

CLOTHING THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19
FACE MASKS
AROUND
THE WORLD



ICOM COSTUME ICOM international committee for the museums and collections of costume, fashion and textiles

ICOM-CC ICOM international council of museums – committee for conservation

ICME ICOM international committee for museums and collections of ethnography

ICOM conseil international des musées Canada

ICOM international council of museums

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Edited by Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset

Proofreading and design by Virginie Lassarre

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INTRODUCTION



I used the mask as a performative object, I made the invisible, visible. Our breath, our life-force and – in 2020 – the transporter of our most feared opponent, COVID-19.

Breath, by Threadstories (2021)

The stories of COVID-19 will be recorded in history books throughout the world. In a similar way, *Clothing the Pandemic* intends to preserve and explore the iconic object of this challenging pandemic from its very beginnings: the face mask. Face masks are implicated in a wide range of areas of society, from health, fashion, and art to politics, identity, and sustainability. It is important for museums and the public to develop a broader understanding of textile and dress collecting in relation to the pandemic.

The face mask has become the iconic object and symbol of the pandemic, representing humanity's resilience, community, and unity during this global tragedy. *Clothing the Pandemic* connects international museums and curators working on this topic and links their collections virtually to a global public. The handbook *Clothing the Pandemic* acknowledges museum initiatives and wider related work, and collects essays from the fields of anthropology, art, art history, sociology, conservation, and museology.

ICOM Costume Chair and *Clothing the Pandemic* project leader,
Corinne Thépaut-Cabasset.

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COLLECTING

COVID19: A Design Response Turned into a Collection

Bastardes Mestre, Teresa

Head of Collections, Barcelona Design Museum, Spain

Casanova Mandri, Rossend

Curator Product Design Collection, Barcelona Design Museum, Spain

Abstract

In the first weeks of the pandemic in Spain, the design sector showed its solidarity by creating a series of products to tackle the health emergency. The Barcelona Design Museum, aware of this situation, started to document and select from the various public and private responses in order to form a collection that would bear witness to this moment, paying special attention to personal protective equipment, to clinical machinery, and communication graphics. This collection was subsequently presented to the general public in the exhibition *Emergency! Designs to combat COVID-19*, shown in Barcelona in November 2020 and in Madrid in February 2021.

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COVID19: A Design Response Turned into a Collection

1. Introduction

The first news about COVID-19 in Spain appeared in the media during the early days of 2020. Not long after, on 30 January, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global emergency in response to the new coronavirus, which had first appeared in China and did not take long to reach Europe. The first people to fall ill were severe cases who could have died, and the rate of infection was so rapid that, given the lack of knowledge, staff, and equipment to deal with it, the strain on the health service reached unheard-of levels.

The following weeks were crucial. Images in the mass media showed dramatic scenes as society confronted this new, unknown disease. In that context, many designers and industrialists set to work, collaborating for the common good, each contributing their own experience and infrastructure or simply offering their materials or equipment.

Those early days and weeks of resisting the unknown sharpened the ingenuity of designers, who were driven more than ever by the need to respond to the crisis. Working alongside health professionals, designers and engineers set about designing and constructing what was needed from scratch, ranging from ventilators (which were in short supply to meet patient demand) to protective items such as face masks and visors. At the same time, the public authorities, whose mission is to serve society, began to launch communication campaigns to inform the public about how to prevent the disease and how to protect themselves and others.

Thus, the COVID-19 Collection was born: an example of how heritage may be constructed in times of pandemic.

2. An unexpected collection

The Barcelona Design Museum preserves various historical and contemporary collections, including Product Design, Fashion and Clothing, Graphic Arts, and Ceramics, all of which are the responsibility of the Collections Department. Each collection has its own manager, given its specific features, who also works with other members of the department on registration, documentation, preventive conservation, and communication.

Given its characteristics, the COVID-19 Collection was conceived by the Head of the Department, Teresa Bastardes, and the Curator of the Product Design Collection, Rossend Casanova, with the assistance of other curators and members of the Department. Both of them, aware of the situation, started to document and select from the various public and private responses, even during lockdown, in order to form a collection that would bear witness to this moment, paying special attention to personal protective items, clinical equipment, and communication graphics.

The new COVID-19 Collection focuses on Spain in terms of design and production, and includes a selection of the many initiatives that emerged from the world of design in response to the health crisis caused by the pandemic.

Most of the projects originated at the start of the pandemic, when there was an urgent need to save lives and protect people. In other words, they arose during lockdown with a clear goal: to design to help. An important point that backs up this idea is that, in contemporary society, information technology and digitalisation have facilitated collaborative design, fluid relationships between interdisciplinary teams, access to open-source designs, and the possibility of 3D printing in companies, universities, offices, or simply from home (**Fig. 1**). This idea of collective work in search of urgent solutions evokes the global interconnectedness of society, in which some people's experiences and others' results are shared solely for the common good.

In creating this new collection, we took into account designers and companies that already featured in the Museum's collections, including Product Design (started in 1994 and active since then without interruption), Graphic Design, and Fashion, given that, in museological terms, the quality and importance of their work meant that they had already merited being part of the Museum's stock. Accordingly, and with due regard to new developments, start-ups, and emerging designers, the collection also includes those new professionals responding to the new needs that arise as society evolves.

Despite the national scope of the Design Museum collection, for reasons of proximity and territorial collaborative synergies, a good many of the pieces in the new COVID-19 Collection were designed or produced in Barcelona or in its wider sphere of influence in Catalonia. In fact, the significant educational, business, and industrial ecosystem in this geographical area has historically led industrial design in Spain and turned it into an international benchmark. In that regard, the Barcelona Design Museum houses a unique public collection of Spanish design that is on permanent display, with continuously expanding reserves.

3. Creating a new collection from home

The possibilities afforded by teleworking (working from home) provided an opportunity to 'collect in a different way', i.e. to contact designers without seeing them in their workshops or to talk to entrepreneurs without meeting them at a trade fair.

Digital technologies, already a fundamental tool in documentation management, became indispensable to the creation of this new collection, since most items were selected at the very moment they appeared on the market, or even before. We also took into account certain prototypes that their inventors ultimately discarded in favour of other designs that were better than the original idea. Without digital equipment, it would have been impossible to create an exhibition of this kind, let alone to realise it in the way it was produced and within a short period of time.

Historically and up to the present day, the collections that make up the Design Museum have received important donations that have helped its reserves grow considerably. These heritage collections belong to Barcelona City Council, which means that they are publicly owned. As a general rule, items that might enrich the Museum's collections are donated freely. Such donations constitute a gesture of generosity towards the city of Barcelona and society as a whole, as well as an expression of appreciation for heritage and support for culture. On this basis, all the pieces in the COVID-19 Collection have been donated by their designers or manufacturers.

Moreover, this is an open collection. Just as the pandemic has given rise to different initiatives depending on the needs of the moment, so the COVID-19 Collection continues to grow in order to capture the exceptional nature of these times and of the designs that are helping to save lives.

4. An exhibition of the times we are living in

Driven by the Barcelona Design Museum (**Fig. 2**), the exhibition *Emergency! Designs to combat COVID-19* resulted from a selection of the many initiatives brought together in the COVID-19 Collection. It opened at the Museum itself on 13 November, only eight months after the collection was started, and under the health protocols imposed by the pandemic itself. It was, and in part still is, a reflection of the way we have lived in public spaces in recent times, with protective face masks, social distancing, and alcohol-based sanitiser. These ideas were reflected in the exhibition slogan, which, together with the theme 'Design Can Save Your Life', demonstrates more than ever how design has been, is, and will be a reflection of our times.

As has already been pointed out in the collection contents, the exhibition is divided into three broad areas that group the objects conceptually.

The first section is devoted to personal protection. Face masks are displayed here, both the so-called

hygienic masks and the FFP2 masks, which offer greater protection, notably those made in the first weeks of lockdown by the fashion designers Txell Miras, Josep Abril with the Opisso studio (**Fig. 3**), and Miriam Ponsa, whose work enabled local workshops to resume production using the materials they had to hand. We will also incorporate fabric masks from recycled plastic, such as *Filter Mask* and *Filter Tube* by the BUFF Company, or *Skut-O* by Manufactures Arpe, along with others resulting from research, such as the *Visible Mask* by Tèxtil Artigas, which uses transparent fabric, or the *Palens* masks with an innovative Proveil® filter developed at the CSIC (Spanish National Research Council). This area will also feature other face masks designed to protect key workers, especially health workers, including products such as the *CAR3D* prototypes, a project promoted by the European Union that offers open-source products, together with information on the production centres to cities in order to promote self-sufficiency and local production. It also includes the noteworthy endeavours of the makers' community, with their altruistic production of face masks and visors (**Fig. 4**), as well as the adaptations of commercial snorkel masks and filters, such as the *3DDF*, conceived, produced, and co-funded by the design studio MOS, or the *Aleu* mask developed by Eurecat. Other protective items include tools for opening doors and the alcohol-based sanitiser dispensers.

The second major section is dedicated to machinery, particularly clinical equipment with ventilators constituting the most important category. The collection features five models developed by various multidisciplinary teams, in collaboration with medical teams, all of them tested, validated, and approved by the Spanish health authorities. They were used at the height of the pandemic in public hospitals in Catalonia (**Fig. 5**) and the rest of Spain, and later sent to other parts of the world. Using different systems, these devices mechanise a manual ventilator, controlling the amount of air, the frequency, and the inhalation-exhalation curve for each patient: *Leitat*, made with 3D printed parts; *OxyGen*, promoted by Protofy.xyz. and shared through open-source platform, the most analogue of all, being activated by a car windscreen wiper and a cam system; *Q-Vent*, a portable ventilator conceived for export to developing countries; and *Respira*, which activates a manual ventilator by means of a piston system available on the market and is regulated by complex software developed by Siemens. Other alternatives sought a way of allowing an approved ventilator to be shared by more than one patient simultaneously, such as the *Angel-Y* valve devised by Minnim Design. Other equipment in this area includes surface-disinfection machines such as the disinfection robot *MTS UVC* (**Fig. 6**), or air disinfectors like the modular air management system *AMS mini* designed by FICEPS3.

Finally, we have the communication projects, notably the institutional information campaigns that were so vital in the face of the pandemic, not only to inform the public about health issues but also about the social changes required in order to protect others. We highlight the Barcelona City Council campaigns *Des de casa* (From home), promoting the strict lockdown of the first few weeks, and *Desconfinament* (Lockdown exit), with the necessary instructions to help the public navigate the changing protocols associated with the gradual lifting of restrictions in the city and in public buildings, as well as the encouraging and optimistic Catalan government campaign #ensensortirem (We will get through this). This section also includes other private initiatives of social protest, such as posters by the designer and artist Mr Zé, as well as initiatives of thanks and remembrance, such as the T-shirts and other products created by the Desficio team, among others.

Most of the products presented here are examples of what emergency design means: making use of existing materials or equipment and employing additive printing technologies to produce them (**Fig. 7**). It should also be noted that all the projects have a solidarity dimension, whether through the altruistic provision of materials or labour during the development of the product or, for example, through the allocation of part of the profits from marketed products to social causes or organisations.

5. Public programmes

The exhibition *Emergency! Designs to combat COVID-19* was presented at the Barcelona Design Museum as part of Barcelona Design Week, from 13 November 2020 to 10 January 2021, with

the support of ADI FAD (Industrial Design Association, Fostering Arts and Design). Subsequently, it travelled to Madrid for the Madrid Design Festival, from 9 February to 14 March 2021. A total of 6,213 people visited the exhibition in Barcelona and around 9,000 in Madrid. We are also working on an online version for the Google Art & Culture project.

The contents of the exhibition are included in the online publication, and all the projects that were exhibited are catalogued there. The explanations necessary for understanding how each item works and for appreciating its design characteristics are also included, and all this material is available in three languages: Catalan, Spanish, and English.

Catalan:

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/museudeldisseny/ca/publicacio/emergencia-dissenys-contra-la-covid-19>

Spanish:

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/museudeldisseny/es/publicacion/emergencia-disenos-contra-la-covid-19>

English:

<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/museudeldisseny/en/publication/emergency-designs-combat-covid-19>

In addition, the Design Museum organised an event on 9 and 10 December 2020 as part of the 'Design for Living' programme, entitled *Designing Futures in Times of Pandemic*, curated by the design historian Oscar Guayabero. The aim was to highlight ways, resources, and strategies through which design can contribute, and to make it clear that design can help to make the likely future (which seems more feasible to bring about) resemble as much as possible the desirable future (which is committed to the common good). Various specialists took part, including some of the designers represented in the collection (**Fig. 8**). ■

Conference available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK4TJoahQGo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7Qmb00yzV4>

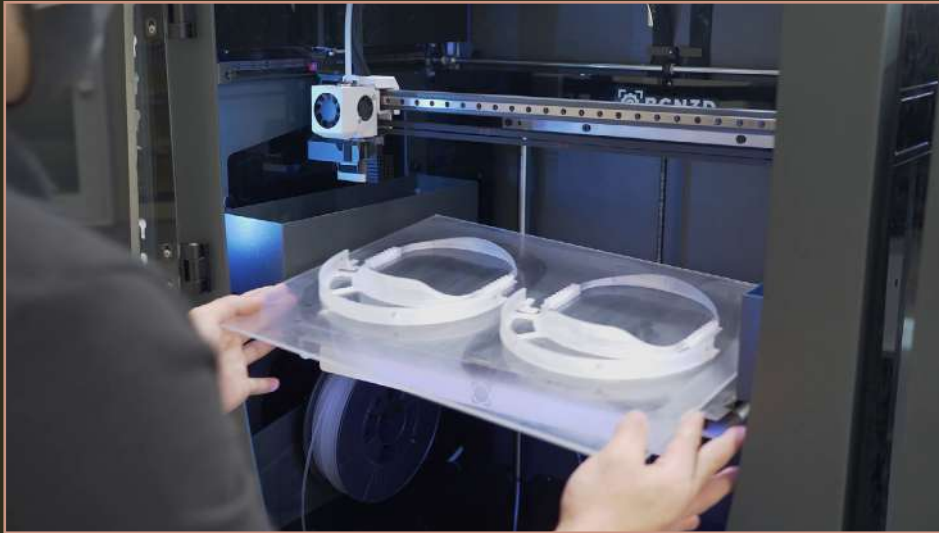


Fig. 1.
Additive printing
process for facial
protectors CARD3D.
© CARD3D



Fig. 2.
Exhibition Emergency!
Designs to combat
COVID-19.
© Museu del Disseny
Photography: Xavi Pa-
drós



Fig. 3.
Mask,
Josep Abril i Opisso.
© Josep Abril i Opisso
Studio



Fig. 4.
Protective visor, COVID makers.
© Museu del Disseny,
Photography: Estudio Rafael Vargas



Fig. 5.
Ventilator Respira, Pau Sarsanedas (CEO of GPA Innova).
© GPA Innova



Fig. 6.
Robot for disinfecting
spaces MTS uvc,
MTS uvc Team.
© MTS tech



Fig. 7.
Exhibition Emergency!
Designs to combat
COVID-19.
© Museu del Disseny,
Photography: Xavi Padrós



Fig. 8.
Conference Designing futures in
times of emergency.
Presentation of the campaign
Desconfinament (Lockdown exit),
Aleix Artigal from the
Família studio.
© Museu del Disseny,
Photography: Xavi Padrós

Conserving a Symbol: Guidelines for the Preservation of Face Masks from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Benson, Sarah

ICOM-CC Textiles Working Group Coordinator, National Museum, Sweden

Laganà, Anna

ICOM-CC Modern Materials and Contemporary Art Working Group Coordinator
Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, United States of America

Abstract

Face masks have been collected by museums to document the COVID-19 Pandemic since April 2020. These objects have become a symbol of this global tragedy and of humanity's resilience, while also allowing for new expression and creativity. Face masks can be made from a variety of materials, some of which may affect how well they survive over time. Preserving face masks in museum collections is fundamental to maintaining the memory of this historic event. Therefore, within the ICOM Costume Committee Solidarity Project, *Clothing the Pandemic*, the ICOM-CC coordinators of the Textiles and Contemporary and Modern Materials Working Groups developed these guidelines for the preservation of face masks. The aim of these guidelines is to assist museum professionals by providing useful information on materials and manufacturing processes used to make face masks, methods of material identification, proper handling, examination for contaminants, material condition, and preservation strategies, including exhibition and storage solutions.

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2. Face mask materials and manufacturing processes
3. Face mask material identification methods
4. Handling
5. Checking for contaminants
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Conserving a Symbol:

Guidelines for the Preservation of Face Masks from the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

Face masks have become iconic objects and symbols of the pandemic, representing humanity's resilience, community, and unity during this global tragedy. Face masks began as a medical requirement intended to protect against the virus; however, they soon became symbols and means of expressing political standpoints, artistic and design styles, institutional and brand identities, and the values of different cultures around the world.

Since April 2020, museums around the world have begun collecting new and used face masks to document this period and to explore their meanings for the people who make and wear them. In order to best preserve these iconic objects, it is essential for museums to understand face masks more fully, including their materials, how they were manufactured and used, and how they may degrade overtime.

During the ICOM Costume Committee Solidarity Project, *Clothing the Pandemic*, the ICOM-CC coordinators of the Textiles and Contemporary and Modern Materials Working Groups were asked to develop a virtual workshop and handbook, which resulted in these guidelines. During the project, the participating museums shared information on their face-mask collections with the coordinators, thereby providing the background knowledge needed to create the workshop and the guidelines, which are intended to support any museum that has collected these objects. These guidelines cover essential information and offer suggestions for understanding materials and manufacturing techniques, material identification, proper handling, examination processes, material condition, and preservation (**Fig. 1**).

2. Face mask materials and manufacturing processes

Within this project, photographs of face masks collected by several museums, reference face masks, online searches, manufacturing information, and material analysis helped to compile this list, which illustrates the wide variety of materials that may be used in the production of face masks (**Fig. 1**) (**Table 1**). However, covering all of these materials in a single set of guidelines would have made the document too long. Therefore, the list was narrowed down to the most commonly used materials, which form the focus of these guidelines. The final list was determined through an evaluation of museum collections and of the most widely available face masks (**Table 2**).

These materials include natural, semi-synthetic, and synthetic polymers, as well as a variety of blends, which may occur in many forms. The most common forms found in face masks made from natural materials are fibres, while in those made from semi-synthetic and synthetic material the most frequent forms are fibres and films, and occasionally foams. Fibres can then be spun into yarns, which may be either woven or knitted into textiles. Fibres can also be pressed into sheets to form a non-woven textiles.

Face masks can be assembled in a variety of ways, especially depending on their purpose. For example, all medical-grade masks have specific requirements that they must follow to achieve that labelling. However, non-medical masks, such as homemade, artistic, or mass-produced fashion masks, can have endless variations in their construction. The basic similarity among most masks is that they are multi-layered. Filters, which are made of non-woven materials, also play an important role in masks and in their protective efficiency. Some masks are made with non-removable filters, such as medical masks, which are commonly made of three layers of different synthetic non-woven materials. In these masks, all the edges are melt-bonded together, so that there are no stitching holes. On the other hand, mass-produced and home-sewn masks are generally stitched together using a variety

of patterns, though the aim is to have as few seams as possible to avoid creating additional holes in the fabric. Many masks also have an opening on the inner lining where a disposable filter can be inserted, allowing the mask to be washed and re-used (**Fig. 2a, b**), whereas all medical-grade masks are produced as single-use masks. All face masks either have elastic bands that go around the ears or ties to go around the back of the head (which may also be made of strips of textile rather than elastic). One common type of face mask is made from a very dense knitted fabric and consists of a single layer with one seam down the centre, while the ear loops are cut directly from the textile rather than being added as separate bands or loops (**Fig. 2c**). Some masks are made with plastic films that are inserted into the surrounding textile, generally with stitches. Face shields are also made of plastic films that are assembled using mechanical joints and/or adhesives (**Fig. 2d**).

3. Face mask material identification methods

Identifying the materials from which face masks are made is an important process that should be undertaken in order to better understand their properties and patterns of degradation, thereby allowing conservators to estimate risks and design appropriate preservation solutions. Material identification (ID) can be carried out in multiple ways, which may also be used in combination and cross-referenced to obtain a clearer confirmation of the material type. It is not always easy or feasible to identify the exact material, but it is nevertheless helpful to identify a range of possible materials.

The following is a list of some of the common methods used for material identification, ranging from the most basic approaches to the most complex techniques, which require the support of analytical specialists:

- Collecting background information: face mask suppliers or manufacturers can provide information about materials and techniques. Sometimes this information can be found with the mask or on it.
- Visual observations and tactile examinations: the physical appearance and feel of a textile or plastic can indicate its material type or help narrow down the range of material possibilities. For instance, a shiny textile may indicate long, smooth fibres, such as those found in silk and in synthetic fibres imitating silk. Similarly, if a textile is elastic and stretchy, this may indicate the presence of elasticised materials, such as fibres made from thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU). There are currently several useful references that can assist with material identification for both plastics and textiles (Collier & Epps, 1998, Timár-Balázs & Eastop, 1998, Waentig, 2011 and Williamson, 1999). In addition, there are two online tools available for foams, films, elastomers, and rigid plastics that can support the process of visual and tactile examination used for material identification. One is the Plastics Identification Tool, freely available on the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands website. The other is the Identifying Plastic Toolkit, available through the Museum of Design in Plastics (Link address: <https://www.modip.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/Identifying%20plastics%20diagram2017.pdf>).
- Microscopic observations: there is a wide variety of microscopes available. The higher the magnification, the more information can be obtained at the fibre level. During this project, a portable digital Dino-Lite microscope with polarised-light options and a magnification of 400- 470x was used (**Fig. 3**). Polarised light can provide a better understanding of the material, as different forms polarise in different ways. To achieve proper identification using a microscope, it is advisable to use known reference materials. A particularly useful online source for comparing fibre microscopy images obtained under different light sources, for helping to determine material identification, is the CAMEO reference database developed by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Link address: http://cameo.mfa.org/wiki/Fiber_Reference_Image_Library).
- Analytical techniques: the most commonly recommended method is Fourier Transform In-

frared Spectroscopy (FTIR), which must be carried out by specialists. This technique relies on the interaction between polymers and infrared light to produce a unique identification of polymers. A table providing a full overview of the analytical techniques that can assist in the identification of plastics was created during the European POPART project and is available on its website. (Link address: https://popart-highlights.mnhn.fr/wp-content/uploads/2_Identification/7_Analytical_techniques_table/2_8_AnalyticalTechniquesTable.pdf).

