

THESIS

MASKS

Submitted by
Marie-Louise Borak
Art Department

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master in Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Fall 1988

NX
650
M3
B67
1988

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

November 9, 1988

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR
SUPERVISION BY MARIE-LOUISE BORAK ENTITLED MASKS BE ACCEPTED
AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

[REDACTED]

Adviser

[REDACTED]

Department Head

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

MASKS

Creation begins, continues, and ends with a story. Life is the stage, and the mask is the storyteller.

My thesis is the visual manifestation of my creation story. My masks are creation spirits. They plant their seeds along the "songlines" of their legends as they create the universe.¹ Together they form the myth of all times and all places. When acting as intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead, these masks put man in touch with spiritual reality. They are gateways of transformation and guides who help man put order into chaos.

As an artist, I am engaged in the continuous effort toward experiencing the mysterious forces of the cosmos. Through my artwork, I want to keep the ongoing myth of creation alive.

Marie-Louise Borak
Art Department
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
Fall 1988

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest thanks go to my instructors--David Dietemann, David Yust, Dr. Patricia Coronel, Dr. Frederick Levine, and Thomas Lundberg--whose knowledge and expertise have been of great help.

I thank Bill Runyan for his contribution and encouragement as a member of my committee.

I would like to thank in particular my husband Tom and my daughter, Theresa, for their continued support and patience.

Also, I appreciate and acknowledge the untiring help of Leah Bradley and Preston Duwyenie.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
The Story	1
Ill. 1. "Creation Mask"	2
Ill. 2. "Rock"	3
Ill. 3. "Bird"	4
Ill. 4. "Fluteplayer"	6
Ill. 5. "Jaguar"	7
Ill. 6. "Feathered Serpent"	8
Ill. 7. "Transcendence"	10
Ill. 8. "Insect-Fish"	11
Ill. 9. "Snake-Skull"	12
Ill. 10. "Dreamtime"	14
Ill. 11. "Puzzle Mask"	15
Ill. 12. "Death Mask"	17
Ill. 13. "Life Mask"	18
Ill. 14. "Mask I"	21
Ill. 15. "Mask II"	22
Ill. 16. "Mask III"	23
Endnotes	27
Bibliography	28

Listen to my story. It will facilitate understanding of the ongoing transformation of the spirit from mask to mask, from painting to painting. I created this story for children of all ages born between steel and concrete and who might never know that the earth was once a garden.

THE STORY

Bular, the great creation spirit, was born out of the earth (Ill. 1). He embraced the four elements and became fire, water, earth, and air. He is constantly re-created by the energy of the molten lava inside the earth and by the constant force of the wind.

When Bular was still a child, he came to a rock. Initially, he thought it was just an eye lying on the ground, staring at him. However, as he approached this strange object, it grew into a huge rock (Ill. 2). The rock said to him, "Climb up on me!" Indeed, there were steps that looked very inviting. Without hesitation, Bular started to climb. As soon as he lifted his feet above the ground, he felt wings pushing and stretching from under his armpits. He changed into a bird (Ill. 3).

Bular was so happy that he started to sing. His song included all the sounds of the most beautiful music. It was the song that lifted him higher and higher, and every time



Ill. 1. "Creation Mask," 44" x 44", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



Ill. 2. "Rock," 44" x 44", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



Ill. 3. "Bird," 18" x 140", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.

