

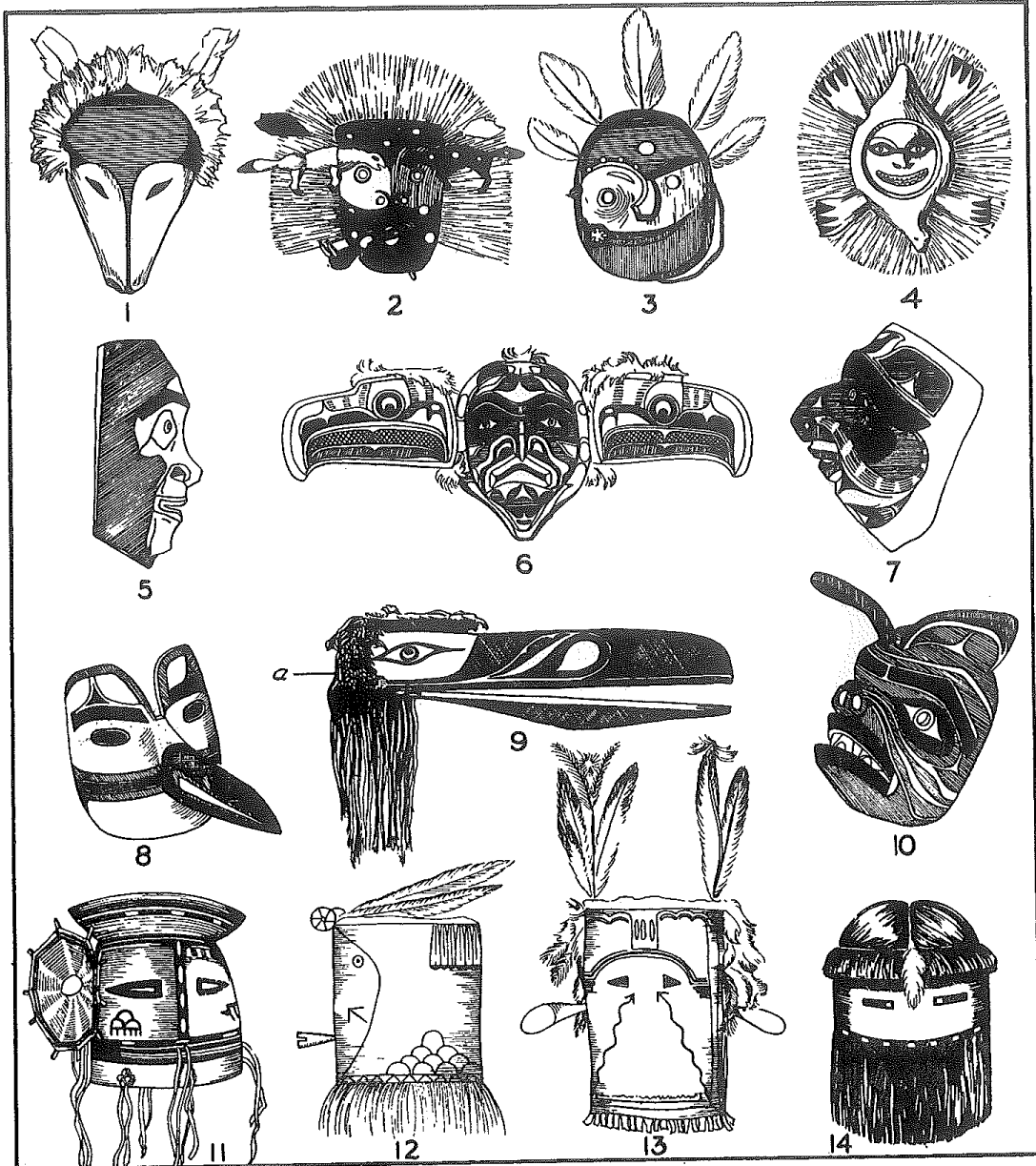
# DENVER ART MUSEUM

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DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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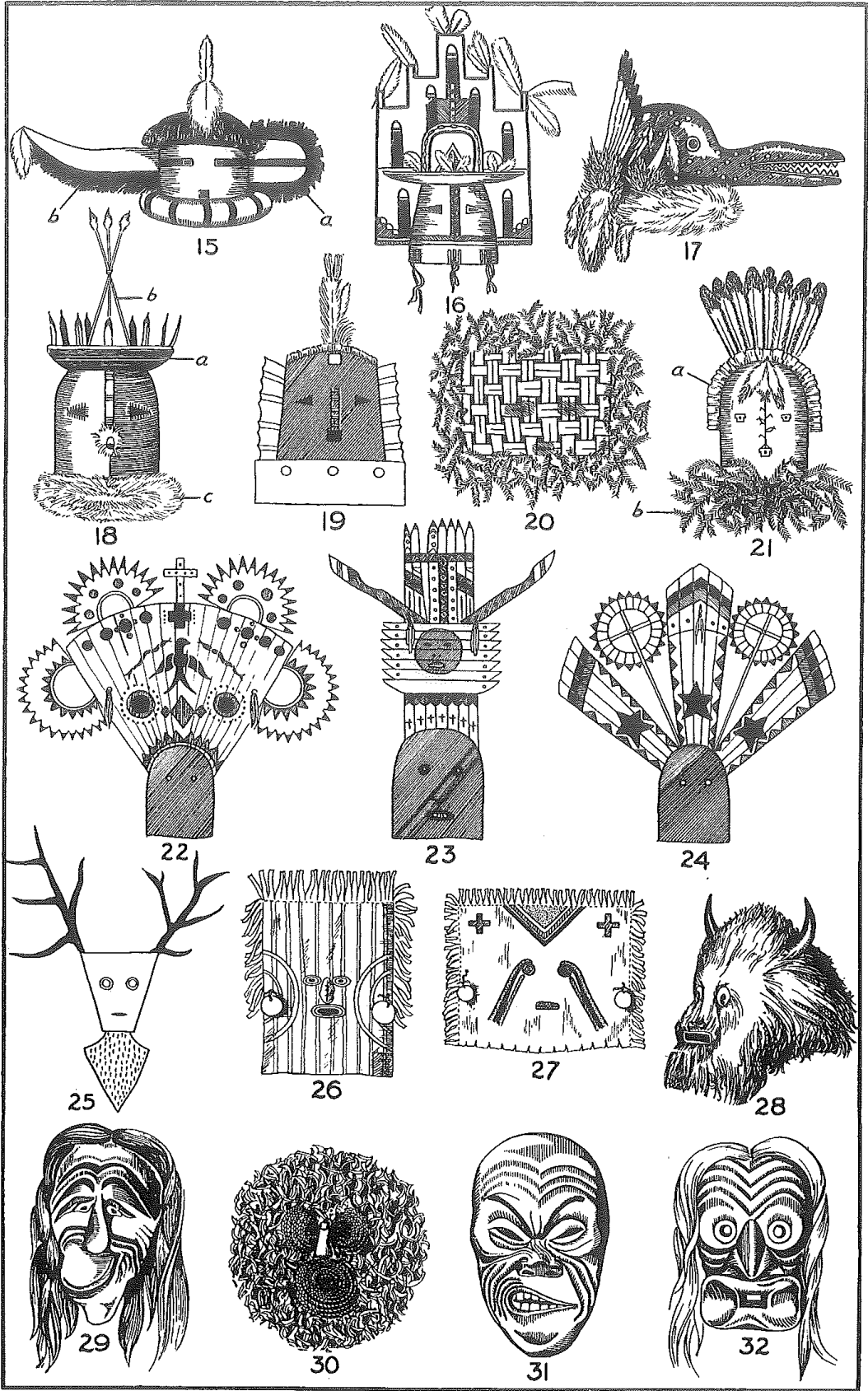
(Acknowledgments on last page)

## TYPES OF INDIAN MASKS

LEAFLET 65-66

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**1. INTRODUCTORY.** The use of masks to cover faces and heads is a widespread practice among aboriginal peoples all over the world. The primary purpose of this masking is religious. Native peoples commonly believe that the wearing of a mask representing a divine or mythological being either turns the wearer into that being or at least makes him the seat of its power or spirit. There are many variations to this belief, but its basic thought is the chief reason for mask wearing. Masks are also worn to inspire amusement or fear or to provide protection against attack. Mere facial concealment, the common reason for masking among civilized people, has little if any place in primitive life.

This leaflet is a description of the types of masks used by Indians in America north of Mexico. The location of the groups using these types and the appearance of the masks can only be discussed, space not permitting any account of the reasons for, and customs connected with, masking.

**2. ESKIMO.** Masking reaches its fullest development in this race among the tribes of Alaska. Masks are reported from other Eskimo groups but as unusual rather than common. How long the Eskimo have been using masks is not known, nor is the origin of the practice. Masks were noted on the Aleutian Islands in the 18th century, but not on the mainland before about 75 years ago.

