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Lesson Plans: Grades 6-8

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What Masks Reveal

Introduction



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In this lesson, students explore the cultural significance of masks by investigating the role they play in ceremonies and on special occasions in societies from widely separated regions of the world. They then reflect on masking behavior in American society, such as at Halloween and in the circus.

Guiding Questions

What can masks tell us about the people who make them?

Learning Objectives

To become aware of the social purpose and significance of cultural artifacts such as masks.

To recognize the influence that stereotyping can have on one's response to artifacts of a different culture or society.

To explore connections between cultures and societies -- including American society -- relating to their use of masks.

Background

While it is perfectly fine to enjoy masks from many cultures as rich, colorful works of art, one can gain a deeper understanding by considering how masks are used in a particular culture and the meanings that the tradition-bearers bring to them.

In general, masks have two important social functions: (1) they provide a disguise for the wearer and (2) they allow the wearer to assume the identity, at least temporarily, of some other person or being.

An individual in clown makeup, for example, is allowed in most societies to behave in ways that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate or offensive. This is certainly entertaining to the viewers, but it also highlights and presumably conveys something about the boundaries of what is appropriate in that particular society.

Traditionally, masks are often worn at dangerous times of "border-crossing" -- what anthropologists call periods of "liminality" -- such as funerals or the planting and nurturing of spring crops. Not unexpectedly, these are also times when the spirits are in closest contact with the people. In religious rituals during these times, the person wearing the mask often becomes the spirit being represented, or at least serves as a medium through which the spirit is allowed to communicate with the people, as in many American Indian and African societies.

Of course, masks can also serve as simple enhancements to story-telling, as a way for actors to "disappear" into the roles they are playing (Japanese Noh masks, for example). Yet even this use of masks can be more complicated than one might suppose: at one time, for instance, Korean masked dance troupes ritually burned their masks after they had been used, suggesting that an element of religious tradition had carried over to the stage.

Lesson Activities

Activity 1. Masks from different cultures

Activity 2. Produce a brief catalog description for each mask

Activity 3. Meaning of mask facial expressions

Activity 4. Discuss cultural significance of a mask

Activity 5. Review background information on masks

Activity 6. Revise catalog descriptions

Activity 7. "Show and Tell" class discussion

Activity 8. Discuss use of masks in American society

Activity 1. Masks from different cultures

Divide the class into small groups. Provide each group with pictures of masks from three cultures, but do not tell students where they are from. All groups can work on the same three masks, or you can vary the assortment. Select examples from these EDSITEment websites:



A Collector's Vision of Puerto Rico: masks created for the annual carnival celebration held in the weeks before Ash Wednesday at the town of Ponce in southern Puerto Rico.



The Arctic Studies Center: masks created by the Yup'ik people of Alaska for use in storytelling dances and ceremonies performed during the long winter darkness of the Arctic.



Art and Life in Africa Online: search the Stanley Collection at this website (select "mask" in the search engine's pop-up menu) for more than one hundred masks created by people throughout Africa.

Activity 2. Produce a brief catalog description for each mask

Have the groups produce a brief catalog description for each mask, including a description of its appearance and hypotheses about its use and where it comes from. Students can imagine themselves museum curators or appraisers like those on the popular public television program, *Antiques Road Show*.

Activity 3. Meaning of mask facial expressions

Have a representative from each group present their favorite mask to the class. Encourage discussion by raising questions about the kinds of information students gathered through observation and the bases for their hypotheses. For example: How can you tell the difference between a smiling mask and one that is snarling or threatening to bite? Can the meaning of facial expressions differ from culture to culture?

Why might it be important to record things like the number of feathers or horns on a mask? What could such details symbolize? How can we tell if they are symbolic?

How should we interpret the coloring of a mask? How can we tell if it is symbolic, a reflection of the skin color of the people who made the mask, or just a result of the material they used?

What part might stereotyping play in our conclusions about where a mask was made and what it is used for? Should we think of masks as part of "primitive" culture? Should we look at them as portraits of the people who wear them? What can the style and material of a mask suggest about its origins and purpose?

