African Tifwebe Masks Essay, Research Paper

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Ideas in the Visual Arts

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The Songye Masquerade

INTRODUCTION

When I again entered the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum, I immediately asked the security guards where the African collection was located. I passed through the Chinese and Japanese galleries but nothing drew my attention more than the African mystique. As I entered the room a distinct smell came across my noise, one that suggested undiscovered grounds. This is an art criticism paper, in which I will describe, interpret, and evaluate the Female Mask, c. Late 19th Century.

DESCRIPTION

The Female Mask is a combination of wood, fiber, hide, pigment, and shell. The Female Mask rests in a case and its height is about 55-inches, width about 32-inches, and depth about 24-inches. The mask has four distinct components that embody the headdress. The first component is the similar style of the hooded sweatshirt shaped, woven under-dress. This material seems to be ruggedly sewn from a fibrous material that is a light maroon color, with distinct hints of light and darker concentrations of a brown tone throughout the under-dressing. Each sleeve of the dressing has three-finger gloves perfectly sewn into the dressings? sleeves. The texture of the under-dressing is that of a chain-mail stitch pattern with all seams cleverly hidden, expressing the attention to detail. The dressing covers the entire upper body of the female who wears this mask. I also noticed the waistline of the dressing is about 12-inches short of the tips of the three-fingered gloves.

The next component of the Kifwebe mask is the thick, beard-like fibrous dressing located about the chest region. The fibrous dressing connects directly to the chin, and is sewn directly below the region of the chin area. The material resembles that of hay from a bail, but has thicker, tubular characteristics. The color of this material has deteriorated, but the fibrous material appears dark brown, and is tangled like many vines stacked on top of each other. The beard?s overall shape resembles the poorly drawn alphabetical letter of M. With the left arm of the M stemming about even length with the actual under-dressing?s arm, with about an 8-inches difference between the left and right respective arms. The middle area is very ruff cut, and shows these same uneven dimensions.

The third major component of the Kifwebe mask is the mask itself, made of intricately carved wood about the size of a basketball. The upper half of the mask is evenly rounded like if the ball were to be cut in half. The bottom half of the mask is skewed inward leading all the way down to the chin; picture an elephant foot connected upside down. These two ?halves? connect to form the frontal view of the mask. The side view of the mask boasts a large forehead, and a protruding mouth shaped like a rectangle, which protrudes about 3-inches from the mask?s cheek and chin areas. The mouth is also hollowed out, and goes into the mask to let air and sound project. The triangular-shaped nose remains flat with that of the long forehead, but cuts in directly below the nostril area. The nose sticks out about even with that of the mouth, and the cheek and chin areas stay flat from the nose down. The eyes are shaped like big basil leaves with a coconut shell color, and have would be ?stems? that lash out to the side of the mask. The 3-inch long eyehole slits, cover the bottom span of the basil leaf-shaped eye region at about the thickness of a pencil. There is also a distinct 1-inch, maroon line that runs thinner thru the nose region, starting at the top of the mask continuing to the bottom of the nose. This same pattern continues from the mouth to the chin. The side view also reveals that the forehead of the mask protrudes about 5-inches from the sculpted side panel border, where the mask connects to the chain mail-like fiber dressing. The mask exhibits adjacent, geometric grooves that start at the major facial features, and are symmetrically contoured to the sides of the mask. The lines on the upper half of the mask are smooth and even. Where as on the bottom of the mask, the lines are sharp and jagged, like a horizontal lightning bolt while staying within this contour pattern. The inside grooves are white, with the surface grooves a dirt-brown. These grooves are also found on the sides of the nose and mouth, and are contoured to the end of these features.

The fourth and final component of the Kifwebe mask is the unicorn-horn shaped crown that is positioned where the crown of the head would be. The small woven bundle of under-dressing connects the crown to the mask, and harnesses the structure securely. The crown appears to be made of animal hide, and appears to have been painted with a gold pigment. The crown has dilapidated over the years and is now hangs down.

INTERPRETATION

The ?Kifwebe? mask, which is significant to a tribal branch of the Songye people of Zaire, served many purposes in the tribal customs, most of which tied to their deep spiritual connection with the environment they inhabited. The masks were used the by secret men’s society as powerful tools for social control and protecting, they were displayed at important funerals, visits, and inaugural ceremonies. The Female Mask on the other hand, embodied properties that were more restrained and elegant, and mostly associated with moon rituals, funerals, and initiation rites. The female masks are distinguishable by the white paint and lacking the crest found on male Kifwebe masks. The Songye people displayed their connection through ceremonial celebration by paying tribute to their life-sustaining resources. These masks were also used to invoke supernatural powers, used by the tribal leaders to heal and strengthen the tribe.

The Female Mask however, had different spiritual content than that of their male counter-parts. The women?s ceremonial dances were always controlled, calm movements to invoke good spirits that will influence future generations. The male displays on the other hand, were wild, and spontaneous to show their power, and force prevalent in their social environment. The elements of design and function are ever-present in the Kifwebe headdress. ?The masks are decorated with mythological motifs; patterns made from geometric grooves, reminiscent of markings on the skin of various animals? (http://www.civilization.ca). The long vertical lines on the nose are characteristic of the forehead and muzzle of the hush back, a small African antelope hunted for survival. Much of the content resides in these distinct features, from the contoured grooves, to the highly abstract facial features. The golden crown most likely represents the horn of an antelope, and the protruding mouth representing that of a bird, or possibly a crocodile. The crest of the nose looks much like that of the crest of the antelope. ?The many art forms of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas are based on long-lasting traditions, learned skills, and fine distinctions, just as Western art is. They are the product of cultural values and concerns?(Artforms, p.353).

The importance of ceremonial rituals, and social hierarchy were extremely evident in these native civilizations. These masks bestowed a sense of being, and a more stable sense of connection with a dynamic environment. The Songye people demonstrated this connection through ceremonial celebration, and paying tribute to their life-sustaining resources. These elements and design principles further enhance the connection of the spiritual sustenance shared between man and nature. The artistic designs of the Female Mask, gives a sense of creating order out of chaos, to communicate with the spirits and pay homage necessary for survival of a nation; the ultimate goal.

EVALUATION

I thought this was an excellent art piece not only to evaluate, but to learn about as well. We Americans take so much for granite with our current status of living, that I don?t believe we spend time enough getting back to our ?roots?. The smell of the room where this exhibit is displayed, for some reason takes me to a place I have felt before. As strange as it may sound, I felt as if a part of who I am was on display only in an alternative supernatural sense. Standing in front of that case, I could almost picture in my mind the sights and sounds of the ceremonial dance. The way the light flickered from the fire as many tribesmen, and women displayed their beautiful works to the Gods they believed in. But isn?t that the feeling one should get when we view pieces of this nature? Historically, pieces like the Female Mask should be greatly appreciated for their aesthetical qualities, as well as for their ability to transport your mind to lands and cultures in retrospect.