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Ritual, Symbolism and Imagery in African Masks

Overview

The unit's purpose is to explore the ritual use, the cultural iconography, and the communicative impact of masked performances on the African continent. I will examine a variety of different masks by their design and function. The unit will seek to make some comparisons of masks types on the continent as well with masked ceremonies found in other cultures.

Understanding African art requires a look at certain prevalent themes. In the African way of thinking a mask cannot be separate from its context. Masks are believed to be sacred magical objects providing a portal for ancestral spirits or mythological characters. The mask and the ritual performance are carefully prescribed by cultural tradition to serve a very specific function within that particular society. Out of context the mask loses its power for the people or culture that is represented. It is no longer a vessel for magic.

Masks fall into the category of Ethnographic art. Ethnographic art is particularly concerned with the cultural attributes of a particular group or race. Ethnographic art has a particular dominant trait: "the imaginative reshaping, rather than the careful observation, of the forms of nature."(H. W. Janson, and Anthony F. Janson, History of Art for Young People). According to the authors the visible world is far less important than the unpredictable disquieting spirit world. The masks are considered a "power object" (Ola Balonga 1990) providing access to an invisible world where spirits and divinities cohabit and communicate with humans.

Animism, the belief that every living thing has a spirit, is embedded in the iconography of the artworks. Because animism is central to their belief

system, Ethnographic societies view the spirits of their ancestors as a potent collective force endowed with a certain dominion over the living. The appeasing of the ancestral spirits thus becomes a key aspect of their "artistic" creations.

It is important to stress again that the western view of art for arts sake, is not a part of the imagination of either African artisan nor other Ethnographic societies. The art is far more conceptual by nature. There is in fact no word for "art" in African languages. In Africa the word beautiful and the word good are the same. Art would be considered that which

embodies both in their way of seeing. The role of the arts is connected to tradition, the ancestors and the unseen spirit world. Among those arts, masking, dance, adornment elaborate costumes and dramatic performance ceremonies allow one to become a sort of medium for the spirit world even if only temporarily; to connect with the living and the dead.

Students will have an opportunity to explore a continent through its masquerade traditions and rituals that is rich and ancient. The very vastness of the African continent which is three times the size of America, where there are over 1000 languages spoken and over 800 million people provides a fascinating array of cultures. There is opportunity here for great discovery about the vastness of the continent and many varieties of cultures within it. Students will be able to compare and contrast differences and similarities as we explore the many groups. Many misconceptions can be laid to rest.

Masks play an important role in the community life of many African communities. Spiritual forces called forth by the masquerade can protect or heal, instruct or induce fear, commemorate the dead or provide entertainment for the living. Their use is crucial in the funerary and initiation ceremonies of many groups. They are used as well to honor important elders or leaders. Masks are used to provide protection from unseen evil, to heal the sick, and of course invoke and appease the unseen but powerful spirit world that are seen to control many of the events that effect the living.

As is often the case mask wearers and mask makers belong to secret societies where only the initiates are privy to their mystery and magic. They are kept hidden from view so as not to lessen their dramatic impact during the ritual performances. Some masks are not worn at all but displayed independently, a complete entity in itself.

As a visual art teacher I seek to engage students in the discovery, examination and understanding of works of art from various times and places. The works of art cover a broad range of styles, media and techniques and explore the social, political and cultural underpinnings of the societies for which they were created. Through such lenses students can find clues to comprehending their neighborhood as well as their universe.

In the classroom the description, analysis and interpretation of works of art are the foundation of our explorations. Through this method the elements of art: line, shape, color, space, texture, value and form are explored. Students are exposed to a broad range of two and three dimensional artworks that chronicle aesthetic expression throughout history.

It is hoped in these explorations that students will discover universal truths about mankind, that they will see mirrored in works of art truths that have lasted throughout time and space, articulating shared beliefs and values of the people and culture represented. In art we attempt to comprehend ourselves and our universe. Artworks convey complex messages that are laden with multiple meanings using the iconography of the elements and principles of art.

When we examine dominant forms of symbolic and aesthetic expression such as can be found in the mask we can discover certain patterns of thought, certain ideologies and the repeated appearance of certain types of imagery which closely connect the aesthetic object with the maintenance of certain societal attributes. The mask provides continuity with a distant past and yet reaches toward the newly initiated into the future. The mask speaks to and for the dead and yet provides guidance and assurances for the continuum into the future. The mask connects the individual to the community and the community to the universe. And while many masks may not be seen by western eyes as beautiful in a classical way, it is the spiritual aspect of the mask that conveys its true value to the people and culture for which its ritual use is incorporated.

Masks have been a part of human culture for thousands of years. Students may recall their own masked experiences. They will have an opportunity to examine and discuss masks from many cultures around the world. Through our discourse and analysis it will be revealed that regardless of the culture we will find overlapping threads weaving disparate cultures to one another.

Most students have experiences with masks and the power and pleasure they derive from assuming a new identity under its guise. Role playing for children comes naturally. They will be able to identify and connect familiar fictional masked characters from pop culture. Spiderman, Batman, and various other superheroes are transformed into powerful beings with the help of their masks, often taking on the special abilities of the animals that they represent. As it happens many African masks represent animals. Many tribes believe that animals serve as a medium to help them communicate with the spirits that dwell in the forests and on the open savannahs.

The students will have an opportunity to learn about the cultural and spiritual motivations for the art making traditions of some African groups. Many examples of masking traditions will be viewed both in the classroom through reproductions and the internet and out of the classroom through museum and gallery visits. We can explore some of the sculptural methods of creating mask forms. For elementary students modeling and sculpting seem to hold special fascination. Most children at this age have a natural affinity for animals so choosing animals as sources for mask symbolism is very enjoyable for them.

