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Unmasked
Iconography and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic signaled to the world the uncertainty and limits of modern medicine in a global society. Most of us recall the beginning of the pandemic. Here in the United States, we watched as cases moved from China to other parts of the world, eventually landing on our shores in late winter 2020. At universities throughout the United States, faculty and students prepared for course delivery to be moved online. For most Americans, the pandemic began in earnest in March 2020. When the National Basketball Association canceled the remainder of the 2019-2020 season on March 11th, the reality of the pandemic hit home for many (Cacciola & Deb, March 11, 2020). The end of this pandemic, on the other hand, is less certain. For some, the end of the pandemic was signaled by a return to work. And it was during this time—Fall 2022, betwixt and between the beginning and the end of the pandemic—that we (JB and RH) ran into each other in the lobby of our college offices and a conversation about masks and photography and mosaics and icons began.

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Our Narratives

JB: I began taking pictures of the masks I saw discarded on the ground in August 2021. I am not entirely sure why I started to do this but in my walks to and from the train, through parking lots and parking garages, and on athletic fields (where kids and adults finally were able to resume their sports), their presence was unavoidable and I couldn't ignore them. It was so easy to stop, take my phone from my pocket, bend at the waist, and snap a photo. For me, these discarded masks seemed to mean something although in the beginning I would be hard-pressed to say what exactly.

In the beginning of the pandemic our masks were homemade, and I recall sharing a selfie on Facebook of me wearing the mask my partner had crafted from an old dish towel. Masks were precious commodities and, during those first few weeks of the pandemic—in Chicago among other places—we were encouraged to both wear masks *and* avoid purchasing the manufactured masks because of the nationwide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) shortage. A year-and-a-half into the pandemic the presence of masks found lying on the ground—whether dropped or discarded—was undeniable. There are some obvious reasons for this: mass-produced masks were no longer a precious commodity. There were dispensers at most Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) stations and all around our campus. In our college office supplies room, there were cases of them. Vaccines had become readily available and I, for one, felt as though we were getting closer to a place of safety. The vast majority of the masks I saw and photographed were the relatively inexpensive powder blue masks, others were the highly coveted KN95 masks, and some were costly masks with designs (i.e. sports team logos) emblazoned upon them. I wondered how many masks were dropped unwittingly (fallen out of pockets) and how many were unceremoniously torn from faces and dumped on the ground. When I shared my project with others and showed them the photos I'd collected, many expressed disdain for this "litter." Some of these same friends and relatives asked me if I picked them up and threw them away (I didn't). But I committed (and still do – two years later) to photographing each one. While I seemed to be taking multiple photographs daily that August in 2021, there have been lulls when I didn't see any on the ground for days.

In June 2022, my family and I traveled to Australia to see my partner's family for the first time in two-and-a-half years. And while Australia had a vaccination rate of something like 90% I did find masks on the ground there, too. Later that summer, my family traveled again internationally, this time to Ontario, Canada to reunite with my relatives. Again, there were masks on the ground. Finally, in November, we traveled to Paris and there were more masks. Long a destination city on my bucket list, Paris was thus both familiar and strange. Today, in October 2023, with a variant raising the daily rates of infection, I am again seeing them on a daily basis.

Fig 1: Chicago—March 2022 (Jay Baglia)

Fig. 2: Brisbane, Queensland, Australia—June 2022 (Jay Baglia)

Fig. 3: Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada—August 2022 (Jay Baglia)

Paris, France—November 2022 (Jay Baglia)

JB: Of the many things the "ease of COVID restrictions" provided, among the most important to me was to be back in my workplace, interacting with my colleagues. In September 2022, I was back on our downtown "Loop" campus, in the lobby of our college, and I ran into Robin. Because Robin is a photojournalist, I mentioned this project to her; I had by this time amassed hundreds of these mask photos and from three different countries. Our trip to France was a couple of months away. Robin listened intently and had an idea.