Eskimo masks are carved from wood. The treatment of features and planes is notably simple and elemental. They are almost always very shallow and cover only the face. They are held in place by cords around the head and by gripping interior projections with the teeth. Paint is much used in a few basic colors. Single colors are used over large areas. Large dots of contrasting colors are often placed over these areas. Most of the masks represent human faces. The features are often distorted (3). Eyes are of different shapes in the same face, noses and mouths are twisted out of line and even the whole face is pulled out of shape. Quite realistic faces are not uncommon, however. Teeth are indicated by widely spaced pegs (3). A number of masks represent animal and bird heads, rather simply indicated (1). Some show human or animal bodies with projecting limbs and a human face carved on the back or belly (4), or have pairs of hands, bird heads and the like projecting from their edges (2). The most complicated type has one face concealed behind another which can be manipulated by strings so as to open and reveal the inner face. Certain masks are too large to be worn. They are hung from the roof and moved by men behind them. Ruffs or halos of hair, fur or feathers are extremely common (1-4). This feature is an outstanding one on Eskimo masks. An expression of gay and childlike humor is very characteristic of the masks of this race.

Masks are carved by men and are worn at dance festivals held in large buildings erected especially for ceremonial use. These dances are still performed.

**3. NORTHWEST COAST.** Carved wooden masks reach their greatest development among the tribes of the coast of British Columbia and southern Alaska, the Tlinkit, Haida, Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, Nootka, Makah and Coast Salish. See Leaflets 1 and 72 for further details about these tribes. Of the origin of the practice nothing is known. The first explorers in the late 18th century found it well established. The introduction of many metal tools in the late 18th and early 19th centuries greatly stimulated all sorts of carving, including that of masks.

Masks in this region are deep enough to cover the sides of the head. The top and back are not usually covered, though certain types which are more headdresses than masks cover only the top. Masks of ordinary size are held in place with cords tied around the head and neck, but many are so large as to need body harness for support. Shredded cedar bark (9-A) often covers the junction between head and mask. The range in size and shape is large. It seems that about two-thirds of the masks represent man-like faces and the rest those of birds (8, 9), animals (10) and fishes, some real and some imaginary. Elaborate, relatively high relief is more common than not (6, 7, 10), and paint is plentiful. Reds, blues, greens, black and white are the colors most used. Heavy painted black eyebrows are a very common feature. While the tendency is toward the grotesque (7), certain masks show a high degree of realism, some being undoubtedly portraits (5). Much ingenuity is shown in that type of

mask which has parts moved by cords controlled by the wearer (9), causing eyes to roll, beaks to open and shut, eyebrows to wiggle and tongues to move. Like the Eskimo these tribes make double masks (6), the outer of which can be opened to show the inner face. The most impressive masks are possibly the carvings of ravens' heads used by the Kwakiutl (9), which are 3 to 4 feet long.

A high degree of artistic quality and technical excellence is exhibited in these carvings. The general character of the masks is about the same throughout the region, but there are tribal peculiarities too detailed for discussion in this leaflet. The influence of this great center of masking has spread to some extent among the tribes of the adjacent interior and to the south. Masks are carved by men and are worn principally by them, though women and children may do so on occasion. Masks are used till worn out and are often repainted. Mask using is not as common as formerly in this region, but has not been entirely given up.

**4. PUEBLO.** It has been suggested that because no masks have been found in the ruins of prehistoric villages the practice was introduced among the pueblos by the Spanish. But references in very early Spanish writings to masks, and their presence in pictographs make it clear that the custom is an aboriginal one. Masks are used today by all Pueblo groups in Arizona and New Mexico. See Leaflets 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 30, 35, 43-44, 45-46, 47, 53-54 and 59-60, for additional details about these tribes.

