



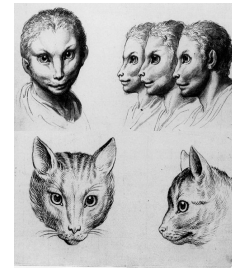
*Ram*



*Camel*



*Eagle*



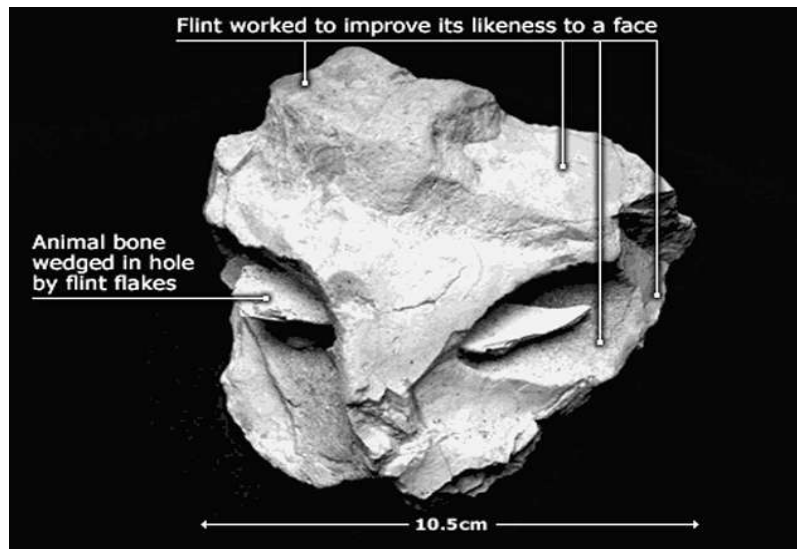
*Cat*

*Charles Le Brun*

*Anthropomorphic Sketches*

*Mask in Theatre Lecture*

by David Bower, Art. Director at Signdance Collective



*The Stone Mask of Le Moustier*

Is this the oldest mask in the world? I don't mean to attempt to answer it, but more to consider the idea. It was found in the Le Moustier region of Dordogne (door-DON-yea) in France. At an excavation of old river sediments in front of a Palaeolithic cave called La Roche-Cotard and it has been dated as approximately 35,000 years old. It has been suggested that it was a mask used by the Neanderthals of the Mousterian culture. It is made of flint and has a natural hole in which a bone was placed and its overall structure was modified, in order to accentuate its resemblance of a face. The mask is categorised as a proto-figurine. The jury is still out, but the argument is that it would be impossible for the bone to have lodged itself this manner naturally.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3256228.stm>

Let just absorb that for a moment, the kind of questions that it might provoke. How did sapient consciousness begin? What was the first instance of cognitive thought? Dare we say that art had a big part to play in this? That our first act of reflective communication back in the morning of humanity was artistic in spirit.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Mind\\_in\\_the\\_Cave](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mind_in_the_Cave)

Steve Mithen, a Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading wrote an excellent book called "The Singing Neanderthals" which provides plenty of food for thought. I found this quote by him, it isn't "The Singing Neanderthals" but following does show his line of investigation.

"The anatomic evolution associated with bipedalism enhanced the musical instrument that is the human body. The spine now entered from directly underneath the skull, the descent of the larynx effectively increased the length of the vocal tract and, as a consequence, the diversity of possible vocalisations and among other the things enhanced breathing control, something with substantial spin-off benefits for singing. A new capability for maintaining an internal

rhythm, arose essential for fluid walking and even more so for endurance running. I suspect this would have also been the time when the capability for entertainment occurred. The fact that we cannot help but respond to rhythm. This new capability for maintaining rhythmic locomotion would have spread over into a capability for maintaining rhythmic sound. To all of these developments we must add the freeing of the upper body a new capability for dance evolved: a capacity for jumping, twirling, skipping, whirling, and even pirouetting under the ancient sun."

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2009.04590.x/full>



*A Judean Stone Mask*

Here's another mask dated at nine thousand years old. It was found in the Judean desert in Israel. It belongs to a very rare group of stone masks, officially regarded as among the world's oldest masks. Its expression is ambiguously potent with meaning it seems fearful or perhaps it conveys shock or could it be menace? Hard to say from a contemporary perspective. But its inexactness would lend itself well to theatre. How the mask was used remains uncertain it has been suggested that it was used in ritual magic. A precursor to performance perhaps. Here is another found in the same area The holes round the edge suggest a functional purpose perhaps with which to adorn it with hair to effect a life like energy or to attach string so as to be able to don the mask.

