

Coming of Age Ceremonies / Mask Project

This interdisciplinary social studies, language arts and literature, and art project combines aspects of traditional coming of age ceremonies with mask making. It is designed for middle school classrooms (grades 6 through 9).

Many cultures have coming of age ceremonies that celebrate a young man or a young woman's entry into adulthood and the assumption of expanded responsibility within the community. Frequently they include special gifts from family and community elders that acknowledge puberty and the possibility of reproduction. Gifts can also be related to the acquisition of knowledge and expertise. Sometimes a coming of age ceremony includes taking a new name that symbolizes changed social status and spiritual transformation. *Spirit Quest* (1990) by Carol Batdorf is a "based on fact" fictional work for middle school students that describes an early eighteenth century initiation ceremony for adolescent boys among the Lenni Salish people living near Puget Sound.

In the contemporary United States, birthday parties and school commencements mark transformations in the lives of young people. Other coming of age ceremonies are religious in nature. They include the Roman Catholic confirmation, adult (or teenage) baptism among certain Protestant church groups, and the Jewish Bar Mitzvah.

Mask making can also have religious or spiritual significance. In West African cultures, wood carvers envision the spirit hidden within a piece of wood and hand carve a mask that liberates it. They do not start with an image and then construct it out of plaster, plastic, or paper mâché.

In many traditional cultures creating and wearing masks are part of the way people tell stories and pass along knowledge of tribal customs. Masks can represent spirits that protect or threaten a tribe and they are often integral to dances and dramatic performances. The Barong dance of the island of Bali in Indonesia and similar dances in India and Sri Lanka use masks to tell the story of the struggle between good and evil. In an example of cultural diffusion, mask dances became an integral part of Buddhist religious ceremonies and spread with Buddhism into Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Thailand, and Tibet. In Tibetan Buddhism, masks are used in sacred mystery plays aimed at exorcizing malignant demons and the masks are believed to possess the qualities of the characters they depict. These masks are generally made of paper mâché and brightly painted.

In China and Japan, mask dances celebrate national history, while in Korea, they tend to have a more local focus. Over one hundred different masks were used in traditional Japanese No dramas to represent Gods, demons, animals, and human beings. In Korea mask dances have political overtones. In the past, dancers used masks to hide their identities as they ridiculed the local elite.

In Africa, masks often honor ancestors and are used in ceremonies that evoke their support for difficult personal or community decisions. Among the Ibo and Yoruba people of contemporary Nigeria and the Bambara of Mali, masks play an important role in initiation ceremonies for adolescents. In an example of parallel cultural development, they play a similar role in initiation rites among the people of Papua New Guinea in Oceania.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations all had mask making traditions. Until a 13th century papal order forbidding the practice, Roman Catholic clergy in Europe wore masks during some ceremonies and while dramatizing Bible stories. The earliest known Japanese masks are made of clay and shell and are over 2,000 years old.

Today, mask making remains important throughout Africa, among Native American people, and in the Pacific rim areas of Asia. Masks are also part of carnival celebrations in many European, Latin, and Caribbean societies.

This interdisciplinary activity combines a coming of age ceremony with mask making. Instead of creating inauthentic versions of traditional masks, students create their own spirit masks using modern materials. The masks represent their hopes for their teen age years and adulthood.

By focusing on similarities and differences between cultural practices, cultural diffusion, and parallel cultural development, this project helps middle school students understand National Council for the Social

Studies Thematic Strands I (Culture); II (Time, Continuity, and Change); III (People, Places, and Environments); IV (Individual Development and Identity); and IX (Global Connections).

Sixth graders at Intermediate School 292 K in Brooklyn New York completed the project as part of their study of Asian societies. Ninth graders at Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn explored mask making while studying Africa. Students and teachers from both schools were able to take advantage of exhibits and printed material prepared by the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This project can easily be adapted for classes studying Native America cultures.

Materials: Clean plastic gallon jugs, any color (milk, water, paint, cooking oil, laundry soap, etc); hammer, nails, and small wood block; retractable knife; latex acrylic paint (black, brown, white, blue, red, yellow, and green); brushes; markers; glue; scissors; construction paper; stapler; wool; straw; feathers; corn husks; needle and thread; buttons, cloth strips, index cards (*Note: Tempera paint cracks and peels off the plastic jugs*).

Procedure:

1) Close your eyes. Imagine a face that represents your inner spirit as it is transformed at a crucial point in your life. Is the spirit angry or happy, supportive or threatening? Are you an adolescent preparing for religious commitment or entering a new school or new grade? a teenager entering adulthood? an adult entering a new career? a person preparing for marriage or parenthood? Think of symbols and colors that describe the image in your mind.

2) Open your eyes. Draw a sketch of the face from your inner vision (see figure 1). Why do you make the choices that you make? Explain them to your neighbor.

3) Think of ways to transform your drawing into a three dimensional mask.

a) Select a plastic jug. Holding it so the handle faces you (it will become part of the mask face), cut up from the mouth of the jug until it is divided in half (discard the back piece) (see figure 2).

b) Use markers to sketch the face on the jug. Use the retractable knife to cut out the eyes and mouth (*With younger students, teachers should do this part or else the eyes and mouth can be painted on later*). Use the hammer, nails and wood block to punch small holes for attaching wool hair, feathers or buttons.

c) Paint the entire mask with a base coat of paint. Allow to dry over night.

d) Paint on the mask face and symbols. Allow to dry.

e) Add wool, straw, cloth strips, buttons, corn husks, feathers, and paper designs. With thinner plastic water or milk jugs, it is easy to staple or sew on items. If the plastic is too thick, use paste.

4) On the index card, describe the transformation in life depicted by the spirit in the mask. Describe the spirit and the role it plays in your life. Describe the special symbols used in your mask (see figure 3).

Follow-up Activities:

* IS 292 K is an inner city school with a heavy emphasis on literacy. As part of the creation of their masks, students wrote first person stories about their coming of age ceremonies and their spirit masks.

* Visit a mask collection in a museum.

* Write a report about coming of age ceremonies or mask making in another society.

Resources:

Print (Reference books and pictures):

Brooklyn Museum of Art. *Ancestors and Art, African Gallery Guides*. Brooklyn, NY, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1998.

Lechuga, Ruth and Sayer Chloë. *Mask Arts of Mexico*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.

Mack, John, ed. *Masks and the Art of Expression*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

Segy, Ladislav. *Masks of Black Africa*. New York: Dover Publications, 1976.

Print (For students):

Batdorf, Carol. *Spirit Quest*. Surrey, BC: Hancock House, 1990.

"Masks". Theme issue of *Faces*, 3(2), (Cobblestone, October, 1987).

Price, Christine. *The Mystery of Masks*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978.

Hunt, Kari and Carlson, Bernice. *Masks and Mask Makers*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1961.

Web Sites:

www.Asiasociety.org/; www.Korea.com/; www.Japan-guide.com/;
www.indo.com/culture/barong/; www.AskAsia.org/; www.AsiaCT.org/

Video:

Millennium: Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World, The Art of Living (PBS Video, 1992, 60 minutes), includes footage of funeral masks and dances of the Dogon people of Mali.