



A VISUAL NARRATIVE: JAVANESE MASK COLLECTIONS AT THE MPU TANTULAR MUSEUM

Identification of the East Java Cultural Diversity Mask Collection

Tri Wahyuningtyas¹, Robby Hidajat²,

State University of Malang

E-mail: ¹ tri.wahyuningtyas.fs@um.ac.id , ² robbyhidajat.fs@um.ac.id

Abstract

This article aims to identify and classify the mask collections at the Mpu Tantular State Museum, Sidoarjo, as a visual narrative of the cultural richness of East Java and its surrounding regions. Through in-depth identification activities conducted from September 17–19, 2025, the mask collections were classified into three main variants based on regions: *Topeng Malang* (Malang Masks), *Topeng Madura* (Madura Masks), and some other regional masks.

The Malang mask collection, the most numerous collection, represents the epic tale of Panji Asmoro Bangun. Its characteristic features include symmetrical, refined carvings and the use of philosophical colors. The green color shown by Panji symbolizes chivalry and tranquility, contrasting sharply with the fiery red possessed by Klana Sewandana, which represents anger. The faded colors on the ancient masks emphasize their inherent historical and spiritual gravitas and value as evidence of the preservation of this noble art form.

The Madura mask collection, associated with the Madura's puppet mask performances, displays characters that reflect the resilience of the community from the Madura island, also known as the salt island. Their characteristics are simpler but firm, hard, and expressive (such as bulging eyes or fangs), implying a strong fighting spirit and straightforward demeanor.

The other regional masks group completes the *Nusantara* (an archipelago country) mosaic, including collections from Cirebon (such as the White Elephant mask), Yogyakarta, as well as the Sandur mask (from Jombang/ Tuban) and the Dongkrek mask (from Madiun). The presence of these masks from outside the immediate region confirms East Java's cultural connection and acculturation with the wider archipelago.

Overall, the mask collection at the Mpu Tantular museum functions as a "spiritual window" that reflects the contrast and unity of values, ranging from the agrarian idealism (Malang) to the coastal fighting spirit (Madura). These artifacts are an invaluable treasure that ensures moral philosophy and local wisdom continue to live on as an educational medium for future generations.

Keywords: East Javanese Mask, Mask Identification, Mpu Tantular Museum Mask Collection

1. INTRODUCTION (TNR, 11 Bold)

Museums are often considered silent spaces where historical objects reside in quietude. However, at the Mpu Tantular State Museum in Sidoarjo, East Java, that silence transforms into a stage where the mask collection 'speaks' loudly. These masks are truly socio-cultural documents rich in meaning, where every carving line, color, and type of wood records the trajectory of civilization.

Volume 4 No.1 (2025)
A Visual Narrative: Javanese Mask Collections at the Mpu Tantular Museum
(Identification of the East Java Cultural Diversity Mask Collection)
Tri Wahyuningtyas, Robby Hidajat,

In September 2025, an in-depth identification activity was carried out on the neatly stored mask collection at this museum. The museum, known as one of the guardians of cultural and historical heritage in the province, holds thousands of collections representing the richness of traditional performing arts. The results of this identification classify the mask collection based on its origin, dividing it into three main variants: Malang masks, Madura masks, and other regional masks. This collection is a visual narrative about the philosophy, characters, and history of performing arts in East Java and its surroundings.

The most numerous and well-known collection group is the Malang mask. This art form originates from the Greater Malang region, with strong roots dating back to the Kanjuruhan Kingdom era. These masks represent the characters in the epic tale of Panji Asmorobangun, a classic Javanese story about a journey and the search for self-identity.

Descriptively, the Malang mask has strong, characteristic features. Its carving tends to be symmetrical and expressive with very fine carving details, reflecting a *adiluhung* (noble aesthetic). The use of color in these masks is key to character interpretation. The central figure, Panji Asmorobangun, is depicted with a green mask symbolizing chivalry and patience. In contrast, giant or antagonist characters such as Klana Sewandana use fiery red, bulging eyes, and grinning fangs, symbolizing anger and worldly desires. This collection is truly important evidence of the preservation of traditional performing arts that teaches the balance of ethics and aesthetics.

The second variant that attracts attention is the Madura mask, which is related to the Madura puppet mask performance. Unlike the Malang mask, which tends to draw an epic tale of Panji, the Madura Puppet Mask often features stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana epics (Bouvier, 2002) or local dramas. This art was born from the geographic contours of the arid and barren salt island of Madura, which, in fact, reflects the resilient characteristics of its people.

Explicitly, the Madura mask has characteristics that contrast with the Malang mask. Its form tends to be simpler yet firm and hard. The facial expression often includes bulging eyes, fierceness, or fangs, which imply a strong fighting spirit and a straightforward nature—an honest reflection of the severity of their environment in Madura. This collection demonstrates a diversity of styles from various areas in Madura, such as the Slopeng or Kalianget versions, which enrich the cultural interpretation of East Java.