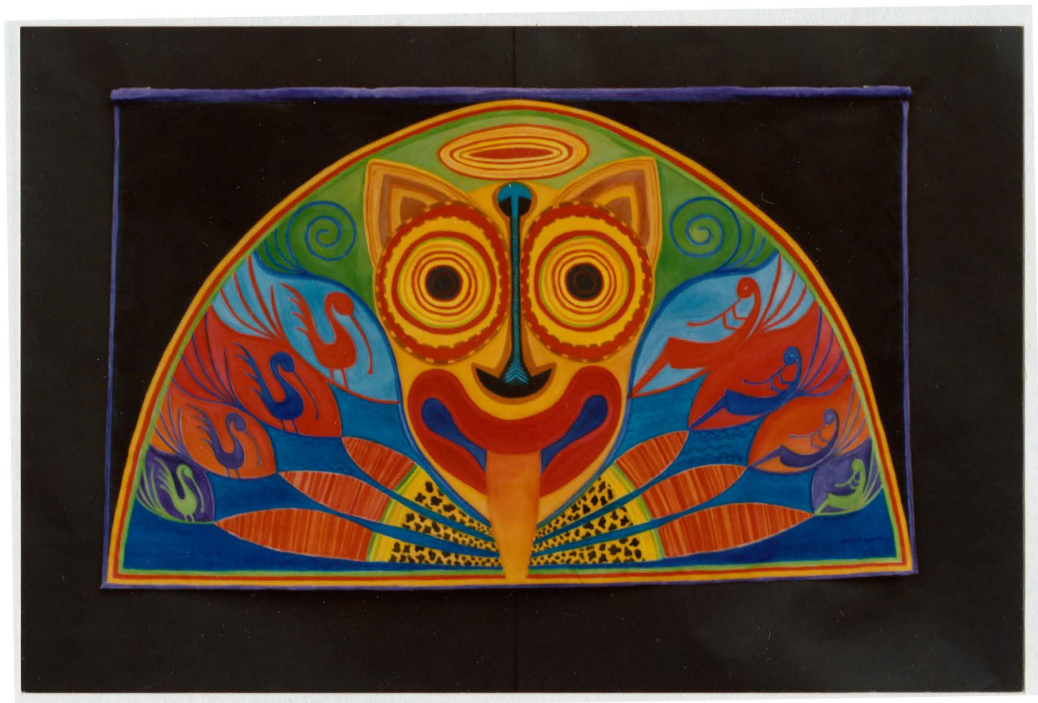
he stopped singing, he ceased moving upward. His song created the heavens and transformed him into a fluteplayer (Ill. 4). In this sense, birds and fluteplayers share the same totem spirits. This leads to the belief that they can change their visible form back and forth from fluteplayer to bird and back to fluteplayer while they are performing. His music still was the most exhilarating bird song. That is why even today flute music sounds like singing birds. Bular's body now was a bamboo flute. Inside of it were many fluteplayers: his ancestor spirits--his grandfathers and grandmothers--who had played the songs a very long time ago when there was only silence and when the first sound of the first flute broke this silence in order to start the creation of the universe. Finally, Bular crossed the rainbow and came into a new world, where he entered the mask of the "Jaguar," which gave him tremendous power (Ill. 5). He was the King of Light in the dark, encircled by the rainbow. The birds and the fluteplayers were playing at his sides.

Bular continued his journey, aware now that he was looking for the center of the universe. He embodied the mask of the "Feathered Serpent" in order to gain the snake's power over life and death and the bird's magic ability of flight (Ill. 6). He was so strong that he was able to carry his entourage, consisting of two elephants, through space.

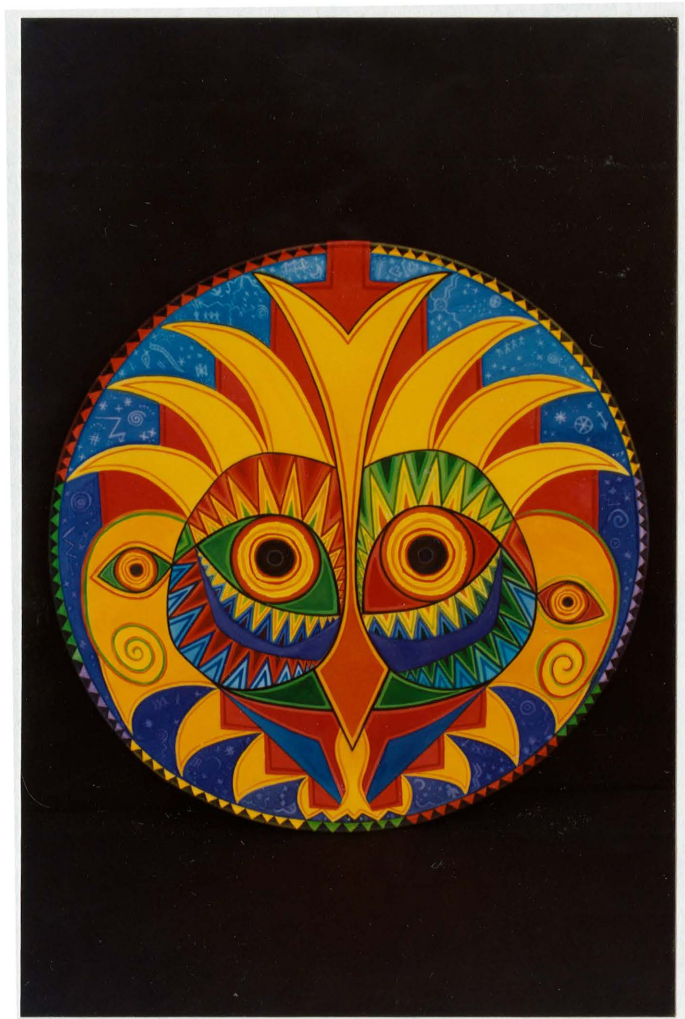
Suddenly lightening struck Bular, and he realized that the center of the universe was within him. All the marvels of his dreams were contained inside him! Bular became pure



