

African Masks

Mask making is a major tradition in West and Central African. The masks are used for ceremonial and religious purposes. Masks usually are worn at ceremonies with dances and music or they will be worn in a parade. African Mask ceremonies are held by many different people for many different reasons. These can be joyful for a harvest festival, sad like a funeral, serious when there is drought and dangerous to ward off evil spirits. Masks are used to mark important events in people's lives when they become an adult.

Masks can help teach people about their past, tell stories, teach lessons and values. Masks were helpful because many African societies did not have a written language and masks helped pass down knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. Masks can represent ancestors, good and bad spirits, witches, and goblins.

Masks were usually carved by blacksmiths or farmers. The tradition was passed down in the family or by apprenticeship. Masks are primarily carved from one piece of wood. Most masks in existence are no more than 100 years old because wood doesn't last very long. The wood would come from local forests and is usually cut down with an adze, a cutting tool with a thick arched blade, kind of like an ax. This was the carver's main tool. Fine details were put in with a knife. Carvers would work on the ground and hold the block of wood between his feet. The carver believed that tools had special magic powers and the wood had a living spirit in it.

Not everyone in the community is allowed to touch a mask or create one. In some villages only certain people are allowed to watch a ceremony. Masks are seen as sacred. They are always looked after by secret groups who keep them in safe places and perform the dances. Only special people from the community can be a member of these secret groups and they can never talk about what they do. People from the outside are not allowed to know anything about the groups. In Africa, most group members are men and they are prepared for the job when

they are boys. It was not always the men who were the mask keepers. Women once were in charge of masks and looked to for their wisdom as told in many old African tales. Men in the communities became jealous and were afraid they would lose their power in the villages for they set up the secret societies.

African masks can have human faces, animal faces or a mixture of both. They will cover the wearer's face, head or top of head. Some masks were life size, some were small. The masks can be one color or many different colors. Some are made of beads, feathers, horns or shells. Others have grass, plant fibers or pieces of material to cover the face or body of the wearer. They conceal the wearer's identity and help create a new one. The masks were not portraits of people but are a traditional shape or pattern of the community. The designs were to please the spirit and make the masks easily recognizable to the spirits.

Many masks represent animals. Ancestors, bush spirits and water spirits like to appear as animals. The form they take represents how they are: fast like a cheetah, strong like an elephant, greedy like a hyena. When the mask wearer puts on the mask they are no longer themselves. They act like the animal they represent. They move and dance like their animal.

Leopard Mask

Dogon tribe of Mali, West Africa

Painted wood

30 cm height

The Graham Collection

The leopard mask is dominated by its large square mouth, and huge teeth. This was originally painted black and white but the white paint has worn off. The light and dark spots look like patterns of the leopard fur. Across Africa, the leopard is seen as smart and brave but very dangerous because it can kill people. It is a great hunter who stalks its prey without being seen and then attacks. Kings, leaders and others responsible for law and order chose the leopard as a sign of power.

Questions for Discussion

(could be used before telling the description above, use questions as a lead into information on mask)

What animal do you think this is? Leopard

What material is the mask made of? Wood

Does the mask look real? No, it is not an exact carving

What part of the leopard mask do you notice? Large mouth, big teeth

What do you know about leopards? Large cats, hunt animals, sneak up on prey, eats large animals, strong

Why do you think the carver chose the leopard? Strong, powerful, good hunter

What do you think the mask represents? Powerful spirits, king or ruler, someone powerful in village, good hunter

What shapes do you see in the mask? Square eyes, rectangular teeth, square mouth

If you saw someone wearing the mask in a mask ceremony, how would you feel? Nervous, afraid, unsure,

If you made the mouth smaller, how would the mask seem? Not as scary or fierce

If the mouth were closed, how would the mask look? Not as fierce or threatening.....

If you changed the shape of the eyes to ovals, how would the mask look? Like the leopard was watching, squinting to concentrate.....

If you changed the color to black with white spots, how would the mask look? more fierce, scarier.....

Would you like to have this piece in your house?

Do you like this mask?