Pueblo masks are made of leather in two basic forms: cylinders with one end closed and large enough to cover the whole head (11 and 15); and bands something like our dominos which cover only the face (14). The latter almost always have beards of hair or fringed leather, and are held in place with thongs passing around the head. There seems to be a tendency for the masks of the western pueblos, Hopi (11, 16), Zuñi (15) and Acoma, to be round-topped, and for those on the Rio Grande to be flat-topped (12, 13). Most masks have more or less human features, principally indicated by paint and openings. All masks are painted in a great variety of color and pattern. They are also trimmed with feathers, (12, 13, 15, 16, 17), beads, hair (15), pieces of basketry (11), representations of jimson-weed flowers made of wood or yarn (11) and various other adjuncts. Certain masks have thin structures of carved wood or of cloth covered sticks (16) projecting from top and sides. Such structures are either semi-circular or terraced (16), and usually bear painted designs and feathers. Many of the cylindrical masks have large collars of fur (17) or spruce twigs around their bottoms. Large slab-shaped ears of wood (15-a), various kinds of horns (15-b), and cylindrical snouts (12), all of many shapes and sizes, are used. Such adjuncts may only be attached to one side of the mask. Eyes are holes of various shapes cut through the leather or large balls goggling from their sockets. Mouths are holes ringed with skin or are indicated with braided corn husk suggesting teeth. Noses are made of stuffed skin or of corn-cobs. A few masks have great snouts (17), sometimes hollow and movable. The fact that there are at least five hundred masks in the various pueblos, each with distinctive individual characteristics, indicates the bewildering variety of Pueblo masks.

The use of masks is strongly established among the Pueblos of today, especially in the western villages. Masks are made by men and in most cases worn by them, though in some ceremonies women are masked. Some masks are newly made for each occasion, others are used in particular ceremonies until worn out. In other cases the masks are reduced to their fundamental cylinders after each period of use and redecorated in other styles as needs arise. Among the Hopi and Zuñi masked dances are held outdoors in public. In the eastern towns masked dances are either held in kivas or ceremonial rooms or outdoors with all whites rigidly excluded. In the villages of the Tewa tribe on the Rio Grande all masked dances seem to be held in the kivas.

**5. NAVAHO.** Nothing sure is known about the origin of Navaho masks, but it is generally felt that the tribe adopted the custom from the Pueblos at some time after its arrival in the Southwest perhaps six or seven hundred years ago. Definite information about Navaho masks only goes back to about 1880. On the basis of the available information, which does not cover all Navaho ceremonies, it appears that there are about two dozen different masks of two general types. These are an inverted bag of skin covering the head (18, 21), for male

characters, and a stiff leather domino covering only the face (19), for female characters. Both types are painted quite elaborately and trimmed with feathers (18, 19, 21), fur, hair (21-a), sections of baskets (18-a) and various wooden accessories (18-b). Collars of fur (18-c) or spruce twigs (21-b) are used. Small openings are cut for eyes and mouths. Certain masks have round wooden or leather beaks, some cylindrical and some pointed. One form of the domino type is made of plaited yucca leaves, fringed with spruce (20).

Navaho masks are made in sets by medicine men and are used until worn out. Each medicine man owns a set which he carries with him to the dances over which he presides. Masks are worn by men, though there is an occasional woman so costumed. They are still frequently used by the Navaho. See Leaflets 3, 9, 15, 21, 43-44, and 59-60 for additional details about the tribe. The Navaho live today in Arizona and New Mexico.

**6. APACHE.** Even less is known about Apache masks and their origin than about those of the Navaho. They resemble Pueblo masks in having a bag which covers the whole head, but otherwise there is no likeness. Until further studies are made and published nothing definite can be said about their origin. Masks are used at the present time. The Apache live in Arizona and New Mexico. See Leaflets 16 and 64 for additional details about the tribe.

The bag which covers the head is today made of cloth (22, 23, 24), on which eyes and sometimes nose or mouth are crudely indicated with openings and paint. Inside the bag is a stiff rod which passes over the head and under the chin. This is presumably the means of keeping the great fan-like tops erect. These fans are the most characteristic feature of Apache masks. They are made of thin, narrow strips of yucca wood set side by side and held in place with cross pieces of the same material. The fans are decorated with painted or pierced designs and with small bunches of wood pendants. Besides the three forms of fans illustrated there is one with a large center section flanked by smaller upright sections of the same type, the whole resembling a large E on its back. The great fans represent the spread tails of birds. Sometimes actual turkey tails are used instead of the fans. There is a clown mask, a bag crowned with a cross or horns.

Apache masks are made in sets by medicine men and used until worn out or until their magic power is thought to have disappeared. They are worn by "devil" dancers, 4 to 6 in number, in healing and girls' puberty ceremonies.

