ICININFO

Artists-Museums Collaborations: Current Research and Future Trends in Ancient Drama Studies

Magda Roussi*

Independent artist, 29, Akti Moutsopoulou Str, GR-185 34, Piraeus, Greece

Abstract

The paper presents a current case of art based research that draws on museum exhibits, namely ancient Greek drama masks. The author, artist Magda Roussi, discusses the way in which museum artifacts are transformed via research into art work that enhances and diffuses new knowledge about Ancient Greek drama (in particular about ways concerned with the creation and use of masks and costumes in ancient drama, that is contributing in the revival of knowledge about these issues). The paper focuses on examples of masks and costumes that were created as a result of this process, tracing the transformation of museum artifacts into scholarly research via the mediation of art based research and practice. The paper draws on parts of work already presented at the Canadian Institute in Greece following an invitation to the artist to give a public lecture.

Keywords: Revival, Mask, Prosopeion, Costume, Collection, Museum, Education, Workshop, Interactive

1. Introduction

This paper comprises an overview of research resulting in art work which explores ways in which the making and enacting of the mask/prosopeion of Ancient Greek Drama took place, considering the mediation of Museum
objects and masks in the revival of knowledge about Greek drama. The demo presented here was based on the poem “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes and the project can be used as a basis for further research in and educational purposes on ancient Greek drama (Tragedy and Comedy) studies. It also exemplifies the range of artists-museums collaborations and the results which may be obtained for the advancement of knowledge. Modern scientific methods have assisted the work presented here immensely.

1.1. Objectives of the project and underlying theme

My work is driven by my passion for the Greek mask and the paper explores the development of my work and the underlying research interests tied to an exploration of ways of creating and enacting Greek masks in ancient Drama. There is no universal definition of the mask, yet mask serve to deliver an understanding that seems to be received across the globe regardless from language differences (Gregor, 1937).

Hence my starting point for this paper has been the notion of the “global mask” (a universally valid, as far as the nature of communication it makes possible, yet not able to be defined in a globally consensual term object). Indeed, it is commonly accepted that, the mask serves social purposes and is encountered in chid play from very early on. Its role is linked to the wish of humans to change the appearance of their face, a habit, which is universally valid and tied to the idea of human expression and the expression of human emotions. Beyond natural connotations, masks are an important component of human culture via the art works that have been created in the course of time. In the latter case the mask as an artwork is invested by the aura of the artist. The mask, it follows, has global force, as it may communicate across cultures, it is made of diverse materials, and comprises therefore diverse, in material terms artifacts, which nevertheless have in common their ability to communicate at a non-verbal level: masks contain social agency and deliver social assent in a way which is recognized as universally valid and is independent from language. All above traits become embodied in an emblematic way in ancient Greek theatre masks, as the example of masks created for “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes show in my paper. Their ability to express emotions is tied to their communicative function, which is explored, and the revival of Ancient Drama, via a case of mask making that approximates ways in which masks were made and enacted originally. The project explored here tried to answer the question of how this cultural artefact was enacted in practice in Ancient Drama drawing attention to the techniques of mask making and the relations between these and ways of acting in Ancient Drama (exploring via the reconstruction of the mask the role and conditions of the actor).

The project initially focused on comedy, exploring archaic uses of masks via the examination of ancient pottery, and by looking at iconographical aspects, bas-reliefs, sarcophaguses as well as ancient texts and authors. We located comical elements in costume masks, which the actor wore in his theatrical role visible in caricaturist form. Until today we do not have adequate data so as to reconstruct the masks of that period so the objective of this project, the revival of the entire collection of the masks mentioned in “Lysistrata”, was a difficult task. Our working definition for the mask drawn from Ancient Drama was the following: “The mask that is still alive in the theatre, is defined as face-head mask, which means it is a face-head that aims to change the characteristics of the user in a deliberate and on a purpose way” (Gregor, 1937).

1.2. Masks in Lysistrata by Aristophanes

Historians mention that theatre began in Europe and the rest of the world in the 5th B.C. in Greece. The fatherhood of theatre is credited to Thespis from Ikaria island and from whom is derived the definition of theatre as a “Thespian Art” (Phyllis, 1980).

