional, academic art practice and mainstream culture” (Anika, 2015). Though the philosophical contexts are wider than earlier mentioned (Myers, 2006: 268-269, 272), the information provided is enough to support Figure 18 and 19 as primitive art inclined. While Figure 18 displays traditional face mask for socio-cultural activity as regular protective mask in public sphere, Figure 19 shows a native environment with leave masks, showing the extremity of the images’ indigenusness. This protection must have been done

with believe in its efficaciousness. The beauty of the mask type in Figure 19 is the creative way the cusps and the ends of the masks were done, a native ingenuity.



Fig. 18: A Lady with Gorilla Mask
Source: WhatsApp



Fig. 19: “Tribals residing in the agency areas of the district [Mulugu, India] have made face masks out of teak leaves”
Source: Mahesh (2020).

While the material and environmental circumstances of the latter figure look realistic, the face mask in Figure 20 and 21 are attestations of artistic realism. In itself, realism focuses on the average working class citizen, the contemporary and everyday scenes as subjects of artistic attention (Richman-Abdou, 2018; Nochlin, 1971: 13-57). Realism is, therefore, the creation, by “choice and treatment of subject matter” that is of everyday life (Anapur, 2016). The portraits in Figure 20 are those of the Governor and Deputy Governor of Lagos State, Nigeria. They pioneered the use of cheap fabric materials as viable alternative for the surgical face mask. This advice opened up the floodgate for the variety of affordable face mask that abound. Figure 21 is also simple and of no unnecessary embellishments. These mask types are commonplace.



Figure 20: Governor of Lagos State Babajide Olusola Sanwo-Olu and Deputy Governor Dr. Femi Hamzat

Source: <https://cdn.punchng.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/25230803/fabric-face-mask.jpg>



Figure 21: Couple “kiss through protective face masks during their wedding ceremony in Italy”

Source: *Newspad* (2020). <https://thenespad.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/italian=couple-wed-1.jpg>

The tenth movement is Romanticism. Human emotion, nature, spirituality, imagination and metaphor are the key interests of romanticism, and many artists expressed these intensely in different ways at different periods during the realisation of the movement. Hannoosh (2011), Galitz (2006) and *The Art Story* (n.d.) provide more insight. Figures 23 and 24 portraits are with deep expressions of the female innate nature. Figures show female passion for fashion and sensuous imagination with what they wear. The expression of the mask fabric as massive headgear exemplify two feminine traits—exploration and showiness.



Fig. 22: Fashionable face mask combined with headgear

Source: <https://www.stylishnaija.com/25-tendy-and-fashionable-ankara-face-mask/>



Fig. 23: Fashionable face mask combined with fez cap

Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/bUGIJs13eyh4kP8t7>

It is worthy of note that many citizens that make dresses during this pandemic period never forget to instruct their dress makers to produce masks with the leftovers. Masking has rapidly turned the greatest necessity and fashion of the year. Even a few fashion-conscious people go to the length of making designer's face masks. Whether they are sufficiently protective or not is secondary. Aesthetics and fashion display are primary; for the female, beauty has shifted from bodily form to bodily accessories. For some reasonably health-conscious ladies, it is: No lipsticks, please! This visual experience of human physicality will be with us for the next few months as an unforgettable historical and artistic event.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the first half of year 2020 the face mask documentation has taken a new turn, because face mask as a traditional masking form and as a protective gadget has taken a totally new dimension. There is an outburst in the display of artistic ingenuity among many mask users and creators/designers, the pandemic situation notwithstanding. Conventional barriers in making, wearing and functioning of mask have been blatantly broken. Face masks have gone beyond a medical-science accessory. It is now an incontestable art form. Its preservation and artistic evaluation have started already, with museum collections and exhibition. With the creative and visual demonstrations, and socio-psychological impacts that these COVID-19 inspired face masks have generated, there is now a need for multi-directional documentation in varied scholarly forms, which are not medical/health science-centric. Public and private art archival centres need to take stock of this genre for the sake of history. Since there are over a thousand in public domains and World Wide Web, nations may also need to further document, and, where possible acquire their locally stylised face masks as part of the arts that are traditional to their cultural formation, even though the face mask is now a symbol that marks our common portrait.

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