



Renzo Freschi

Himalayan Masks Lanfranchi Collection

Luciano Lanfranchi





Luciano Lanfranchi - The “Art Hunter”

Interview by Renzo Freschi

“There are people who hunt hares and pheasants, I am an art hunter.”

This is how Lanfranchi describes himself and his relationship with that distinct form of human expression that we call art. His look is as firm as his handshake; after years of regular contacts I can present him as the archetype collector. He is at once curious and selective; his competence is parallel to his library, which he consults and updates regularly (pages 12 and 13). I ask him to tell me how he became an “art hunter.”

“I was 18 and before starting University I had gone to Paris to improve my French. I took to frequenting museums and galleries, and I discovered the world of modern art. It was the beginning of a passion which I passed to my mother when I returned to Milan. I remember that my first acquisition was a painting by Roberto Crippa (a Milanese artist who had joined the ‘Spatialist Movement’), which I bought ... with my mother’s money! I became her art consultant. I accompanied her to exhibitions and galleries around the world to train my eyes, compare prices and gradually built up a collection that, like the Crippa painting, is still hanging on the walls of her house. She loved the great masters of the 20th century and the informal artists of the post-war period, while my taste took me towards new idioms; in fact, when I started to form my personal collection, I focused on artists like Fontana, Manzoni, Castellani, Burri and others, and on American and European Pop Art.

I rarely sold my paintings, and when I did it was purely to finance the acquisition of significant works. I couldn’t live without them, they are around me, they energize the place where I live, and they never stop ‘talking’ to me.”

As a matter of fact, this interview is taking place in his house in Switzerland, which is the hub for his collections, or rather for his passions: besides the paintings lining the walls in every room like pieces of a puzzle, there are tribal art objects; masks from the Alps to Indonesia, from Mexico to Africa; sculptures by modern artists and primitive art; ritual objects and implements of various origins and ethnic groups. But his “sanctum”





Another view of the "bunker" with masks from various places and works by Alexander Calder, Günther Uecker, François Morellier, Herbert Zangs, Marcello Morandini, Mario Ceroli, Getulio Alviani, Giulio Paolini and Alberto Burri.

NEPALESE TRIBAL MASKS

Discovery and Adventure

Renzo Freschi

To the friends with whom I had the luck of making a discovery and then turning it into an adventure.

1971: BY BUS TO KATHMANDU

In 1971 I reached Kathmandu, the end of a land journey that began from Europe to Afghanistan, then to India and finally to Nepal. I was a young merchant and had taken an interest in ethnography and folk art, and was shuttling between Milan and the Orient. I traveled by train and bus among common people and from their costumes and jewelry I learned to identify their ethnicity. Upon arriving in Kathmandu the scene and atmosphere struck me as what 16th-century Florence must have been like: a city, no—a valley, where the eye was lost among pagodas, temples and palaces decorated like works of art. Every morning the main square of Basantapur teemed with sellers of ancient marvels, jewelry, wood carvings, masks, furnishings, ritual objects, illuminated books, sacred images—all waiting to be exchanged after some haggling which was both a ritual and a way to know the person in front of you. The articles were mostly Nepalese but there were also Tibetan ones from the diaspora that brought a sizeable community to the valley, and with the migration everything the Tibetans could rescue or obtain through mysterious ways.

1975: A MYSTIFYING DISCOVERY

After the mid-1970s, in that square and in local shops, more masks appeared alongside the “classical” ones from Tibet. These masks were completely different, covered in hair, with extraordinary shiny patinas supporting fierce or dazed expressions; sometimes they were made of roughed out pieces of wood. No-one knew or was willing to reveal where they came from. Possibly these odd masks had been discovered by some local supplier while going from one village to the next to provide antique dealers and markets. So old were they that even their owners had lost all memory of them. The first merchants

Ritual Mask

Nepal - Wood, hair, pigments, metal teeth - H. 27 cm

Prov. Coll. Renzo Freschi

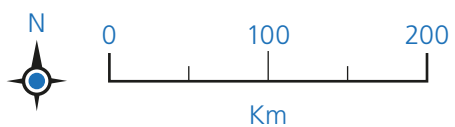
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Exh. *Maschere rituali*, Milano, 1992 - *Maschere rituali del Nepal*, Milano, 1984



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CHINA



Lhasa

TIBET



BHUTAN

BANGLADESH

MYANMAR (Burma)

1.

Masks of the *Phagli* Festival

India, Himachal Pradesh and Borderlands with Nepal

In Hindu mythology, the gods are believed to sleep and rest in winter, whereas demons are constantly lurking; therefore, men are always exposed to these dangerous beings. The *Phagli* festival (from *Phag*, the month of the lunar calendar between February and March) celebrates the awakening of Vishnu-Narayan—the god worshipped in the Kullu Valley—and his renewed protection of the community. For a few days a procession of dancers, music players and devotees in traditional costumes visits the villages of the valley to bring the god's blessing, to herald spring and the renewal of nature. The dancers' faces are covered by masks that for generations have belonged to the whole village and are worn only on this occasion. Their heads are topped by sumptuous floral decorations adding solemnity to their procession; sometimes they wear a wide straw costume.

