

## To Wear or Not to Wear: Black Masks and Luxury Shopping in 17th-Century England

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### Abstract

This paper examines issues relating to women's self-fashioning through the deployment of black half masks in 17th-century England. First, it traces the evolving function and perception of the accessory, starting from the 16th century, and secondly, it focuses on the mid-17th century growing issue of women wearing black half masks within the public sphere. This paper argues that, in the context of consumer culture in London at that time, the black colour of the half mask blurred the thin line between social distinction and incognito, prudence and impudence, liberty and libertine. The multiple meanings attached to the black half mask echoed the anxiety of the time about female agency, as women from all social classes were able to conceal, reveal, and even reshape their identity through these consumable black accessories, sold on the urban marketplace.

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A vogue consisting of placing costume overlays on top of miniature portraits prevailed in mid-17th-century England. A set of such miniatures, now preserved at the Royal Collection Trust, consists of a base image—a portrait of Henrietta Maria—and 19 mineral mica overlays, which include a variety of fashion accessories, some of which are contemporary, fantastical, exotic, religious, and even male. By dressing the base image with different ready-made costume overlays, the sitter's identity could be flexibly transformed. While external signs such as clothing and accessories reliably index Henrietta Maria's social position in Renaissance portraits, these 17th-century mica portraits of costume overlays prompt us to re-consider to what extent identity could be concealed, revealed, and altered by clothes and accessories, especially when they could be easily purchased by people across social classes. The popular fashion of wearing black masks in the setting of mid-17th-century English consumer culture is the main topic of my paper.

One of the mica pieces in this collection shows a black half mask (**Fig. 1**). The mask is secured to the face by two strings behind the head and one string in the middle that goes over it; it is worn in the same manner in Wenceslaus Hollar's prints (**Fig. 2**). The black half mask is a repeated element in Hollar's 1640s prints such as still lifes with piles of fashion accessories (1642-1647) and three sets of *Seasons* (1640-1647). The black half masks, in Hollar's prints, have been interpreted as winter accessories used to protect the skin from

cold winds.<sup>1</sup> This paper looks beyond their seasonal function and considers them as commodities, at a time when London was a growing centre of luxury consumption in the first half of the 17th century. The blackness of the half mask blurred the thin line between social distinction and incognito, prudence and impudence, liberty and libertine. The multiple meanings attached to the black half mask echoed the anxiety of the time about female agency, as women from all social classes were able to conceal, reveal, and even reshape their identity through these consumable black accessories, sold on the urban marketplace.

Known as vizards, black masks emerged in the mid-16th Century.<sup>2</sup> Only one full-face mask from the late 16th century or early 17th century has survived (**Fig. 3**). It is made of three layers: an outer layer of black velvet, an inner paperboard, and an inside lining of white silk. Near the centre of the mouth is a thin thread with a bead. The bead would have been bitten between the teeth to secure the mask to the face.<sup>3</sup> Wearing masks was originally an attribute of women of high status. Emanuel van Meteren (1535-1612), an Antwerp merchant in England, described that the English 'ladies of distinction' covered their face with masks to protect their complexion.<sup>4</sup> According to John Dee, Elizabeth I's advisor, the Queen was masked when she walked through the palace gardens, but she removed her mask when she had to bow to a visiting dignitary.<sup>5</sup> When Anne of Denmark went on a journey without a mask, Dudley Carleton criticized her, saying 'for her favor she hath done something wrong.'<sup>6</sup> Noblewomen were expected to maintain the whiteness of their head, neck, and hands. Masks, which protected their fair skin, became a guarantee of their social distinction. The revealing of the milky white face was heightened by the contrasting black colour of the masks. Made of velvet and silk, the soft and smooth surface of the accessory gently caressed and protected the soft and smooth facial skin underneath.

The black mask not only revealed the ideal beauty but also functioned as a concealing apparatus. Moralists believed that women should be authentic and legible. English poet Richard Braithwaite wrote in 1641 that women should keep their head and face bare without

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Christoph Heyl, "The Metamorphosis of the Mask in Seventeenth-and Eighteenth-Century London," in *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, ed. Efrat Tseëlon (London: Routledge, 2001), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Susan J Vincent, *The Anatomy of Fashion: Dressing the Body from the Renaissance to Today* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 139.

<sup>3</sup> "Record ID: NARC-151A67 - Post Medieval Mask," The Portable Antiquities Scheme (British Museum, 2011), <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/402520>.

