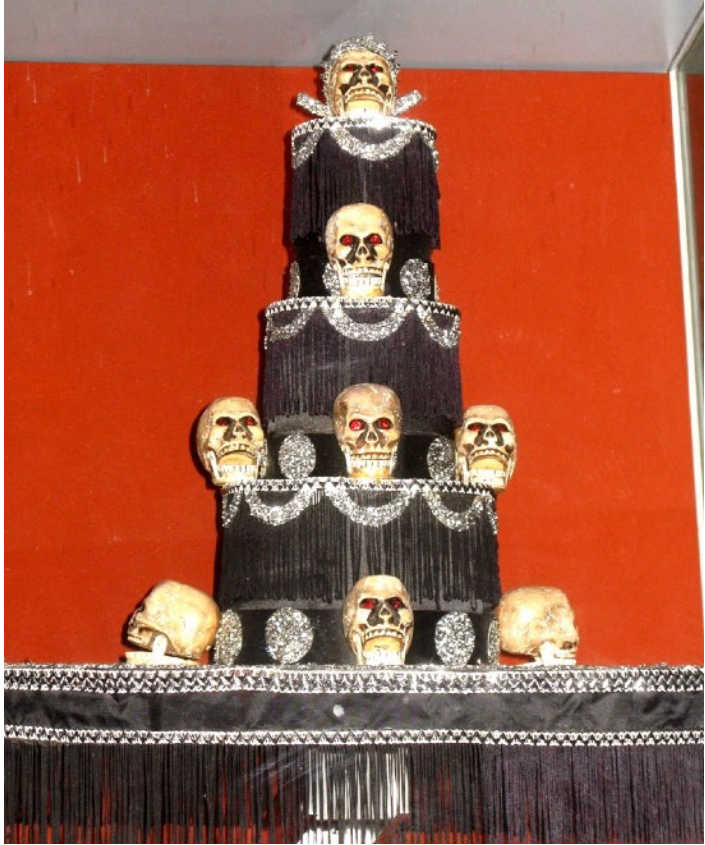


Midnight Robber Headpieces
Commissioned and Collected for the
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Kathryn Chan
Member of the Curatorial Team for
“Many Worlds One People”
as part of the
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Images of installation
and Text panels

Narrie Approo



Charles Harrington



MIDNIGHT ROBBERS

"This Midnight Robber art, which is the extension of the oral tradition that we mastered in Africa, brought to the West Indies and refined here in the Trinidad Carnival Cauldron...

Brian Honore "Ogangaciero"

Midnight Robber Trinidad, West Indies

Curatorial Introduction

These elaborate and hideous hats decorated with skulls and skeleton are part of the attire of the "Midnight Robber", a character found in the Carnival of Trinidad, West Indies. A Robber can choose to perform at any time during the two day Carnival - for the J'ouvert celebrations (the early morning beginning where a simpler Robber costume is worn) or - for the more fancy daytime Carnival on Monday and Tuesday, (the two days before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, when he wears his new creation and enters competitions). Contrary to what we see of Carnivals today, a 'mas' (Trinidadian word for a costume), if well executed and on the masquerader, transforms the ordinary person into something frightening and powerful.

These awe-inspiring hats created with matching capes, carry images that tell a tale of the fearsome character: his robber name ("Agent of Death Valley", "Tombstone", "Benbow the Brave") and his accomplishments - the tombstones or skulls of victims he boasts of having killed. They are worn together with: a mask, goggles or beard to conceal the identity of the notorious bandit; a whistle to attract the attention of his victims ("Twee-e ... Twee-e ... Twee-e ..."); a dagger, sword or axe and; baggy trousers and shirt

derived from the American cowboys. They carry a container, often in the form of a baby coffin, to hold the money they extract from their victims by verbally accosting them with long and horrendous speeches.

In addition, it is the "Trini" (Trinidadian) or West Indian penchant for the English language evident in speeches, calypso, "talk tent" (comedy), ordinary conversation, rapso (a rhythmic performance using words similar to dub) and some say in politics, that secures the Robber, a continuing existence, in the carnival. This "Robber Talk" appeals to the West Indians who have an opportunity to show off their sensitivity and skill with words and their ability in delivery. There is only one recording of a woman playing a Robber although they are known to assist in the making of costumes and the crafting of the speeches.