<http://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/the-oldest-mask-in-the-world/DQEivPUy-IKFYA?hl=en>

Who can say what happened way back at the dawn of humanity, outside of an educated guesstimate but by contemplating ancient examples such as these it ought to evoke a sense of awe and respect. So many questions, the possibility that what actually happened could well challenge our own personal interpretations of the past and yield fresh impetus for new ideas.

"The concept of a character mask, and more generally the concept of masks, can be regarded as one of the simplest and oldest in human social theory. Yet it is also connected to the most difficult issues about the interaction between the self and the social world. Indian experts say that "Masks are one of the earliest creations of humans to establish a relationship between the outer world and the inner person". The Jungian psychologist Jolande Jacobi commented that "With the advance of civilization, the mask, originally connected with the gods and animated by them, has become through constant use an everyday necessity." The Nepalese scholar Shanker Thapa claims that the concept of masks is "not much highlighted in the scholarly world" and that "its relation to human creativity and nature are ignored" – a "precise scientific and cultural analysis and elaboration is still lacking."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character\\_mask](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Character_mask)

The Judean mask looks very much like a modern Basal Mask. Was a mask like this an inspiration for Jacques Lecoq. Many of the great performance practitioners often mined the past for fresh ideas. Mixing the study of behavioural archaeology with contemporary art practice. Here is well known painting La Guernica by Pablo Picasso (see below), he was inspired by the rock art that was being discovered throughout Europe, it is interesting that modern art arose around the same time as these discoveries were being made. So can we say that modern art is actually a 30,000 year old genre?. Coming back to Le Coq, he developed basal mask technique as theatrical tools that enabled the actors to don the calm equilibrium of the neutral mask. It seems to empower the actor to enter a state of perfect openness, discovery, and balance. The neutrality of the mask helps actors to set aside the personal and discover with the right attitude permitting a free space within which to explore new ideas and find new identities that can be used for character development.



*Basal masks*



*Guernica by Pablo Picasso*

<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/guernica>

....and

Is modern art really in actual fact, a 30,000 year old genre?;

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/15/artsfeatures>

A different approach;

### **RITUALS AND MASKS**

Augusto Boal the founder of The Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil approached mask as an analog or symbol that is so deeply embedded within our social make up that objectivity require's our diligent research. His company sought to rediscover how we arrived at our current identity through recognising and unmasking our prescribed social mask, their method of research and development is entitled

Rituals and Magic:

"The participants reveal the ideological structure of rituals, through which specific interpersonal relations, social hierarchies and relations of power are manifested. By using masks the actors reflect the behavioural patterns that individuals must accept in their everyday life through various rituals, which are determined by their social role. This technique emphasizes the diversity of meanings of the same ritual for people from different classes."

<http://www.sofaglobal.org/index.php/en/programs/theatre-of-the-oppressed/about-the-theatre-of-the-oppressed>.

Coming back to ambiguity in mask its surprising as to how much meaning can be conveyed by the wearer who takes on the qualities of a seemingly blank mask. A Commedia dell'arte mask is clear in its prescribed persona its almost as if it is endowed with its own physical script and its generally clear as to who the character is, whereas a mask such as the Judean mask as I showed you earlier is full of implied possibility and [Jean Paul-Sartre](#) would suggest that this kind of mask frees both the actor and audience from literalism to enter a deeper state of imaginative engagement and therefore possibly push us in the direction of a total theatre experience. A conundrum of mask is that there is no reverse to a mask in the sense that the audience can't see the reverse of the mask and neither can the wearer, the action in a sense takes place in this mediating zone of nothingness that exist between the audience and the player, it is the analogon of Sartrean existentialism or the in-between world of the shaman, depending, of course, on your personal world view, and furthermore, the activating zone of the imagination. It becomes the responsibility of the masked performer to ensure a state of conviction is held both physically and emotionally so as to maintain that this zone is kept "energised" in order for the mask to be effective.

Here is very short film blink and you will miss it is of a Noh Theatre performer using a very ambiguous mask at 4.43secs

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ModfyW8wDvo>

### **Commedia Dell'Arte**

One of the best documented uses of mask in theatre is of course is Commedia dell'arte, translated roughly as a comedy of craft. There is so much documentation and many schools in which the craft of Commedia is still taught. The tradition of Italian Commedia dell' arte is believed to have began in Italy during the 16th century towards the end of the high renaissance and continued into the mannerist period, but has been traced back, possibly, to the Roman era, for example, where a form of mask theatre called the Fabulla Atellana or Atellan Farces, they employed masked archetype's too, a few examples;

Asinus ("The Donkey"),

Hetaera ("The Courtesan"),

Quaestio ("The Trial"),

Surdus ("The Deaf Man") also the etymological origin of the word absurd apparently.

