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Closing Streets, Opening Museums

■ In the International Festival of Masks, you can walk along Wilshire for a free peek at culture.

By BRENDA REES, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

On Saturday, families will be able to party in the street, create exotic handmade masks, listen to an eclectic mix of music and check out old and new art, saber-toothed cats and Jimi Hendrix's guitar. The best part? It's all free.

From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wilshire Boulevard from Curson to Fairfax avenues will be closed to traffic so people can participate in the 25th annual International Festival of Masks, sponsored by the Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum. For the seventh consecutive year, the festival will be held in conjunction with the LA Arts Open House, for which many county museums open their doors free to the public for one day.

"When we first brought up the idea of closing down the streets, people told us we were crazy," said Steve Kramer, president of the Miracle Mile Chamber of Commerce. "But the idea is to let people wander from museum to museum and discover things they can't see from their cars. It's a strange concept for some city folk. The first year we did it, no one wanted to walk in the streets!" Indeed, the festival site encourages families to wander the streets as well as visit each of the four participating museums. On the asphalt, three sites with performance stages will offer a variety of music, dance and song. Stages will be placed near the Craft and Folk Art Museum and the Petersen Automotive Museum, and in between the L.A. County Art Museum and the Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits.

Kids will no doubt be heading straight for the Craft and Folk Art Museum site, where they can create a mask to later wear in a parade around the festival grounds. The parade is scheduled to begin at the Craft and Folk Art Museum at 2 p.m.

Dancers and musicians from Korea, Guatemala, Japan and Africa, among other places, will perform throughout the day.

"Every culture in the world uses or has used some sort of mask in its history," says Patrick Ela, acting director of the Crafts and Folk Art Museum. "A mask is a vessel filled with values that communicates something about the culture that made it. Some masks are spiritual, some emotional, some pure entertainment. Masks make us see that we humans are essentially all the same, yet we are so different, so diverse."

Also at the Craft and Folk Art site will be mask-making demonstrations, ethnic mask vendors and foods from many lands.

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"Given that some 140 languages are spoken daily here in Los Angeles, this festival--which is one of the oldest cross-cultural festivals in the city--helps us to celebrate each other and promote understanding and communication," Ela says.

Down the street at the next site, the Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits will be promoting a greater awareness of Ice Age history, helping kids make masks of such prehistoric creatures as a short-faced bear, a saber-toothed cat and an American lion.

In addition, visitors to the Page Museum will be able to touch fossil relics, watch paleontologists at work and learn about the creatures that roamed early Los Angeles.

"We also have an interactive display where kids can see how it would feel to be stuck in tar, like what happened to the animals back then," says Helena Seli, education coordinator.

At the nearby Los Angeles County Museum of Art, families can check out a newly opened outdoor art exhibition, "Transportable City," created by a collective of Cuban artists who call themselves "Los Carpinteros" (the carpenters). Between LACMA buildings is a series of 6-to 15-foot-tall "tent buildings," such as a church, lighthouse, hospital and factory.

Guests can also walk inside LACMA's galleries and see works of old and new artists, including an exhibition from Modernist painter Stanton Macdonald-Wright.

And finally, down the street, the Petersen Automotive stage will feature a variety of rock 'n' roll bands to coincide with its current exhibition, "The Cars & Guitars of Rock 'n' Roll." "We'll have auto-related masks for the kids to make," says Jenna Mitchell, marketing coordinator. "There will be face painting and plenty of traditional American food like hamburgers and hotdogs."

In addition, kids will be able to roll up their sleeves and get artistic as they help paint a life-size BMW that is constructed completely out of cardboard. Inside the Petersen, kids can also participate in the museum's regularly scheduled Discovery Day activity, which this week offers youngsters the chance to make helmets, be they gladiator, race car, etc. Mom and dad will probably enjoy a stroll through the rock 'n' roll exhibition that showcases more than 40 cars and 75 classic and custom guitars. "We want folks to learn that we aren't a parking garage for old cars," Mitchell says, adding, "We've also got 90 years of L.A. transportation history here on display. We like to see folks come back after the event."

*

International Festival of Masks on Museum Row/LA Arts Open House, Saturday , 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Wilshire Boulevard between Curson and Fairfax avenues in Los Angeles. Free admission to the street festival and museums: Los Angeles Craft and Folk Art Museum (5814 Wilshire Blvd.), Page Museum at the La Brea Tar Pits (5801 Wilshire Blvd.), Los Angeles County Art Museum (5905 Wilshire Blvd.) and Petersen Automotive Museum (6060 Wilshire Blvd.). Parking for a fee at the museums' lots and on surrounding streets. For information about the Festival of Masks, call (323) 937-4230; for information about Los Angeles Arts Open House, call (323) 964-5454.