

“MOON DANCERS: YUP’IK MASKS AND THE SURREALISTS”

By Christopher Green ☞ September 1, 2018 10:15am



For André Breton, collecting *les arts premiers* (tribal art) was an inherently “surrealist activity” capable of displacing the rationalized relations of the modern world. “The surrealist practice,” he wrote in 1948, “is inseparable from seduction, from the fascination that these objects exercise over us.” The Surrealists desired Indigenous arts of Oceania and the Americas for the mythic and animistic characteristics they saw in totemic carvings and masks, including those created by Arctic peoples for winter ceremonies. In 1935, the Surrealists began acquiring Arctic material from the [Galerie Charles Ratton](#) in Paris; and the pace of their collecting accelerated when many of them moved to New York to escape the strife of World War II. There, they encountered [Julius Carlebach](#)’s Third Avenue boutique and its stock of Northwest Coast, Inuit, and Hopi objects.

“Moon Dancers: Yup’ik Masks and the Surrealists,” which [Di Donna Galleries](#) organized in collaboration with [Donald Ellis Gallery](#), paired [ritual masks](#) from Alaska with works by Surrealists who prized such masks for their ceremonial role in transforming the wearer into the embodiment of the spirit—a transfigurative power that they imagined might also affect the Euro-American psyche. Against deep blue walls, the twisted grins and feathered visages of seventeen *kegginaqut* dance masks embodying powerful beings such as *yua* (animal spirits) and the *tuunrat* (spirit helpers) of Yup’ik shamans were interspersed among nearly sixty paintings and sculptures. A small mask owned by Breton, for example, appeared next to his gouache *Pour Elisa* (1947). The blonde fringe of hair and oval head in the portrait mimic the mask’s yellow halo of feathers and its concentric hoops representing the universe. The exhibition organizers claimed that such formal affinities reveal the “poetic associations” between the Surrealist aesthetic and the mystical hybrid qualities of Yup’ik art.

The side-by-side hang of the exhibition seduced the viewer into finding semblances everywhere: the toothy crescent smile of a nineteenth-century Anvik mask seemed to be reflected in the curving feline spine in **Victor Brauner's** *Extrait du radiant symbolique* (1962) as well as in the red-lipped mouth of **Picabia's** pale and ghoulish *Monstre* (1946). However, too many of these comparisons were superficial, coincidences of clever curation rather than representations of any historic encounter. The wicked teeth on a birdlike figure in **Max Ernst's** *À l'intérieur de la vue: les oiseaux* (1928) mirrored those of a feather-ringed Cup'ik mask. Yet Ernst had likely not seen such masks when he made that work, and derived his avian forms from other sources. The out-of-context correspondences recalled the failures of the Museum of Modern Art's 1984–85 “Primitivism' in 20th Century Art” exhibition, which was criticized for freezing non-Western cultures in an ahistoric past that was “discovered” by Euro-American artists. While “Moon Dancers” brought more historical specificity to the subject, it remained tainted by the asymmetrical power and colonial circumstances of Surrealist contact with these masks, privileging the Euro-American artists as the agents who elevated Indigenous objects to the category of fine art. The Yup'ik creators were unnamed and relegated to the space of mystic ritual and the primitive, a position exacerbated by the lack of Yup'ik voices in the gallery. The work of constructing substantial connections was left to the catalogue, which features well-researched scholarly essays discussing the history of Surrealist collecting and the use and meanings of the masks. The authors argue that the relationship between the collector-Surrealist and the masks was more than mere colonial desire because of the anti-anthropocentric Surrealist belief in the power of objects.

The highlight of the exhibition was one of nine elaborate weather masks collected during a 1907–08 expedition to Alaska by Adams Hollis Twitchell and purchased in 1944 by Enrico Donati. Representing *ungalaq*, the south wind, the toothy mask embodied a warm rain-bringing *yua* when danced, while the paddles and batons hanging from its winglike appendages clacked together to mimic rain and breaking ice. Breton described the “force” that such masks exercised over him (he owned a similar mask, now at the Louvre), and Donati imbued his paintings with a diaphaneity not unlike that of the mask's downy feathers. But rather than using these masks merely to contextualize the avant-garde's craving for otherworldly escape, this exhibition might have foregrounded Yup'ik understandings of these ceremonial objects as beings and potential agents. Yup'ik could tell us how these masks might have watched the Surrealists at work in their studios and actively influenced their art, rather than merely serving as inspiration. Such a perspective could help to avoid primitivist pitfalls and to allow for a deeper exploration of the resonances between the immanent ritual power of these dancing masks and the forces perceived by the Surrealists enchanted by their crooked smiles.