



LIFE UNMASKED:

EXPLORING OUR FASCINATION
WITH WEARING OTHER FACES

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One afternoon, during a trip to London a few years ago, I paid a visit to a certain museum.

Its Victorian founder was obsessed with collecting items that he felt were linked to medical science and human wellbeing. As a result, the exhibition rooms are bursting with an international array of oddments, curios, and trinkets from across the ages.

Aimlessly wandering among them, I suddenly spied a dozen faces staring back at me through the glass of a long case on the wall.

They were masks, of all shapes, types, and sizes. A motley bunch, to say the least. One gave a wild-eyed smirk, one bared a set of pointed teeth, another gave me a conspiratorial wink. I felt as if I was participating in some sort of bizarre, art-world police lineup.

And the masks' purposes were as varied as their expressions. One was for displays of ritual healing, whilst its neighbour was worn to entertain the masses. Some were made for protection, and some were designed to harm. One, a plaster impression of a dead man's face, memorialised a life; beside it, an executioner's mask, made of cold, glinting iron, was worn to dole out oblivion.

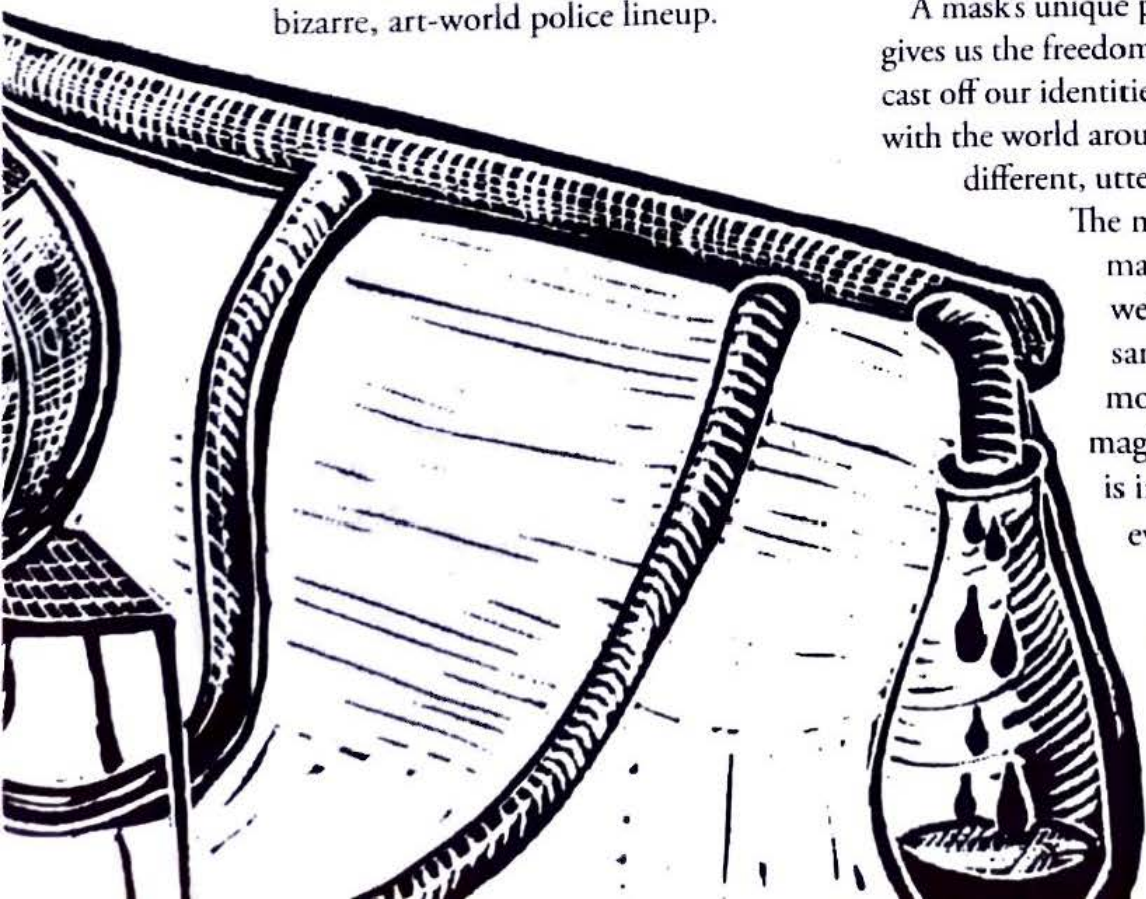
Despite their many differences, though, these manmade faces shared a single characteristic: they were all a means of transformation, whether physical or unseen.

