

M A S K S O F T H E

# HIMALAYAS



M A S K S O F T H E  

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**H I M A L A Y A S**

OCTOBER 26–DECEMBER 8, 1990

CURATED BY LISA BRADLEY  
ESSAY BY ERIC CHAZOT

**PACE PRIMITIVE**

32 EAST 57TH STREET  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10022





MIDDLE HILLS TRIBAL GROUP  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 8½ inches

*The wise man beholds all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings. . . . To the seer, all things have verily become the Self: what delusion, what sorrow, can there be for him who beholds that oneness?*

The Iśa Upanishad (6, 7), 6th century B.C.

This exhibition of Himalayan masks represents the surfacing of a twenty-year interest that began in the early seventies when I was a student at Boston University. At that time, along with my own work as a painter, I studied Tibetan Buddhist ritual, religious symbolism, and Zen painting. After graduation I traveled extensively in India and Nepal. My investigation of the art and cultural traditions of those regions has continued through the last fourteen years, enriched by my involvement with African art at Pace Primitive.

Although interested in many areas of Hindu and Buddhist art, I was especially struck by the profound beauty and variety of Nepalese and Tibetan masks. Over the past several years we have acquired a representative collection of these remarkable works of art during travels throughout Nepal, Europe, and the United States. As a result, Pace Primitive is very pleased to present one of the first major gallery exhibitions in this field. These masks represent the power and mystery of ancient Buddhist, Hindu, and shamanistic traditions in the Himalayas.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that the gods and demons represented by the masks, as well as our own gods and demons, are manifestations of our thoughts and feelings: fear, hate, anger, and desire. If we can recognize our gods and demons as our own thought forms, they lose their power and we cease to identify with them. Those things with which we do identify—occupations, familial roles, possessions—are not, however, the



essential reality. To reach the essential reality, a destruction, a seeing through, or a falling away of the illusory ego is necessary. The mask enables the viewer to transcend individual personality and thus pierce the facade of ego to reach the “One Mind” or universal nature.

Death, also, is understood as illusory. It is derived from the identification of the individual consciousness with a personal and separate ego. Lama Anagarika Govinda, in the introduction to the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*—a book of instructions for the act of dying—explains, “The initiated disciple attains dominion over the realm of death, and being able to perceive death’s illusory nature, is freed from fear.”

The paintings, sculptures, and masks of the temple tradition are implements of this mystic struggle. The mask reveals a more profound and irreducible essence behind our illusory identities. As a result, Himalayan art has the capacity to transcend time and space, to allow us to see beyond the mind’s imaginings, to touch the essential self.

Putting together an exhibition requires the help of many colleagues. First, I would like to thank Eric Chazot for his fine essay in this catalogue. His vision and scholarship in organizing the exhibition *Facing the Gods: Ritual Masks of the Himalayas* (now traveling with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service) have set a new standard for the field. He is one of the most important scholars studying these masks, and his help on the catalogue has been invaluable. Ian Alsop deserves special thanks for his translation of Eric’s essay from the French.

My colleagues at Pace have been extremely supportive. I would especially like to express my indebtedness to Lucia LaVilla-Havelin for her invaluable assistance in every aspect of the exhibition and catalogue. Catherine Peck has been extremely helpful in applying her editorial skills. Richard Solomon has been enthusiastic and generous with his support from the start. Finally, I am most appreciative of the constant encouragement and personal support of my good friends Paul Mills, Edward Ragsdale, Jerry Needham, and Carol Joseph.

SHERDUKPEN  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Atzara, Buddhist Priest  
Wood  
Height: 9¾ inches

Lisa Bradley  
Director, Pace Primitive









M A S K S O F T H E

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# HIMALAYAS

Over the centuries, the many ethnic groups that populate the Himalayas have produced a myriad of fascinating masks. Presented together, they evoke the spirit of the ancient cultures of this region of the world. While the classical art of the Himalayas (bronze, wood, and stone sculptures as well as murals and paintings on cloth) has been acquired by western museums and is recognized for its quality and richness through publications, the art of the Himalayan mask is just beginning to be discovered. Several exhibitions in the United States and in Europe have aroused the curiosity of museums and collectors, yet, unfortunately, ethnographic studies of Himalayan masks are almost nonexistent.

The masks presented in this exhibition reveal a great diversity of styles and forms, of colors and patinas. They were created in various regions of the Himalayas and thus originate from widely disparate cultures, from the Nepalese Terai on the northern border of the Indian plains to the high plateaus of Tibet, as well as the middle hills of Nepal, Bhutan, and Ladakh.

The diversity in beliefs of ethnic groups who have been isolated by the mountains has resulted in a variety of dance performances in which masks are used. The masked dances of the Himalayas are generally ritual in nature, and differ from the western carnivals by their religious significance.

The masks themselves reflect the beliefs of Hindu and Buddhist religions and the shamanistic cults of the hills. Hinduism, born in India, is found predominantly among the populations of the south and certain central regions of Nepal, while Buddhism, of the Tibetan variety, dominates the northern regions.

This collection of masks can be divided into two broad categories: classical and tribal. The classical masks appear as



Tibet  
Gonpo, Buddhist Protector  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 11½ inches



figures of deities, humans, and animals. The sculpture is relatively sophisticated with precisely defined, traditional features. Personalities from diverse pantheons are represented, many from the major religions. The masks are well maintained and often show signs of repeated painting. The interior, when it has not been recut, has a rich brown patina from use.

Among the classical examples are both Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu masks portraying the gods and heroes of the great epics, masks used in monastery or village dances to celebrate ritual ceremonies and seasonal festivals, and masks portraying other characters from the myths of both great religions.

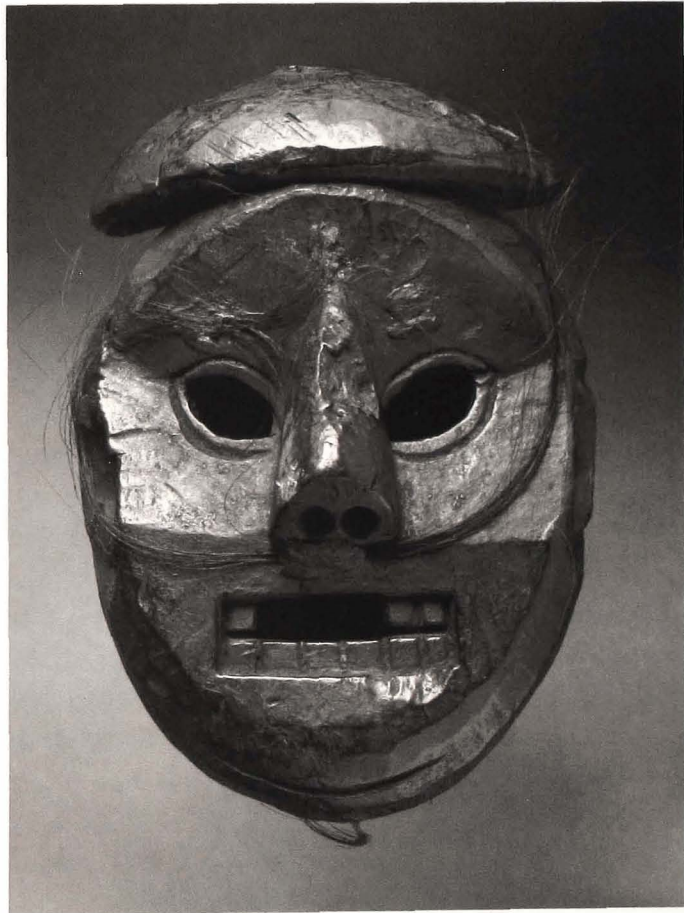
Buddhist subjects include the terrible protectors such as the different forms of Mahakala; the four great Kings; Padmasambhava, or Guru Rimpoche, in both his peaceful and terrible forms; the deities and demons of the Bardo; the king of the dead; and saints and ancestors.



