



Mask (Mukenga)

Late 19th/mid-20th century

Kuba, Western Kasai region, Democratic Republic of the Congo

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education
Division of Student and Teacher Programs
Crown Family Educator Resource Center

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Wood, glass beads, cowrie shells, feathers, raffia, fur, fabric, thread, and bells

57.5 x 24.1 x 20.3 (22 5/8 x 9 1/2 x 8 in.)

Laura T. Magnuson Fund, 1982.1504

Background

Dance is central to the life of many people in Africa. The Kuba, who live in central Africa, use masks like this Mukenga mask in funeral ceremonies for the highest ranking men of their village or town, or, occasionally, to honor an important guest. The man who wears the Mukenga mask also wears a full-body costume while performing a dance with special steps in honor of the achievements of the visitor or of the man who has died. For the funeral ceremony, the wearer of the Mukenga mask takes part in a parade through the streets on the third day after the death; the dance follows the parade and lasts until sunset.

Because the mask honors men important to Kuba, its materials relate to rank, status, and leadership. What forms suggest an elephant? The mighty elephant is a supreme symbol of leadership and had a special meaning for the Kuba. Important chiefs were land chiefs because they controlled the products of their land. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some of the last elephant herds in central Africa roamed Kuba lands. The Kuba controlled the trade of the precious ivory that came from elephant tusks, making them a wealthy people. Symbolic of this wealth are the cowrie shells that decorate the mask and form the trunk and the tusks. Cowrie shells come from the Indian Ocean and other tropical seas and are so prized for their shiny surfaces and markings that both in Africa and some South Sea Islands they once were used for money. Where else do you find these shells on the mask? What are the nose and eyebrows made of? Where do you see a tuft of red parrot feathers?

These masks are quite rare because it took great skill to work with the shells, beads, fur, and other materials. Their makers became so renowned that people from far away villages would seek the artists out and order masks to honor their leaders.

Use of Symbolic Materials

In this mask, the artist uses luxurious symbolic materials to give expression to its power. The face is covered with the fur of the fearsome leopard; the ruff of the regal colobus monkey forms a beard; the protruding eyes recall the rotating, all-seeing eyes of the chameleon; a long, protruding trunk suggests the power of the elephant. A cluster of red parrot feathers accents the trunk and contrasts the weighty power of an elephant with the air flight of a bird. The parrot is considered a bird of prophecy.

In many African societies, masquerades continue to play an essential role in the life of the community and provide an aesthetic means of addressing universal human issues such as concern for order, the nature of reality and the cosmos, relationships to others, and coming to terms with death. A masquerade is any disguise or pretense of appearance that conceals a person's real personality, character, or intentions. A masquerade's purpose is to transform attributes of power.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

- Describe what you see. This mask is made of many different kinds of materials. How many can you find? Describe each material, noticing patterns and textures. Look for: leopard fur (for the face); fur ruff on the colobus monkey (beard); bells (eyes); cowrie shells (elephant-like trunk); and red parrot feathers (accenting the trunk) beads.
- What different patterns can you find? (Look for repeated blue and white interlocking rectangles and arrangements of cowrie shells.)
- How does this arrangement create a sense of movement and rhythm? (The variety of textures contributes to the sense of movement.)
- The Kuba artist who created this mask lived in Zaire, central Africa. (Locate Zaire on the world map.) The Kuba people are renowned and accomplished artists, decorating objects of daily life with rich patterns. The patterns can be seen on wooden boxes, the walls of government buildings, and especially the clothing of the king's court. Think about designs in our everyday lives. Are patterns found in clothing, furniture, buildings, and cars?
- Is this a symmetrical (having two equal or equivalent sides) mask? Why is balance (symmetry) important in life?

DRESS UP

- Discuss disguise in American culture. Do you ever disguise yourself? How (e.g., costume, mask, makeup, change voice, stand or walk differently)? Does wearing a costume or disguise make you feel differently about yourself? Does it make you act differently? Can you think of fictional characters who are transformed and assume important responsibilities through their dress (e.g., Batman, Superman)? Can you think of real people whose dress for their jobs transforms them into figures of responsibility or power (e.g., a judge's robes, an umpire's uniform)?

TELLING STORIES

- African folktales and myths can provide a wealth of opportunities for reading, geography, and social studies units. Read African folktales together as a class. You may enhance your students' enjoyment and understanding of the literature by developing an activity in which they can create masks and act out stories. You may also suggest that they write and perform folktales of their own.