He is considered to be the first actor and impresario/theatre director. He also devised the theatrical costume while the mask was the most important piece of this and was called Thespian Tunic. The mask and tunic were worn by the actors for about one millennium. All masks were stereotyped. The creation of masks comprised an art work allocated to distinguished artists of the period. The average size of a mask was slightly bigger than that the size of the head of the actor (big enough for the spectator to recognize the identity of the character from whatever distance he may have being sitting in relation to the stage). The actors were all men and used the masks in order to play more than one roles including the feminine ones. If Aristophanes wrote mainly plays that are classified as
Ancient Comedy, the Democracy in Athens in 411 B.C. experienced difficult moments and with the poem “Lysistrata” (which was the product of his imagination) he wanted to contribute to the end of the war and the survival of the Athenian State. According to the work’s plot, the women in the play, on the instructions of “Lysistrata” abstain from sex, in order to force their men, not to go back to war and return home. This is Aristophanes’ main message: “stop the war” and symbolically what comes to mind is “make love and not war”. The play is part of the curricula of University Departments of Theatrical Studies in Greek Universities and abroad, performed in theatres around the world, as Shakespeare’s plays are and has a tremendous impact as an example of Ancient Greek drama. The work instructs in the values of peace, dialogue, equality of the two sexes, human dignity and in children’s rights, as well as in the value of reconciliation (at a personal, social and state level).

1.3. Collections of Masks from “Lysistrata” performances

We visited the mask workshops in which masks were made for “Lysistrata” performances between 1968 and 2004. We found only poor, incomplete evidence for the processes employed in the making of modern masks for Ancient Greek drama. We assembled all available material from performances where the actors wore masks from “Lysistrata” performances and present the result here. The record of performances and evidence of masks are drawn both from performances in Greece and abroad:


1.4. Design and translations: methodological remarks

Following data collection we moved into the design process. At this stage we realized that the type of translation of the play, which we used presented considerable differences and challenges to the pre-design stage. Very important for us was the choice of translation of the ancient poem “Lysistrata” to work with. The translation selected was that of philologist Kostas Topouzis whose style was familiar to us also from his previous translation of the play “BIRDS” by Aristophanes (Topouzis, 1997).

My University of Piraeus students under my guidance worked on this mask collection for the Festival “PA.PEI 2005” (http://www.tex.unipi.gr/university/eikastiki_en.htm). This poem is very rich in composition and combinations of feelings, Gods, demi-Gods, fables, facts, situations, cities, sentiments, relations, conflicts, oppositions in a way that you feel that what is narrated this is happening before your eyes.

1.4.1. The three phases of pre-design

We continued with the pre-design stage, which comprised three phases. In the first phase we focused on certain character elements, which were reported in the play and were used to distinguish different roles/identities. In the second phase we looked at hairstyles and more qualitative aesthetics of the period were distinguished. In the third the actual drawing in sketch form begun. The representative sketches of the third phase are nineteen: 1). “Lysistrata”, 2). Kalloniki, 3). Myrrina, 4). Lampito, 5). Other women, 6). Chorus of Old men, 7). Chorus of Women, 8). Proboulos, 9). Women a’, b’, c’, 10). Kinissias, 11). Child, 12). Manis, 13). Preacher, 14). Ambassadors a’, b’, c’, 15). Dean, 16). Athenian a’, b’, 17). Reconciliation, 18). Chorus of Spartans and 19). Chorus of Athenians. At this stage we completed the preparation of the pre-design phase of the 45 characters and continued with the preparation for the Planning of the actual design of the mask.
1.5. The preparation for the Design of the mask

The material, which we assembled from performances of “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes gave us the opportunity to acquire knowledge into ways in which the artists approached and tackled the issues of collaboration and planning in the course of preparation of the art work. Such information inspired us to continue to study and develop constructively artwork as masks for “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes. Masks shape both the acting style as well as an actor’s behaviour since, to draw on and paraphrase a remark by Greek artist Patrikalakis, via the mediation of the mask actors avoid the risk of developing a narcissistic style of acting while addressing the audience. On the contrary, the mask gives the opportunity to the spectator to focus on the intellectual messages that are transmitted via the actor and the acting itself instead of focusing on his or her facial traits and physiognomic characteristics. If masks convey knowledge, by way of analogy, the mask of “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes, and the evidence derived from the attempt to reconstruct it which we discuss here, has the ability to convey not simply knowledge about the particular mask, but about ways of acting with the mask in Ancient Drama, being an object important for attempts to revive the latter.