Ill. 4. "Fluteplayer," 18" x 140", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



111. 5. "Jaguar," 22" x 36", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



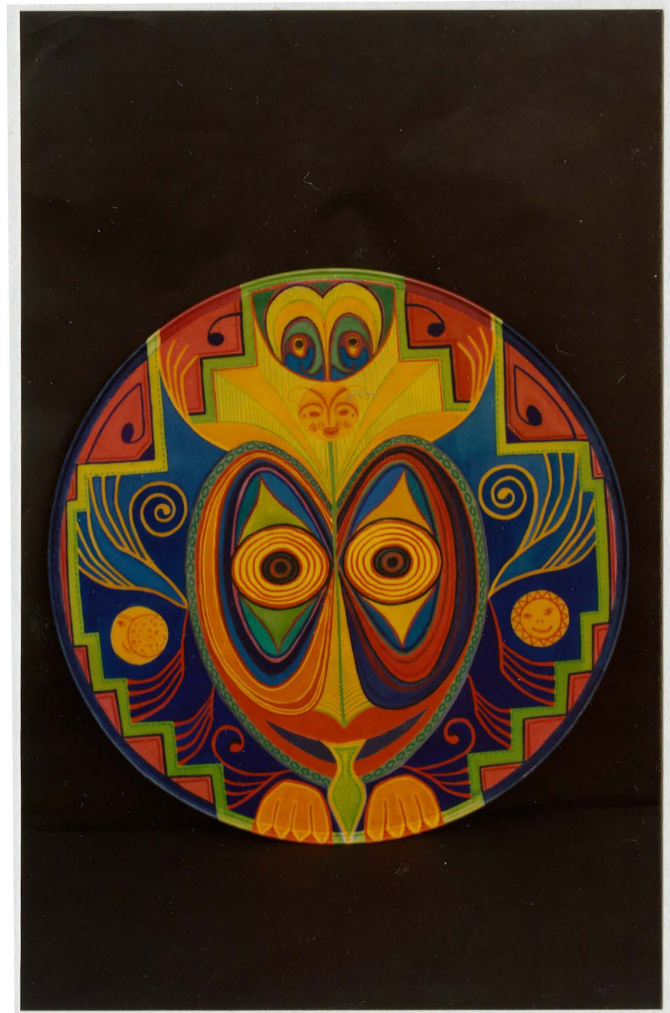
Ill. 6. "Feathered Serpent," 25" Diameter, Watercolor on crepe de Chine.

light when the mask of "Transcendence" came over him (Ill. 7). Now he was able to see beyond. Ordinary reality was just a transparent screen behind which new realities were visible. Bular understood that what he was looking for out there, on his quest, was really inside of him.

As there was no need to look further outside, he caught a ride back to the earth on the setting sun. He found himself back on his planet as a huge insect, which could take the shape of all sorts of creatures (Ill. 8). Whenever he entered water, he became a fish. Every morning he greeted the rising sun as a fluteplayer with a new song. One day his tune sounded rather sad, for he knew that he had to go on again. A bluebird had told him that it was time to become a snake and shed his skin (Ill. 9). This transformation was more dramatic than the previous ones, for he had to say good-bye to all his friends on earth. Fortunately, he had learned during his journey that the earth was only a station on his way to new realities.

- - - - -

In my paintings Bular's journey is a metaphor of man's journey. Man emerges out of the earth and grows step by step as his consciousness expands. The pyramids are constant reminders of this emergence out of the earth and the call to heightened awareness. The symmetry of the pyramids refers to the importance of balance in life. The adobe



Ill. 7. "Transcendence," 25" Diameter, Watercolor on chiffon.



Ill. 8. "Insect-Fish," 27" Diameter, Watercolor on canvas.



