Masks

A stroll through the new Washington State History Museum's permanent exhibit begins as a rather pleasant, fairly absorbing visit to the past. Recreations of a railroad carriage, a general store, a Hooverville shanty: all well done, all informative. Then, just around the corner the casual visitor's attention is suddenly arrested. The eye is drawn to a shadowy niche out of which gaze ten mesmerizing faces. Here is an exhibit that would be at home in an art museum, but this art--these masks--explore and express a crucial part of Pacific Northwest Indian history: death by disease and epidemics.

The events addressed include the first smallpox epidemic in the Pacific Northwest (1775) which took the lives of about a third of the Columbia River Indians, the 1830 malaria outbreak at Fort Vancouver which, by 1833, claimed ninety percent of Chinook-speaking peoples, a measles epidemic in 1847, the smallpox outbreak of 1853 (this was the epidemic known as the "Big Sick"), and the worldwide pandemic of Spanish Influenza during World War I. The masks also represent the coming of alcohol and the resultant devastation it has brought to the Indians.¹

In early 1996, five Washington Indian artists were asked to create masks which addressed these themes of Indian death by the sicknesses (including alcoholism) which came from contact with non-Indians. The ten masks represent the results of that request. The artists, Peggy Ahvakana (Suquamish), Greg Colfax (Makah), Ron Hilbert (Tulalip), Caroline Orr (Colville), and Lillian Pitt (Warm Springs) responded in very individual ways using a variety of media. All of them delineate the two great themes: the victims and the survivors.

Peggy Ahvakana created two masks, "The Survivors" and "The Unborn." These two works express far-reaching effects of the epidemics. "The Survivors" is a mask of
woven red cedar. The face has features that are just suggested--underdeveloped. In the accompanying text, Ahvakana explains that the underdeveloped image represents lost gifts: "things being taken away before they were with us." This is a powerful vision of the ripple or echo that is felt generation after generation when a large segment of the population is decimated. The stories, the traditions, the individual visions are lost forever. There is a suggestion or possibility of hope here, but there are irreparable losses. Ahvakana's second mask, "The Unborn" is the face of an infant. It is peaceful, perhaps sleeping, evoking a quiet sadness. With this, Ahvakana says "Thank-you" for the "few, precious survivors." So again, the devastation and tragedy is acknowledged, but there is a spirit of hope and even (amazingly) gratitude. 

Greg Colfax's contributions are the most traditional in appearance. He created two carved, wooden masks, "Smallpox Mask" and "Bringer of Alcohol." Colfax did not supply any accompanying text, but in a phone interview he explained that there is a history of smallpox masks among Pacific Northwest Indians. They were used in healing rituals. He decided to create the "Bringer of Alcohol" after reading a copy of the wall text. He mentioned that he had heard of an older mask bearing a similar identity, but had not seen it. After reading the text, he was moved to create a mask that would connect strongly with the alcohol stories.

Ron Hilbert's masks are distinctive because of the brilliant coloring and the backgrounds. Behind his two masks, "Female Mask" and "Male Mask" are figures surrounding the faces. In each, these figures represent the healing community and reinforce the idea that the suffering and deaths were not isolated, individual experiences, but had severe repercussions for all of the people. In the explanatory notes for "Female Mask" (which features a bit of blanket below the face) Hillbert refers to the practice of giving disease-contaminated blankets to Indians. This mask and its accompanying text are the most explicit in pointing out the intentional infection of the Indians by Whites.

Caroline Orr's work is notable for its non-traditional materials. She works in
resin, plastics and metals. Her "Alcohol Mask" is a ghostly face with eye and mouth openings that seem torn and ragged. This face is fused onto a background of bottles and cans and creates a skull and crossbones effect. The mask looks messy and confused—like trash. It is an effective interpretation of the destructive force of alcoholism on Indian lives. Orr's "Demographic Mask" is striking in its high-tech appearance. It is a smooth oval of resin in a copper frame. Inside the mask float a map of Washington and many figures. The figures represent the 85% of the state's native population lost to disease. The figures are shadowy, ephemeral, rising upward.

