

Face to Face

The Oldest Masks in the World

Debby Hershman

with contributions by Yuval Goren; Leore Grosman,
Ahiad Ovadia, and Alexander Bogdanovsky



The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

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Foreword

A 9,000 year-old mask, whose mysterious smile reaches us from before the dawn of recorded time, represented the Israel Museum in March 2012 when we joined the Google Art Project, a revolutionary initiative that enables online audiences to conduct virtual visits to museum collections worldwide. Shortly after the launch, we learned that our mask, from a Neolithic site in the Judean Hills not far from Jerusalem, enjoyed one of the most active responses among the tens of thousands of cultural treasures made available to the public at that time through Google's technology. Its eternal artistic qualities – which stimulated so enthusiastic a response – and its tremendous importance to the history of human culture and to an understanding of the origins of religious practice and belief clearly made this mask an appropriate choice from among our encyclopedic holdings for Google's technological initiative in our own time.

Our mask from Horvat Duma, originally in the collection of the late Moshe Dayan and purchased and gifted to the Museum in 1982 through the generosity of Laurence and Wilma Tisch, New York, is part of a small and highly rare group of Neolithic stone masks. Three of these are on permanent display in the Museum's Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Archaeology Wing, where they hold a central place in the earliest chapter of our narrative of the story of religion, followed, in turn, by our presentation of the emergence of polytheistic belief, monotheism, and, finally, the formalization of the foundations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as we know them today.

Given this background, we are especially proud to present *Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World*, which brings together for the first time eleven of the only fifteen known examples of masks from this period. The exhibition follows a decade-long research project to locate, identify, and analyze this unique body of material in an attempt to unlock the secrets that these masks hold about the beginnings of ritual practice in the first agricultural societies. One year ago, with the generous cooperation of collectors who, over many years, were able to assemble a remarkable holding of nine masks, we had the privilege to complete our research – led by our Department of Prehistoric Cultures, working together with archaeological scientists from Tel Aviv University and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. *Face to Face* offers the debut for our findings, revealing the geographical origins of the masks – all within a close radius of our Museum's setting in Jerusalem – and enabling learned conjecture about the uses they served in their early communal setting.

We are deeply grateful to Dr. Debby Hershman, Curator of Prehistoric Cultures at the Israel Museum, who participated in the excavation of two masks from the Nahal Hemar Cave, starting her on her career-long pursuit of this exhibition's subject, and to exhibition designer Chanan de Lange, who joined forces with Debby to produce an installation that both captures the ancient cultic character of these masks while engaging innovative contemporary means to shed light on the masks' creators, meaning, and place in cultural history. We are also indebted to the scientists who collaborated with us on our research, especially Prof. Yuval Goren, Director of the Laboratory for Comparative Microarchaeology at Tel Aviv University, and Dr. Leore Grosman, Director of the Computerized Archaeology Laboratory at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. And warmest thanks are due to the many members of the Israel Museum staff who participated in the preparation of the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue.

Above all, we extend our deepest gratitude to Judy and Michael Steinhardt, New York, whose collecting interests embrace both the ancient world and modern visual culture, allowing them to connect the visual mystery of Neolithic masks with the modern vitality of portraits by Pablo Picasso and others. We are indebted to them for enabling our research and for the generous support that made this exhibition and its accompanying publication possible.

James S. Snyder
Anne and Jerome Fisher Director