RH: As soon as Jay mentioned his trove of mask images, the idea of a photomosaic came to mind. I have always been fascinated by optical illusions, particularly photomosaics. A photomosaic uses many small photographs to create a larger composite image. My dad got me a book about them when I was in junior high, around the same time I did a math assignment that taught me how to project a small image into a larger one by using a grid. Years later, in college, I used that same technique to make a photomosiac of Paul Robeson. I used my darkroom test strips (the scraps of paper you use to test your print settings) of pictures I had taken of Black student protests at Penn State in 2001. Looking at the shading in each tile, I created a larger image of Paul Robeson. I spent months in my apartment piecing it together, working late into the night, much to the dismay of my college roommates. This mosaic now hangs in the African American Studies department at Penn State.

Fig. 5: Paul Robeson photomosaic (Robin Hoecker)

Fig. 6: Robin Hoecker assembling her photomosaic of Paul Robeson by hand using darkroom test strips in 2002.

RH: I felt the same about the COVID mask mosaic; once I had the idea in my head, I felt like I had to make it or I would explode. Making it would get the idea out of my head and into the world. Once again, I stayed up late at night, playing around with the images and thinking of what to make out of them. Thankfully, software makes this process much easier now.

Once I had Jay's folder of mask photographs, I started experimenting with software and different composite images. I settled on a program called "Mozaika" because it gave me a lot of control over things like repetition and rotation of images, as well as the opacity of the different layers. It also exported the mosaic as an interactive website, where I could then manipulate the HTML and CSS code. At one point, I couldn't figure out how to do a few things. I tracked down the Mosaika creators on the other side of the world and they graciously helped me.

That was the technical side. On the creative side, I still had to figure out who, or what, should the larger image be? Anthony Fauci? Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot? I tried those. Too political. The Chicago skyline? Too touristy and not relevant. Plus the images were from all over the world, so that made less sense. A coronavirus spike protein? Too redundant. I finally settled on St. Vincent de Paul, the namesake of our university. St. Vincent de Paul was a Catholic priest in 17th century France. He was committed to looking after the poor, famous for his compassion. Confronted with a problem, he asked, "What must be done?" That's a question I thought about a lot at different points in the pandemic. I also liked the juxtaposition of history and the present. What can we learn from the past? That's one question I wanted to explore with this project.