There was something so compelling about seeing them. It somehow felt like a secret was being revealed in front of me. The feeling has haunted me ever since.

A mask's unique power is that it gives us the freedom to temporarily cast off our identities and interact with the world around us in a wholly different, utterly thrilling way.

The moment we lift a mask to our faces, we're no longer the same as we were only moments ago. The magic of this simple act is innately sensed by everyone on earth.

In times of celebration, masks give us permission to let loose. Each year, for example, as part of the Midsummer and Midwinter >>



Watch festivities here in Chester, citizens paint their faces and don costumes, taking to the streets as angels, demons, royalty, ravens, and bodies both celestial and skeletal. It's a time to dance about, be cheeky, and have a laugh together.

On the other side of the globe, actors in the traditional Japanese art of Noh theatre perform wearing wooden masks. Since these stylised faces appear to be devoid of expression at first, they can often seem pretty disconcerting to our Western sensibilities.

When you think about it, though, it's often people who aren't actually expressing their feelings, and, from a Japanese perspective, Noh masks are seen as pure distillations of human emotion.

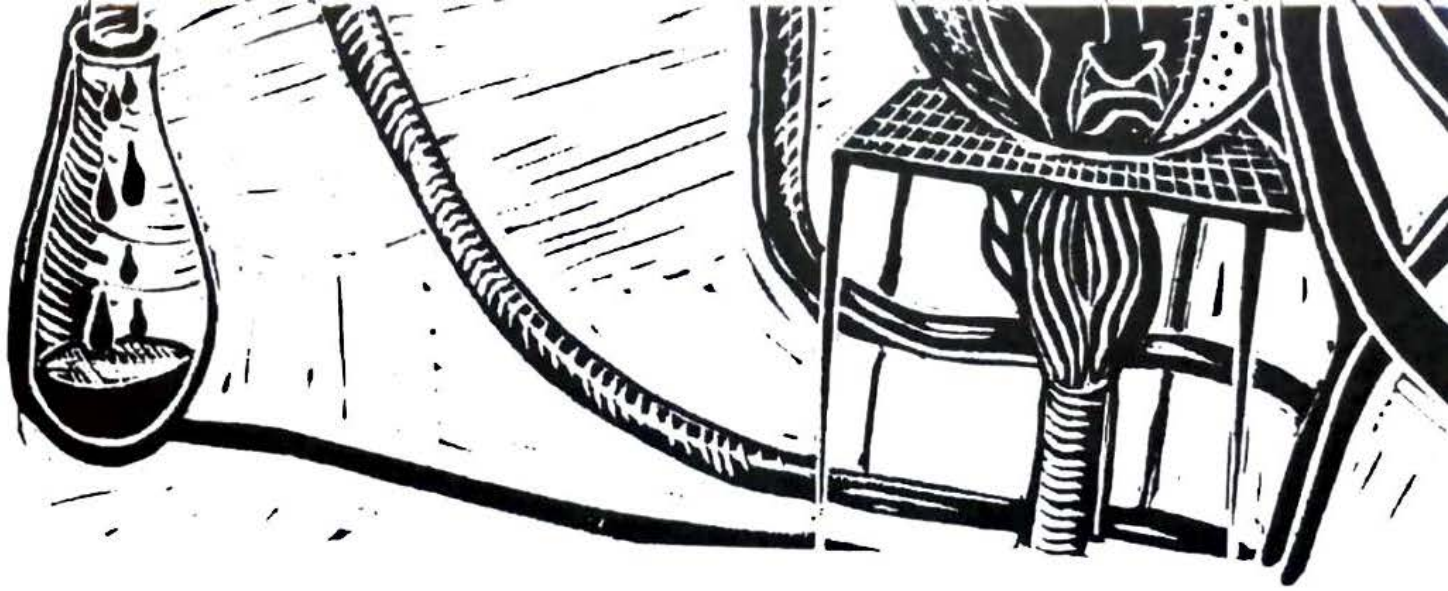
With a masterful of the head, the performer transforms a mask's blank stare into a shining embodiment of happiness or a heart-breaking depiction of sorrow. With every new angle, a fresh emotion emerges.

