

# Art in the Garden

Mirrors of the Mind:  
The Noh Masks of Ohtsuki Kokun

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## AN ARTISTIC TRADITION

The tradition of *Noh* theater has been part of Japanese culture since the 8th century. Today, *Noh* and the complementary comic theater style *Kyōgen* have received UNESCO's designation as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

*Noh* masks have been an integral part of the *Noh* performing art tradition since the 14th century. There are approximately 60 types of *Noh* masks, and some, made up to 400 years ago are still being used in performances today.

This artistic tradition continues in Ohtsuki Kokun's work. Born in Kurashiki City, Mr. Ohtsuki currently resides in Kyoto. He has made masks for many prominent *Noh* masters, including Hayashi Kiichiro, Umewaka Rokuro, and members of the Kanze family. He also teaches mask carving in Kyoto and Sagamiyara.

## SUBTLE ELEGANCE

Different from any other art form in Japan, a *Noh* mask is a "window to the soul" that captivates its audience by becoming its own character on stage through the living presence of the actor and the imagination of the audience itself. Although inherently static in appearance, a *Noh* mask is intended to convey a wide range of human emotions and feelings.

For example, an actor can change the character's expression from happiness to one of deep sorrow, just by tilting the mask slightly. The play of light, the angle of the mask, the actor's skill and stage position, all contribute to portraying the character, as does the spirit imbued in a mask by a masterful carver like Ohtsuki Kokun.

The creation of a single mask can take several months. The process includes carving the finest quality *hinoki* cypress wood, applying undercoat layers of paint mixed with glue called *nikawa*, drying,



sanding, and coating with *urushi* (lacquer) and delicately coloring details of lips, eyes, and hair with an extremely fine brush.

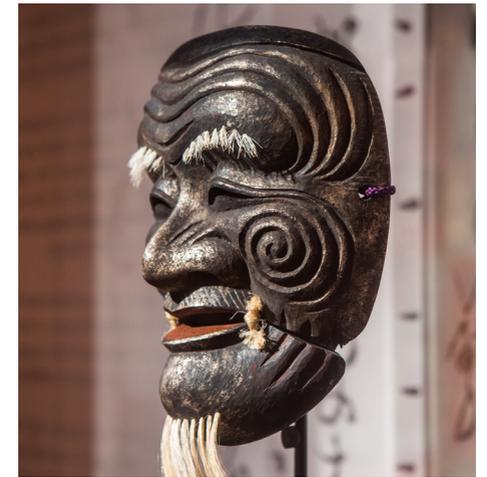
A typical *Noh* play introduces a masked actor as a wandering priest or traveler who is given shelter in a humble abode. While asleep, a dream reveals a tormented past or hidden truth that releases him or her from the shackles of illusion. This leads to a cathartic change that sets the character free, enlightened so as to return to daily life unburdened.

The structure of *Noh* masks aids in this transformation. Viewing a mask face-on, you are presented with the bright face of the character; it appears to smile. When the mask is turned downward, its expression darkens as though the character were weeping. In carving each mask, much thought goes into the relationship between the upper and lower lids of the eyes to create a sense of depth.

Likewise, the indentation on both sides of the mouth is vital to enabling a multitude of expressions when worn by an expert actor. The masks are deliberately shorn of individualized features so that they can look like anyone.

## THREADS OF NOBILITY

Accompanying the masks in this exhibition were a selection of beautifully woven, silk brocade costumes in patterns that relate to a season or *Noh* theme. Each costume is matched with a mask that would be worn together in a particular *Noh* play. These costumes were woven on the looms of Orinasu-kan, one of the most respected weaving houses in Kyoto. Made exclusively for the samurai and upper classes, they typically feature geometric patterns and are more subtle and refined than the exuberantly designed *Kabuki* costumes.



*Noh* masks and the simple, lean forms of modern sculpture have much in common. The masks are stripped of all garnishes and stand as a pure essence while still maintaining depth and spirituality.

OHTSUKI KOKUN,  
NOH MASK MAKER



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All Noh masks are courtesy of Ohtsuki Kokun.  
Costumes courtesy of Orinasu-kan of Kyoto. Photos by Yamazaki Kenji.

Diane Durston  
Curator of Culture, Art, and Education  
ddurston@japanesegarden.org



📷 All Photos: Jonathan Ley

Portland Japanese Garden | Post Office Box 3847 | Portland, Oregon 97208-3847

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