The RCAH Center for Poetry and the MSU Museum hosted West Virginia poet laureate Irene McKinney for a week long residency in February 2011 that included public readings, class visits and discussion, and a writing workshop.

Irene McKinney Visiting Poet

The exhibit provides a core for continuing activities and products complementing MASK: photography, performance, digital media, artwork, writings, public presentations and more. Bring us your ideas.

"MASK: Secrets and Revelations"

The MASK exhibition at Michigan State University Museum includes over 200 masks from the museum’s global collections on public display for the first time.

"Masks are both works of art and powerful statements about cultures and human behaviors," notes Gary Morgan, MSU Museum director and exhibit curator. "They are a part of the universal human experience. This exhibit explores issues of spirituality, perceptions of self-identity, power and authority, human rites of passage, and the place of people in nature, as well as masks in sport and war, and in the popular media. There are life and death masks, and masks that simply reflect the desire of people to have a good time."

"The MASK exhibit does not seek to document how different cultures make masks, or to catalog the many purposes of masks. Ultimately, MASK is about identity and perception - how we perceive ourselves, how we want others to perceive us, and how we perceive those around us. The MASK exhibit is as much about ideas as it is about the artifacts themselves."

"MASK is based on a variety of cross-campus collaborations. We wanted the exhibit and related programs to actively involve faculty and students as contributors and as participants," explains Morgan.

Poet Irene McKinney showed me that masks can be vehicles for contemporary expression as well as historical objects.

Colleen Anderson, workshop participant
Irene McKinney

West Virginia poet laureate Irene McKinney is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry and two West Virginia Commission on the Arts Fellowships in Poetry.

Irene is the author of six books of poetry (below). She is editor of the anthology Backcountry: Contemporary Writing in West Virginia, and has held fellowships at MacDowell Colony, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Blue Mountain Center. She was appointed Poet Laureate of West Virginia in 1994. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines.

Irene is Professor Emerita at West Virginia Wesleyan College and Director of the new West Virginia Wesleyan Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing. Her poems have been featured on Garrison Keillor's Public Radio show The Writer's Almanac and on Verse Daily.

Books by Irene McKinney

- The Girl With A Stone In Her Lap
- The Wasps At The Blue Hexagons
- Quick Fire and Slow Fire
- Six O’Clock Mine Report
- Vivid Companion
- Unthinkable: Selected Poems 1976-2004

Masks are works of art and powerful statements about culture and human behaviors. We wear them to hide, we wear them to project a presence, we wear them to cross spiritual dimensions.

Gary Morgan, MASK curator and MSU Museum director
Bush Pig

Inspired by a video

The Bush Pig masker in this market day performance charges toward his audience, kicks up a shroud of dust, then turns away and flops down abruptly on the ground complete with an irascible attitude that quivers to the tips of his ivory tusks.

I am amazed to see this actor on the earthen stage in Africa portray the pig so well that I can divine his art from but moments of video images transported to the white wall of the MSU Museum, separated by an ocean, mountains, and further divided by rivers of culture.

Fran Lewis

Masked Conversation

Am I wearing a mask? Why do you ask? Don’t I always bare my teeth and wear cowries in my hair?

And you?

Am I to believe that you are really mean one day, and beneficent another? You are not for real.

Your breasts are not so pointy, though your hair is bristly, your skin is blotchy, and your eyes bug out a bit.

You think you are so brave wearing worms in your hair, Remember, Medusa had snakes.

Pull in your horns, my dear, You can’t scare me.

Allan Schmid

Mossi warthog or bush pig mask, Burkina Faso. Photo by Julie Avery, MSU Museum Collections.

Tiger mask, Guerrero, Mexico and Bamana n’tomo mask, Mali. Photos by Stephanie Wottreng, MSU Museum Collections.
Looming

My face’s blackness is filled with power and urging. 
Red rimmed eyes see maidens yet to know my lust; 
mothers heavy with my lust and fertile seed. 
Horns of power, horns of procreation. 
Commanding you to come to me.

Blackness for willpower and domination. 
Wild dull strands of hair obscure my face – 
My mask, my past.

White teeth clack and sing: 
clack out a pulsating, intimate dance. 
Sing of my prowess and fertility.

Do you want me? I want you.

Patricia P. Miller

Outgoing

Where my eyes should be are holes a buckeye could drop through. 
I see nothing.

I speak wind, 
talk nonsense in two directions, 
say whatever comes into my head and out again,

sing a song of cilantro and sassafras, 
shout hallelujah and go to hell and ha-ha-ha.