4. Handling

The first step that objects go through when entering a museum is examination and documentation, and they must be handled properly to prevent accidental damage.

Before handling the face masks, it is advisable first to clean the working table or cover it with a piece of Tyvek (a fabric made from polyethylene and resistant to water, abrasion, and bacteria). You should also protect your clothing with something easily washable, such as a lab coat. Make sure your hands are clean, which is often sufficient for handling textiles. However, all plastics should be handled only with nitrile gloves in order to protect them from the oils in our skin and from fingerprints.

If the face masks that were acquired had previously been worn, they could be contaminated with mould, bacteria, or even viruses. In this case, it is best to use a N95 or FFP3 face mask (filtering 95% of all airborne particles, including mould), protective goggles, and a lab coat that will be washed afterwards. If there are known contaminants, such as large amounts of mould, use a disposable full Tyvek suit instead of a lab coat, with the hood covering your hair and the gloves worn over the suit.

Do and Don'ts for handling: there are a few general rules that should be followed to prevent damage (**Fig. 4**):

- a. Do try to keep the face masks flat on the table as much as possible.
- b. Pick the mask up from the centre, supporting it from underneath with both hands.
- c. Don't pick up and handle the mask harshly; folding or rubbing the materials should always be avoided.
- d. Don't pick up by the elastic ear loops or the edges, and don't stretch the elastic.
- e. Don't fold or crush plastic sheets, and don't put pressure on foamed materials.
- f. It is a good idea to use an acid-free board to move the masks from one surface to another.
- g. Some masks are made with a seam down the centre, and it may therefore be better to keep them folded.
- h. Finally, don't forget to keep your area clear of objects that could damage the face masks, such as sharp objects, inks, glues, liquids, or other materials.

5. Checking for contaminants

The first step recommended when examining previously worn face masks is to check whether they have any contaminants on their surfaces. Contaminants will fluoresce differently from the mask's materials under ultraviolet (UV) light. This can be done using a standing or portable UV lamp in a very dark room. It is advisable to use an unused mask to visualise how the materials fluoresce in the absence of contaminants. A mask that has been worn can then be examined to determine whether other areas fluoresce, which may indicate a form of contamination. When fluorescing materials are found around the area that comes into contact with the mouth, they may contain forms of bacteria or mould (**Fig. 5**).

If contaminants are found on the face mask, it should be sanitised. This can be done safely in several ways. First, if mould or bacteria are suspected, make sure that the face mask has dried completely by placing it, uncovered, in a drier, well-ventilated environment at around 40% relative humidity (RH) for a couple of days. A common practice for neutralising mould is the use of ethanol; however, this can cause irreversible damage to some plastics and synthetic materials and is therefore not recommended for face masks. After drying, the mask can be gently surface-cleaned with a low-suction vacuum equipped with a HEPA filter and a soft brush. It should be remembered that full personal protective equipment must be used during this process.

Encapsulation can also be used to deactivate mould. Anoxic treatment has been proven to deactivate mould spores over time, although it can take up to one month. This is the same procedure explained later in the *Dos and Don'ts for storage* section.

For viral contamination, isolation or quarantine is the recommended approach for possibly infected objects. This should be done for at least seven days at room temperature, as the COVID-19 virus naturally deactivates when outside the human body. However, objects should not be stored at low temperatures or low relative humidity, since this has been proven to prolong the life of the virus. Comprehensive online guidelines on dealing with COVID-19-infected cultural materials were provided by the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI).

6. Face mask conservation issues

This is an overview of how some materials found in face masks can degrade, showing typical degradation patterns when they are kept in inappropriate environments (Timár-Balázs, 1998, Sashoua, 2008, and Waentig, 2009):

- Silk characteristically becomes very weak and may develop a shredded or shattered appearance as it degrades. This type of damage is frequently caused by light (**Fig. 6a**).
- Cellulosic materials, such as cotton and linen, also become weak, but they do not shatter in the same way as silk. They frequently yellow over time as a result of oxidation, which may also be caused by acidic environments. Semi-synthetic materials such as viscose may also show some similar degradation characteristics (**Fig. 6b**).
- Polypropylene fibres are frequently used to make the non-woven textiles found in face masks and filters. They are highly sensitive to light and UV radiation. As they degrade, they may discolour and lose their mechanical properties, resulting in cracking, tearing, and eventually crumbling (**Fig. 6c**).
- Natural rubber can be used to make elastic ear loops found in some face masks. The degradation of this material is caused primarily by oxygen and occurs in stages. First, the material begins to discolour; next, it cracks or tears; it then becomes soft and tacky; and later, it becomes hard and brittle, ultimately breaking into pieces (**Fig. 6d**).
- Plasticised PVC can be used in face masks to create a clear window. Its degradation may be caused by light, UV radiation, and oxygen, and generally involves the migration of additives to the surface, which causes changes in mechanical properties, such as loss of flexibility. Typical degradation phenomena in plasticised PVC include discolouration, shrinkage, deformation, hardening, tackiness, and the appearance of white bloom or liquid on the surface (**Fig. 6e**).
- Polyurethane is a large family of polymers with a wide variety of chemical compositions, and it can occur in various forms. There are two main types of polyurethane, the ester type and the ether type, which degrade differently.
- Polyurethane esters are highly susceptible to humidity, while ethers are highly susceptible to UV radiation and light (van Oosten, 2011). In face masks, polyurethane is primarily

found in the form of fibres, specifically TPU. TPU fibres are used in the production of textiles known as spandex, Lycra, or elastane. They are frequently used to make the elastic ear loops of face masks, as well as some stretchy textiles. Currently, the main degradation issues observed with TPU ester fibres are that, over time, they become harder, lose elasticity, may become sticky, and eventually break (Rizzo & Scaturro, 2021) (**Fig. 6f**). Sometimes polyurethane can also be found in face shields in the form of foam. Ether-based foam generally crumbles (**Fig. 6g**), while ester-based foam becomes sticky and loses its resilience (**Fig. 6h**).

The other materials previously cited as being among the most commonly found in face masks, such as polyester and polycarbonate, are generally very stable, and are therefore not included in this overview.

7. Preservation

Labelling with museum numbers: the first aspect of preservation that should be considered is the labelling of face masks, which preserves the identity of the object. All museums must label their collections to keep a traceable record of accessioned objects. However, some methods of labelling can directly damage the synthetic materials found in face masks. For instance, inks and solvents should never be used directly on synthetic materials, as they can permanently damage them. The best approach is to label the mask by attaching an acid-free label, such as a Tyvek label, using an acid-free string. This should be loosely tied around the ear loops or another area where the label will not slip off. If a more discreet label is required for exhibition, then, for textiles, the traditional method of stitching a small Tyvek label to the inside of the face mask may be the best approach. Make sure that any pens or inks used to write the label will not bleed or smudge in water. For plastic films, however, a thick handmade watercolour can be used. It is made by mixing gum arabic with loose pigments and then writing directly on the film with a fine-tipped brush. This is a safe method because it is reversible with water.

Environmental conditions: materials degrade faster in uncontrolled environments, and although some materials have specific environmental needs, general guidelines can be applied to most exhibition and storage conditions. The agreement across the guidelines developed by various conservation committees is that temperature and relative humidity should be kept as stable as possible. The following parameters are recommended on the basis of current guidelines and with reference to the preservation of the materials used in face masks (Link: <https://www.iiconservation.org/sites/default/files/static/6972-2014-iic-icom-cc-environmental-guidelines.pdf>) (Timár-Balázs, 1998 and Shashoua, 2008):

Temperature (T): between 18 and 20 degrees Celsius, ± 2 degrees.

Relative Humidity (RH): 50%, $\pm 3\%$

However, some specific materials require different parameters because of their causes of degradation. Polyurethane esters found in the form of fibres and foams are very sensitive to humidity. Research studies have shown that storing objects made of these materials in a low RH of 30% can greatly improve their preservation (Lovett & Eastop, 2004). One possible solution is to construct a storage unit maintained at 30% relative humidity, as developed by the Powerhouse Museum in Australia to preserve textiles made of TPU ester fibres (Chee & Gatenby, 2014). Most face masks are made of textiles and synthetic materials, which both fall into the most critical light-sensitive category. Therefore, to prolong the life of these materials, they should be kept in dark storage, and when on exhibition, the light levels (which is a measurement used to quantify the intensity of visible light) should be maintained at around 50 Lux, with a max of 100 lux. UV light is the most damaging form of light and should be minimised to as close to zero as possible through the use of UV filters.

Dos and Don'ts for exhibition solutions: for exhibitions lasting longer than a photo shoot, only chemically stable materials should be used to mount and display face masks. Polystyrene foam, which is commonly used for mounts, should be avoided, since it will turn yellow and sticky over

time, releasing harmful pollutants onto the objects. Acidic materials such as wood should also be avoided, as they release acids that may cause yellowing and brittleness in the face masks. Regarding mounting, an important point is that although elastic ear loops were made to be stretched, they were designed to withstand this for only a short period of time. Prolonged stress on elastic will cause it to overstretch and deform, which may become irreversible after some time (**Fig. 7a**). Not fully supporting the face mask can cause creasing, deformation, and folds that may also be irreversible. It is always best practice to avoid putting holes in an object, so the use of pins to hang up the face masks should be avoided (**Fig. 7b**).

It is necessary to use stable and inert materials to display face masks. However, it can be challenging to find a head-shaped mount made from such materials. Currently, fibreglass is the most common stable material from which mannequins are made. Another option, however, would be to create your own mount using Fosshape (which is an inert mouldable polyester fabric). Masks can also be fully supported on a flat padded board made of inert materials.

Fibreglass and most other inert materials used for mounts cannot be pinned or stitched into. Attaching the face mask without placing strain on the object, and especially without placing strain on the elastic ear loops, can therefore be difficult. One way to secure the face mask to the mount is to stitch it to a semi-transparent, stretchable material such as nylon (polyamide) net. First, cut the net to the correct width. Then stitch it at the side edge of the face mask, where the mask is strongest, (**Fig. 8a**), making sure to use inert stitching threads and as fine a needle as possible to avoid making holes in the textile. Smooth the net around the mount until it is taut enough to hold the face mask in place (**Fig. 8b**), pin it in place to the net, and stitch the other side. Lastly, loosely whip-stitch the elastic ear loops to the net (**Fig. 8c**). The result is a mounted face mask without strain on the elastic loops or the textile (**Fig. 8d**). An alternative to a mannequin mount would be to support the face mask on a padded board with a soft cushion covered with Tyvek. The top edges, sides, and ear loops can then be carefully stitched to the textile-covered board in order to evenly secure the face mask to the mount (**Fig. 9**).

Dos and Don'ts for storage solutions: the approach used for storage can be similar to that used for displays, although the timeframe is much longer and therefore the choices made are even more important. For long-term storage, unstable materials such as polyurethane and polystyrene foams, plasticised PVC, and acidic papers, cards, and boxes should never be used. Previously used acid-free tissue should also be avoided, since it has likely absorbed acids from its surroundings and is no longer acid-free. It can be tempting to try to fit as many face masks as possible into one box to save space; however, this prevents proper support and will result in crushed surfaces, distortions, and creasing that may not be reversible.

There are many appropriate ways to store face masks. Firstly, it is advisable to store them in archival boxes. To layer or cover the masks, you can use soft, stable, synthetic materials such as Tyvek or Bondina, the latter made from polyester; alternatively, new acid-free tissue may be used. If a more rigid material is needed, transparent Melinex polyester film can be used, while Ethafoam or Plastazote, both of which are made from polyethylene, can be used to create supports of different shapes. A simple and effective solution for face masks that lie flat (with no seam down the centre) is to store them in individual Melinex film folders. These folders can be made by folding and heat-sealing the Melinex along one edge, allowing the face mask to be easily viewed and supported (**Fig. 10a**). For unknown transparent plastic film found in face masks, a folder made from silicon-release Melinex film is recommended, since the plastic may be PVC and may therefore become sticky over time. This way, the PVC will not stick to the folder or to other packing materials as it degrades (**Fig. 10b**). Face masks designed to fold in half are often best stored in that way. Acid-free tissue can be used, but it generally has to be replaced every five to ten years. Therefore, although Tyvek and Bondina are more expensive, they represent a more sustainable approach, as they do not need to be replaced and may prove cheaper in the long term (**Fig. 10c**). Face masks with raised surface embellishment that could be crushed by other objects can be protected with a soft pillow made

of polyester wadding covered in Tyvek (which has been heat-sealed on all sides) (**Fig. 10d**). Some masks made of mixed materials may require additional support, so that they are stored neither fully opened nor flat nor folded. One solution is to cut Ethafoam into an angled support and then cover it with Bondina. More objects can be fitted into a box by dividing it with an acid-free card tray and placing flat objects below.

For transport, the edges should be packed with inert materials to keep the face masks from shifting during movement, and overfilling the box with packing material should be avoided, as this could crush the face masks (**Fig. 10c, e**). Face shields, as they are much more three-dimensional and less flexible than textiles, can be more challenging to pack properly. If a shield lies flat naturally, it should be kept flat. Plastic shields can be lifted using Tyvek-covered Ethafoam up to a depth only slightly greater than that of the face shield's foam, to avoid stress, and Ethafoam can be added at the sides to keep the support and shield from shifting inside the box. Shields can also be covered with a piece of Melinex if there is sufficient space to place a lightweight face mask on top (**Fig. 11a**). Shields with attached glasses may be the most challenging, as stress can be introduced into the film by closing the glasses completely, while leaving the glasses open creates a large, awkward shape. Therefore, the area of the film that curves when the glasses are closed should be supported, for example with a Tyvek-covered cushion (**Fig. 11b**). If the glasses are open, use a deeper box and wedge the shield in place with various shapes of Tyvek-covered Ethafoam. It is not advisable to place anything else on top of these shields.

To prolong the life of face masks containing materials that degrade by oxidation (such as natural rubber used in some ear loops), it is advisable to store them in an oxygen-free package (referred to as an anoxic environment). Several specific materials are required for this approach: a heat sealer, an impermeable barrier film known as Escal, oxygen scavengers, and oxygen indicators, which detect when oxygen is present again, indicating that the scavengers need to be replaced. First, place the face mask in an acid-free box and use Ethafoam to support it and fill as much space as possible, thus reducing the total amount of oxygen. Then calculate the approximate volume of oxygen within the box in order to determine the number of scavengers required. For example, 2 litres of oxygen require three RP-3K packs, because each pack absorbs 300 ml of oxygen. Information about oxygen-free packaging and material can be found on the Keepsafe website (Link: http://www.keepsafe.ca/?page_id=101). Then place the scavengers and the oxygen indicators in the box so that they do not come in contact with the face mask. Prepare an Escal bag by sealing both long sides and one short side as tightly as possible, making sure to seal the edges at least twice. Slide the object into the bag and seal the final side at least twice to ensure that it is completely closed (**Fig. 12**). Remember to label the package with the date. Periodically check the indicator to know when the scavengers need to be replaced. This storage solution can also be used as a treatment for objects with biological contamination such as mould. This treatment should last for about one month, whereas for rubber it is intended as a long-term storage method. Recent studies have suggested that polyurethanes, both in fibre and foam form, can also benefit from this storage approach (Rizzo & Scaturro, 2021 and França de Sá *et al.*, 2016). ■

Acknowledgments

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Fig. 1.

Variety of face masks in museums collections. Courtesy of: Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA), National Museum of Scotland (NMS), and The Rose Textile and Fashion Archive (Shenkar).

Natural	Semi-Synthetic & Synthetic	Other
Cotton	Viscose	Finishes/high-tech elements
Wool	Acrylic (PMMA)	Antibacterial finishes
Silk	Polyester	Metallic finishes
Linen	Polyurethane	Anti-fog films
Paper	Polypropylene	LED lights
Fur	Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)	
Skins	Polycarbonate	
Metallic elements (copper, silver)	Polystyrene	
Natural rubber	Polyamide (Nylon)	
Blends	Styrene butadiene	
	Silicone	
	Neoprene	
	Blends	

Table 1.

Variety of materials used in making face masks.

Natural	Semi-Synthetic & Synthetic	Blends
Cotton	Viscose	Natural + Natural
Silk	Polyester	Natural + Semi-synthetic
Natural rubber	Polyurethane (TPU)	Natural + Synthetic
	Polypropylene	Semi-synthetic + Synthetic
	Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)	Synthetic + Synthetic
	Polycarbonate	
	Polyamide (Nylon)	

Table 2.

Most common materials used in making face masks.

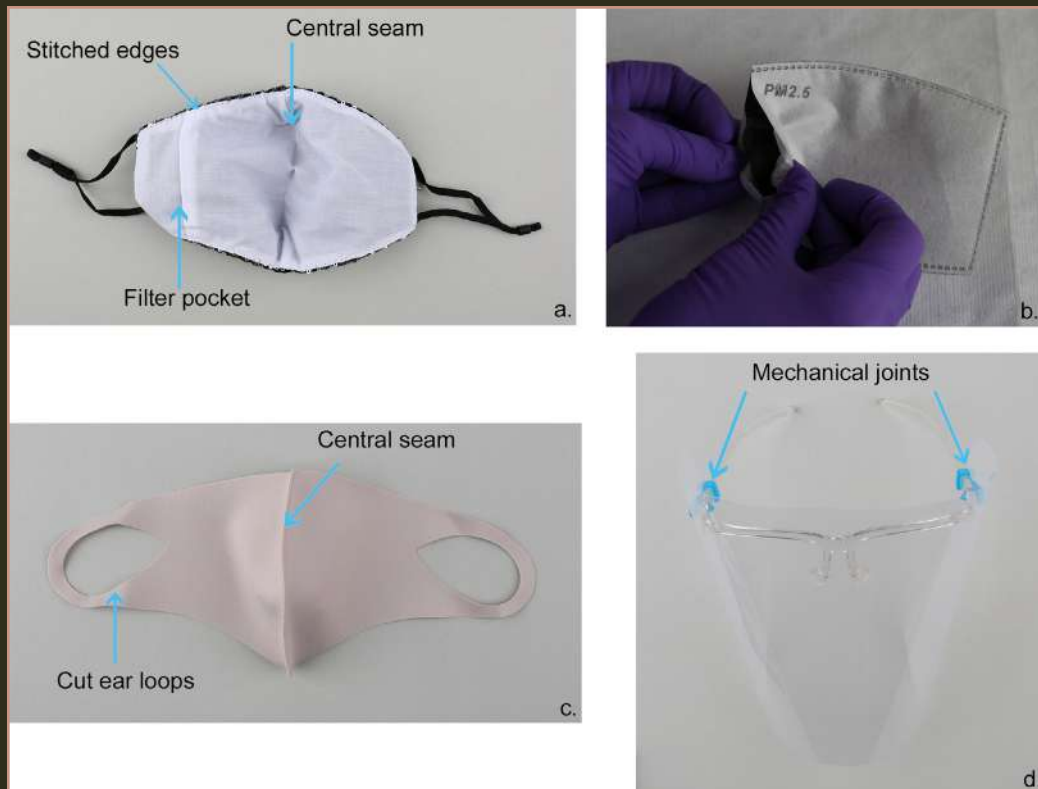


Fig. 2.

a: Stitched face mask with inside filter pocket, b: Disposable filter made of multi-layered non-woven materials, c: Single-layered knit face mask with centre seam and cut ear loops, d: Face shield made with film and mechanically joined to glasses.



Fig. 3.

Portable Dino-Lite (Manufacture number) with background polarised light observing the front-side of a face mask.

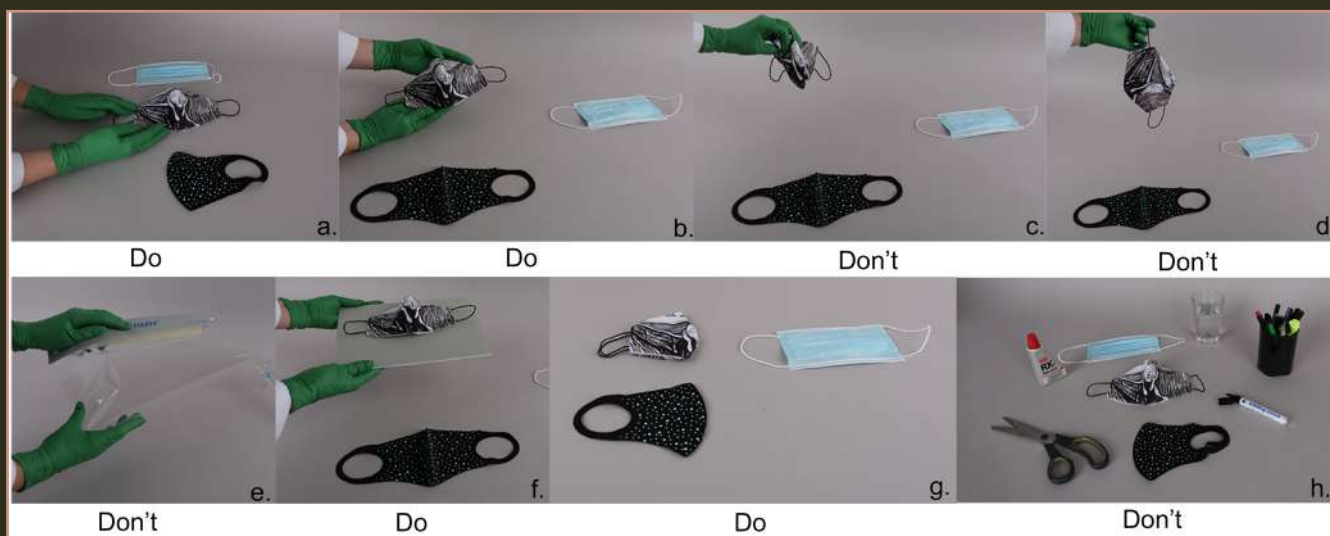


Fig. 4.
Do and Don'ts for handling face masks.

