



All Masked?

At a time when wearing a mask is currently obligatory in many places, the Swiss have just voted in favour of a ban on covering one's face in the public space! An unimaginable situation barely a year ago, the mask has totally infiltrated our daily lives. The Musée Ariana has several objects in its collection that question our relationship to this accessory, so reassuring for some, but terribly anxiety-provoking for others...

In this strange atmosphere, with the profound impact it has on social interactions, some people choose to wear coloured masks, or ones with patterns or printed messages: does this help them preserve their uniqueness in the face of the armies of anonymous and standardised blue masks? This object, whether protective, festive or ritual, and either partially or fully hiding the face, is an integral part of popular culture: ranging from ancient Greek theatre to the *commedia dell'arte* (No. 5), from animist tribes to the Venice carnival, from Egyptian mummies to death masks, from samurai warriors to Mexican *luchadores*, from superheroes to Anonymous and from the KKK to the medical profession.

Some people become unrecognisable, as it is mainly by our faces that we distinguish one another. The large nude bust of *Batman* with zoomorphic mask by **Anna Malicka-Zamorska** (Poland, 1942) wears a kind and benevolent expression (No. 1). This "Dark Knight" carries a mole on his broad shoulders, an allegory of his secret identity as a shadow superhero and of blind justice. The sculptures by this Polish ceramist oscillate between the grotesque and the fantastic, mixing animals and humans in a magical and poetic world.

The mask encourages transgression and makes us less inhibited in our relationship to others, so reducing embarrassment or reserve. It reveals the animal side of this naked feline-woman with her voluptuous curves (No. 2). She embodies the tiger, showing her teeth in an attitude that is both defiant and comical. Together with the monkey sitting on her back, two of the twelve animals of Chinese astrology are personified here. Ceramist **Esther Shimazu** (Hawaii, 1957) draws her inspiration in particular from shamanic and Asian traditions. Certain ritual masks are thought to have the power to open a magical connection between the terrestrial world and that of the spirits, during dancing and trances that awaken invisible sacred forces.

Highly irreverent, the Christ with the head of a hippopotamus by **Christine Aschwanden** (Switzerland, 1976) is demystifying and liberating (No. 4). In her *Nippes* ("bibelots") series, the artist transforms salvaged porcelain figurines. She covers their heads with zoomorphic masks and adds amorphous shapes or golden highlights by means of multiple firings. She diverts and reappropriates them, creating new characters, who we can picture as the protagonists of stories, sometimes nightmarish, but always full of irony and humour.

The restrictive mask stifles speech and breathing. This "false face" cuts off access to one's real face, suppressing emotions and expressions. It creates a distance between individuals or sets up a barrier between the outside and inside worlds. This is the case with the small mummified, muzzled or gagged white heads (No. 3), born of the tortured imagination of **Carmen Dionyse** (Belgium, 1921-2013). Her disconcerting and mysterious beings, without ears, mouths, noses or sometimes even eyes, remain entirely focused on their spirituality, either willingly or by force, and invite introspection.

Behind a disturbing pastel pink mask hides an angelic face (No. 6). **Nuria Torres Dominguez** (Spain, 1976) has created a series of busts of masked children, with interchangeable accessories. The latter profoundly modify the expression of the faces and how we perceive them. This artist draws inspiration from classical sculpture, reinterpreting it in porcelain or marble. Here, she copies a famous bust by Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741-1828), representing Louise Brongniart (1772-1845), daughter of French architect Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart (1739-1813). Hovering between innocent or alienating children's games, her amusing or disturbing young "Louise" certainly leaves no-one indifferent.

The mask, this symbol of submission or of power, object of dissent or of rallying, used for ceremonial occasions or for entertainment, brings us face-to-face with ourselves, awakens our fears and stimulates our imagination... Which one would you wear?

Ana Quintero Pérez, Research Assistant, April 2021

- 1. Anna Malicka-Zamorska** (Poland, 1942)
Batman, 1998
Modelled stoneware, lustre glazes, porcelain
Gift International Academy of Ceramics, 2000 – Inv. AR 2000-491
- 2. Esther Shimazu** (Hawaii, 1957)
Monkey on the Back of Tiger, 2011
Modelled stoneware, engobes, porcelain
Purchased, 2013 – Inv. AR 2013-159
- 3. Carmen Dionyse** (Belgium, 1921-2013)
Tête and *Le Muselé*, 1979 and 1980
Moulded bisque porcelain and white stoneware, enamel
Gift Frank Nievergelt, 2015
Inv. AR 2015-194 and AR 2015-191
- 4. Christine Aschwanden** (Switzerland, 1976)
Nippes 1 (hippo), 2013
Salvaged porcelain figurines, modelled paper clay porcelain, overheated low temperature clay, enamel and gold painted decoration
Purchased, 2015– Inv. AR 2015-74
- 5. Figures from the Commedia dell'arte:**
Pulcinella and *Dottore* ?
Undetermined manufacture, Italy ?, 19th Century
Moulded porcelain, enamel and gold painted decoration
Gift Manuela Busino, 2009
Inv. AR 2009-547 and AR 2009-550
- 6. Nuria Torres Dominguez** (Spain, 1976)
Louise con máscara agrietada, 2017
Moulded bisque porcelain, slip cast coloured porcelain, glaze
Purchased, 2017 – Inv. AR 2017-40