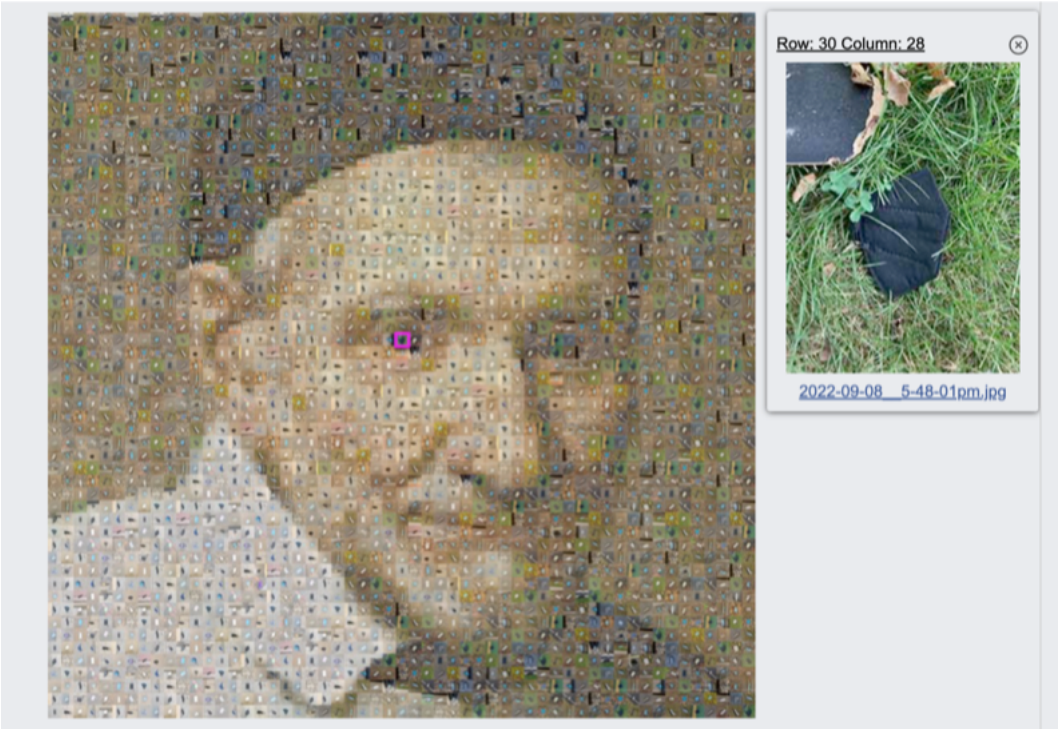

Fig. 7: Photo mosaic of St. Vincent DePaul made from over 3,000 images of discarded masks taken across three continents during the COVID-19 pandemic. When you click on one of the cells of the digital mosaic (link below), the individual photo can be seen up close. The project represents a collaboration between colleagues in different fields. As the project took shape, we realized that it represented the liminal spaces we found ourselves in as we moved through different stages of the pandemic.

View the digital mosaic here: https://robinehoecker.website/vinnymosaic/index.html

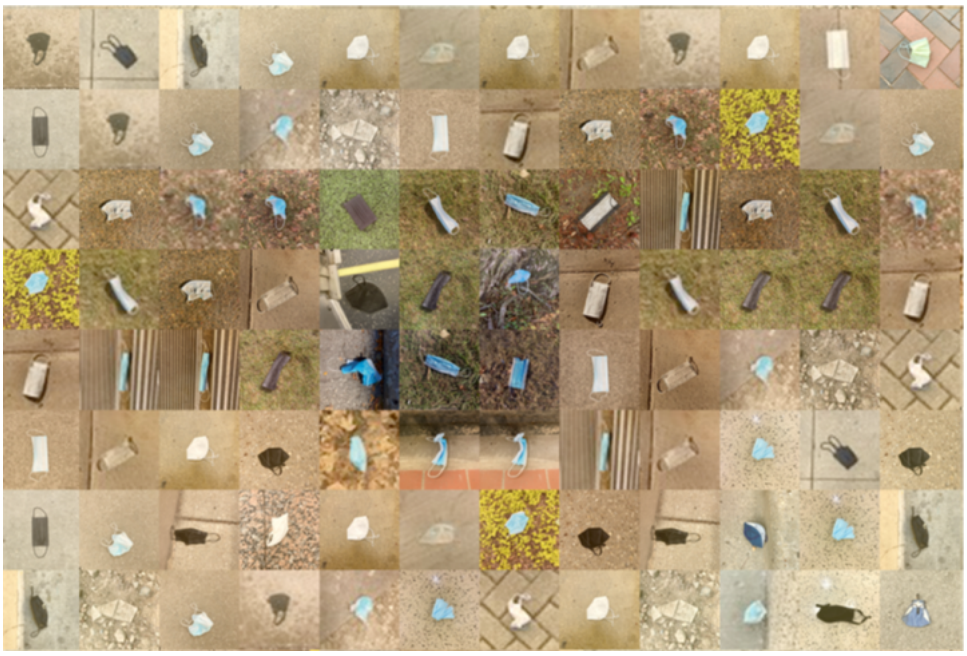

Fig. 8: Detail of photomosaic, showing the left eye of St. Vincent DePaul.

Fig. 9: Robin Hoecker and Jay Baglia stand in front of a physical copy of the photomosaic that now hangs in the College of Communication at DePaul University.

On Meaning Making

What do these discarded masks mean? We're not arguing that masks on the ground mean the same to everybody. Indeed, as suggested above, many people were discouraged by the masks on the ground, disgusted by the lack of care exhibited by their fellow citizens in this age of climate change. For us, "meaning" is sense-making. And while most everyone is now familiar with the phenomenon of encountering a discarded mask, three things are true: 1) we've had time periods where we see fewer of them, 2) whatever the pandemic once was, it is something different now, and 3) the mosaic is emblematic of both individual masks and, collectively, our shared global experience of living through a pandemic, the likes of which we have not experienced in 100 years, not since the so-called Spanish flu epidemic of 1918-1920. As communication scholars, we believe human beings "make" meaning. What the mosaic does – through the image of St. Vincent de Paul – is ask us, "What must be done?"

