

# Modern Masks

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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# Modern Masks

Masks carry a weighty load of historical, cultural, mythological, psychological, and aesthetic references. They have been used as totems and toys, ritual objects and exaggerated portraits. Only in our own time have they gained status as art objects. The majority of works assembled in “Modern Masks” consciously refer to primitive design, an allusion that has been commonplace since early twentieth-century artists began to appreciate the abstract qualities of tribal cultural artifacts. In the late 1950s and early 1960s artists began creating masks in response to a surge of neo-primitivism in non-traditional art forms. In either the materials used—fur, rope, bark, wood, leather, clay, and stone—or in their specific format, these masks express a metaphoric link with the atavistic values which remain part of our consciousness in the late twentieth century.

Robert Brady’s ceramic sculptures draw a specific parallel between modern masks and their ethnographic predecessors. The works in his Benicia series bear an uncanny likeness to the form of an East Greenland mask made in 1934. His more obviously primitive *Circle Mask* and *Untitled* (1982) are directly influenced by the elliptical shapes and black-and-white surface decoration common to other tribal pieces. By contrast, Daisy Youngblood’s work demonstrates an affinity with prehistoric art in its media—unglazed clay, human hair, sticks, and other natural materials. Like primitive masks, her works have the power to command a space larger than their actual scale would suggest, perhaps because they evoke fetishistic objects more than the real people whose portraits they ostensibly present.

Similarly, David Finn’s *Masked Figure (G.E. Bird)* recalls the fetishes of African tribal cultures. It is a work constructed like a voodoo doll, from rags, sticks, and articles of clothing found on the streets of New York. One of a series of life-size figures, Finn’s

bird-man approaches the image of the tribal icon with a playful urbanity. The featureless heads in Terry Rosenberg’s cowhide masks are reminiscent of straw Shetland Islands mumming costumes of the 1880s which, according to a contemporaneous description, “stood like so many statues. . . . Eyes, mouth, or noses they had none, nor the least trace of countenance.”

Some artists combine primitive design elements with the playful attitude often found in masks created by children. While Rafael Ferrer’s tin can and coconut bark masks employ materials associated with the folk art of his native Puerto Rico, they are embellished with circles and slits, the symbolic designation all children use to describe facial features. The cardboard form of Rodney Alan Greenblat’s *Ancient Mask* is also constructed with purposeful naiveté—folded down the middle in the symmetrical style of its grade-school counterparts. At the same time, the wide-eyed animal head-piece, hieroglyphic design, and elongated nose refer directly to tribal works. Equally childlike in presentation and medium, Saul Steinberg’s paper bag masks address issues of contemporary art and society. They are portraits, meant to be worn, which represent specific people (often including the artist himself) or contemporary stereotypes—the wide-eyed “voodoo woman” or the stiff bureaucratic military officer.

Since masks have no religious or fetishistic function in modern life, contemporary masks lack the primitive power to terrify. Their static presence in the gallery defines them as sculpture with an aesthetic power rather than a ritualistic one. Yet they remain totemic mirrors—modern objects whose forms reflect our ancient past and comment on our present.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY

# Checklist

*Dimensions are in inches and in the case of irregular forms are approximate; height precedes width precedes depth.*

## Robert Arneson (b. 1930)

*Alfred*, 1981

Glazed ceramic, 14 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$

The Saxe Collection

*Mr. Hyde*, 1981

Glazed ceramic, 13 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew M. Lewis

*Raw Bacon*, 1981

Glazed ceramic, 15 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 10 x 6

Collection of Saralee and Robert Fine

*Ges-Hu*, 1982

Glazed ceramic, 18 x 16 x 8

Collection of Laila and Thurston

Twigg-Smith

*Pollock*, 1983

Glazed ceramic, 15 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$

Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York

## Robert Brady (b. 1946)

*Alto Mask*, 1980

Glazed ceramic, 13 x 12 x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Daniel Jacobs

*Rage*, 1981

Glazed ceramic, 24 x 16 x 18

Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

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## LEFT

### Robert Brady

*Alto Mask*, 1980

Glazed ceramic, 13 x 12 x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Collection of Daniel Jacobs

Photograph by Malcolm Varon, New York © 1983

*Untitled*, 1981

Glazed ceramic, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 8 x 6

Collection of Daniel Jacobs

*Circle Mask*, 1982

Glazed ceramic, 20 x 10 x 12

Collection of Robert J. Warrens

*Untitled*, 1982

Glazed ceramic, 25 x 8 x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$

Collection of Daniel Jacobs

*Benicia Series Mask #10*, 1983

Glazed ceramic, 18 x 12 x 7

Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

*Benicia Series Mask #11*, 1984

Glazed ceramic, 23 x 15 x 8

Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

## Roger Brown (b. 1941)

*Mask for the Chairman of the Board of Directors*, 1974

Acrylic on wood and mixed media, 37 x 9 x 14

Collection of George Veronda

## Craig Coleman (b. 1961)

*Delirium*, 1984

Enamel on metal and wood, 64 x 32 x 16

Collection of Marsha Fogel

*Hallucination*, 1984

Enamel on metal and wood, 72 x 34 x 22

Gracie Mansion Gallery and New Math Gallery, New York

## Rafael Ferrer (b. 1933)

*Face*, 1980–81

Paint on coconut bark, 44 x 10

Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

*Face*, 1980–81

Paint on coconut bark, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{4}$

Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1981

Paint on metal, 15 x 16

Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

## David Finn (b. 1952)

*Masked Figure (G.E. Bird)*, 1984

Acrylic on cardboard and refuse materials,  
54 x 32 x 24

Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York

## Nancy Graves (b. 1940)

*Untitled*, 1981

Shells, wire, and aluminum, 27 x 34 x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$