The clown is a frequent Buddhist subject that is often present in masked dance dramas of the Himalayas. The most famous is the figure of Hwashang, the Chinese teacher of the Chan sect. After his defeat in philosophical debate by the great Indian Mahayanist Kamalashila, Hwashang became for Tibetan Buddhists the comical figure par excellence. He is shown as a grotesque monk, with large, thick features and a placid expression commonly associated with the comic spirit and the buffoon.

Among the Hindu subjects are Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Indra, Bhairava, Hanuman, and the ranks of demons all defeated one day or another by heroes or gods. The great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as innumerable other Hindu myths, furnish the main personalities incarnated in these masks.

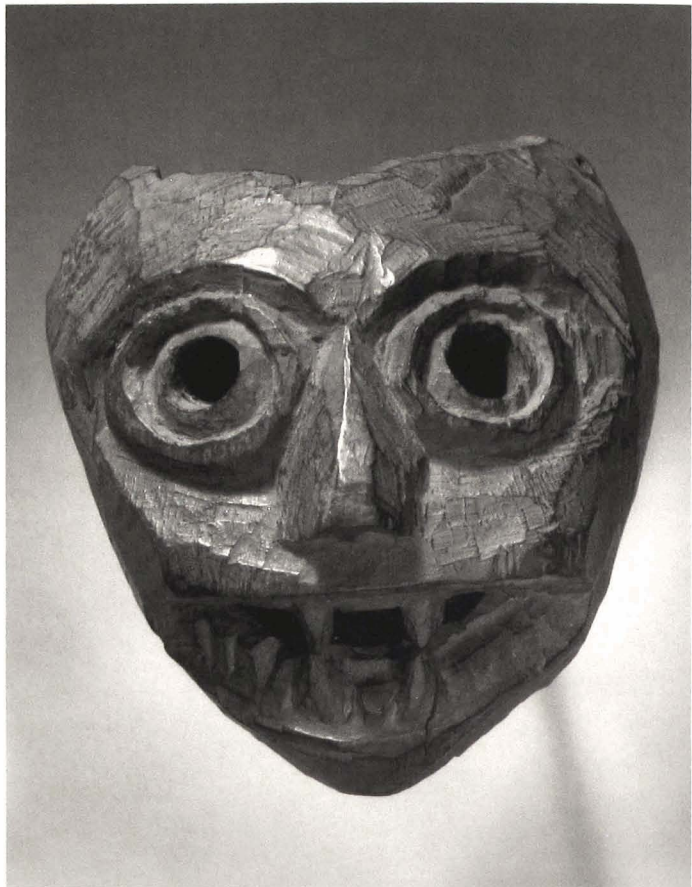
The second group of masks, tribal, includes examples from the various ethnic groups of Nepal, including the Rai, Gurung,



GURUNG  
Nepal  
Wood and hair  
Height: 10 inches



MIDDLE HILLS TRIBAL GROUP  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 9 inches

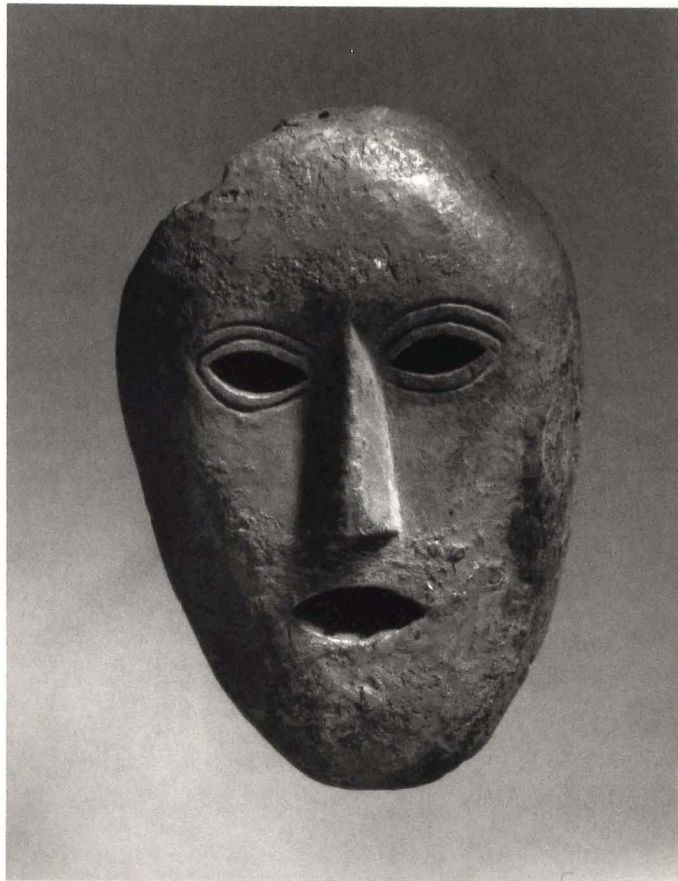


Magar, and Tharu. Represented are clowns and gods, demons, fabulous animals, and local divinities. There are masks used by shamans, masks used in divination, and even scarecrow masks. Often they boast a lustrous black patina reminiscent of objects from Africa, Indonesia, or the Philippines, or a simple polychromy of three or four earth colors, most prominently the white of China clay.

The appellation *tribal* can also be applied to masks representing subjects from Buddhism and Hinduism as well as from shamanism. The tribal aesthetic is a bridge between archaic traditions and the current of the great religions. The features and modeling of the masks, which are the mark of the individual carver, can be surprising and full of fantasy or deformed and exaggerated to lend an amusing or disquieting air.

The shaman has an important relationship with the art of the mask. Though somewhat changed and influenced by the dominant religions, the practice of shamanism still endures from

GURUNG  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 8½ inches

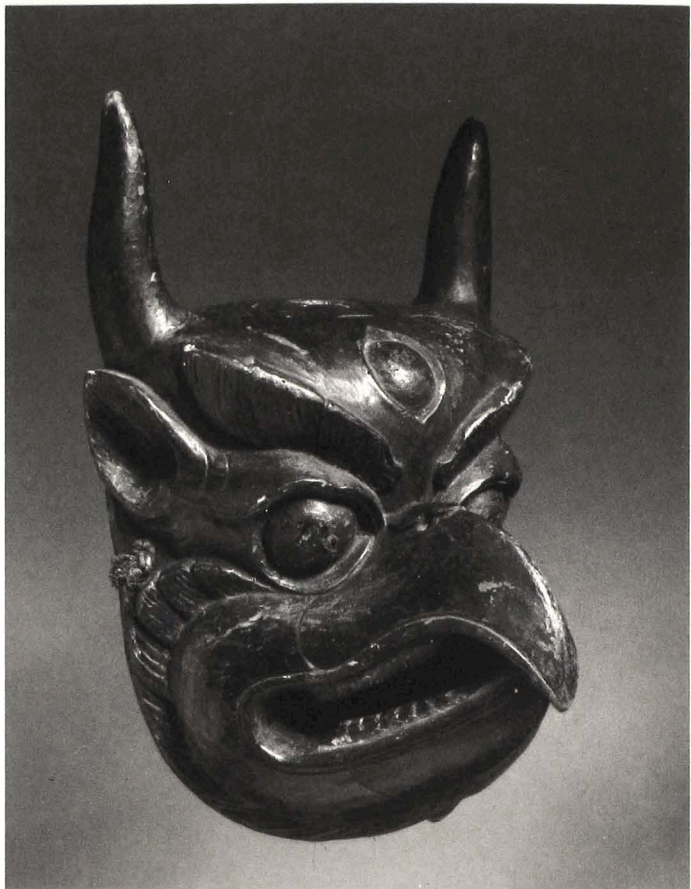


north to south. The traditional way to effect a cure for disease in the Himalayas is to call upon a shaman who is able to understand the cause of the problem by invoking his tutelary spirit. Trance and sometimes even psychic traveling are part of his ritual technique. In every village the shaman is an indispensable personality; he knows their rites and myths, he is familiar with mysteries unfathomable to the ordinary man. He commands the spirits, he can divine the future, and he possesses the ability to heal. As a man of knowledge, he actively participates in the seasonal masked dances, his visions and trances revealing to him the appearance of spirits and gods. His experience and knowledge allow him to sculpt their faces in wood as well as perform the dances of propitiation.