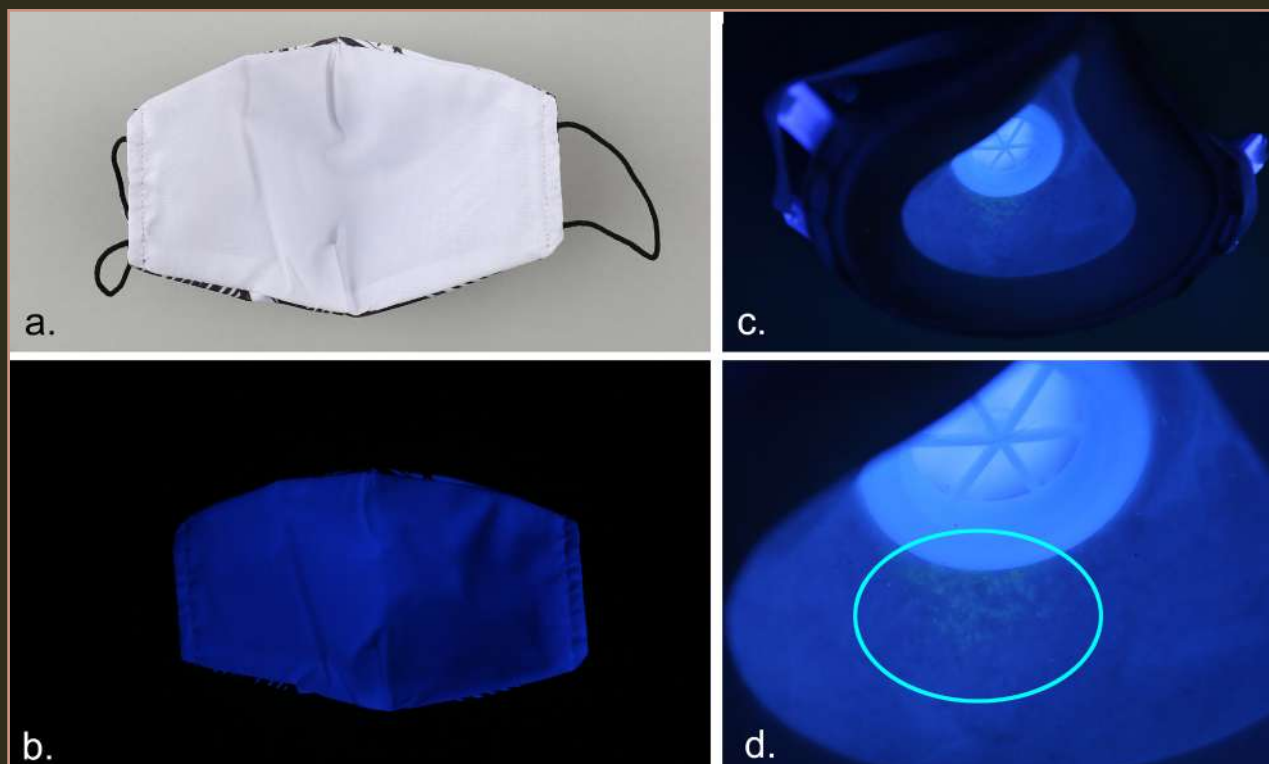


Fig. 5.
a: Unused face mask in regular light, b: Unused face mask in UV light,
c: Used face mask in UV light, d: Close-up of mouth area with contaminants.

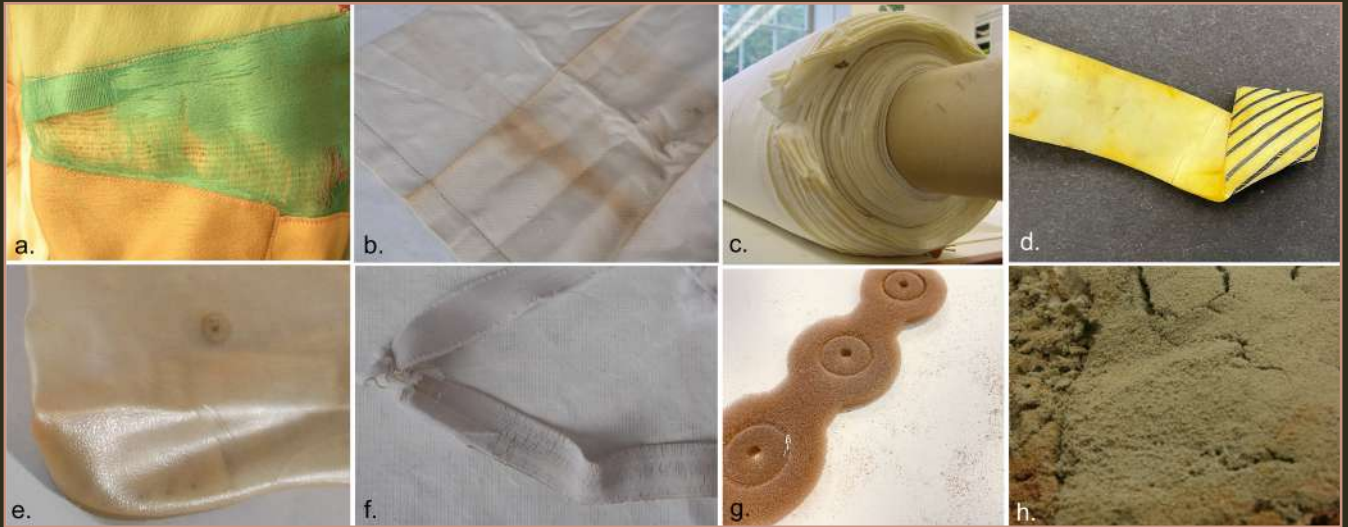


Fig. 6.

a: Degraded silk, b: Degraded cellulosic material, c: Degraded polypropylene courtesy of Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands © Thea van Oosten, d: Degraded natural rubber, e: Degraded PVC, f: Degraded TPU fibres, g: Degraded polyurethane ether foam, h: Degraded polyurethane ester foam.

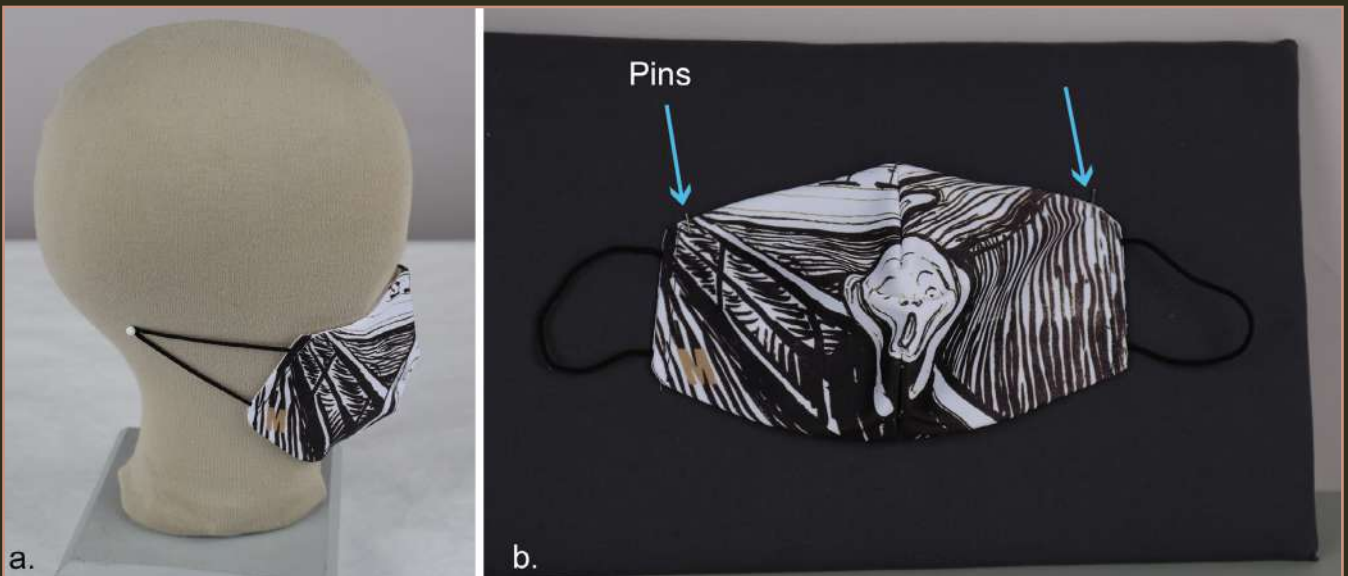


Fig. 7.

a: Strain on elastic ear loops from mounting,
b: Unsupported mask with pins that create holes under strain.

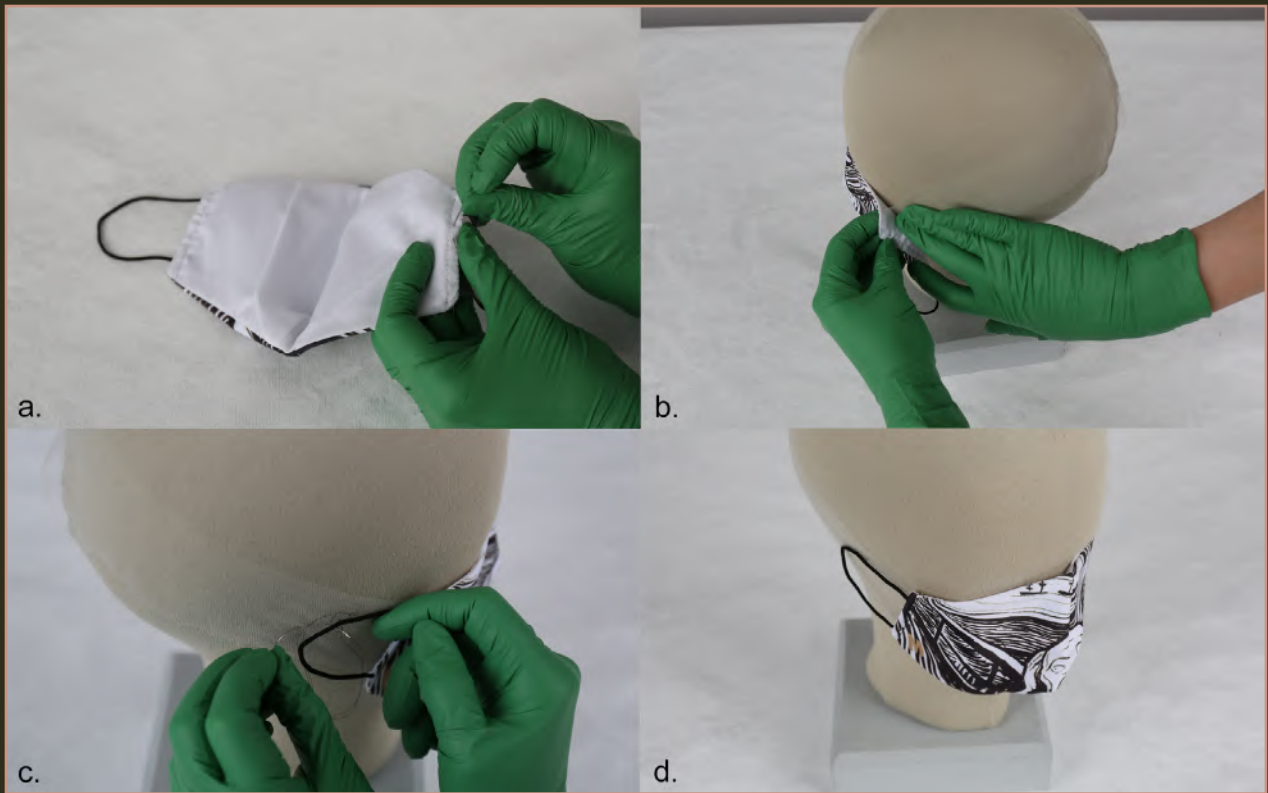


Fig. 8.

a: Stitch net to the side edge, b: Smooth net around back of mount to other side, c: Whipstitch ear loops to the net, d: Mounted facemask without strain on ear loops.



Fig. 9.

Face mask mounted on a padded board with inner soft support and stitched at top edge and ear loops as marked by arrows.

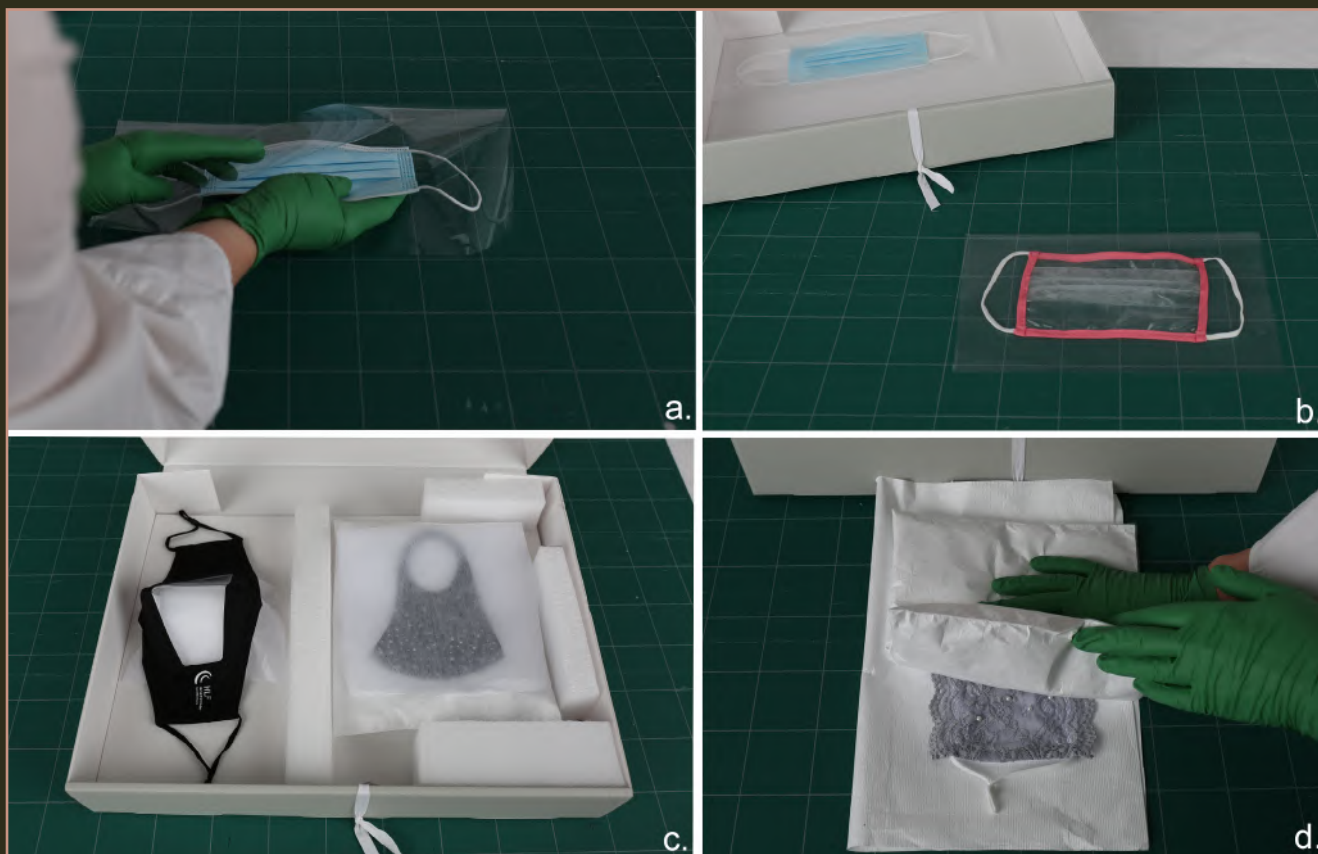


Fig. 10.

a: Melinex folder for flat face masks, b: Silicon release Melinex used for PVC face masks, c: Folded face mask covered in Bondina, d: Embellished face mask protected with soft Tyvek pillow.

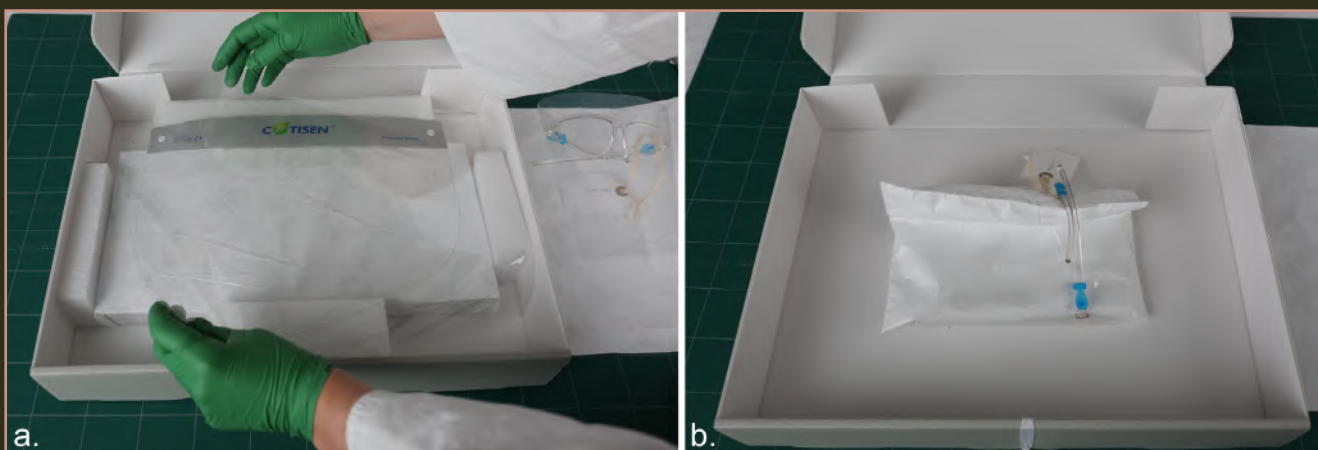


Fig. 11.

a: Flat face shield supported by Tyvek covered Ethafoam and Melinex on top, b: Face shield attached to glasses with Tyvek covered cushion supporting the curves.



Fig. 12.

a: Heat sealing the final edge of the Escal bag with the packed white face mask, oxygen eye and scavengers packed inside, b: Completed oxygen-free package.

Many Faces, Many Viruses: A Collection of Ritual Masks in Mexico

Cárdenas, Blanca

National School of Anthropology and History, Mexico

Abstract

Which viruses have human groups distant from the Western lived with? What is their face? What are their features? This article aims to present a collection of 12 ritual masks that personify COVID-19, or its causative virus, known as SARS-CoV-2. These masks were made by artisans from different parts of Mexico who, following their tradition, designed faces linked to contemporary problems and materialised a virus in accordance with their reality. The article seeks to substantiate the theoretical argument that ritual masks are much more than folk art or aesthetically valuable objects; rather, they may be defined as devices that embody alterity and allow us to transit to other worlds.

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1. Introduction
2. What is a ritual mask?
3. Masks that won't dance
4. COVID masks
5. Projections

Many Faces, Many Viruses: A Collection of Ritual Masks in Mexico

1. Introduction

It was a warm night in Southern Mexico. The dining room of the house, located in the open air and only a few metres from the patio, was illuminated by the waning moon and a small golden light bulb. Jonas, a friendly four-year-old boy who had made his appearance to greet us during the afternoon with a tender and shy smile, now wanted to show us his enthusiasm for the Devils' Dance¹.

He was wearing a red pyjamas and he was ready for bed. Jonas, however, put on his mask with surprising care for his young age and began to dance to the sound of the harmonica played by his uncle. Within seconds, the infant vanished. The mask did all the work and someone else appeared, there, in the home's heart: a little devil, the 'Almita'² they call him, capable of flooding the place with a ritual air that, resoundingly, invoked Ruja.

This brief ethnographic narrative highlights a central idea in anthropological research on masks, which today describes them as ritual artifacts and portals to other worlds. There are, without doubt, many types of masks, and in each cultural region it is necessary to understand their specific features and uses. However, based on Jonas's dance, I agree with Devi Mucina (in Andrade, 2020:x) that masks are for dancing because dance is the one place where we can express our spirituality, where we can connect with the Divine, and where we can think about health and wellness; that is, dance is the performance of life.