Images, Text, Histories

"Authentic eh! Man eh playing no stupidness yuh know. If you playing a role you researching your role, you playing a character, you researching your character."

Pat Chu Foon, 1994

Artist and "one-time" 'mas' man

Inevitably, during a visit to a 'mas' man's (any individual associated with costumes for carnival, be it in designing, making or performing) house he will pull out a remarkable book with incredible illustrations: Hamlyn books such as *The Greek Armies*, *The American Indians*, *The Treasury of Natural History*. A Robber will have in his collection titles such as *The Great Train Robbery*, *the Bible*, History books and other sources of Literature. Phrases handed down from another robber could be used, or natural disasters heard on the news,

or geographical locations that suggest extreme limits. He would call the names of well known characters from books and films and generally aim to portray himself as dreadful, notorious and with supreme power, a trait he would have attained from even before his birth.

Speeches begin and end with the "Twee-e, Twee-e, Twee-e,...." of the whistle. They can either be directed at a spectator who the Robber singles out as his victim, or can be use in battle against another Robber. Battles can last minutes or even hours depending on the skills of the Robbers. The following is an excerpt from a recorded speech between two Robbers - "The Agent of Death Valley" and "Ogangaciero":-

The Agent of Death Valley

"I am the voice of the Agent of Death Valley

From the day my mother give birth to me the sun refused to shine the earth started to tremble, terror hit the city streets,

By the age of one, my toys were canons and machine guns

By the age of two I have necked and slain all the mock men like you By the age of three my anxiety is to rob, murder, plunder,

leaving men, women and children to suffer

At the age of four my name was marked with blood stains on every door At the age of five I was wanted by the TSP, CID and the FBI

for the miraculous wonders I performed

At the age of six I was known as public enemy number one,two and three At the age of seven my physical structure was of steel ribs, iron jaws,..... In order for a man to

fight with me, he must be a double fisted fighter..... From
thence I became a Midnight Robber"
Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e

Ogangaciero

"It was a great mistake in natures plan
When your parents

I can tell you plainly that you may understand You are
nothing but a nuisance to mortal man For the day I was
born the sun refused to shine Hurricanes smashed the
citadels of the city Atomic eruption raged in the mountains
Philosophers and Scientists said the world has come to an
end

But no it was me the Ogangaciero who had come forth
But what manner of man are you who will stare your own
death in the face What is your name, your claim to fame,
and from whence you came

Talk robber man"

Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e, Twee-e Twee-e

Patronage

Built into the character of the Robber is its ability to raise enough money to reimburse the 'mas' man for the cost of his costume, and maybe, to earn extra. There are many characters in the old time carnival that would perform and be paid: the street sweeper, the tailor, the moko jumby the blue devils, but many of these performances do not exist today or if they do, do not initiate payment anymore. The Robber however, must accost unsuspecting spectators in the street. The spectator might pay up quickly and run, or stay longer to hear a whole speech. Narrie Approo explains:

"When he says give up your hidden treasures he means give up your money, if not you will surely die. That is all the speech is about: to frighten you and collect your money."

"I was living in Tunapuna, which is where I saw my first robber....I was on the step watching mas....and I see this man coming down de road with a whole set of little boys behind him....and he just bust open the gate and come up...he give me one long speech about eating my liver and, and, and meh mother tell me give him some marbles.... and at some point she join me now ...and eventually when he talk, and he talk, and he talk, and he talk,she send me inside (to get some money)....

Brian Honoré, Midnight Robber, "Ogangaciero"

Midnight Robbers also meet each other on the streets where they have battles spontaneously. They use these as opportunities to extract money from onlookers. Otherwise there are traditional locations where Robbers meet for battle. "The robber will have a main speech for the year.... but you use alot of different speeches, if you meet a robber you have to have speeches". (Narrie Approo)

"When we meet it is like two enemy....beh, beh, beh, bah, bah, (sounds representing the speech)....people gather....and we collect money....last carnival, I think it was Dwayne and my son - collect most of the money. You know the novelty of the young fellas....This is a 'mas' that doesn't solicit money it demands it....the sweeper will just start to sweep and you will get the message, the robber tell

you "one time" (right away), I eh talking yuh know (until you pay), this is the real ting."