We argue that the discarded mask has become the icon of the pandemic. Obviously, when masks were not available and we didn't even yet understand the need for the masks as a mechanism to thwart the spread, the mask was *not* the

icon. Indeed, when we think about the early days of the pandemic what comes to mind is yellow police tape surrounding playgrounds and tennis courts, empty streets and trains and—digitally through news and entertainment media—images of healthcare personnel (not only wearing masks but also gloves and hazmat suits) and graphs documenting the uptick in cases and deaths. Further into the pandemic, many communities saw memorials set up to acknowledge the deceased.

Iconography of Illness

The study of iconography as it relates to disease has a robust history. From Peirce's (1991) study of semiotics, the icon is a certain kind of sign which partakes "in the characters of the object" (251). "Characters of the object" is indicative of a particular kind of sign that embodies an essence "we" (as audience) that *connect* with the object; this relationship between essence and object then, is not arbitrary (as with symbols). To further the point, Sebeok (1994) identifies Peirce's icon as having "topological similarity" (28). In the instance of a mask, it becomes iconic only in the context of the pandemic. Even in a surgical operating theatre, a mask (prior to the pandemic) was not iconic. Speaking about the iconography of AIDS, Gilman (1987) importantly argues that an icon of disease is not necessarily dependent on the *reality* of a disease. In other words, what's selected as an icon need not accurately reflect the disease. For Gilman, the iconography of AIDS was the AIDS patient. An audience is intended; accurate representation is not. Through the image of the AIDS patient, Gilman argues, the disease is anthropomorphized. Anthropomorphism is not uncommon when it comes to illness and death. Lupton (2012) points out how during the plague years of the 15th and 16th centuries, "Death" was ever-present and threatening, with artistic representations of Death riding a horse or dancing in celebration of another conquest.

Despite the relative recency of COVID-19, there have been some efforts at identifying its iconography. The focus of the existing research, however, has been more on the early days of the pandemic and the images reflect the public's representation as the seriousness of the pandemic began to be understood. Cohen et al. (2022) identified commonly found images on social media in the early months of the pandemic and the themes included "ghost town" (abandoned city streets and otherwise normally peopled gathering places), "health care" (images of professional caregivers in PPE), politicians, and other decision-makers. Ostherr (2020) asks, "How do we know when we're in an outbreak of invisible, infectious disease?" (707) and discusses, as an example, the "bills of mortality" alerting the community and posted on church doors during the London plague of 1596-1598. As for the coronavirus pandemic, Ostherr draws our attention to the electron microscope images of the virus with the crown-like shape which gave it its name, what Lewis (2021) calls "a tennis ball covered in spikes." Only through technology can such an icon render the invisible visible.

Masks themselves can be said to have operated at a level of the iconographic, relative to health and illness. During the long history of European plagues, the city of Venice eventually began to implement a variety of techniques to limit the spread. The forty-day mandatory waiting period demanded of suspect ships off the Italian coast was called *quaranta*; from this we get the word quarantine (Kolbert, 2020). Recognizing how disease could be spread not just through contact but through fouled air (miasma theory), doctors examining the sick began to don long beaked masks, augmented with strong-smelling herbs and spices (Linkov et al., 2014). Arguably, these masks are representative of medieval European plague and a predecessor of PPE.

Fig. 10: A plague doctor in Rome. Woodcut print.
Artist Unknown. 1656. British Museum (Public Domain)

Fig. 11: "Fall Sweep" by illustrator Adrian Tomine for the *New Yorker*, Nov. 7, 2022.

Death masks and the documentation of death masks enjoyed a renaissance in the decade following the Great War and the Spanish Flu pandemic. The impetus being the vastness in scale of death and dismemberment needing to be retained in the public's consciousness as compensation for the victims (Henning, 2017). And yet even the death mask was transformed. Masks of all kinds (including death masks) signaled transformation for the Surrealists who, following the Dada

movement earlier in the new century, sought to reject traditional art and embrace the ordinary, but by playing with arrangements through collage, contradiction, and non-sequitur (Cheng, 2009). Arguably, it is the smart phone's ever-improving camera feature that similarly invites us to capture the ordinary, our 36-exposure film roll giving way to unlimited snaps, creative filters and, perhaps most importantly, instant gratification in terms of being able to see (and share or delete) the products of our creativity immediately.