Rationale

The unit will provide exposure to masks from various cultures with a particular focus on masks from certain parts of Africa. The goals of the instruction are connected to the national standards for education in the visual arts. Students should be taught to recognize that artworks serve as primary and secondary sources for the documentation and interpretation of the multilayered aspects of history and culture. The classroom is the vehicle for a dialogue that challenges our assumptions about things. We must analyze

and interpret the expressive content of various objects. We must make judgments about the aesthetic choices artists have used and come to understand that an aesthetic itself is culturally based.

The unit will cover all of the state and national standards for the arts and humanities. They will have the opportunity to produce masks from a variety of materials and also have an opportunity to write creative interpretation of possible uses for their mask as they endow them with special powers of their own choosing to help them overcome certain obstacles in their everyday life.

Among other objectives the goal is to convey to students that while some works of art are created for their aesthetic enjoyment other objects play important roles or functions in everyday life for events such as ceremonies, rituals or special occasions for specific groups of users. Context and object are not separate. In our discussion we can identify ritual objects used on special occasions in our own lives such as births, weddings or funerals. We contrast these to ritual use of masks in Africa to mark the birth of a child, a turning point in one's life, such as coming of age, the time of death and passage to the next level and to respect the ancestors or the creator.

Masks are ceremonial objects through which powerful spirits are believed to be channeled for important occasions in the life cycles of many cultures. This has occurred for thousands of years and across many continents. Through our discovery, dialogue, and manipulation students will be engaged in a culturally rich interactive experience allowing them to look into the distant past and the connected future with an art form that is timeless and rich. They will take away an experience in constructing an object for power and protection as many of their ancestors have.

In some of the earliest research on mask traditions shaman-like figures on cave walls appear to be the first maskers. Often these figures were surrounded by the animal figures believed to be the prey. It was the shaman who possessed the power to help the clan capture the animal in the virtual and real sense which would ensure the survival of the clan. This tradition seems to represent a certain commonality among various cultures. Discovering what is common about our ancestors sheds much light on the present and the very nature of community.

By way of ancient traditions the shaman-like figures were believed to channel powers far greater than their fellow mortal clan members. It was they that could maintain the balance between God and nature or life and death. People were extremely superstitious and felt it necessary to maintain the traditional ways in order to assure the survival of the clan. This tradition can be found in ancient cultures of the Pacific West Coast of North America (now Canada and Alaska) and the tribal traditions of Africa.

Masks maintain and transmit historic tales. Myths are rooted in history. The mask is responsible for breathing life into tribes founding myths and connects them with the everyday life of its current inhabitants. The spirit the mask personifies is believed to be

capable of affecting the everyday life of the villagers. The spirit inhabits the realm of the sacred as well as the profane. The present and the world to come are connected.

Certain themes seem to be present in the study of African art which are the focus of this discussion. These themes will be found in a variety of art forms from sculptures, to masks, from beadwork to fetishes and a wide range of textile and fiber arts. The objects are used to teach beliefs values and customs, certain morals and religious ideas deeply embedded in African thinking. In a culture where “beautiful” and “good” mean exactly the same thing it is easy to connect the moral basis for the artworks. The creations must be both beautiful and good in their ritual and spiritual function as well as pleasing to the eye.

“Tribality is the essence of African art and each tribal group is a highly autonomous structure,” according to Robert Bleakley. He further asserts “Amongst the different tribes, vastly different means may be employed to represent the same concepts, ideals or emotions.” Some motifs are viewed similarly by a wide range of tribes even over large areas. For instance in mask forms a high domed forehead is an indicator of wisdom and unmarred spirituality. The use of white pigmentation such as can be found on the Ibo maiden mask is believed to indicate ghosts, the spirits of the dead and to express another worldly quality. In many parts of the continent the buffalo or bush cow is believed to be associated with witches, exorcism and spirit transmigration and the honoring of ancestors.

While our discussion will focus on masking traditions, these themes appear again and again in other art forms as well, underlining their importance in African thought. According to Bleakley there are over 1000 tribes in Africa but only a small number produce sculpture and of those approximately one hundred produce masks.

Examining the Major Themes African Art

The themes that appear with regularity in African art fall into these somewhat broad categories. When we examine the masks we will be able to categorize them according to their use in ceremonies for the purpose of recognizing these essential features of the culture and the elements of the African aesthetic. In *Arts of Africa* Katie Dowling discusses at length this thematic approach to studying African Art.

LINEAGE

-The practices necessary to ensure continuity of the clan or group. The survival of social values for individuals and the community as a whole is most important. Fertility which can relate to childbearing and or healthy crops is essential. The passing on of tradition through proper childrearing ensures no break with the established laws and practices.

INITIATION

-The transmitting of the culture to the young as they reach adulthood again ensures the connection between ancestors and the future. Special initiation associations were entrusted with the great responsibility of passing on the history, philosophy and moral tenants of the group to the young.

BEAUTY AND STATUS

- The art of personal adornment is a way to communicate critical information as well as to beautify. Social status, wealth, ethnic identity, authority all could be communicated through a particular hairstyle or scarification marks or other types of body adornment. Women could communicate whether they were married or single. They could project certain desired characteristics about their personality and the ideals of their culture. Lustrous and smooth surfaced objects generally indicate healthy shiny skin. The composed face is a sign of intelligence, dignity and self control. The rough deformed surface is intended to appear ugly and deformed both physically and morally. A youthful appearance is viewed as a sign of vitality and productiveness

DEPARTURE

-The tradition of looking back for guidance and assistance is strong in African cultures. The past and the present are ever connected. The dead are ever present in the fortunes of the living. Through the art associated with masking traditions the dead are honored and commemorated. Their achievements are celebrated and entreaties are made for their safe passage to the next world. Funerary tributes often go on for several years after departure.

