Concealment and Exposure: Contemporary Application of Masks in Lampshade

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the use of traditional African masks in the designing and production of interior design accessories. Through pre-colonial antecedent and masks’ contemporary explorations, three masks were selected and redesigned for interior ambiance using ceramics studio practice. The selection of the masks was based on their physical characteristics and associated meanings. Masks are believed to be carriers of the spirits they represent and may possess religious, reproductive, socio-cultural and theatrical significance. Due to their original use and symbolism, African masks have scarcely been sociable objects for ordinary domestic and public adaptations. They are deemed mystical, ritualistic, and psychic, and create auras whose exploration for today’s design concerns seem plausible. The design outcomes from the study showed that masks as cultural objects associated with mysticism and socio-cultural purifications, could through effective design decisions be adapted for functional and aesthetic concerns.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics, Aura, Ceramic Practice, Concealment, Design Concerns, Mysticism, Traditional African Masks

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INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, a mask is a mode of presentation and representation, and vehicle through which repressed and veiled identities are publicly projected. Traditionally, it is the invocation of the spiritual power into action, either to instill order or to disrupt it. It is a veil that transforms direct vision of its spectator into character playing roles - especially in traditional cultures throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Blackmer, 1993; Aronson, 1991). Masks have been used by many cultures for various purposes, particularly for concealment – including covert, social and professional. In their modern and contemporary archetypes, like the judicial costuming and wigs, as well as social order uniforms of police and various camouflages, they help in instituting and constituting new identities informed by powers that instituted their creation and customs (Finley, 1999:13; Strother, 1998; Sogolo, 1998). Traditional masks limit the subjects’ reactions toward and around the mask or masquerade with taboos (Okafor, 1991; Achebe, 1958). In Africa for instance, masks are religious and social objects which represent spirits and ancestors who control the good and evil forces in the community (Kreamer, 2010; Richards, 2005; Stephan, 2005; Finley, 1999; Strother, 1998; Kasfir, 1988). They are sometimes animated to give life metaphorically, as they seem to be possessed by associated spirits, during ritual performances, enhanced by both music and the atmosphere of the occasion in their various forms and shared symbolisms (Bentor, 2005; Okafor, 1991).

Finley (1999) argues that the significance of masks in Africa is contextually and locally disseminating; including wearers’ transfigurations (Vogel, 1988; Strother, 1998; Okafor, 1991), with certain exceptions that limit their repetitions. African masks of ancestors or totems are seen as objects of family pride in their various forms (helmet masks and pendant masks which appear in the form of anthropomorphisms and totems), and are honoured with ceremonies and gifts (Okafor, 1991; Walker, 2009; Leighten, 1990; Cervenka, 1984; Mount, 1974; Willet, 1971; Seggy, 1969 and Beier, 1968).

Traditional African masks in their various complexities and materiality are considered amongst the finest creations in the art world, and are sources of inspirations to contemporary art and artists in Africa, Europe and America (Anoldi, 1999; Strother, 1998; Blackmer, 1993; Okafor, 1991; Leighten, 1990; Crevenka, 1984). In the 20th century, artistic modernism can be attributed to Picasso’s Africa Moment (Jennings, 2011 as cited by Agyeman, n. d.), and in Mademoiselles d’Avignon (1907) which marked a paradigm shift for a radically new kind of modernism with an African foundation. Through this development, movements such as cubism, fauvism and Dadaism emerged with their latter transmutations within European modernity. In effect, African culture was used to refresh the tired tradition of mimetic painting in Western Art (Murrell, 2008; Bacquart, 2002; Belcher, 1999; Strother, 1998; Pekenham, 1994; Leighten, 1990; Duerden, 1974).

Being guided by the practices and philosophies of Dumile Feni, Issah Samb, Sokari Douglas Camp and Romuald Hazoume, which place meaning through emergent complexities in contextual modifications (Nettleton, 2011; Gore, 2008; Ebong, 1999),
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