Photographing discarded masks had been underway for over a year when the November 7, 2022 issue of the *New Yorker* arrived. The illustration by Adriane Tomine (2022) depicts a man in a hoodie on an urban street using a broom to sweep aside the leaves. Among his modest pile of leaves are a half-dozen masks. He seems as though he might be contemplating them, asking "What do they mean?"

Discarded Masks as the Icon of the Pandemic

Visuals play an important role in shaping collective memory, especially when it comes to traumatic events (Hariman & Lucaites, 2008; Zelizer, 2004). Images freeze important moments in time, allowing them to be examined over and over again (Hariman & Lucaites, 2008). As time marches on, only certain images remain as symbols of a given event, often becoming disconnected from the reality of their creation (Zelizer, 2000). Instead, they come to symbolize larger ideas.

For example, Dorothea Lange's photograph of the migrant mother (fig. 12) became representative of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs. But the image has also "traveled", taking on a life of its own. Over time, the photo has been used to represent many other issues, such as inequality, poverty, grit, motherhood, and the role of government in addressing society's problems (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

There are a handful of iconic images that represent some of our country's most trying moments, and in some cases, our resilience to overcome them. Joe Rosenthal's photograph of U.S. Marines raising an American flag at Iwo Jima has come to symbolize the U.S. victory in World War II, but also broader ideas of the American can-do spirit. Nick Ut's photograph of two young Vietnamese children running down a road after being burned by Napalm came to symbolize misguided U.S. foreign policy and the horrors of war. More recently, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 generated a number of iconic images, from the second plane exploding into the twin towers, to people jumping to their deaths, and the raising of the American flag at Ground Zero, mimicking the earlier image from Iwo Jima. These photographs are used to commemorate the events year after year. For younger Americans born after the attacks, these photos shape their understanding of the events, even though they didn't experience them first-hand.