Ill. 9. "Snake-Skull," 25" Diameter, Acrylic on leather.

buildings illustrate how the earth has served mankind as a home (Ills. 1 and 10).² Ladders are pathways we climb with patience.

The journey of life is one of never-ending transformation. I have expressed it in the ever-changing curves of spirals. My painting "Dreamtime" is rolled into a spiral (Ill. 10). It invites the viewer to walk to its center while reenacting the procession of life from darkness to light. At the entrance the "Puzzle Mask" greets the visitor and reminds him/her that life is initially a confusing and complex puzzle filled with frustration, bitter toil, and travail (Ill. 11). The "Puzzle Mask" is a circle of light in the dark. The light creates the unity of the image by merging the different shapes and colors. The same thing happens when people of different colors and shapes come together. They become light and "fit" like a puzzle. This is dreamtime, the ongoing creation in which we all are co-creators. The term dreamtime, "altjeringa," comes from the Aborigine tribes of Australia.³ In their eyes, everybody is an artist and has the responsibility to keep the world going through a creation ritual (painting, dancing, singing, etc.).⁴

The visitor of the "Dreamtime" spiral is offered the experience of life which is similar to Bular's journey of transformation. As he travels inward, he is reminded that he is called to become light. Then, at death, he can shed his physical body gracefully. He can easily climb the



Ill. 10. "Dreamtime," 44" x 140", Mixed media on crepe de Chine.



Ill. 11. "Puzzle Mask," 17" x 27", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.

ladder up through the "Death Mask" (Ill. 12) and exit the life of the material world.⁵ The viewer's journey back out of the spiral is one of meditation and can be compared to rebirth from a temple or a cave. On the outside of the spiral, the visitor encounters the "Life Mask" (Ill. 13). A dark red face decorated by black and white lines reminds him/her of new life.

The "Dreamtime" spiral summarizes the function of all my masks, namely the guidance through life, by giving clues for solving life's puzzle. These masks are an invitation for the viewer to dance to their song after taking off his/her masks of pretense and self-importance. They only seemingly disguise. In reality, they reveal the truth, the ultimate mystery of being as they transcend all thought.

The water, always present in these paintings, is my metaphor for the mystery of life and at the same time the mystery of the mask. Water hides the depth of the ocean, and thus is often referred to as a symbol of our subconscious. As fog, it masks off color and depth of space. As a cloud, it creates the illusion of solidity.

The fish in my paintings represent the spirit life in the water, serving mankind as nourishment for the body. The masking tradition of the American Indians of the Northwest Coast ties in with the catching of salmon.⁶ I want to join these Indians in a thanksgiving prayer to nature and express my appreciation in particular for the tasty Rocky Mountain trout that my husband has caught.



Ill. 12. "Death Mask," 17" x 27", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



Ill. 13. "Life Mask," 17" x 27", Acrylic on crepe de Chine.

All the animals in my paintings are creation spirits and, as such, refer to the mask as a transformer. Therefore, they also act as guides as they teach us how to live in harmony with nature. They are in no way inferior to man! They act as intermediaries between the material and the spiritual reality.⁷

Serpents have been feared and worshiped since man lost his divinity in the Garden of Eden. Since that time, nature has been split into opposites: life and death, good and evil, sacred and profane, mystery and reality, ideal and material, truth and falseness. Snakes, just like masks, can bring these opposites together. A prophecy of transformation is fulfilled every time a snake sheds its skin or, should we say, its mask?

The butterfly and the jaguar usually are present in these masks sometimes depicted literally, sometimes in secret writing. The hidden aspect of the symbols relates to the mystery of transformation at the birth of a butterfly and to the darkness of the night ruled by the jaguar (Ill. 5). The Mayas, who had one of the highest aesthetic cultures in the world, venerated the Monarch butterfly for its beauty during the daytime and its counterpart, the jaguar, the king of the night. Together, the butterfly and the jaguar kept the journey of the sun--the change from light to dark and from dark to light--in balance.