In this article, I do not intend to delve into the theoretical discussion of dances and ritual masks, even though I will return to some of the main premises of their study. Rather, I will focus on the presentation of a collection of twelve masks made during 2020 in response to the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic that causes COVID-19. The world has been paralysed with social consequences that were scarcely imaginable, but these masks came to light not simply as representations of the virus constructed from diverse cultural codes, but—as I will try to explain here—as the faces of the many viruses that exist and that have acted as predatory agents upon the work, the territory, and the resources of many Indigenous communities in Mexico (Hernández Dávila & Peña, 2021:38).

In anticipation of the reflections that may emerge from this article, the masks that I will present are not entirely distant from the face masks that we are forced to use today in public places. Let us take a selfie and look at the image of our faces covered by a mask: that image, so common today, is the face of the virus with which we have lived for over two years in the Western world. In this sense, I asked myself: what viruses have other human groups lived with? What is their face? What are their features?

2. What is a ritual mask?

The collection of COVID masks brings together crooked faces, malevolent looks, phosphorescent colours, and curly hair that have disturbed many viewers. In various conferences, publications (Hernández Dávila, 2020a; Hernández Dávila, 2020b), lectures, and conversations with students and colleagues, reactions of discomfort have emerged, and, in almost all cases, questions such as: why did the artisans use these materials? Why did they represent the virus with that gesture and colour?

The analysis of materials remains an area that has yet to be explored through an appropriate lens, because, according to Tim Ingold (2013), it is necessary to limit the idea that these are only inanimate components of the object that become relevant only through human thought and creativity. On the contrary, Ingold points out that materials are active elements that flow, mix, and mutate, thereby making things 'alive' (Ingold, 2013:33). In this sense, a COVID mask is a mesh in which stories, lines, and variations come together from the encounter of wood, hair, bone, paint, and fabric.

This approach supports others that are less focused on materials but that likewise seek to move

away from the study of masks as folk art or as a fixed repertoire of objects condensing traditions deemed worthy of display in museum showcases and scenarios (García Canclini, 1989:158). The anthropological study of masks has drawn on concepts from numerous approaches focused on art, dance, music, and ritual life, and today it is also closely connected to relational and cosmopolitical debates that are highly suggestive for the specific case of the COVID collection and the contemporary global environment.

In this way, ethnographic research has revealed that masks are ritual devices or artefacts that, rather than representing a deity, demon, or supernatural being, embody alterity—human or non-human—and give it presence in specific relational contexts. In other words, within the framework of a carnival, it is not enough to assume that the participants disguise themselves by wearing a mask or costumes; rather, they embody different or non-human beings who participate, dance, and share messages.

The work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss on masks in 1975, triggered a set of reflections that continue to be confirmed through ethnographic experience. One of his most important arguments concerns the relationship between masks and myths, since both are part of a constant dialogue within society. Masks are artefacts that evoke places and times that often do not coincide with our empirical perception, but even so, as part of ritual, they inspire laughter, fear, anger, and solemnity (Questa & Neurath, 2018).

A good example in the cotext of the COVID-19 pandemic is provided by the case of the scholar Sandino Bucio Dovalí, who, after more than seven years of travelling through the region known as the Gran Nayar³, joined the ‘Judea Cora’ celebrations wearing a green mask adorned with coloured spikes, which brought the Coronavirus to life within the community. According to the traveller, until April 2020 the population of the Gran Nayar only knew of the virus only through the radio news and felt that it remained distant from their daily lives. Despite attempts to cancel the Judea carnival, the rituals took place, and the virus was personified: ‘People called me “COVID”; hardly anyone approached me, and they made gestures of washing their hands or spraying disinfectant every time they saw me. [...] At the end of the week, a man dreamed that they had to throw me into the river so that the disease would not reach their community, and then they organised to carry me and take me out on the last day’⁴.

As we can see, as with many textiles and clothing, wearing a mask is not just a superficial, decorative, or aesthetic act. In general, masks have a reverse side (Lévi-Strauss, 1975:163) that turns them into expressions of other worlds and links them to myths and diverse meanings. Likewise, masks personify beings who dance, fight or, as in the case of the COVID mask in the ‘Judea Cora’, integrate themselves into the local cosmology generating new world orders. A human body wears the mask but is temporarily assembled with a non-human being that must interact with the world with its own agency and life (Neurath, 2020:13) (**Fig. 1**).

The study of masks brings us closer to an old debate between form and substance; that is, between aesthetics and its associated ‘ugliness’, on the one hand, and its social use, its political functions, and cosmological role, on the other. The collection of COVID masks transcends its description as folk art, although this does not prevent us from recognising the dexterity of artisan’s hands or the inventive capacity of its creators. In fact, the point is to understand that art—Indigenous or otherwise—implies processes and dynamic relationships that reveal ways of living in the world (Neurath, 2020:17).

3. Masks won’t dance

In short, we can list at least three characteristics associated with masks in anthropological research (Lechuga, 2011):

Masks are living art. Beyond the tension between the traditional and the modern, masks are one of the convergence points where myths and traditions are intertwined with modern materials, innovative techniques, and uses linked to contemporary political, ecological, and economic realities.

Carnival thus constitutes a context in which cultural and historical authenticity is linked to the present (Neurath, 2020:19), and masks personify beings that help us to understand international crises, catastrophes caused by natural phenomena, national politics, and endless cosmopolitical debates.

Masks are art that must be worn. Many ethnographic museums claim that the objects on display in their rooms come from real social contexts; that is, the spoon in the display was once used to eat soup, or the textiles in the collections were worn by women at a party. This understanding differs from that applied to objects in a folk-art gallery, which are usually presented for their beauty or the complexity of their manufacture, without showing their biography as relevant information. When we talk about masks, this distinction is fundamental, although some precisions are necessary. A frequent question is whether a mask ‘has already been danced’, assuming that its agency and importance emerge when it is part of ritual activity.

Masks are community art. Finally, a mask does not come only from the imagination of an isolated artist; in fact, no art is born that way. Creativity, even when it takes shape in the hands of an artist, is a collective process in which traditional and cultural heritage are highlighted, even more so when we talk about objects that are inserted in the daily and ritual life of a community and that give presence to beings whose energy and power are usually central to the continuity of life.

That said, the collection of COVID masks deserves an explanation that shows its particularities, since about it consists of twelve masks that ‘have not been danced’, but that we can easily understand in light of the arguments set out above. The project⁵ began between March and May 2020, when many artisans in Mexico were facing serious financial problems due to the closure of the traditional markets where they usually worked. Consequently, many artisans began to offer their work on Facebook pages and groups, despite conditions of technological inequality and WI-FI signal failures that persist in many rural communities in Mexico to this day.

In this way, we asked some artists to make masks that would personify the SARS-CoV-2 virus, responsible for COVID-19. The objective was, of course, to offer them an additional source of income on top of their daily sales, but there was also the curiosity of discovering the face of the virus that they and their communities were dealing with. The only instruction given was for them to design a mask that would show the face of the virus.

Between May and June, many of the masks were ready, and over the following months, we began to gather them in a room at the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, where they would remain safe. Most of the masks express anger, perhaps pain; they show alien worlds and beings that, before 2020, would have been completely unthinkable. Some artisans were inspired by masks they had made before; others studied scientific images of the coronavirus. One of the artisans took several months to send his mask, as he claimed that he had difficulty dreaming about the virus, but in the end, he succeeded and joined the collection with a face where death and the mestizo universe are combined in a masterful way.

By the end of 2020, the ethnographic collection of twelve masks was complete and could be considered a repository of alternative narratives to Western science: a gathering of some of the many viruses that coexist on our planet today. But no one had danced with them. We were concerned that these masks had been made specifically for the collection and had never been part of a ritual or ceremony.

However, in an agile analysis, these masks draw their strength from traditions, from their manufacture, their technique, and many of their materials. At the same time, they are contemporary artistic expressions that personify viruses as non-human agents with which each community lives and survives. Ultimately, these masks cannot be danced because they are the very virus that paralysed humanity and seeped into the interstices of our most intimate existence.

These masks do not dance—not as a defect—but rather as an integral part of their very definition.

4. COVID masks

1. COVID pig

The pig is an animal that came to America as part of the process of conquest and, to this day, in many Indigenous communities in Mexico, it is associated with deadly diseases. Although it is frequently consumed, there are numerous considerations about its preparation and the respect with which the animal should be treated. Therefore, it is not surprising that COVID-19 is identified with the pig as a potentially dangerous foreign agent. This mask was designed by the Nahua artisan Zeferino Baltasar Basilio, from San Francisco Ozomatlán, Guerrero, Mexico (**Fig. 2**).

2. *Mestizo* man

In the history of Mexico, the most pernicious diseases have always come from *mestizo* or 'white people'. The idea of a humanised virus is suggestive, but it is radically an 'Other' identified with the process of evangelisation, subjugation, and colonisation of souls since the sixteenth century in the Americas (Hernández Dávila & Peña, 2021:27). This mask represents the face of a pink-skinned, blue-eyed man who has been aggressively attacked with the virus. This mask was designed by the Nahua artisan Zeferino Baltasar Basilio, from San Francisco Ozomatlán, Guerrero, Mexico (**Fig. 3**).

3. Teneek face mask

Face masks are today part of our attire and there is extensive research on their degree of effectiveness depending on their materials and designs. However, some artisans took face masks as the starting point for their creativity and made wooden masks associated with the festivities of the dead in the month of November. This mask was produced in the 'Maskuali' workshop in Tantoyuca, Veracruz, Mexico, on the Gulf of Mexico (**Fig. 4**).

4. The devil of Teloloapan

Among the Afro-Mestizo groups in Mexico there is a long tradition of manufacturing masks that were intended to scare away the conquerors during the colonial period, both because of the unpleasant faces they presented and because of their use in cults considered heretical. This mask was designed by Fidel Puente, from Teloloapan, Guerrero, Mexico (**Fig. 5**).

5. COVID skull

Inspired by cartoons, this mask presents the virus as a skeleton and as death itself. The mask's expression reveals the terror that the pandemic has left in its wake. It was made by the artisan Melky Argüelles from Naolico, Veracruz, Mexico (**Fig. 6**).

6. Evil jaguar mask

Mixtec communities in Puebla, Mexico, preserve dances and traditions in which the jaguar is a central character associated with infamy and evil. Also called 'jaujau', the jaguar represented in this mask has traits specifically linked to the virus and the devastating consequences it is leaving in today's world. It was made by the Mixtec artisan Yonny Calixto, from Ahuehuetitla, Puebla, Mexico (**Fig. 7**).

7. The Green Devil

In the Afro-Mestizo communities in Mexico, the devil has many faces. In this case, the virus takes the form of a cell-infested woman, who has two goat horns, horsehair, and a demonic expression. This mask was designed by the artisan Nicolás Peñalosa, from Ometepec, Guerrero, Mexico (**Fig. 8**).

8. COVID bull

In Western Mexico, there is a dance known as the 'Tastoanes', in which people perform a fight between the apostle Santiago and the devil incarnated in the body of a bull. Drawing on that tradition, COVID-19 is here given the face of a bull combined with a skeleton, or death itself. This mask was

designed by the artisan Juan Serrano, from Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico (**Fig. 9**).

9. Cocoliztli

In the region known of Mexico known as 'Huasteca', some Nahua communities have called the most lethal diseases with the name of 'cocoliztli'. This term comes from the plague that, in times of the Viceroyalty, devastated many communities in New Spain. However, today it is applied to COVID-19, which likewise comes from regions and cultures distant from the Huasteca. This mask was designed and elaborated by the Nahua artisan Juan Hernández González, from Atlapexco, Hidalgo, Mexico (**Fig. 10**).

10. The mask of power

The Ikoot, or Huave, communities inhabit the coast of Oaxaca in Mexico, and during 2020 they faced numerous social and political disturbances that, together with the pandemic, resulted in a significant number of deaths. In June 2020, 21 people were killed by their neighbours during local clashes. In this case, death emerged from a combination of human actions and non-human agencies. This mask was designed by the Ikoot artisan Diego Victoria Hidalgo, from San Mateo del Mar, Oaxaca (**Fig. 11**).

11. COVID tiger

Tiger masks are widely known and used in Indigenous communities in southern Mexico. Most of the time, these masks are yellow and are associated with rituals and dances held in the month of May. However, this time, COVID-19 takes the form of a green tiger with details that are related to the scientific image of the virus. This mask was designed by the Nahua artisan Armando Pascualeño, from Zitlala, Guerrero (**Fig. 12**).

12. Afro COVID

The Devils' Dance in Guerrero may take many forms and expressions. For the personification of the virus, the Afro-Mestizo artisan redesigned the traditional mask of this dance with motifs that present the virus and the devil as allies of Black Mexico. This mask was made by the Afro-Mestizo artisan Baltazar Castellanos Melo, from Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero (**Fig. 13**).

5. Projections

According to Critical Museology, work with collections must go beyond their mere registration and require anthropological and historical research into their formation processes. In other words, any collection—whether or not it is housed in a museum or gallery—requires work dedicated to investigating the connections, discourses, and internal narratives of the objects it contains (Shelton, 2013; Thomas, 2016).

In this sense, the collection of COVID masks has involved highly detailed ethnographic work that needs not only admiration for the objects that make it up, but also their description or their photographic and photogrammetric documentation. This project has included field work, interviews with the artisans, photographs of the making processes, and long hours of theoretical reflection. Likewise, the project has involved the gathering of other equally important objects such as a mate paper figures cut out by Otomi shamans in Puebla, or textiles embroidered by women in the same region who wish to communicate stories about how they live with the virus and how they face different social issues.

Returning to the mask collection, one of the most important expectations is that it will be exhibited in a museum where masks will be presented not only as decorative or fantastic objects, but also as expressions of the economic crisis affecting many Indigenous groups in Latin America, as the faces of the many viruses that coexist with different peoples, and as portals to other worlds. The collection will be housed in the coming months at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. ■

Notes

1. Traditional dance of the Afro-Mexican people of the Costa Chica; it is associated with celebrations of the dead in October and November. This dance may be considered as a way of conjuring the dead and venerate the god Ruja (Gabayet, 2020:110).
2. 'Little soul'
3. West and North-Central Mexico.
4. Sandino Bucio Dovalí, interview, July 2021.
5. The original idea and the financing of this Project come from Dr. Carlos Hernández Dávila of the National School of Anthropology and History in México, with whom I currently collaborate.

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Fig. 1.
Corona-Mask and another ritual mask, both form the 'Judea Cora' in 2020. Credits: Blanca Cárdenas, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 2.
Covid pig. Credits: Blanca Cárdenas, courtesy of the COVID Masks project, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 3.
Mestizo man. Credits: Blanca Cárdenas, courtesy of the COVID Masks project, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 4.
Teneek face mask.
Credits: Blanca Cárdenas,
courtesy of the COVID Masks
project, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 5.
The devil of Teloloapan.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy of
the COVID Masks project, Mexico
City, 2021.



Fig. 6.
COVID skull.
Credits: Carlos Dávila,
courtesy of the COVID
Masks project, Mexico
City, 2021.



Fig. 7.
Evil jaguar mask.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy
of the COVID Masks project,
Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 8.
The green devil.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy
of the COVID Masks project,
Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 9.
COVID bull.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy
of the COVID Masks project,
Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 10.
Cocoliztli.
Credits: Blanca Cárdenas,
courtesy of the COVID Masks
project, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 11.
The mask of power.
Credits: Blanca Cárdenas,
courtesy of the COVID Masks
project, Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 12.
COVID tiger.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy
of the COVID Masks project,
Mexico City, 2021.



Fig. 13.
Afro COVID.
Credits: Carlos Dávila, courtesy
of the COVID Masks project,
Mexico City, 2021.

INITIATING

A Digital Toolkit for Crisis Response

Elkerton, Fleur

Digital Producer, United Kingdom

Talley, Anna

Digital Producer, United Kingdom

Abstract

As part of their participation in the July 2021 ICOM *Clothing the Pandemic* Workshop, Talley and Elkerton presented a Digital Toolkit for Crisis Response, intended to provide a framework for individuals, collectives, and institutions wishing to create their own digital archiving projects. This toolkit was based on their experience of running the *Design in Quarantine* project, a rapid-response digital archive of design responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The toolkit includes suggestions for how to respond, adapt, upskill, and reflect throughout a digital project, as well as on how to disseminate project outcomes and conduct outreach to impacted communities.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Be responsive
3. Adapt quickly and be agile
4. Upskilling
5. Reflecting, enriching, and evolving
6. Disseminating and outreach
7. Conclusion

Anna Talley and Fleur Elkerton are the founders of Design in Quarantine [<https://designinquarantine.com>], a rapid-response digital archive of design responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the project's founding in April 2020, the project has amassed over 450 works of design, which are integral to documenting the evolution and diversity of design responses to the coronavirus pandemic. The project has also received international press recognition and is preserved by the UK Web Archive.

A Digital Toolkit for Crisis Response

1. Introduction

We have created this toolkit around five key actions that individual, small teams, or large institutions can take to respond in the event of a crisis, based on what we have learnt through *Design in Quarantine*. However, we would like to stress that some of these actions can, and should, be applied even when *no crisis* is necessarily looming on the horizon.

2. Be responsive

First, be responsive. This means not only acknowledging the situation but actually taking (sometimes physical) action as an institution to respond to the event—centering your community and audience in your work, whether that be through collecting or even opening up your museum space to those in need.

One method that institutions can utilise in order to be responsive is rapid-response collecting. We believe that rapid-response collecting, both digital and physical, is an effective way to engage with local communities and helps to ground the institution as a pillar of public support in a times of crisis.

We employed rapid-response collecting in *Design in Quarantine*, adapting the approach from the Victoria and Albert Museum's rapid-response collecting practice, developed by its Design, Architecture, and Digital Department. This type of collecting was introduced in 2014 to allow for acquisitions that are 'in response to major moments in recent history' (V&A, *Rapid Response Collecting*).

As a practice, rapid-response collecting can increase community engagement and position the institution as socially responsive. Visitors can relate to items on display and sometimes even actively participate in the collection process, as in the UK's Museum of the Home's *Stay Home* collecting project, which asked the public to answer seven questions about themselves and their home, submit five photographs of their home, and share diary entries spanning one month of the pandemic. This material will be incorporated into the museum's larger *Documenting Homes* collecting project. By employing rapid-response collecting and inviting the public to submit their stories, the collection process becomes more active within the wider community, thereby demonstrating the Museum's responsiveness in a time of crisis and allowing the community to participate actively in the formation of the collection.

Of course, there are challenges with rapid-response collecting. A common problem is that there may be too much material to collect, particularly when the public is invited to contribute. One way of alleviating this issue is to define very clearly the scope and aims of the collecting project and to be extremely specific with the public about the type of material being sought.

Another challenge is that objects are being selected 'before their time', before their true impact and historical relevance are fully understood. If an institution has the infrastructure, it may catalog such objects as part of temporary collections and decide later whether to accession them fully. It may be necessary to reflect on what the institution defines 'historical' material, as well as on the community's own understanding of historical objects, in order to clarify the kind of material being sought as part of a rapid-response initiative.

3. Adapt quickly and be agile

Building on the action to 'be responsive', it is also crucial to adapt quickly and be agile as an institution when faced with a public crisis. Institution should ask whether they have the necessary measures in place to adapt quickly to fast-moving situations and, if not, how both spatial and digital transitions might be made easier in the event of an emergency.

The following examples may serve as useful points of inspiration.

For instance, the Museum of Homelessness in London, which works in partnership with the London homelessness health teams, the Government's Rough Sleepers initiative, local partners in Islington, and grassroots groups across the UK, began to take immediate action to protect people experiencing homelessness in their area. They introduced temperature screening at their weekly solidarity drop-in service, published a plan to utilise empty hotel accommodation for people experiencing homelessness, borrowed a vacant community centre from the local council to launch a 7-day-a-week pandemic-response operation, and even repurposed their museum shelving to serve as food bank storage. They also wrote to the Secretary of State to ask that the closed Mildmay Hospital in London be brought back into use for COVID care for homeless people and campaigned for further government assistance. All of this was achieved within three weeks.

An example of how small, hyperlocal museums have quickly adapted to the pandemic is the David Parr House Museum in Cambridge, United Kingdom. It is a very small space and is therefore limited in terms of the numbers of physical visitors it can accommodate. When the pandemic hit, the museum received funding from Historic England and the Arts Council to establish virtual tours of the house and to train staff who were not technologically literate to support this initiative. As it is a small organisation, it was able to make these changes rapidly, quicker than many others. This flexibility helped it adapt to the pandemic and beyond.

Another example of adaptation occurred last summer during the BLM protests in New York, when the Brooklyn Museum opened its lobby as a resting place for demonstrators, making itself available between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. for activists to get out of the sun, use the toilets, and charge their phones. In doing so, the Brooklyn Museum emphasised its role as an essential institution for the community, not only through education, but also by simply opening itself up as a gathering space.

Museums can even serve as vaccination sites. In April 2021, New Yorkers could be vaccinated under the 94-foot-long model of a blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History, and Londoners could do the same at the Science Museum.

4. Upskilling

'Upskilling', a popular term in business today, is the process of using additional training or education to build upon and advance one's existing skills. It can apply to an individual, as well as to an entire team or organisation, if an institution fosters a culture in which everyone is always learning and growing.

When thinking about upskilling to respond to crises, increasing digital skills in engagement, platform building, and social media is essential. This is in addition to more enduring skills, such as diversity training. Taken together, these skills help to enable local, national, and international collaboration, and such connections can be essential when responding to a crisis of any scale.

These skills can and will change and evolve in line with technological developments. To take the pandemic as an example, those organisations that had upskilled in digital and virtual technologies were able to respond and adapt more quickly. For instance, during the pandemic, organisations that had a clear social media strategy were able to engage with their audiences online, even if they did not have highly developed digital infrastructures on their own sites. The Getty Museum Challenge is an excellent example of how the museum used existing platforms, such as Twitter, and Instagram, to engage audiences.

