Magnificent and Marvelous Masks of the Island

Posted on

Sri Lanka is home to many indigenous arts and crafts, and the traditional face masks are no exception. Fusing creativity, culture, and tradition, Sri Lankan masks play an important role in the mask heritage. It is also popular in the mask dance-drama. From earlier times to the modern-day, making masks passed on to generations, creating vivid and intricate designs native to the island. However, in the current situation, with the ongoing pandemic, when we talk of ‘masks’ what strikes our mind is the practice of wearing ‘masks’. It has become a lifestyle routine adopted in everyone’s lives for safety and protection.



Sri Lankan masks are fascinating because they have distinct features and characteristics representing a story peculiar to them. It is very much a part of a living social framework, mythology, and philosophy of the southern people of Sri Lanka.

Exotic creations of expert craftsmanship, these fascinating masks are used essentially for theatrical or ritual masquerades. The effect is usually visual and amplifies the dramatic situations or the rituals performed.

Sri Lankan masks could be divided into two categories – Kolam masks and Thovil Sanni masks.

Kolam is a rural dance drama, a form of traditional entertainment associated with the country's south. The Kolam masks aid in the clever caricature of characters and incidents from southern Sinhalese village life, including the infiltration of foreigners with the advent of the colonial era.

> Apart from playing an important role in rituals and ceremonies, Sri Lankan masks are the best souvenirs that reminisce the island's history and traditions.

The actors, headed by a narrator, depict various episodes through masked dance, mime, and impromptu dialogue. Here almost every character wears a mask. Each Kolam dance has its own characters, such as Panikkala, the drunken drum messenger; Nonchi Akka: his wife of the Anabera Kolama; and Lenchina, the young and pretty wife of Jasaya, who is the oldest washerman in the Pedi Kolama.

Thovil and Sanni (disease) are demon dance ceremonies performed to exorcise disease-causing demons. The Kattandiyas (witch doctors) impersonate these demons, wearing masks and costumes peculiar to each demon. Some of the masks used in these rituals, such as 18 Sanni demons, have their own distinct features, symbolizing a particular Sanni, and masks of the five Yakku (demons) such as the Kalu Yaka and Mahasona Yaka.

Crafting a mask was initially reserved for those belonging to families of artisans coming down the generations. It was an undertaking, which involved a lengthy procedure. In carving the mask, the wood of the Kaduru tree is used almost always. This wood is light, easy to carve, and durable.

In the preliminary stages, the bark of the tree was peeled and the trunk chopped into sizeable blocks. Gradually, the chosen part was trimmed and reduced to a specific size and hollowed from the inside. Later, the potential mask was kept close to the kitchen fireplace for about a week to absorb smoke and fume. The wood, originally white in color, turns a golden hue. The final product is reached after several such seasonings at different stages of its carving.

If a mask is kept at the kitchen fireplace for three months, it will last nearly 75 years. And a mask kept for six months will last almost 150 years.

This process is essential because the type of wood used contains a large quantity of latex, and the wood needs to be completely dry as otherwise, it would tend to crack during the hollowing and scraping. Then the dried face of the mask is smoothed first with rough skins of the swordfish and stingray. It is further smoothened with tree leaves of Motadeliya and Delsavaran, and yellow is applied as a primary color. After this, the detailed painting is begun. Next goggling eyes, lapping tongues, sagging cheeks, pointed chin, wrinkles on the forehead, protruding teeth, beards, horns, and fangs of demons are patiently and carefully worked out.



Salu Paliya presents an energetic performance.

Traditional artists possess handwritten manuscripts containing prescriptive verses (Ambum Kavi) detailing the conventional masks' proportions, characteristics, and color combinations.

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In the past, masks were painted with natural paints extracted from leaves and flowers of trees, stones, and minerals. Brushes for painting were made of the fiber of roots and hairs of animals. Painting a mask in this pure local tradition involves much labor and time. Such masks, made according to conventional methods, are highly valued and used in traditional performances and rituals.

Masks manufactured today are essential for the tourist market. These masks will not fail to mesmerize you with their delicate carvings, attractive color combinations, haunting features, and hypnotic effects. Apart from playing an important role in rituals and ceremonies, Sri Lankan masks are the best souvenirs that reminisce the island’s history and traditions. You can find mask-making workshops and shops that display vibrant collections of masks.

Mask performances are an expression of portraying stories that are distinct to the island. A mask is a true treasure for your Sri Lankan collection that is sure to recall the nostalgic experiences of the vibrant island.



Naga Rakshaya.



Gara Raksha.



Gurulu Raksha.



Anabera kolama.



Kolam masks.



Dukkiniya, son of Ana Bera from the Pedi kolama.



Lenchina, the young and pretty wife of Jasaya.