

【Noh Theater & Masks】

Noh Theater

Noh is a form of traditional Japanese theater that has been practiced in one form or another since the fourteenth century. In addition to the actors who portray the main protagonist (*shite*) and supporting characters, a Noh performance includes musicians, stage attendants, and a chorus that sings the narration and dialogue. The chorus often delivers lines for the *shite*, who conveys the emotions of his character through posture and movement rather than their own voice. Noh actors also commonly wear masks to indicate a particular character archetype, and these greatly limit their facial expressions. Given these constraints, Noh actors must be able to evoke nuanced emotion through subtle physical movements.

Noh was initially performed outdoors, and that tradition is represented in the roof above the stage and the pine tree painted on the back wall. The four columns supporting the roof also provide vital visual landmarks for the *shite*, who can see very little of the stage when wearing a mask. The covered bridge leading to the main stage (*hashigakari*) is used to indicate travel and settings outside the main scene.

Noh Masks

Masks have been a fundamental part of Noh since the beginning of its development. Although the masks cover the actors' faces, they are carved in such a way that the mask's expression can be softened or hardened by tilting the face up or down. Initially, a wide variety of different masks were used, but certain common characteristics gradually came to be associated with specific characters and archetypes.

In addition to the masks that are used exclusively for a variation of Noh called *okina*, Noh masks can be largely grouped into those representing elders (*jō*), women (*onna*), men (*otoko*), demons (*kijin*) and spirits (*ryō*). Within these types are numerous subtypes encompassing some 60 different common characters who can be further expanded into 250 or more different variations. The museum collection of masks spans all genres of Noh and includes items that were commissioned or collected in the first decades of the twentieth century by the fifteenth head of the Ii family, Ii Naotada (1881–1947).