

Ceremonial Bugaku Dance Masks

Dance has been a feature of religious ritual since ancient times, and masked-dance performances (Bugaku) at ceremonies (and for the benefit of privileged guests) became an aspect of Japanese society. These dances were performed for visiting dignitaries during the seventh century when the city of Dazaifu was a major center of foreign relations and cultural exchange. The three ceremonial dance masks showcased here—one Ryōō mask and two Nasori masks—were crafted in the thirteenth century.

The facial features of these masks are not of typical Japanese design. The distinctive long face, prominent nose, and bulging eyes added an “international” flavor to dance performances. The Ryōō mask is crested by a winged dragon, whose legs extend below the ears. Similar mask designs have been found in Indonesia but are rarely seen in Japan.