Certain conclusions about the origin of tribal masks can be made by examining stylistic elements, such as the expression of eyes, eyebrows, and mouth or the application of hair and beard. Details of the structure of the mask, its weight, the thickness of



MONPA  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Garuda (King Eagle)  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 12¼ inches



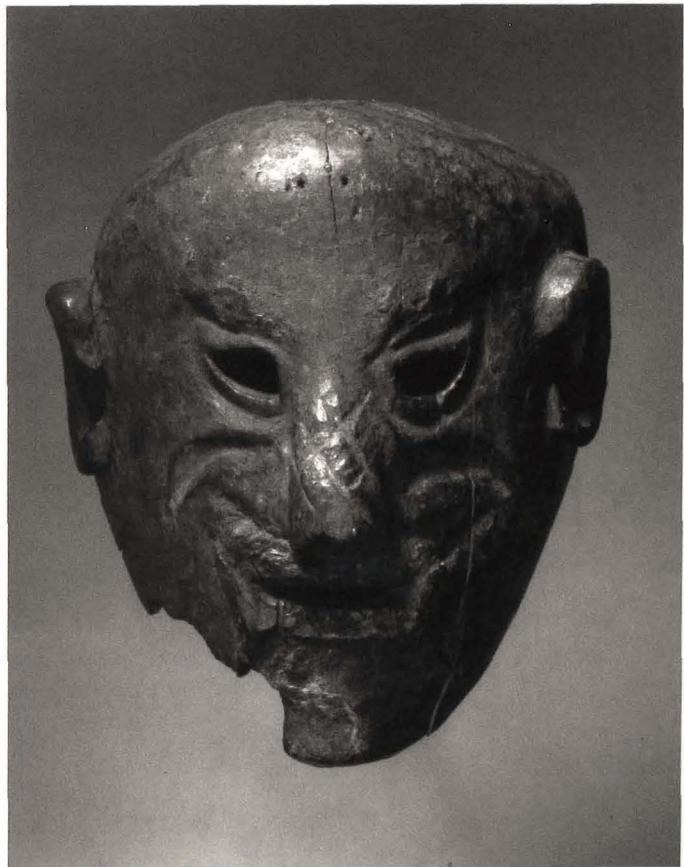
the sides, and the technique of interior carving also reveal certain styles particular to a region. The interior may be deeply cut with deep sides, or carved with bevelled edges. It may be circular and undifferentiated in form, or it may have a fully carved mouth, nose, and chin. The most finely chiseled and highly finished interiors, for example, are found in the masks of the Monpa and Sherdukpen peoples of Arunachal Pradesh.

The overall patina of the mask is another indication of origin. For example, masks from the middle hills are covered with a brilliant black patina that is never found on examples from the Nepalese Terai. In this humid and sultry region that borders India's northern plains, houses are not inundated with the smoke from cooking fires that fills houses of the middle hills and invariably produces the patina.

The way the mask was attached or worn is also rich in meaning. The position of the cords that bind the mask to the dancer often indicates its source. In general, there are two ways of at-

taching the mask. In the first, the mask is tied at three points: on the forehead, at the ears, and under the chin. These are the dance masks of the Tibetans, Bhutanese, and the Monpa peoples of Arunachal Pradesh. The second method has a simpler system of attachment: two holes for cords above the ears. This is the system generally used for tribal masks, as well as iconic masks that were suspended in temples or served to decorate ritual mannequins. And in the case of Newar masks from the Kathmandu valley, the interior often contains a roll of cloth around the mask's perimeter to protect the face of the wearer from contact with the wood or metal.

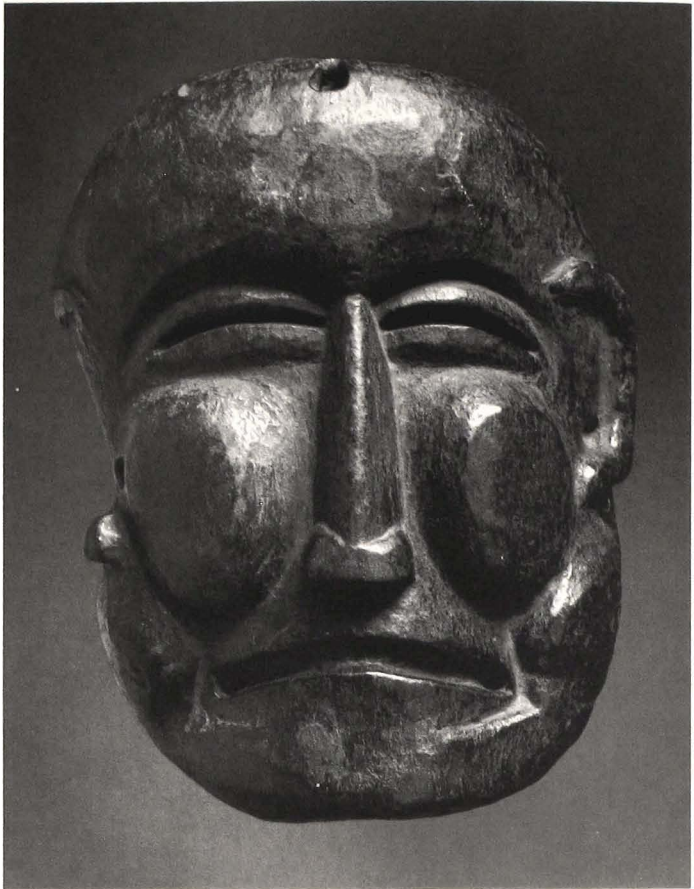
Masks have various purposes and were not, however, always made to be worn. Some were displayed near the altar and had the same function as other icons in paint or bronze. Masks of ancestors were stored for use in annual ceremonies, when they were placed on the altar to preside over the ritual. Other masks were used for possession cults which are still to be found, nota-



MIDDLE HILLS TRIBAL GROUP  
Nepal  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 10 inches



BUDDHIST TRIBAL GROUP  
Nepal  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 9 inches