We would also like to advocate for upskilling in digital technologies, as these are closely linked to preservation in a crisis scenario. With *Design in Quarantine*, we learnt a lot as we went along, and, looking back, we wish we had put in place a more robust archiving and preservation workflow. If possible, we suggest working in collaboration with a digital archivist, who can help define the exact processes that work best for your collections.

5. Reflecting, enriching, and evolving

In times of crisis, museums need to constantly acknowledge their own perspective, as institutional experiences may differ greatly depending on where they are located in the world. Reflecting on this is crucial if museums are to enrich and evolve, both in time of crisis and beyond.

Firstly, it is important to read and conduct research beyond one's usual publications and media sources, especially those based only where one lives. With *Design in Quarantine*, we consciously chose to move beyond only design media outlets such as Dezeen or Designboom and began to look at a variety of sources—such as international newspapers—to find examples of responses that we could include in the archive.

We also utilised social media as a tool for reflecting and evolving our practice. We used hashtags to search for particular terms, which generated results from around the world and allowed us to reach out to those people and to their work. This helped to diversify the content of the archive beyond what would typically be featured in design media. We also began to actively seek submissions on social media, which led us to become more engaged with our audience and to think more proactively about our collection process. The archive is open for submissions, and we have received several designs from individuals, firms, and studios all over the world.

Next, to reflect you need to acknowledge your limitations—financially, geographically, and otherwise—but you should not let them define your responses. Collaboration and sharing experiences with others allow you and your organisation to expand your boundaries.

Similarly, take your time. In a crisis, ideas and opinions can take time to formulate. But if possible, you can still respond. This can be as simple as being mindful of how other museums or heritage organisations are responding. Take time to research their approaches and let this feed into your own team's practice. When suitable, reach out to your audiences and the wider public for feedback, and let that also influence the process of reflection: did you make the right choices? What could have been better in your response? What can you learn and put in place for the future?

One material example of reflection and evolution of display practice can be seen here in the Wellcome Collection's exhibition 'Being Human'. Here, the original label was supplemented and adapted through the addition of a second, white label beneath it. This updated the interpretation to address the COVID-19 crisis, rather than Ebola alone, demonstrating how the museum reflected on the context of the crisis and intervened through interpretation in order to respond (**Figs. 1 to 3**).

6. Disseminating and outreach

Understanding *how* to communicate your initiatives to local, national, and international audiences can be a challenge, but this is where collaboration with local and global partners comes to play an important role.

Institutions can create focus groups at different levels in order to understand how communication with local communities may differ from communication with global audiences, or work with community partners and foundations in the areas they wish to reach in order to help develop a communications strategy.

When using social media, it is important to be ambitious without allowing it to become overwhelming. Hyperlocal audiences can be crucial in supporting museums, especially in difficult times. Institutions should not become too preoccupied with large-scale outreach if their stories and communities remain local.

With *Design in Quarantine*, we knew we needed to be on social media platforms to disseminate our work, but we kept it simple. We stuck to Instagram and Twitter, where we knew our audience was

most likely to be, and we planned our content calendars in advance, allowing posts to be published automatically and checking comments daily. At first, we simply copied over the labels from the website into our social media captions, but more recently we shifted to asking our audience questions in order to encourage greater engagement.

Using Twitter and Instagram also underscored the importance we attached to using only free and accessible platforms through which the public and the research community could interact with the material. And it allowed us to interact easily with our audiences! Dissemination is not a one-way process. By disseminating our project and inviting our audience to engage, we were, in turn, able to attract submissions and help the project sustain itself.

In 2021, we also started an online newsletter, continuing our public outreach by providing updates about the archive and COVID-related design more broadly. We have also used the newsletter as a way to elevate the voices of those who have been affected by the virus, such as in our May newsletter, which included a guest essay spotlighting India and links to mutual aid groups.

Digital collecting and programming in museums have certainly taken off in the last year, but attention must also be paid to reaching those who are not digitally included. Arts and culture may, in some cases, help to narrow the digital divide, for instance, through community partnerships that provide laptops and tools for older isolated people so that they can access events. Knowing one's audience, understanding their barriers to access, and identifying ways of overcoming them is essential, although this does not fall entirely within the remit of cultural heritage institutions. However, the empathy and skill sharing that can be generated by digital heritage projects has been noted in a study by the think tank, *The Knowledge Exchange*, which concludes that, overall, digital forms for outreach can provide a more accessible and wide-reaching programme. Not everyone will always be able to access this due to digital divides, however this is always evolving, and the pandemic has accelerated the need for more work to be done.

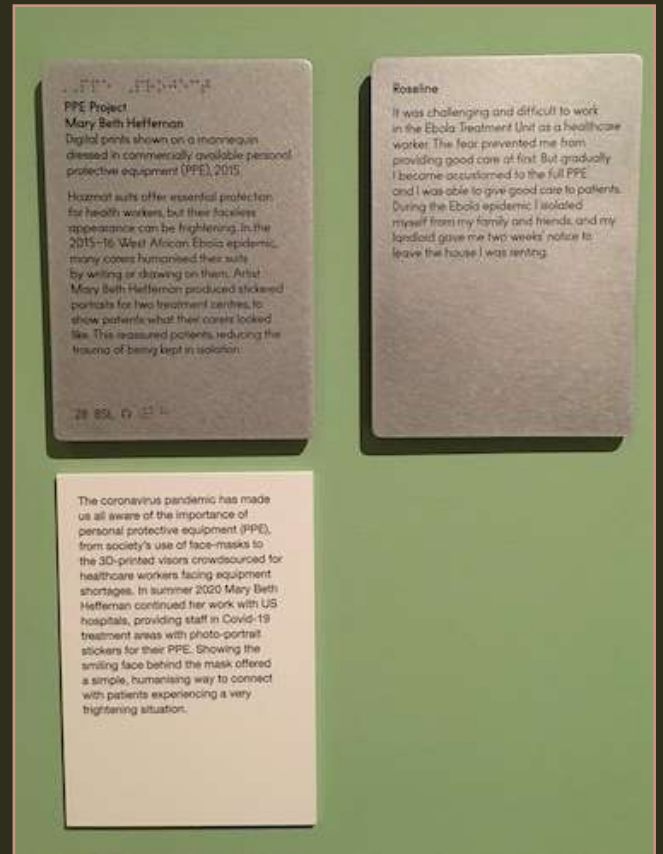
Lastly, we wanted to explore how outreach functioned in our project beyond the archive itself. We led a three-day workshop at the Royal College of Art, the ALT/ARChive: Alternative Archiving Workshop. The workshop aimed to break away from traditional modes and concepts of archiving, exposing students to new ideas about collecting and preserving both the material and the immaterial. The aim was not to place our project centre stage, but rather to collaboratively discuss and observe how participants responded to different methods of archiving, different prompts, and different opinions (Figs 4 to 6, Figs. 7 and 8).

7. Conclusion

Finally, we hope that, by sharing this presentation with you all, we are continuing to disseminate the *Design in Quarantine* project, while also sharing what we have learnt through the process of co-founding the archive. ■

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Figs. 1, 2 & 3.
Being Human exhibition,
 Wellcome Collection, 2020.

Figs. 4, 5 & 6.

ALT/ARChive outcome,
Johann Spindler,
@jfspindler,
<https://www.jfspindler.com>





Figs. 7 & 8.
ALT/ARChive outcome, Zifei Ge.

Contaminated Objects: Collecting and Exhibiting Face Masks during COVID-19

Groves, Andrew

Professor of Fashion Design and Director of the Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom

Sprecher, Danielle

Curator of the Westminster Menswear Archive, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom

Abstract

Between April 2020 and April 2021, the Westminster Menswear Archive collected face masks designed, manufactured, and retailed by the British menswear industry in response to COVID-19. One of the outcomes of the project was an online exhibition. Opened on 11 May 2021, the exhibition *Undercover: From Necessity to Luxury. The Evolution of Face Coverings during COVID-19* featured 52 unique face coverings. They were arranged chronologically, demonstrating how these everyday objects evolved from being utilitarian items of personal protective equipment, often in scarce supply, to becoming a highly desirable fashion accessories manufactured by companies such as Burberry, Balenciaga, and Louis Vuitton. During the development of the exhibition, face mask became a highly contested object. Other challenges faced by the curators included how to conduct rapid-response collecting in a commercial setting during lockdown, and how to create a distinct curatorial narrative when many of the exhibits remained available for purchase online from fashion retail websites.

Contents

1. Context of the research proposal
2. Online collection of face coverings
3. Collecting face coverings in physical stores
4. Designing the digital exhibition
5. Discarded face coverings
6. Conclusion

Contaminated Objects:

Collecting and Exhibiting Face Masks during COVID-19

1. Context of the research proposal

On 14 May 2020, the University of Westminster, London, issued a funding call for research proposals in response to COVID-19. Our successful bid proposed that the Westminster Menswear Archive (WMA) conduct research and document the rapidly evolving response of the British menswear industry to COVID-19 by acquiring examples of personal protective equipment (PPE) and related artefacts. These objects would be the focus of an online exhibition exploring the United Kingdom's (UK) response to the pandemic one year later, in 2021.

This approach aimed to examine emerging object-based responses to COVID-19 as design solutions to specific PPE problems and to track the development, formalisation, and public adoption of a new product category within menswear. The curators decided that this would be a one-year project, beginning on 23 March 2020, the date of the first lockdown in the UK, and concluding on 22 March 2021. A revised collection policy for COVID-19 artefacts was subsequently developed in order to plan the WMA's response.

Given the emerging information regarding COVID-19 in March 2020, and the possibility of contaminated face coverings, it was decided to collect only new face masks. Almost all websites prohibited the resale of face coverings during our research period, which made it challenging to acquire the initial objects produced in the UK at the start of COVID-19, as these had become unavailable. However, as the project developed, we sourced a small number of used and resold face masks. This curatorial decision was driven by the significance and representativeness of these particular face coverings, which could only be acquired second-hand.

Numerous challenges emerged during the object acquisition process. These included uncertainty about what masks would be produced during the research period and whether they would be fundamentally diverse in their design and materiality; the inability to access and obtain these objects due to lockdown and the closure of retailers; the changing product positioning and marketing of masks by the fashion industry; the rapidly evolving and at times contested response to face coverings; as well as the public mood towards an exhibition and the appropriate approach that would be required.

2. Online collection of face coverings

The curators were under lockdown for a significant portion of the project, which meant that masks were primarily acquired online from various sources. These included menswear companies' own e-commerce websites; multi-brand sites such as Farfetch, END, and Selfridges; and resale sites such as Grailed, StockX, eBay, and Etsy. Of the 52 masks in the exhibition, 43 were purchased online, six were donated, and three were purchased in person from Liberty, Balenciaga, and Louis Vuitton. Only two masks had been worn before: the *Metropolitan Police mask* (WMA.2020.100.56) and the *Climate Revolution protest mask* (WMA.2020.100.37).

The ability of designers also to utilise social media as a sales channel is exemplified by the face covering (**Fig. 1**), released by the Manchester-based fashion company WAWWA via Instagram on 23 March 2020, the day on which the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the country's first lockdown. Due to the immediacy of social media, independent businesses were able to respond far more quickly than global brands to the pandemic.

A few weeks later, in April 2020, UK online retailer BoohooMAN released a face covering with a white skull print on it. It was quickly withdrawn from sale following complaints in British newspapers that it was in poor taste and that it was wrong to sell 'fashion' face masks at a time when PPE for healthcare workers was in short supply (Baker 2020). However, the archive was able to locate two

of these BoohooMAN masks online in December 2020. They were being sold in Japan, where they had previously been imported by a company specialising in selling British high-street fashion. The curators purchased the masks via a Japanese online proxy shopping service and had them sent back to the United Kingdom (WMA.2020.100.49.1 and WMA.2020.100.49.2).

The curators used their industry contacts throughout the acquisition process to identify potential manufacturers of new face coverings. It was critical to be able to react to events as they occurred, as the objects were ephemeral and disposable, meaning that they would vanish quickly. Many of the face masks acquired for the WMA collection are no longer available, and many were purchased from websites that are now also defunct. Several retailers whose masks are featured, including *Burton* (WMA.2020.100.22) and *Topman* (WMA.2020.100.16), have permanently closed their physical stores due to the effects of lockdown on their businesses, and their brand assets have since been acquired by Boohoo and ASOS, respectively.

Another significant challenge was predicting both the exhibition's evolving narratives and the objects that had yet to be produced over the course of the year. Given the seasonal nature of fashion production and its presentation through runway shows, garments are customary viewed at least six months in advance of their retail release. However, this was not possible because of the disruption to global supply chains and the cancellation of physical catwalk shows. In addition, face coverings were a new and untested product category for most menswear brands, with no guarantee that designers would produce them.

Alexander McQueen was the most notable British brand not to produce any face masks, which was unexpected given the brand's history of incorporating references to face coverings into its collections. In July 2020, Vivienne Westwood personally distributed a non-commercial face mask to close friends and acquaintances in support of her Climate Revolution campaign (Anonymous, eBay message to author, 8 March 2021; WMA.2020.100.52). However, her company did not release any face coverings for public sale until November 2020, when two new designs were made available in Westwood's retail stores and online (WMA.2020.100.37).

Alongside objects created in response to COVID-19 between 2020 and 2021, the archive acquired examples of menswear designers' pre-COVID-19 face coverings in order to contextualise the industry's response (Brand 2018). For example, Virgil Abloh's Off-White label had been selling mask designs since at least 2017 (WMA.2020.100.61). In 2018, designer Samuel Ross created a mask for his brand A-COLD-WALL (**Fig. 2**), which served as an invitation to his runway show and was also sold online to the public (WMA.2020.100.45).

In addition to researching the face coverings that were being produced, the curators also documented the online environment in which the masks were marketed. As a new product category, many businesses were unsure how to position these items. Most websites did not use models to promote their face coverings, opting instead for a still image of the masks, thereby allowing them to avoid gendering the products if they wished. However, despite this, companies frequently gendered the presentation and classification of their face coverings within their online retail spaces through their websites' search structures. Some retailers classified them solely as menswear or womenswear, while others classified some as menswear and others as womenswear; still others classified the same face mask in both categories.

3. Collecting face coverings in physical stores

In the autumn of 2020, as physical stores reopened to enable in-person retail purchases, several high-fashion brands released designer face coverings as part of their Autumn/Winter 2020/21 collections. This Balenciaga face covering (**Fig. 3**) was photographed in August 2020 in the menswear department of Harvey Nichols, Knightsbridge, and later purchased at the Balenciaga concession at Selfridges, Oxford Street (WMA.2020.100.36). Its presentation within a glass case employs the curatorial language of modern art, thereby elevating the object's apparent value and possibly alluding

to its problematic status as a potentially tainted artefact, sealed off from the usual environment of luxury shopping.

While the initial response to COVID-19 had seen face coverings appear unannounced into online retail spaces, Burberry was one of the first designer brands, in August 2020, to issue a press statement announcing the imminent release of a face mask (Marriott 2020). These were released ten weeks later, in October 2020, in several variations of the company's Nova check for £90 each, and quickly sold out online. By this point, face coverings had become an integral part of the product mix of major fashion brands and were positioned as the latest accessory 'drop', promoted in advance in order to generate interest and a sense of exclusivity and rarity. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the Burberry face mask, which arrived heavily packaged inside an expensive box that contained another box tied with ribbon, as well as the face mask itself, which was packaged in a drawstring bag and then wrapped in tissue paper (WMA.2020.100.7).

By October 2020, runway shows had returned, and on 7 October 2020, fashion journalist Bryan Boy attended the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer womenswear show in Paris. He wore a black face mask with an LV logo and, while posting on TikTok, also wore a Louis Vuitton LV shield (**Fig. 4**) that covered the entirety of his face (@bryanboy, 7 October 2020). The curators contacted Louis Vuitton after seeing this TikTok post to inquire about acquiring one of the masks, but the company confirmed that the mask was from the women's Cruise collection and therefore did not meet the WMA's collection policy (Anonymous, email message to author, 8 September 2020).

4. Designing the digital exhibition

The online exhibition (**Fig. 5**) was scheduled to open on 11 May 2021, one year after the UK government first advised people to wear face coverings in enclosed public spaces.

While the WMA acquired the face coverings almost immediately after they were manufactured and made available for purchase online, many of these objects lacked complete information about their release date, country of manufacture, or material composition. Additional research was conducted by contacting brands and designers directly or through their public relations representatives. While many were extremely helpful, some did not respond to multiple requests or could provide only partial information. The most common request concerned the date on which each object was released, but in many cases, companies or public relations representatives could provide only a broad answer. Some also asked for their products not to be displayed in the exhibition, while other did not respond to inquiries. The Off-White face cover included multiple digital and tracking processes (**Fig. 6**), such as barcodes, QR codes, Certilogo, and Radio-frequency Identification (RFID) tagging (WMA.2020.100.44). However, none of these revealed the release date, and the company's public relations firm could not tell us when this item first became available for purchase (Anonymous, email message to author, 24 April 2021).

The masks were displayed chronologically in order of release, and were interspersed with headline dates corresponding to the various lockdowns, restrictions, and mask mandates implemented in the UK. Presented as a single long vertical webpage, the design echoed various news sites that featured lengthy lists of available masks in order to generate click-through revenue. This fusion of news and commerce demonstrated how fashion editorial can serve as a significant source of income for publishers. The exhibition's graphic language was inspired by medical and pharmaceutical packaging, with the blue backdrop sampled from the packaging of a box of Type IIR face masks.

Throughout the exhibition's run, the content was also displayed on Instagram, with two masks posted each day in chronological order. This example (**Fig. 7**) shows a face covering produced by Savile Row tailors Huntsman (WMA.2020.100.11). However, because the exhibition's Instagram post mentioned COVID-19 and face coverings, they were shadowbanned by Instagram and received significantly less engagement than the WMA's typical posts. Additionally, the curators were unable to promote the exhibition posts because they were deemed to violate the company's COVID-19 policy :

Ads must not contain content that exploits crises or controversial political or social issues for commercial purposes. This includes using urgency or guaranteed prevention claims to promote supplies and products related to COVID-19. Ads may not promote the sale of COVID-19 vaccines or services that expedite access to COVID-19 vaccines. Additionally, ads may not promote the sale of medical masks and COVID-19 test kits. Ads promoting non-medical masks, hand sanitisers and surface disinfecting wipes are restricted to eligible advertisers who meet the criteria outlined in our Business Help Center. (Anonymous, Instagram message to author, April 2021; Facebook n.d.)

5. Discarded face coverings

The exhibition concluded with 365 photographs of abandoned masks, also chronologically presented. Entitled *Undercover: From Necessity to Debris: The Pollution of Face Coverings during COVID-19*, these images were taken by one of the curators on their daily walks during lockdown until 365 masks had been documented. In contrast to the images used for the main section of the exhibition, which were all purposefully digitally enhanced, and photoshopped, the photographs of the discarded masks were not. Instead, the discarded masks were presented exactly as they were documented when photographed on the pavement or road (**Fig. 8**). Each photograph was taken from above, parallel to the frame's primary structural elements, such as the pavement edge or painted road markings, resulting in a unified framing technique.

While the 365 images were displayed on the exhibition website, they were also minted as non-fungible tokens (NFT) and distributed via OpenSea.io, the world's largest NFT marketplace (Groves 2021). NFTs utilise blockchain technology to establish ownership of digital or physical artefacts. During the exhibition's run, 52 of the 365 NFTs created were given away for free. The curators were interested in highlighting issues of ownership and value creation within the fashion industry and curatorial practice. Although ownership of the blockchain-based digital record would be transferred away from the archive, it would remain within the exhibition's digital collection. As a result, even if new value were to be created for the digital artefact, it would continue to exist in perpetuity as a form of curation recorded on the blockchain.

6. Conclusion

The global response to COVID-19's December 2019 appearance has been complex, swift, and contentious. The Westminster Menswear Archive's initiative to collect examples of face coverings manufactured between April 2020 and March 2021 has enabled the creation of a snapshot of this initial response. Similarly, the exhibition *Undercover* acted as a time capsule for this moment by presenting a rapid curatorial response. It is hoped that both the original artefact collection and this immediate curatorial response will provide valuable material for future researchers examining reactions to COVID-19, once time and distance have enabled a more nuanced and reflective analysis. ■

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Fig. 1.
Instagram post by WAWWA for their face mask.