Its interesting that we can surmise so much information as to who these characters are. They resonate on a deep level within our imaginations. These characters though bear a striking similarity to the stock characters used in Commedia and still are used even right up to this day. A quick glance at the influences that bought about the Roman empire tells us that the Roman empire sought to emulate the ideals of ancient Greece hence Greek theatre. Mask has

clearly has held a deep fascination for people throughout the ages.

For the latter part of this lecture I would like to look at Commedia dell'arte and what it can teach us about interaction and movement when using a mask in performance, but bear in mind though that you ought be able apply laterally the thinking in commedia across to the other kind of mask-work for example Basal mask.

The stock characters in Commedia dell'arte characters can be divided into three groups these are;

**The Zanni** The Clowns

**The Vecchi** The Villains/The old people (again a stereotype here, but a Vecchi can be a villain if he/she thwart's the innamorati's courtship)

**The Innamorati** The Lovers

**Cantarina** and **Ballerina**; often took part in the comedy, but for the most part their job was to sing, dance, or play music. Almost like the chorus of Greek theatre

The **Zanni** are the servants, and drove the comedic element of a commedia. They were acrobats, clowns, narrators.

The **Vecchi** (The Old People), were the merchants, intelligentsia or Doctors and primarily functioned as the engines of the plot which usually evolved around a love story.

The **Innamorati** were the lovers and often their parents were played by the Vecchi characters.

There are two types of Zanni's. There was the First zanni and Second and often functioned as a team, the original double act. All the commedia performances had a least two Zanni's, they were like flip sides of the same coin. Their primary purpose was as the sole cause of all the confusion that ensued in a commedia piece. They were also able to interact with the audience and were in a sense narrators. The first zanni was called "**il furbo**" meaning the clever one and second was called "**lo stupido**". The first zanni was the leader of the duo a schemer and was able to confer directly with the Vecchi and the innamorati, whereas the second zanni just tried to help but made everything even more confusing than it was begin with. Some examples of "il furbo" zanni's were;



*Brighella*

**Brighella** was also sometimes a vecchi. He is the astute, crafty servant and an expert musician. Friends with Arlecchino. Big belly, a thick nose chubby cheeks. Big Dog, such as a Labrador.

**Franceschina**; or Franceschina a particularly libidinous nature. She's a bit too far over the line to come off as truly sexy, but she's good enough for the likes of most zanni and vecchi. If she's unmarried, she doesn't care; and if she's married, she still doesn't care.



*Tartaglia*

**Tartaglia** plays a kind zanni official, he might conduct a marriage for example. He can't see very well and he often is shown with thick glasses. so his mask has a big forehead, small nose, bold eyebrows, dopey looking eyes. A rounded nose is also common. In a nutshell, a pig.



*La Ruffiana*



**La Ruffiana** plays the old woman, either the mother or a village gossip, who thwarts the lovers.



*Liza Minelli as Sally Bowles  
aka Columbine?*

or more traditionally



*Arlecchino*

**Columbine/Arlecchino** was the smartest character in the commedia canon and she is interesting, she could also be a vecchi or an innamorata. She is often in love with one of the other characters usually the Harlequin. Colombine is a real social chameleon. Colombine is an all rounder, plays a musical instrument, sings and dances. She sassy but not cheap a good example of Colombine would be Liza Minelli in Cabaret as Sally Bowles.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkRiBUT6u7Q>

**"lo stupido"**



*The Mean Fiddler!*

**Coviello**; could dance and play the mandolin quite well. His mask usually portrays him with a ridiculously long beak-like nose, often near as long as his whole face. His nose and cheeks are usually painted red. He sometimes wears glasses, and is frequently shown with plumes in his hat. Callot shows him dancing with a slapstick and a sword on his belt.



*Harlequin*  
by  
*Pablo Picasso*

**Harlequin**; Could potentially be an "il furbo" character alas all his scheme's fail. A cheeky but loyal servant to Pantalone or the Doctor, usually drives the action. Forms a Couple with Colombina. The Harlequin wears the mask that has a low forehead, small eyes and a wart. The physicality traditionally is lowered forward as if from carrying heavy suitcases for the Doctor, the Captain or Pantalone.



*Beppi Nappa*  
*Surdos from Fabulla Atellana?*

**Pierrot**; or **Pedrolino** Originally tended to play pranks and insult other characters for humour; later came to be known for innocence and dreaminess. Perhaps this was a combination Burrattino and Beppi Nappa. I think quite possibly the descendent of the deaf man, Surdos in Fabulla Atellana plays I mentioned earlier.

**Purricinella**; or **Pulcinella**, **Polichinelle**, Punchinello primary trait is a tendency toward malice and selfishness which is usually covered by an ignorance as to the harm he's causing, disingenious. His shape is somewhat like that of a chicken, and this is probably the origin of his name (from medieval Italian pollicino, chicken.)