WOMEN

-The roles of women are recognized and celebrated. In many communities they possess great power in the economic, social and political spheres. They are artisans, child bearers, elders, and essential to agricultural concerns of the community. The contribution and power wielded by women appears in many different art forms on the African continent. Their power and beauty appears in many other art forms as well. Imagery in sculpture, pottery, carvings and even musical instruments is extensive.

RECOGNITION OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

-The recognition of leadership is prevalent in masking traditions. Leadership includes respected elders whose accumulated wisdom can provide counsel to the divine kings or chiefs who in turn are believed to be directly linked to various deities and ancestors whose spiritual assistance is essential. Artworks convey these important attributes. Students can make connections here to the great architectural monuments in Egypt, like great pyramids of Giza as symbols of power and authority. Many artists are employed specifically to glorify the powerful rulers throughout the continent.

Let us begin with the first category. Lineage or the continuity of the community and social wellbeing of its inhabitants is of course paramount and one of the most commonly found themes. The survival of a community depended greatly on the ability to raise healthy children and the production of bountiful crops. The children would be responsible for working the land and caring for the elders. They would be chiefly responsible to ensure that proper burial customs would be adhered to and essential contact with ancestral spirits would not be broken. This is often necessitated elaborate burial rituals. Artworks reflect the concerns and belief systems of those who create them. The masquerade and dance are the acts which manifest the spirits which are used to initiate those approaching adulthood. It is considered essential in most tribes.

For students initiation to a group might seem somewhat familiar. Various fraternal organizations have special ceremonies to honor new members and pass on the group's often secret information or traditions. Children may belong to clubs like boy scouts or girl scouts. In such clubs certain tasks are required to advance. Discussion can be centered on how such clubs pass on certain knowledge and teach important values which enhance the development of the individual and the group.

Both human and agricultural fertility appear in the imagery of a variety of art forms which are used in rituals that have to do with planting or harvesting. The community would appeal for continued prosperity and abundance. Sculptures featuring mothers and children represent this concern as well as other animal figures representing fertility. Animal imagery is very common in the masking traditions of Africa and other Ethnographic societies. They are believed to be much closer to the spirit world than humans, possessing a special clairvoyance. One wonders too if images of mothers and children are also a metaphor of continuity as well fertility. Even in Western art images of mothers and children suggest a similar message.

The Bamana people of Mali believe the antelope called the Chiwara taught men the secrets of agriculture and thus use helmet masks in the shape of the antelope in many of their fertility rituals. The Dogon people as well use the Chiwara image in masking but see its elements somewhat differently though still through the lens of fertility. Their antelope mask is slender and elegant with both a larger more powerful male version and a smaller feminine version. The dance itself is smooth and graceful imitating the movements of the animals.

The Dogon people of Mali use a variety of animal masks in a complex religious system. The main cults in the system are the Awa, the cult of the dead, Bini, cult of communication with the spirits and Lebe, cult of nature and earth. The antelope mask they use is made of a rough rectangular box with several horns projecting from the top; it symbolizes the hardworking farmer and recognizes his contribution to the society as a whole.

In African art much attention is given to the role of women. In the complex Efe-Gelede cult their dual role as powerful witches is acknowledged as well as their role as mothers, as artisans, and as elders who guide and make significant contributions to the community. The Gelede Dance mask of the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria is used in a rite in which the contributions of women are honored through a festival that promotes non-violence and social harmony. The mask acts out the conflicts and struggles encountered by ordinary men. The masks acts out or connects to women's dual roles sometimes radical shifts in presentation from humorous to frightening perhaps showing women's the layered aspects of the woman's nature.

Efe is the night performance and Gelede follows the next afternoon. The night performance serves to enlighten the community through social criticism. In the daytime performance honor is paid to the mothers through the outpourings of paired dancers who act out beautiful dance sequences called eka. The Gelede festival is held at the beginning of the new agricultural season between March and May.

The Gelede dance is held in the marketplace which is believed to be a center of power for women. The market is a metaphor for the world where spirits intermingle with ordinary mortals. As personal responsibility is always at issue people are reminded that honor and responsibility to the community, the village, and the spirits that dwell on the edge of the forest cannot be lost sight of or taken lightly. For children of the age group for which this unit is intended discussion of choice and responsibility are frequent as they too must become contributing members of our society.

Once again tribute is paid to the mystical power of the ancestors, elders and various deities. But in this case special tribute is paid to the entities know as "our mothers." Their power can be both constructive as they relate to fertility and the very secret of life, or a more superstitious destructive force.

In the Gelede culture there is believed to be a diurnal half (day) and a nocturnal half (night). This spiritual life force, a sort of witchcraft possessed by women called "aje" can be creative and positive, and life bringing. But the opposing side of that force is called "aje" which can be destructive and deadly, extinguishing individuals or the community. The mask is a physical representation of the "two ness" of the woman's personality her inner and outer self, her human and Godlike power.

The purpose of the masquerade is to placate and pamper the mothers so that they will encourage rain for fertile soil and bestow blessings and healing as opposed to desolation and hardship. While the Gelede ceremony is intended to provide instruction and reinforcement of Yoruba social values. It can also be used at funerals of dignitaries or during times of crisis such as drought, disease or famine. The Gelede mask is one that touches many traditions at once. Ancestor and elder worship as well as fertility are connected in the tribute.

