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Face Masks: Their History and the Values They Communicate

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Masks, now recommended and worn by a growing proportion of the world's population, have reflected various perceived meaning across time. This paper provides a brief history of the socio-cultural perceptions attached to wearing a mask by surveying how masks were perceived in ancient Greece and Rome, the origins of medical masks, and the ascribed socio-cultural meaning of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of a mask has historically diverse perceived meanings; currently, wearing a mask communicates a bipolar socio-cultural meaning and a nuanced, divisive symbology. To some, masks communicate a belief in medical science and a desire to protect one's neighbor from contagion. To others, a mask communicates oppression, government overreach, and a skepticism toward established scientific principles. It is the mask's ability to signal a deception, or extrapolated more broadly, a value system, that is highly relevant to current public health guidelines encouraging mask use to decrease the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health officials and providers should utilize evidence-based health communication strategies when findings warrant a reversed recommendation of a symbol (such as masks) with a legacy of socio-cultural underpinnings that are deep-seated, complex, and emotional.

Throughout history masks have served a variety of purposes: as costume components in Athenian tragedy, as instruments in Roman funeral processions, and, most relevant to today's biopsychosocial context, for medical and public health purposes. The English word 'mask' traces its roots back to the Medieval Latin word '*masca'* which translates to 'spectre or nightmare' and later, through Italian, French, and Arabic influences, assumed its current definition in mid-16th century England to describe face coverings. Yet a distinct and more nefarious definition simultaneously exists: "a pretence, a front, an outward show intended to deceive" (OED Online, 2020). It is the mask's ability to signal a deception, or extrapolated more broadly, a value system, that is most relevant to current public health guidelines encouraging and sometimes even mandating mask use to decrease the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Politicization and value signaling surrounding masks has catapulted it from a rudimentary medical device to a preeminent symbol of the 21st century. Through an exploration of the mask's historical roots in Greek and Roman culture and medicalization in the 17th century, it becomes evident that individuals communicate both their values and beliefs when wearing a mask.

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Masks in Ancient Greece and Rome

The public use of masks to communicate societal values was a defining feature of ancient Greek theater. Greek tragedies took the form we recognize today in Athens in the 5th century BCE, where they were performed at week-long festivals honoring the god Dionysus. The central role of masks in these performances has been highlighted by many scholars, such as Edith Hall, who wrote, "Throughout antiquity, tragedy and the actor's mask were conceptually wholly inseparable" (Hall, 2010, p. 18).

Masks worn by actors in these performances had multiple functions. The Greek word for mask, *prosopon*, means "face." During a performance, when an actor donned a mask, he assumed a new face and signaled to the audience a transformation into a character familiar from inherited stories. Masks were useful both because they helped the audience recognize faces at a distance in large outdoor theaters and because they allowed a single actor to play multiple roles in the same tragedy (Rehm, 2017). Some scholars also believe that masks amplified actors' voices, almost like megaphones (Wiles, 2000). These functions were important, but it is the ritual and civic aspects of masks in Athenian tragedy that tie their use most closely to the function of masks in the current pandemic.

Donning a mask while performing tragedy at the festival of Dionysus was a religious ritual (Calame, 1986; Easterling, 1997; Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1990). Masks were also used in the worship of Dionysus in contexts unrelated to theater, but it was at the dramatic festivals that all of his aspects were

visible: Dionysus was the god of wine, wild nature, dance, masking and disguise, mystic initiation, and ecstatic possession (Easterling, 1997). As they broke boundaries by transforming themselves into another character, actors paid homage to the god of ecstasy, since the Greek word *ekstasis* literally means "standing outside" of oneself (Rehm, 2017). After performances actors dedicated their masks to Dionysus in his temple (Wiles, 2000). By constantly reminding audience members of the presence of Dionysus, theater masks reminded Athenians of their religious values.

In addition to its religious nature, Greek tragedy also had an important civic function. Every Greek tragedy was written and performed in the polis of Athens. Some have argued that this art form could not have developed outside of the context of Athenian democracy (Ober & Strauss, 1990). Contemporary political events were regularly reflected in the plots of tragedies, inviting audience members to explore their own responses to the collective decisions of their state (Knox, 1957). The Great Dionysia, the most important festival at which tragedies were performed, was the largest gatherings of citizens each year. This civic celebration, attended by thousands, "enabled and fostered participation and self-reflection on personal, familial, intellectual, and political issues of general concern" (Goldhill, 2004, p. 232). Gazing at the mask, the defining symbol of Athenian tragedy, thus encouraged Athenians to reflect on their own civic values. Far from being considered a symbol of pretense and deception, the mask represented what Athenians valued most. As David Wiles noted, "donning a face was no negative act of concealment but a positive act of becoming" (Wiles, 2007, p. 1).

