Modern masks and helmets : September 12-November 19, 1991

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Modern Masks and Helmets

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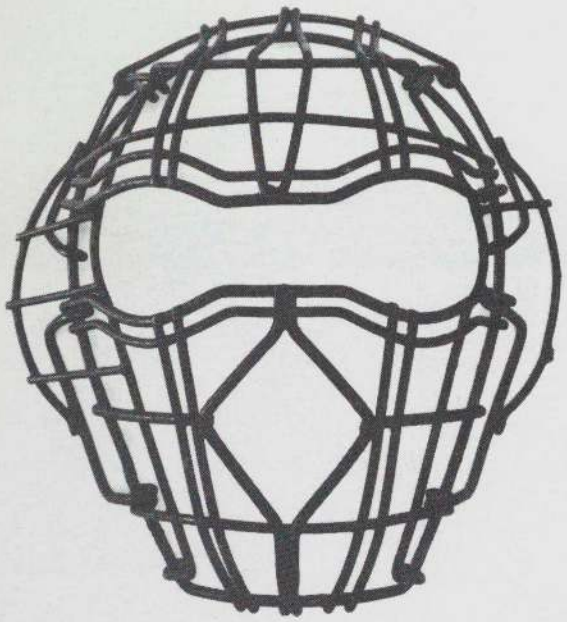
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Whether it be for ceremony, disguise, or protection, giving form to our fears through myths, masks, and personifications has always been a part of the human imagination. For centuries masks have been associated with such rich traditions as tribal ceremonies, Greek tragedies, Venetian carnivals, and Japanese Noh theater. They represented deities, ancestral spirits, or natural forces, and they provided a way to confront the unknown, the mysteries of nature, of life and death. Unlike masks, helmets have always been designed primarily for protective purposes. But even as armor, they were valued at least as much for their ornamental and artistic excellence: their decoration and forms were a symbol of honor and pride, signifying an individual's rank and power.

Designer unknown. Firefighter's respirator. 1910
Brass, glass, leather. Mfr.: J. Mandet, France
Lent by William Greenspon, New York

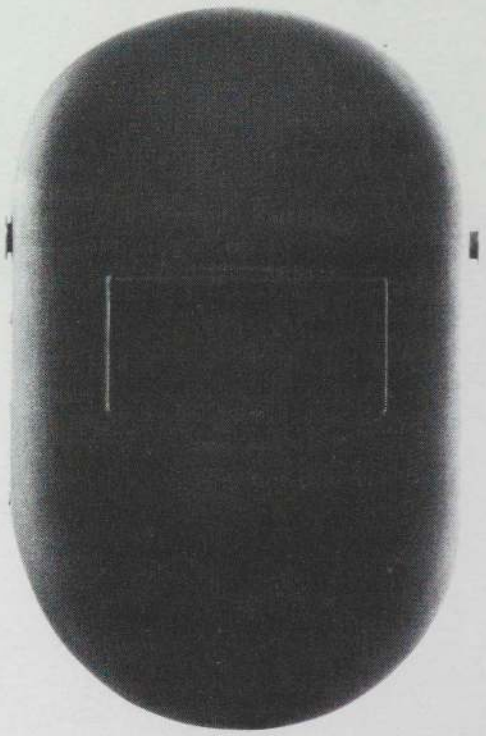


Twentieth-century masks and helmets have been designed almost exclusively for physical protection. Rather than offering ritual contact with spirits of other worlds, they have been created to help ensure our safety in everyday occupations and some of life's pleasures, like sports, but also our survival in the face of life-threatening situations. Some were designed for impact resistance, others for protection against fire, explosives, civil disorder, diseases, radiation, chemicals, or warfare. Some, like underwater and space helmets, make an alien environment tolerable. Today's headgear is also worn as part of the drama with which we face the unknown; however, many of our unknowns are of a different type: hazardous wastes, outer space, chemical and nuclear warfare, terrorism.

