

Ed P&L 834
Prof. Gordon
Final Project
Sui Huang
May, 2011

Lesson Title: Exploring the Arts of African Masks

Grade level: 9th grade

Subject:

Social studies/Arts/History/Multicultural

Duration: Three 45 Minute~1 hour class

periods

Resource needed: Computers with internet

access

Description

In this class, students will research on one important form of African art, which also exerted greatly influence on arts all around the world. By knowing the background, social origin and functionality of African masks. Students will be able to identify characteristics of African masks, identify materials used to create an African mask and become aware of symbolic meanings of African Mask arts. Students will be asked to work as a group and to conduct research on one specific African tribal mask of interest and present their findings and interpretations of this mask in front of class. Understanding that African mask bears strong cultural meanings, at the end of the class, students will be asked to create their own 'personal mask' using self justified colors and patterns.

Objectives

The student(s) will:



- View multiple examples of African Masks featuring different themes
- Discuss the symbolism in African Masks and the patterns and shapes within this art form.
- Examine the colors used in African Art that represent African cultural heritage:

For Example:

Red- Life & blood; **Gold**- Fortune; **Blue**- Innocence; **Green**- The earth and Africa as the mother country; **Black**- The Unity of the people of Africa

- show their understandings of one selected African mask
- Brainstorm ideas for creating their own personal masks.
- Create their own African inspired art mask.
- Write a short description of what materials they have used to create their art masks and what significance these materials have to them personally.

Teacher's Responsibilities

1. Provide a brief introduction about African masks. Show students video clips on African Masks and mask dancing.
2. Provide the class with reading materials, including books and internet links. Provide some examples of African Masks.
3. Lead the discussions on the meanings of colors and patterns utilized in African masks.
4. Help students to conduct research on their interested masks online.
5. Direct students to make their own personal mask.

Background Information

African masks can be traced back to well beyond Paleolithic times. A wide variety of materials have been used in the making of these masks, ranging from leather, metal, fabric to various types of wood. African masks are considered amongst the finest creations in the art world and are

highly sought after by art collectors. They have also provided inspirations to many contemporary artists. *Pablo Picasso* and *Andre Derain* are two of them. They were inspired by the bold abstract designs that they discovered in African tribal masks and subsequently collected and used these works of art to influence their own style. Reviews commented that ‘they used African culture to refresh the tired tradition of figure painting in European art. As a result, we now tend to admire the bold design and abstract patterns of African masks through European eyes.’ In the museums and art galleries all around the world, we could see a wide collection of African masks and even their replicas.

The significance of masks in Africa is closely associated with the cultural and traditional meanings that African people assign to them. Recent ethnographic developments in understanding African aesthetic principles, religious and ceremonial values has brought about a greater insight into the ideas and moral values that African artists express in their art. African masks are usually worn by one chosen or designated dancer in masking ceremonies such as celebrations, initiations, crop harvesting, war preparation, peace and trouble times. There could be multiple ways in which the dancer wears the masks: vertically covering the face: as helmets, encasing the entire head, and as crest, resting upon the head, which was commonly covered by material as part of the disguise. Often times, African masks represent a spirit and it is accepted in the African society that when the dancer wears the mask, the spirit of their ancestors would possess him. Ritual ceremonies generally depict deities, spirits of ancestors, mythological beings, good and or evil, the dead, animal spirits, and other beings believed to have power over humanity. In Africa, masks of human ancestors or totem ancestors are seen as objects of family pride. Therefore, when they are regarded as the dwelling of the spirit they represent, the masks may be honored with ceremonies and gifts. At the mask ceremony, the mask wearer

'communicates' to his ancestors by going into deep trance, while a respected wise man or translator accompanies the dancer during the ritual. His function is to translate the words of wisdom that the dancer obtained from their ancestor, which is in the form of grunted utterances, into understandable language to other members of the community. Songs and African traditional music played with traditional African musical instruments usually accompany the whole process of rituals.

While For thousands of years, rituals and ceremonies was an integral part of African life, it is no longer as common as it was before. The gradual, effects of parceled out territories to Colonial governments, and the ensuing damage to traditional economies followed by the displacement of huge quantities of people, by colonialism, resulted in economies and food production systems being wrecked. In general the vast number of people has lost some of its tribal identity and cultures, thus masking ceremonies are no longer common place in Africa.

Characteristics of African Masks

{ Additional information link http://www.rebirth.co.za/african_mask_basic%20forms.htm }

One important element in African mask is the bold pattern, either painted or carved. It is seen as a powerful and expressive element in African mask design. Most patterns tend to be geometrical and symmetrical and are presented as a form of coded information. Parallel, zigzag, cruciform, curved and spiral lines, representing scarification marks or tattoos, are frequently used to adorn the planes of the mask face. These could represent social status or have magical or religious powers. Male and female masks could sometimes be distinguished by the different geometric patterns used. Square and triangular checkerboard grids are often carved to decorate sections of a design. A variety of complex braided hairstyles adorn the top of the head. Interlacing crosses and

geometric forms are often seen as details on African masks. With the spread of the Moslem faith in Africa, some of these designs show an influence of the decorative ideals of Islamic Art.