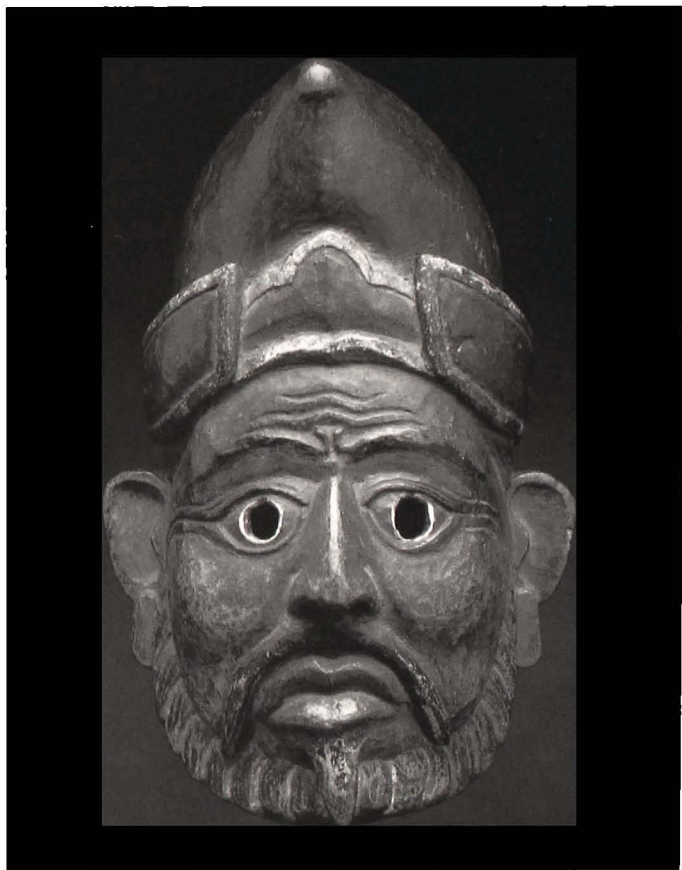
bly in the valley of Kathmandu. There, donning a mask may be the crucial moment when a god takes possession of the body of the initiated dancer chosen to represent him.

To wear a mask is often to vanquish the demonic and maleficent spirits; or perhaps it is a celebration, a commemoration of that victory. The vanquished demon is immortalized in innumerable representations of his agony, such as the buffalo demon being killed by the Hindu goddess Durga. The demon may become a faithful ally of the gods, such as the protector Lhamo, who was transformed from ogress to proselyte of Buddhism.

Gods created men, but it is the duty of men to make the gods live. Masks bring the gods and heroes to life; they bring the great epics into everyday reality. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are universal sources of inspiration for Indian theater as well as for the masked dramas of certain populations of the Terai and the middle hills. The dance, the hand gesture, music, and poetry all contribute to the spectacle.

The people of the mountains, accustomed to the difficult work in the fields and the precarious struggle for survival, love to divert themselves in their music and entertainment. Fanfares, for instance, precede both marriage and funeral. And the spirits, if they are known and mastered, even if they are malefic, become precious and necessary allies.

To celebrate the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, commemorative religious ceremonies involving the use of masks were instituted in many of the monasteries and performed annually. Initially secret performances, they have now become great popular festivals and major events in the religious history of the country. The exploits of the great Guru Padmasambhava or the marriage of the first Buddhist emperor to two princesses—one from China and the other from Nepal—were played out in the form of masked dances and processions. Certain masks of divine personages decorated ritual mannequins that were part of the processions. Masks were often suspended from posts or pillars



Bhutan  
Lama of the Red Hat Sect  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 13¾ inches

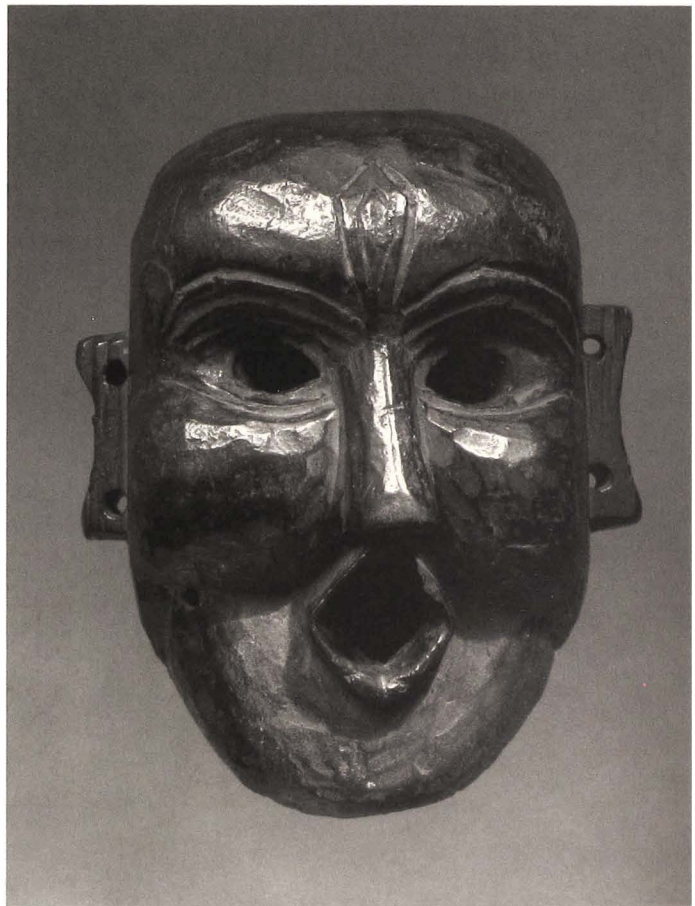


in houses or monasteries, where they served as a protection against malicious spirits.

The icons that serve as the residences of the gods are held sacred, and a mask is recognized as such a residence. To wear it is to become a medium for the divine personality, to abandon oneself to the divine presence. Here the image is more than just a symbol; by a magical process the representation becomes the divine subject itself. The statue of the god *is* the god, the mask of the tiger *is* the tiger.

In the Himalayas, even the animals have souls. In the masked dramas of the Sherdukpen peoples of Arunachal Pradesh, the spirits of mistreated animals come back to torture their keepers in the hells, even unto death.

There exists an after-death ceremony in which a mannequin is dressed in the clothes of the deceased, a printed paper mask serving to evoke his image in the gesture of prayer. In rites that may well come from the tradition of the early Bonpo religion, the



MONPA  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Whistler  
Wood  
Height: 7¼ inches

SHERDUPKEN  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Deer  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 10 inches

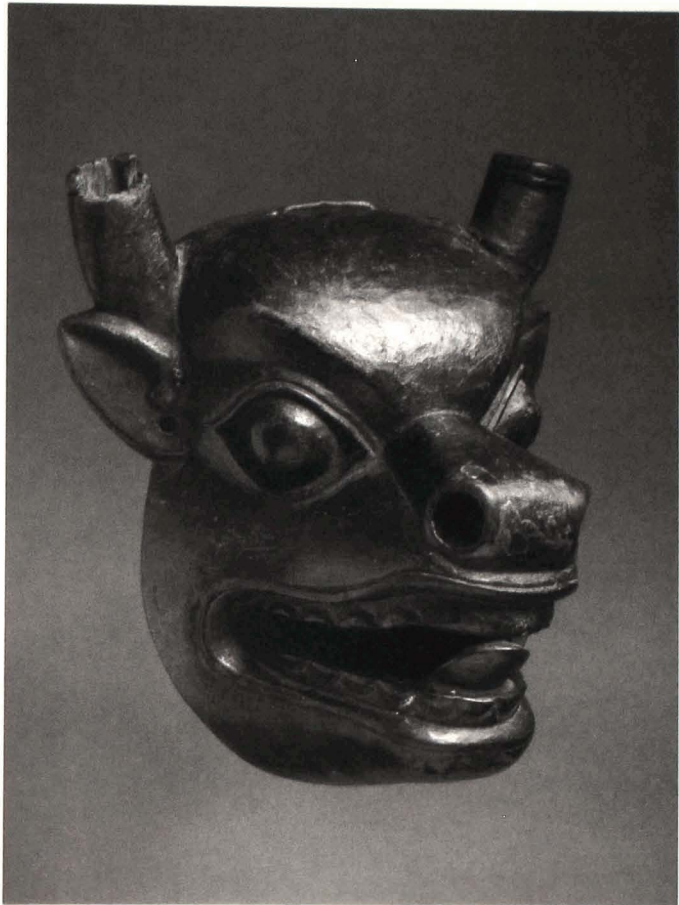


figure is burned to avoid the return of the spirit in the form of a bothersome phantom. The representation of the figure is all important in this ritual, as is the disquieting reality of the departed spirit and its terrible power to disturb.

