

Meet the Masters

January Program

Kuba Mukenga African Mask

Grade 1

Africa, Zaire, Kasai Province, Mweka District, Kuba People

About the Artist:

The maker of this mask was renowned and the people from villages for miles around would want the artist to make masks to honor their leaders. This mask is very rare as the skill required to work with many elements, shells, beads, fur and other materials was developed by only a few artists. Artists in countries such as Africa generally did not sign their work, so we do not know the name of the mask maker.

Artwork Overview:

This mask would have been used for ceremonial purposes. Dances are important in the lives of people in Africa. The Kuba, who live in central Africa use masks like this Mukenga mask in funeral ceremonies. This was used to honor the highest ranking men of their village or town or an important guest. The man who wears this mask would wear a full body costume, while performing a dance. The dance would contain steps and movements in honor of the achievement of the visitor or of the man who has died. For the funeral ceremony, the wearer of the Mukenga mask takes part in a parade through the village on the third day after the death: the dance follows the parade and lasts until sunset.

The materials used in the Mukenga mask are important to the Kuba and the man it honors. The materials relate to rank, status, and leadership. In this mask we can see the elephant which was a symbol of leadership, power and wealth. The Kuba were a wealthy people who controlled the products of their land, the most valuable being ivory from the elephant. The cowrie shells were symbols of great wealth, as they were prized for their beauty and rarity. All of the materials used on the mask are of natural origins. The African people live close to the land and must depend upon their environment to provide them with their materials for survival as well as for their artistic expression.

The face of the mask is covered with the fur of the leopard: the ruff of the Colobus monkey forms a beard: The protruding eyes recall the rotating, all seeing eyes of the chameleon. The protruding trunk represents the power of the elephant while the red feathers represent the parrot which is considered the bird of prophecy.

Topics for Discussion:

1. This is a special mask worn during ceremony by the Kuba people of Africa, can you name a time when masks are worn in our society? (Halloween, Mardi Gras etc.)
2. Describe what you see. This mask is made from many kinds of materials, can you name these materials? (leopard fur for the face, Colobus monkey ruff for a beard, bells for eyes, cowrie shells for elephant-like trunk, red parrot feathers on trunk and beads)
3. What repeated patterns can you find? (repeated blue and white interlocking rectangles, arrangement of cowrie shells)
4. How does this arrangement create a sense of movement and rhythm?
5. Is this a symmetrical (equally balanced on both sides) mask? How is this balance like your own face?

6. Do we use masks and disguises in our culture? When and why?
7. Discuss metaphors and how we can take characteristics of some animals and find a trait which can be used to describe a human behavior. (lion: bravery, cat: agility, elephant: strength)
8. Are the materials used in the mask of natural origins or man made? Explain your answer.

Hands on Art Activity- Make an African Bakuba-like Mask

Materials: cardboard or poster board ^{TAG} 9"x 12"
scissors
pencils
paint brushes (medium size)
masking tape
glue / water mixture (2 parts glue to 1 part water)
colored tissue paper
string for tying mask to face

Directions:

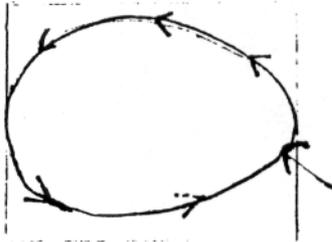
1. Cut the cardboard into oval shapes a bit larger than the child's face. You may want to help each child draw the oval then let them cut it out.
2. Using the pencil mark the location of the nose mouth., and eyes. You will need a triangle of cardboard or an elongated shape for the elephant trunk or a nose.
3. Cut the mouth in whatever shape is desirable for the student. Mark the location of the eyes, and cut in almond-like shapes.
4. The nose will be made from a triangle which can be cut from a scrap after the oval or a rectangle which can be taped onto the mask.
5. Cut holes in sides for string. A hole punch is useful for this.
6. The tissue paper should be pre-cut into geometric shapes. This makes the decorating of the mask neater, easier and faster.
7. Paint the glue/water over the entire mask. Place the tissue on the mask in colorful patterns and repeated design.
8. Paint the glue onto the tissue paper gently so not to cause smears or running of the glue in the tissue paper.
9. When the glue is dry place string in the holes and you have a mask.
10. When the decorating, is complete. paint a coat of glue/water over the entire mask. Tie string in holes.

Clean-up.

African Bakuba-like Dance

Mask

1.



2.



3.



Cut

Cut \circ , Δ , ∇

Cut Δ for nose

4.



5.



6.

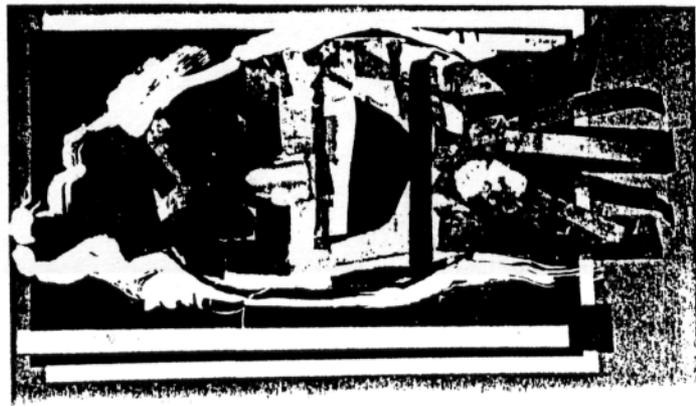


Fold Δ , tape inside
nose opening from
back.

Paint glue/water
over entire mask

Apply tissue,
paint entire
mask with
glue/water.

7.



Make holes/
attach string