Kali Tongue on Khon Mask by Saran Yen Panya Plus the upcoming auction on 12 July 2020 to support the charity group Mask for the Masses





Bangkok, Thailand: The art of Khon performance, and the crafting of Khon masks are revered and deemed sacred. Any Thai would agree the beloved art is to be conserved, but to what degree of rigor? Time and again, the heated debate would erupt between lovers of the art, those who wish to conserve opposing the modernist with the inspiration to explore and celebrate with new appearances. A decade ago, Saran Yen Panya returned from his studies abroad with an energetic curiosity towards the definitions ‘conserve -vs- ‘conservatism’.

Saran would muse quietly, “Is High Art real? Does ‘conserve’ merely mean to hail the art on the pedestal, placed in a museum display case? What would happen if I (as a lover of the Khon mask) choose to take Khon from the pedestal and change it in the desire to ‘conserve’ it too?” Immersed in his inspiration, Saran swiftly began to draw his version of the Hanuman Khon mask with computerized polygons. He is keeping to the classic shape and form yet reduced the lines and pattern on the face, leaving only simple geometric forms and eyes adorned with stars. “I wanted my Hanuman to show his tongue, a play on ‘Tongue and Lips’ by John Pasche for the Rolling Stone.” he excitedly shared. Any designer buff knows this iconic graphic art. They would also know well, John Pasche’s famous Rolling Stone tongue is derived from the Indian depiction of Goddess Kali. “For me, taking inspiration from religious art that is on the pedestal and to produce a pop art version is a great example of conservation with a contemporary eye and heart,” explains Saran passionately.

While Khon is known throughout the world as Thai performance art, its root comes from India by way of the Khmer influence that dates back to the Ayutthaya era. Therefore, the art of Khon mask should be able to be made into pop art also. Yet Saran quickly found himself outnumbered, “I was very wrong. As soon as I sent out my sketch to Khon mask artisans in Thailand, everyone turned me down. Except for one blessed gentleman that agreed to make it for me with the stipulation that he remains anonymous.”

In the tradition of Khon dance drama, a sacred ceremony is performed to indoctrinate students. In the heritage of Khon mask making, alteration of the classical design is forbidden. It is deemed a taboo. Every master mask artisan believes this. “I went into great detail explaining my intention and inspirations that originated from the concept of evolution and conservation. Then, I proceeded to share my vision of incorporating Goddess Kali’s tongue on my mask. Our phone conversation lasted nearly an hour.” he recalled. In conclusion, to Saran’s great fortune, the artisan agreed to make the unique contemporary design.

From that fateful day in 2011, Saran never imagined he would display his modernist Khon Mask in public for any occasion. What began as a mission impossible that led him to the unnamed artisan was a monumental win. “ I felt the need to personally and privately treasure the experience, a reminder of how two strangers came to understand and honor one another at a heart level. Today I remain in awe at my ability to convince the craftsman, who is devoted to his art yet chose to explore, test, and change his inherited view.”

Sunday, July 12th, 2020 marks the milestone for Saran Yen Panya’s ‘Khon Mask with Tongue’ to come down from his private collection to find a new admirer. This rare one of a kind Khon Mask will be up for auction to raise funds for pandemic relief at the community level. “I hope this change will benefit the project ‘MASK for the MASSES’ and inspire others to be inquisitive. For me, conservation is not only about a treasure on a pedestal, but it also means passing it on too.” beamed the thought-provoking designer.

MASK for the MASSES is bringing together Thai creatives to create limited edition ‘Fascinator Masks’ to raise funds for community-based projects in Thailand amidst the pandemic. We welcome all galleries, art collectors, and art aficionados to join forces in bidding for each of the masterpieces on auction. This way, not a mask is left behind, and more good gets done. FB & IG // MASK.forthe.MASSES

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