In this way, masks can grant us the ability to outwardly project how we feel. Even without words, they bring us together and create a moment of shared understanding.

To see just how deeply we respond to this effect, you only have to look at the popularity of the Guy Fawkes mask from the V for Vendetta comic and film franchise, which has exploded into a global phenomenon, over the last decade, as a symbol of the protest movement.

In fact, the Fawkes mask has had so much of an impact that it's even been adopted as an insignia by the global hacktivist network, Anonymous. And, of course, anonymity is another part of a mask's allure. Rightly or wrongly, it enables us to articulate our opinions, experiences, and frustrations, without fear of reprisal.





At other times, too, a mask gifts us the strength to handle things we'd be incapable of tackling on our own. Usually, this sort of mask is invisible. We summoned it up – with a lucky charm, a treasured memory, a favourite song – to wear like armour.

It paints you with outer cool and confidence, while you deliver a presentation at work, though you're a nervous wreck inside; it wraps you up in an air of absolute serenity and professionalism, while you deal with an unpleasant colleague, though all you really want to do is give your office supplies an airborne introduction to their face.

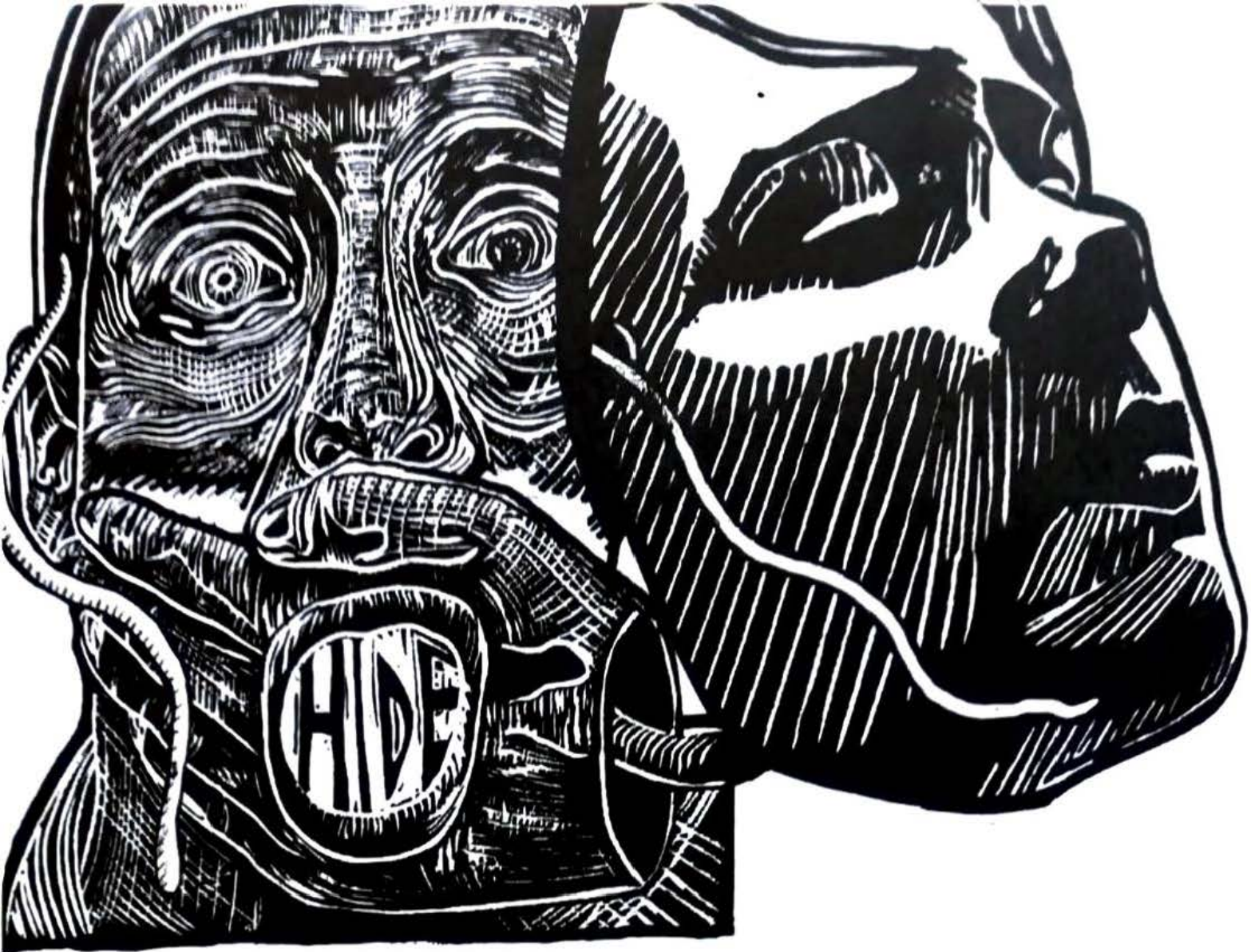
Masks can help us achieve remarkable things, to be sure, but it's important to recognise that it's really us, and not the mask, who's achieving them. By their very nature, most masks are there to produce a temporary transformation only. Their purpose fulfilled, we remove them and, once again, become our true selves.

The trouble is, we wear some masks so often that they become difficult to take off – or, worse, we forget we're wearing them altogether. These are the most dangerous. Wear some masks long enough, and they begin to wear you.

