

Aura of Mask Art: Panji's Story in the Green Open Space of Surakarta

Stella Rossa Zarifa Sholihah, Rahmanu Widayat and Andi Setiawan

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta

e-mail: stella_rossa411@student.uns.ac.id;

rahmanuwidayat@staff.uns.ac.id; andisetiawan@staff.uns.ac.id

ORCHID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7621-4409>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6644-901X>;

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4819-5380>

Abstract

Panji story masks in urban public areas convey a distinct vibe compared to masks used in dance performances. This study demonstrates how masks, as a customary artistic legacy, evolve in purpose over time. In Surakarta, alterations in the material landscape and the power of the government follow shifts in the role of masks. This change questions whether mask art can enter contemporary art because it loses its aura when it has a different function. This research uses an exploratory qualitative method with research techniques through work analysis data, interviews, and literature reviews. The results of the research state that the development of mask art into an art product indicates that mask art in public spaces has become contemporary art. As a result, the modern era's culture heritage will continue to exist, and technology will be given priority, leading to a loss of traditional art's aura as a form of innovation in modern art.

Keywords: Panji Story Masks, Aura, Contemporary Art, Public Art.

1. Introduction

Surakarta is a Javanese cultural city with a heritage of cultural objects from the Islamic Mataram Kingdom, namely the Surakarta Kasunanan Palace and the Mangkunegaran Temple. According to Hartanto et al., Surakarta is one of the cities at the center of Javanese culture. The Giyanti Agreement of 1755 distinguished the Mataram Sultanate's inheritors into Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Since the nineteenth century, this has facilitated the growth of various literacies such as Javanese language, dance, culinary arts, fashion, architectural works, and other forms of cultural expression (Hartanto et al., 2016). Traditional cultural forms are derived from historical objects housed in the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace Museum, the Mangkunegaran Temple, and the Radya Pustaka. One type of art is the Panji mask. Sedyawati defines the Panji mask as a cultural object carved from wood depicting a human face and covering the face (Tri Suwasono, 2021).

The Panji mask, which once existed in Surakarta, has reappeared in the modern era with a new purpose in public spaces as it has begun to be forgotten. This refers to Sumaryono's statement that the art of mask performance as a classical art suffered a setback in its development because, during the Palace era, the arts in the Palace were more focused on bedhaya, shrimp, wiring, wayang wong, and langendriyan, both in Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Sumaryono, 2021). As a result, its presence in Surakarta society gradually faded. The government promoted the appearance of masks in public spaces as another form, thereby strengthening Surakarta's position in preserving Javanese cultural roots. This is related to Suhemi's statement; he explained that artistic life cannot be separated from the participation of

local governments in its development. Creativity is required to bring art to life in a region; however, it must be acknowledged that changes in cultural functions frequently destroy its authentic aura. Suhemi (2013) provides an example of how traditional art can be manipulated for political purposes, undermining its inherent value (Suhemi, 2013).

This research focuses on mask art's role as a traditional art heritage in Surakarta and its function as a decorative element in public spaces. This refers to masks crafted from materials distinct from those employed in masked dance. This phenomenon exemplifies the government's efforts to evolve traditional art by incorporating a transitional mask function, which ultimately diminishes its original aura due to changes in material and purpose, leading to a transformation in the art form. Surakarta's aesthetic elements are subject to variations in public space masks. However, material changes will inevitably be made while creating public spaces and dance art masks.

According to Solo's motto, "The Spirit of Java," using masks in public places indicates that Surakarta is developing into a vibrant city in terms of its culture. Surakarta is evolving into a metropolis that embraces the arts and culture, with its growth and progress being rooted in Javanese principles (Nilawati et al., 2016). This alteration also impacted conventional artifacts in Surakarta, stimulating the ancient culture and enhancing its recognition among the populace through traditional art and other contemporary advancements. Its presence is regarded, among other factors, as a prominent or visual component of the city. Nugroho gave the example of the Keris monument in Surakarta as a landmark related to the city's identity and a form of appreciation and respect for the Keris cultural heritage. According to him, one of the roles in cultural preservation is to turn to art through landmarks, which are used as city branding (Nugroho, 2023).

