

# A PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY

*The Handwoven Masks of  
Susan Barrett Merrill*

“The term ‘Personal Mythology’ contains an inner contradiction. Myths are by nature transpersonal – beyond individuals – and their elements are universal themes...our personal uniqueness perishes as we enter an eternal role. And yet it is only through entering this paradoxical zone that we truly find our individuality.”

*Stephen Larson, The Mythic Imagination*

## *Why I weave masks*

Susan Barrett Merrill

On August 13th, 1989 I had a dream in which I walked from this era into a timeless landscape. There I discovered a decorated wagon filled with beautiful handwoven masks. When I inquired of an older woman nearby what they were for and how they were made, she presented me with a spirited handwoven mask and explained to me exactly how it was created. As she carefully handed it to me she said, “This mask will teach you something very important about yourself. When you find out what that is, share it with others.”

When I awoke, I wove my first mask: stunning, extraordinary, beautiful. Nowhere in mask-making history have I been able to find masks woven with this technique. I have since called it *Zati*, an Urdu word meaning “intrinsic, from an inner place,” because the complete idea and method arrived in a dream, from the inside out.

My fascination with the mask and its construction was only the beginning. In order to understand more of its meaning, I began to research and study mask-making and the place masks have been held in cultures throughout history. Consequently, I wrote a book, “The Art of Weaving a Life” and developed a small lap loom on which to weave the mask. This book and loom have become the basis for the classes I teach to students all over the world. As I use the information to enrich my vision, my students are also enriching and healing their own lives. They now have students, and so the gift in the dream is changing many lives.

To me, the *Zati* mask is a symbol of identity. Just as it is made out of Earth’s materials, so are we. When placed over the human face, the mask becomes enlivened. Who or what enlivens us? This is the question that emerges when thinking about the masks we all wear. And so we tell our stories, which I call “A Personal Mythology.” Who do we believe we are? This is the metaphysical work that fascinates me. Weaving is the perfect metaphor for life. The vertical threads of the warp, our inner life, and the horizontal threads, our daily actions, woven through our values and beliefs: together, these create the fabric of our lives.



PHOTO BY AVY CLAIRE

*When I made my first masks, I was living beside Acadia National Park (at left, I am weaving on Sand Beach). The wild nature in the park was deeply important to me at that time in my life. To feel it with my fingers and my face, to rest at peace among the tall, quietly powerful trees, to listen to the ocean, was a gift I will treasure forever. Acadia has been an important influence in my art, an inspiration and connection with the living Earth.*



### *Epona, She of the Wild Horses*

Epona's face is woven with linen warp and handspun island wool. The headdress, with its ram's wool corona, is felted with shyrdak designs and couched brown handspun, and a headband of Bolivian-style finger weaving. The horses are wet-felted of merino with ram's wool manes. The earrings are antique Tibetan silver-plated brass.

28" w x 31" h x 13" deep

Epona – old as the mountains, wise through persistent patience with suffering, pain and sorrow. She teaches me to have courage to go forward with humor and love.

# E P O N A

“Weaving allows us to touch our ideas; they become tangible. Whether we work alone or in community, we are all called to explore the meaning of our lives, to come to the revelation that occupation, gender, age, family and income are aspects of the masks we wear, but the essential fabric of our humanity is woven with love.”

*Susan Barrett Merrill*

## *Mountain Gate – Xi Wangmu*

Inwardly we are timeless.

5000 years ago in China, Xi Wangmu was a female shaman who lives in a garden cave on the top of Wu Mountain. She was a healer living in a place where the human and the divine worlds touch. She wove on a loom

in her lap. She was also a mask maker, a dancer, a singer and a mystic.

Legend says that the weaving of Xi Wangmu helps to shape the cosmos. She is the original teacher for a whole lineage of female shamans, the Wu, who call in the spirits of Heaven and Earth to bring healing to the people and the planet. Their mission is to stay in tune with the energies of Earth and to keep life in balance.

The spirit and practice of the Wu evolved into what we now know as the Tao.



Zati masks begin with a flock of sheep on an island off the coast of Maine in the United States. Because of the moor-like island meadows, the fleeces are unusually clean and lustrous. I like unfolding the huge woolly mass at my feet, picking up one end of it and watching each fiber gently twist into the thread that becomes the yarn for the mask.

Zati masks are woven faces felted onto headdresses. I am fascinated with archetypal pattern and design, and ancient methods of twining and interlacing structures.



### *Mountain Gate – Xi Wangmu*

is constructed with a linen warp and Maine island sheep's wool. A soumak technique is used in the brow ridge and nose. The ears are crocheted, and copper wire is sewn into the margins of the felted headdress to stabilize the form.

15" w x 31" h x 12" d



Mountain Gate – Xi Wangmu –  
a timeless practitioner of the Tao.

