

Meet the Masters

January Program

Northwest Coast Indian Mask “Kwakiutl Transformation Mask”**About the Artwork**

Northwest Coast Indians often used masks in ceremonies. These masks most often represented mythical creatures and ancestors. Many of these mythical creatures probably originated as spirit helpers or individuals. Knowledge about them was handed down from one generation to another, so that the religious origin may have in time become transformed into symbols of family or political significance.

At the center of the mask designs are a formalized treatment of the human face. The depiction of crests is regarded as coming down from a single art tradition, and developed slowly over thousands of years. Throughout the Northwest Coast people have spoken many languages but shared common hunting and fishing grounds. Through the many generations, the Northwest Coast Indians developed a highly stylized wood carving tradition. Carved wood forms appear as decorations for the home on “totem poles”, as well as in mask making.

These carved wooden masks were used during large banquet feasts or “potlatch”. While not all feasts are potlatches, all potlatches are feasts. The primary occasion for potlatches was for rites of passage: for the birth of a chief’s children; for the naming of children; or the transfer of names for adults; for marriages; for deaths. Most often, the potlatch was a ceremony in memorial for the dead.

With the arrival of Europeans in the Northwest Coast potlatches and the masking tradition declined. Today, many museums display the masks for visitors to view and enjoy. This mask was made by a Kwakiutl Indian.

Artwork Overview

This mask was carved in wood and painted by the artist Xa’niyus (Bob Harris) before 1893. Notice that the mask opens to reveal another stylized face within. The design on the mask is bilaterally symmetrical (the same on both sides). The hair appears to be made of dried plant matter.

Topics for Discussion

1. When do we wear masks in our culture? (Halloween, costume party, Mardi Gras)
2. Would you like to wear this mask? Why or why not?
3. How you think the artist wanted this mask to look?
4. Find where the shapes are the same on each side of the mask.
5. What colors did the artist use on this mask?
6. How would you decorate a mask?

Hands on Art Activity

Make a Mythical Bird Mask

Teacher preparation: There are templates for the mask and beak available in the MTM file cabinet. Trace the shapes for both pieces of the mask, for every student, onto the tagboard. Cut out forms and make folds and cuts prior to class following steps 1 – 4.

Materials

9" x 12" manila tagboard	Bold color markers
Pencils	Glue
Scissors	Hole punch
Tape	String or yarn

(This is not a wearable mask)

1. Fold beak down the center on the long side.



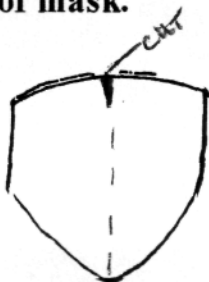
2. Fold round sides on beak from center to inner corner.



3. Fold mask down center. Open flat



4. Cut 1" to 2" on fold from top of mask.



5. Decorate beak.



6. Glue beak onto the mask. Decorate mask.



7. Tape tip of beak. Overlap top at cut in center fold, tape into place.



8. Punch holes at sides. Attach string.