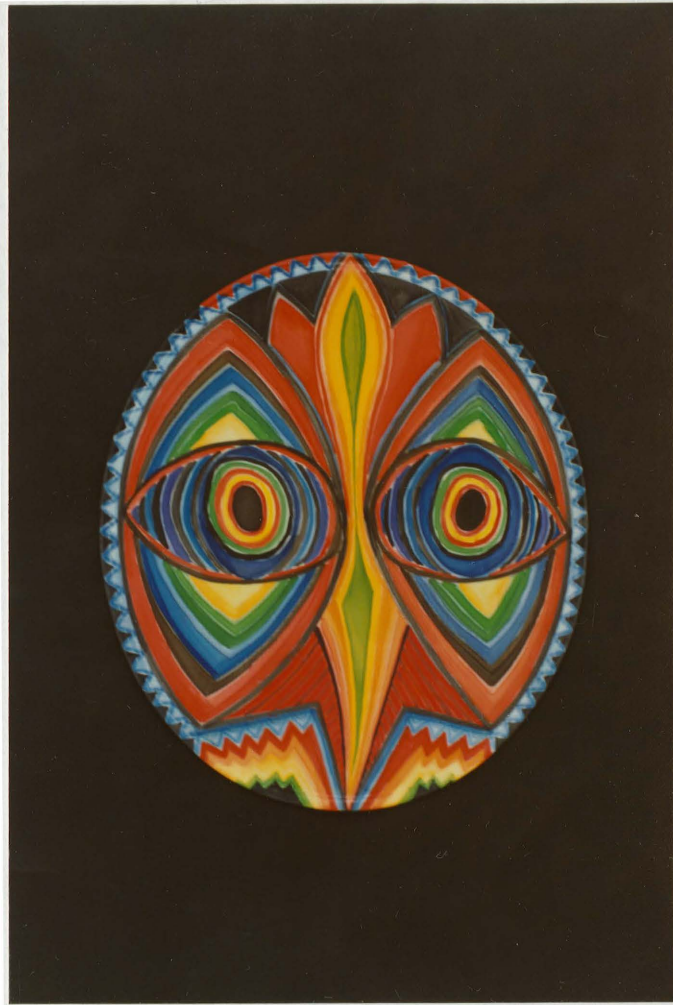
How birds connect the physical reality of the earth with the spiritual reality of the heavens is shown in my

"Bird" mask (Ill. 3). The bird, a transformed fluteplayer, stretches from the floor to the ceiling while singing his song of creation. Often I enjoy watching birds fly freely in the sky as they transcend the limitations of gravity. Birds are regarded as messengers from a spiritual world by many primitive cultures. Their songs speak to the heart.

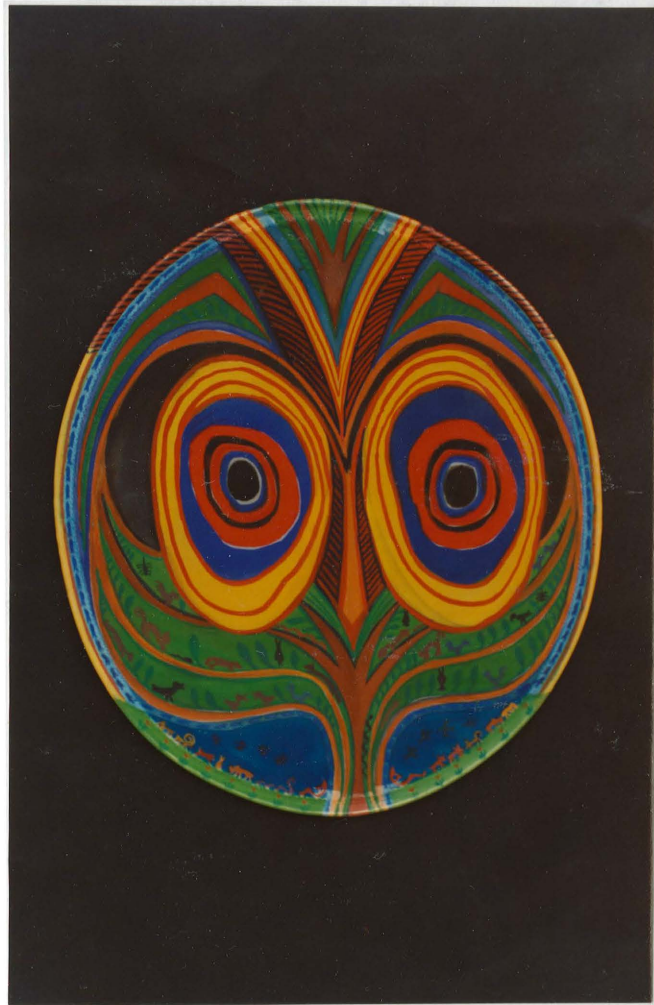
Through the ages fluteplayers have been messengers and guides for people around the globe. The Hopi Indians believe their fluteplayers lead them to this, their fourth, world. For me, the flute is the vessel for the sound in the way that the mask is the vessel for the spirit (Ill. 4). The sound has to be embraced by the flute, but it needs to escape freely through the holes in order to create the sound.