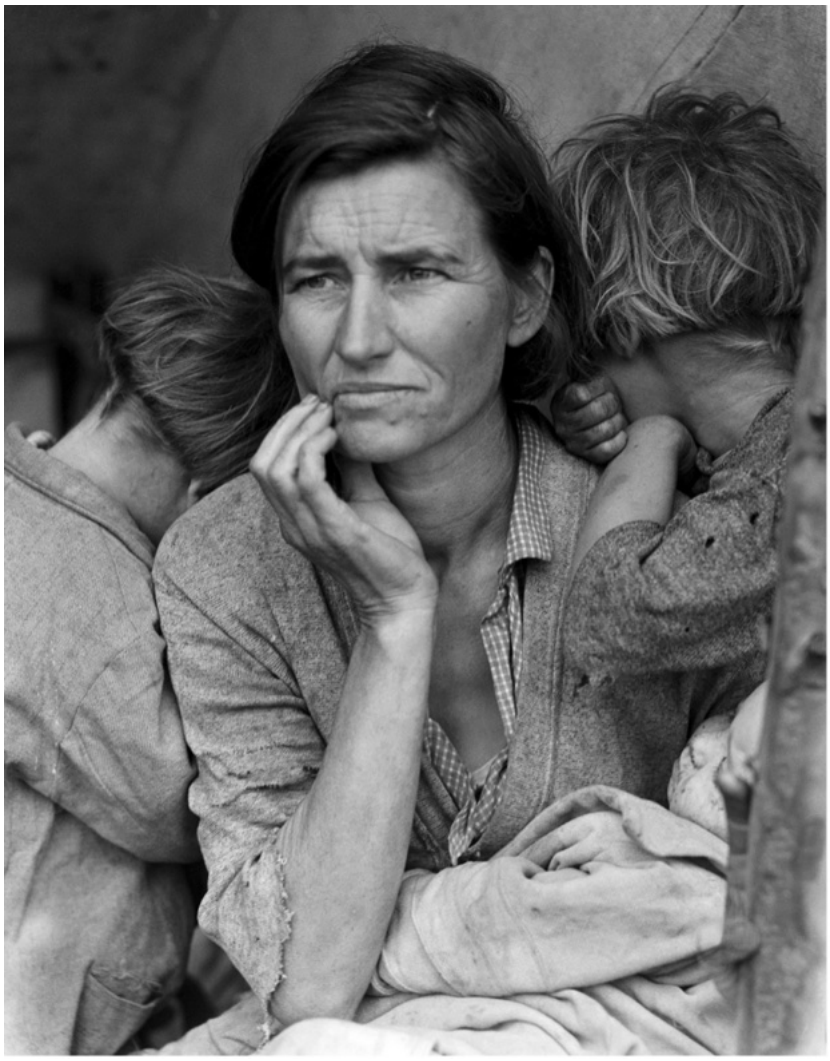

Fig. 12: Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph of a migrant mother during the Great Depression has shaped our collective memory of this collective trauma. (U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information. Prints and Photographs Division.

The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably been a traumatic event on a global scale. So where are the iconic images of this time? We are not the first ones to ask this question. In a 2021 essay in *The Atlantic* magazine, author Helen Lewis asked,

> Where are the iconic COVID-19 images?... Having one or more iconic images would help anchor the conversation about the pandemic in a shared

> set of facts, a common reality—something that seems particularly vital when COVID-19 denial is already a potent force.

There are a number of reasons why no single image has broken through to become a global or national icon of the pandemic. Most of us experienced the pandemic in isolation in our own homes. Unlike 9/11, there wasn't a single moment of trauma, rather the disease was more akin to a slow-moving disaster. The threat was not a person or a terrorist group, but a microscopic, spiked protein invisible to the naked eye.

Fig. 13: *Atlantic* magazine image by Sasha Arutyunova for Helen Lewis' article, "Where are the iconic COVID-19 images?

It's not that photojournalists weren't out there making strong images. As Epping (2023) points out in his dissertation about COVID-19 imagery, photojournalists around the world were risking their lives to cover the human cost of the pandemic, entering hospitals and documenting mass burials. However, we live in a much more fragmented media landscape these days, with hundreds of TV channels, websites, and social media platforms, and algorithms that keep audiences

relatively siloed. Even though powerful and dramatic photographs were made, they did not break through to reach a national or worldwide audience.

According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007), iconic images have the following qualities: 1) they are widely recognized, 2) they depict a historically significant event, 3) they activate a strong response in the viewer, and 4) they are reproduced across a range of media, genres and topics. We argue that the mask on the ground has become a kind of *generic icon* of the pandemic that meets these criteria. There is not one specific mask image that has come to represent the pandemic, rather it is the commonness of the mask on the ground that makes this kind of image so recognizable. For those of us who lived through it, we remember this significant moment in time. People recognize the discarded mask and connect it to the hugely disruptive peak time of the pandemic. We argue that the mask images activate people's own memories of the pandemic as well as their feelings towards public safety measures, such as masking and social distancing. Perhaps the best evidence that the discarded mask has become an icon of the pandemic is that the lead image used for Lewis' *Atlantic* essay about the lack of iconic COVID images is a discarded mask on the ground.

Using the general iconography of the discarded masks as the tiles in our photomosaic is part of what makes it meaningful.

Photomosaics as Liminal Spaces

Photomosaics are inherently liminal creations. Their meaning derives from blending many images into one. Depending on where a viewer focuses, they can zoom in on an individual tile, or the composite image created by the mass. In many ways, we found this liminal art form to be very representative of our experiences. While everyone's experiences during the pandemic were unique due in part to our social isolation, we, as a society, went through a national trauma. Even the circumstances around the mosaic's creation was born of liminal, in-between space. We happened to bump into each other as some people returned to the office, while others stayed at home. We work on different floors, in different fields, with different methods and perspectives. The creation of this piece represents a fusion.

Is the photomosaic art? A performance? A research project? Is it about photojournalism or health communication? Is it digital or physical? Religious or cultural or scientific? Is this about the past, present or future? Is the pandemic over, or is this still happening? Does it show people caring, or not?