Pairs of men wear the masks at an angle on the tops of their heads. Transparent fabrics cover but do not hide their faces. The mask itself is carved out of wood and consists of

two parts, a lower mask with an idealized woman's face and an upper super structure. The lower structure epitomizes calmness, patience and coolness as desired in a woman. Small markings are placed on the forehead and cheeks which are considered gems. The upper super structure is by contrast vital and diverse with carved pairs of animal figures. Snakes and birds are often featured. The coiled snake represents calmness and patience; it may sleep but continues to see. The bird, the messenger, is clairvoyant. Other animals, humans and objects can be used as well to comment on a variety of aspects about daily life, including gender roles, fashion, technology and knowledge of honored proverbs.

While the lower mask represents the admired personal qualities which can be seen from the outside, the upper superstructure displays the immense and unpredictable mystical power she possesses which cannot be seen. The dance itself is meant to appease and placate the mothers and pay homage to their special gifts. The performance offers an opportunity for both instruction and entertainment and continually incorporates new situations in its design.

The fabrics which make up the costume are collected from women throughout the village. It is bulky with special emphasis on the breast and buttocks underlining again her life giving qualities. The dancers must adhere to carefully choreographed movements which will shape a metaphor for social perfection.

Many masks show the ideal of feminine beauty. In the masks of the Penu of Gabon the carver creates highly arched brows, almond shaped eyes and narrow chins. Dark black hairstyles frame and top the whitened face. The whiteness on the face represents the spirit world. Men on stilts dance, wearing the mask during the performance. One of the female masks is the Ideas mask of Benin commissioned by the King of Benin. It was created to commemorate his mother. To honor his mother the king wore it on his hip during special ceremonies.

The Okpella of the Edo people of Nigeria use many different types of masks some of which take up to a year to complete. The masks are used for a variety of different rituals and ceremonies. There is a luminous white faced mask used to represent their "dead mothers" the Odogo, at the Olimni festival to signify social control and the deification of ancestors. As stated earlier the color white is symbolic of a link to those who come before.

The instruction of the individual or the community in the skills needed to observe important tradition is found throughout the continent. Cooperation and social harmony ensured the survival of the community as did hard work and adherence to societal laws. Initiation associations were chiefly responsible for the task of providing this instruction to members of the community approaching adulthood. Students can think of their own religious training for baptisms. Confirmations, bar mitzvahs etc.

Transition from childhood to adulthood is a critical passage in many African communities well. The ritual of initiation can require the removal of the child from his

usual surroundings where the societal laws can be transmitted. It is here that the history, philosophy, the moral and practical knowledge needed to conduct oneself was conveyed. Circumcision is often a part of these ceremonies. The ability to endure physical pain is seen as a sign of maturity and bravery indicative of the initiated ability to now face life's many challenges. Mask-making is often taught during these ceremonies. The traditional symbols that are incorporated in masks, sculptures and costumes are also taught. Masks used during such ceremonies play many roles, some frightening, some protective, some instructive.

The Djoanibe Mask of the Ivory Coast is used in rites of passage for adolescents. As the spirit guide and teacher the mask is responsible for transmission of essential information for the initiates. The experience in the bush with the mask lasts for seven days and is said to be very intense. These traditions are passed down through the mask families. Members in the mask families are born into the art. Outsiders must be instructed by one of the family members in the proper and accepted knowledge of the construction of these initiation masks. The experience for the young men is their preparation for man hood and is very secretive.

The masquerade has a multitude of functions within African societies as we have discussed. The word mask is all inclusive; the mask, the songs, the dance, the music and interactive audience participation. The power and excitement of the performance cannot be fully appreciated outside its ritual context. Masking continues to play an important role in contemporary societies as the performance adapts to ever changing circumstances.

Beauty, personal adornment and status are as important in African society as it is elsewhere in the world. Hairstyles, scarification marks and other forms of body adornment serve the dual function of beautification as well as communicating information about the individual. Textile arts were also used in this capacity. Such enhancements could signify marital, economic or social status, ethnic identity, and represent certain ideals of beauty.

The Baule people of the Ivory Coast create a special portrait mask of women admired for their physical beauty, social status, and dancing ability. The mask is called the "ndoma" a word which means "double" or namesake". This mask serves multiple purposes. It entertains, instructs and honors those qualities held in high regard. Ideal beauty is both physical and moral and is depicted in these masks. A closed mouth, downcast eyes refer to composure and respect. Scarification symbolizes refinement. Elegant and elaborate hairstyles denote both leisure time as the hairstyles can take many hours, and her social bonds as the work is usually done by family and close friends. During the performance the dignified movements suggest the movements if an elder combined with the physical beauty of youth.

The Gbagda masquerade which uses these portrait masks is performed at times of celebration or at the funeral of an important individual such as a man or woman associated with the masquerade. Unlike many other masks the ndomo portrait mask represents a person of the real world as opposed to those masks which embody some

aspect of the spirit world. The woman who is being honored by such a performance is also a participant for as long as she is physically able. When she dies a daughter or granddaughter will take her place thus providing the continuity of honoring and reverence across generations.

Art forms are an integral part of the way in which leaders project their authority in African societies. The respected elder who advises the community, the revered chief or the divine king with his host of gods and ancestors, all make use of art forms to represent their power and authority. Of ten the councils and associations also responsible for governance of the community would order the creation of masks, sculptures, textiles and other utilitarian objects that would project the rulers status.

In many cultures the powers of control and grace associated with the lion or leopard are appropriate symbols for the ruler. The capacity of the animals to kill represents great warrior like power, the ability to be the greatest of all killers, king of the forest. They are animals that are deadly to man. In Benin an ivory belt mask in the form of a leopard represents the feline motif in African leadership. Its eyes are set wide open to denote spirit possession. The sign of the leopard as an icon for king-ship dates back as early as the ninth century. In the Kore society of the Bamana country there is leonine representation of authority carved from wood. Kore lion dancers wear a mask with discreet slits for eyes and quiet surface treatment. Despite taunting by hyenas during the dance ritual the lion remains cool and imperturbable in his serene knowledge of his power and reason.