Lillian Pitt's masks, "Yakama Man" and "Wasco Man" state, again, the two themes in this exhibit: the victims and the survivors. "Yakama Man" is a tuberculosis victim, and "Wasco Man" is a survivor of smallpox. The survivor mask, especially powerful, is a strong, metal face, deeply scarred and pocked. The survivor will always carry the marks of his brush with death.

In addition to the masks and the text, there is continuous audio of Northwest Indian speakers telling stories of the epidemics. They recall stories that were told to explain these sicknesses. The words of the Cayuse, Smohalla are heard: "Marcus Whitman brought poison from the east. He came and uncorked his bottle of death. I labored hard to save the people, but my medicine would not work as it used to." Others said that the people had been "diseased by a hostile shaman." Another voice speaks of the "dismemberment" of the community and culture that came from the loss of tradition, people and language, and prescribes "re-membering" as the healing process. The voices are an important part of the multi-media matrix of this exhibit and help to catch and hold the viewer's attention.

The lighting of the mask exhibit is subdued, preserving the shadowy, deep feel, but each mask is lighted, in turn, by a brighter spot light that moves from one face to another. The lighting adds to the sense that these are real faces with real characters. It also allows the artistry of each individual mask to be appreciated and seen in detail.

The initial effect of this exhibit is a sense of overwhelming grief. After spending time with the work, the other themes emerge: death and survival. The devastation was
that these diseases came to the Indians. It is interesting that although half of the masks represent the dead, the other half represent survivors. It is a representation that reflects reality. The survivors are not without scars and are poorer for the loss of people, stories and traditions that died early. But there are survivors. The text reflects this hope and persistence in such expressions as, "in spite of these losses, the indigenous peoples of Washington have persisted in asserting their rights and maintaining their traditions."  

In the text dealing with alcoholism, an adult recalls the words of a teenager urging her to stop drinking with the argument, "you're killing an Indian!" This is the idea that Caroline Orr expressed so eloquently in her "Alcohol Mask." The adult quoted in the wall text goes on to report recovering from alcoholism, and this is another expression of hope. The primary theme is, unquestionably, death. But the power of the exhibit comes from the survival theme, and the sense of the stubborn persistence of life.

The most troublesome component of the exhibit, from an historical perspective, is the text accompanying Ron Hilbert's "Female Mask." While there is some evidence that one trader may have given an Indian a contaminated blanket, this incident was not well-documented, and seems to be an isolated experience. The Hilbert piece perpetuates the apocryphal stories that this was a common practice. When an exhibit of this nature (primarily artistic) is included in a museum of history, should the artists' explanations be presented without comment, censorship, or clarification? Maria Pasquale, Project Manager for the permanent exhibit, while aware of the inaccuracy of Hilbert's quote, felt that for this exhibit, the artists should be free to create whatever they wanted to create, and to comment on the work without censorship. 4 This policy might be appropriate for an art museum, but because these works are in a museum of history, a note (or footnote) of clarification should accompany the artists' text.

While including art in a history museum may create controversy, especially if the artists are interpreting history, the controversial aspects are not severe enough to preclude this sort of exhibit. The compelling, magnetic effect of this exhibit points out the value of including the contributions of artists in the telling of history. The value is not only in the power art has to
grab and hold the attention and imagination, but in its power to gain access to what is human in us. It moves quickly to the level where we relate person to person rather than White person to Indian person. Beyond this, the inclusion of several artists adds to the spectrum of vision and allows for a more complete exploration of a story. The view through many eyes is what helps us to see both the unimaginable tragedy and the indestructible hope.

This paper is well-written and engaging. Your descriptions of the masks bring them to life and your follow-up calls provided more depth to some of the issues behind the exhibit. I'd like to know more about why the museum chose to include this type of exhibit. The only other place where art is displayed as art is in the "Inviting the Spirit" exhibit.

Note: The word "Indian" was preferred by the contributors to the mask exhibit, and was used by the native speakers in the text and audio.