# MOUNTAIN GATE



## *Spring Snow*

Spring snow melting into blossoms  
Robins return to Salsbury cove  
Sparrows splashing in the puddles  
Under pine and cedar  
Moss grown thick between the rocks  
Crow moon makes rainbows  
On the melting snow of red maple buds

– Susan Barrett Merrill



## *Axis*

Warp and weft  
Axis between earth and spirit  
The loom  
Boundaries of the body,  
the four directions  
By weaving back and forth day  
after day  
In time  
You weave  
a Life

– Susan Barrett Merrill



### *Oma*

Maine island wool, linen warp, merino, dyed with comfrey leaves, rock lichen, tansy blossoms and burdock leaves. The brown and white band around the face is handspun of natural brown, white, and comfrey/lichen/burdock-dyed yarn. Face: natural gray and dark brown island wool. The ruff is made from lustrous locks of long-staple island wool.

24" w x 22" h x 13" d





This shaman is crowned with a black headdress with a sheep-pelvis arch and a figure in the arch meditating on a vertebra - a healing within a healing. The headdress is lined with a band of roping done in Bolivian roundweave. The colored yarns are dyed with goldenrod and madder. The band over the brow is a ribbon woven on an inkle loom of yarns dyed with madder roots, goldenrod blossoms, and natural black and white wool. The earrings are made of contrasting wool rolled, felted, and sliced to show the spiral pattern. The face is light gray wool dyed with goldenrod, with madder-dyed stripes. The drum is decorated with shyrdak patterns and a central spiral slice of felt. The head of the drum beater is deer skin tanned with oak bark and made in the traditional way (also used for making rattles): soaking the leather, stitching it wet, and filling it with sand to dry.



The helper has a ruff of fleece, madder-root- and walnut-dyed yarns, and periwinkle shells, with a touch of indigo tears winding down her face.

## SINGING THE SPIRIT HOME

The iron frames, forged by neighbor Joe Meltreder, a blacksmith born in Hungary, are 27" wide by 24" high, with curving supports for the faces and drums.







The central figure is a deep, dark, earthy, natural brown wool yarn. Her gaze is inward as she awaits her healing within the embrace of the helper.



In this scene, squash, beans and corn, the sacred trio of many Native American nations, is a recurring theme, both on the drum and in the headdress. Black merino felt is layered and embroidered with unspun pale blue and white indigo-dyed trim and metallic thread. A constellation of fine stars is seen on the shoulders. A triangular goddess pattern woven with natural brown handspun flanked by indigo-dyed fleece locks is crowned by a double rams-horn pattern with a row of alternating brown and white symbolizing beans, and an inverted triangle of earthy brown at the top. At the foot of this lies a weaving with squash vines curling over it, and at the top is a pair of corn ears reminiscent of the double "tablet" of the Egyptian god Horus. The stripe of white and dark brown down the center of the natural camel-hair face indicates mineral paint for the ceremony.

Shamans and mystics are those humans who have made the effort with grace to sacrifice their egos and personal success in order to help humanity understand a greater identity.



The entire triptych is 8 feet wide, 25" high, and 12" deep.

# BALANCE

Balance expresses the duality of living on the Earth.



PHOTO BY PAOLA GIANTURCO

Her face, both light and dark, recognizes we have a dual nature. The struggle to live with that nature is embodied in the red headdress, a frame the color of life itself. How do we find our place and our balance in a world that changes so rapidly?

In mathematics, balance is found by equalizing both sides of the equation.

To find the least amount of friction in a wheel, you go to the hub, where the weight is balanced in every direction.

Finding balance in our lives is an individual affair. For me, the heart is the hub. Finding balance involves working with my hands with materials that bring joy to my heart.

## *We thought*

We thought we would live forever  
like this  
and then not long enough  
We created gardens,  
foraged the wild things  
And breathed in the sharp air,  
the cold air, the sweet air,  
The soft nights, the stars, the darkness  
and the fire.

– Susan Barrett Merrill

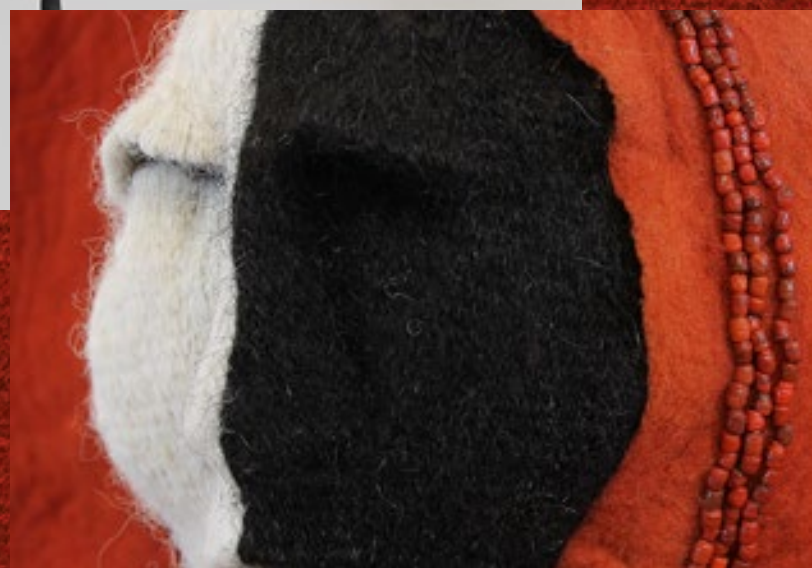
Tansy and goldenrod flowers, apple bark and madder roots: the spirit of the plant or tree remains alive in the wool. Laboring to shape the wool into felt is very much like the birth process: out of water and warmth a new being emerges.