The theme of departure is another key feature of African art. The departed go on to join the great life cycle wherein they will continue to play a role in the lives of those left behind. Funerary ceremonies were often quite elaborate depending upon the person's status sometimes lasting for years after the person's death. Artworks were created which would honor the individual's achievements and ensure their safe passage to the world beyond where their guidance and attention would still be requested.

In Benin for example, the performance by the great Egungun masks speak to the cult of the dead. Villagers in Benin are of the belief that the performance puts them in the presence of their dead ancestors. The purpose of the masquerade is to cleanse and reconcile the community. Burdens are said to be lifted. While the dance may elicit both fear and hope the ultimate goal is optimism for the community. Members are urged to behave responsibly. The ritual is performed by initiated men who will expose misdeeds and exact swift punishment which could be harsh unless the exposed individual is willing to make up for his failures.

During the dance being touched by the mask may be seen as the exposure of some misdeed. The guilty would need to make amends to be released from a sort of symbolic death. They must make amends for their transgressions in an agreed upon manner and appease the ancestors.

While dance appears to be a part of virtually every sub Saharan culture, the wearing of masks is not. Where masks are used there is a vast array. The materials which are used, the shapes and forms and functions are many. The ways in which they are worn can also vary greatly. The costumes though carefully proscribed may not be made of materials that last as long as the masks. Costumes are frequently made of bark cloth, fiber fringes, animal fur and may include attachments such as cowrie shells, sections of animal horns and other magical attachments. Some types of masks are actually destroyed during performance.

The Dogon of the Bandiagara Cliff region use of great body of mask types which are classified according to their role in certain sacred "operas". This region which is present day central Mali was isolated and thus protected from invaders for centuries. In some other regions there are fewer types and a much smaller number. One example is the Karumba people who have only the elegant Antelope, worn on a cap placed on the head of the dancer.

The Dogon were settled in the Baderiagara Cliff region since the twelfth century of our Western era. This allowed them many years to develop expand and enrich their own culture. It is thought that not only did the Dogon incorporate elements from their neighbors the Karumba, the Mossi, and the Peul; but also has had close contact with a variety of other peoples. The rich variety of their iconography and the complexity of their underlying myths seem to provide strong evidence that this is the case. This is important in that many believe Ethnographic art is somehow fixed by tradition and functionalism and does not incorporate newer elements. And yet a look at modern African Gelede masks from the Yoruba territory include not only traditional bird and serpent imagery but also incorporate such things sewing machines, motor bikes, and aero planes, certainly a departure from past tradition.

Mask wearers and mask makers belong to specialized secret societies where only the ritually initiated are charged with maintaining the balance between the real and spirit world. The word "awa" from the Dogon is an all embracing term referring to the "the mask society" and the particular "show". The "show" incorporates masks, dance, music, costumes and the recitation of certain myths. The dancer's role is prescribed by tradition and during the performance he will be invested with the spirit of the mask and will effectively no longer human according to Robert Bleakley, in his book, African Masks. The complicated network of elements serves to reinforce the unified whole linking the people to the cosmic order originally envisioned by the creator God. The repetition of these elements symbolically links the world of today to the time of creation in African thought which is curiously similar to creation myths and artworks from the Australian Aborigines. An examination of the individual elements finds them heavily endowed with very specific meanings which can be transformed by combining individual elements in different combinations.

In one study of masks from the Dogon region, one of the oldest cultures in Sub Saharan Africa, masking and agricultural traditions are clearly linked. Studies show however, that Paleo-African populations felt ambivalence toward nature. Farming, while essential, was

seen as offense to nature. In order to appease nature's unpredictable power certain purification rituals need be performed. Rituals connected to this purification required the use of masked performers. In this case then the institution of the Mask Society seems aimed toward purification of the earth and those who defiled it.

In African cultures the masquerade is a total aesthetic experience involving multiple elements. There is the mask, the costume, the dance, the songs, the music, and the interaction with the audience that create the total experience where the element of sustained disbelief is a key aspect. Even though the performer can be a man or woman, young or old, onlookers accept willingly the idea that the performer is the incarnation of an ancestral spirit and as thus possess unknowable power.

We can divide masks in some broad classifications to talk about their structural qualities. They can be divided into six main categories: (1) masks made from a variety of materials like leaves, wicker work, cloth wood, or ivory and sometimes metal was used in the construction if not the main body; (2) helmet masks; (3) facial masks; (4) helmet peaks; (5) blade shaped masks; (6) masks surmounted by sculptures. The symbols and iconography vary greatly. There are all types of animals, masks in the form of men, masks representing fantastic beings, masks crowned by group sculptures and other objects. Sometimes the objects used or represented are unexpected, like sewing machines or bicycles.

As in the traditions of cultures worldwide the universal concerns—fertility, the hunt, maintaining contact with the ancestors, initiating the young, healing, the ability to enable a visitation of the spirits, appeasement and honor are all wrapped into the masking traditions.

Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations is a mixture of Pagan and Christian traditions. In America Halloween is a connection between children and the dead. In Mexico masked children scare away evil spirits and honor their ancestors.

In many cultures masked performers could play the role of the fool. That character could have multiple roles. The fool could be wise or unwise. He could be considered beautiful or grotesque, playful or violent. It depended on the need as to whether the masker would simply entertain or to demonstrate life's paradoxes.