Activity 4. Discuss cultural significance of a mask

Conclude this discussion by having students suggest questions they would ask in order to understand the cultural significance of a mask. List their suggestions on the chalkboard. Among the questions that might appear on their list:

What region is the mask from?

What society or community made the mask?

When is the mask worn?

Who wears it?

What is its social function?

What does it represent to those who use it?

Activity 5. Review background information on masks

Provide each group with background information on their masks (available at the websites listed above) and maps they can use to locate the regions where their masks were created. You can print out outline maps of the Caribbean, the Arctic, and Africa in the "Atlas" section of the National Geographic Expeditions website on EDSITEMent.

Activity 6. Revise catalog descriptions

Have students pair-off in their groups to revise their catalog descriptions, giving each pair one mask to work on. Direct students to use the background information to answer the questions they listed as important for understanding the mask's cultural significance. Have them locate where the mask comes from on the appropriate map and organize the other information in a chart or with bullet-points. Advise students that they might not find answers to all their questions.

Activity 7. "Show and Tell" class discussion

When they have completed their research, have students share information in a "show and tell" class discussion. Display the masks in different groupings to highlight similarities and differences. Some suggestions:

Group the masks geographically and discuss stylistic elements that seem to identify a mask as coming from a particular region. What are some traits that seem to appear in all regions (e.g., exaggerated eyes and mouth)?

Group the masks according to the occasions when they are worn: initiation rites, funeral rites, festivities, storytelling performances, etc. Explore thematic connections between these different occasions. To what extent are these times when members of the community are crossing some kind of border -- from youth to adulthood, from life to death, from winter to spring? To what extent are they occasions marked by a need to preserve and pass down traditions -- recount legends, reaffirm beliefs, restore values, reinforce rules of behavior?

Group the masks according to their social function. To what extent are they all intended to disguise the wearer? Do some serve to identify the wearer as prominent in the society? Or to give the wearer a new, supernatural identity within the society? Discuss the range of emotions the masks are designed to provoke -- for example, fright, amusement, disgust, reverence, curiosity, empathy or a sense of self-identification. What do these reactions contribute to the occasions when they are worn?

Group the masks according to what they represent: historical figures, characters of myth and legend, character types like "an old man" or "a fool," and so on. To what extent could we say that masks like these represent ideas? Talk about the kinds of ideas the masks bring to life -- authority, identity, honor, responsibility, right and wrong. How do we evoke these "spirits" in our society?

Activity 8. Discuss use of masks in American society

Conclude the lesson by talking about the use of masks in American society. Students might mention Halloween, Mardi Gras, masquerades, theatrical performances, the circus, or clowns and mimes in mask-like makeup. How do these uses of masks compare to their use in traditional societies?

Extending The Lesson

Collaborative or Take-Home Activity

Assign a take-home activity, or work with your school's art teacher to have students design or make masks for an appropriate occasion in their lives -- a holiday, a birthday, a personal milestone, a family event -- and produce a catalog description of the mask that explains its cultural significance.

Extending the Lesson

Explore the use of masks in drama. Visit the Perseus Project website on EDSITEment for background on masks in ancient Greek drama. Visit Teaching (and Learning) About Japan for information about masks and mask-like makeup conventions in Noh and Kabuki theater.

Learn more about the use of masks in traditional African society with study units from the Art and Life in Africa Online Unit Design Databank. For middle school, there is a multi-part unit on "Transformations: Animal Masks." For high school, an in-depth study unit on "Masks and Symbolism."

Time Required

2 class periods

Subject Areas

- History and Social Studies > Place > Africa
- Art and Culture > Subject Matter > Anthropology
- History and Social Studies
- Art and Culture > Medium > Visual Arts
- History and Social Studies > World
- History and Social Studies > Place
- Art and Culture

Skills

- Analysis
- Compare and contrast
- Gathering, classifying and interpreting written, oral and visual information
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Map Skills

- Oral Communication
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- Synthesis

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