The third group, other regional masks, is a variant that completes the mosaic of the Mpu Tantular Museum collection. This group includes masks from outside Malang and Madura, which show cultural connections and acculturation with other regions. The presence of these masks provides a broad context for the development of mask art, both related to the *Wayang Wong* (human puppet) tradition and other ritual arts.

This collection shows a wider variation in carving techniques and materials. Identification within this group requires extra meticulousness to determine their origins, which essentially underlines the role of the Mpu Tantular Museum as a state museum responsible for storing and displaying cultural heritage from the entire province of East Java, even touching upon connections to the *Nusantara* (archipelago) culture.

2. IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

The methods used are both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative is evident from the team's efforts to classify the masks based on visual characteristics and their suitability with existing types of performing arts. This process involves visual interpretation, cultural



understanding, and artistic interpretation. Quantitative is seen in the steps of measuring and weighing the masks. Measurements of height, width, and weight are numerical data that can be analyzed for comparison or correlation purposes in the future.

When researching the masks, the method of direct observation is the main key, much like a detective examining every clue at a crime scene. Through sharp eyes, researchers can deeply immerse themselves in the mask details. This process begins with classifying the masks based on visual characteristics—a step similar to identifying fingerprints on each mask. Researchers examine each mask, dissecting every carved line of form, color, and understanding every expression that is carved, whether it is an expression of sadness, anger, or joy. In analyzing the material, it can be seen whether the mask is made of sturdy wood or flexible leather, and its art style, which may be realist, abstract, or highly stylized.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1.1 The Epic Tale of Panji and Character Traits

The largest and most well-known collection group is the Malang mask. This performing art originated in the Greater Malang region and has existed since the Kanjuruhan Kingdom era in the 8th century. These masks represent the characters in the epic tale of Panji Asmorobangun, a classic Javanese story that narrates a journey and the search for love (Hidajat, 2012).

Descriptively, the Malang mask has a strong characteristic. Its carving tends to be symmetrical and expressive with fine carving details. The use of color on the Malang mask is deliberate; every color and shape reflects the nature and status of the figure represented. For example, the central figure, Panji Asmorobangun, is depicted with a green mask, symbolizing chivalry, patience, and virtue. As collected by the Mpu Tantular Museum, the color of the mask is faded due to time and unconditioned storage methods. This condition, in fact, imbues the ancient masks with an even more pronounced historical and spiritual gravitas.



Figure 1. Panji Asmarabangun mask with peeling paint.



Figure 2. The expressive character of Klana Sewandana (Document photo)

The eyes are often depicted like a rice grain (*gabahan*), implying an honest nature. Meanwhile, figures like Raden Gunungsari, Panji Asmorobangun's brother-in-law, appear in a different color, white, representing a gentle and loving character. In contrast, the Sabrang character or antagonist figures like Klana Sewandana typically use fiery red with ferocious facial carvings, bulging eyes, and grinning fangs, symbolizing anger and worldly desires (Hidajat, *Wayang Topeng Malang*, 2008).

The existence of the Malang mask collection at the Mpu Tantular Museum is important evidence of the preservation and spread of traditional East Javanese performing arts. Identification in this collection includes masks that may be the work of a Malang mask maestro, such as the late Mbah Karimonn, whose works are known to have high artistic and historical value (Harini, 2012). These masks function as narrative aids used in *Wayang Topeng* (Masked Puppet) performances. If one piece of this collection were lost, the historical value and narrative integrity presented would certainly be diminished.

3.2. Tough and Strong Movements

The second variant that attracts attention in this collection is the Madura mask, which is primarily related to the Madura puppet mask performing art. In contrast to the Malang mask, which tends to feature the Panji story, the Madura puppet mask often draws stories from the Mahabharata or Ramayana epics, or local plays. This performing art was born from the geographic contours of the arid and barren Salt Island. This art form, in fact, reflects the characteristics of its people who are known to be resilient (Soelarto).

Explicitly, the Madura mask has characteristics that contrast with the Malang mask. Its shape tends to be simpler yet firm and hard. The facial expression often includes bulging eyes, fierceness, or fangs to imply a fighting spirit and a straightforward nature—a reflection



of the severity of the environment of the Madurese. The colors used also carry philosophical meaning:

- White: Clean soul, knightly.
- Red: Calmness, affection (although often associated with hard characters).
- Black: Wise, judicious.
- Yellow: Elegant and authoritative (but can potentially (the phrase indicating possibility) symbolize quick-tempered or arrogant in certain characters).

The identification of the Madura masks collection at the Mpu Tantular Museum can be observed through the image below:



Figure 3. Dewi Sembodro (Document photo)



Figure 4. Raden Arjuno (Document photo)



Gambar 5. Raden Gatutkaca (Document Photo)



Gambar 6. Prabu Kresna (Document Photo)

The Madura mask collection at the Mpu Tantular Museum shows a diversity of styles from various regions in Madura, such as the Slopeng or Kalianget versions. These stylistic differences can be seen in the detail of the mustache carvings (for example, the Slopeng version uses brush-like palm fiber), the use of accessories, and even the mask color for the same character (for example, Gatotkaca can be red or white depending on the version). These masks serve as silent witnesses to the richness and variation of East Javanese cultural interpretations.

