September, 2012

Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Modest and Demure, or Bold and Disguised: Colonial Women and their Masks

By Philippe Halbert

In September of 1759, the newly married Colonel George Washington placed an order for "various sundries" from London. For his new stepdaughter, Patsy Custis, he requested a variety of toys, fans, gloves, and ribbons. Among the more unusual items desired for the four-year old Patsy were two masks. What was Patsy doing with a mask? Archival sources confirm that she was not the only child or adult wearing a mask in eighteenth-century Virginia, let alone in the other colonies. Unlike those associated with contemporary religious traditions such as the Venetian *carnivale* or ones worn at European masquerades—which did not take place in America until 1801— Patsy's masks were the kind worn by women and some children for cosmetic reasons, permitting them to cover their faces when traveling, riding, or simply when out being out of doors to shield themselves from the sun, wind, and other elements.

Detail, anon. Drawing of two French girls, c. 1700

Newspaper advertisements establish the sale of these utilitarian masks in the colonies by the 1720s, and probate inventories prove their presence in colonial wardrobes as early as the 1650s. The 1654 inventory of cooper George Burrill, who died in Lynn, Massachusetts, is the oldest to mention them; "too masks" valued at 5 shilling were listed between an assortment of stockings and gloves. "4 velvett masks" were appraised in the 1719 inventory of Edmund Berkeley, a planter in Middlesex County, Virginia. Both Burrill and Berkeley had several daughters, and it is possible that they or their wives wore these masks. To the north, the inventory of twenty-one-year-old Sarah Williams, who died in Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1737, described one mask valued at 2 shillings, and her merchant brother Elijah sold them in his store for 10 shillings each in the 1740s. Lacking an inventory of Carlyle House during the lives of Sarah, Sybil and their children, one can only imagine whether masks were present during the eighteenth-century life of the house.

The female practice of donning simple oval-shaped masks, referred to as "visards" or "vizards" in English texts, for cosmetic purposes first became an element of popular fashion and travel attire in Europe during the Renaissance and lasted through the early eighteenth century. These were usually lined with silk or vellum, and the latter could be perfumed like gloves. As these oval masks covered the whole face, holes were cut for the mouth and eyes and an interior piece of cardboard or paper stiffened them. They could then be held on the face by biting down on a bead or mouthpiece sewn onto the back, imposing a certain silence on the wearer. As late as the 1760s, masks were advertised with great frequency in America, especially in Charleston, South Carolina,

CARLYLE HOUSE
Sarah Coster, Site Administrator
Helen Wirka, Site Specialist
Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant

and Boston, Massachusetts. They disappear from newspaper announcements in 1769, although John Watson's 1830 history of Pennsylvania recalled how his grandmother traveled wearing "a black velvet mask in winter, with a silver mouthpiece to keep it on, by retaining it in the mouth" as late as 1775.

Ann Gibbs of Charleston by John Wollaston, 1767.

In Venice, Italy, where a distinct culture of masks developed, they were viewed as a useful means to support the establishment and maintenance of a patriarchal society through the "anonymous indistinguishability" of women. This same sense of patriarchy was maintained in many colonial American communities, and contemporary English literature, such as William Wycherley's 1675 comedy *The Country-Wife,* maintained that women were "least mask'd, when they have the Velvet Vizard on." By interpreting them as temporary obstacles that could be removed as easily as they were put on, masks could seem less threatening to men and even serve as reassuring symbols of male authority.

Yet, the historical record reveals that colonial women could outnumber men in the purchase of masks. Of the twelve masks sold by Deerfield merchant Elijah Williams (brother to Sarah Williams) in 1742, nine of these were acquired by women, some unmarried and in their teens. As their facial features, expressions, and even voices remained covered by masks, colonial women could gain a degree of autonomy. Put simply, masks empowered women with a symbolic mobility and independence that received comment in contemporary texts related to manners and morality. Whether walking through city streets or riding through the countryside, masked women possessed a tool by which they could repudiate any charge of immodesty and interact with others, taking full advantage of the anonymity and disguise that accompanied a masked visage.

