

All Masks Have Danced

The tribal masks in this book are a variegated anthology of the collection of Amsterdammer Tom van Groeningen (1948). An extensive and extraordinary collection from the Kullu Valley, India. Van Groeningen is not an average collector. He is not a collector of art that focuses on beauty, provenance, and profit but rather focuses on the stories and people behind the masks. The embedding of objects in the religious, cultural setting of India. "All my masks danced," he says with a twinkle in his eye. What drives Van Groeningen? How did his collection grow? What makes his masks so appealing to the imagination? An introduction.

Not the first of his generation, in 1979 Tom van Groeningen traveled to India. From the magic sixties onwards, India and Nepal exerted a great attraction to younger people, thirsty for eastern wisdom. After getting acquainted with Himachal Pradesh's mountains as well as the people and festivals in northwestern India, he was sold. For forty years he visited the region, several times a year and often by bicycle. Over eighty times he's been there now and he almost always brought back masks. Not as souvenirs, not as merchandise but as carriers of small memories. Over the years, he saw more and more of the traditional legends of the seasons, about the dances in spring, on religious gatherings. Rituals in which masks play a role, often grim-looking with big mouths and mostly decorated with orange and yellow flowers. Each spring masks are carried by the locals to celebrate the Phagli-feast for three days. Cheerfulness prevails because winter is coming to an end. India may be a patchwork of tribal people, what they all have in common is that masks are brought out at traditional festivals and rituals. Whoever understands the masks, understands India.

Van Groeningen bought his first mask at a market in Kathmandu, Nepal. He didn't wonder whether it was an authentic specimen or specially made for tourists. He found it a fascinating gem. As he traveled further through India in the following years, he made it a habit to shed his light at random places and take notes. Without knowledge but with a fixed method. He rented a bicycle and went off: "Left, right twice and then left again. That way you'll get somewhere." He ended up with a man alone in a cabin in the woods. There were all sorts of effigies hanging on the facade of his house, masks. Supposedly very old but actually carved from pine by the resident himself. Van Groeningen bought several attributes. The next day he went again and

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saw to his terror, which soon turned into tenderness, that his six children were wearing new school clothes. Experiencing something like that does more for him than buying a mask with a certificate in a store. What is fake and what is real? The masks had been made by the Indians, so they were real. At most, his sales pitch was false.

Besides personal stories, van Groeningen began to delve into the relationship between the mask and the festivals. The ritual is that villagers perform to depict Hindu narratives. For example, the development of modern man from the forest monkey to a civilized villager. A story that accompanies an image of Vishnu and his ten avatars or is it, Krishna, with his followers? On that, you can argue. The origin of the Phagli festival will, as with many Christian festivals, date from the time when religions did not exist. Perhaps the use of the masks too. In search of the link with Hinduism, you come across the complexity of the origins of traditions. And sometimes you may already have a finger behind the incomprehensibility of the event. Perhaps it is better to simply accept the masks, their use, their iconography, and not to look for conclusive constructions that give everything a precise place. “We know no more than we know”, is his motto. And that is fine, in the best case, it is a challenge for anthropologists to search for the roots of use together with Indians.

Film recordings of masked men who symbolized the arrival of the fertile season during the Phagli party show how sober the locals themselves use their masks. Is there a shortage in the village? Then they just as easily use a plastic copy as a spare. Whoever wears each mask seems random. Sometimes he is surprised by Western art connoisseurs who want to assign different values to the masks than the makers and users had in mind. A damaged and therefore discarded mask was – once in Europe – placed in a showcase and provided with a tribute by art dealers. Walking from village to village through the Banjar Valley in Himachal Pradesh, looking for tribal masks, he ran into a carpenter who makes masks to sell. He quickly understood the logic: “They have to be made by someone?” Stories about the “chosen ones” who would cut the masks in a trance, he takes with a pinch of salt. Just like about the “designated” who are allowed to wear certain masks. Every time he asked about the status of the porters, the answer was simple: the sons took over from the fathers. They are and remain in the family. In essence, India with its festivals full of traditions and attributes resembles many other countries where residents also celebrate the arrival of spring and at the same time exorcising the winter devils. Such as in

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Austria where locals set up their horns and tie the cowbells, Hungary where villagers disguise themselves, or Twente where large fires are lit.

Not only around the spring celebration are rituals less sacred than often thought also the Hindu festival of Dussehra in October is under the earthly influence. It's a big celebration with bronze and copper masks. At the same time, it is a commercial market that lasts a week with numerous religious expressions. The tradition was almost lost but has been revived by the middle class and the state. The beginning of this tradition was already worldly. Around 1700 was this instituted by a ruler. All villagers were obliged to travel once a year to the residence of the ruler to offer money. Those who refused were severely punished. It was a classic economic start to what is now a religious phenomenon.

In recent years, his focus has been entirely on the Banjar Valley where he is one of the family. The villagers attach great importance to their masks. It happens regularly, when Van Groeningen rests in the evening after a day of hiking, that people secretly report to him to offer a mask for sale. Nowadays there are no more masks on the facades of the houses. The risk of theft is too great.

There is a certain reevaluation of these Phagli parties. Not so much for religious reasons but for social reasons. Villagers go to work in the big cities, like Delhi or Amritsar, and return to their village to meet each other and the family. There are also more and more people who do return to the valley but do not celebrate the Phagli festival.

Tom van Groeningen will keep coming back to the area. "The nice thing about masks is that you don't know what it's about. It can't be enforced. And the fascinating thing is that I'm getting closer to that culture. I never get bored."

By Stephan Steinmetz