

Kurokawa Noh Mask Collection

NOTE: This corresponds to a museum exhibit depicting historic noh masks. The content will be accessed by scanning a QR code on the exhibit.

At the heart of any noh drama troupe are the masks worn by the performers. Some are associated with specific roles while others are used to portray the general characteristics of characters. Masks are typically used for six main roles: *okina* (old man), *jo* (elder), *onna-men* (woman), *otoko-men* (man), *kishin* (deity), and *onryo* (ghost or spirit).

The masks used to represent an *okina* (old man) are the oldest type of noh mask, originating in *sarugaku* (a form of theater predating noh) in the Heian period (794–1185). They depict an older male with a long white beard, intended to convey wisdom.

The masks portraying an elder (*jo*) are distinguishable by their hair. They are generally worn by the leading performers in deity or warrior plays, in which they play incarnate spirits.

Onna-men (woman) masks vary according to the character's age and character type. They have details that reflect the kind of woman being presented. There are also several varieties of *otoko-men* (man) masks. Each is designed to reflect both the man's character and social class.

Masks for *kishin* (a deity that could be both good and evil), which were developed early in noh's history, are split into two categories: *tobide*, which portray demonic spirits and fierce deities, and *beshim*, which portray goblins.

The final category of mask, *onryo* (ghosts and spirits), portrays the spirits of the dead who harbor some type of regret. They are used for both male and female characters.

Kurokawa Noh, a local kind of noh in Kurokawa, draws on an extensive collection of masks curated from a variety of sources. Many masks have been passed down over centuries to the noh's *kamiza* (upper troupe) and *shimoza* (lower troupe). Others belong to Kasuga Jinja Shrine, including some dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Kurokawa Noh-no-Sato Ogi Kaikan (Kurokawa Noh Village Ogi Hall) collection includes about 250 masks. Photos of some of them are on display. A few masks are considered sacred and treated with particular care. Others have seen frequent use and are damaged.