From this point onwards we will deal with certain elements of our research in the order, which will allow us to achieve better results and more functional masks. Each “revived” mask should meet the following conditions: It must be comfortable enough for the actor to wear, it has to be light, it must not bother the actor when he wears it for a long time, it can be cleaned and kept sanitary, the volume must appropriately suit the light and shades and colours under the lights of stage produce so that it does not degrade the characteristics of the role, its aesthetic form must match the costume.

1.6. Design types

All above preparation acted as a first step towards the Design of the mask. Following that, a sample catalogue of the nineteen representative sketches was to be prepared. The resulting Designs of masks were based on research undertaken on the original artifacts, on the study of the poem of “Lysistrata”, the study of bibliography and drew on our own inspiration as well. The masks concerned forty-five roles/identities. From this total we concentrated on nineteen representative characters out of which 10 are of men and 1 of a child while 8 are of women.

1.6.1. Design phases

The Design process was divided in three phases and the same architecture of drawing was used for all of them. The general characteristic elements of the mask were shaped by various general influences in each phase. We found that the basic colours of Ancient Comedy, which were used are based and taken from nature. The architecture of drawing is based on the natural globally accepted rules of sketching a face both in fine arts, religious and secular painting. The general characteristic elements of the mask from the influences were based on various sources mainly comical figurines and Greek sculptures of the period of Ancient Comedy. In Short, the men all had beard which is sharp or short and wide rounded or stepped noses etc.

1.6.2. The three Phases in mask design

In phase one the elements that are reported in the text “Lysistrata” were used for every role for the materialization of each mask as well as for the hairstyles. In phase two as applied to the Design of the masks the different phases can be distinguished by the following characteristics: differentiated hairstyles with more qualitative aesthetics of their period and in other elements. Finally, in phase three after thoughtful planning the actual drawing took place. The materials used comprised pencil on paper in the right dimensions, which allowed us to have the most perfect results in all the nineteen drawings representative masks out of the forty five. For the three phases in the design of each mask as a role/identity we demonstrate below a sample of drawings illustrating Phase one, Phase two and the final Phase three:
Cinesias, the role, which is enacted via the revival of the mask in sketch here, is Myrrina’s husband, they have a child and a servant. He is a spouse, a father and a soldier he is an example of a family member in the Greek Democracy having a rough time with the war. He comes back full with erotic energy. He comes only to have sex with Myrrina and is indifferent to the child. Afterwards he leaves for the war. Here Myrrina with the guidance of her friend “Lysistrata” is using a pretext to avoid sexual contact with Cinesias, and thus she remains faithful to the oath she gave in the Acropolis along with the rest of the women, so as to force their husbands to stop the war.

1.7. Materials and Technology

In Aristophanes’ time, when “Lysistrata” was performed, distinguished artists made theatre masks with materials that we could find even in our days. They come from the animal and plant kingdom, use minerals and are molded into detail.

1.8. Conclusion

Our revival of the masks of “Lysistrata” by Aristophanes was deemed a successful project. Its success was secured by the extensive research and planning that resulted in excellent results both at a theoretical and creative level. Thus a museum object, a theatrical mask was transformed into an educational apparatus. Contemporary museums have long assumed an educational role and the role of museologists and interpreters in recent years has been to tease out the cultural significance, past and current, of artifacts for the visitor. In this context, artists and research on museum objects that results in art work, could provide a great resource both for museums, visitors and educational purposes at large (here the example consists in knowledge about Ancient Greek Drama provided via the revival of Greek masks). Such examples may elicit experiences of artifacts that transcend mere description making artists-museums collaborations, such as this, an incentive for further scholarly research and the public understanding of Ancient history as living practice and creative artwork.

2. Illustrations

1. Three phases in mask design

References


http://videolectures.uoa.gr/ retrieved 15-8-2013

http://www.alfavita.gr/old/12860 retrieved 15-8-2013