No matter what group of masks is considered, a multitude of clowns and buffoons is always found in addition to subjects from the conventional pantheon. These masks teach as well as make the audience laugh by practicing a type of self-criticism, causing those who watch to reflect upon their own lives. Even that personage found in many dramas, known everywhere as “the yogi,” who clearly represents the effort of spiritual search, is a clown. Atzara, or Acharya, he is both teacher—such as the first Indian masters who introduced Buddhism to Tibet—and buffoon.

Clowns often open the spectacle and populate the intermissions between acts in religious dramas. The amateur clowns of the village spectacles come forth from their houses for festivals



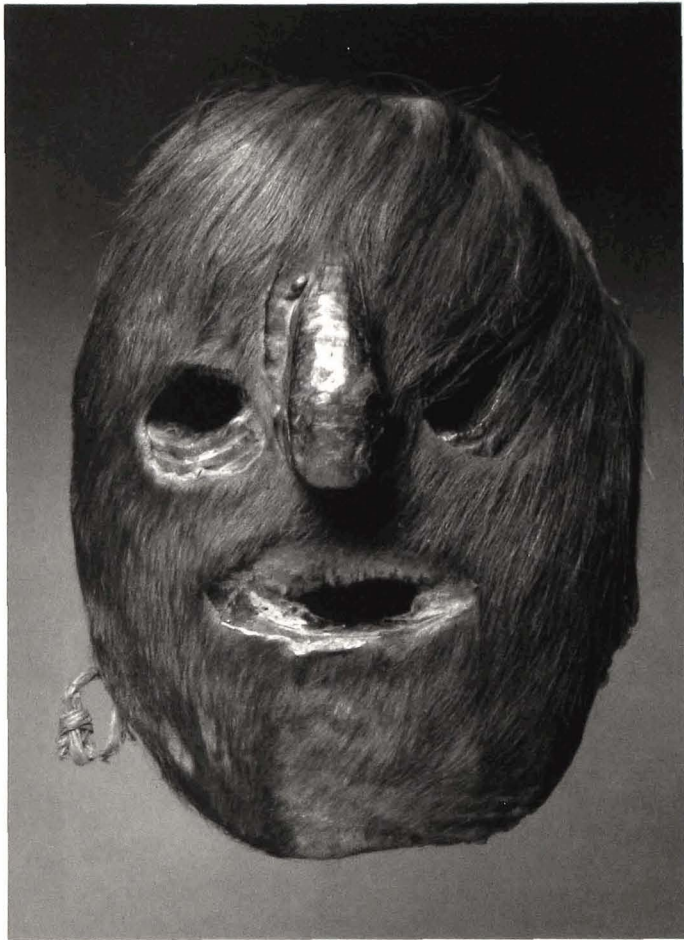


Bhutan  
Joker  
Wood, pigment, and hair  
Height: 10 inches

such as Tihar, the festival of lights in honor of the Hindu goddess of fortune Laksmi, or for the festival of Durga, the great Dasain. They dance through the laughing crowds in the streets, miming legends and begging for small coins.

Professional actor troupes bring their dramas from village to village throughout the winter months, inviting the crowds to admire their spectacles. They know how to take advantage of the powers of the night, performing in the trembling light of butter lamps that lends mystery and illusion as it animates their masks. Their rich brocade vestments have patterned waves and clouds that amplify every gesture. And because the dances often commemorate battles against demons, the darkness is propitious, for it is only then that the demons appear. As good weather is necessary for the staging of the drama, a specialist performs the

MIDDLE HILLS TRIBAL GROUP  
Nepal  
Yeti  
Wood, leather, and hair  
Height: 9½ inches



rituals guaranteeing such conditions, for neither masks nor costumes will benefit from rain.

Those behind the masks are possessed by the divinity whose visage they wear; they tremble and roar, brandishing swords in their hands as if to attack the crowd, abandoned entirely to the spirit that has seized hold of their bodies. The dance and the ritual evoke, consecrate, and create a space for the sacred to manifest itself.

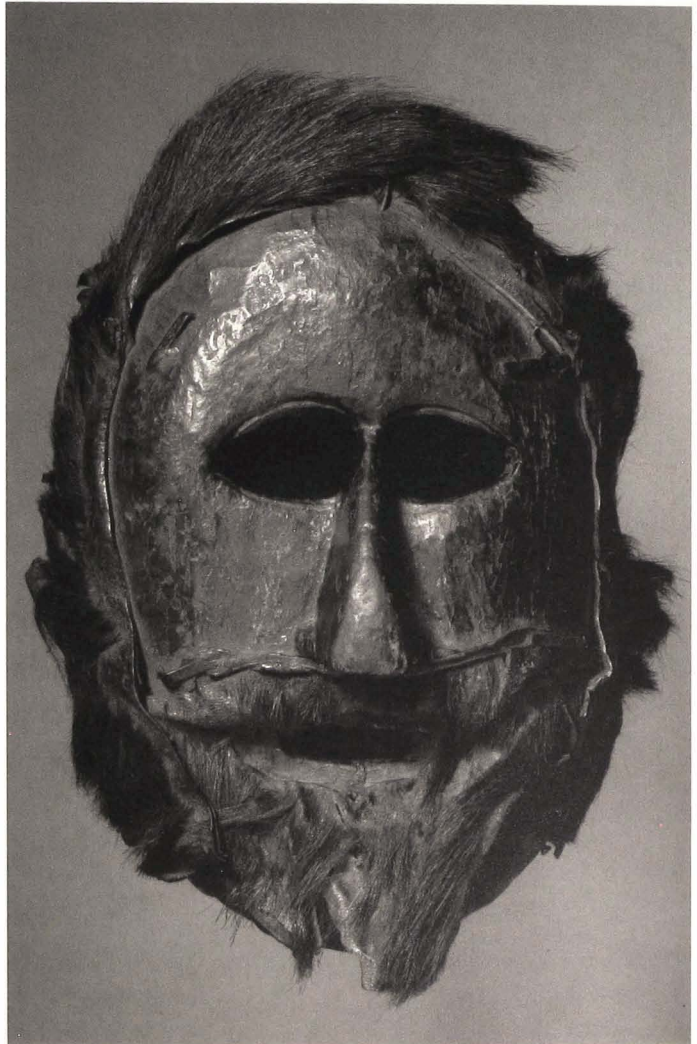
Each mask has a message of its cultural function within its context, but to the Western eye this message may be particularly veiled. Both Buddhist and Hindu masks often have distinctive and readable signs through color, form, details of headdress or crown, aspects of the mouth or eyes, beards and teeth, or other elements. The various features, dimensions, col-



ors, and types of hair designate and identify the personage by character trait. Each mask is part of a precise idea; the details of the face reinforce, support, and illustrate that idea. The structure of the object is always in direct accord with the sentiment the sculptor wishes to invoke in the spectator.