ANIMAL METAPHORS

- Discuss the notion of animal metaphors with your class. Have each student select an animal that exemplifies some quality or characteristic which they find desirable, for example: lions and bravery; elephants and strength; monkeys and cleverness; gazelles or antelopes and grace; cats and agility; dogs and fidelity. Which of these traits might people attribute to their rulers? To their ancestors? To soldiers or hunters? To mothers or fathers? Why?
- With older children, more sophisticated ideas might be introduced. For instance, the leopard is associated with speed and ferocity, but it can also see at night. How does this ability separate it from other animals and from man? Why would this quality be important to people who don't have widespread access to artificial lighting?
- How does the use of different creatures in one composition enable the artist to emphasize the concepts of power, strength, and aggression? Do the combinations make the images more or less effective in conveying these ideas? Why?

CARICATURE MASKS

- Satire is an honored feature of many African masquerades. Suggest that the students select a person, either an individual or a type (e.g., rock star, athlete, teacher, or parent), and create a caricature mask, emphasizing distinctive features and mannerisms. Is it necessary for the mask to present an exact likeness of the subject in order to be an accurate representation? What can be added to the mask to aid in the identification of the subject? How can the maker enhance the likeness by using gesture, movement, costume, and speech?

Lesson Plan

Unit Goal: Social Studies

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- explain the different uses of masks
- describe animal metaphors
- design a mask which incorporates different animal attributes.

RESOURCES

Arts of Africa at Crown Family Educator Resource Center at the Art Institute.

Art Inside Out at Crown Family Educator Resource Center at the Art Institute.

LESSON PREPARATION

- Discuss the different circumstances which masks are used in our society.
 - disguise (Halloween)
 - protection (goalie mask, catcher's mask, surgeon's mask, gas mask)
 - entertainment (theater, Mardi Gras)
 - concealment (criminals)

Various African societies use masks in their daily lives and ritual observances such as funerary rites, fertility rituals, and ancestral and educational events.

LESSON CONTENT AND ACTIVITIES

In the galleries

- View African masks.
- Discuss the materials used in the masks
- What are the attributes of the animals depicted in the masks? How does the inclusion of several animals create a new character?

In the classroom

- Discuss why people create masks (see Lesson Preparation).
- Discuss animal metaphors (see Notes).
- Create a mask. Directions: Use a paper plate or paper bag for a base, have students place the base over their face and

mark the eyes and mouth and then cut them out. Using the materials listed below, add facial features, ears, horns, teeth, etc., to the base. Attach them with staples, glue, or tape and let them hang down over the mask.

Follow up

- Have students describe a ceremony for which their mask would be used. How will the wearer move while wearing the mask?
- What music will accompany the ceremony?

NOTES

Animal Metaphors:

lion = bravery

elephant = strength

monkey = cleverness

gazelle = grace

cat = agility

dog = fidelity

fox = slyness

owl = wisdom

MATERIALS

poster board strips

construction paper

tissue paper, yarn

paper streamers,

feathers, fabric scraps

foil, buttons, dried pasta

beads, pebbles, sequins

beans

scissors

staples/stapler

glue

tape

EVALUATION

- Can students explain animal attributes?
- Can students explain the purposes of masks in different cultures?

Related Resources for Teachers

Alkema, Chester J. *Mask Making*. New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1981.

Baranski, Matthew. *Mask Making: Creative Methods and Techniques*. Boston: Davis Publications, Inc., 1954.

Maxwell, M., ed. *An African Studies Handbook For Elementary and Secondary School Teachers*. Amherst, MA: Center for International Education, School of Education, 1983.

Ross, Doran H. ed. *Elephant, The Animal and Its Ivory in African Culture*, Los Angeles, CA: Fowler Museum of History, 1992.

Wiley, M. *Teaching About Africa in Elementary Schools*, Gainesville, FL.

University of Florida Center for African Studies, 1970.

The Arts of Africa Teaching Manual, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1989.

Related Resources for Students

Glubok, Shirley. *The Art of Africa*. Designed by Gerard Nook. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

Musgrove, Margaret, *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*. Illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon. New York: Dial Press, 1976.

Price, Christine. *Made in West Africa*. New York: Dutton, 1975.

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