Will I listen? No. 
If ever I had an ear, 
it's done a disappearing act, 
gone missing in the cleft between my faces.

I am all expression, pal, 
extroverted to the extreme. 
Everything’s leaving, 
always leaving. 
Nothing’s coming back.

Colleen Anderson
Spiral Dance

I don this narrow mask

to celebrate the spirit that unites us.
The spiral is a celebration,
a dance to share the most basic,
the most complex of that within us
from which we
all originate.
To which we
all return.
(Of course, we never really left.)

The ripple never-ending,
the spiral of life.
We celebrate the end of the dry season.
The turning of the Wheel.
The dance that spins
us all.

As above, so below.

The rains return
as they always do.
Completing, and resuming
the infinite spiral.

Laurie Hollinger

Dancer

I am honored to represent the outward flow from the inner, in a ripple that spreads eternally. My face is that of blank surprise, unadorned, with eyebrows raised, and lips ajar.

Your attention is drawn above my head. My face, even masked, is irrelevant. These patterns of triangles and squares and lines are but a frame for the spiral of life, emerging from the tall placard above my third eye. We know nothing, really, which is all we need to know.

Laurie Hollinger

Igbo mba mask, Nigeria. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, MSU Museum Collections.
A Start . . . then Recognition

The hair on my head rises!

My eyes widen into growing circles,

to take it all in.

Then brows up, rippling like

from a stone hitting water.

Shoulders follow, up to my ears,

and push my arms into a hug

to protect my soul.

Hands are there, ready;

to hold my life breath,

and protect my senses.

First reaction, then growing understanding;

realizing no threat,

I can exhale in expressions of joy!

Julie Avery

Chant for a Klansman Outfit on Display:
Who Sewed Your Robe?

Who sewed your hallowed gown

that sheltered you from hood to foot—

did you require some wife

to acquiesce and stitch all night?

Or was it your own hands

that sewed those sleeves from sheets

with the stench of smoke that lingers,

will not leave?

Was that a sliver on your thumb,
festering from carting crosses in your truck?

But then, knotting braids of thick rope

can chafe on blisters, rub like hell.

When you tried on that matching hood,
squinting pig-eyed from its mask

did sweat slide down, glisten your cheek

and one drop hit your tongue?

So who sewed your robe, Klan Man?

No way can I walk by—
your residue comes through, still stains—
your ghost threads spiral, rise.

Dorothy Brooks

Papua, New Guinea mask. Photo by Stephanie Wottreng, MSU Museum Collections.

Ku Klux Klan robe, USA. Photo by Pearl Yee Wong, MSU Museum Collections.
Still with Us in the Village

_after viewing a mask
from Papua, New Guinea_

I am the dark part,
so black I am beyond black,
beyond all the words
we know for fear, for loss, even for death.
I am an animal you cannot name.
You have never seen me,
but you know I roam
the chambers of your heart,
swim the streams of your blood,
climb the ladder of your ribs.
Like Jacob, I sleep beneath
it on a stone.

At migration time,
I make no sound. You feel
only an inner shifting,
something like paws
on snow, something
like fringe in the wind.
Part wolf? Part skunk?
Part knobbly-brained squirrel?
My eyes are convex
or concave, depending
on the light. I have no tongue.
There is no need for me
to speak. The body
speaks for me.
The body punctuates
my thought. See the hand
go up in front of the face?
See the feet slip backwards?
See the body drop
to its knees?

That's my sorrow
prowling the long grass
of your memory,
my grief streaking the winter
sky you walk beneath
on an April day.

Anita Skeen

Mask #166

If only I could be young again
If only I had known then
what I know now.
So I sit with the Nigerian Igbo gazelle mask
narrow, bold, stark white diamonds
painted on a black background.
A stripe of earth ochre
where a nose would be
goes from top to bottom,
is studded with four rod-like protrusions,
white-ochre-white-ochre.
Each of the four rod's ends are painted black,
the white have a dot of ochre at the end
surrounded by black, the white
a dot of ochre.
The eye slits are long and narrow,
surrounded by a thin band of black,
inside large white diamonds,
so I can see far, far.
But, most magnificent is my single horn,
slicing high into the air,
scimitar slicing forward, the sides
are a white diamond on black background,
touch of that ochre nose strip
bleeds over onto the bottom.
The front edge that cuts into the future
with such felicity
alternates dots of ochre and white.
Though I am but head and horn
all of my being,
chased by famished lions,
charges into the future.

Michael Davis

Papua, New Guinea mask. Photo by Stephanie Wottreng, MSU Museum Collections.

