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In Israel, Masks With a Past

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Masks in the exhibit "Face to Face."

The Israel Museum

It is a tiny yet haunting exhibit: just 12 stone masks, primitive faces with only holes for eyes, small gaping mouths without lips and uneven, spiky teeth.

These are masks that were made more than 9,000 years ago, all of them in the Judean hills and desert.

The masks are now on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, in a show called "Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World."

They have been assembled from just a handful of sources: the museum itself; the collection of the New York financier Michael Steinhardt and his wife, Judy; and one mask that belonged to the Israeli general Moshe Dayan, who loved antiquities.

The museum's curator of prehistoric cultures, Debby Hershman, who has done more than 10 years of research, said she believes that they are symbols of ancestors.

The manner in which the masks are displayed — each in its own slender glass case set at eye level in a dark room arranged in a circle reminiscent of Stonehenge — creates “ a subliminal reference to prehistoric ritual settings,” said the director of the Israel Museum, James Snyder.

“We wanted to use current technology to get a kind of up and down lighting that emphasizes the sculptural depth of each mask,” Mr. Snyder said, adding that the reflections in the glass vitrines create a kind of holographic condition in which visitors could see the front and back of the masks at the same time.

The exhibition will run through Sept. 11.