The phenomenon of the presence of traditional art objects cannot be denied because of the city's need to show cultural identity through replicas of traditional art objects. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be avoided. An explanation of traditional art's current position in changing times is required to address this phenomenon. Walter Benjamin's aura theory can explain this phenomenon. This is critical, given the rapid evolution of culture's role and significance in artistic understanding.

2. Method

An exploratory qualitative method was chosen for this research. Research data was obtained through data sources such as typical Surakarta Panji mask works, event data, informant data, and library data. Data collection methods include work analysis, interviews, literature review, and triangulation. Sugiyono explained that the triangulation method is a method that combines various existing data collection methods (Sugiyono, 2015). Triangulation involves documenting work, interviewing sources, and reading literature reviews. After the data is obtained, sampling is carried out to collect samples that are considered appropriate using correct data while considering the population's character and distribution (Hardani & dkk, 2020). The sampling technique is a non-probability sampling method with a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling was used on the main informant, Narimo, as a Surakarta public space mask craftsman, and additional informants from cultural circles based on recommendations from Narimo.

The research data was then validated using triangulation and field data validation with mask craftsmen, namely Narimo, as well as cultural figures, namely Bambang Suwarno (puppeteer) and Daryono (mask dancer, choreographer), who understand masks in the city of Surakarta. Qualitative research does not have specific measuring tools to determine validity and reliability. This is because qualitative research is holistic. According to Raco & Semiawan, holistic is used to

understand an event by explaining the components that influence the environment by looking for and finding patterns, themes, concepts, and thoughts resulting from qualitative data analysis (Raco & Semiawan, 2010). The analysis flow was carried out using three methods based on Milles and Huberman: data reduction flow, data presentation, and conclusion. According to Patilima, data reduction is a data analysis process that selects data that appears by looking for similarities and differences in information so that the resulting data is more focused on research regarding public space masks. After the data is obtained, the research results are presented by presenting the data, consisting of conclusions and recommendations that can be understood. Finally, conclusions are drawn and described in text or images to answer the formulation of the problem being studied (Hardani & dkk, 2020).

The "Walter Benjamin" aura theory is used to analyze the data. The "Walter Benjamin" aura theory was chosen to answer the changes in masks' aura when in public spaces. As a traditional cultural heritage, Masks have changed their function and developed over time. Then, it appears as a form of innovation that has transformed traditional art into an art product. The change in function was then accompanied by a change in the materials used because of the need for their function, namely as a decoration element for public spaces. Walter Benjamin's theory of aura, outlined in an essay published in 1939 with the title *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, is considered capable of explaining the phenomenon of replicas of traditional objects appearing in public spaces as an aesthetic element of the city.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Aura of the Panji Story Mask in Public Places

Masks are utilized in dance to accurately portray the mask's character during the dancer's performance. Conversely, Javanese masks are characterized by realistic and minor characters. Masks are currently employed in dance performances to satisfy the necessity for artistic expression and to illustrate particular character types (Martono et al., 2017). Masks are a component of craft art, and they are created through a wood carving process. The creation of masks requires high concentration and caution, which results in a time-consuming process. The function of masks has evolved from their use in dance performances to their expansion as interior and exterior decoration ornaments. The imagination and technique of mask-making are also influenced by the shift in the value function of masks, as explained by Tusan (Martono et al., 2017). Artistic values become one whole, with the dramatic and spiritual values of dance and drama masks separating. The decorative value masks can provide as interior and exterior elements may be intriguing. However, they have lost their meaning compared to masks and drama dance. This makes the mask lose its aura because it loses its original value based on the development of its function.

Walter Benjamin's aura theory is closely connected to masks transitioning from being decorative elements in interior and exterior spaces. Traditional art undergoes technological development and loses its inherent aura as its functionality evolves. Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of the Possibility of Technical Reproduction" elucidates the concept of aura in his theory. The essay focuses on cultural criticism, which elucidates that traditional art has diminished its inherent mystique due to material alterations in the artwork and political circumstances. The emergence of works of art during the Benjamin era resulted from the emergence of photography and film, which were examples of mechanical reproduction technology. This new form of media was used to achieve political objectives at the time, as Tukan explained in his journal. Benjamin addressed this phenomenon by suggesting that the political climate in Europe and changes in the

material of the works of art contributed to the emergence of "works of art" (Tukan, 2018).