Igbo yam mask, Nigeria. Photo by Stephanie Wottreng, MSU Museum Collections.
Niqab

I have seen the way flowers look at night. The way small cupped petals perch upward on thin gray stems and sway as the night moves in that way it moves without anyone really noticing. I have seen the way flowers look at night. Black and curled like toes or the arched spines of cats. Folding like swarming tides, or cloaked brows, or dark skin creasing with worry.

Grace Pappalardo

The Workshop Experience

Workshop participants were a diverse group of MSU students, faculty, staff, retirees and community members.

Dorothy Brooks  I think this workshop represented the very best model of what can happen when many facets of the MSU cultural network take the initiative in building bridges—not only among various cultures, but between town and gown, as well.

Laurie Hollinger  I am interested in the way we “represent” ourselves in different settings, and the array of these representations in the form of masks gave me much to ponder. Irene McKinney’s vast insight into the uses and meanings of masks was priceless.

Anita Skeen  The MSU Museum Mask Workshop was one of this semester’s highlights. Being in that wonderful space, with those intriguing masks, and the magic of poet Irene McKinney, was transformative. The comment of McKinney’s that I took away from the workshop was related to how we, as observers, so often find the masks frightening. “Why should we be afraid of them and find them so strange?” said McKinney. “We made them, they came out of us. All that stuff is already in us, somewhere.”

Grace Pappalardo  I enjoy writing poetry about the small and mundane in hopes that readers will view such things with a renewed sense of appreciation. This workshop gave me the opportunity to create a literary relationship with a very particular object, a mask.

A. Allan Schmid  The MASK exhibit gave me insight into the similarities and differences among cultures. It was fun to imagine stories for each mask.

Patricia Miller  I support and enjoy the writing experiences sponsored by the Poetry Center. I am primarily a prose travel and fiction writer, so my experience with the great poets involved with the center has been inspiring and meaningful. The mask workshop was especially intriguing and it stimulated some exceptional poetry as each participant reflected on and was moved to write about a mask that particularly "spoke" to them.

Colleen Anderson  Irene McKinney’s workshop inspired me to see the exhibition masks in a new way: she showed me they can be vehicles for contemporary expression as well as historical objects. I have always loved reading and writing poems.

Fran Lewis  I gained a greater depth of appreciation for masks as expressions of art and culture around the world. The more I learned, thought and wrote about the masks in the exhibit, the more real and intrinsic to culture their functions became.
Head with Two Ducks

after a mask from the Ivory Coast

Stop that incessant quacking, and the quacking back. Stop the flapping and the slapping of feathers, the yellow down always floating down. Stop the bill snapping open, snapping shut, duck cackling cracking the frozen air. Go find a pond, find a lake, find a paddling of ducks, a gaggle of geese, or better yet, a rout of wolves, an ambush of tigers. Do not come back. Find another nest to preen your fluff on, to drop your eggs in. Take flight, take off, take Prozac. Tuck your happy yapper under your wing. Turn out the lights. Don’t snore.

Anita Skeen

Honoring and in thanks to Irene McKinney
Residential College for the Arts and Humanities
Center for Poetry

Since the fall of 2007, the RCAH Center for Poetry has encouraged the reading, writing, and discussion of poetry and a growing awareness of the place and power of poetry in our everyday lives.

The center brings prominent poets to campus to share their work through readings, workshops, informal gatherings, and one-on-one tutorials. Poets are also work in the community with public school students, adult learners, and organizations.

Primary funding for "MASK: Secrets and Revelations" is from the MSU Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives, the Asian Studies Center and the African Studies Center.

Special Thanks

Poets
Irene McKinney, poet-in-residence
Colleen Anderson, Julie Avery, Dorothy Brooks, Michael Davis, Lia Greenwell, Laurie Hollinger, Fran Lewis, Patricia Miller, Grace Pappalardo, Anita Sleen, and Al Schmid.

RCAH Center for Poetry
• Anita Sleen, poet, director and founder of the center
• Stephanie Glazier, assistant to the director. MFA student, Antioch University
• Lia Greenwell, programming assistant. RCAH and English programs undergraduate student

MSU Museum
• Gary Morgan, director and MASK curator
• Julie Avery, education director and Mask Inspired Poetry editor
• Lora Helou, communications, marketing director
• Stephanie Palagyi, production assistant

MSU Museum
The Michigan State University Museum is committed to understanding, interpreting, and respecting natural and cultural diversity.

As Michigan's land-grant university museum, this commitment to society is met through education, exhibitions, research, and the building and stewardship of collections that focus on Michigan and its relationship to the Great Lakes, and the world beyond. Much of our work is done in collaborations – on campus and in communities nationwide and internationally.