Masks were used in Roman theater as well. The Latin term for this kind of mask, *persona*, can also be translated as "role" or "character," thus communicating the continuation of the Greek tradition of theatrical transformation. Nevertheless, masks had another function that was even more important in Roman society; the display of ancestral death masks in Rome was able, by some estimations, to "command far more attention than the work of her playwrights" (Martin, 2007, p. 51). These masks depicting illustrious family members, known as *imagines*, were used in public rituals to communicate both the Roman sense of a proper social order and the central place of ancestor veneration in Roman religious values.

From at least as early as the 2nd century BCE Rome to as late as the 6th century AD, wax death masks were used to signify reverence for one's ancestors while simultaneously conveying the wealth and prominence of established families. Pliny (*Natural History* 35.6) and Polybius (*Histories* 6.53) described these wax molds of the faces of prominent Romans. Thought to be incredibly intricate and frequently decorated with the individual's own hair and clothing, the masks were extraordinarily lifelike (Rose, 2014). These masks of family ancestors, stored in wooden chest-like structures in a home's atrium, often along with coats of armor, military trophies, and heirlooms, illustrated a family's genealogy and historical prominence. All individuals entering the home were greeted by these masks and other objects signaling the family's power. As Simon Goldhill put it, "Families matter in Rome . . . a Roman man lives among the dead who made him the man he is" (Goldhill, 2004, p. 4).

Following the death of a wealthy Roman citizen, these portrait masks were removed from their storage chests and worn by hired actors or living relatives during funeral processions to honor the dead. Each actor wore the costume tied to the highest office reached by the portrayed ancestor within the rigidly hierarchical Roman political system (Polybius, *Histories* 6.54). The goal was that "all of the achievements of that ancestor's career would have been summarized in the funeral oration, which means that the masks were surrounded by visual and verbal narratives that celebrated the family's accomplishments from its origins to present" (Rose, 2014). Similar processions with *imagines* took place at religious events such as public sacrifices. These central roles of masks in Roman religious rites and in representing social status in the homemade them an ever-present expression of religious and civic values. With masks, Romans communicated how much they cared about their ancestors and about their status within a fixed social hierarchy.

Origins of the Medical Mask

Prior to the development of microbiology, doctors in the 17th and 18th century believed disease was spread through direct contact (e.g., a poison) or through contaminated air (i.e., *miasma*, which means "pollution" in ancient Greek) (Ruisinger, 2020). Miasma theory postulated that many diseases including cholera, plague, and other ailments were spread through rotting organic matter deposited in the air. Scientists at the time claimed that holding a sponge or cloth infused with mixes of spices and vinegar would "purify" the air and diminish the likelihood of contracting a contagious disease (Ruisinger, 2020). The first medical mask was created amidst this historical backdrop.

While some debate the origins, most credit the invention of the medical mask to 17th century French physician, Charles de Lorme (Blakemore, 2020). The mask was a component of the medical uniform used to treat plague victims in central Europe. The uniform, depicted in Paul Furst's 1656 engraving, consisted of a long black cloak impregnated with waxes and other oils to repel bodily fluids, a top hat, a long stick used to examine patients without the laying of hands, thick goat-skin gloves, and waxed trousers composed of materials similar to that of the cloak, and large boots (Figure 1). The most recognizable and enduring component of the uniform, the headpiece and mask, were constructed of a waxed hood, glass eyepieces, and a long beak-like structure with two nares on either side. The beak like structure, echoing a belief in miasma, was designed to house *theriac*, a mixture of herbs, spices, and other materials, thought to purify the air and protect the physician from contracting the plague (Blakemore, 2020; Ruisinger, 2020).

Despite its presumed association with healing, the plague mask's presence (and by extension the plague physician's presence) communicated death, disease, and suffering. The lower register of Furst's illuminated page suggests this ominous message. In the image, a group of figures, presumably children, flee

Figure 1. Doctor Schnabel von Rom, Kleidung wider den Tod zu Rom, print, broadside, Nuremberg, 1656, The British Museum, London, UK.

the doctor as the mask and associated plague regalia signified that death was likely imminent; there were no standard treatments for the bubonic plague and mortality rates frequently exceeded 50% (Figure 1). This is further reflected in the hourglass perched atop the physician's staff insinuating that time was short – a memento mori (Figure 1). It is possible this fearful message surrounding the plague mask led to its adoption as a comedic symbol in the 17th and 18th century Venetian *Commedia dell'arte* stock character, *Il dottore*, an extremely pompous and disliked figure. In this domain, the best means to offset the fear of death and impending suffering invoked by the mask was to mock it; a valiant attempt to disarm the macabre message it communicated.

