THE MEXICAN MASK: ART AND RITUAL

An Exhibit at the Beacon Street Gallery
Chicago, Illinois - 1986
curated by Paul L. Tyler

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exhibit has been made possible with support from...

Illinois Arts Council
National Endowment for the Arts
Borg Warner Corporation
Joyce Foundation
Chicago Council on the Fine Arts

All masks on loan from members of...

The Mexican Fine Arts Center

Special thanks are due to Dale Hillerman, William Goldman, Robert Barnett, and Elise Ferguson without whose help this exhibit would have given in to the forces of disorder.

THE MEXICAN MASK: ART AND RITUAL
An Exhibit at the Beacon Street Gallery
Chicago, Illinois - 1986
by Paul L. Tyler

The masks in this exhibit provide a small, but stimulating glimpse of the rich world of Mexican folk art. These masks are powerful, not only as purely aesthetic objects, but also as items that play an important role in the indigenous cultures of Mexico, both past and present. On display here are two kinds of maks: authentic dance masks, representing traditions that have been conserved through many generations; and decorative masks, artistic expressions made for the marketplace in response to the demand created by collectors and tourists. The decorative masks include a number which were made in the style of various dance traditions (scattered throughout this exhibit), and masks in which the maker has given a freer reign to his imaginative use of traditional elements (#s 1-14).

The dance masks are used for ceremonial dances performed at holidays and fiestas by especially recruited and well-rehearsed troups of mostly male dancers, musicians, and in some cases, actors. The performance of ceremonial dances in Mexican villages is supervised by a <u>mayordomo</u> who has responsibility for the successful execution of the dances and of the entire fiesta. Some of the dance traditions represented in this exhibit involve only dancing with music. Others are spectacles with a story portrayed through action and speech. When spoken lines are involved, it is again the <u>mayordomo</u> who ensures that the actors learn their lines and who, in some cases, maintains possession of the well-used and cherished script that has been handed down through the years.

The dance masks in this exhibit have been organized into three categories according to origin. Though the lines between these categories are quite fuzzy in practice, these groupings correspond to the major periods in Mexican history. The first catefory includes the oldest dance traditions, those with roots in the pre-Hispanic era of the Aztecs and other native groups. The second major category focuses on dances that sprang from the Spanish Colonial Era. And the third category emphasizes a variety of fiesta and carnival dances performed in modern Mexico. Nearly all of the dances represented here have enjoyed continued performance in the 20th century.

Included in the pre-Hispanic grouping are dance traditions in which the masks help to transform men into animals, and several ritual traditions concerned with the agrarian cycle. In the <u>Mach Cabrillo</u> (male goat) dance the dancers have license to act in ways that would normally be prohibited (#s 17- 23). Such raucous behavior, exhibited by masked characters in many other dances, symbolizes the inversion of the social order and the temporary triumph of disorder that holds for much of the temporary world of the festival. A more serious threat to the normal order of things is encountered and defeated in the <u>Tigre</u> (jaguar) dance (3s 24-32). This spectacle involves the chase and capture of a jaguar who threatens the village's crops and domestic animals. The dancer in the <u>Tigre</u> costume is sometimes ritually killed and resurrected. Metaphorically, the spilling of his blood restores fertility to the earth. The <u>Tlacololero</u> (those-who-slash-and-burn) dance is a variation of the <u>Tigre</u> dance that features the <u>Tlacololeros</u> who utilize an ancient method for clearing fields for cultivation #s 29-44).

Colonial era dances cover both dance-dramas brought by the Spanish <u>conquistadores</u> and Catholic missionaries, as well as spectacles that relate to the conquest of native peoples by Europeans. All of these dance traditions exemplify the syncretism of Indian and Spanish elements that pervades Mexican culture. Examples of imported dances include the danced battle between Moors and Christians, in which blue-eyed and fair-skinned Christians, often with Roman names, defeat brown-eyed and dark-skinned pagans of non-European ethnicity (#s 61-66 & 48-55); and the <u>Pastorales</u> (Shepherds) pageant enacted at Christmas (#s 67-71). The latter derives from dramas used by priests in both Spain and the New World to teach Christian truths,

but has been readily adapted to the Mexican world of fiesta with the inclusion of such characters as the Negrito, various devils, and a viejito and bartolo who, as clowns, act as intermediaries between the audience and the ritual performers. An example of a conquest dance is the Santiago (St. James) dance in which the patron saint of Spain defeats the evil Pilatos (#s 58-59 & 61-66). In some cases, Santiago with an army of Pilates (Romans) conquers the Aztecs. The latter are here represented by two eagle-knoght masks and Malinche, the native woman who, according to legend, aided Cortès in his campaign of domination (#s 45-47). Variant traditions in this cycle include the dances of the Marquez (#s 56-57) and of the Curpites (#60).

A rich variety of Masked dance troups and characters appear in Mexican villages at Carnival and Fiesta time. These range from dance groups representing various occupations, such as the dance of the Pescados (fishermen - #s 80-83), to dances which mock the mostly European higher classes (#s 104- 110), to dances celebrating locally revered figures, such as the dance of the Viejitos (#s 90-95). The latter symbolize the wise and experienced elders, looked up to in native culture, who may be bent and forced to walk with canes, but who nevertheless show their capabilities in the dance. A related group is that of the Negritos who reflect a pre-Hispanic tradition that associates the color black with power, wealth, and even diety. Like the Diablos (#s 99-103), many of these characters may appear singly in other dances as well as with their compatriots in their own dance.

As examples of the blending of native and Spanish found in Mexican culture, the various ritual dances from the northern State of Sonora and the Parachicos dance stand out. The Venado (deer) dance and the Pascolas (coyote) dance of the Yaqui and Mayo Indianas are animal dances, probably with pre- Hispanic origins, that have become associated with the Christian Holy Week. The Parachicos (for the child) dance is possibly an older agricultural tradition that has become intertwined with a legend about a beneficent Spanish woman who distributed gifts of food in gratitude for the recovery of her stricken son.

The final major category of masks presented in this exhibit include a number of masks from one professional mask carver, Juan Orta y Castillo from Tocuaro, Michocan (#s 125-134). Juan's creations include both authentic dance masks and decorative masks. It is important to note that Juan is currently active in his profession and even has several aprentices. His apprentices, however, have remained amateurs when it comes to mask-carving, though they practice other kinds of carving aimed at the tourist market. Juan Orta, on the other hand, serves both his own people and interested outsiders as a creator in a still vital, though changing, tradition that stretches back to pre- Colombian times.