Two main forces have exerted substantial influence on the design of African masks:

1. Social and religious beliefs of the community were generally manifested in the design of African mask as a tradition.

2. The individual vision of the mask designer also greatly influences the style of the mask.

African tribal artists do not try to create a perfect representation of their subject. Although some realistic portraits are made, others celebrate more abstract qualities like nobility, beauty, courage, mischief and humor. They create an idealized version, emphasizing those elements that they consider most important.

Composition: Formal symmetrical arrangements of line, shape and form in figures and masks evoke integrity and dignity.

Texture: Skilled craftsmanship, fine detail and quality of finish are of great importance to the African tribal artist. Highly polished surfaces which represent a youthful healthy skin reflect the idea of beauty and virtue, while rough dirty surfaces suggest fear and evil. Many African carvings portray the idealized human figure in its prime, brimming with health, strength, and celebrating fertility or virility.

Shape and Color: African masks take on many forms. They can be oval, circular, rectangular, elongated, heart-shaped, animal or human, or any combination of these. Shapes and Colors of African masks are tribe specific, thus they are used as parameters to locate the mask's origin. In ethnic art the colour was always vegetable, sometimes mixed with sacrificial blood or some magical substance. It was applied to the mask during special rituals in order to ensure its magical power. A wax substance was often added to the colour to achieve, after some rubbing, a glossy finish. Some tribes utilized the 'mud

bath' or burning technique to apply black color to the masks. In different tribes different colours have different meaning. Kaolin, white colour, can be a symbol of death, spirit or daylight but also good fortune. Charcoal, black, symbolizes evil. Ochre, red – is used to mark a celebration of life. Yellow ochre and blue lye are also used.

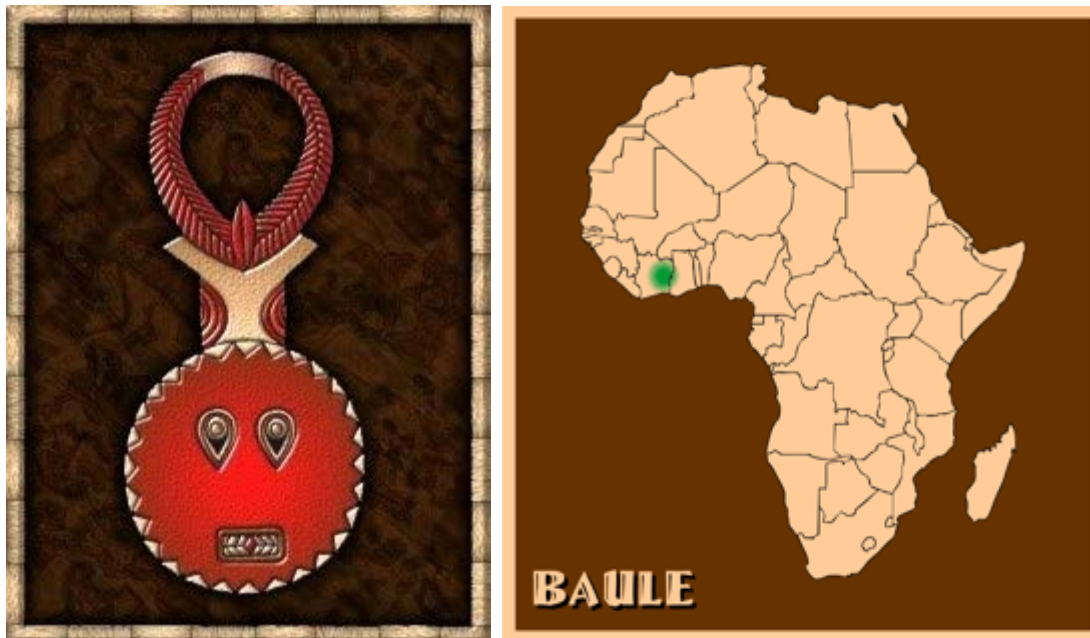
Activities

1. Online search information about one selected African Masks

Access to the online resources and explore among the various available African masks in terms of its' primary purpose and the symbolized meanings.

