

Japanese Nō Theatre Masks from the Collection of the National Museum in Krakow. Conservation as a Form of Intercultural Dialogue

Summary

In 1920, Feliks Manggha Jasiński donated to the National Museum in Krakow his unique collection, including *nō* theatre masks: two male masks – of a young man *Chūjō* and an old man *Kō-jō* – and two female masks: *Kō-omote* and *Manbi*. Before conservation all the masks were in very poor condition. This was caused not only by the passing of time and storage conditions. To make matters worse, they were also damaged as a result of inappropriate repairs, ignoring the fact that they came from a different culture.

Nō theatre masks are some of the most refined, yet simple masks when it comes to their form. Their form and character in an essential way add to the mystical-aesthetic quality of the *nō* theatre referred to by the specific Japanese term *yūgen*. Therefore, their conservation posed a considerable challenge. At the beginning conservators carried out an analysis of the materials used in Japanese art, their origin, production, features and, above all, the symbolism of forms produced by using these materials. A detailed plan of the conservation treatment was adopted, taking into account the ideals of Japanese aesthetics, in particular one characteristic of the *nō* theatre.

All alterations were removed, i.e. layers of wrongly selected, cracked putty, darkened varnish and re-paintings; bubbles were flattened and the loosened primer (*gofun*) was backed; the peeling layer of paint was strengthened. Conservators developed a method of backing the loosened and cracked *gofun* layer combined with removing stains. Based on the materials used by Japanese sculptors of masks, the polished *gofun* technique was reconstructed, the same as mechanical losses.

The methodology of the conservation was the same for all the masks and the only differences resulted from the scale of damage.