Masks provide us with a way to examine the very nature of manhood. We can look back to ancient people and cultures and examine common mythologies that link the present to ancient tribal and folklore traditions. The use of fantasy, the need to disguise, the coming of age, the need for healing, respect for and communication with ancestors—all of these concepts overlap cultures. We have examined some broad categories of masking traditions in Africa but there are of course many others. Now we will discuss the objectives which will be achieved through the study of African masquerade traditions.

Objectives

I chose masking traditions because of their accessibility to the age of students that I teach. I feel that masks have a special fascination for students in the elementary grades. This unit will be geared toward the upper elementary grades but could be adapted for virtually all of my elementary school students.

The unit will allow students to be exposed to some of the masking traditions of the African continent and compare them with their own experiences with masks. Through our discussion and research we will explore the continent of Africa and begin to understand its vastness. There are over 800 million people on the African continent and over 100 different languages spoken. Even today there are more distinct people and cultures in Africa than on any other continent. Rock engravings and cave paintings found there predate by more than two millennia the first Pharonic dynasty in Egypt. Thus works found in Africa are among the earliest surviving examples of human creativity.

Broadening our understanding of ceremony and rituals is an important key to cultural understanding which is essential for art appreciation as well as examining the connections between religion, ritual and how art functions within. The students will have an opportunity to examine and categorize a variety of African masks by their specific uses. We will be defining ritual in people's lives, big and small. We will define and discuss symbols and their impact. We will compare imagery from a variety of cultures and discover motivations.

Goals of the instruction

The visual arts seek to engage students in the discovery, examination and understanding of works of art from various times and places. The students are exposed to a wide range of styles, media and techniques. In our explorations we engage in description, analysis and interpretation of a variety of genres, forms and media. In analyzing a work of art we discuss the elements of art: LINE, SHAPE, COLOR, TEXTURE, FORM, AND SPACE and how the artists manipulated the elements in the creation of the work.

Art works serve as a vehicle for understanding the social, political and cultural underpinnings of the societies that created them. I want students to understand that masks play a very important role in many African communities. A role that is different from the Western view of mask chiefly for entertainment purposes. The belief by African societies that masks instead channel powerful spirits might even seem somewhat frightening. We will discuss the idea of belief systems where objects are actually felt to have magical powers or provide portal for ancient spirits which will seem a little far fetched to most Western thinkers but still engages students in discussion of similarities and differences among people the world over.

We will look at the African way of thinking in the masking traditions as we will identify and analyze are those associated with initiation for males and females as they reach adulthood, and how is knowledge passed on to the young. We will look at those masks associated with the power of women which recognize their great contributions and yet unpredictable natures. Lineage is important to African people and artworks recognize the

importance of continuity, the past and present being ever connected. Students can think of sons named for father and daughters named for other family members as signs of continuity and perhaps fertility one of the other areas of focus.

Feminine beauty is celebrated in the masking traditions. This will allow us to look at how we adorn ourselves the world over. We can discuss and examine what the word beauty really means and who gets to judge.

Artworks recognize leadership and authority are not just common to Africa and we can look and think of beautiful objects owned by the mighty the world over. In our examination of masks used to celebrate departure we have an opportunity to discuss how different cultures mark and commemorate the departed. For the complex messages conveyed by artworks about people and cultures, masks are an art form well suited for taking apart the complexity of culture.

Of course a large part of education is also art production, and providing an opportunity to create an artwork similar to one worn by one of our ancestors using a variety of media and materials will engage the student's problem solving skills as well as well as an active imagination.

Standards for Visual Arts

-All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.

-All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.

-All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.

-All students produce, perform or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings their work has for them.

Instructional delivery in the art room must focus on the following attributes. A high quality program will provide students with the opportunities and experiences needed to achieve major goals. The student will demonstrate abilities in the following areas to achieve the following goals:

HISTORY: Understands the roles and functions of artists and artworks in times and places

AESTHETICS: Perceive and appreciate diverse values and meanings

ASSESSMENT: Evaluate complex characteristics of works of art

PRODUCTION: Using media and materials to communicate ideas and feelings

EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS AND STRATEGIES

One of the many goals of a multicultural education is to help students become accustomed to and accepting of the mythologies of cultures other than their own. It must challenge their assumptions and help them to discover that humanity the world over are linked in many ways. Our study will engage students in the critical thinking skills necessary to decode a mythology that is different than our own.

The instructional strategies in the unit will address some primary goals; (1) To provide students with an opportunity to have an enhanced view of the continent of Africa (2) To increase their knowledge of how cultural beliefs can be embedded within works of art affecting their form and function (3) To draw comparisons in how various cultures recognize important events in the lives of it's people (4) To view masks and masquerade traditions in a new light.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

We will examine a map of the African continent and identify important characteristics of the topography. We can compare Africa to the United States of America and other continents. Students will discover the continent as the home of many diverse nations.

As we view video and internet resources of African masks and masquerade performances we will be able to see a vast array of styles and be able to get a more authentic sense of the masks in motion and a more complete realization of the concept of masquerade as a total aesthetic performance with each part; the mask, the dancer, the movements, the music, and the audience participation each having a specific role to invoke the power and spirits sought.

Students can have an opportunity to plan an imaginary trip to Africa and research some of the people, beliefs and customs one might encounter. We can of course visit some of the countries for the masks we discussed earlier in our research and discover how these groups' pf people live.

When we discuss our own experiences with masks we will of course discover great contrast but subtle similarities as well. As we list the various types of masks we see in use such as safety masks used by firefighters or surgeons, theater masks such as those used in operas or other dramatic performances, carnivals such as Mardi Gras, or holidays such as Halloween the theme of protection and transformation arises again especially as we compare masked cartoon characters and compare and contrast them with the African belief in animism.