3.3. Mask Collections from Other Regions

The third group, other regional masks, is a variant that completes the mosaic of the Mpu Tantular Museum collection. This group includes masks from outside Malang and Madura, such as from other regions of East Java, or even outside East Java that historically

have links or have been enriched through cultural exchange. Although their numbers may not be as large as the Malang and Madura masks, the presence of these masks provides a broad context for the development of mask art in Indonesia.

The masks in this category show a wider variation in carving techniques, material use, and color palettes. Identification within this group requires extra meticulousness to determine their geographical origin and cultural context, which may be related to the *Wayang Wong* (human puppet) tradition or other arts.

Specifically, among this "Other Regional" collections, several unique masks were identified. There is one Cirebon mask with the label identity of *Gajah Putih* (White Elephant), which is shaped like an elephant profile with nine eyes on its face. Moreover, there are two masks from Yogyakarta, and Sandur mask likely originating from Jombang or Tuban. Finally, there is this magical mask from the Dongkrek processional performing art type from Madiun.



Fig. 5: White Elephant from Cirebon

Fig. 6: Sapien mask
(Sandur mask)

Fig. 7: Yogyakarta mask

The existence of this "other regional" collection underlines the role of the Mpu Tantular Museum as a state museum responsible for storing and displaying cultural heritage from the entire province of East Java, and even touching upon connections to the Nusantara culture. The entire mask collection identified in September 2025 reflects the three main pillars of mask art in East Java. They are physical representations of folklore, moral values, and local wisdom passed down through generations (Alifia, 2022). The collection at the Mpu Tantular Museum is an invaluable treasure that continues to function as a medium for education and the preservation of *adiluhung* (noble culture), ensuring that the narrative and philosophy hidden behind every mask carving remain alive and known to future generations.

4. CONCLUSION

The identification of the mask collection at the Mpu Tantular Museum in September 2025 offers more than just inventory data; it presents a deep reflection on the contrast and moral and spiritual cohesion within East Javanese culture. This collection proves that the mask is a visual narrative, an 'ethnographic treasure' that records the journey of mask artists.

The Malang mask reflects the philosophical depth of the agrarian society. In the refinement of the carving and the symmetry of the Panji mask, one finds idealism about virtue, patience, and the ethics of *adat adiluhung* (noble cultural ethos). The green color of



Panji Asmarabangun is a symbol of inner fertility, contrasting with the red of Klana Sewandana which represents the turmoil of worldly desires. The reflection is about internal harmony and the hard effort to achieve self-perfection.

Conversely, the Madura mask provides a reflection of the spirit born from struggle. The firm, hard, and fierce expression is not a sign of evil but a manifestation of the straightforward character and resilience of the coastal community that must fight against a barren environment. This mask reflects the value of courage and high self-esteem, an honest acknowledgment of the harshness of life (the fighting spirit).

The presence of other regional masks concludes this reflection with an understanding of the *Nusantara* connection. This group reminds us that East Javanese culture did not grow in isolation but is always in dialogue and enriching itself through acculturation.

Overall, the collection at Mpu Tantular functions as a "spiritual window" that shows how two cultural poles (the refined mainland Javanese and the firm Madurese) coexist. These masks are an eternal legacy that ensures folklore, moral philosophy, and local wisdom continue to live, becoming a timeless educational medium for future generations. The museum preserves the soul and identity of East Java.

References

- Alifia, M. (2022). Peranan Museum Mpu Tantular Dalam Melestarikan Koleksi Warisan. *Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah*, 1-15.
- Bouvier, H. (2002). *Lebur: Seni Musik dan Pertunjukan dalam Masyarakat Madura*. Jakarta: Yayasan Asosiasi Tradisi Lisan dan Yayasan Obor Indonesia.
- Harini, N. (2012). Transformasi Tari Topeng Malang Dalam Pertunjukan Dramatari Tradisional di Wilayah Kabupaten Malang. *Jurnal Media, Seni dan Desain*, 46-57.
- Hidajat, R. (2008). *Wayang Topeng Malang*. Malang: Gantar Gumelar, Jurusan Seni dan Desain.
- Hidajat, R. (2012). Wayang Topeng Malang dalam Perubahan Kebudayaan. *Jurnal Seni dan Pendidikan Seni Imaji*, 34.
- Robby, H. (2019). *Dari Panggung Ke Panggung: Perkembangan Topeng Di Malang*. Malang: Universitas Negeri Malang.
- Soedarsono. (1977). Tarian Tarin Indonesia 1. In Soedarsono, *Tarian Tarin Indonesia 1*. Jakarta: Proyek Pengembangan Media Kebudayaan.
- Soelarto. (n.d.). *Topeng Madura (Topong)*. Jakarta: Proyek Pengembangan Media Kebudayaan, Ditjen Kebudayaan Departemen & K Republik Indonesia.

Notes :

- Manuscripts/papers are written in a **ready-** made DOC format **and are ready to print** according to the provided template
- The length of the manuscript/paper is about 6–10 pages and typed 1 space