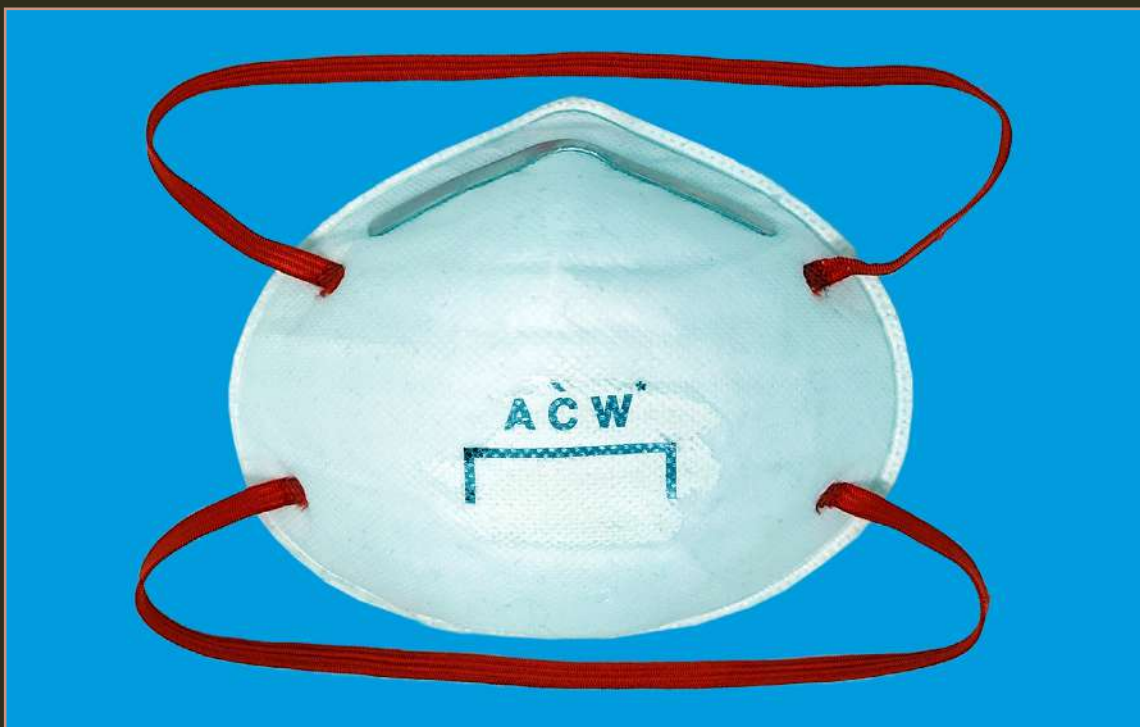


Fig. 2.
Dust-resistant face mask, A-COLD-WALL*, 2018.



Fig. 3.
Balenciaga Care Mask, Harvey Nichols department store, August 2020.



Fig. 4.
Louis Vuitton LV Shield, Spring Summer 2021.



Fig. 5.
The homepage for the online exhibition *Undercover*.

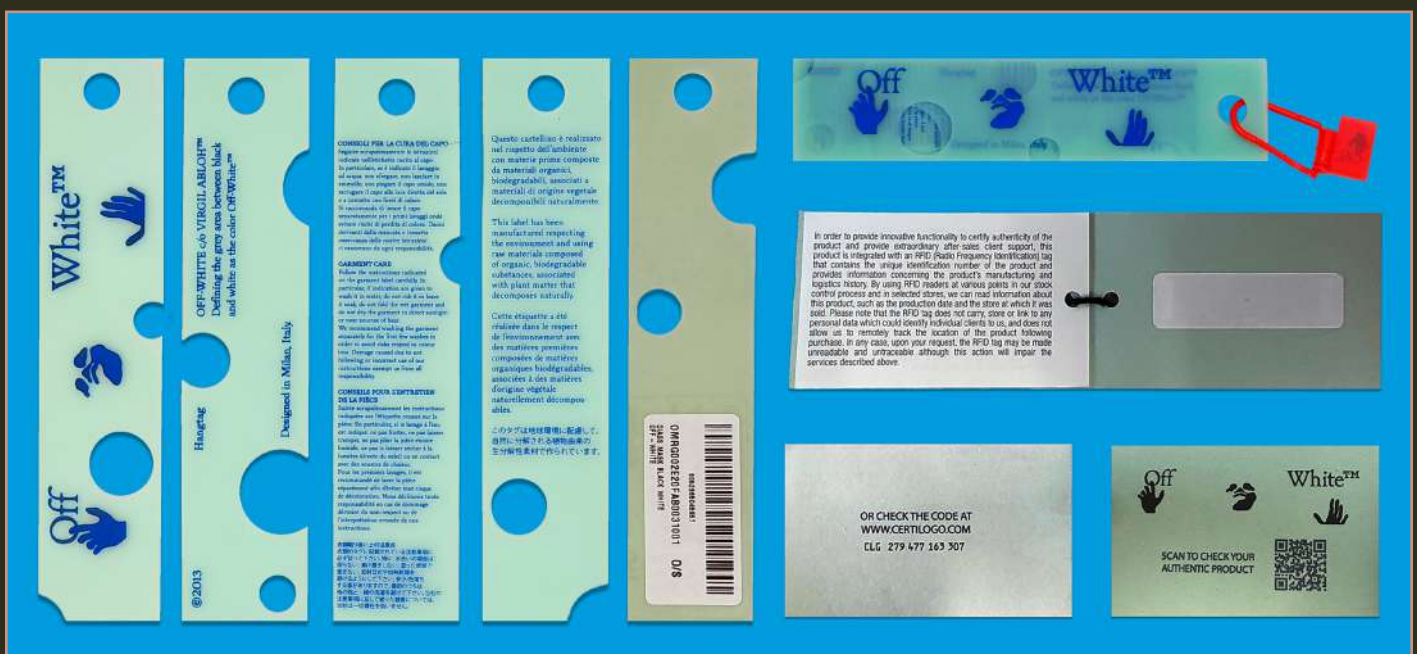


Fig. 6.
Off-White packaging with barcodes, QR codes, Certilogo, and RFID, July 2020.



Fig. 7.
Blue Herringbone Face Mask, Huntsman, 8 May 2020.



Fig. 8.
Discarded mask #161

Religious, Occasional, and Political: the Social Functions of Anti-Virus Masks in Poland in 2020

Kowalska, Joanna Regina

Curator of the Textile Collection, National Museum Krakow, Poland

Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic meant that we all had to come to terms with the necessity of wearing anti-COVID face masks. Although they were intended as hygienic items, they quickly began to function as fashion accessories as well. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise: after all, the face is what primarily attracts the eye, so an aesthetically designed anti-COVID face mask could easily become a decorative element within a fashionable ensemble. However, this is not the function of the anti-COVID face mask that I want to focus on here. Rather, I would like to trace the messages face masks could convey, especially when they turned necessary during events at which costume appropriate to the occasion played a particularly important role. It is also important to create a museum collection that documents this aspect of anti-COVID face mask, even if this means obtaining masks of lower artistic quality.

Contents

1. Face masks as an expression of solidarity
2. Face masks for everyone
3. First Communion facemasks
4. Masks as an expression of resistance

Religious, Occasional, and Political: the Social Functions of Anti-Virus Masks in Poland in 2020

1. Face masks as an expression of solidarity

In March 2020, the pandemic began and a lockdown was announced in Poland. It quickly became clear that, in the absence of a vaccine for the new virus, the face mask was the most effective means of preventing transmission. Unfortunately, despite the sharp increase in the supply of face masks, they began to be scarce on the market and reached alarmingly high prices. Most disturbing of all was that hospitals and other branches of the health service were running out of face masks as well. In this situation, everyone in Poland who owned a sewing machine was putting aside other work to sew face masks for friends and, on a larger scale, for hospitals.

Of course, these homemade face masks were not used in places where surgery was performed or in the wards dedicated to COVID-infected patients, but they did fulfil a protective function in regular wards. Standards for the density of the cotton fabric used for face masks, and the cut allowing the insertion of a replaceable filter made of thick interfacing, were quickly established. The pattern did not matter: face masks were sewn from all available materials that met the recommended parameters, featuring polka dots, dogs, stripes, birds, and many other motifs. If a batch of face masks was large and diverse, it gave users an opportunity to show off and choose the most tasteful patterns, according to their own preferences.

Over time, supplies of hygienic face masks began to cover at least the needs of the health service, while the gradual lifting of lockdown increased the demand for face masks that had to be worn in public spaces, in shops, and on buses.

2. Face masks for everyone

‘Civilians’ outside the health service wore mostly hand-sewn cotton face masks. Sometimes it was necessary to wear a face mask with a pattern completely inappropriate to one’s gender, age, or profession; often these were patterns taken from children’s bedding. However, no one was ashamed, because they were wearing masks that had been made thanks to the dedicated work of Polish dressmakers.

As the pandemic progressed, pattern began to gain importance. Here I would like to present examples of printed cotton face masks featuring charming designs characteristic of the Polish company ‘Medicine’, which is known for its collaboration with young graphic designers.

In the spring, when face masks could still be considered items that were not readily available, there were also various tips on how to make a mask in the easiest way, intended for people who had never sewn before. The most interesting solution, drawing on the art of origami, was a face mask designed by Anna Myczkowska-Szczerska (inv. No. MNK XIX-12718/1-2; MNK XIX-12719/1-2). The face mask could be made of paper towels or interfacing fabric rubber, fastened with paper clips and with ordinary elastic bands worn over the ears. Interestingly, such masks were promoted by First Lady Agata Kornhauser-Duda in a special film showing, step by step, how to fold such a face mask (Prezydent.pl 2021).

3. First Communion facemasks

The pandemic began in the spring, and May in particular is a very important time for many Catholics in Poland: it is the season eight- or nine-years old children’s First Holy Communion, that is, their first full participation in Mass in the third year of primary school. It is one of those celebrations in which the dress code is extremely important. For years, discussions have been held about to the extent to which First Holy Communion dress may be decorative and expensive, especially in the case of girls. It has been argued that excessive attention to clothes and, as part of tradition, to expensive gifts,

distracts from what is most important—namely the first meeting with God during the Mass. It has also been argued that the dress code should not emphasise social inequalities during this ceremony. Many parents ignore calls to dress their daughters modestly, and girls appear at church wearing miniature wedding dresses decorated with lace, embroidery, and pearls. Many parishes addressed this problem by providing the same modest costumes for all girls and boys, decorated only with a simple religious motif (inv. No. MNK XIX-12707). In this way, children from poorer families would not feel inferior to those from wealthier families. However, it is impossible to standardise everything, and there is still a whole range of accessories to display: wreaths, hair decorations, gloves, handbags, capes, and shoes. Masks have also recently been added to this list. Their appearance sparked a discussion about what is appropriate for the First Communion outfit and what is not. Was a lace mask suitable for a child receiving First Communion? Should it, too, be modest? The answers were very different. Thus, masks became part of this ritual religious attire.

4. Masks as an expression of resistance

Let us now turn to the most interesting topic. We are all familiar with slogan face masks designed primarily to tame the fear of the coronavirus. At this point, however, I would like to present face masks with a slightly different function. The first is the ‘anti-mandate’ or ‘anti-penalty’ face mask. Such face masks were sewn in large numbers as an expression of resistance to the obligation to wear masks in the open air, announced in the spring, and criticised mainly by people exercising outdoor. All these ‘resistance’ face masks had one feature: they were very permeable, i.e., they were merely dummy anti-COVID face masks. Usually, they were sewn from gauze or a single layer of polyester. One such mask, featuring deliberately selected crown motifs, has recently been included in our collection (inv. No. MNK XIX-12708).

The face mask assumed its most significant political role in Poland at the end of October 2020, when protests broke out across Poland in response to a ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, the consequence of which was to tighten the law on abortion in Poland. These protests, initially largely spontaneous, were supported by various organisations, including the feminist Women’s Strike. Earlier, in April 2020, a Women’s Strike poster by Ola Janiszewska was created, depicting a female head wearing a mask bearing the symbol of the ‘Strike’—the lightning (Wikipedia). When the protests grew in scale in October 2020, it turned out that the lightning sign was so easily recognisable that many participants in the demonstration began to put it on their face masks, regardless of whether they supported the Women’s Strike, or did not. Because of the simplicity of the motif, such a protest mask could easily be made at home. Over time, the protests were taken over entirely by the feminist movement.

The mask turned out to be a much more effective medium for political expression than a T-shirt. It is worth noting that the great popularity of the lightning mask was caused by the strong polarisation of political views in Poland, which, it might be argued, can be compared to polarisation between supporters and opponents of Donald Trump in the United States. The easily recognisable lightning symbol quickly became a declaration of an anti-government attitude, and many people wore lightning face masks on a daily basis: on trams, at work, and in shops. As a reaction to masks with a lightning bolt, ‘pro-life’ masks were also created, but on a smaller scale.

The anti-COVID face mask, which had to be worn every day in all circumstances related to social life, proved to be an excellent vehicle for conveying a wide range of meanings. ■

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Fig. 1.

Anna Myczkowska – Szczerska, Origami face mask, the National Museum in Krakow collection, given by Anna Myczkowska – Szczerska 2021, Inv. No. MNK XIX-12718/1



Fig. 2.

First Communion face mask, 2020, National Museum in Krakow collection, given by Sylwia Wolarek 2021, Inv. No. MNK XIX-12707



Fig. 3.

Katarzyna Bury, 'Anti-penalty' mask, 2020, the National Museum in Krakow collection, given by Anna Grzelak, Inv. No MNK XIX-12708



Fig. 4.
Manifestation face mask with applique lightning motive, 2020, private collection.



Fig. 5.
Pro-life facemask, Catholic Light-Life Movement in Gdańsk ('KACK' society), 2020, private collection.

EXHIBITING

Corona's Ancestors: Masks and Epidemics at the Vienna Court, 1500-1918

Kurzel-Runtscheiner, Monica

Director, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wagenburg, Wien, Austria

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic is a phenomenon as incomprehensible as it was unexpected. This is largely because the major epidemics with which our ancestors had to live have long since disappeared from collective memory. Time and again, the world has been afflicted by terrible diseases such as the plague, smallpox, cholera, and Spanish flu. The strategies developed to combat them seem surprisingly familiar: even in the Early Modern period, borders and entertainment venues were closed, trade restrictions were introduced, large gatherings were banned, and travelers, the sick, and their contacts were required to quarantine.

The exhibition *Corona's Ancestors* was quickly put together to help people process the shock of the current pandemic by taking a look to the past. In order to save time and costs, only existing exhibition materials and mainly objects owned by the KHM Museum Association were included; supplementary documents from other institutions are presented virtually in exhibition videos.

Contents

1. How do you get visitors into a carriage and costume museum during a pandemic?
2. *Corona's Ancestors*

Corona's Ancestors:

Masks and Epidemics at the Vienna Court, 1500-1918

1. How do you get visitors into a carriage and costume museum during a pandemic?

The Imperial Carriage Museum is part of the KHM Museum Association and houses the surviving carriages from the vast Habsburg fleet. The museum is located on the grounds of Schönbrunn Palace, the former summer residence of the imperial family on the outskirts of Vienna. In addition to magnificent carriages and harnesses, the museum also houses paintings depicting court life, personal garments of the imperial household, and a unique collection of civil uniforms and court liveries.

The museum normally receives around 100,000 visitors a year, but due to the coronavirus, the situation changed dramatically. When the museum was allowed to reopen after the first lockdown in June 2020, it remained almost empty, as tourism, which previously accounted for around 80% of visitors, had come to a complete standstill. To bring people back to the museum, a programme had to be developed for the local population. Traditional themes associated with the Carriage Museum, such as travel and court festivals, seemed inappropriate at a time when people were not allowed to travel or hold parties. The idea therefore emerged of developing an exhibition on the topic that was on everyone's mind at the time: the pandemic.

This exhibition was designed to:

- be socially relevant and appeal to all residents of Vienna;
- be implemented quickly, in order to respond to the present moment and encourage people to visit the museum;
- be inexpensive to realise, as the museum was experiencing the greatest financial crisis in its history as the result of the pandemic.

Exhibitions require usually two to three years of preparation, so that the curators can become fully conversant with the subject matter and identify and request loan items. Furthermore, lenders may need time to restore items before they are put on display. None of this was possible in this case.

For, me as a curator, this presented the following challenges:

- I had to familiarise myself thoroughly with a completely new topic (I am not a medical historian) within a very short period of time and under difficult conditions (with libraries and archives closed).
- For the most part, the exhibition had to rely on items from the KHM Museum Association's collection, since most museums were not making loans at all. Even within the Association, however, it was impossible to get all the items of interest at such short notice.
- To save time and money, we had to work with the existing display materials.
- Since the Carriage Museum does not have a dedicated exhibition area, the displays had to be integrated into the permanent exhibition.

The following concept was chosen for implementation:

Where this was possible without disruption to the permanent exhibition, 'islands' were set up with information and displays on *corona's Ancestors*. The walls and display aids were all dark red in colour and therefore easily identifiable. Between these islands, historical quotations were situated on the floor as linking elements. These were surprisingly topical (e.g., 'Admission is open only to those wearing a mask.' Ball announcement, 1818; or 'many people would rather expose themselves to the risk of infection than endure onerous constraints,' cholera, 1832). Since for a long time, neither

groups nor guided tours were allowed, the exhibition was designed so that it could be visited individually: films were created for each station, providing detailed background information on the respective topic and thus substituting for the guided tour. Furthermore, they also show those items from other collections that cannot be exhibited in their original form due to the pandemic (**Fig. 1**).

The exhibition concept was approved by the management of the KHM Museum Association at the end of August, and 'Corona's Ancestors' was due to open two months later, on 4 November. On 2 November, museums in Vienna were closed again under the second lockdown, and the exhibition could not open until 18 December 2020. Since then, there have been three more lockdowns during which the exhibition was closed for many weeks. It has nevertheless proved a success. 'Corona's Ancestors' has attracted considerable interest from national and international media and has proved very popular with the Viennese public. While only 20–30 visitors a day came to the museum after the outbreak of the pandemic, that number has since risen to 100–200. Some people have even visited several times to take a closer look at the displays and films, and many have written that the exhibition has helped them cope better with the current situation. Due to the significant interest it has generated and its ongoing relevance, the exhibition has since been extended to 24 April 2022.

2. Corona's Ancestors

Under the Cover of Masks

The most striking and arguably the most controversial symbol of the Coronavirus pandemic is the face mask, which has had to be worn to prevent infection in many areas of everyday life. Covering one's face on a daily basis is unfamiliar in Europe and has therefore often been perceived as an excessive restriction on personal freedom. Wearing a mask occasionally, however, has a long tradition and has generally been viewed positively throughout history. In the strictly hierarchical society of the Middle Ages, wearing a mask once a year during Carnival offered the wearer the chance to celebrate anonymously in the streets, to slip into different roles, and to make critical remarks in public. This 'inverted world' was an important outlet for a population to whom masks offered a guarantee of anonymity and immunity from prosecution.

The aristocracy, too, loved masquerades. Renaissance tournaments were theatrical productions in which wearing a mask allowed the exclusively male protagonists to portray women, foreign nationals, and even gods. In the Baroque era, Carnival events moved off the streets and into homes. Masked balls were organised at the imperial court, in the palaces of the nobility, and in public taverns, where one could celebrate anonymously, while concealed behind a face mask and a long cloak (*domino*). Until the nineteenth century, the mask remained an important part of Carnival in Vienna. Medical use, by contrast, such as the much-cited 'beak mask' for plague doctors, cannot be documented in German-speaking countries (**Figs. 2 and 3**).

The Plague – the 'Black Death'

The plague is a bacterial infection transmitted by rat fleas and has been known since ancient times. It was introduced from Asia and Africa into Europe along the major trade routes, where it repeatedly depopulated entire areas of the country during the Middle Ages.

Vienna experienced no less than nine plague epidemics in the Early Modern period—the worst and most traumatic occurring between 1678 and 1680. The city administration collapsed, medical care was catastrophic, people lay dying in the streets, and the dead had to be buried in mass graves. The Emperor, the court, and a large part of the population fled the city and became 'super-spreaders' throughout the empire. Around one fifth of the Viennese population probably died during this period. When the plague returned in 1712/13, people had learned from their mistakes. The Emperor remained in Vienna and thus prevented a new mass exodus. The sick and their relatives were accommodated in a closed-off hospital district, their homes were sealed and disinfected, and public life was reduced to a minimum. As a result, the number of victims was kept comparatively low.

In 1728, a cordon sanitaire with strict quarantine and medical checks was established along the border with the Ottoman Empire. Since then, the plague has been eliminated in Austria (**Figs 4 to 6**).

Smallpox

Smallpox was a viral disease transmitted by droplet infection. It became the worst scourge in Europe after the plague. The patient's face, abdomen, and thighs became covered in pustules, the scars from which permanently disfigured survivors. In the eighteenth century, smallpox claimed some 70,000 victims every year across Austria.

Even the upper echelons of society were not spared: the French king Louis XV died of smallpox, as did the Habsburg rulers Ferdinand IV and Joseph I. Empress Maria Theresa survived, but lost two of her children to the epidemic. To combat it, she established a hospital that offered free vaccinations using the new method of inoculation with human serum, and her youngest children were also vaccinated. But even when risk-free inoculation with cowpox (vaccination) was developed around 1800, the population remained sceptical. Thanks to public information campaigns conducted by parishes, public exposure of vaccination objectors, and nationwide vaccination campaigns throughout the nineteenth century, a high level of immunisation was achieved. Today, smallpox has been eradicated; it is the only disease for which this has been achieved through vaccination (**Figs. 7 and 8**).

Court mourning

Diseases, epidemics, and childbirth complications carried off many Habsburgs at a young age. As the death toll mounted, endless periods of mourning ensued, plunging the court into deep black for extensive periods. Carriages were painted and fitted out in black, the servants wore black liveries, and even the nobility had to dress accordingly. For the first few weeks, simple materials were also prescribed. Ladies wore black wool dresses with black accessories and black jewellery. Men appeared in mourning tailcoats made of rough cloth with melee weapons made of blued steel. Ordinary swords were also permitted, provided that the metal parts were covered with black cloth. In the second phase of mourning, more refined materials were allowed as a sign that the most stringent mourning period was over: ladies were now allowed to wear silk dresses and men tailcoats made of fine fabric. Accessories, however, remained black. Only in the last phase of mourning were small dashes of colour allowed. Ladies were allowed to wear garments trimmed with white lace and real jewellery, and gentlemen could carry their usual swords (**Fig. 9**).

