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 Sagamihara.

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

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