With the advent of the germ theory of disease developed by Louis Pasteur, Joseph Lister, and others in the 19th century, the medical mask evolved and eventually communicated scientific progress. These significant scientific developments are captured in Thomas Eakins' renowned medical paintings *The Gross Clinic* (1875) done in the midst of controversy regarding antiseptic technique and *The Agnew Clinic* (1889) completed after the Germ Theory and Lister's anti-septic practice were more widely accepted (Barker, 2009).

Growing recognition of contagion and concern for antisepsis led to pervasive use of re-usable and, later, disposable medical masks in the 20th century (Strasser & Schlich, 2020). The use of masks also extended into the public sphere amidst the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918–19 when numerous cities in the United States mandated their use in public spaces, albeit with some politization and resistance (Hauser, 2020; Strasser & Schlich, 2020). The public messaging surrounding face coverings is reflected in the 1918 illustration for the magazine *Public Health Reports* (Figure 2, Randall, Marr, & Ewing, 2020). Here, a young boy in the midst of sneezing is greeted by a personification of the public brandishing a handkerchief and the message, "Use the handkerchief and do your bit to protect me" (Image 2) (Randall et al., 2020). Over 100 years ago, wearing a mask communicated that individuals were willing to do their part to protect others.

Masks in the Time of COVID-19

Sentinel events have shaped history. This includes the juxtaposition of plague, war, and famine with progressive eras such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Plague as a cultural and

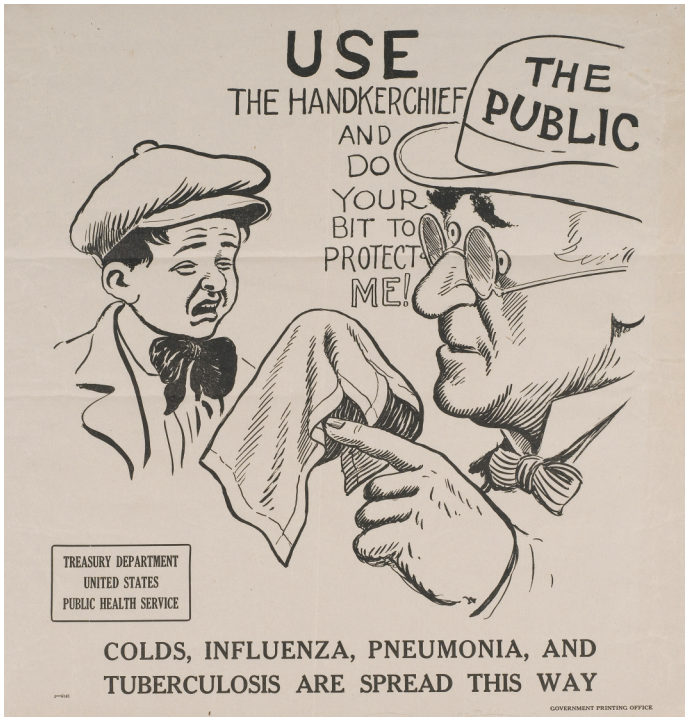

Figure 2. Poster, United States Public Health Service, 1918. Public Domain. Retrieved from: http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101453084.

historical event has remained central to the human experience. As of November 20, 2020, the current pandemic due to SARS-COV-2 has infected roughly 56.3 million individuals worldwide and resulted in more than 1.3 million deaths; the case fatality rate ranges from 0.5% to 3% in developed nations (*Johns Hopkins University COVID Tracker*, 2020; "Mortality Analyses," 2020). Contrast this to the Black Death (1347–1350) in Europe which claimed upwards of 100 million lives and ravaged half of the European continent with a case fatality rate of 50% (Snowden, 2020). In more recent history, the 1918–19 Spanish Flu pandemic infected 500 million people worldwide with roughly 50 million deaths, 675,000 of which occurred in the United States (1918Pandemic (H1N1 virus), 2019; Latham, 2020; Snowden, 2020).

Historic plagues transformed existing economic and social paradigms, world views, and the public's understanding of and reception to medical technology and public health (Latham, 2020). For example, the Black Death of the Middle Ages contributed to the fall of the feudal system through a restructuring of the labor market; peasants suddenly possessed a far greater degree of mobility and bargaining power in the marketplace (Latham, 2020). It is this type of seismic shift that is in part responsible for the Renaissance, a historical revolution of thought which would not have been possible under the prior economic and political infrastructure (Latham, 2020).