These head sculptures are portraits of our technological society. They are very real, and terrifying reminders of some of our society's worst fears. For the most part, the reason they were created is not something on which one likes to dwell. Gas masks, resembling insects, for example, are a modern image associated with some of the most horrifying tragedies of the twentieth century. The mere sight of one inspires fear.

Masks and helmets can be seen daily. Even now they can represent "good" or "evil" spirits, and they make possible both the most humanitarian acts as well as some of the most destructive. As in the past, some are worn by society's heroes—fire-fighters, athletes, or the military—people who do something beyond the ordinary, who risk or sacrifice their lives for others or who must perform courageous and honorable acts, for example walking into fire.

Designer unknown. Catcher's mask. c. 1920
Steel rod. Mfr.: unknown, USA
Lent by Allan Stone Gallery



Because the wearer's identity is usually concealed, we still attribute traditional powers to masks to scare, intimidate, or transform one's character. As a shield that hides the face, it represents a barrier between the wearer and the world. One can achieve strength and anonymity by donning a mask: immured, one's inhibitions are released and the wearer is empowered with a feeling of security in the face of danger. They often give one an advantage over others: a masked intruder frightens the victim while remaining unidentified. Because anonymity de-individualizes, it can liberate people to indulge in behaviors they may not otherwise. The danger is that one might not feel personally responsible for one's acts. Hockey players are known to develop "cage courage" when masked; armored and disguised, they feel protected, confident to play the game more violently.

Not only does headgear transform the wearer, but it can affect the observer psychologically. When someone's identity is concealed, it arouses our curiosity, often stimulating the extremes of our imagination. Who is the real person behind the mask? Our inability to see another's eyes can be unnerving. The face is what gives one identity, character, and as with all faces, we instinctively attribute a persona to masks—whether as happy, sinister, insect-like, eerie, or robotic. Our fascination with the use of masks and helmets to alter personality has even been capitalized on by the film and comic book industries. Popular characters are frequently distinguished by headgear that transforms them from the ordinary to the extraordinary. A recent memorable example is Darth Vader in the film *Star Wars*.

Contemporary headgear manufacturers are motorcycle and sporting goods companies, underwater contractors, body armor companies, the military, and medical suppliers. Protective headgear from the early part of this century 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. Features were articulated and often crude, giving the masks and helmets a distinct, personal character. Between world wars, headgear took on an industrial look, with machine imagery substituted for human features to convey the wearer as a mechanized individual.

Today the earlier individualized style has been replaced with increasingly standardized and refined forms mass-produced from molds, with few protrusions and virtually flawless paint finishes. Features such as ventilation, noise reduction, and scratch-resistant face shields have become an integral part of the design. And masks and helmets are being combined into entire head systems replete with visors, breathing apparatus, lamps, infrared binoculars, and built-in radio communication systems. Color and decals are used for safety purposes as well as for team identification, personal pride, and fashion. Because most are worn as part of professional attire, it is essential that the level of body protection be comparable to that of the headgear. Nevertheless, sophisticated design may suggest a level of protection that is deceptive, giving the wearer a feeling of over-confidence.

Superior Togs Corp., company design. Cold-weather mask. c. 1950
Felt. Mfr.: Superior Togs Corp., USA, for US Air Force
Lent by American Primitive Gallery