Tribal masks are less easily read. Lines and features are extremely personalized, with techniques and styles that can radically differ. The freedom of expression makes it difficult to identify even well-known deities.

In almost all cases the mask is a sign of good augury, implying a notion of protection. It is a witness for the ancients and a symbol of continuity. Often the mask is associated with an



MAGAR  
Nepal

Wood, hair, and leather  
Height: 10 inches

idea of fertility and prosperity, or it is a way of initiation. It teaches the spectator and modifies the very personality of the actor who wears it, provoking trance or possession as a medium of divine forces.

The eyes are found either open or not; sometimes the actor sees from two incisions close to the nose or below the eyes. Two sets of eyes are then superimposed, one which expresses, the other which sees, one turned toward the interior, the other toward the exterior. In some examples the teeth are indicative: their number and disposition, their uniformity or lack thereof, convey much of the message and emotion. The thickness of the lip, the form and angle of the opening of the mouth, the orienta-



MAGAR  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 10 inches



tion of the chin, the dimension of the forehead, the amplitude of the brow all have meaning as well. The man who carved, sized, and modeled the mask had an intuitive understanding of the face, of its rapport with the soul and human sentiments.

First, the mask is a silhouette, the essence of a face drawn from the very source of human character. And then, as in all art, there is a spiritual power, an allusion to the soul, the preservation of a sacred presence. Such is the power of the mask—that it transcends the elements of its evolution and remains above all the embodiment of a face, a window to the soul of man.

Eric Chazot

Translated from the French by Ian Alsop

## PLATES



NEWAR  
Southern Nepal  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 9½ inches





MONPA  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Clown  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 9¼ inches





GURUNG  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 9¾ inches





TAMANG  
Nepal  
Queen  
Wood  
Height: 9½ inches





TERAI  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 9½ inches





MONPA  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Character of Yak Dance  
Wood  
Height: 8½ inches



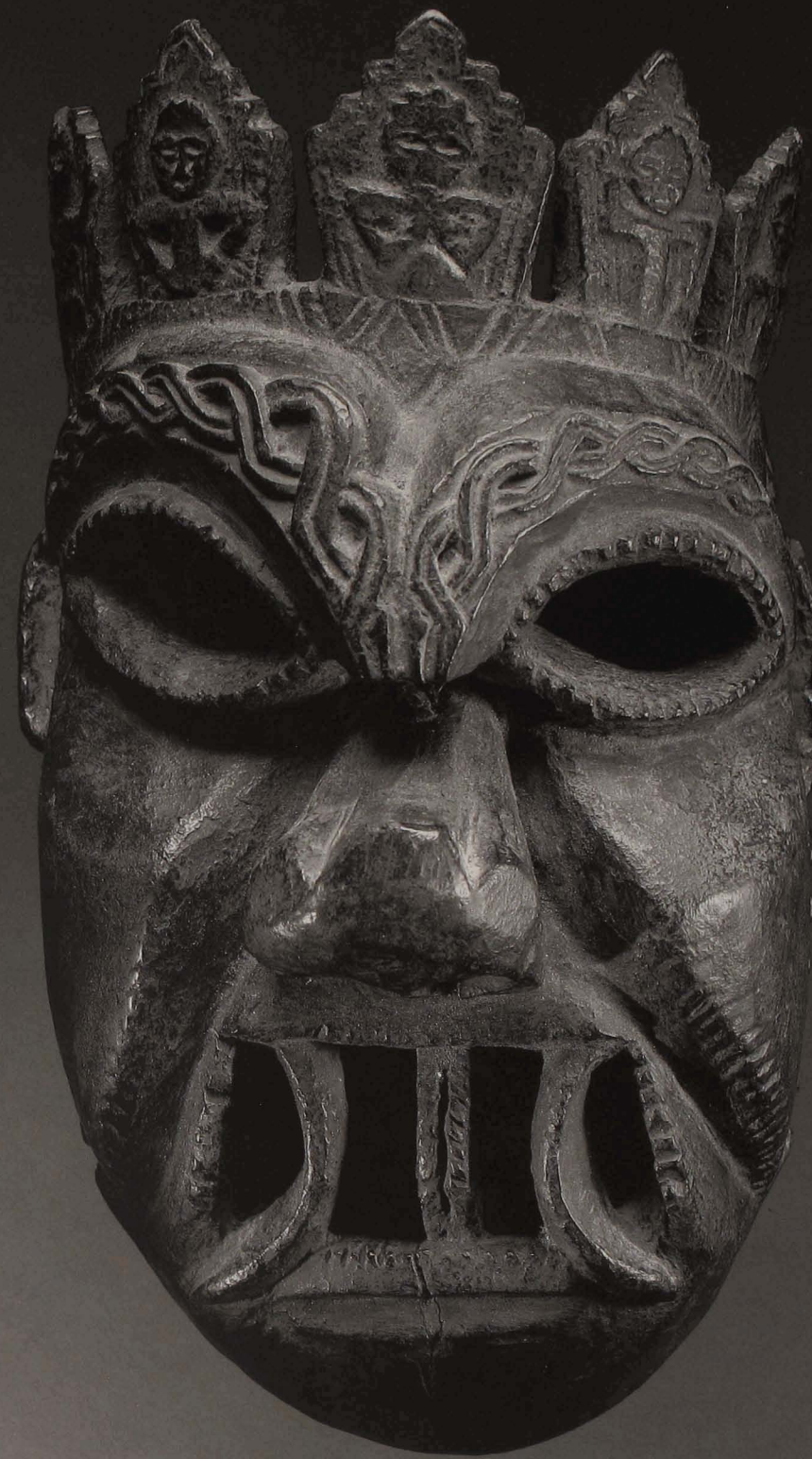


MONPA  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Joker  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 9 inches



