

Unmasking a talent

Current pop trend has artist casting in that direction

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

FACIAL MASKS, the pop art trend of the moment, are captured by artists in a variety of artistic expressions, using a wide variety of mediums.

The masks range in size from miniatures appearing on jacket lapels, to larger-than-life versions that decorate walls. They are created from metal or ceramic, papier-mâché or fabric. Some are contemporary, as real as life. Others are traditional, an exercise in fantasy.

John Sutton of Garden City is an artist of facial masks. The 56-year-old Sutton has taken the medium and personalized a style of expression he describes as "on the average, realistic."

SUTTON'S MASKS are nearly life-size and a majority of his 62 or so samples are realistic. Some are extremely life-like, portraits of women done on commission.

But an equal number possess fantastic colored hair of blue, purple or green, and traces of animal-like features.

The most-personalized aspect of Sutton's masks are the eyes. Eyes in a normal mask are cut out, revealing human eyes when worn. Sutton's masks are not intended to be worn and the eyes are intact.

Most are shaded traditional blues, browns and black but there are startling sets of eyes colored gold, turquoise or lavender. All are outlined

with thick, luxurious lashes, "beautiful sets of lashes," Sutton said.

Because the masks are hand-painted, no two are alike. Each is signed by the artist, making them collector pieces of potentially increasing value.

MOST OF Sutton's masks represent female faces, whether it be a girl's face plastered with freckles, Sutton's interpretation of Juliet or a fantasy mask with feline features.

Sutton fashions his human portraits from colored photographs supplied by the customer. He uses the photograph to gauge accurate eye and hair color. He said the photo is all he needs to paint an authentic likeness.

The most difficult commissioned order was a mask of a female lion, complete with a mane. "Lionesses don't have manes," Sutton explained. He ended up with a mask containing a mane of feminine curls laced with forget-me-not flowers.

Sutton, who was raised in Traverse City, said he has no idea where his artistic talent came from. Neither parent was artistic. Yet each of their children are.

Sutton's sister, Edith Knapp of Ypsilanti, is an artist of local renown and his brother, Harry, is Sutton's right-hand man.

It is Harry who casts the ceramic masks for Sutton to paint. They are cast from molds Sutton designed. As he "dreams new ideas," he said, he designs new molds.

The two do seminars throughout

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the Midwest.

This Christmas season Sutton will release two new styles, one mask decorated with mistletoe and berries, and another festooned with mistletoe.

CERAMIC is not a new medium to Sutton. He served for 16 years as art director for Ceramic Arts & Craft Magazine, a national trade magazine. During that time he began painting ceramics. He has also authored two books, "Brushwork on Ceramics" and "A Guide to Painting Figures."

Sutton was trained as an artist at Bradley University in Illinois and he has studied at Kennebunk Art School in Maine. Prior to working for the magazine, he was a commercial artist for 21 years.

A year ago, Sutton said, "I'd been the property of other people long enough." Last November he created his first mask and business has been good ever since.

His mask samples are displayed for sale with the Michigan Association of Gift Salesmen in Northville. His work was displayed by Jacobson's in June and countless smaller shops carry the masks as well. Sutton said they are priced between \$50 and \$80 each.

If Sutton is not busy fashioning masks, he and Harry are attending Indian powwows in Michigan and neighboring states. The Sutton brothers are descendants of Potawatomi Indians.

"We are big fans of Indian lore and crafts," Sutton said.

This interest has led Sutton to paint ceramic pots in a style strongly reminiscent of traditional Indian style. Sutton also works with oil, water color and pastels.



John Sutton (left) and his brother Harry team up to do ceramic masks. John designs the molds and paints them, with the casting of the molds falling to Harry.



A hallway in the Suttons' Garden City home is framed with their ceramic artwork. John Sutton fashions his human portraits from color photographs supplied by the customer.

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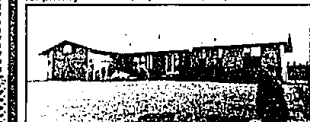
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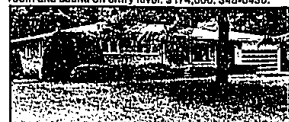
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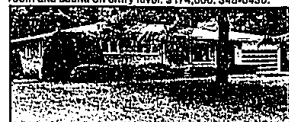
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