

THESIS

MASKS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Art

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1989

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1989

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

4 APRIL 1989

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR  
SUPERVISION BY: LOWELL KEITH SMALLEY ENTITLED: MASKS AND  
TRANSFORMATIONS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS  
MASKS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

I use the mask as a vehicle to carry the symbols I feel call attention to the metaphors which best represent my philosophy of life. Inspired by my studies of Ancient American (Mayan and Anasazi) art and archaeology, I use the jaguar, the bird, the snake and man in metaphoric allegory to parallel the four stages of life. All ideas and expressions in my artwork and in my thesis paper are personal and represent my own view of life.

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Spring 1989

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The journey toward enlightenment is, and always has been, a guiding force toward the development of mankind. Religion or religious fervor provides organization for a sense of unity within a culture. I feel a personal religion is a set of values that will help guide a person through life. Religion and life are inseparable in my philosophy. My understanding of the basic fundamentals of the Methodist religion, the teachings of Jesus, and other fundamental religions I have studied, is that I should live my religion.

My religious values are not very different from any other cultural religion throughout time. The quest is and always has been to find one's place in the cosmos. Joseph Campbell said that is not so much that we have our distinct religion, but that it is more important to find one's own place in life. To develop a personal philosophy in the understanding or interpretation of life is the essence of religious belief.

In ancient civilizations, life, religion and art were inseparable. These philosophies were manifested in their art. For instance, the Ancient Greeks made no distinction between life, religion or art. One term, 'Arte' was used as the definition of something that we classify as separate units. Art itself reflected the essence of the society.

Art from India revolves on what is called the Rasa Theory. In general, the theory designates specific emotions, which then are depicted symbolically through the arts. The art then reflects or calls attention to these emotions. I feel this continuity in their art is a primary factor for the resilience of this society.

Art is unique in its ability to reflect, without deviation through time, the hum and aspirations of the society, while establishing its own special place in the development of a culture. I feel it is the artist's responsibility to express through art, ideas that point to the essence of life. Suzanne Langer feels, 'Art is the epitome of human life, the truest record of insight and feeling, and that the strongest military or economic society, without art is poor.... Whenever a society has really achieved culture it has begotten art, not late in its career but at the very inception of it.'

Art is inseparable from my life and religion. The art I create reflects a spiritual philosophy through the use of certain symbols to call attention to specific aspects of life. The symbols that best represent my philosophy are intended to indicate conceptually, metaphors which reflect my aspirations in life.

In my art, man, jaguar, bird and snake represent the four stages in the life cycle and are the manifestation of certain metaphors of life. In a program concerning East/West religion, the late Joseph Campbell pointed out the four stages

of life; birth, life, death and recreation. My art calls attention to these stages.

I feel that birth is significant in that it is the beginning of the incarnation of the soul into physical life. Birth is a manifestation of creation and is marked by celebration. We celebrate this occasion and through celebration we call attention to the miracle.

This miracle brings us into life, which is a great reward for the soul; it is an opportunity for the soul to manifest itself in this world. Life represents a continuous cycle of learning; the on-going process of the development and expansion of the soul. Physical life is a means to gain knowledge. I believe the soul is incarnated in a cycle of continuous growth in order to acquire this knowledge.

Living life to its fullest brings about many rewards and contentment. This lifestyle may also bring the most trials and tribulations. I think the quest for knowledge should be the ultimate concern, as opposed to a life of laziness and non-involvement. A meaningful life needs to be lived with courage. We have the freedom to choose which path to follow, and a full life brings many challenges, they should be viewed as opportunities to gain wisdom. These are the unique experiences that are available to the incarnated soul.

As physical life develops through natural succession the body is altered in such a way that the attitude of a person toward life may be changed. This may begin to effect the soul. I feel it is at this time one can begin to

understand that death becomes the means for the soul to free itself from the physical bond. Thus, death need not be feared. Instead, it can be graciously accepted, as it is merely a transformation of the soul and the final step toward recreation.

To lead a courageous and gentle life is the essence of my philosophical belief and values. I strive to express this in my lifestyle and through my art. Also using my knowledge and skills provides me with the opportunity to leave my mark on earth. This, a chance to give birth to an idea or work of art, is intended to influence mankind. Hopefully then, through efforts like these, future generations will have the opportunity to live in a world that more fully understands the essence and importance of life.