**Burrattino**; or Burattino or Burratino, means wooden doll or puppet in Italian. Burrattino is extremely good natured. He is so trustworthy that, in one of Flaminio Scala's scenari, the lone innamorata Isabella takes him along as her sole accompaniment on a journey across the country. When he later in the story believes (mistakenly) that Isabella has been kidnapped and raped, he weeps and laments at length.

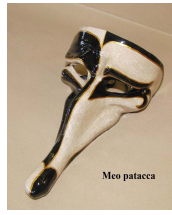
A **lazzo** is a joke or gag. If you watch any good clown, like Harpo for example . You can see that the clown has worked for many hours on different kinds of skills and perhaps even has made props devices for the performances. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a Zanni trying for a job in a commedia troupe might be asked what kind of Lazzo's do you have.

Zanni's can address the audience directly. Zanni contributes to the plot by being the "principal contributor to any confusion"

There many more Zannis for example Scapino, Mescalino, Mezzatino, Giangurgolo, Trappolino



*Giangurgolo*



*Mea Pattaca*



*Scapino*



*Scaramuccia*



*Francesquina*



*et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.....*

As I mentioned already sometimes a zanni may be a combination of two stock characters example Groucho Marx's character was a combination of the Harlequin and Brighella. Whereas Chico was a Brighella and Harpo was a combination of Pierrot and possibly Burrattino. Harpo didn't like to use his voice in performance, therefore Pierrot was a perfect character for him. Lets take a quick look at them in "A Night in Casablanca" as The Marx brothers are good illustration of Commedia dell' Arte.

Night in Casablanca: The Marx Brothers - Clip  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IHajGgFiQ>

In the following clip we can see Harpo as a zanni type character operating in context of the "society" portrayed in the film, all the characters from the different social strata are represented. Lets take a look at some of Harpo's lazzo's

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMBBhyV3sME>

The Lovers (**innamorati**)



*Errol on top form here*

(**innamorato**): Never masked. His name is usually Lelio, Leandro, or Claudio. Generally in love with himself, and with the idea of being in love, and with the innamorata.



*Virginia Cherril  
as The Flower Girl in The Kid*

(**innamorata**): Never masked. Generally in love with herself, and with the idea of being in love.

**The Vecchi's** (The Old People); They tend to get in the way of the lovers' happiness. Either they are parents of the lovers and if not then they are secretly in love with the innamorati. The plot thickens.



*il capitano (The Captain)*



*A Lipizzan horse*

**il Capitano**; An arrogant and ambitious soldier yet a sensitive man, something of a poet and dreamer. He has trouble distinguishing fantasy from reality. Low voice, very big persona. During the the 16th century, Spain was a world super power and Capatino was a satirical send up as a jibe towards Spain. He pretends to be confident and capable when really he isn't. A Lipizzan horse



*il Dottore (The Doctor)*



*Is Grandpa Duck 'The Doctor'?*

**il Dottore** (The Doctor); Very pompous, intellectually conceited. His mask has a large forehead with big nose that priapically, sticks out. He moves like duck as he waddles a bit when he walks. Wears a big black cape. The zanni's would probably fall asleep during one of his sermons



*Pantalone usually has Patrick Moore eyebrows*

**Pantalone**; A greedy old merchant who runs after the young women. From Venice, Veneto originally. (Represents the people that have money, the upper class, very selfish). Very large nose, big wrinkles on his forehead. Pantalone would be a corvid or a vulture he has a peculiar, shuffling walk, because he's always wearing Turkish sandals. When he walks he lifts his knees high and is hunched over with is hands clasped behind his back like a pair of wings. Traditionally he



wears a black cape with red inner lining, so that when he explodes the cape would flap with red flashes and his tongue would stick out, his neck jerks back and forward like a raven. When surprised he explodes onto one leg and lifts body up.

And finally, wild card mystery character;

**Mamuthones;** Has been thought to have originated in Pagan times, Mamuthones precise origins and meaning have been lost in the ensuing centuries, 'Sos Mamuthones' have maintained intact their fascination and mystery. From Sardinia, a place of many legends.



*Mamuthones*

To summarise, the lecture aims to look, from all angles, at the elusive and mysterious aura surrounding the antiquity of mask, albeit mainly in Europe, and its continuing usage in modern theatre. As I have already shared with you, the following, some technique and warm up processes and attitudinal approach to mask usage. The most important thing for you now as a creator and performer is to think laterally and draw from all these sources to create your own characters and if need be combine characters together. Each of you will undoubtedly approach mask from your own world view and respecting with openness the others process is essential to a fully rounded theatre experience both for yourself, the team and the audience.

David Bower (Art. Director Signdance Collective International)