Cholera – the 'Asian Angel of Death'

Cholera is a bacterial infection of the intestine transmitted by contaminated water. It can spread rapidly as an epidemic and, in severe cases, it leads to death through dehydration. It first arrived in Europe from Asia in 1830 and provoked absolute horror. Unlike the plague, it could not be stopped by border closures and quarantine, and even doctors were completely at a loss. When it reached Vienna in 1831, the city had prepared accordingly. Emergency hospitals were set up in all parts of the city, and the staff at the General Hospital was doubled. In order to improve hygiene and provide work for the unemployed, construction of a sewer was started. Cholera nevertheless raged for an entire year and claimed several thousand lives. Since it was wrongly assumed that the disease was caused by toxic fumes rising from the ground (miasmas), a large-scale sewer system was built over the following years in an attempt to prevent the disease. These 'cholera conduits' did indeed significantly improve the city's hygiene, but they could not completely eradicate the disease. Only when Vienna's first alpine spring pipeline was commissioned did cholera finally disappear from the city in 1874 (**Figs. 10 to 12**).

Spanish flu

The Spanish flu was caused by an influenza virus and claimed around 50 million lives worldwide between 1918 and 1920. It first appeared in the United States and was brought to Europe by

American soldiers in the spring of 1918. Since the warring powers kept its rapid spread amongst the troops under wraps, the public only learned of the new disease when it reached neutral Spain in May. By the summer, the whole of Europe was affected. The flu was extremely contagious and had a short but severe course, affecting above all young people. While there were hardly any deaths at first, mortality rose steadily in the second half of the year. In Austria, the authorities reacted hesitantly as they wanted to avoid panic. In October, around 2,500 predominantly young people died in a single week in Vienna. Only then were the long-demanded emergency hospitals set up, and schools, theatres, and entertainment venues were closed. The war was lost, and the monarchy was dissolved. When the Republic was declared on 12 November 1918, the peak of the flu had passed, and a few months later it was eliminated in Austria (**Figs. 13 and 14**). ■

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Fig. 1.
Exhibition view. © KHM-Museumsverband



Fig. 2.
Maria Theresa in Turkish costume with mask.
Vienna, c. 1745.
Klagenfurt, Convent of the Elisabethines, inv. no. 422. © KHM-Museumsverband

Maria Theresa (1717-1780) was one of the most important rulers of the house of Habsburg. After defending her legacy against overwhelming hostile forces, she laid the foundations for the modern Austrian state with extensive reforms. As a young woman, she loved exuberant parties, where she could celebrate unrecognized under the cover of masks.



Fig. 3.

Empress Elisabeth's Mourning Mask and Veil.

Fanny Scheiner, Vienna c.1880

Imperial Carriage Museum Vienna, Department of Court Uniforms, inv. no. N 122.

© KHM-Museumsverband

At the funerals of senior members of the imperial household, the ladies following the coffin wore veils made of black gauze ('cloches') that covered them from head to toe. Empress Elisabeth (Sisi), who never let fashion dictate her wardrobe, had a magnificent mask made of black velvet with jet-bead decoration and lace trim to wear on such occasions. This mask featured a lace bonnet with ostrich feathers and an asymmetrical veil extending down to her hips. Elisabeth's funeral mask is unique – nothing comparable is known either in Vienna or at other courts.

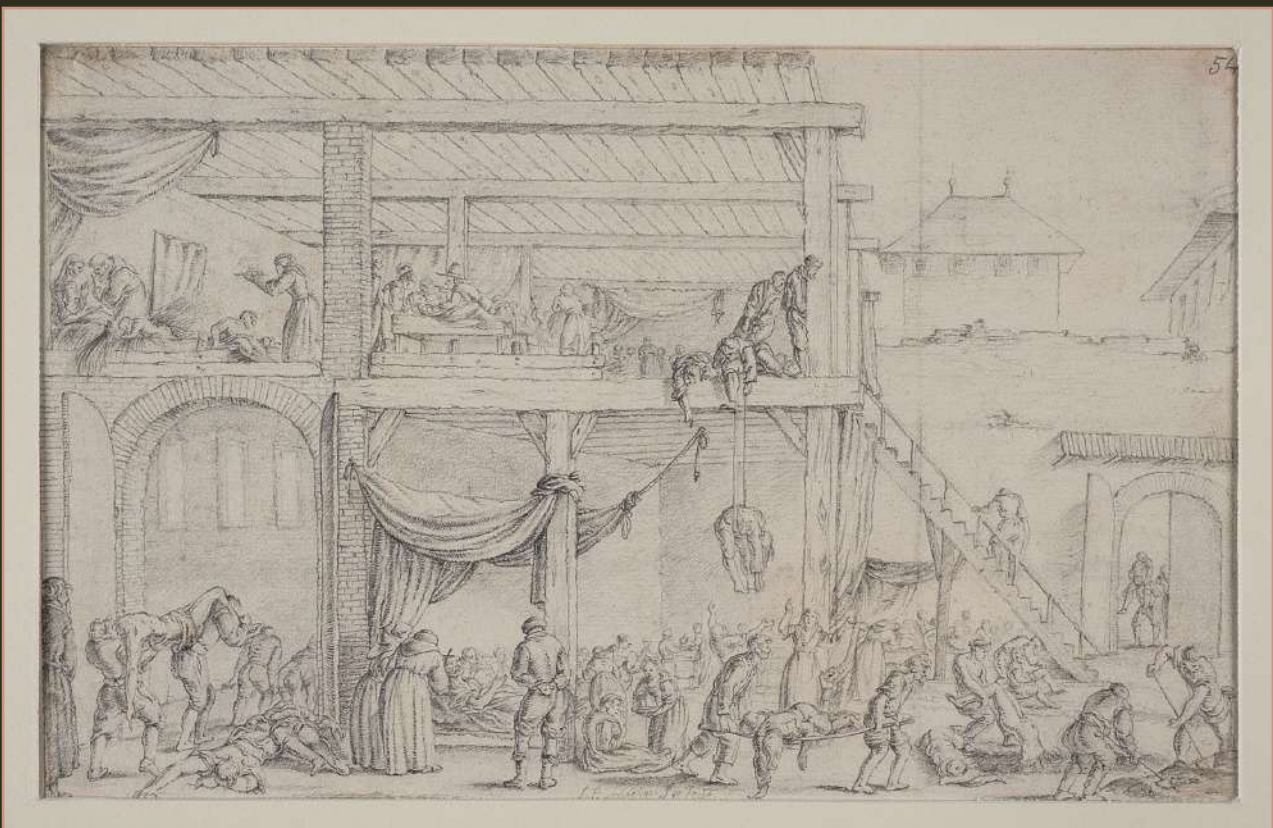


Fig. 4.

The plague hospital in Vienna. Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini, Vienna, c. 1680.

Theatermuseum, Vienna, inv. no. HZ_Min29_54a1. © KHM-Museumsverband



Fig. 5.

The Plague Column in Vienna.

Salomon Kleiner and Daniel Heumann, Augsburg 1733.

Imperial Carriage Museum Vienna, inv. No. Z 339. © KHM-Museumsverband

To show his gratitude for the eradication of the plague epidemic that raged from 1678 to 1680, Emperor Leopold I had a Holy Trinity column erected in Vienna. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, many Viennese residents came here to pray and light candles.



Fig. 6.

Church of St Charles Borromeo in Vienna.

Salomon Kleiner, Hieronymus Sperling, Andreas Pfeffel, Augsburg 1724.

Imperial Carriage Museum Vienna, inv. no. Z 320. © KHM-Museumsverband

After the eradication of the last plague epidemic in 1712/13, Emperor Karl VI had a magnificent church built to the plague saint St Charles Borromeo. It also served as a burial place for the city's last plague victims. When Vienna's clubs had to close in 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic, the square in front of the church became a night-time party hotspot.

Von der k. k. u. ö. Landesregierung ist unter 7^{ten} und Empfang
17^{ten} May d. J. folgende allerhöchste Verordnung herabgelangt:

“ Der von hieraus dem höchsten Hofe vorgelegte Bericht über den Fortgang der im vergangenen Jahre vorgenommenen Nüßpocken-impfungen ist vermöge des herabgelangten höchsten Hofdekrets vom 28^{ten} April und Empfang 4^{ten} May zur guten Nachricht genommen, und zugleich befohlen worden, daß man sich die weitere Verbreitung dieser nützlichen Anstalt ferner angelegen halten soll.

Das Konfistorium habe daher den Seelsorgern zur Pflicht zu machen, daß sie durch zweckmäßigen Unterricht dem Wolfe die wesentlichen Vortheile der Kuhpockenimpfung anschaulich dar- stellen, und an das Herz legen, dann die allenfalls dort und da noch dagegen herrschenden Vorurtheile zerstreuen, nütlich zur immer weitern Verbreitung und allgemeinen Anwendung dieser für die Menschen so nützlichen Erfindung alles mögliche be- tragen sollen. „

Weiche allerhöchste Verordnung den Herren Pfarrern und Seelsorgern zur genauen Befolgung und Darnachachtung hiemit bekannt gemacht wird.

atens wird denselben in der Anlage ein Exemplar der von der Jen-
nerschen Schutzpocken-Gesellschaft zu London zum Druck beförder-
ten Vergleichungstabelle in Betreff der natürlichen, der geimpf-
ten, und der Kuh- oder Schutzpocken mit dem Auftrage an-
geschlossen, den für das Leben, und die Gesundheit der Men-
schen so wichtigen Inhalt derselben allenthalben bekannt zu ma-
chen; das Volk über die wesentlichen, und überwiegenden Vor-
theile, welche mit der Schutzpockenimpfung verbunden sind, zu
belehren, und an das Herz zu legen, mit welcher Eilfertigkeit
jeder diese für das Menschengeschlecht so heilsame Erfindung zu
benutzen sich bestreben soll. Dann ist

Die Kuh = ober
Schuttpockenim-
pfung durch zweif-
massigen Unter-
richt 2c. zu besu-
bern.

Vergleichungstabelle in Betreff der natürlichen, der geimften, und der Kuh- oder Schafpoften.

Fig. 7.

Instruction from the Consistory to Viennese priests to explain the benefits of smallpox vaccination with cow serum to their congregation. Vienna, 10 June 1803. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, archives, inv. no. AR_II_142. © KHM-Museumsverband.

Thirtyfive years after the introduction of vaccination by Empress Maria Theresa, the population was still sceptical. The number of children who died of smallpox year after year was accordingly high. Since the clergy had the most direct contact with the people, they were directed to dispel parents' doubts 'by warmly recommending smallpox inoculation to their congregation and promoting the advantages of this beneficial invention by offering evidence and examples'.

[illegible]

Fig. 8.

Comparison table produced by the Jenner Society in London on the eradication of smallpox, 1803.
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, archives, inv. no. AR II 142. © KHM-Museumsverband

In 1798, the English physician Edward Jenner developed a smallpox inoculation using cow serum (vaccination) which, unlike inoculation with human serum, was harmless. After this method was tested at the Vienna General Hospital in 1802, the government launched a widespread vaccination campaign. Priests were instructed to praise the benefits of vaccination in the course of their sermons and pastoral ministry. To this end, a table was printed with the permission of the Edward Jenner Vaccine Society in London, comparing the dangers of vaccination with cow serum, vaccination with human serum, and disease progression without vaccination.



Fig. 9a & 9b.

Gala livery of a coachman or lackey (9a).

Gala livery of a coachman or lackey during court mourning (9b).

Imperial Carriage Museum Vienna,
Department of Court Uniforms,
inv. no. MD U 1033, U 1045, U 1027
and U 1076-1079.

© KHM-Museumsverband





Fig. 10.

Exhibition view with the installation *Austria Defies Cholera*. © Photo: KHM-Museumsverband
Due to the short lead time, it was not possible to get the painting *Austria and Cholera* (Leopold Bucher, 1835. Belvedere, Vienna © Johannes Stoll) for the exhibition. Therefore it is virtually presented as part of a multimedia installation: the picture is animated and accompanied by the sound of the waltz 'Cheerful even when times are tough', composed in Vienna during the first cholera Pandemic (1831) by Johann Strauss Sr.



Fig. 11.

Portrait of a cholera prevention man.
Illustrated supplement to Saphir's magazine 'Der deutsche Horizont', 1831.
Vienna Museum inv. no. 20037.
© Wien Museum / Vienna Museum

In 1831/32, numerous caricatures made fun of the precautions taken by 'cholera prevention' men and women to avoid contracting the new disease. Since it was believed that the disease entered the body through toxic fumes, these men and women covered themselves from head to toe. To this end, the man depicted here is wearing several layers of clothing, a face mask and glasses. To filter the air, he has a smelling bottle hanging in front of his nose, and he is waving an incense flask and two juniper branches to drive away the toxic fumes.



Fig. 12.

Construction of the main sewer ('cholera sewer') in Vienna 1831.

Tobias Dyonis Raulino, c.1831/32.

Wien Museum, inv. no. 108959. © Wien Museum / Vienna Museum

Border closures and trade restrictions were implemented with the goal of preventing cholera from entering the country in 1831. These measures could not stop the disease, but they did damage the economy and led to high unemployment. To provide work for those who had lost their jobs and at the same time to improve hygiene, construction of a sewer along the River Wien was started.



Fig. 13.

Under the influence of flu. Caricature for wearing masks as protection against infection.

Supplement to 'Die Muskete', 31 October 1918.

© Austrian National Library, Vienna

Austrian National Library, Vienna,

inv. no. 449976-D.27 1918-1919 Neu Per

While face masks have been successfully used to prevent infection in neighbouring Switzerland since July 1918, this measure has never been successful in Austria. The caricature shows that after theatres were closed, the idea was at least considered of whether they could be opened again if wearing a mask was made obligatory.

Reichsgesetzblatt

für die

im Reichsrat vertretenen Königreiche und Länder.

XXXII. Stück. — Ausgegeben und versendet am 25. April 1913.

Inhalt: M 67. Gesetz, betreffend die Verhütung und Bekämpfung übertragbarer Krankheiten.

67.

Gesetz vom 14. April 1913, betreffend die Verhütung und Bekämpfung übertragbarer Krankheiten.

Mit Zustimmung beider Häuser des Reichsrates
habe Ich anzuordnen, wie folgt:

I. Hauptstück.

Ermittlung der Krankheit.

§ 1.

Anzeigepflichtige Krankheiten.

Anzeigepflichtige Krankheiten im Sinne dieses
Gesetzes sind:

1. Scharlach,
2. Diphtherie,
3. Abdominaltyphus,
4. Ruhr (Dysenterie),
5. Epidemische Genickstarre,
6. Wochenbettfieber,
7. Flecktyphus,
8. Blattern,
9. Asiatische Cholera,
10. Pest,
11. Rückfalltyphus,
12. Aussatz (Lepra),
13. Ägyptische Augenentzündung (Trachom),
14. Gelbes Fieber,
15. Milzbrand,

16. Röh,

17. Wutkrankheit sowie Bissverletzung durch
wutranke oder wutverdächtige Tiere.Wenn eine im ersten Absatze nicht bezeichnete
Krankheit unter Erscheinungen oder unter Verhält-
nissen, insbesondere in Kurorten, Anstalten und Inter-
naten, auftritt, die ihre Verbreitung in gefährdeter
der Weise oder in weiterem Umfange bezogen lassen,
kann diese Krankheit durch Verordnung allgemein, für
eine bestimmte Zeitdauer oder für bestimmte zu be-
zeichnende Gebiete der Anzeigepflicht unterworfen
werden.

§ 2.

Erfassung der Anzeige.

Jeder Fall einer Erkrankung an einer anzei-
gepflichtigen Krankheit, der Tod einer mit einer solchen
Krankheit befallenen Person sowie jeder Verdacht
einer solchen Erkrankung oder eines solchen Todes-
falles muß unverzüglich dem Gemeindevorsteher jener
Gemeinde, in deren Gebiet der Kranke oder Krank-
heitsverdächtige sich aufhält oder der Tod erfolgt ist,
unter Angabe des Namens, des Alters und der
Wohnung des Kranken oder Verstorbenen und soweit
möglich unter Angabe des Namens der Krankheit
angezeigt werden. Der bloße Verdacht des Wochen-
bettfiebers begründet keine Anzeigepflicht. Außerdem
kann durch Verordnung allgemein oder für bestimmte
Zeit oder für bestimmte anzeigepflichtige Krankheiten
angeordnet werden, daß anzeigepflichtige Fälle, die
einen Schüler, eine Lehrperson oder einen Schul-
bediensteten betreffen, der Schulleitung angezeigt
werden.Die Anzeigepflicht tritt ein, sobald die zur An-
zeige verpflichtete Person weiß, daß ein anzei-

Fig. 14.

Law on the prevention and control of communicable diseases of 14 April 1913.

Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, library, inv. no. 108.967. © KHM-Museumsverband

In 1913, a comprehensive epidemic law was published in the *Imperial Law Gazette* based on centuries of experience with fighting epidemics. It regulated all relevant issues, such as reporting requirements, hygiene measures, isolation of the sick, quarantine of contact persons and places, traffic restrictions, factory closures and claims for damages. In 1950 it was re-published and in March 2020 formed part of the basis for measures to combat Corona.

The Creation of an Online Art and Design Reference Library: Information Seeking and Sharing Among Mask Makers

Newmark, Serena

Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

Abstract

Using practice-based research methodology, Newmark investigates the information-seeking and information-sharing behaviours among home-based creators of protective cloth face masks during the era of COVID-19. The spontaneous creation of an effective online reference library is analysed alongside the teaching and learning behaviours of mask designers and makers, which emerged within the constraints of a newly established, socially distanced lockdown pedagogy. Particularly remarkable examples of cloth face masks are discussed through established art historical concepts such as those of the artist, designer, donor, and patron, as well as along the spectrum from folk artist to professionally trained artist. The article also includes a discussion of materiality and the talismanic and therapeutic qualities of artistic materials and the artistic process. Mask designer Iris Luckhaus and the mask-donation group Auntie Sewing Squad are included as case studies.

Contents

1. Practice as research
2. The creation of an online art and design reference library
3. Masks within art education
4. Masks within art history
5. Masks within the analogue world and the academic art library

The Creation of an Online Art and Design Reference Library: Information Seeking and Sharing Among Mask Makers

1. Practice as research

In March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, people all over the world were asked by their public health authorities to remain in their homes and refrain from gathering in public spaces as much as possible. Many employees transitioned to working from home, and students from elementary school to graduate school adapted to learning at home. Using video-conferencing software for work, education, professional conferences, and even socialising became the norm out of necessity. Concurrently, members of the public were instructed to adapt to wear face coverings over the nose and mouth to protect themselves and others from spreading the highly contagious new coronavirus. As surgical masks and N95 respirators were in short supply at the start of the pandemic, those not working directly in medical settings were asked to wear protective cloth face coverings and to reserve scarce disposable medical masks for healthcare providers involved in direct patient care.

Professional large-scale garment manufacturers began constructing and subsequently marketing protective face masks to the public, but they rapidly found themselves outpaced by home-based, small-scale mask makers, both amateur and professional, who could adapt more quickly to changing tastes and, most importantly, rapidly incorporate evolving advice from medical authorities on how to create more effective protective masks into their construction techniques. Individual mask makers working from home laboured primarily to create masks to protect their friends and family, and often also to provide a much-needed service within their communities, with many donating masks or selling them at cost. Small-scale mask creators were also able to meet the aesthetic wants and needs of mask wearers by providing individualised masks made from fabrics featuring favoured sports teams, universities, child-friendly patterns, embroidered of slogans, or elegant formal textiles suitable for special occasions such as a weddings.

As necessity demanded, small-scale mask makers worked extremely quickly to adapt to rapidly changing conditions and, in the spirit of community service and with the desire to bring joy in difficult times, communicated with one another online to create objects, share information, and solve problems collectively. There is no established art-historical method for analysing a sudden mass social movement to create and disseminate cleverly designed homemade, medically protective garments. Accordingly, the data for this study were collected using a practice-based research method, in which becoming a home-based mask maker and gathering information about how to do so constituted the first step in the art-historical study of small-scale cloth COVID-19 protective mask creation.

2. The creation of an online art and design reference library

Many established public and academic libraries adapted to COVID-19 lockdowns by increasing patrons' access to digital collections while restricting the borrowing of physical materials to prearranged pick-up and drop-off services. Although it was not planned by a committee of librarians, a comprehensive art and design reference library nevertheless sprang into existence online specifically to aid small-scale mask makers in the creation of homemade face masks. A traditional reference desk was replaced by social media search engines and specially created social media groups and hashtags. The library collection, including textual documents, videos, drawings, and images, was provided by professionals and skilled hobbyists who believed their mask patterns or mask-making instructions could be useful to others and who continually donated their intellectual property to the online library, often with frequent updates and new editions. Content creators used the person-to-person connections enabled by social media to serve as ersatz art librarians, often directing online library users to materials in the virtual sphere beyond social media itself, such as designers' websites, as well as to locations in the offline world where mask-making supplies could be acquired or where finished masks could be sold or donated.

Unlike in the physical library, where opportunities for user feedback are limited, patrons of the online library were frequently redirected toward mask-making posts, individual mask creators, and dedicated groups via established social media algorithms. Repeated engagement with these virtual educational spaces enabled the constant evolution of mask-making knowledge, allowing mask makers to learn new and improved techniques for making masks more comfortable and effective. After becoming familiar with the virtual materials available in the online mask-making library, many patrons in turn directed newer mask makers to useful materials online and offline, effectively serving as reference desk assistants.

3. Masks within art education

The sudden and rapidly evolving practice of mask-making and mask-wearing at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the transfer of many educational activities from in-person to online formats. Countless schools and universities quickly moved classes online, while many museums closed their physical galleries, expanded virtual galleries, and made lectures and other educational experiences newly available to visitors via their websites. Although virtually all learning and teaching experiences concerning home-based mask-making took place outside the established realm of official art or craft education, education in mask creation was still able to draw on new online modes of learning and virtual pedagogy used by accredited academic institutions during the COVID lockdown period. Educational opportunities for mask creators were often advertised on social media but subsequently took place outside it, and mask-creation educators used the same virtual platforms and technologies, such as video-conferencing software and private websites, that were already well used by accredited academic institutions and myriad workplaces.

