



Facts about Greek Theatrical Masks

The theatre of Ancient Greece flourished between 550 and 220 BC. The city-state of Athens, which became an important cultural, political and military power during this time, was at its centre and where the three kinds of play: *tragedy* (late 6th century BC), *comedy* (486 BC) and *satyr* were first performed.

Plays were written and performed as part of a festival called the Dionysia, which honoured the god Dionysus. Athens travelled the festival to its many colonies and allies which helped to give Greece a common cultural identity. In time almost every Greek city had a theatre.

Greek theatres were built on hillsides in the open air and could often hold more than 18,000 spectators. They were built in a semi-circular shape with rows of tiered stone seating around it. The shape of the theatres gave everyone in the audience an excellent view and also meant they could hear the actors clearly too. In the centre of the theatre was a circular dance floor (*orchestra*), with an altar for sacrifices dedicated to Dionysus. The stage was a raised area within this circle.

All the actors were men. They wore large masks that exaggerated facial features and emotions.

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The mouth hole of the mask was large to help amplify the actors' voices. Plays were either spoken or sung in rhyme.

In Greek tragedies stories of the past were often told. The actors would wear masks like this female tragedy mask, where the corners of the mouth are turned down. Their costumes would be dark in colour. In Greek comedies the play would usually be about current, everyday life. Comedy actors wore bright coloured costumes with smiling masks like this male comedy mask. The originals of these masks can be seen in the Archeological Museum of Athens.