**7. PLAINS.** Masks were not common in the Plains area as a whole and nowhere in that area was the practice highly developed. It centered in the upper Missouri valley. Two types were used. Certain men's societies with animal names made masks from actual animal heads or from skin to represent them. In this group were the Arikara, Hidatsa, Mandan, Plains-Cree, Plains-Ojibway or Bungi, the Sisseton or eastern Sioux and the Oglala Sioux. All of these made masks from whole buffalo heads (28), though possibly those of the last two tribes did not completely cover the face. The Hidatsa used blue glass beads for eyes and painted the nose of the mask blue. The Oglala Sioux had masks representing the heads of elk (25) and of black-tail deer. These were made of soft skin stretched on a frame. The antlers were tree boughs covered with fur to suggest the velvet. This tribe also had a wolf society which used painted rawhide masks.

The second type of mask was used by clowns. It is reported from the Crow, Assiniboin, Plains-Cree and Plains-Ojibway.\* These masks were crudely made cloth bags trimmed with paint and fringes (26, 27). Doubtless skin was formerly used in place of cloth. Most of them had large, hooked noses. Plains masks were made by men and worn by them alone. The Plains-Cree were an exception, for their women wore buffalo masks. There are no available data to indicate whether Plains masks are still used. See Leaflets 2, 7, 20, 23, 24, 37-38 and 41 for additional details about the Plains tribes.

**8. IROQUOIS.** The origin of Iroquois masks is not known. They have not been found in excavations, but the fact that they were reported by almost the first explorers to meet

\*Comanche Sun Dance clowns wore mask-like helmets of willow twigs, with false noses of mud. Ralph Linton. *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 37, No. 3. 1935.

the tribe in the early 17th century indicates that the practice is an aboriginal one. The masks are of two types, both of which cover only the face. The more common are carved in wood (29, 31, 32). In order to keep within them the spirit of the tree the beginning of carving was made on a living tree, the basswood being usually chosen. The masks are supposed to represent forest spirits, often called "Flying Heads". They are made and worn by the men members of the False Face society, an organization of healers. Most of the masks have grotesque and often highly distorted human features (29, 32), though there are some specimens with beast-like snouts and teeth. Carving is in high relief. Deep wrinkles are a notable feature. The eye holes are outlined by wide rings of sheet metal. Horse hair, either black or white, is fastened to the top of the masks and hangs in long locks down each side for 6 or 8 inches below the bottom. Some specimens have hair on one side only. The masks are painted a solid color with no patterns, the colors being black or red, or, less commonly, both colors divided by a vertical center line. There are also unpainted masks said to be worn by clowns (31). The few examples seen have rather Oriental features with slanting eyes and black painted brows.

The second type is made of braided strips of corn husks sewn together into crude representations of the human face (30). Not all have the husk fringe shown in (30) and some are much less grotesque than this example. Both types of masks are held in place by cords around the head. Iroquois masks are still used. A revival of mask carving was conducted by the WPA under the direction of the Rochester Museum. See Leaflets 12, 26, 31 for additional details about the tribe. The Iroquois live in New York and Ontario.

**9. MASKS AMONG OTHER TRIBES.** Mask using was not restricted to the groups so far mentioned, though they are the only ones who have made extensive use of the custom, at least in fairly recent times. It has not been possible to comb all of the sources for data on the use of masks, but the following other occurrences have been noted. In the Southwest two wooden masks were found among the Pima; cloth bag and painted gourd masks are used by the Papago and Maricopa; and the Havasupai formerly had one dance in which Pueblo type masks were used. The use of masks by tribes near the Northwest Coast group has been mentioned in Section 3. The Tinne of Alaska use masks of the Eskimo type. In the Great Lakes region a birchbark mask is mentioned from the Menomini. In the East masks of the Iroquois carved wood type were used by the Delaware, Nanticoke, the Missisauga band of Ojibway and other Algonkin tribes, and by the Cherokee. From the mounds of the prehistoric peoples in the Middle West and Southeast have come copper plates of figures wearing eagle masks very suggestive of Mexico. On Key Marco, Florida, a number of quite realistic carved wooden masks were found while excavating mounds.

**Compiled by F. H. Douglas from the following sources:**

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- The illustrations are taken from the following references. Lack of space compels this brief form of acknowledgment. Figure numbers are in italics. *1; 7, 2; 6, 3; 6, 5; 11, 6; 12, 7; 11, 8; 16, 9; 3, 10; 11, 11; 20, 12; 27, 13; 24, 14; 17, 15; 17, 17; 17, 18; 28, 19; 28, 20; 28, 21; 28, 25; 38, 26; 37, 27; 37, 28; 34, 29; 5.*