<sup>4</sup> Emanuel van Meteren, *Nederlandtsche Histories*, cited in Vincent, *The Anatomy of Fashion*, 139.

<sup>5</sup> John Dee, *The Private Diary of Dr. John Dee: And the Catalogue of His Library of Manuscripts, from the Original Manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and Trinity College Library, Cambridge*, ed. James O Halliwell (London: Camden Society, 1842), 37, 4 December 1590.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Vincent, *The Anatomy of Fashion*, 139.

being veiled, for they were expected to 'bee indeed what you desire to bee thought.'<sup>7</sup> The artificiality of wearing a black mask, obscuring the authentic face, was linked to women's vanity and lack of religious piety. In Gillis van Breen's etching (**Fig. 4**), an elegantly dressed lady with a fan and a black half mask is accompanied by a peacock, a symbol of vanity. In Abraham Bosse's print *The French Nobility at Church* (c. 1628), an elite woman wearing a black mask is styling her hair and faunting new accessories instead of reading her prayer book in church.

Moreover, hiding one's body was seen as hiding one's moral and physical flaws. Barnabe Rich wrote in 1606 that women would use "a mask to cover an impudent face, a periwig to hide a loathsome bush, and a buske to straighten a lascivious body."<sup>8</sup> Maerten de Vos's print from the early 17th century shows a group of women in a shop, trying on black masks and farthingales (**Fig. 5**). The legend reads: 'See the store of raging loves: of vanity and pride and other tricks: of which many who dress the stinking flesh, go with the devils into the burning hell.' 'Dress me with the ugly, coarse, and dirty mask: because the ugliness is in me the principal beauty.' 'Buy, lady, masks and lace. Show your poor pride boldly.' 'Come, beautiful girls, with your skinny buttocks. Soon I will make them round and pleasing.'<sup>9</sup> To the obscuring characteristic of black masks was added the juxtaposition of farthingales, which, besides shaping a deceptive silhouette of the female body, were often seen as ways to hide illegitimate pregnancies in the 17th century.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, farthingales and black masks were both regarded as contributors to sexual promiscuity. No wonder the masks represented in this print are described as 'ugly, coarse, and dirty.' Black masks' connection with sexual economy is well summarised in the 1673 comedy *The Careless Lover*: 'Sin conceal'd: l'le engage Vizard-Masques to ruin more Women's virtues than all the Bawds in Towne.'<sup>11</sup>

Once an attribute of ideal beauty and high social status, black masks have now become available to anyone who can afford them. De Vos's print, which depicts the shopping of black masks, thus emerged not just as a condemnation of fashion accessories themselves but as a condemnation of their commercial nature. In other words, shopping calls into question women's modesty and chastity, a concern also visible in Abraham Bosse's print depicting the interior of the Galerie du Palais in Paris (**Fig. 6**). On one hand, the print celebrates the burgeoning salesmanship and, on the other hand, acts as a warning against worldly desires. The woman in the right foreground carries a pocket watch and a mirror, which were

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentleman and the English Gentlewoman: Both in One Volume Couched* (London, John Dawson, 1641), 330.

<sup>8</sup> Barnabe Rich, *Faults, Faults, and Nothing Else but Faults* (London: n.p., 1606), 21.

<sup>9</sup> My own translation.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Bendall, *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 201-211.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Ravenscroft, *The Careless Lovers: A Comedy* (London, 1673), 7-8.

fashionable items but simultaneously traditional symbols of vanity. The stall in the middle of the shop exhibits masks, gloves, ribbons, muffs, and fans, considered luxury commodities women adored in both England and France. Interestingly, Hollar depicts exactly the same items in his still lifes of fashion accessories (**Fig. 7**).

Elite women's shopping accounts reveal that black masks were among the most frequently purchased items. In the first half of the 17th century, wives and daughters from noble families came to London to buy luxury items for themselves, and as presents for family and friends. For example, Margaret Spencer's shopping list from 1613 shows that she purchased a black velvet mask, a French lace ruff, Italian cuffs, and a yellow fan.<sup>12</sup> According to Elizabeth Cecil's 1638 account, she spent an extraordinary amount of £174 on accessories, including a vizard, masking ruff, and embroidered gloves for the upcoming masque organised by Henrietta Maria.<sup>13</sup> Rachel, Countess of Bath, bought a mask and pendants in 1640 for 10s.<sup>14</sup> Pat Poppy's research on buying fashion accessories, as depicted in Hollar's still lifes in the 1640s, sheds light on this current study: by comparing the spending on those fashion accessories by different classes, she demonstrates that black masks, lace cuffs and ruffs, fans, gloves, and muffs were bought by noblewomen and women of the middling sort alike. They did not differ much in kind or appearance, but in cost and quality.<sup>15</sup>