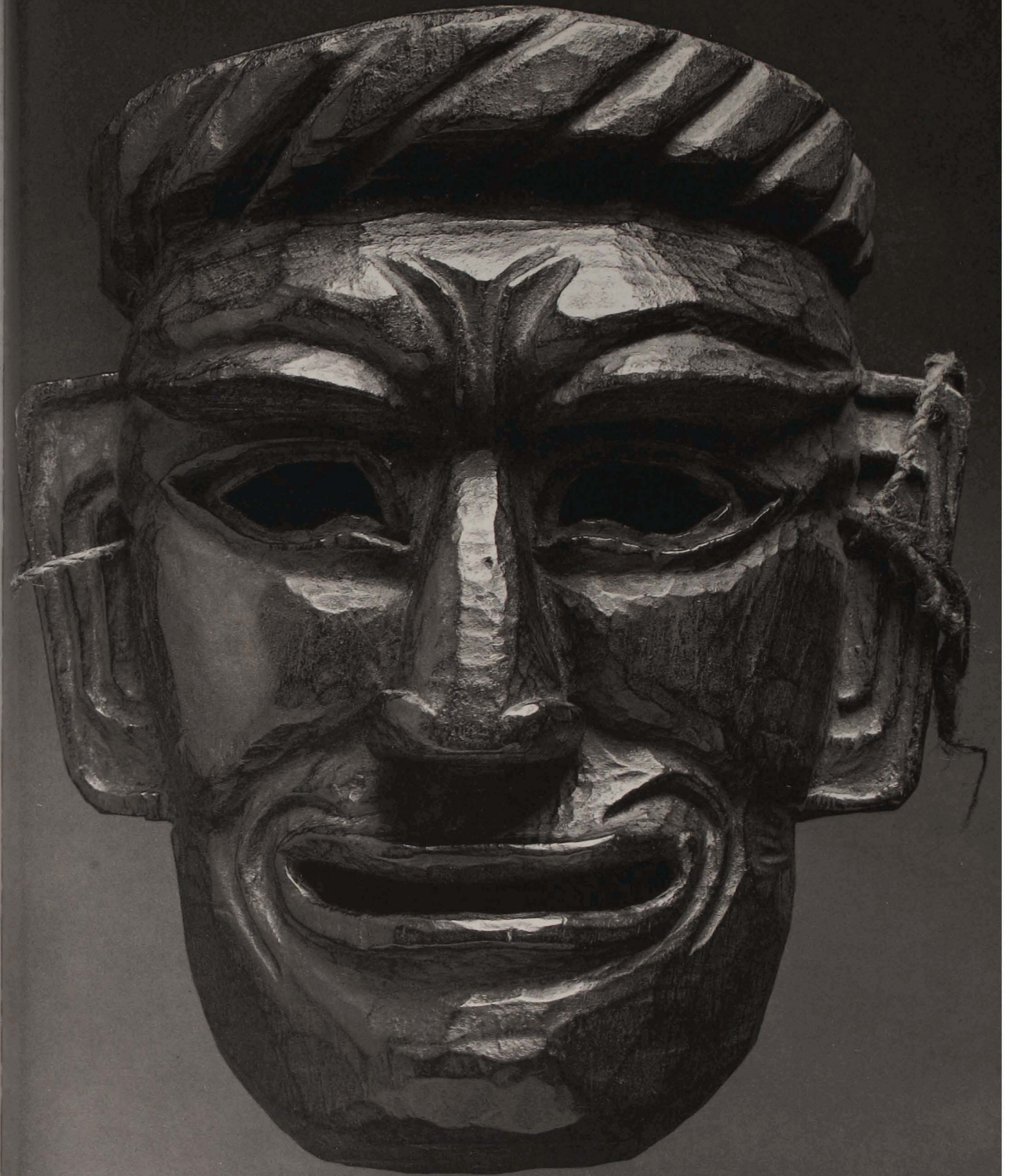


Tibet  
Bonpo Mask  
Wood  
Height: 13½ inches





Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Clown Arakacho  
Wood  
Height: 9½ inches





Tibet  
Garuda (King Eagle)  
Papier-mâché and pigment  
Height: 18 inches





MAGAR  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 10¼ inches





Bhutan  
Skull  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 12 inches



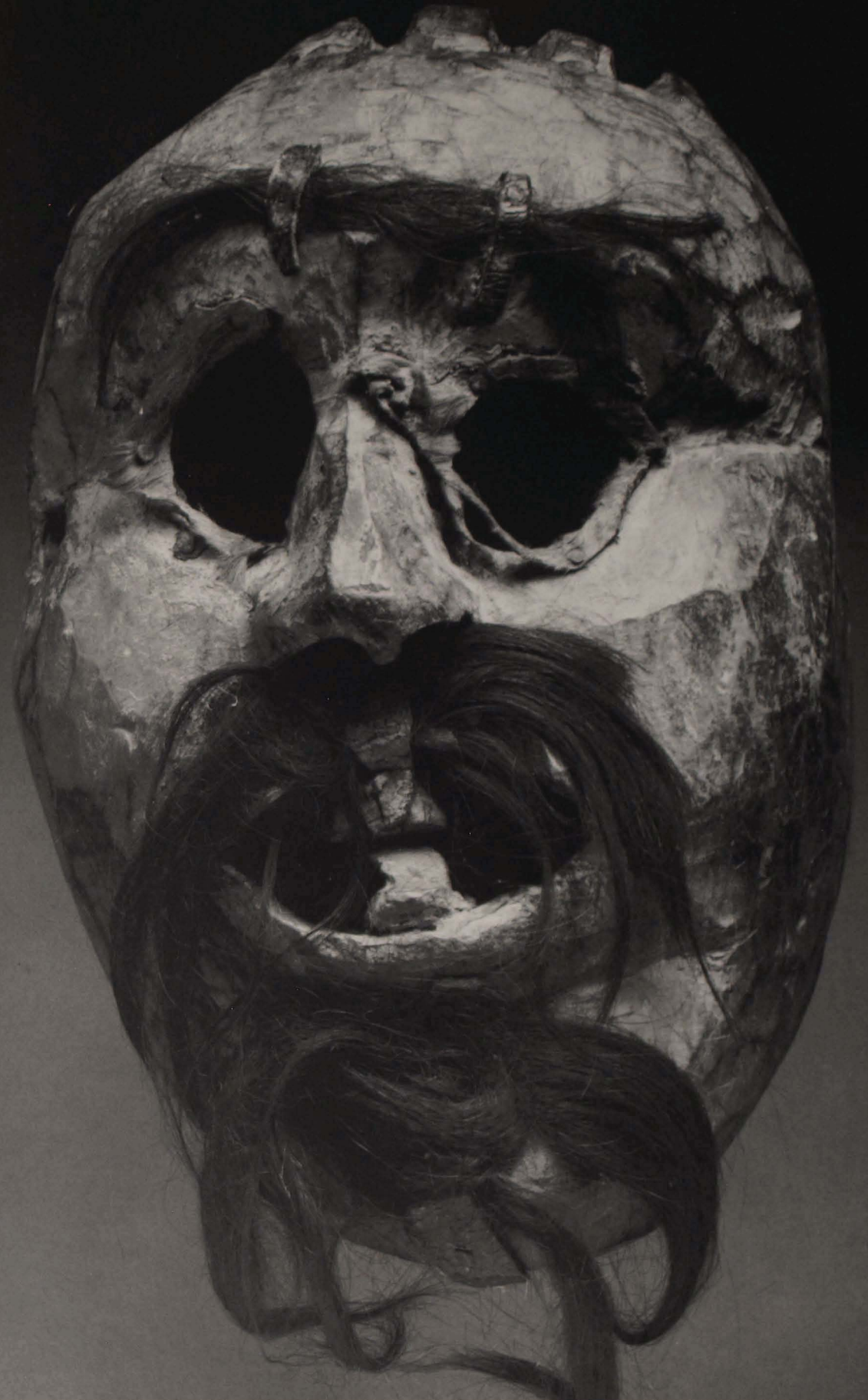


MIDDLE HILLS BUDDHIST GROUP  
Nepal  
Yogi  
Wood  
Height: 10¼ inches





NYING-BA  
Humla District, Nepal  
Wood, hair, leather, and pigment  
Height: 11 inches





Bhutan  
Tiger  
Papier-mâché and pigment  
Height: 7 inches





SHERDUKPEN  
Arunachal Pradesh, India  
Skull  
Wood  
Height: 9¼ inches





MUSTANG BUDDHIST GROUP  
Nepal  
Gonpo, Buddhist Protector  
Wood  
Height: 13 inches