Surviving masks are rare. Colonial newspaper advertisements reveal that black and green were common colors; South Carolina merchant John Scott sold the "best black and green masks" in 1767. Postings by the Charleston firm of Corrie and Scott in 1762 even describe masks that boasted glass lenses, presumably inserted to improve vision or protect the eyes during a windy day or, if colored, to ward off the sun. An oval-shaped mask of the late Elizabethan or early Stuart periods provides tantalizing clues to the kind of mask donned by colonial women. This mask was uncovered during the renovation of an inner wall of a circa 1600 stone building near the town of Daventry in Northamptonshire, England. Covered in black velvet and lined with silk, holes were cut in the cardboard form for the eyes and mouth. The three layers of velvet, cardboard, and silk are held together with a black cotton thread. On the silk lining, just below the center of the mouth, is a loose thread of white cotton. This thread originally held a black glass bead, used to secure the mask between the

The Daventry mask folded in half, as found in the wall.

wearer's teeth; this bead was also recovered from the wall.

Newspaper advertisements also provide details as to how masks were also sold by colonial milliners specializing in fashion accessories. Boston milliner Benedicta Nettmaker sold the "best Masks" imported from London in the early 1740s. Another local milliner, Elizabeth Murray, advertised masks twice in the 1750s. Pennsylvania milliner Ann Pearson included them in her sale of "ladies sattin riding hats, with feathers, or gold or silver bands and buttons for ditto, and natural coloured or black velvet masks" in 1766. When viewed along with the storehouse inventory of Williamsburg, Virginia, merchant Lewis Holland, who listed five masks alongside an assortment of over fifty bridles in 1731, and portraits of women in riding costume with masks, these notices highlight the sale of masks by both milliners and more generalized merchants in conjunction with travel, riding, and outdoor wear.

Newspapers such as Boston's *New England Weekly Journal* provide a uniquely American point of view of masks as they figured in colonial views of deportment, gender, and race. A tract on manners published in the *Weekly Journal* in 1728 noted that

> "one of the greatest pieces of Ill-manners that has come under my Observation, is, the Practice of some Ladies of Fashion, that will walk with uncover'd Faces thro' the Streets, 'till just as they are near enough to pay their Honours to a Gentleman […] and then they will fill on their Masks and […] either take a bold view […] or else let him know they desire not his approach […] It is long since I have taken up a Resolution against pulling off my Hat to any Lady, till she has taken off her mask to let me know she is a white Woman."

The proper courtesy or honors for men consisted of a bow and the extension of a leg as weight was shifted onto the other bent leg. Men were permitted to look the person that they greeted in the eyes. For women, honors involved a curtsey or sink at the knees, with the hands folded at waist level or holding the sides of the gown or petticoats. The head remained level with the floor, although the eyes were lowered for the sake of modesty. The fact that masked women felt empowered to "fill on their masks" and "take a bold view" when greeting a man speaks volumes as to how women viewed masks as symbols of power and even equality.

The author's note is also interesting for its comments on manners and the inclusion of race in the discussion of masked women. He apparently "pay'd very dear for being too mannerly" to a

> "light-coloured Lady [who] felt too well to take any Notice of me, any otherwise than to stare upon me thro' the Port-holes of her Mask, while she sailed along by me with that haughty and disdainful Air which is so natural to Persons of great Pride and little Manners."

Detail of a Young lady of quality in hunting dress, print by Bonnart, 1690-1700.

Recounting his travels in another section, he tells the story of his having greeted another masked woman whom he supposed to be a "Lady of Quality" given her dress and posture. As she removed it, he was shocked to discover that her presumably black mask was "but little different in Complection" from her face. Not only do these citations reveal that women recognized and asserted a form of equality when masked, but they prove that masks were also marked by contemporary racial discourse as non-white women also appear to have adopted them for daily outdoor attire.

The greater cultural, economic, legal, and religious contexts of masks in the early modern Atlantic world reveal varying interpretations. Whether the masks sold to and worn by colonial women were discreet tools of patriarchal domination or visible symbols of female liberty, their multi-faceted meanings expose greater community concerns, including the distinction of godliness over sinfulness, gender roles and the maintenance of patriarchy, personal identity, and the demarcation of social class and even race.