

Of late, I've been contemplating a few of Life's Big Questions. Among them is what can turn an ordinary mortal into an artist? In this, I think of my good friend Mort Golub and a memorable Sunday afternoon back in 1984. It started off like any other Sunday in those days, where we would "come on down and pay our respects to the Church of the Holy Flea" (better known to most as the Sausalito Flea Market). This was held north of San Francisco, just across the Golden Gate Bridge. There was always a rich mixture of treasures, junk, ephemera, and ethnic art from Afghanistan, Bolivia, or Cambodia right on to Xhosa, Yemen, or Zambia and everywhere in between. It shut down in 1995 due to real estate development, and its loss is still acutely felt by many.

FIG. 1 (below left):
Mort Golub, 2014.
Photo: Nora Stratton.

FIGS. 2a and 2b (right and middle): Mask.
Monpa or Sherdukpen;
eastern Bhutan or Arunachal Pradesh. 18th–19th century.
Wood, pigment. H: 20.3 cm.
Ex Mort Golub.
Luciano Lanfranchi collection, Switzerland.
Photo: Don Tuttle.



MORT GOLUB

From Mahakala to Outsider Art

By Thomas Murray



I arrived a little late that day, and Mort came over with a mask in his hand, his morning score: "What did I think?" In an instant, I recognized the folly of my tardiness. It was one of the finest Himalayan masks I had ever seen—a black Mahakala (FIG. 3). It had come fresh from Nepal, brought down out of the mountains by a Sherpa to be sold to pay the expenses of a Tibetan New Year's pilgrimage to circumambulate the sacred Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu. Now it was halfway around the world, and Mort had astutely bought it for \$600.

Mort understood the mask to be a serious work of art, a blessing, and a sign. Why not

FIG. 3 (right):
Dharmapala mask probably depicting Mahakala.
Tibet. C. 15th century.
Wood, pigment. H: 27.9 cm.
Ex Mort Golub.
Jonathan French collection, Washington state, USA.



use it as the founding piece of a collection of Himalayan masks that he and I would collaborate on? In that moment, there were great examples coming out of Nepal with an aesthetic that was not widely understood. What constituted a masterpiece had not yet been codified, and beauty was truly in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes this permitted a great acquisition opportunity for an overlooked piece at a very attractive price. Mort agreed to fund the effort, and I would draw upon my connections in Kathmandu, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, where important pieces were bubbling to the surface. We handled many masks, thinking deeply about each, and the collection grew to be what was one of the most important of its kind. More significantly, it proved to be a partnership that would be enriched by each of our visions and aesthetic sensibilities. The more masks we acquired, the more we learned from them as they spoke to us and revealed their magic.

We felt a responsibility to advance understanding of this important yet relatively unknown art tradition, and, to that end, in 1995 I published the article “Demons and Deities” in that year’s *Hali Annual*. There had been very little academic literature on Himalayan masks, so I proposed three primary style designations: monastic, village, and primitive-shamanic. The history of religion, from Siberian shamanism to early Buddhism, was considered in relation to mask rituals, which served to convey spiritual messages to an often preliterate people.

A psycho-spiritual power becomes invested in a ritual object the more it is used in ceremonies. Here, efficacy need not be in alignment with Western aesthetic priorities such as symmetry, fineness of carving, and so on. A deep patina of long use begets its own magic, which becomes far more important to the user’s psyche than a mask’s conventional beauty. This principle is well understood by the cultures of the South Seas, defined by the word, *mana*. So too, centuries of use have invested Himalayan masks with thick patina and great *mana*.

About halfway into this ten-year process of acquisition, Mort began to create sculptures and “masks” out of found objects, such as



FIG. 4 (above):
Mask. Gurung or Magar;
Middle Hills, Nepal.
Likely 17th century or
earlier.