Analogously, French existentialist Albert Camus, explored the social and moral implications of contagion in his 1947 novel, *The Plague* (Camus, 1947). Camus' narrative set in the fictional French seaside town of Oran in the early 20th century follows a physician and priest as they are shaped in varied ways by their exposure to widespread death and suffering at the hands of the bubonic plague (Camus, 1947). The novel, one of Camus' finest works, is an exposition on the frailty of human nature and the ability of disease to reshape human consciousness. It is against this historical and cultural backdrop of contagion and its immense power to reframe our collective attention that masks worn by both healthcare workers and the public in the era of COVID-19 continue to communicate messages beyond their utilitarian purpose.

In the current polarized political and social climate in the United States, masks reflect both individual and societal values. First, wearing a mask signifies a type of person who believes in medical sciences and desires to protect others (especially the most vulnerable), even at the cost of individual discomfort. This messaging has been reinforced by health officials throughout the world including the United States' ranking infectious disease expert, Anthony Fauci. Political parties, most notably the Democratic Party, adopted the mask and all that it signifies as a central tenet of their political platform. Presumptive President-Elect Joe Biden has made clear his belief that wearing

a mask as the pandemic ravages the United States is an act of patriotism, reflecting our values and collective civic duty. The mask communicates a message beyond its basic scientific purpose. It has come to symbolize an entire system of political, scientific, and socially held beliefs.

This interpretation, however, is accompanied by a second counter-narrative surrounding mask use that simultaneously exists within the U.S. population. There are population segments who equate mask wearing as a submission to authoritarian rule and an emasculation of individual liberty. This counter-narrative can in part be explained through the cognitive dissonance behavioral model. When the nationwide messaging surrounding mask use in public shifted in early 2020 from "not recommended" to "recommended," individuals faced a choice. They could affirm their prior beliefs that masks were not useful in decreasing the transmission and spread of COVID-19 or they could adopt a new modality of thinking supported by emerging scientific evidence. Through politicization and mixed messages, in large part delivered by sitting U.S. President Donald J. Trump, a significant majority chose to double-down on previously held beliefs opposing mask use and seek out support from those with similar views, in a manner consistent with cognitive dissonance theory (Cooper, 2007; Johnson & Wan, 2020; Saitz & Schwitzer, 2020).

The dueling interpretations of mask use exists within broader spheres of divergent cultural narratives. As a result, masks have been politicized to communicate and symbolize themes that extend beyond medical sciences. They have come to signify one's political perspective and respect, or lack thereof, of the scientific establishment. Misinformation, disinformation, and public confusion surrounding mask use occurred at a time when clear health communication and health literacy strategies were needed most. Clear, factual messaging was obfuscated by multiple parties, effectively contributing to the social anxiety associated with wearing masks (Johnson & Wan, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, 2017; Nutbeam, 2020; Parker & Ratzan, 2010; Ratzan, Sommariva, & Rauh, 2020; Reynolds, 2020; Saitz & Schwitzer, 2020).

The implication of these dueling narratives is not to deter public health officials from changing public health recommendations on the basis of new, empirically robust evidence. Instead, the suggestion is for public health officials and providers to appreciate that they should take universal precautions and utilize evidence-based health communication strategies when findings warrant a reversed recommendation of a symbol (such as masks) with a legacy of socio-cultural underpinnings that are deep-seated, complex, and emotional.

Masks have been used to communicate a variety of messages and values in theater, Roman funerary practice, or in the realm of public health. In turn, a contemporary challenge is to contextualize the multi-faceted historical and cultural symbolism of masks with fluid public health recommendations and the potential for dissonance created by evidentiary shifts. State-of-the-art health communication strategies will be critical to ensure consistent and evidence-based messaging surrounding mask use is clearly transmitted to the public.

Conclusion

Throughout human history, masks have had the power to communicate and signify a wide range of individual and culturally held beliefs. In Greek theater and Roman funerary practices, the mask reflected civic identity and religious values. Hundreds of years later in 17th and 18th century Europe, the plague mask communicated themes of disease, death, and suffering. It was only later through advancements in science and medicine that masks came to signify and communicate antiseptic practice and the containment of respiratory pathogens. However, the 21st century COVID-19 pandemic has granted the mask an even more nuanced symbology. The mask is now divisive. In one sphere, the mask communicates a belief in medical science and a desire to protect one's neighbor from contagion. In the other sphere, the mask communicates oppression, government overreach, and a skepticism toward established scientific principles. What remains evident throughout its historical metamorphosis is that masks continue to communicate should society chose to listen – and this enduring capacity influences health and social perceptions.

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