In my art, through metaphoric reference I try to provoke certain thoughts about these concepts regarding life. One thought will lead to more and deeper thoughts, suggesting guidelines that may be shared by those on a quest for life. I hope that my art will help them separate reality from the illusions created around themselves by clarifying their perception of life.

I have always felt that the study of art history was essential in the development of my own art. Understanding the true concepts used in the art of any civilization gives the best indication of the nature, aspirations and philosophy of that culture. My journey began with intense study of the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures and led me to the art of the



ancient civilizations in this hemisphere, the art of the Anasazi and pre-Columbian Mayan.

I noticed that the ancient symbols referenced certain metaphors of life. This triggered feelings in me and suggested a philosophy which coincided with mine. These symbols speak a conceptual language to me, suggesting their outlook and approach to life. This language, to me, is different from what most written information or established interpretation would suggest, because it addresses a literal portrayal of their art whereas my interest is the conceptual essence.

To understand better where the concepts depicted in their art was rooted, I studied the environmental influences of Anasazi and Mayan groups and the areas where they lived and worshipped. When I was involved in this study, I kept in mind the same three questions I continuously ask myself; Where do I come from? Where am I? Where am I going? This helped me to keep a clear perspective, because I feel all great civilizations asked themselves these questions and reflected the answers through their art. I agree with Langer in her writing: "Art is the spearhead of human development". This statement reflects the importance of art in order to develop a better understanding of the society.

My desire to research and understand the art of the Anasazi and Mayan cultures on my own grew out of my disagreement with accepted views. Archaeologists are taught to analyze linearly, whereas I feel the interpretation is to be made cyclically. Their interest is to analyze the art of

these cultures scientifically, and I disagree because I feel art is based on conceptual ideas.

I felt the art and the metaphors support the same views I have regarding life and religious values. I found an outlook on life that I believe was the philosophical and spiritual aspiration of the people. These concepts, intrinsic in the art, are perceived in different ways at different times. This suggests to me that a reference of the on-going cyclical process of life is being represented. Art is a tangible manifestation, a record of their philosophy.

In my design these four symbols are in constant transformation representing the constant cycles and transformations in life. My use of the mask is a metaphor for the masks in life which describe who we appear to be. In my philosophy, we are locked in a never ending cycle; in the same manner as the mask is created, lives and dies. Life is only a mask of the soul.

The jaguar is the most prominent figure in the masks I create, symbolic of life. The jaguar is the warrior and symbolizes the courage necessary to live in the world of today. In our present day society we are faced with complexity, uncertainty and tribulations. This creates a world in which internal courage is paramount. Fearlessness epitomizes the warrior's approach to the transformations in life. With the same courage exhibited through all the challenges and transitions in life, the warrior accepts death as yet another transformation.

To represent this positive outlook on death and such gracious acceptance of this transformation, I use the bird symbol in my art. The bird symbolizes the flight or transformation of the soul into the next consciousness, as a metaphor of happiness and freedom, representing the soul shedding this body mask. The bird itself is not specific. Different metaphors emerge as one thinks of the eagle as the warrior of the sky, or the dove as a symbol of peace also intended to reflect the grace and acceptance of death.

The symbols of the jaguar and the bird in my art, are illusions made by using the line of the snake. The snake is my symbol for conception or recreation, thus present at the very inception of life. As we know, the sperm is snake like and is necessary for conception. The sperm is the first snake like form encountered in our life cycle. The line of the snake is sensuous as many other forms in nature; such as mountains, rivers or even the edge of a leaf. Because the line moves in harmonic rhythm and the snake itself is in tune with the earth and its cycles, I use the snake line to create the images in my masks to also reflect the harmony and constant transformations of life.

Man is the fourth element in my symbolic representation of life cycle. He is the catalyst in this process and in my concept, the necessary key in bringing my masks to completion. Man is the birth symbol - a necessary key to the life cycle. Without men the vastness of the universe would go unmarked as we know it.

Thus in my art, man is referred to as the actual birth symbol as it takes man to bring my art to life. The jaguar refers to the desire to live a full and courageous life. The bird refers to death or the transformation of the soul in death. The snake symbolizes conception or recreation as its distinct shape is present at this stage of the life cycle.