The Panji mask emanates an aura when employed in dance performance arts. Sumaryono clarified that a mask, in its specific definition, pertains to its manner of being worn, precisely when it is worn on the face. A *mask* is defined as a representation of a specific face or figure worn on the face of the wearer, specifically by the mask dancers. Ruth D. Lechuga posits that a mask is an artificial visage placed over a natural face that adapts to the mask's character during dance performances, creating a mutually beneficial connection between the mask's form/character and the wearer.

Therefore, the aura of the mask is awakened when used in a mask dance. The character of the masked figure is depicted through dance movements, and the form of a story is conveyed when dancing. Classical masks are depicted as craft art through dance performances. Sumaryono explained that masks have different expressions, characters, and facial shapes depending on the role and story. The shape of the wayang mask figure is a stylisation of the human form and figure, which in Java is a type of human representation in the form of a living object that is realistic to its natural form. The characters in the Panji Story mask figures are distinguished in detail by iconography and physiognomy in their visual shapes and forms. Shape, texture, lines, and the colour system (*sunggingan*) are all examples of mask iconography. These elements differentiate the characters in the Panji Story (Sumaryono, 2021).

In Surakarta, masks appear in public spaces as dance masks. However, the larger size and unique material use of dance masks set them apart. The mask is constructed from fiber and supported by iron. The character's face remains identical to the dance mask during the coloring stage (*sunggingan*), which is determined by iconography and physiognomy. Fibre material is employed in outdoor environments to accommodate the requirements of larger mask shapes. Narimo's interview revealed that the mask's primary material was fiber, as using other materials, such as cement, would result in a heavy mask. Consequently, the mask's weight was considered before selecting fiber material (interview, February 8, 2024).

The city government's actions during that time are closely related to the presence of masks in Surakarta's public spaces. Masks have been present in city public spaces for over a decade, beginning with Mayor Joko Widodo's tenure. In 2007, Surakarta participated in the Andong Mask Dance Festival in South Korea, when the custom of wearing masks in public spaces first emerged. After participating in this event, the innovation of masks in public spaces was introduced as a means of sustainability. Surakarta was invited to participate by showcasing dance performances, mask exhibitions, and mask workshops, and a select group of artists was invited to represent the city. Narimo, a classic mask craftsman in Surakarta, also participated in the event and presented a mask workshop. Subsequently, Narimo was tasked with creating masks that were exhibited in the city's public areas throughout Joko Widodo's tenure as mayor.

There are two factors in "mask art" in public spaces: 1) material changes as mask functions change, and 2) political conditions imposed by the government, which wishes to present "Solo, the spirit of Java" during its reign. As a result, the mask's aura in the art of dance has vanished, but its beauty is preserved through decorative arts that highlight its aesthetic side. The presence of a mask that has lost its aura serves another purpose, namely as a decorative element in public spaces. It indicates that the Panji mask is found in Surakarta. This is consistent with the views of Bambang Suwarno, a puppeteer who believes that masks in public places are both decorative and a form of artistic development. Bambang Suwarno emphasized the aesthetic value of wearing high-quality masks in public places. He believes that

displaying masks of good quality will attract people's attention and pique their interest in learning more about them (interviewed, May 15, 2024).



Figure 1. Public space masks in the city of Surakarta (2024)

3.2 A Comparison of Surakarta Public Spaces and Dance Mask Materials

Masks in public spaces represent the cultural advancement process. According to Law No. 5 of 2017 of the Republic of Indonesia concerning the Advancement of Culture, culture is an investment in the nation's future and civilization in order to achieve national goals. So, at the moment, the government is focusing heavily on advancing regional culture. During this procedure, the government invited artists, academics, and other relevant stakeholders to collaborate to foster cultural development in each respective region. Undeniably, its existence represents Indonesia's commitment to safeguarding its cultural legacy. Various innovations continue to be carried out to create variations for dissemination to society.

The presence of masks in public places is one manifestation of the process that precedes the public launch of the cultural promotion movement. It is widely recognized that masks in public spaces in Surakarta have a similar facial shape to dance masks, but they are made from different materials and have different dimensions. This is receiving attention because art objects have specific functional requirements that necessitate using materials and dimensions that differ from the original. According to Daryono, a mask dancer, using masks in public areas in Surakarta is a tangible manifestation of cultural advancement, which aligns with the interview results. Public space masks are displayed in city parks for the general public. However, their presence also brings complexity because creating these masks requires persistence in producing high-value and intricate works of art. It is important to emphasize that this process is complex and cannot be done quickly (interviewed, May 17, 2024).