2. Presenting an African Mask of interest to your group members

Example: <http://www.artyfactory.com/africanmasks/masks/baule.htm>



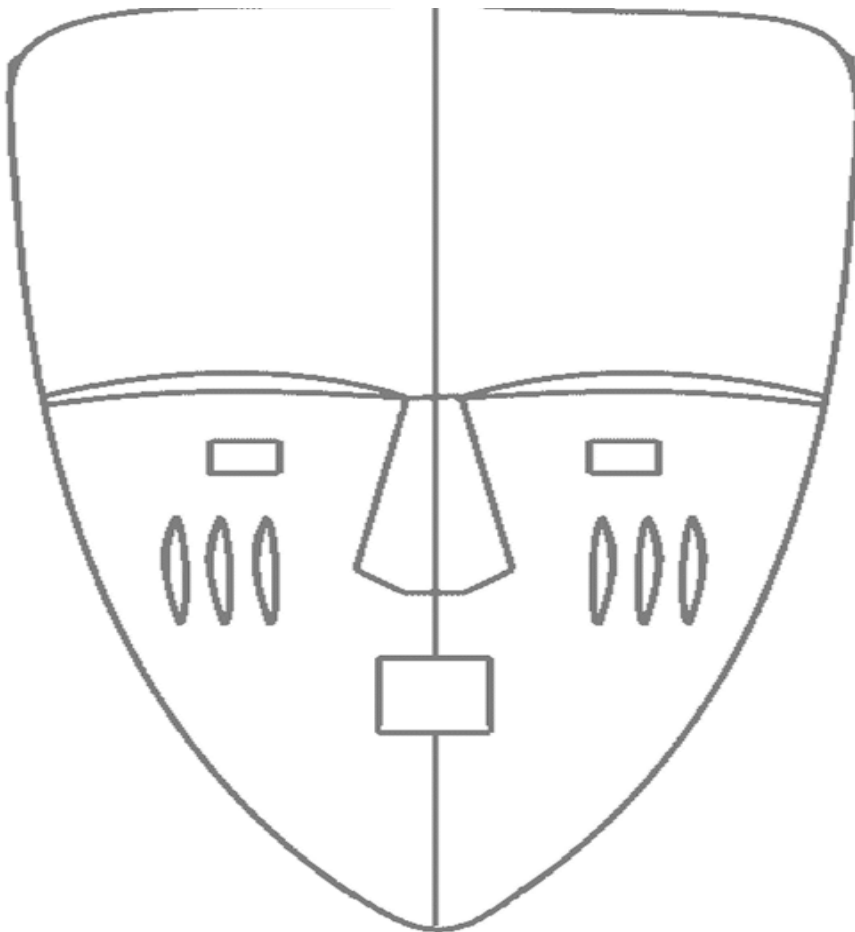
This type of Baule mask is known as a Goli mask. It is used in dances during harvest festivals, in processions to honor distinguished visitors and at the funerals of important figures. The circular face represents the life-giving force of the sun and the horns symbolize the great power of the buffalo. The mask is made of wood with two holes cut into the eyes to enable the wearer to see. The rectangular mouth is also typical of this type of mask. The Baule are farmers who

populate the eastern side of the Ivory Coast. They are part of the Akan people who dwell in both Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

3. *Making your own personal mask*

Procedure: The size of each mask can vary depending on shape selected. 9x12 paper is an adequate size for this activity. Holding the paper vertically and then the center top and bottom is cut in about 1½ inches. The cut section is pulled together and glued. Students can build onto the mask form considering the following: Symmetry (cut two shapes at one time so they are the same). Breaking the edge (extending beyond the shape of the mask by adding horns, hair, beards, scalloped edges or geometric shapes) layering color and pattern.

Example:



4. Writing Assignment

Express in a 2-3 paragraph writing their rationale in designing their own personal mask. E.g. Why do you select this pattern? Why do you use this color? What is the meaning that you are trying to symbolize by this mask?

References

Suggested books and articles for further reading:

Kasfir, S. L. (1988). *West African masks and cultural systems*. Tervuren.

Adams, M (1986) Women and Masks among the Western Wè of Ivory Coast *African Arts* Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 46-55

Tonkin, E. (1979) Masking and Masquerading, with Examples from West Africa. Discussion Papers, ser. C, no. 36. University of Birmingham.

Stepan, P (2005) *Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks*, Prestel Publishing.

'Over 150 images of outstanding African masks from the world's leading museums and private collections reveal the splendour and majesty of these fascinating masterpieces. The masks seen in these pages represent diversity and an aesthetic power that rivals the most famous works of art from around the world. Originating from more than thirty countries, the masks featured here are shown in stunning full-page reproductions and accompanied by field photographs. Enlightening commentaries offer background information about the function and origins of the masks use within the ethnic groups from which they originate. A beautifully produced full-colour fold-out map places each mask in its original site, which together with the stunning reproductions, field photographs and text, creates a magnificent celebration of African artistry and culture. It is the 'best of' African masks book. "Prestel's African Masks" by the same author has sold over 40K copies worldwide.'

----- Amazon book description

Online resources and gallery of African Masks

<http://www.artyfactory.com/africanmasks/design/design.htm>

Gallery of African Masks: http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~bcr/African_Mask.html

http://www.rebirth.co.za/african_mask_basic%20forms.htm

Video Clips:

African Masks Part 1: Ghana, Benin and the Congo region.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdEGuFkxbCw>

Dogon Mask Dance 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFu9Sgru9o0>