



### **Cajun Mardi Gras Screen Mask Maker**

Georgie Manuel, a native to Eunice, Louisiana, was taught to make screen masks by grandmother, Alman McGee. The Manuel family represents five generations of costume and screen mask makers. Based on family stories and research, the ancient screen masks appeared in southwest Louisiana in the late 1800s.

The Cajun Mardi Gras celebration is believed to have developed from celebrations of medieval peasantry. Historians believe that the peasants would construct makeshift masks and costumes to wear as they traveled in groups from house to house to beg for food. In imitation of the fashion of the Queen and other wealthy and powerful citizens, they would fashion conical hats much like a dunce hat, which are called capuchins. The masks used to hide their identity were made from whatever materials available.

Georgie and her husband, Allen, use the same technique that Mrs. McGee used. Each mask is individual; color combinations and expressions follow no set pattern. The masks evolve as they work through the process. Mr. Manuel begins the process using metal screening. The screen is cut into an eight to ten inch square with a three-inch slit cut in the bottom where the chin will be formed. Using a ball peen hammer, he carefully pounds the screening into the contours of a mold. The mold is made from a two by twelve-inch piece of pine. Eyes, nose, and chin emerge in three dimensions. Mrs. Manuel staples the pieces of the rounded chin together, and sews fabric over the edges so the weaver will not be scratched. After refining the impression, she paints facial features on the mask using enamel paint. She tries to leave the wire screen as free of paint as possible so as to make the mask cooler for the masker. According to Roshto, Mrs. Manuel's masks "demonstrate a smooth, fluid stroke, and the painted features appear as caricature, almost cartoon-like." Since these masks are painted quite simply, they show dramatic, almost theatrical, intensity. The exaggerated impressions around the eyes provide the masker with a mysterious, other world look. If Mrs. Manuel applies a base coat of enamel to the wire, it invariably suggests Caucasian skin tones. Mrs. Manuel notes that she adds either mask elastic or the more traditional ribbon or cloth strips to hold the mask on. Some of her masks might sport fabric strips or decorative fringe; such as the ribbon and fringe found on Mardi Gras capuchins and costumes.

Georgie and Allen Manuel love Mardi Gras. They spend the year demonstrating their craft at various fairs and festivals like the Louisiana Folklife Festival, New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, Red River Revel, Louisiana Native Crafts Festival, Natchitoches-NSU Folklife Festival, and CODOFIL Cajun-French Celebration Cajun Heritage and Music Festival. Georgie and Allen are included in *By Southern Hands* and in Louisiana Folklore Miscellany, and are recognized by the state of Louisiana as Louisiana Craftsmen and Louisiana Division of the Arts juries their work.

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