Sifting back through the murky origins of the word 'mask', we come to the Medieval Latin, *masca*, meaning 'nightmare' or 'spectre'. So, you see, they've always had a dark side.

Historically, there were masks cruelly forged from iron, in order to silence, humiliate, or simply torture their wearers. The horrible irony is that, nowadays, many of us forge masks with the very same purpose, for ourselves.

After all, even the biggest smile can be a mask. Putting on a brave face, when you're suffering, is a knee-jerk defence against appearing weak or broken. It hides from others, as well as from the person in the mirror, that we're feeling overwhelmed. >>



With a face-tune here and a filter there, we hide our troubles behind a digital mask of impossible perfection and superficial wellbeing, because we mistakenly hold ourselves up to the same illusory masks of others.

However, that protective barrier we put up quickly becomes a prison. We become isolated, ashamed, and incapable of asking for help. Over time, the mask consumes us.

What we need to realise is that, whatever we're going through, we're not alone in how we feel. No matter how perfect the lives of others may seem, the reality is that every single person alive is just as vulnerable as the next. We each wear masks of our own. That's why we mustn't be afraid to let those masks slip, to let down our guard and open ourselves up to the people around us.

Vulnerability makes us strong, not weak, and it shouldn't be locked away. It's how we connect with each other, how we allow ourselves the chance to heal and to grow.

So, let's do ourselves a favour and approach masks with caution. The next time you go to slip on a different face, ask yourself why you're doing it. Maybe – just maybe – you don't need it, after all? 🐾