

East Greenland Masks and Drum Dancing

Driftwood mask of a woman (recognizable by the top knot of hair, made of the skin and outer hair of the musk ox, obtained from Scoresby Sound), with bone teeth and furrows engraved on the face blackened with lamp soot and sea mammal fat, 35 cm, Ammassalik, 1920s/30s



Driftwood mask with musk ox skin and outer hair, bone teeth and inlaid bone eyes, carved furrows, ~22 cm, Ammassalik, 1920s/30s



Bruce White photos

This mask was not hollowed out in the back and has no holes for a strap. It was therefore not made to be worn but exhibits the same sculptural qualities of more conventional masks and is similar to “unwearable” masks of this type collected by the French expedition to Ammassalik in 1934 (Gessain, 1984).

Provenance: Lars Sunde, ETHNOGRAFICA, Store Regnegade 2, Copenhagen, 1977

Drum fights were a traditional way to settle disputes in the small isolated communities of East Greenland, and were often able to settle feuds between settlements as well as resolving conflicts between individuals. In a song duel the aim was to bring out the weak sides of the opponent and get the audience to laugh at him (or her - women less frequently dueled with women). A drum fight could last all night, during which the sun set only briefly in the summer at this latitude, and even continue for several days with the audience staying until it was clear who won.



A drum fight in the hills of Qingaq mountain in Ammassalik fjord, East Greenland
(William Thalbitzer photo, June 1, 1906)

There is no indication that masks were worn in drum fights in the early contact period, although much about their use was concealed due to their prohibition by the Danish missionaries, but the singing and dancing in drum fights can be considered as a precursor to the use of masks during singing and drum dancing. Their most extensive use was probably in the *uâjêrtut* games that took place in the large winter house when the ice, from January on, permitted guests to travel by sled between the islands. There were many different “games” or scenes in *uâjêrtut* played in no particular order (Rosing, 1957; Gessain, 1984), but as in drum fights one of the most important aims was to amuse the audience and make them laugh.

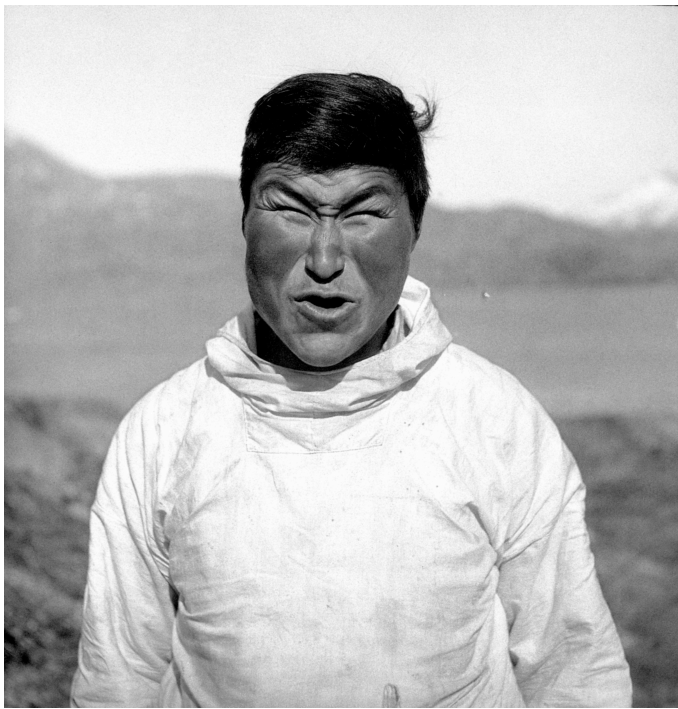
Although the meaning of many of the mask traits and shapes remains unknown, some are related to legendary personages or mythical beings (Gessain, 1984). For example, the nose with enlarged nostrils represents the martyred orphan who was lifted by the nostrils and teased, and the mouth distended with a piece of wood represents *Qaqilangerseq* (“the one who makes noise with a bone between the teeth”).



Odin, dancing and singing the repertoire of his father (a well-known singer and dancer who participated in a number of drum duels) wearing a female mask with the distended mouth and bulging cheeks that is produced by holding a piece of bone or wood between the teeth. This practice, together with the Ammassalik custom of “making faces” (see below), partially accounts for the distorted appearance of some masks. (Robert Gessain photo, 1935; from Gessain, 2007)

Literature:

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- Rosing, J. (1957): Den Østgrønlandske “maskekultur”, *Tidskriftet Grønland*, No. 7, pp. 241-251



“Making faces”

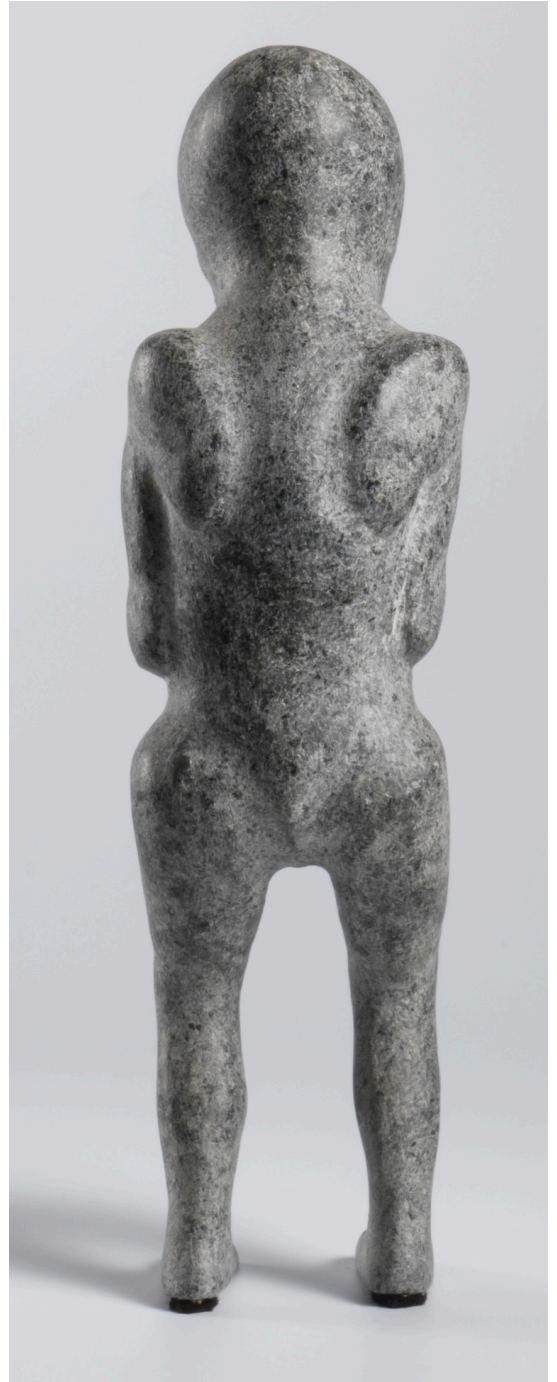
(Robert Gessain photos, Ammassalik, 1935; from Gessain, 1984)

East Greenland carvings of drum dancers





(Note: Hands holding drum and drumstick are interchanged in this photo!)



Bruce White photos