Much inspiration for these paintings came from trees and dreams. According to old legends, trees have been the main resource for making masks. They provided visions to the shamans and gave themselves up in sacrifice to be carved into faces for spirits.⁸ My three small oval masks ("Mask I," "Mask II," and "Mask III") are faces I have seen while staring at trees (Ills. 14-16). They are my guides. They are the chorus in my story.

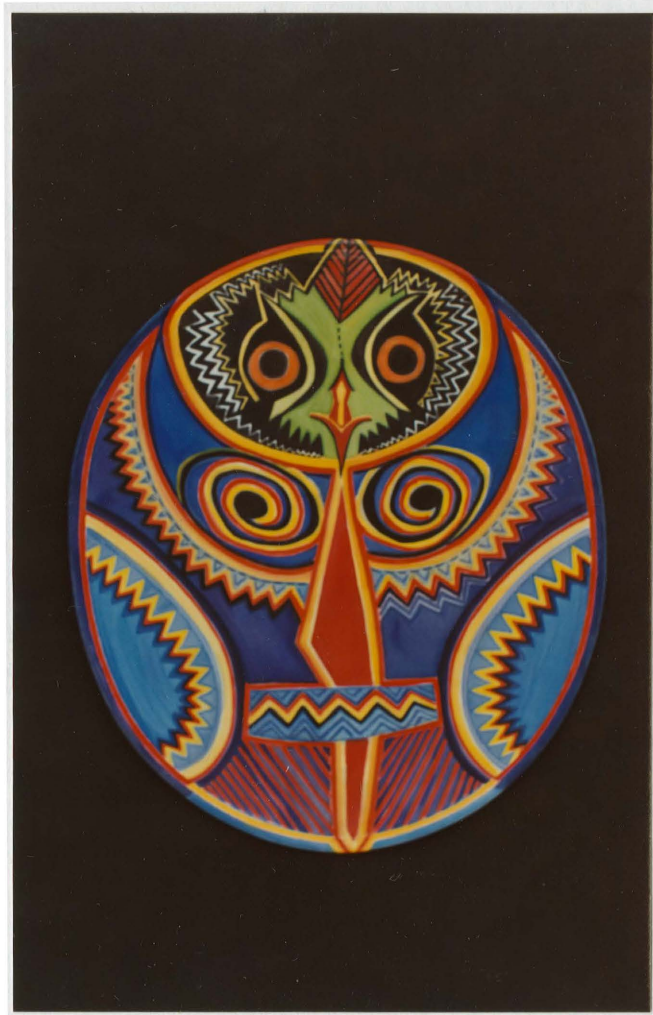
Trees and dreams are both rooted in an underlying plane of mystery: the subterranean for the tree and the subconscious for the dream. Trees and dreams put man in direct touch with his inner self, the center of consciousness. That is where my masks are born. I have experienced that



Ill. 14. "Mask I," 14" x 16", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.



Ill. 15. "Mask II," 14" x 16", Watercolor on chiffon.



Ill. 16. "Mask III," 14" x 16", Watercolor on crepe de Chine.

going out there on a vision quest means to find your inner self, to look at yourself honestly, and to ask who you are. The masks give you the truthful answer. I now realize that painting masks has meant expressing "who I am" and, at the same time, "who we are." We includes all human beings, all animals, all of nature, and the entire universe as one energy. My masks have taught me that the cosmos cannot be divided.

Regarding the more formal aspect of my paintings, the shape is essential to their meaning. The square (Ills. 1 and 2) refers to the four cardinal directions of the earth. The round and oval shapes (Ills. 6-9 and Ills. 11-16) are faces. The verticality of the "Bird" and the "Fluteplayer" (Ills. 3-4) indicates ascension to a spiritual reality just like totem poles or Gothic cathedrals. Together with the "Jaguar" mask, the "Bird" and the "Fluteplayer" form a gate of transformation (Ills. 3-5). The walk-in spiral "Dream-time" (Ill. 10) accentuates horizontality and circular movement in relationship to our journey on earth.