The animal imagery found in African art which is very prevalent in almost every ethnic group on the continent. In reading myths and stories from Africa we will find again these

human traits in animal forms which again provide understanding of African ways of viewing the world. The same can be said as we discover African proverbs and compare them to American thinking. There is much that is universal in the proverbs.

We will consider the elders in students' lives and the roles they play in our families or communities. I would like the students to write a letter to one or more of their ancestors and honor them for a way in which they have helped us.

As we try to create an experience for the student which best enhances knowledge acquisition we use traditional methods such as those listed below:

Describe- the physical characteristics of the artworks

Analyze - Identify the dominant elements of art featured in the artwork

Decide-Judge the artwork based on an aesthetic understanding of the object

These methods allow us to utilize vocabulary as related to art criticism in terms of elements and principles of art, media, technique and art forms. It will generate discussion of themes inherent in African art making and masking traditions. We find the ways in which myths and legends become a part of artworks.

We will have an Introduction of new vocabulary words related to masking traditions:

LINEAGE	FERTILITY	ANIMISM	SPIRITS
INITIATION	LEADERSHIP	DEPARTURE	
ADORNMENT	MASQUERADE	ELDERS	ANCESTORS
SYMBOLISM			

Of course making any art object requires planning and in the art room that means sketching. Students will enjoy the process of sketching ideas for the creation of their own magical mask. We will think of what kind of magic would we like our mask to perform. What animal powers would our mask use to be powerful?

In the mask making process we will design and construct a mask form using a cardboard or plastic armature to which plaster will be added. Found objects are often added to create various structures on the face or headdress. This activity provides an opportunity to apply media and techniques and exhibit problem solving skills. We will paint the mask form with tempera and acrylic paints and use natural objects such as seeds, beans, shells, feathers, raffia, yarns etc. to add texture or pattern to the surface of the mask.

As schools try to develop and enhance the writing ability of their students it is important to provide a writing component to visual arts experiences. Students will be asked to write a story about how their mask might be used by a group of people. What kinds of music would be used in the performance? What kind of dances would be used? The writing component can also include an assessment of the mask object created in a personal

reflection. In their discussion the student can describe physical characteristics of the work created. The student can identify the art element which most dominates artwork. The student can discuss the choice of colors, textures, patterns, etc., and whether or not they are specific symbols. The student can discuss whether or not the mask created reflects any African ways of viewing the world or whether it is a more Western view. These methods will help students develop a lifelong appreciation for arts from other cultures based on being given the tools necessary to analyze the complex symbols and meanings inherent in the artworks.

One of the many goals of a multicultural education is to help students become accustomed to and accepting of the mythologies of cultures other than their own. It must challenge their assumptions and help them discover that humanity the world over is linked in multiple ways. We want to learn how to appreciate and value the “otherness” of cultures unlike our own. Our study will engage the students’ critical thinking skills as we decode masking traditions from various African countries.

They will be able to describe and discuss some of the roles and functions of masking traditions in a number of African cultures. The student will find parallels to the masking traditions found in other societies through comparing and contrasting. The student will be able to explore the nature and use of ritual in communicating ideas. We can perhaps act out some rituals that might be required in the use of the mask we design and compare them to other cultures.

As the student designs a mask for a specific function as have the African tribes in the study they will be able to engage in a discussion about how and why the aesthetic of mask making is different than other art forms. Such painting or drawing.

The Goals of the Pennsylvania Standards will be met:

- Students are asked to describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts based on an aesthetic understanding of the art form.
- Students are asked to evaluate these works and respond critically to the works showing that they understand important features of those works.
- Students are asked to demonstrate knowledge of the historical and cultural context of artworks as a basis for decoding.
- Students are asked to produce artworks and describe the meanings their artworks have for them.

The study of masks will provide a meaningful and easily accessible way to reach these goals. The unit seems especially appropriate for the elementary grades because fantasy and suspended disbelief is natural.

Children of this age group have very active and fertile imaginations.

We can discuss abstraction and how an object can be changed and interpreted differently. In masks we can see how things can be exaggerated or distorted and what those choices might mean in terms of the mask's intent. We can notice how certain motifs are common, like geometric patterns and concentric shapes, or incised designs to represent tribal markings. We can examine the use of natural pigments in the coloration of objects making their colors subdued on the one hand but emphasizing form on the other. All of these terms will provide for rich discussion and written response.

Another important factor to discuss with students is how the impact of the discovery of African masks and sculptures literally changed the course of modern art. Notable artists like Picasso, Braque and other Cubists were greatly inspired by the vitality of the African aesthetic. According to Henry Louis Gates, Picasso finally admitted, "The masks weren't just like any pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things... I too believe that everything is unknown." African Art caused a shift away from the naturalism characteristic of the Western 20th century art. The stylized forms so prevalent in African art caused people to rethink their perceptions and be more receptive to new interpretations. In a way the abstract art we admire today is due to the influence of the "modern" interpretation of the human form by African sculptors.

For students to create a power object of their own in order to recognize an important event in their own lives or to provide protection against life's unseen forces is indeed a way to connect our distant past with a hopeful future.

Reflection

When students reflect on their artwork they become accountable for their own decision making, effort and learning. The process allows them to look back at planning and developing an idea, refining an idea and using art processes, tools and materials safely. The student will discuss some of the aesthetic choices made in terms of form, color, texture and pattern and embellishment and possible iconography. It is always helpful if students discuss some of the most effective aspect of their artwork and discuss an aspect they might change were they to approach the assignment again. And finally, the student will be able to identify in their own artwork and in the artwork of classmates creativity, originality. They will see how effort and perseverance create what is "good" and "beautiful" a true portal into the African view of the universe.