Wood. H: 20.3 cm.
Ex Mort Golub.
Private collection, Paris.
Photo: Don Tuttle.

pieces of rusty metal and odd pieces of wood he found at the beach. He scoured flea markets even more deeply, now looking for objects with shape and form that spoke to him—old metal tools, industrial detritus, and wooden hat forms, to name just a few. Through an internal creative alchemy, he would transform these discarded shards of our consumer society into compelling, visionary, and *mana*-laden artworks informed by the aesthetic lessons the Himalayan masks had offered. As his body of work grew, it became clear that something very special was happening: responding to what had become an irresistible urge, Mort had gone from collecting art to creating it.

The marvelous sculptures Mort fashions are mostly in the form of human faces, though some are more fully figurative. Working without the impediment of formal art training, he seems to have accessed a psychic landscape populated with indigenous nature spirits, Buddhist subdeities, and animal totems. His art emanates a sense of quiet inner life, expressed with unusual sensitivity and a rare ability to discern compelling forms in common objects. While he describes how collecting transformation masks of the Himalayas had, in fact, transformed him, his sources of inspiration extend far beyond the Tibetan Plateau to Siberia, Japan, Indonesia, Alaska, Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and the artwork of Paleolithic man found in the caves of Eurasia.

As it all too often will, real life intervened, and around the turn of the millennium Mort found he had to part with much of his mask collection to cover obligations to his ex-wife. Unthinkable at one point but thanks to the satisfaction that came from making his own art, he found it was far easier to let go of those masks from the mountains that he so dearly loved. Timing wise, this aligned with the development of a strong interest in Himalayan masks in Europe, and collectors and dealers flew over from Paris and Brussels to seduce one or more masks from Mort's collection. Many also brought examples of Mort's own sculptures back to the Continent, where he is now represented in a number of celebrated private collections, such as that of Luciano "Lele" Lanfranchi.

Initially, Mort sold his artworks privately, mostly to tribal art collectors, dealers, and fellow artists. Starting in 1996, he began doing gallery shows, as well as selling to the general public twice a year during the Open Studios event in the ICB Building, a famed artist colony in Sausalito where Mort and I shared a gal-

lery space. Having begun locally, in due course this expanded to shows in New York, Paris, Milan, and London. He formed a long-standing relationship with Cavin-Morris Gallery in New York, which represented him and placed his work in a number of exhibitions and prominent collections of outsider art.

Mort's journey demonstrates how collecting art can change life for the better, enrich the soul, and inspire greatness and creativity. The process of his transformation can be seen as an archetypal story of the hero who struggles, suffering to accept his destiny, yet in time emerges victorious—in this case as a true artist, whose creativity arises from within.

And it all started with buying a mask at the flea market.



FIG. 5 (above):

Mask.
Middle Hills, Nepal.
19th century or earlier.
Wood, pigment, wax. H: 24.1 cm.
Ex Mort Golub.
Clinton Nagy collection, California.
Photo: Robert Bengtson.

SELECT EXHIBITIONS

1996, 1997, 1998, 1999 — Lawrence Hultberg Fine Arts, San Francisco (two solo shows, three group shows, and permanent collection)

1997, 2001 — Shirley Day Gallery, London (group shows)

1999, 2005 — Tony Kitz Gallery, San Francisco (group shows)

2002 — *Art at the Lagoon*, San Rafael, California (group show)

2004, 2005, 2006, 2007 — *Marin Arts Council Annual Studio Show*, Corte Madera, California (group shows)

2005, 2006, 2007 — *Sausalito Invitational Shows*, Sausalito, California (group shows)

2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 — *Marin Arts Council Annual Show*, Marin Civic Center, California (group shows)

2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 — *I.C.B. invitationals*, Sausalito, California (group shows)
2006 — Gallery Commonweal, Bolinas, California (solo show)

2006, 2007, 2008 — Volakis Gallery, Yountville, California, (group shows)

2006, 2009, 2011, 2013 — Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York (group shows)

2008 — *Sticks*, Intuit Museum, Chicago (group show)

2014 — *Transformation Masks and Artistic Metamorphosis*, San Francisco Tribal and Textile Arts Show, San Francisco (solo show)

2015 — Gangl Interieur in die Buchdruckerei, Graz, Austria (solo show)

2017 — Renzo Freschi Oriental Art, Milan (solo show with Himalayan masks from the Lanfranchi collection)