

能面

NOH MEN
NOH THEATER MASKS

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Central to the world of *Noh* theater are the wooden masks that serve to denote character.

Kohkun Otsuki's Kyoto townhouse is a short walk from the former Imperial Palace. On the second floor, a spacious, tatami-floored area contains his workshop and an archive of masks that Otsuki has crafted over the years. He is one of the most respected *Noh* mask carvers in Kyoto.

Noh is recognized as the oldest theater art still being performed in modern times. With a history reaching back to the fourteenth century, the evolution of *Noh* has seen it transform from an aristocratic form of theater to a highly ritualized art, in which actors train from a young age, often from three years old. To an outsider watching for the first time, it may seem like an inscrutable production—from the glacially slow but exquisite movements of the actors to the incomprehensible but beautiful throat singing of the main actor. The chant and sharp drum strikes of the four musicians creates an otherworldly atmosphere against which the play unfolds.

The main performer, known as the *shite*, almost invariably takes the stage wearing a *Noh Men*, or *omote*. These masks are arguably the most important element in a *Noh* play, denoting nearly everything about the character, including gender, age, and whether or not the character is human or divine.

To a *Noh* actor, even the act of donning the mask is an esoteric ritual, involving channeling the character by staring into a mirror for an extended period of time. Once the mask is put on, the actor ceases to be. The mask—one of 60 different types, depending on the play—is the character.

Each *Noh* mask is carved from a single block of Japanese cypress. Often times, a mask is only used in one performance yet they are revered and treasured for their beauty and craftsmanship, often finding themselves objects of desire for wealthy collectors or on display at museums around the world.

Noh-menshi, or mask carvers, such as Otsuki are highly respected artisans. "I got into woodcarving when I was 20, mainly because a friend of mine was doing it," Otsuki says. "It wasn't as if I was born into a family of mask carvers." Apprenticing to a Kyoto-based *Noh* mask carver started the artisan upon a career spanning 50 years and hundreds upon hundreds of masks.

The most recognizable *Noh* mask is of a woman, characterized by a white face framed by painted black hair, and red lips, the mouth opened in an expressionless rictus. The eyes are flat and staring, yet somehow the mask is eerily lifelike. This surreal



Otsuki's versatility shines through in his body of work. In addition to examples of staple *Noh* mask types, such as the young-and-old woman and demons, more experimental designs are also present.