Our answers to all of these questions is yes.

Both Jay's individual photo project and Robin's interactive mosaic art from those photographs indicate not the beginning of the pandemic but (perhaps as much for wishful thinking as anything) the beginning of the end.

Each mask photo—whether viewed in the interactive mosaic or individually—has meaning which is two-fold. Masks are very individual. We don't, for

example, *share* masks (for obvious reasons). The masks found on the ground and photographed each occupy a specific space, rarely more than a square foot. So many of these masks are of a common variety, whether the inexpensive powder blue masks or the more expensive KN95 masks. But there are also the relatively unique corporate logo masks and extremely unique (often one-of-a-kind) home-made masks. A mask found on the ground belonged to a single person. And yet the pandemic happened to all of us. Worldwide— albeit to varying degrees—we experienced this interruption in our lives, in our travels, in our interactions with our closest friends and families. That experience is universal. So we have the universality of commonly worn masks and the unique plot of land each mask was found upon. And seeing masks lying on the ground—whether dropped accidentally or on purpose—is also a worldwide experience.

Conclusion

"Betwixt and between" is the phrase used by anthropologist Victor Turner (2009) to describe the liminal space in the midst of a social drama. For Turner, the social drama has four stages. First, there is the *breach* (something's wrong, something's changed). For those of us in the United States, the breach can be characterized as the inevitability of the virus coming to the states, following the news reports from China. In Turner's model the breach is followed by the *crisis* (an identification or meaning of the breach). Here we recognize the crisis has many elements. From the record number of deaths and hospitalizations, to social isolation, the loss of jobs, and the drastic change to our day-to-lives including, for many, long COVID or the unresolved health complications stemming from an infection. Next comes the redressive stage and it is in this stage that we experience liminality. What will happen? Many would identify vaccine availability as the redressive factor and yet the vaccine (and, particularly vaccine adherence) did not exactly provide an end to the sense that things were back to normal. Finally, the fourth stage which can take us in one of two directions: irreparable schism and reintegration. Many have moved on, reintegrated, no longer wearing masks, getting "back to normal." Others are more cautious, dutifully acquiring another vaccine as suggested, wearing masks in most, some, or specific places (like public transportation). Or suffering from long COVID and maintaining precautions. For our purposes, we argue we remain—a iconographically speaking—in the liminal space of the redressive stage.

As we note above, in the early months of the pandemic the images we came to be familiar with—through our social media feeds as much as anywhere else—were fairly consistent. Turner (1988) remarks how the social drama represents an eruption from social life with its predictable, organized cycles of human behavior. Once the crisis is established we move to the redressive stage to both acknowledge the rupture and to perform the necessary rituals which move us either to reintegratation or acknowledgement of an irreparable schism. Alexander & Smith

(2020) point out how in the first months of the pandemic, images and practices quickly "generated a set of stable collective representations" (264). Furthermore, the crisis stage produced behaviors, including individually-performed interaction rituals (maintaining a distance of six feet, or donning masks and gloves to go grocery shopping). On social media we were privy to storytelling, DIY concerts, and even worldwide pub choirs with tens of thousands of participants. These are examples of Turner's performance "as making" in its execution (see Conquergood, 1992). Similarly, the mask mosaic can be presented as an interactive, communal performance. The making not only required Robin's digital imaging skills but hundreds of unknowing participants—who through the act of wearing and then discarding these one-time necessary evils—provided fodder for Jay's ever ready camera phone.

Masks have long been recognized as having a relationship to identity. Pollock (1995) argues that "the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity" (582). We use the totality of our faces to project our identity and to communicate with others (Magalhães & Martins, 2023). And while there is little doubt that mask wear during the pandemic altered our faces considerably and protected our health, few preferred the requirement of the mask. The preference was/is for the pandemic to be over. Hence, the masks on the ground.

In *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History* (1997), not only are there no pictures of the masks worn during the Spanish Flu pandemic, there is no mention of the Spanish Flu Pandemic at all. And yet the pervasiveness of the masks worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the digital and social media world we now occupy, the memory of masks as part and parcel to this pandemic is not only assured, it is iconic.

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