All these masks, except for the leather mask "Snake-Skull" (Ill. 9), are painted on fabric. I have used the transparency of most fabrics and the water color to express transcendence. The viewer who can see through the painting is reminded of "separate realities" which lay beyond the apparent ones. These unknown realities are revealed by the masks. Opaque and thick masks hide what is behind them. They create the mystery of the unknown and the unknowable.⁹

The "Insect-Fish" mask is such an opaque mask with two different sides (Ill. 8). The basic image remains the same, but the colors and some of the lines change. The viewer has the illusion that only one reality can be seen at a time, until he/she discovers himself/herself reflected in the mirror-eyes and becomes the mask.

The leather mask (Ill. 9) refers to the skin shed by the snake in transformation. I especially like using leather for a mask because it can be molded to a three-dimensional mask, which fits on the viewer's face. I hope that the pleasant smell of the leather will attract people to put on the mask and peek through the eye slits. There are two sides to this leather mask. The front is smooth, slightly glossy, and repellent, while the back is like suede and absorbent.

My masks are colorful and bright when they refer to life. They are the happy dancers on the stage of life. However, when they refer to death or pure spirit, they become black and white.

The use of line in my work is as a metaphor of the magical power of the mask. Lines create something where nothing existed. They are the tools for charging my masks with beauty. The rhythm and the continuity of the lines reveal change in time and space. Lines connect different spaces in the same way that masks bring together different realities, creating order out of chaos. The Aborigines of Australia only have one word for line and country. They

believe that their land is made up by "Songlines" which are kept alive through the rituals of reenacting creation in songs, dance, and paintings.¹⁰

The Bambara people in Africa believe that the maskmaker becomes the spirit of the mask and learns to understand it.¹¹ When I sing and dance with my masks and play the quena (flute of the Andes) in their presence, I feel their spirit is my spirit, and as friends, we share the deepest mutual understanding. My masks are born out of the universal tradition of myth. They call all human beings to a deeper awareness of the very act of living itself.

We seek not rest but transformation.
 We are dancing through each other as doorways.
 We are ripples crossing and fusing, journeying and
 returning from the core of the apple, the eye of the
 mandala, the cave in the heart of the rose,
 the circle without boundaries centered on silence.¹²

Marge Piercy
 "Circling"

ENDNOTES

¹Bruce Chatwin, Songlines (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), pp. 13-14.

²Brian Swimme, The Universe is a Green Dragon (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1984), p. 34.

³Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 88-89.

⁴Charles P. Mountford, The Dreamtime. Australian Aboriginal Myths. Paintings by Ainslie Roberts (Adelaide, Australia: Rigby limited, 1974), pp. 9-15.

⁵Patricia Janis Broder, Hopi Painting (New York: The Brandywine Press Inc., 1978), p. 196.

⁶Peter L. Macnair, The Legacy (Seattle: University of Washington, 1984), p. 17.

⁷Suzanne Greub, Art of the Sepik River (Basel, Switzerland: Edition Greub, Tribal Art Centre, 1988).

⁸Lecture, AR 492, Dr. Frederick Levine, Colorado State University, October 1987.

⁹Carlos Castaneda, The Fire From Within (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 257.

¹⁰Chatwin, Songlines, p. 56.

¹¹Lecture, AR 311, Dr. Patricia Coronel, Colorado State University, April 1988.

¹²Lynn V. Andrews, Jaguar Woman and the Wisdom of the Butterfly Tree (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 80.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, Lynn. Jaguar Woman and the Wisdom of the Butterfly Tree. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985.
- Broder, Patricia Janis. Hopi Painting. New York: The Brandywine Press Inc., 1978.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology. New York: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Power of Myth. With Bill Moyers. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Castaneda, Carlos. The Fire From Within. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.
- Chatwin, Bruce. The Songlines. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987.
- Greub, Suzanne. Art of the Sepik River. Edition Greub, Tribal Art Centre, Basel, Switzerland, 1988.
- Macnair, Peter L. The Legacy. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984.
- Mountford, Charles P. The Dreamtime. Australian Aboriginal Myths. Paintings by Ainslie Roberts. Adelaide, Australia: Rigby Limited, 1974.
- Swimme, Brian. The Universe is a Green Dragon. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1984.
- Willetts, Frank. African Art. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1986.