



At Face Value

MSC exhibit provides insight into cultures of Spain and Mexico

BY BRIAN FLEMING
The Battalion

Whether worn for disguise, humor or ritual, masks have become a means to study the cultures of the past. "The Mexican Masks of the 20th Century," featured this month at the J. Wayne Stark University Center Galleries, brings a few such cultures to Texas A&M.

At the exhibit, a variety of masks can be seen ranging from nearly every culture that can be found in Spain and Mexico.

All of the masks featured come from a private collection owned by Jean and Richard Kellaway. "The best masks have a power beyond easy explanation," Richard Kellaway said in a press release.

"They touch feelings and memories that connect us with larger realities. As for me, I like being alone with our masks, as long as I do not have to look at them too closely."

Catherine Hastedt, curator of the Stark Galleries, said the masks are more than a fashion statement.

"The people that create these bring their experiences to the creation of the art," she said. "These masks really have two functions: story telling and transformation. They put the mask on and become someone else."

The masks can represent social status, protect the wearer from evil or even be used in the working of magic spells.

Hastedt said the masks are constructed from a variety of materials and are all handmade.

"They are made from every conceivable material: wood, papiermache, plaster, ceramic, to

name a few," Hastedt said. "Some are neat because they are so lifelike — they really catch the eye."

The exhibit is divided into four sections, each representing a historically significant dance.

One mask from the portion of the exhibit, called the "Dance of the Moors and the Christians," is made of formed copper with enamel paint.

Other masks are made of rubber, hemp, animal hair and leather. One is even made of animal teeth.

"There are four major categories," Hastedt said. "The Dance of the Tiger, the Devils, the Moors and the Christians (which is the largest section), and the carnival-related masks."

In fact, the "Dance of the Moors and the Christians" was the first Spanish dance performed in Mexico. It was used to teach the Mexican Indians a belief in Christian superiority and refers to the fall of the Moors to the Spanish in 1492.

"It's interesting too, to see how the Christian masks are portrayed with blue eyes and the Moors with a darker, more complicated look," Hastedt said.

Many of these masks are not dated, but all of the masks in the exhibit were constructed in the 20th century.

"The characteristics of the masks identify specific roles, but vary from region to region," said a press release. "The balance between Spanish and Indian influence also varies."

Some of the masks are the result of the mixing of cultures that occurred when the Spanish began to occupy Mexico.

The four groups of dances give evidence to this — showing the influence of the Spaniards on

the existing Aztec culture of the early region.

This influence carries on into the 20th century with these works.

"It is fascinating to see how different people approach the making of the mask," Hastedt said.

"Part of the wisdom is to bring in as wide a variety as possible. This year, we are featuring craft-orientated arts," Hastedt said.

"We're so close to Mexico, this is an opportunity for us to learn about our partner country," Hastedt said.

Beverly Wagner, who works with the gallery, said the museum has brought in a variety of exhibits including Ansel Adams and Norman Rockwell.

"However, we have never had one quite like this," Wagner said.

Wagner said so far, reactions to these works have been positive.

"The feedback is that people have been impressed and have really enjoyed it," said Wagner.

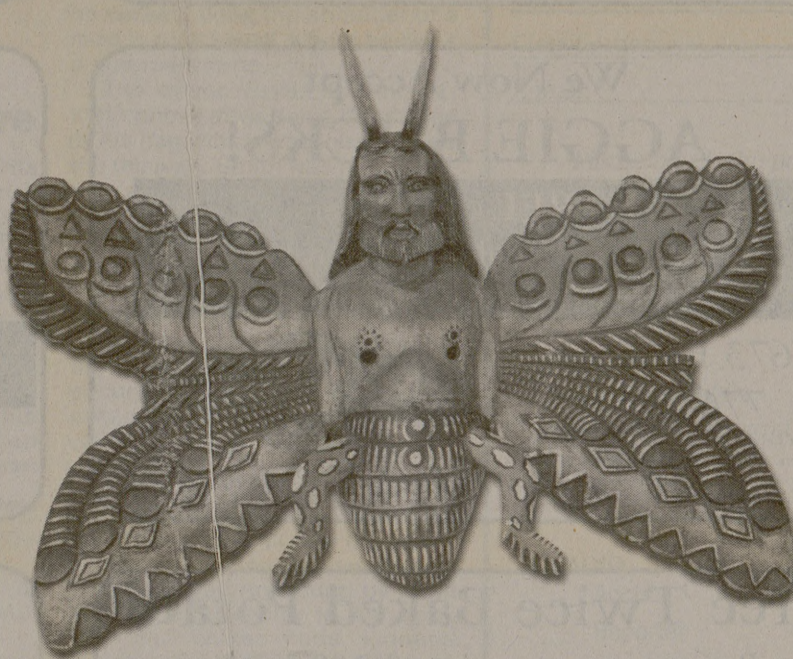
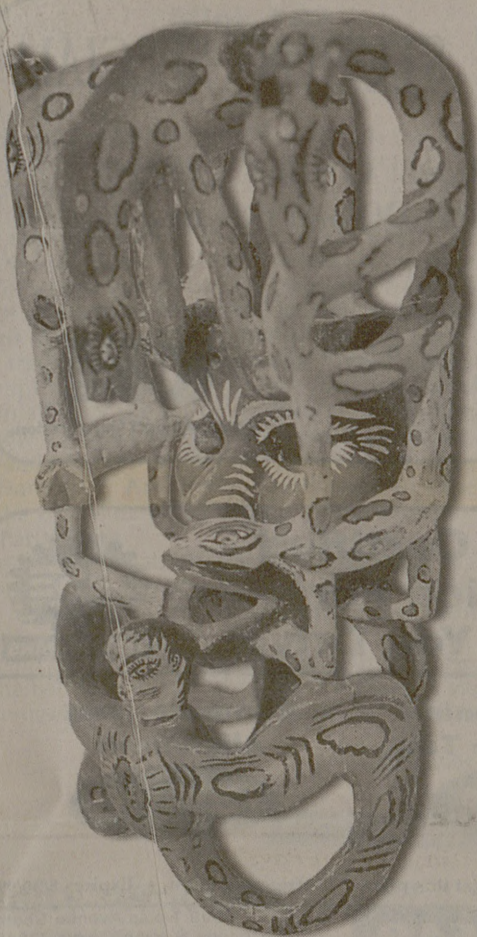
The exhibit is open to the public during the gallery's regular operating hours free of charge.

"We do offer tours for anyone interested in a more in-depth explanation," Hastedt said. "They can be booked by calling the gallery. But for those tours, we take walk-ins as well."

The gallery will begin "Art Tours on Tuesday" to go along with this as well. Information for this also is available by calling the gallery.

"This all really enhances the students' experience," Hastedt said.

Today, masks are still used to exhibit all of what these represent. They are scary, funny, but most of all, true handmade representations of Mexican culture, both past and present.



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