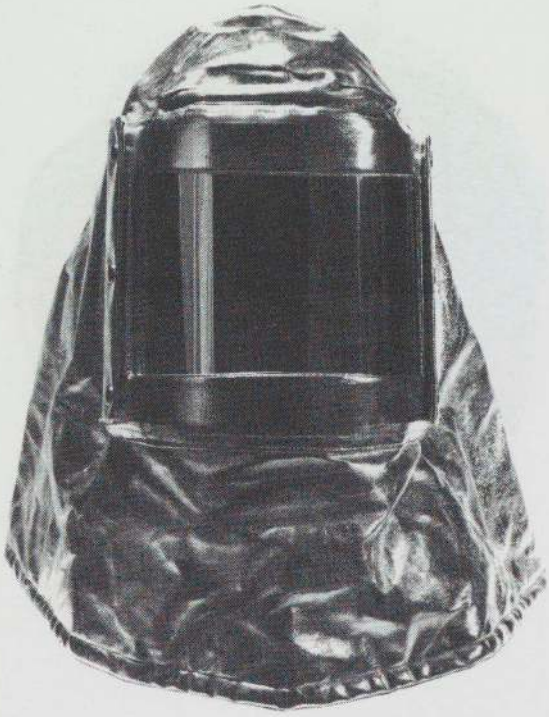
Eugene Walters. Welding helmet. 1980
Fiberglass, plastic. Mfr.: Fibre Metal Products Co., USA
The Museum of Modern Art, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Design Fund

Revolutionary synthetic and composite materials such as expanded polystyrene foam, reinforced plastics, and Kevlar have greatly improved headgear's comfort and fit, and above all its ability to protect. Kevlar fiber, for example, known for its unique combination of strength and heat resistance, is being used in a wide variety of protective applications. When reinforced with Kevlar, headgear can withstand extreme temperatures, is flame resistant, fragmentation resistant, and bullet proof.

How does one design protective headgear for unknown conditions? What sentiments, if any, should be expressed? When wearers will be venturing beyond their own environment, designers must anticipate a multitude of conditions, many of them completely unfamiliar. In space exploration, for example, astronauts confront nature in some of its most hostile states. Their helmets are part of a portable life-support "environment" designed to accommodate the astronauts' physical and psychological needs. The transparent, bubble-like sphere that encapsulates their heads extends their ability to see in all directions.

Sometimes headgear is made to fit an image or to express a certain state of mind or emotion. In some arena sports, like hockey, masks are very much a part of the spectacle: their sinister appearance contributes to the ritual of intimidation. A black welding helmet not only protects the worker's eyes and face from infrared and ultraviolet rays and sparks, but its impenetrable character gives it the appearance of being an indestructible shield against fire.

Ernest C. Higgins. Goaltender's mask. 1964
Fiberglass. Mfr.: Ernest C. Higgins Co., USA
The Museum of Modern Art, Emilio Ambasz Fund



These high-performance designs have been reduced to their essence and have one overriding purpose: to keep the wearer alive. Like most survival designs, they look like what they were intended to be: protection. Whether it be a helmet, mask, or combination of both, or variations in form, materials, or hole size, each feature provides a visual clue to the headgear's particular function. Aerodynamic forms suggest the helmet was designed to enhance speed; holes in a goaltender's mask are strategically positioned and sized to deflect an oncoming puck as well as to provide ventilation; silver-colored or aluminized helmets, combined with gold-coated visors, are used to reflect heat and ultraviolet rays.

In a sense, all headgear today can be considered combat design and has been fostered by competition in one form or another: man's survival in nature; man against man; man against technology. As we continue to be faced with new and graver dangers, or as the level of sophistication of current threats such as terrorism increases, so must the advanced protection used to combat them. Manufacturers will continue to be challenged to improve their designs, their body armor. But while the purpose of contemporary headgear is to protect, it is no less powerful a form of communication than its predecessors. 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.

Cara McCarty
Associate Curator
Department of Architecture and Design

Lite Industries, Inc., company design. Firefighter's protective hood. 1988
Aluminized Kevlar, rayon, Nomex, gold-coated polyester
Mfr.: Lite Industries, Inc., USA
Lent by the manufacturer

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Cover photo:
Stephen Armellino. Bullet-resistant mask. 1983
Kevlar, polyester resin. Mfr.: American Body Armor & Equipment, Inc., USA
Lent by U.S. Armor Corp.

Mitchio Arai. Motocross helmet. 1985
Fiberglass, expanded polystyrene foam. Mfr.: Arai Helmet Ltd., Japan
Lent by Arai Helmet U.S.A., Ltd.