Collection of Madeleine and Jay Bennett

## Rodney Alan Greenblat (b. 1960)

*Ancient Mask*, 1984

Acrylic on museum board, 13 x 10 x 3

Collection of Bodi

## Nancy Grossman (b. 1940)

*Head*, 1968

Epoxy, leather, and wood, 16 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$

Whitney Museum of American Art, New

York; Gift of the Howard and Jean

Lipman Foundation, Inc. 68.81

*Cob II*, 1980

Wood, leather, horn, and lead, 33 x 9 x 12

Collection of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz

*Ninja*, 1980

Carved wood, pigskin, zippers, and cast

aluminum, 16 x 10 x 11 (including base)

Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York

## Marisol (b. 1930)

*Sun Mask*, 1980

Cast bronze, 13 x 11 x 3

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

## Terry Rosenberg (b. 1954)

*Untitled*, 1979

Cowhide, 34 x 19 x 22

Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1979

Cowhide, 39 x 21 x 24

Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1979  
Cowhide, 36 x 19 x 22  
Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Susan Rothenberg (b. 1945)

*Untitled*, 1981  
Brass and copper wire, 9 x 6 x 3  
Collection of Madeleine and Jay Bennett

Joseph Schactman (b. 1957)

*Untitled*, 1983  
Wood, linoleum, fur, asphalt, metal, and latex, 15 x 6 x 19  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1983  
Wood, fur, and lead, 25 x 10 x 12  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1984  
Resin, fur, shoelace, and latex, 10 x 9 x 15  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1984  
Cardboard, fur, rubber, and chain, 8 x 12 x 25  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1984  
Resin, fur, rope, and paper, 10 x 9 x 12  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Ursula Schneider (b. 1943)

*Mask E*, 1976  
Hair and thread, 17 x 14 x 4  
Collection of the artist

*Mask Y*, 1976  
Hair, thread, and lacquer, 13 x 12 x 5  
Collection of the artist

*The Hat for the Chimney Sweeper*, 1983  
Hair, 14 x 12 x 12  
Private collection

Robert Sherman (b. 1945)

*Red Demon with Green*, 1979  
Raku (Japanese fired clay), 9½ x 8 x 3  
Collection of the artist

*Under the Sea*, 1979  
Raku (Japanese fired clay), 12 x 9 x 5  
Collection of the artist

Kiki Smith (b. 1954) and  
David Wojnarowicz (b. 1954)

*Untitled*, 1984  
Mixed media, 18 x 12 x 36  
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Saul Steinberg (b. 1914)

*Untitled*, 1958  
Mixed media on wood and paper bag,  
17¼ x 7½ x 4½  
The Pace Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1961  
Mixed media on wood and paper bag,  
74 x 19½ x 7½  
The Pace Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1961  
Mixed media on wood and paper bag,  
18 x 9¾ x 5¾  
The Pace Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1961  
Mixed media on wood and paper bag,  
17½ x 12¾ x 5¼  
The Pace Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1968  
Mixed media on wood and paper bag,  
13 x 9¾ x 5¾  
The Pace Gallery, New York

Jeff Way (b. 1942)

*Two-Horn Mask*, 1983  
Oil on plaster, 22 x 9 x 3½  
Collection of the artist

*Owl Mask*, 1984  
Oil on turtle shell, 12 x 10 x 3½  
Collection of the artist

Karl Wirsum (b. 1939)

*Skull Mask I (Sid)*, 1975  
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 9 x 1½  
Collection of Robert A. Lewis

*Skull Mask III (Saul)*, 1975  
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 8 x 1½  
Collection of Gladys Nilsson

*Skull Mask IV (Sam)*, 1975  
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 8 x 1½  
Collection of Marina Kellen-Gundlach

Daisy Youngblood (b. 1945)

*Black Horse*, 1979  
Unglazed ceramic, 8 x 6 x 14  
Private collection

*Goat/Heart Spouting Blood*, 1979  
Unglazed ceramic, 22 x 19 x 13  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Comfort,  
courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery,  
New York

*Cheetah Head*, 1980  
Unglazed ceramic, 7¾ x 12½ x 10¾  
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis

*Sylvia*, 1980  
Unglazed ceramic, 8½ x 5¾ x 7½  
Collection of Marsha Fogel

*Male Gorilla*, 1981  
Unglazed ceramic and stone, 11½ x 11 x 13  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Carl D. Lobell

*Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1982  
Unglazed ceramic and moss, 4½ x 8 x 7½  
Collection of Ursula Kalish, courtesy  
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

*Watching Girl*, 1983  
Unglazed ceramic, sticks, and hair,  
17 x 15 x 15¼  
Collection of Margot Gordon, courtesy  
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. Special thanks are extended to Patterson Sims, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, for his valuable advice and to intern Suzanne Shepard, who helped with the research for this publication.

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### Free Performance Series

**Joan Jonas**

Friday, December 14, 1984, at 7:30 pm

**Theodora Skipitares in collaboration with Virgil Moorefield**

Tuesday, December 18, 1984, at 7:30 pm

**Jeff Way**

Thursday, January 10, 1985, at 7:30 pm

**Robert Sherman**

A special performance for children of an Inuit Eskimo legend.

Monday, January 28, 1985, at 11:00 am

*Reservations required for school groups (212) 878-2453*

Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris  
120 Park Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

### Gallery Hours

Monday–Saturday 11:00 am–6:00 pm

Thursday until 7:30 pm

### Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Free admission

### Gallery Talks

Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 12:30 pm

Tours by appointment

For information call (212) 878-2550

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