Iris Luckhaus, a professionally trained artist and educator who holds a degree in clothing design from the Universität der Künste in Berlin, made her particularly innovative and protective face-mask sewing patterns available to home mask creators via her professional website. On her webpage, users were invited to read her instructions on mask creation and to download and print her expertly designed PDF sewing patterns at no cost. To reach those who could benefit from her patterns, she provided links to her website on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter. She also invited users to post images of masks they had made from her patterns on social media, and she answered questions and provided helpful suggestions about wear and fit (**Fig. 1**). Although these interactions took place within the relatively informal atmosphere of social media, Luckhaus assisted home-based mask makers utilising her patterns with the same professionalism she brought to her students in the analogue classroom, thus blurring the boundaries between folk art or craft practice and professional instruction by an academically trained artist.

Professional actress and performance artist Kristina Wong used her community networks on Facebook to create the Auntie Sewing Squad, an 800-person strong group of volunteer mask makers, which used the social media platform both to organise its members and as a starting point for the exchange of information on how to obtain mask-making supplies and organise the delivery of completed masks to communities in need. Members of the Auntie Sewing Squad also utilised Zoom and other video-conferencing software, widely used in business and higher education, to host more formal educational and recreational activities for mask makers. These activities included classes in relaxation and stretching, as well as a summer workshop specifically for children that focused on the basics of hand sewing and provided each child with an opportunity to receive active feedback from the instructor, to exhibit their hand-sewn creations, and to interact with other young participants (**Fig. 2**).

4. Masks within art history

Although a tremendous amount of creativity and artistic excellence is displayed in the creation of cloth face masks, there are significant challenges in placing homemade face masks within the broader context of art and design history. After frequent use and repeated washing, their condition

quickly deteriorates. The identity of the creator is often lost, as homemade masks are unsigned works of art, and the user may not have noted the maker's identity during purchase. Creating a thorough record, to be preserved in perpetuity, of websites and social media posts through which most creative activity surrounding mask-making has taken place is extraordinarily difficult.

A connoisseurship-based approach may be used to identify the designer of the sewing pattern used to create a mask, as in the case of the distinctive Luckhaus mask created by German designer Iris Luckhaus (**Fig. 3**), and these objects could be approached in much the same way as a chair created by a cabinetmaker in colonial Massachusetts after the published designs of Thomas Chippendale. Masks made from fabric featuring a national or state flag, the mascot of a sports team, the insignia of a university, or the slogan of a social movement or political candidate can, with a relative degree of certainty, be attributed to a specific time or place. The complexity of the pattern used to create the mask can also help date it within the period stretching from the global outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, when the public was asked to wear cloth masks, to mid- to late 2021, when members of the public were largely instructed to discontinue the use of cloth masks in favour of surgical masks or N95/FFP2 respirators. Mask patterns and materials became more complex over time, with cloth versions of surgical masks made with one or two layers of fabric quickly being replaced by more complex and better-fitting masks made from more sophisticated patterns, adjustable straps, and a minimum of three protective layers.

Future study and collecting of homemade masks from the COVID-19 era should take into account the full range of potential emotional and talismanic properties of the textiles used in their creation. For many home-based mask creators, the choice of fabric is integral to the mask's protective function. As works of art created to save lives, they are the opposite of art for art's sake; yet many homemade masks are made from materials that incorporate elements of religion, good luck, family history, or personal emotional significance. Examples include the use of fabrics that were previously part of professional uniforms, vintage textiles inherited from cherished friends or family members, fabric motifs featuring fictional or historical heroic figures, and textiles that have been used in cultural or sacred contexts (**Fig. 4**). The stories of individual mask creators will also be relevant to an understanding of these objects. The intention of the artist, the practice of mask-making as a therapeutic exercise in a difficult time, and the artist as donor are all vital themes (**Fig. 5**).

5. Masks within the analogue world and the academic art library

Several books have been written on the process of creating and wearing a mask made at home. A number of colourful illustrated books for children focus on the love and care invested in the practice of making a mask, and how the same spirit of love and care is also part of wearing a mask and protecting oneself and others. Kristina Wong, founder of the Auntie Sewing Squad, and the noted historian Rebecca Solnit wrote a history of the group's mask-making and mask-donating activities in *The Auntie Sewing Squad Guide to Mask Making, Radical Care, and Racial Justice* which was published by the University of California Press (**Fig. 6**). These materials, together with other similar written accounts and others yet to be written about the COVID-19 mask-making era, are quickly becoming part of analogue library collections.

Since the earliest days of the pandemic, several museums and cultural institutions have taken homemade cloth masks into their collections alongside other examples of COVID-19 material culture, such as vials that once held vaccines and scrubs worn by healthcare providers. Collecting materials documenting teaching and learning is, however, more challenging than collecting and housing physical objects in an analogue library. At the start of the pandemic, countless individuals across the globe had to work together to learn how to create a garment that many had never even imagine wearing before: a medically protective covering for the nose and mouth. With skills levels ranging from those of professional clothing designers to those of people who had never picked up a needle and thread, small-scale mask makers taught and learned, with astonishing speed, how to protect themselves and one another using a small homemade garment. This extraordinary and

rapid process of creating a virtual reference library and using its materials to support the teaching and learning of mask-making is undoubtedly one that deserves further study and publication in the analogue world, both for its importance to material culture and as an example of alternative online pedagogies in an unprecedented time. ■

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Fig. 1.

Tweets exchanged on 9 April 2021 between the author, Serena Newmark, and mask pattern designer Iris Luckhaus. An example of significant and individualized person to person teaching and learning behaviour enabled by social media.



Fig. 2.

'I'm a chef and . . . I was out of the kitchen for 13 months. So the first fabric I used was upcycled from a bunch of my old chef coats. And because they were basic white I got to experimenting with tie dye as well. Looking back on this, it looks rudimentary, the pattern isn't great and my sewing skills weren't very refined. But I was still damned proud of this work. Joined this amazing community a few months later, learned a ton, changed up the pattern, honed my skills, and now I'm approaching 500 masks for Auntie related pledges!'

- Beth Matthiessen describing her use of upcycled professional clothing to create masks and her process of learning to make better designed and sewn masks through volunteering with the Auntie Sewing Squad.



Fig. 3.
Luckhaus Mask displaying the signature pleats, gapless fit, and backward nose flap of the originally design. © 2021 IRIS LUCKHAUS All Rights Reserved



Fig. 4.
'This mask was made from fabric donated by a Buddhist temple in Northern California. They had an excess supply of new monk robes and generously donated some to us. I'm particularly proud that I was able to incorporate the top stitching of the fabric into the mask. It looks so classy! This mask went to a farmworker. I hope this mask with its blessed beginnings kept the wearer safe.'
- Gwen Wong describing her dedication to the creation of an aesthetically beautiful mask that additionally incorporates materials with a religious significance.



Fig. 5.

'This is my very first set of masks for donation to what became Auntie Sewing Squad. Made from remnants & scraps, I had no idea how huge a part of my life, & major coping mechanism, mask-making would become, for me & the awe-inspiring ASS community. The embroidered heart covered a hole in the fabric I missed while constructing; it became a metaphor for the whole endeavor – covering faces with love.'

- Sandra Hise describing the practice of utilising previously unusable pieces of fabric to make masks alongside the therapeutic aspect of showing love for others by creating medically protective face masks.



Fig. 6.

'These masks went to San Quentin as part of a request organized by Grace J. Yoo back in August 2020. Sending masks to incarcerated people made me feel incredibly grateful to be part of ASS. While sewing these masks, I frequently thought of Chol Soo Lee who was on death row there. His wrongful murder conviction in 1973 led to a national pan-ethnic Asian American social movement.'

- Sylvia Kwon on the importance of making masks for incarcerated persons and the importance of advocating for a fair criminal justice system.

The Emotional Power of Masks

Rothwell, Sarah

Senior Curator, Modern & Contemporary Design, National Museums Scotland,
Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Abstract

Within this paper, I aim to demonstrate through the practice of two artists, how the emotional impact of the global COVID-19 crisis of 2020 was captured through the art of their masks and, in turn, evoked a sense of empathy in the viewer. I focus on the work of the Irish performance artist threadstories, who created a series of new works that visually reflected the tension and anxieties that she and others were carrying within themselves, and on the Icelandic artist Ýrúrarí, who sought to relieve this tension by creating whimsical and humorous pieces to lighten the mood and encourage engagement. By presenting these works on social media platforms, both artists reached thousands of people, creating a space in which empathy could grow and extend globally in ways that no static display could achieve.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. A mask that conveyed our fear
3. A mask that brought back joy
4. Conclusion

The Emotional Power of Masks

1. Introduction

Over the last two years, we have all experienced huge changes in our lives due to the ongoing global pandemic, which has led contemporary society to adopt mask-wearing as part of a global shared identity. It was therefore natural for many artists, makers, and designers to use these facial adornments as a vehicle to spread messages, evoke empathy, and discuss the emotional impact of the situation, imbuing their masks with narratives that articulated our fears, hopes, warnings, and celebrations. In doing so, they created a body of work that has become a tangible reminder, for future generations, of what has taken place, and these works have been acquired by museums around the world to reflect this development.

My own organisation, National Museums Scotland, focused its COVID-19 collecting activity around a range of themes—cutting across social, medical, military, design, and global histories—and thereby reflecting both the all-encompassing effects of the pandemic and the multidisciplinary nature of the museum. This involved collecting a broad yet focused selection of material, ranging from highly visual objects clearly linked to the virus, such as face masks, but also vaccine vials, and social-distancing signage, to other objects that speak to the social and cultural histories of the pandemic from regional and local perspectives within Scotland and across the world.

The face masks selected for the Art & Design department were intended to represent how artists, makers, and designers from across the United Kingdom and Europe responded, through design innovations and emotive artworks, to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the wider socio-political movements that have emerged over the last year.

2. A mask that conveyed our fear

In March 2020, as the lockdown was announced and we were all thrown into confusion about what was happening, the anxiety felt by many of us was palpable. The thought that my own breath, or that of another person, could now carry this new deadly pathogen was frightening and, understandably, something that needed to be contained. However, as an asthmatic, the very idea that a mask would become part of my daily attire brought back traumatic childhood memories of the respirator I had to wear. I remembered how claustrophobic it had made me feel, and how that sensation had, in turn, affected my breathing, creating another level of anxiety and fear. This was an understandable emotional reaction that was felt by many: for some, including myself, because of a pre-existing respiratory condition, for others, because they feared they would be unable to communicate once the mouth was obscured, thereby impeding lip-reading. This very visceral reaction prompted me to focus my research on contemporary artists, makers, and designers who sought to explore masks as part of a wider discourse on non-conformative identity, heritage, and socio-political debate. In doing so, they created pieces that projected, or sought to evoke, empathy and an emotional response in the viewer.

One of the artists I identified as using masks to convey such messages was the Irish visual artist threadstories, whose performative practice focuses on the creation and activation of masks as a vehicle through which to question, in her words, ‘the erosion of personal privacy in the digital age shaping how we view and portray ourselves online’ (Ebert 2020). Each of her handmade masks starts out as a crocheted balaclava, which she then develops using a variety of textile techniques to create various malleable, draped additions that obscure and transform her features. These masks are then activated by the artist and captured either on film or in photographs, as part of a performance, before being shared primarily on her Instagram platform. Each mask serves as a visual representation of how people obscure their lives, whether intentionally or not, for public consumption, questioning our motivation and vanity while also exploring complex emotions that are often hidden beneath

the surface and struggle to be heard. When discussing her masks, threadstories describes them as 'sometimes monstrous, other times farcical façades that poke at the performative nature that social media cultivates and celebrates' (Ebert 2020). These masks are often reused over time and reinterpreted through different narratives in response to a particular moment in time or to questions she wishes to explore.

During the Irish lockdown, and amid the uncertainty of what was happening, threadstories took solace in the time-consuming nature of her practice to create a series of new works that visually reflected the tension and anxieties that she and others were carrying within during this period. In doing so, she actively transferred these fears into her work, creating pieces that marked this new phase in our shared global lives. Some of these works prompted a nervously smile in recognition because of how closely they reflected what many of us were feeling, as in her performative piece *Masked mask* posted on her Instagram platform on the 13 March 2020 and viewed by over 54,000 people. Within the short film, the simple silver balaclava with a drawn-on smiley face is then covered with a matching coloured mask. However, this mini-mask is adorned with tinsel threads symbolising and drawing attention to her breath (**Fig. 1**). The visual reference to a smiley face can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the public attitude of 'grin and bear it' in response to the new need to adorn ourselves with a mask. At the same time, the visualisation of her tinselled breath suggests the stark realisation of why such an act had become necessary. Other masks posted on her Instagram platform during this month similarly offered a visual release for the anxieties manifesting in many of us because of this new global situation, as can be seen with her portrait entitled 'Silent Scream'. Originally created and photographed in 2019, threadstories chose to share this raw and powerful image of her screaming through the silver threads spilling across her masked face on 20 March 2020 as 'it felt apt to me at the time. It captured the anxiety of the times we were living in'¹ (**Fig. 2**). The portrait mirrors a moment of frustration, anger, and fear that brewed within, and at times erupted from, so many of us during the first few months of the global pandemic. One follower commented, 'I totally get this!', and also wrote 'Hope you're okay'², highlighting that these digital communities are more than passive appreciators. They are engaged and emotionally connected to the artist through her masks.

The gravity of the situation we faced is perhaps best reflected within her work *Breath*. Posted on her Instagram feed at the start of the Irish lockdown, on the 10 March 2020, with its 51 915 likes², shows how strongly people connected with its message. This mask, and her performance associated with it, reflect how something as natural as breathing, became, for us all, something to fear, something that could harm as well as heal. An individual's breath is a subjective act. A common turn of phrase is to say 'take a breath' when someone is uneasy, reassuring them that, by stopping their activity to take that much-needed breath, it will help regulate the heartbeat, calm the disquiet of mind and body, and restore a sense of equilibrium in return. Within the performance of *Breath* (**Fig. 3**), we see the silvery tendrils of the mask rippling in the air—making visible the previously unseen terror of COVID-19. By creating a tangible exponent of our fear, threadstories conveys a tension that resonates in her gaze and in the pattern of her breathing, thus mirroring the discomfort and emotional unease that we all experienced, and have continued to endure, globally as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. When discussing the motivations behind its creation, threadstories explained:

*the physical mask through-out history has had many varied roles in society, such as religious and social ceremony, theatre and entertainment, to provide warmth, for protest, adornment, and fashion, as a tool for criminality and globally in 2020 for protection. My masks are made to tell stories, in Breath I used the mask as a performative object, I made the invisible, visible. Our breath, our life force, and in 2020 the transporter of our most feared opponent, COVID-19. My masks are in a constant state of flux, the same object is reworked again and again in the studio. In a year when a vast majority of our lives felt like they were put on hold, there is something poignant about this mask entering the National Collection, it too has now been suspended in time.*³

3. A mask that brought back joy

Not all art masks created during the first year of the pandemic conveyed fear and anxiety; others sought to encapsulate a sense of whimsy and to bring joy, encouraging distanced engagement at a time when many felt the strain of reduced interaction and the loss of community. They allowed the wearer to articulate a sense of humour, not in order to ridicule the situation, but rather to project happiness to those that they encountered during what was a dark time for so many. One artist who chose this methodology was the Icelandic textile designer and artist Ýrúrarí, whose Lockdown Facemask Project was conceived, like so many others, as a way of coping with the isolation she found herself facing, as well as in response to the global requirement and necessity to wear masks. She described her pieces as ‘spontaneous objects of art created in strange circumstances. Not as items for protection. But as something to make people smile’⁴.

Ýrúrarí, whose practice is based on marrying traditional craft skills with sustainable production and recycling, often works with second-hand clothing, to which she gives new value by adding her hand-knitted, quirky, whimsical, and colourful facial expressions. She turned her attention to creating art masks in early April 2020, when Iceland went into lockdown. Although mask-wearing was not mandatory within Iceland, Ýrúrarí hoped that her creations would encourage people to wear masks by allowing them to have fun with them and use them as a form of self-expression. The idea was to design a monstrous yet humorous form that would encourage people to stay away from the wearer, thereby ensuring social distancing, but, perhaps more importantly, without creating a sense of alienation. Her initial approach to adapting her practice to mask-making was, in the form, as she puts it, to use the knitted scattered around her studio as additions to a regular face mask. This approach was inspired by an image from 2018, which she posted on her Instagram platform on 6 April 2020, showing her covering her own mouth with one of her large-lipped mouth doodles featuring a protruding tongue. This light-hearted portrait does not reflect the fear and anxiety of the situation itself, as it was created two years before the events we were, and still are, undergoing. Although her gaze is questioning, it engages the viewer, almost as if asking, ‘Do you like?’ In a similar way to threadstories’ use of a past image to express her feelings, this post suggests Ýrúrarí’s own need to lighten the mood, while also reflecting a broader wish shared by others. The positive response to this engagement—the post has received 4,416 likes—shows that even in the darkest times, humanity responds to joy and needs that release in order to help navigate the uncertainty around it.

This engagement, and the need for whimsy, can also be seen in the growing response of her followers to these creations. Her first post in this series, *Face Mask Experiment #1*, shared on her Instagram account a day later, on 7 April 2020, featured a red-lipped mouth with gold braces smiling out at the viewer; to date, it has received over 16,000 likes and 331 comments (**Fig. 4**). Just a few days later, on the 12 April 2020, she posted *Face Mask Experiment #5*, a more complicated knitted piece featuring an extended tongue almost approaching the nose to lick; to date, it has received 25,580 likes and 326 comments (**Fig. 5**). Her masks, which began, as we see in #1, as relatively simple creations, became increasingly complex and outlandish, featuring exaggerated mouths, often with protruding tongues, as we can observe in #5. This increase in complexity reflects not only the confidence she gained from the admiration her online community showed for her creations, but also mirrors her own need to increase her activity and remain occupied during a period of anxiety and stress. As she explained,

*the reason why I made my masks was a reaction to the quick changes I had to go through, the new global reality and not being able to meet colleagues in person. People needed to release some tension, and laughter can be a good way to do it.*⁵

However, beneath the humour of Ýrúrarí’s masks, there is an underlying emotional tension, as we also witnessed in the masks of threadstories. It is as if, in the act of making, the artists subconsciously transferred their emotions into the masks, thereby supporting their own mental wellbeing. For instance, in the mask *Stay away, the braces edition* (**Fig. 6**), with its multiple tongues and braced

mouths, created in December 2020 to convey the idea ‘of something being released and held in at the same time’⁶, and as a sign-off to the very strange year, we can observe a subtle tension within the braced mouths, a grimace almost that reflects our fears. However, through its exaggerated scale and lolling appendage, we cannot help but be calmed by its appearance and find comfort and joy within its humour. The whimsy of Ýrurari’s work allows the viewer to feel more relaxed and at ease in our own potential adornment, and the exchanges we may have with others whilst wearing them. Through her knitted doodles, she allows facial expressions we would once do. Spontaneous reactions such as a smile, a puckered mouth to blow a kiss, a tongue stuck out in jest, which, prior to the need of wearing a mask brought about by COVID-19, would have brought comfort and joy to those we encountered. And although our faces are now covered, we can still interact and find ways to communicate this joy once more.

4. Conclusion

The level of emotional connection and empathy cultivated by these artists through their masks via their social media platforms, not only gave them a vehicle through which to express their own feelings, but also allowed a global community to connect and discuss their own experiences, fears, and anxieties—not only about COVID-19, but also about wearing masks. In this way, these works provided an opportunity for many people to reconsider masks, reflect on how provocative they can seem, and think more deeply about their emotional resonance within our own lockdown worlds. At a time when museums and galleries were closed and could not display the artefacts of the pandemic they were collecting, the importance of digital platforms as global conduits and connectors became even more significant in our isolated worlds, as they enabled wider forms of engagement through which messages of solidarity and joy could bring people back together.

Within these works, both artists have powerfully encapsulated the emotional roller-coaster experienced by many as a result of COVID-19, from the heightened tension seen within threadstories’ performative mask *Breath*, created right at the beginning of March 2020, to our global need to reclaim joy by the end of the year, when Ýrurari’s *Stay away* was created in December 2020. These works of art and craft truly speak of our new identity and what it feels like to live through this period of global uncertainty, and they demonstrate the emotional power that masks now hold in our lives. ■

Notes

1. Unpublished correspondence with threadstories, 20.12.21.
2. One of 20 comments posted as a response to ‘Silent Scream’ featured on threadstories Instagram feed. [last accessed 22.12.21].
3. Unpublished correspondence with threadstories, 21.04.21.
4. Unpublished correspondence with the Ýrurari, 20.04.21.
5. Unpublished correspondence with Ýrurari, 21.04.21.
6. Unpublished correspondence with Ýrurari, 22.12.20.

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Fig. 1.
Simple silver balaclava masked with a matching coloured mini-mask adorned with tinsel threads symbolising and drawing attention to her breath.
Masked Mask, threadstories, 2021.



Fig. 2.
Silent Scream, threadstories, 2019.



Fig. 3.
Breath, threadstories, 2020.



Fig. 4.
Face Mask Experiment #1, Ýrúrarí, 2020.



Fig. 5.
Face Mask Experiment #5, Ýrúrarí, 2020.



Fig. 6.
Stay away, the braces edition, Ýúrará, 2020.

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