Face-sized masks are utilized in the art of dance, specifically for dancing. Surakarta masks are characterized by bite marks on the back, which the mask dancers make during their performances. On the other hand, public mask art maintains a traditional aesthetic by incorporating elements from dance masks. Still, it is designed to be more significant in accommodating outdoor settings. Additionally, it utilizes sturdier materials compared to those used in dance masks.

Table 1. Comparison of Surakarta's Public Space Masks and Dance Masks

| Items | Dance Masks | Public Space Masks |
|-------------|-------------|---------------------|
| A. Function | Dance | Decorative elements |
| B. Material | Wood | Fiber, Mix media |

| | | |
|--------------|---|---|
| C. Size | Face size | Average width 150 cm x Height (plus ± 50 cm) |
| D. Time | 1 Week | 1/2 - 1 Month |
| E. Shape | The front face is the same. The back face is open with a strap to hold on to when dancing. | The front face is the same. The back face is closed for decoration. |
| F. Finishing | Same | Same |
| G. Display | Same | Same |
| H. Craftsman | Individual | Group |
| I. Needs | Individual | Group |
| J. Process | a. Choose Wood b. Forming a Mask c. Sculpting d. Finishing (color) | a. Design b. Mal uses 1:1, clay material c. Transfer print to fiber d. Print fiber per mal e. Unification of each mask mall f. Finishing (color) |

The distinctions in material and purpose between dance masks and public space masks are evident, necessitating changes due to their divergent functionalities. In addition to functional factors, other factors influence city public spaces, such as location and city identity. The presence of masks in Surakarta can be attributed to their use as ornamental objects in popular tourist destinations, such as Kauman Village and Triwindu Market. Significant modifications are limited to the public space mask, the city's defining characteristic. Utilizing fiber material guarantees the mask's durability in urban public areas.

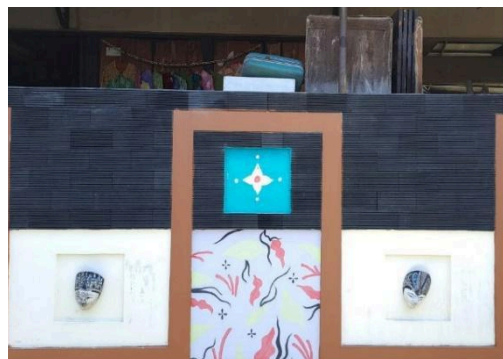


Figure 2. Mask decoration elements at Triwindu Market (2024)



Figure 3. Mask decoration elements in Kauman Village, Surakarta (2024)

3.3 Emerging Patterns in the Evolution of Public Space Art

The changes in mask art in public spaces are material. This occurred due to its utilitarian requirements, specifically as an ornamental component for green landscaping areas in Surakarta. In Surakarta, masks are strategically positioned in verdant areas, specifically city parks and green thoroughfares. The five placement locations include Kerten City Park, Sekartaji City Park, Slamet Riyadi Green Lane on both the right and left sides, and Manahan Stadium Green Lane. The choice of material for the mask is influenced by the specific location where it is positioned. Originally, dance masks were crafted from wood due to its density, which facilitates the process of shaping and carving them into mask form.

Meanwhile, public space masks use fiber material because the mask is placed outdoors. Using wooden materials in this context has the potential to be susceptible to weather-related damage. Artisans seek alternative options when crafting masks, taking into account the mask's durability and weight during the manufacturing process. So, when selecting materials, careful consideration is required when creating works.

The selection of fiber and iron materials demonstrates advancements over time. In his book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan (Sugiono, 2021), elucidates that the medium serves as a messenger. Contemporary artists utilize art mediums to advance media development, incorporating attribute values and pursuing practical and political objectives. This demonstrates a transition in understanding the medium, which initially emphasized aesthetic and artistic purposes, to a more expansive form of message handling. Sugiono elaborated that the agreement regarding using techniques and materials in fine art is separate from their standardized usage. Instead, selecting art media is deemed the most pivotal aspect for artists. Sugiono (2021) argues that the emergence of contemporary art in the new media era poses limitations for the aesthetic problems experienced by post-physical media.