Brian Honoré, Midnight Robber, "Ogangaciero"

Parody and Humour

It is said that, Robbers are a take-off from the American cowboy. This idea of a masked cowboy holding up people for money appeals to the West Indian sense of humour and drama and, because of its basic costume and action is easily adapted and varied. Furthermore, the hero genre is appropriate to masqueraders who at carnival time feel like kings and want to feel like kings. In the Robbers case, he is the "baddest bad". He wants to be the most dreaded and hideous Robber and to outdo his oponents with his crafted speeches and delivery.

Generally a 'mas' man who plays Robber would come up with his own concept and design. Robbers are known to have themes peculiar to themselves - figurative, historical buildings, proverbs, temples. He is usually also capable of sewing and building the entire costume. In some cases, he might commission a craftsman to build a particular component, however there is always an element of secrecy. The complete idea can only be known by the 'mas' man until he reveals himself at carnival time. In the old days, there were many variations - Blanket Robbers (made from brightly patterned cotton blankets), Bag Robbers (made out of hemp sacking which is stripped and frayed), White Robbers (made out of all white fabrics), Hunting Robbers (dressed in ragged clothes covered in fig leaves) to name a few. Today there are so few Robbers that they are almost all referred to as Midnight Robbers or Fancy Robbers. The costume of the Midnight Robber is preoccupied with power and death, they are sometimes even gothic -

mimicing the architecture of the Hindu or Muslim temples in the structure of their hats.

In an article in the Caribbean Quarterly, 1956, Dan Crowley notes:

"...the speeches which issue forth from these curious costumes are even more complex in derivation. An American expects a quasi-cowboy to say something like "Wa-al Podnuh, put her thar, haow you-all doin," &c., but soon discovers that while this talk is well known in Trinidad and called "talking Yankee" it has nothing to do with Robbers. Instead of sounding something like cowboys, Robbers sound like schizophrenic patients recently escaped from St. Ann's (the mad house)..... Up to a point, a Carnival costume represents a fulfilment of one's needs and desires. Historical masques are "playing rich", military are brave and dashing, and without pushing a good idea too far, Robbers are evening up their score with a cruel and heartless world. This "dionysian" catharsis alone would justify the whole institution of carnival to a psychologist, and ultimately to any government. But along with ridding man of the frustrations, it gives him a *raison d'etre*, recognition from his peers, and a sense of accomplishment."

ADDITIONAL INFO

In an interview with Brian Honoré, "Ogangaciero", he says

"My research tells me this is an essentially African thing... I don't know if you ever read a book called 'Arrow of God',...Chinua Achebee... I am de man who tamed lions and crossed the Sahara and slew de dreaded monster

known as de hydrophobia....dis and dat and de other and de other....Actually I found another piece of "robber talk" straight out of the Mississippi,...in no less a book than the Huckleberry Finn (he laughs) he just called the fella the masquerader....hear this...."I am de old original Iron George, brass mouted, copper bellied corpse maker from the wilds of Arkensaw. Look at me I am the man they call sudden death and general desolation. ... by hurricane damed by an earthquake half brother to the cholera nearly related to the smallpox on my mothers side. Look at me I take nineteen aligators and a barrell of whiskey for breakfast when I am in robust health and a bushell of rattle snakes and a dead body when I am ailing I split the everlasting rocks with my glance, wails of the dying is music to my earit have something I hear Puggie say exact, exact, now this is Mark Twain eh, Now hear this eh, this fella Huck Finn bumming this ride on this boat, but he hiding because he doesn't want the boat men to see him, and the boat men drinking and having a good time ... and one fella get up and chant a verse and another fella get up and answer back and eventually they end up fighting.... Mark Twain and anytime you talking Mississippi you talking Africa.