



UNMASKING MASKS

From 27 October 2026 to 28 February 2027, the Barbier-Mueller Museum presents *Unmasking Masks*, an exhibition featuring 84 works from Africa, Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas. Through a unique exhibition itinerary, it explores the universal reasons that drive human beings to wear masks.

Why do human beings wear masks?

For millennia and across every continent, men and women have been creating masks. Some are intended for rituals, others for theatre, carnivals, sports, cinema or even contemporary art. They are made of wood, metal, fibres, leather, plastic or recycled materials. They seem to belong to very different worlds. Yet they all tell the same story: that of humanity. With *Unmasking Masks*, the Barbier-Mueller Museum offers a unique experience that transcends conventional classifications.

Here, the works are no longer presented according to their geographical origin or historical period: they engage in a dialogue centred on a fundamental question: why have human beings, everywhere and throughout history, felt the need to wear masks?

A unique dialogue between cultures... and eras

The exhibition brings together 84 masks from a wide variety of regions: Africa, Oceania, Asia, the Americas and Europe, as well as contemporary creations and objects closely linked to masks or echoing their forms – sometimes even ‘pseudo-masks’, which challenge the very boundary between mask, appearance and representation – drawn from cinema, theatre, the professional world and sports.

A Baoulé mask from Côte d'Ivoire and a funerary mask from the island of Java stand alongside contemporary works by Romuald Hazoumè and a piece by Jean Tinguely, a Noh theatre mask, a hockey helmet, a welder's mask and even a Commedia dell'arte mask.

At first glance, they seem to have nothing in common.

And yet... They all invite us to ask ourselves the same questions: who are we?

Why do we want to become someone else? What are we seeking to hide, protect, reveal or transcend when we mask our faces?

The mask: a universal language

The exhibition shows that the mask is not merely an ethnographic object or a relic of the past. It has always been part of the great human experiences: celebrating, healing, protecting, impressing, performing, passing on traditions, communicating with the invisible, or confronting fear. By concealing a face, the mask often reveals a deeper identity. It allows us to cross a boundary, to leave everyday life behind and enter another world, whether sacred, artistic, sporting, or imaginary.

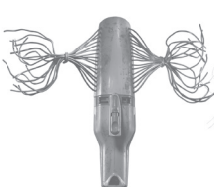
An exhibition firmly rooted in the present

By juxtaposing ancient works with contemporary creations, *Unmasking Masks* demonstrates that the mask has never ceased to be a powerful creative tool.

The works of Romuald Hazoumè and Jean Tinguely remind us that today's artists continue to use the mask to examine our world: memory, war, identity, the environment and consumer society. The mask does not belong to the past. It is still very much alive.

As the late Alain-Michel Boyer, professor of art history and specialist in African art, emphasised: ‘The mask does not distance us from ourselves: it can sometimes help us discover ourselves better’.





A presentation that deliberately blurs the lines

The exhibition takes the public by surprise. During the first month, some exhibition labels will be deliberately reversed. Visitors become detectives. They can no longer simply read a label; they must observe the works, comparing forms, materials, gazes and expressions.

This presentation invites everyone to rediscover the pleasure of observation before that of knowledge. It challenges the way we visit a museum and reminds us that a work of art can never be reduced to a few lines on a label.

A richly illustrated exhibition catalogue

A 274 page art catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Unmasking Masks*. First published in 2012 and now featuring a new cover, it brings together several contributions that highlight the symbolic richness and diversity of the masks on display. It opens with a foreword by Érik Orsenna, a member of the Académie française, and an introduction by the renowned Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt, offering two complementary perspectives on the imaginative and human power of the mask.

The catalogue also features an original short story by Koffi Kwahulé, an Ivorian author and playwright, which explores, in narrative form, the grey areas between presence and absence, reality and the imagination. Richly illustrated, the volume reproduces all the works in colour and accompanies them with detailed descriptive notes written by recognised specialists, making this catalogue a true reference tool and an essential extension of the exhibition.

The Barbier-Mueller Museum

Treasures from around the world nestled in an intimate museum of international renown.

Located in the heart of Geneva's Old Town, it preserves, studies and displays a remarkable and highly diverse collection of art objects. Today, this collection comprises several thousand pieces, ranging from antiquity to the contemporary era and spanning every continent.

Twice a year, the museum revamps the presentation of its collections and stages temporary exhibitions. It also occasionally invites contemporary artists to offer a fresh perspective on the works and, where appropriate, to rethink the layout of the exhibition spaces, thereby helping to shape the interpretation and perception of the collections.

The programme is enriched by lectures, talks, readings and performances, which extend the exhibition experience.



Practical Information

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**The Museum is open every
day from 11 am to 5 pm.**

