

***Guatemala's Masks and Drama.* Jim Pieper. Torrance, California: Pieper and Associates, 2006. Distributed by University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. 284 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Walter E. Little

Guatemala's Masks and Drama by Jim Pieper is a coffee table book with substance. Lavishly illustrated with 586 color photographs—predominantly of ritual dance masks but also of the artisans who fabricate them and the dancers in costume that wear them—this glossy book will most likely enthrall and annoy scholars of indigenous art and performance. Essentially, the book is a catalogue of Guatemalan masks—mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries—that have been previously used in cultural performances and are now in the possession of private collectors and small museums.

Drawing on 30 years of experience as a collector of Guatemalan masks and witness to the dramas and dances in which these masks are used, Pieper writes in a casual style for other collectors, rather than to an academic audience. The opening chapters combine romanticisms of Mayas' cultural ways with guidelines for mask collecting. For example, Pieper writes: "How was the mask treated—lovingly or carelessly? Was it danced or did it sit, preserved, on a shelf? The reader will begin to understand how to intuit the mask's essence and retain energy" (p. 12). This kind of romanticism in combination with collecting advice has the effects of creating a number of ambiguities for the reader. For instance, Pieper laments the decline of woodcarving but discusses a thriving tourism trade of masks that will never be danced. At the same time, he provides detailed tips on how to identify an old mask that has been used in performances from a new mask that has been modified and not used. These perspectives are then placed within his enthusiasm that all masks—new and old, used in performances or produced for the tourism market—are worthy of the collector. These ambiguities mask what would be truly offensive to scholars, a guide to identify antique masks and the sources to find them. Instead, Pieper presents the material in value-neutral ways. Maya woodcarvers and vendors are not trying to cheat foreign mask buyers in making their new masks look old; they are merely responding to the cultural aesthetics of their customers (p. 21). We are assured that carvers and sellers are not out to cheat tourists and collectors, but these consumers can benefit from knowing how a mask is constructed, knowing whether it was used in a performance, and being able to determine its age.

The aspiring collector, one may assume, will take this advice to search out old masks, rather than the plentiful reproductions and colorful new creations found at affordable prices in tourism-oriented markets. As with other collectible Guatemalan handicrafts—textiles, in particular—this kind of collecting does not encourage the continued production of masks or inspire youths to become carvers. What is not made clear is to what extent does mask making constitute a viable income. Can mask makers sustain themselves and their families through sales to local clients, tourists, and collectors and by renting masks and dance costumes for festive and sacred performances? Pieper does not go beyond a superficial celebration of all masks and an encouragement of collectors and tourists to buy new masks.

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Most scholars will also find Pieper's lack of citations bothersome, but he does not have to appease this audience. In addition, although Pieper places himself as the butt of Maya jokes regarding his collecting techniques, these same techniques may seem offensive to scholars. For instance, he writes:

I once negotiated with a dancer who responded to my request to buy his mask in pantomime in the center of a large group of villagers. He would dance over, fake taking off his mask, motion to see how much money I was holding in my hand, then dance back to the center of the group. Every one [sic] would laugh as this continued for probably a half hour until I realized I was the entertainment and sale was going to happen (p. 53).

Why then would a scholarly audience be interested in reading *Guatemala's Masks and Drama*? The book is a wealth of raw data. First, he provides a good, basic introduction to Guatemalan mask making and the performances in which masks are used. Pieper explains mask-making techniques, provides overviews of three different mask workshops, and short descriptions of roughly 32 different dances, including those commonly described by folklorists and anthropologists, like "Dance of the Conquest." Of these dances, he includes eight scripts (the instructions for performers and their dialogue) that he copied from the performers themselves, as he collected masks over the years. Aside from providing little socio-cultural context and no analysis, the only documentation lacking is the choreography of the dances.

A second reason for scholars of handicrafts, in general, but masks in particular, to read this book is that not only does Pieper write freely from academic restrictions, he is also free from the typical museum catalogue genre. Not faced with having to describe a limited number of masks, he visually presents a wide range and variety of masks. This illustrates how variable and changeable Guatemalan masks are over time, across regions, and among different ethno-linguistic groups of Mayas. With photographs as evidence, his book documents Maya creativity and diversity in a way that exhibition-oriented catalogues tend not to do.

A third reason why scholars should consider Pieper's book is that it provides an intimate look into the mind of a collector, one who is secure in his collecting habits vis-à-vis other collectors and who is curious about Guatemalan customs beyond masks themselves. Anthropological research on collectors themselves has been sparse and this book is a wonderful source for understanding how collectors think about the items they desire.

One cannot help but be overwhelmed by the hundreds of photographs of masks in this book. However, *Guatemala's Masks and Drama* needs to be read in context of the many fine ethnographies of highland Guatemala and the culturally rich analyses of Maya craft production and traditional performance. These books frequently lack such photographs and leave the reader to imagine the cultural items and practices being described and analyzed.

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