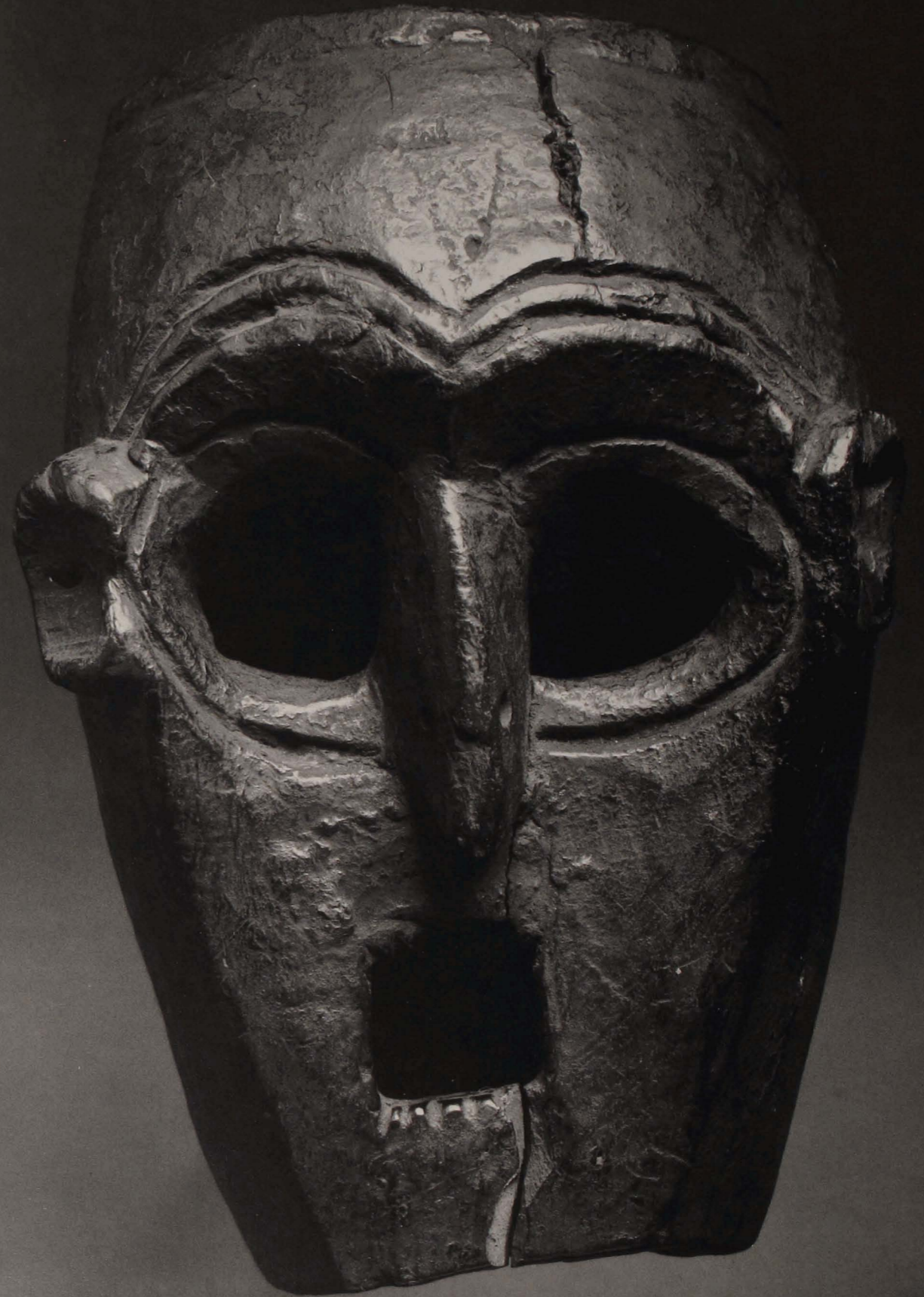


Tibet  
Papier-mâché and pigment  
Height: 10½ inches





MAGAR  
Nepal  
Wood  
Height: 9¼ inches



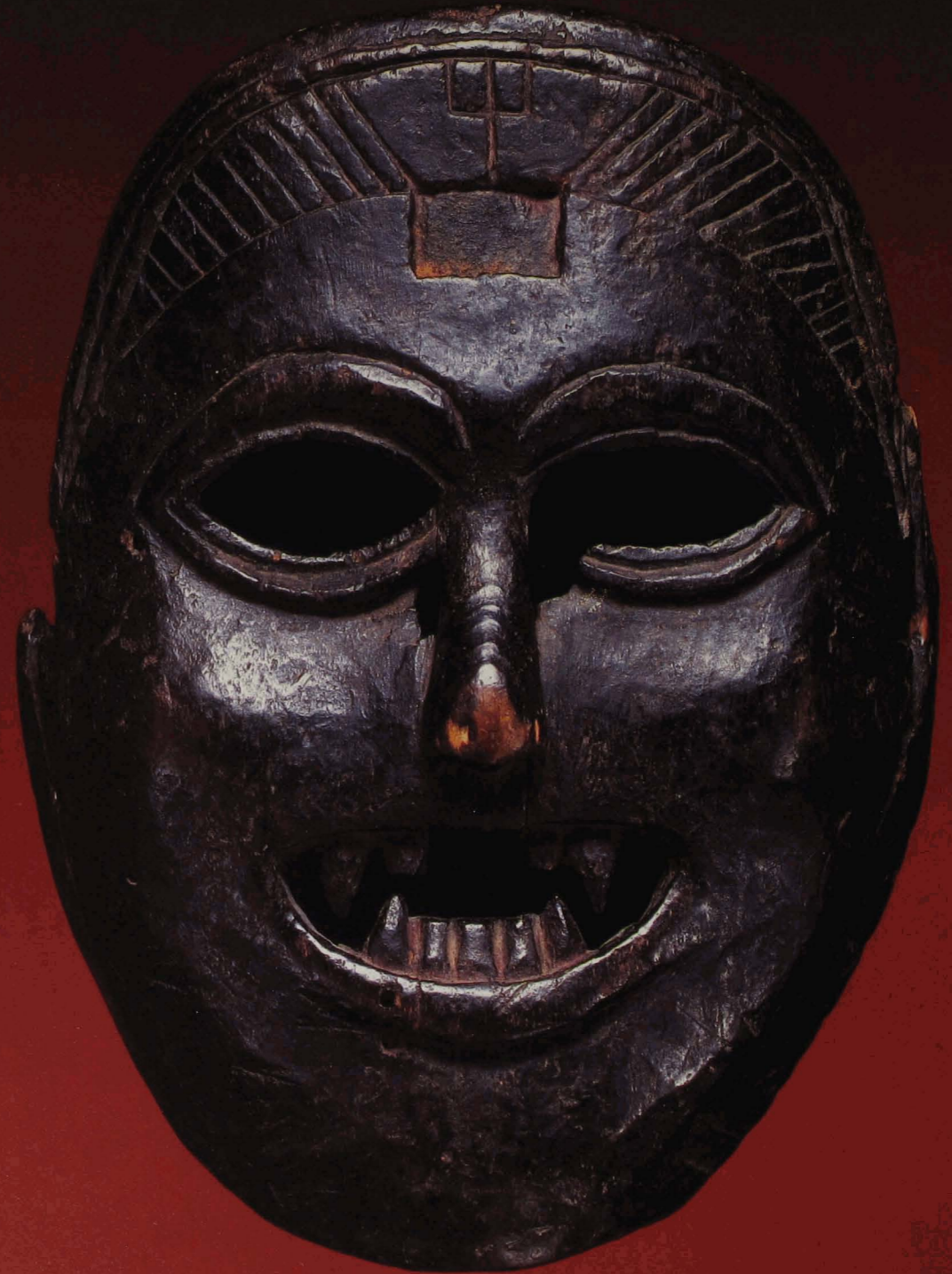


TERAI  
Nepal  
Monkey  
Wood and pigment  
Height: 15 inches





RAI  
Nepal  
Hindu Mask, sign of Shiva on forehead  
Wood  
Height: 11 inches





Tibet  
Gonpo, Buddhist Protector  
Papier-mâché, wood, and pigment  
Height: 14 inches





Front Cover:  
Tibet  
Gonpo, Buddhist Protector  
Wood  
Height: 9 inches

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