Phagli masks are usually larger than other types of Himalayan masks and are characterized by exquisite carving and a physiognomy that underscores the influence of Indian art. All masks are similar, but with formal and chromatic differences depending on the village from which they come and on the sculptor's personal taste. Some are bordered by a flat frame provided with holes through which the floral or feather ornaments are fixed (pages 53, 61 and 62), others just have holes for the ropes that secure them to the dancer's head. *Phagli* masks belong to a stylistic tradition that can be considered "classical" as opposed to the "primitive" style of many Himalayan masks. A more detailed explanation on this subject is discussed in the last paragraph on page 353.

This section also includes some masks not belonging to the *Phagli* tradition which come from other Indo-Himalayan regions bordering on Western Nepal. Some are reminiscent of the *Phagli* style, others feature local characteristics mixed with possible Nepalese traits.

Mask for the *Phagli* (February) Festival

Kullu District, Seraj area, Banjar Valley (?)

Wood, pigments - H. 23 cm

Prov. Coll. Christian Lequindre

Publ. *Népal. Chamanisme et sculpture tribale*, No. 127



2.

Hairy Masks

Nepal

Goats, yaks, bears, monkeys, boars and ... the *yeti*!

Nepalese zoology features a wealth of hairy creatures and there is nothing surprising in the fact that so many masks are decorated with different kinds of hair, color, and length. But who do these bearded, mustached, and long-haired masks represent? The legendary *yeti* is no doubt an outstanding figure in Himalayan imagination. Although there is no evidence of its existence, its presence nevertheless suggests that “hairy” masks are deeply rooted in Nepalese mountain culture.

Do they provide a physical face to ancestral fears rising from the depths of the unconscious? Are they images of demons to be exorcized or fierce faces meant to frighten and ward off evil spirits? For certain they do not depict real faces, since Nepalese men rarely have beards. However, this puzzling mystery testifies to the creativity of those who manufactured the masks. In some of them the black fleece alternates with a fair-colored fleece, in others it is exceedingly long, still in others it is made of plain leather, in an aesthetic taste that makes them all different one from the other.

बाबु जन्मोर [जन्ते][में] देक्[देखे]
 रालु खत का गहुने [गैहु] ली पामौक
 [पापभोग][में][...] कल्मे नज [...] मण
 [ताजमान:] तैली खी खी बुमी [बुमि]
 भै [में] उरेरे दे गनी [गीता] श[...]
 ज १०३३ कानि [...] गने [गने] जेन
 काहो [...]

"The reputed cereals trader, known to all by the name of Bābū, after a dispute regains [his] reputation [thanks to] the Offering of oil [illegible word] ... Eat, eat! [followed by onomatopoeia of the "bija mantra" type: *de re re de te*, translator's note]". Seeds [illegible word] are put on the Earth [illegible word]. Thus 1033 spirits arrive [in order to] take part in the chanting [and in] the feast [illegible word].

Votive Mask

Nepal, Middle Hills

Wood, animal hair, pigments - H. 26 cm

Prov. Coll. Roberto Gamba





Ritual Mask

East Nepal

Wood, red pigment, iron staple - H. 33.5 cm

Prov. Coll. Christian Lequindre

Publ. *Népal. Chamanisme et sculpture tribale*, No. 88

C¹⁴ tested, 143 years (+/-30 years), University of Waikato, New Zealand

The sun, the moon, two tridents and the third eye are incised on the forehead.

The trident carved or painted on the forehead of some masks in this collection (see also pages 154, 164, 203, 211, 291 and 309) is connected with the Hindu religion and it is notably a distinctive symbol of the god Shiva.

The trident as a ritual object or as an *ex voto* is attested in Nepal, also in shamanic rites and cult places (see page 164). However, masks featuring a trident are not shaman masks, since Nepalese shamans never wear masks, neither during the ceremonies, nor during the rites leading to a trance. The term *shaman mask* that we sometimes come across is misleading and incorrect.

However, there are reports from some areas of Nepal of shamanic rites in which an assistant of the shaman sometimes holds a mask but never wears it. Moreover, in folk theater and in pantomime there is sometimes a mask representing the shaman as one of the characteristic figures of the community.

The difference between lay and religious purposes concerning some types of Nepalese masks remains an open question. While new information may still crop up, in light of the current research, it seems unlikely that firm evidence can ever be provided of real "shaman masks."





Bear Mask

Nepal, Middle Hills

Wood, pigments - H. 27 cm

Prov. Galerie Frédéric Guislain - Galerie Joaquin Pecci

This mask of a bear was obtained from a tree trunk which included a big branch: there was no need for modeling, it was enough to summarily carve the eyes and finish more carefully the large jaws and the sharp teeth.



Ritual Mask

West Nepal

Wood with glossy thick patina, red pigment, metal teeth - H. 26 cm

Prov. Coll. Christian Lequindre

No doubt quite old, this powerful mask has an extraordinary glossy patina and bears traces of red powder emphasizing the eyebrows and mouth. The teeth are made of repoussé metal. Between the eyes and the nose are two holes whose purpose is unknown. The patina, shape and color are strikingly similar to the mask on the cover of *Masques de l'Himalaya. Du Primitif au Classique* (pl. 36).





PRIMEDIA

