

The Museum of Modern Art

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MODERN MASKS AND HELMETS

September 12 - November 19, 1991

An exhibition of twentieth-century helmets and masks designed for physical protection is the subject of an exhibition on view at The Museum of Modern Art from September 12 to November 19, 1991. Organized by Cara McCarty, associate curator, Department of Architecture and Design, the exhibition presents 40 examples of motorcycle, welding, and speed skiing helmets, gas, martial arts, and hockey masks, and helmets for firefighting, diving, and space exploration.

The exhibition was made possible by Lily Auchincloss and The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art. Additional support was provided by Gallet S.A., Giro Sport Design, Inc. and Kiwi Helmets.

In almost all cultures and epochs, masks are part of the drama with which we face the unknown, reflecting the societies that made them. Because most of the hazards modern headgear is designed to guard against differ from the dangers faced by previous cultures, modern masks and helmets also provide a sculptural portrait of our technological society.

Twentieth-century masks and helmets have been designed almost exclusively for physical protection. As Ms. McCarty writes, "Rather than offering ritual contact with spirits of other worlds, they have been created to help ensure our safety in everyday occupations and some of life's pleasures, like sports, but also our survival in the face of life-threatening situations. Some were designed for impact resistance, others for protection

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against fire, explosives, civil disorder, diseases, radiation, chemicals, or warfare. Some, like underwater and space helmets, make an alien environment more tolerable."

Early twentieth-century protective headgear was influenced by tribal masks and medieval armor that were richly decorated, carved, and painted. Made of leather, metal, felt, or rubber, they were frequently heavy and cumbersome. Between the world wars, headgear took on an industrial look, and the wearer conveyed a mechanized look.

The emphasis on proper fit, vision, mobility, and comfort of today's increasingly standardized forms, mass-produced from molds, have replaced earlier individualized styles. Such features as ventilation, noise reduction, and scratch-resistant face shields have become integral parts of the design. Masks and helmets are becoming entire head systems with visors, breathing apparatus, lamps, infrared binoculars, and built-in radio communication systems.

Contemporary headgear manufacturers are motorcycle and sporting goods companies, underwater contractors, body armor companies, the military, and medical suppliers. Revolutionary synthetic and composite materials, such as expanded polystyrene foam, reinforced plastics, and Kevlar, have greatly improved the performance of protective headgear. Kevlar fiber, for example, allows the headgear to withstand extreme temperatures, is flame resistant, fragmentation resistant, and bullet proof.

These modern helmets and masks provide a visual clue to the headgear's particular function. Aerodynamic forms are designed to enhance speed; holes in a goaltender's hockey mask provide ventilation, while its sinister appearance contributes to the ritual of intimidation; silver-colored helmets

with gold-coated visors reflect heat and ultraviolet rays. Ms. McCarty writes, "Masks and helmets have a long tradition of being exhibited in art museums as objects worthy of artistic consideration, and they remain an area that is extraordinarily rich in expressiveness."

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No. 62

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