The association of Hollar's prints with shopping in the urban marketplace is further enhanced by the depiction of a masked woman in front of London's Royal Exchange in *Winter* (1643-44, **Fig. 8**). Thomas Heywood's play, 'If you know not me, you know no body, the second part with the building of the royal exchange', written in the 1620s, describes the Royal Exchange's openness:

'There is more ware there than in all the rest,  
Here like a parish for good Cittizens  
And their faire wiues to dwell in, ile haue shoppes  
Where euery day they shall become themselues

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<sup>12</sup> British Library Add. Mss. 69873, Margaret Spencer Account Book 1610-13, quoted in Linda L Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69.

<sup>13</sup> Cecil Mss., Accounts 127/8, Account of the Privy Purse for one year ending at Michaelmas 1638, quoted in Peck, *Consuming Splendor*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Poppy, "The Clothing Accessory Choices of Rachel, Countess of Bath, and Other Mid-Seventeenth-Century Women," *Costume* 54, no. 1 (2020): 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 3-29.

In neat attire, that when our Courtiers  
Shall come in traines to trace old Gresham's Burse  
They shall haue such a girdle of chaste eyes  
And such a globe of beauty round about:  
Ladies shall blush to turne their vizards off,  
And Courtiers sweare they ly'd when they did scoffe.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike contemporary prescriptive literature that demoralises shopping at London's two Royal Exchanges, Heywood's play destigmatises luxury shopping. The Royal Exchange was as pure as a parish that welcomed not only courtiers but also urban citizens. What is important in maintaining the chaste nature of the Royal Exchange is the use of masks, as virtuous ladies would refuse to take off their masks when visiting the shopping centre, using the consumable item as a barrier to impudence. Hollar's *Winter*, which depicts a woman keeping her mask on in front of the Royal Exchange, highly resembles Heywood's literary description of the shopping centre. Both the new and the old rich could put on the black mask that once identified nobility. In other words, it made the wearer incognito as she walked through public spaces such as parks, theatres, and shopping malls, where women's presence was previously discouraged. The consumable black mask in Hollar's *Winter* is a statement in support of the urban middle class's liberty and agency.

The commodity culture in London thus invites a reconsideration of the mica costume overlays of Henrietta Maria, in relation to the urban marketplace. Many of the accessories painted on the mica discs can be identified in Hollar's costume prints. Whether the mica overlays served as models for Hollar or vice versa, is unknown. However, they demonstrate a shared interest by both the upper and middle classes in self-fashioning through consumable clothes and accessories. To wear or not to wear a black mask is not simply a question of fashionability. No longer exclusively used by the aristocracy, black masks as ready-made commodities were disseminated to all social echelons. The fashion of wearing black masks unmask the evolving power struggles between the old nobility and the new urban bourgeoisie, as well as between patriarchal society and female liberty and agency, in mid-17th-century England.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Heywood, "Excerpts from *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody*, Part 2," *The Map of Early Modern London*, Edition 7.0, ed. Janelle Jenstad (Victoria: University of Victoria).  
<https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/IYKN2.htm>.



**Fig. 1**

Anonymous (British School), set of mica overlays and miniature of Henrietta Maria, c. 1650.

Oil on copper; mica

RCIN 422348

Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2023

**Fig. 2**

Detail of Wenceslaus Hollar, Plate 13 from *Ornatus Muliebris Anglicanus*, c. 1640.  
Etching, 13.2 x 7.2 cm.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



**Fig. 3**

Mask, c. 16th century.

Textile, glass, 19.5 x 17 cm.

NARC-151A67.

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Fig. 4

Gillis van Breen, *Elegant Lady with Peacock*, c. 1595-1610. Engraving, 23 x 15.5 cm.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Fig. 5

Maerten de Vos, *The Vanity of Women: Masks and Bustles*, c. 1600. Engraving.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Voy cy la boutique des enrouez amours,  
De vanité & d'orgueil & d'autres tels vices:  
Dont plusieurs qui corrompent la chair puante,  
S'en sont avecq' les diables en la gehéme ardante.

Dit's f'raem van de v'enus diere,  
Van ydelheyt, en houcr'richen, met hoopen  
Die hun siel oncrey, en d'licham vercreien  
Ende alse den duyvel hun siel vercoopen.

