

BHUTA MASKS, FROM SHRINES TO PEDESTALS

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In Bhuta religion as well as in Hinduism, when a representation of a god is damaged, it loses its holiness and cannot be worshipped anymore.

This custom is ruling the life of the bhuta masks as, after the *bhuta kola* (ceremony), they are often kept in *sthaana* (temples) where they are worshipped as representations of the spirits.

The metal alloys they are fabricated with, make them very resistant in their thickest parts and very brittle in their ornaments (Naga crowns...) and prominent elements (horns, ears, tongues...).

Looking at the pieces which are displayed in museums and galleries, it appears that many of them were repaired several times before being removed from their shrine, in order to extend their lifetime as ritual objects.

Indeed, the purchase of such masks is very costly and only the sponsorship of a rich local family (Shetty e.g...) makes possible the organization of the *bhuta kola*.

In some rare cases, in order to save money, these expensive masks are kept by the sponsors in their house for a further *kola* and get repaired in the meanwhile when needed.

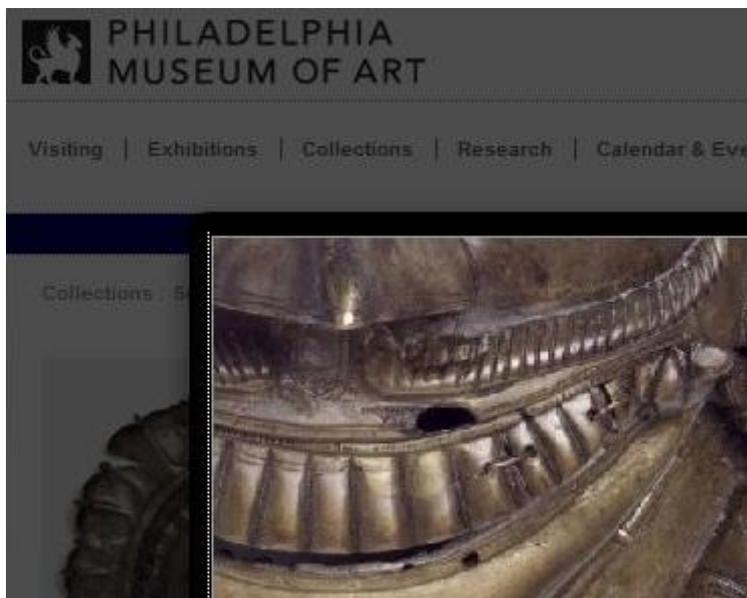


Fig01: Staples fixing a *Jumadi* mask (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

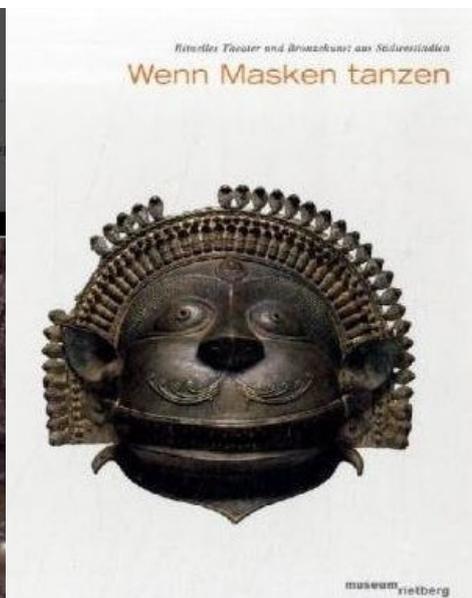


Fig02: *Pilichamundi* mask with a broken Naga crown (Rietberg Museum)

Theoretically, once removed from the *sthaana*, these broken masks should be put into the sea but, practically, this rarely happens.

Few of them are thrown into the ponds which often adjoin the temples. They are recognizable by their very "archaeological" looking patina and the layers of mud and oxidation they are covered by (see Fig03).

The others are usually sold by the temples or sponsors to antiques dealers and collectors.



Fig03: *Panjurli* mask found in a pond (*Le Toit du Monde* collection)

The recent spotlight set on the bhuta masks (exhibitions (*Musée du Quai Branly “Autres Maîtres de l’Inde” 2010*, *Rietberg Museum “Wenn Masken Tanzen” 2009*) and the resulting high value of these pieces on the antiques market, have motivated some people to rob the *sthaana*.

This explains why some old masks in excellent condition, which should have remained in the temples, are at times available for sale...

APPENDIX

The following illustrations present some examples of damages which are commonly observed on bhuta masks.



Fig04: *Nandigoona* mask with a repaired horn (Rietberg Museum, 2009)

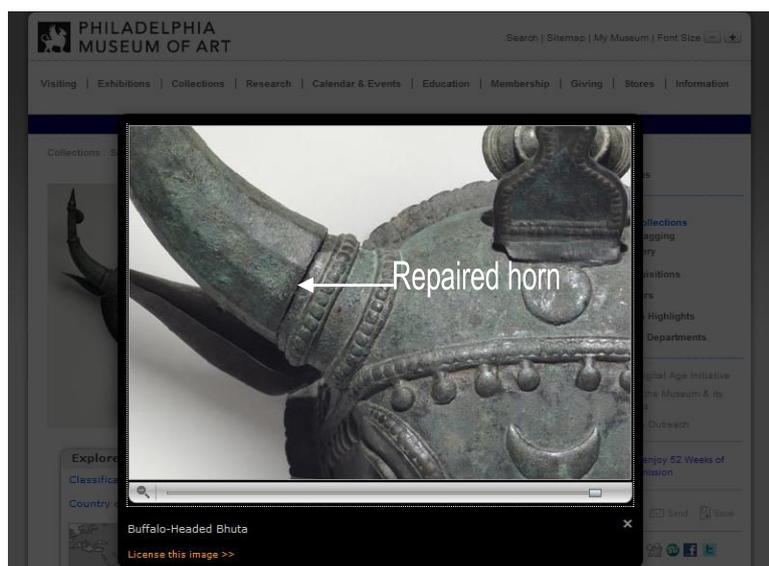


Fig05: *Nandigoona* mask with a repaired horn (Philadelphia Museum of Art)



Fig06: *Banta* mask with broken earslobes and crown (Musée du Quai Branly “Autres Maîtres de l’Inde” 2010)



Fig07: The welding used to repair this *Nandigoona* mask locally changed the colour of its patina. The ear made of another metal alloy was probably replaced some time after the mask was used in a *kola* (Private collection).

NOTE: This short paper is the result of several interviews of locals involved in *bhuta kola* in the Mangalore area. It couldn't have been written without the precious help of the Miranda family and Mr Mulya.