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Bleakly, Robert: African Masks, Pierre Terrail, Paris, 1992

This work has an in depth essay on the historical background in the development of African Art and the relationships between the forms and meanings. It provides interesting discussion and information about a broad range of mask forms. The long captions with each mask discuss the mask type, the culture, and its use for the people who created it. There are forty mask pictured which make it useful for displaying the vast array of mask types and power and beauty they express. Reference is made to Modern Expressionist artists like Picasso and Matisse and Kirchner for whom African art provided inspiration.

Burness, Megan and Litchfield Melanie: CI:99/00 Carnegie International 1999/2000

This book for arts educators is useful as it looks at the national and state standards for teaching art. The discussion of iconography in modern art seemed transferable to the artworks discussed in my own work. Many rubrics for assessing artwork are included and educational strategies for discussing and analyzing art which can be used at all levels are useful for arts educators.

Dowling, Katie: Arts of Africa, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1998

This work provides a guide to the continent with in depth geographic information and historical background on many tribal groups. A number of approaches to African art are explored including the thematic and geographic format, Other decorative arts are explored as well which link certain concepts found in the masks. Pottery, metalwork furniture and textiles are discussed at length. Hundreds of photographic examples are included.

Huet, Michel: The Dance, Art and Ritual of Africa, Random House 1978

In this study the art, dance and ritual are closely examined. There are hundreds of photographs of dances and ceremonies which not only have seldom been photographed but will soon be wiped away as Africa modernizes. In this book there are rituals and ceremonies linked to funerals, harvesting and planting, initiation rites and other everyday nuances. The masks discussed in our research are pictured in performance.

Meyer, Laurie: Black Africa Masks Sculpture Jewelry, Pantheon Books, New York 1988

In her study Meyers discusses the forces which influence African art which include their belief in magic, their religion, their sensitivity to the powers of the occult, traditional funeral rites, the ceremonies used in initiations, the powerful secret societies, the chief's desire for monuments and implements of his prestige and the use of jewelry in the pursuit of beauty and adornment. The beauty and craftsmanship endowed in everyday objects is also studied. The work is comprehensive and provides hundreds of photographs of masks, sculptures fetishes, jewelry, terracotta work, metalwork, beadwork and carvings.

Art/Artifact African Art in Anthropology Collections (no author noted): featuring essays by Arthur Danto, R.M. Gramly, Mary Lou Hultgren, Enid Schnidkrout, Jeanne-Zeider, The Center for African Art 1988

This is the catalog and book published in connection with a traveling exhibit of African Art featured at the Carnegie museum in the 1970's.

The writers grapple with the concept of art from people who have no word for art. How museums can create context for complex belief systems is discussed and how and why it is so difficult for Western eyes to translate these objects into more than artifacts.

Anthropology and the study of human habits are explored in connection with the objects. The objects in the exhibit and in the photographs cover a broad range of styles and countries. Masks, sculptures, power objects, carvings, instruments, textiles, funerary relics, beadwork and staffs are among the many beautiful objects pictured.

Jones, Andrew: Ancient Spirits Incarnated in Rare US Exhibition of African Ritual Art, National Geographic News, June 15, 2001

The author reviews an exhibit of African artworks called "In the Presence of the Spirits" at the Smithsonian. The objects date from 1850 until the mid 20th century and are being seen for the first time outside of Lisbon Spain. Included in the collection are fabulous mask forms from the Dogon Kongo and others. Other forms are included as well, including ritual dolls.

Ladislav, Segy: Masks of Black Africa, Dover Publications, 1976

The book features in depth discussion of an amazing array of masks. It includes 247 photographs that provide details of tribal life and rituals of many groups. Information on the Dogon and Senofo were used in my study.

May, Sally Ruth: African American Art , The Art Institute of Chicago 1997

The discussion of influences of African Art on African American art may not seem essential to a discussion of masks but is useful in making connections to artistic traditions among Africans transported to America.

African Arts, UCLA January 1978 Volume XI, Number 2

In depth looks at carving techniques, mask types, indigo dyeing techniques and examples of costumed performances with accompanying cultural background give an in depth look at individual groups. Many photographs are included. Also photos of contemporary African works and discussion of tribal influences make interesting connections for research.

African Arts, UCLA July 1978, Volume XI, Number 4

Examples are provided with in depth discussion on several dance performances including the Igbo Ijele Mask of Nigeria which is one of the most massive and elaborate masks in all of Africa which only appears every twenty five years. Other mask and architectural forms are also discussed.

Raynor, Vivian: Art: Behind African Masks and Ritual Objects, Spiritual Mysteries, The New York Times, March 4, 2008

Raynor discusses an exhibition of African art from private collections with the curator's point of view in mind. According to her the display seems to make an attempt to help the object regain their original significance. Connections are made again to how African art has had its influences in Modernist movements. A number of cultures are discussed.

Thompson, Robert Farris: African Art in Motion, UCLA Art Council, 1974

This work features incredible photographs of hundreds of art objects from masks to carvings, jewelry to sculptures, headdresses, waking sticks, instruments, even everyday objects like hair combs. The nuances expressed are impressive but the focus of the work is to see the works in context. What is particularly interesting is the in depth discussion of the dances and interpretations of the movements and music. The way the mask looks and its function truly do influence the rhythms and patterns of the dances structure

Willet, Frank: African Art, Preager Publishers, New York 1971

The author provides an extensive historical background on the tribal groups and religious customs within the African continent. This work goes from ancient to contemporary and makes clear the continuity of tradition in modern form. Many mediums are covered from rock engraving to sculpture, architecture, jewelry, textiles, masks and costuming.

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