***Balance***

The handspun natural black and white wool face is framed by a bold rounded diamond of wet-felted merino wool dyed with madder roots. The endless ring of red antique Nepalese beads in three layers are the three stages of life, circling endlessly.

23" w x 28" h x 13" d



# BLUE TARA

Blue Tara is the mother of the mother of all Buddhas, removing fear and spreading joy. She is a powerful protector and removes hindrances on the path to enlightenment.

The mask has been used as a symbol of transformation since ancient times. While for some it conceals, the mask becoming animated by the wearer is a metaphor for the animation of matter by the divine.

PHOTO BY BART HICKMAN



Touching spruce roots  
my fingers reach down  
under the sprills  
on the sloping side  
this Queen Spruce Tree  
thick with memories  
years of longing for the sky  
shedding and releasing  
rising up from and pushing  
into the Earth  
She touches heaven with her heart  
her roots running errands  
while her branches sing  
with the wind.

– Susan Barrett Merrill

*Blue Tara* here takes the form of my wind Goddess. She understands storms, is able to blow away any of the icy blasts of life that leave you cold and alone. She reminds me of the power inherent in all of us to focus on the blue sky behind the storm clouds.

When we work deeply on what inspires us, we enter a mythic domain that is self-luminous, lit with our own inner light. This inner light kindles our imagination.



### *Blue Tara*

In this form, she is singing, surrounded by swirling winds. She is woven of indigo-dyed handspun wool on a linen warp, with a headdress of pure white merino and curling island woolen locks dyed in indigo.

29" w x 32" h x 17" d



# RADHA

Radha is the “beloved one” – the one who burns with the fire of Love.

For me, each mask is an opportunity to experience the perspective of our World Mother caring for us, feeding us, clothing us, supporting us. Just as we cherish our mothers who gave birth to us, the Earth also has generously given of herself, and we are called to cherish her.



## *Fire*

Are we strangers?  
or do I recognize you  
as my twin  
same body, same face  
born of Earth’s womb

My arm around your shoulders  
how many lifetimes  
have I never noticed  
how we are joined  
by our fire in the heart?

– Susan Barrett Merrill



Our hands imbibe like roots,  
so I place them on what is beautiful  
in this world.

And I fold them in prayer,  
and they draw from the heavens  
light.

– St. Francis of Assisi  
trans. Daniel Ladinsky

So each of us with our individual spiritual  
fire, our enlivening force, may wonder *what  
is behind the masks I wear?* Could it be that the  
thread woven through all the billions of us on  
this planet is one story? For me, behind our  
individual masks lives the original Artist.



### *Radha*

Woven with handspun black and white Lincoln-Romney wool, with madder-dyed lines and lips. Cords of Bolivian roundweave and twining frame her face. The madder-dyed headdress has curling tendrils of smoke, and flames of madder wool.

21" w x 31" h x 12" d



Fiber sculptor, teacher and designer Susan Barrett Merrill was born in New London, Connecticut, USA, in 1946. She graduated from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, with a BA in Art and Education. She received a graduate degree in Experimental Education from New Experimental College in Jutland, Denmark. Susan studied at the Aegean School of Fine Arts, Paros, Greece, and Harvard University,

Cambridge, Massachusetts. Susan is a pioneer in the field of arts and disabilities, and was a US delegate to the International Conference on Arts and Disabilities in Kobe, Japan. She represented Very Special Arts at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. She was director of Spindleworks, an arts center in Maine for people with disabilities.

Susan has been spinning and weaving since her early 20s. She studied with Cordelia Coronado, a National Treasure, in New Mexico. Susan's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. She taught weaving and spinning at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts and the Kripalu Institute. Her work was featured in the Fibre Biennale in Chieri, Italy, at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland, Maine, and in the Portland Museum of Art. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Museo di Citta di Chieri, as well as in many private collections.

## Susan Barrett Merrill

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Masks and exhibits: [susanbarrettmerrill.com](http://susanbarrettmerrill.com)

Personal exploration: [weavingalife.com](http://weavingalife.com)

Community building: [earthloom.org](http://earthloom.org)



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