

<p>Philip Guston, The Studio, 1969, oil on canvas, 122 x 107 cm (48 x 42")</p>	<p>Initial analysis</p>	<p>The painting, described as in a Private collection, was on the wall of Guston's studio when BBC television visited Guston's daughter in 2011.</p>
<p>A figure in a conical mask that recalls the Klu Klux Klan, with two slits for eyes, stands before a canvas on an easel. The figure's right hand, painted red, is painting the canvas. The left edge of the canvas is emphasised by the tacks holding the canvas to the stretcher. The left hand painted white and pink with black lines, rises from a black sleeve and white cuff with red lines. This hand holds a cigar. A dark grey patch on the back of the mask presents a shadow. Part of the mask has dots suggesting sewn edges.</p> <p>Most of the colours in the painting are red, white and black. The exceptions are the green blind and light blue of the sky in the window, the vertical brown of the easel against which the canvas leans and the brown of the horizontal part of the easel seen in the lower left.</p>	<p>The painting is part of a radical shift in Guston's practice away from Abstract painting. Initially the work can appear to resemble a cartoon illustration, eventually slower, subsequent viewings make clear that a disturbance and far from straightforward comprehension is necessary.</p>  <p>In the foreground are two tins holding brushes and part of a single brush. The back wall has been painted in pink with darker pink areas in the appearance of curtains or drapes or perhaps shadows. There is a clock on the wall. An unshaded light bulb hangs from the ceiling.</p>	<p>The painting appears to be a self-portrait of the artist at work in his studio painting a self-portrait. The suggestion is that such a practice is a masked activity, a pretence. The larger suggestion is that this a human trait and that it can be seen to be deceptive. Guston's early attentions included depictions of the Klu Klux Klan and work with Labour Unions. His painting of children at play show the repeating use of masks and deception.</p> <p>This analysis would then benefit from understanding some of the insights achieved by C.S. Peirce in the field of semiotics and a variety of work carried out by anthropologists. (Attached to this initial analysis are extracts from Donald Pollock, 'Masks and the Semiotics of Identity,' 1995.) Peirce's insight comes about through his theory of the icon and the index. In terms of the subject of Guston's <i>The Studio</i>, it is apparent that iconically the depiction provides a portrait of a painter in a mask in the situation of facturing a self-portrait. Indexically the portrait becomes a metaphor for the human condition. As Guston's work develops from this premiss it becomes apparent that the human condition like that of the artist is in a state of alienation, uncertainty and dread. This can be seen elaborated in the following work by Guston, such as <i>Painting, Smoking, Eating</i> (1973) in Amsterdam.</p>

Extracts from **Donald Pollock. 'Masks and the Semiotics of Identity,'** 1995.¹

Anthropology approaches the mask as a phenomenon comprising, on the one hand, the symbolic meaning of the mask and, on the other hand, the social function of ritual masking. Donald Pollock's article, by adopting a semiotic perspective allows treatment of the mask as both an icon and as an index of identity. Such a framework also makes it possible to extend the 'masked' category to other signal systems serving the semiotics of identity. The traditional and stereotyped design of the mask is thus enlarged. The relationship between mask and identity, and the variety of mask shapes, is illustrated in the full article by examples taken from the Kwakiutl of the northwestern coast of North America and the Kulina Indians of western Brazil.

'... identity is displayed, revealed or hidden in any culture through conventional means, iconically or endemically. In semiotic terms, an icon is a variety of sign that bears a resemblance to its object; a diagram, for example, is an icon of that which the diagram represents. An index is a variety of sign that refers to its object, in Charles Sanders Peirce's terms, "by virtue of being really affected by that object"² ; a thermometer, for example, is an index because *how* it displays is affected by *what* it displays. Masks ... are iconic inasmuch as they resemble, and are also indexical, inasmuch as they draw upon dimensions or extensions of their objects to signal their representation.' (Pollock 1995: 582)

'... the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity, either through the modification of the representation of identity, or through the temporary – and representational – extinction of identity.' (1995: 582)

Alfred Gell says, 'Mask styles take their point of departure, not from the fish, cassowaries, termites, or whatever entity they are overtly intended to represent, but rather from the human head itself: the mask is not an image of nature, but an elaboration' of humankind.'³

A feature of masks used by the Kwakiutl culture may be relevant here. Stanley Walens 'uses the images of the box to offer the rather structuralist suggestion that "boxiness forms the metaphorical basis in Kwakiutl philosophy for ideas of kinship and separateness, space and time, cooperation and competition, secularity and sacredness, self and other, life and death, and innumerable other dialectic oppositions ... Even the human body is a kind of box"⁴ (1995: 587)

'... whatever Kwakiutl masks mean in any particular case ... semantic effect is achieved by manipulating the semiotic media that conventionally display identity. In this instance, the semiotic field is the receptacle form, and the basic distinction between the two physical forms of masks – the face mask and the chest mask – replicates the indexical properties of "outside" versus "inside" or container/contained possessed by the receptacle form. ...' (1995: 590)

'If the mask is an icon of identity, and an index of the identity transformation taking place, it is also a sign of a sign, or of signalling.' (1995: 593)

'The problem of the mask ... is that masks are not simply pictures, and their effects are not the effects of pictures. While anthropologists, archaeologists and art historians have devoted considerable attention to the representational meaning of masks ... or to the social functions of masking, such analyses focus only on the representational functions masks may perform, in common with a wide variety of other representational media. Masks are not simply pictures of the spirits, animals or other beings they represent (when, indeed, they do represent); masks are also and simultaneously icons and indexes of identity, and it is this conjunction of semiotic functions and fields that give the mask its particular form in any society ...' (1995: 594)

¹ Donald Pollock. 'Masks and the Semiotics of Identity', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Sept. 1995, pp. 581-597.

² Charles Sanders Peirce. *Collected Papers*, volume 2, Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1931, p. 248.

³ Alfred Gell. *Metamorphosis of the cassowaries*, London: Athlone, 1975, p. 301.

⁴ Stanley Walens. *Feasting with cannibals: an essay on Kwakiutl cosmology*, Princeton: University Press, 1981, p. 46.