3.4 The Evolution of Traditional Art into Contemporary Art

Masks originated as conventional artistic expressions and have since evolved through diverse forms of advancement. The concept of design innovation suggests that creativity is the solution to a creative impasse. Design innovation involves exploring the benefits and distinctiveness of materials and developing original design ideas into products with new functional values (G, 2018). In Surakarta, an innovative mask can be found in the city's green planting spaces. Due to consumer interest in culture, this type of innovation evolved into art products. This is evident from its presence on the green route at the Jombor gas station in Sukoharjo.

The presence of the Panji Story mask in public spaces, exclusively in Surakarta, initially sparked curiosity and uncertainty. Narimo, the craftsman of the Panji mask, subsequently verified its presence. According to his statement during the interview on February 08, 2024, he clarified that the mask displayed at the gas station was explicitly requested by the owner, who had a particular interest in the Panji mask. This demonstrates the enthusiasm of individuals with a deep understanding of culture to showcase Panji and Candrakirana masks in public settings. In addition to the Sukoharjo district, the proprietor distributed masks in the Madiun district. It can be inferred that traditional Surakarta masks are no longer limited to Surakarta. They have spread to the surrounding region and are now appreciated by consumers who admire the craftsmanship of mask artisans.

The Panji Story The mask is a prominent feature of Surakarta and is increasingly recognized for its expanded economic value as a marketable product. Initially crafted for traditional purposes, Masks have evolved into contemporary art forms due to material transformations. Moreover, due to the high demand, it acquires economic value. The diminishing aura of masks as conventional art objects is accompanied by their growing appeal to the masses, who are increasingly drawn to them due to their greater accessibility. Kiril Vassilev expressed the same idea in an article titled "The Aura of the Object and the Work of Art: A Critical Analysis of Walter Benjamin's Theory in the Context of Contemporary Art and Culture" (Vassilev, 2023).

“Capitalism creates the masses, mass production and mass consumption. It turns man into as a commodity, i.e., alienates him from himself. This self-alienation is due to the capitalist relations of production, but it also has its projections in the modern urban way of the life that arose on the basis of these relations. Benjamin describes the experience of the life in the modern city, the experience of the masses and with the masses, as a continuous series of shocks. This new experience with reality also forms a new perception of art.”

The conclusion can be drawn that when art transforms into a mass-produced product, it will lose its inherent connection and continuity. Consequently, a fresh perspective on conventional art has emerged, giving rise to contemporary art and facilitating widespread production and consumption. The public's interest in masks emerged when they were first seen at the Jombor, Sukoharjo gas station. This provides insight into implementing the traditional Panji Story mask adaptation in Surakarta. Furthermore, the societal acknowledgment of the economic value of Narimo's mask art products has progressively risen, notwithstanding the significant amount of time needed for their creation. The result is the emergence of innovations that inevitably eliminate the aura of the mask itself but present a function with economic value in it. Suhemi elucidated that when traditional art is transformed into an art product, it is imperative to consider the personal, psychological, social, and cultural elements manifested in the artwork. Furthermore, art products must be communicative and easy to accept by considering the product's aesthetic quality and the audience's level of appreciation (Suhemi, 2013).



Figure 4. Masks appear as art products at gas stations (2024)

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

According to the research findings, the aura of the Panji mask disappears when placed in a public space but reappears when used in the art of masked dance. According to Walter Benjamin's theory of aura, the loss of aura in works of art can be attributed to changes in materiality and shifts in political significance. The presence of masks in Surakarta's public spaces, made from various materials and in larger sizes, can be attributed to the government's initiative. The decline of traditional art's aura has prompted the evolution of art into contemporary art. This is because contemporary art is grounded in values that serve practical and political objectives.

Furthermore, masks that lose their aura provide new value because their functions grow wider. The Panji Story Mask, initially emerging through government innovation, has developed into an art product because consumers understand cultural values. For economic value to arise during its development. It is hoped that the development of masks in public spaces will continue to spread as a form of innovation so that mask art will continue to exist through sharing art forms.

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