

Meanings of the Mask

(Grades 4-8)

Objectives:

Introduce students to the ceremonial, cultural, and artistic meanings of traditional and contemporary masks of the Yup'ik Indians of Western Alaska. Study people of other cultures to learn about their customs, natural resource use, food and shelter, and other important components of culture. Help students learn math, science, and geography through the use of three-dimensional art.

Procedure:

Students will be welcomed by a museum educator and will be introduced to Fenimore Art Museum and the Thaw Gallery of American Indian Art. The museum educator will speak with the students about various regions of North America and what Native cultures live in these regions. This brief introduction of regions will finish with the Arctic region, which will be explained in detail. We will discuss climate, weather, native plants and animals, and names of the various cultures that live in this region.

The educator will then ask the students to actively engage in a series of question sheets shown to them on the document camera. These questions will refer specifically to masks in the collection, as well as questions about the Native cultures of the Arctic and Subarctic. After explaining why the masks were made, how they were used, and what they represent, students will create masks of their own using the materials provided. This portion, along with a question/answer session, will complete the lesson.

Background Information:

Native American Cultures

- Native Americans were the first settlers of North America. It is widely believed that the first Native Americans reached North America from Asia through use of a "land bridge" connecting present-day Russia and Alaska.
- Until European exploration and settlement of North America, Native Americans lived a completely **subsistence lifestyle**, using only natural resources to survive.
- A subsistence lifestyle includes hunting, trapping, fishing, and farming. All tools, clothing, and shelters are created using natural materials such as wood, clay, stone, and animal skins and bones.
- Native Americans utilized established **trade routes** between cultures. These trade routes often were waterways, such as rivers and coastal routes. These routes are much easier than climbing over mountains or walking across a desert.
- Native American settlements can be found in every type of North American **environment** and **climate**, from the Arctic regions of Alaska and Canada, to the desert southwest.
- In different regions, natural resources may vary due to climate and environment. The animals of the Arctic differ from the animals of the Desert Southwest. There are fewer trees in the Great Plains than in the Northwest Coast region. As natural resources change from region to region, so do Native American cultures and their methods of subsistence.
- As European settlement began, Native American life changed. Europeans brought with them items Native Americans did not have and could not produce. These include metal pots, guns, and glass beads for clothing and as currency.
- Certain items Europeans brought with them were more useful to some cultures due to the regions they lived in. Horses introduced by the Spanish allowed for much easier transportation to the Great Plains Indians. Horses were less useful to cultures of the Northeast and Northwest Coasts because the large animals could not easily negotiate the dense forests in these areas.

Arctic Tundra Fact Sheet

- The arctic tundra spans the high latitudes of the northern hemisphere in a belt around the Arctic Ocean. It includes areas of Alaska and the Northwest Territories of Canada.
- Weather in this area is extreme. There is only a 6-10 week growing season, surrounded by a long, cold, dark winter where mean temperatures are below freezing. Less than five inches of precipitation falls per year. The ground is primarily a layer of permafrost. No true soil develops here.
- Fauna in the area is minimal. Along the coast, seals, walrus, and whales can be found. Inland, musk ox, arctic hare and fox, and some birds such as the ptarmigan and raven reside. Caribou arrive during the short growing season.
- Flora is even sparser due to the lack of soil. Grasses, alpine flowers, and sphagnum moss are all that can survive.
- Native American Cultures in this area include the Inuit, Aleut, and Yup'ik. The distribution of these cultures in the Arctic is the most extensive of any single ethnic group on earth.
- People in these cultures survive by studying and understanding the movements of ice flows, weather patterns, and animal migrations. The majority of hunting, fishing, and gathering is done during the brief growing season. Meat is frozen to remain preserved during the long winter.
- Cultures in the region live either in above-ground igloos, or in homes dug out from the frozen ground.
- Coastal cultures rely on seals, walrus, fish, and whales for food and clothing. Inland cultures live almost always near a large body of water, such as Hudson Bay.
- Extreme conditions led to some very creative uses of natural resources, including the seal gut parka, which protected the wearer from water when fishing.

Yup'ik Masks

- Yup'ik masks were primarily made out of wood collected in the forests to the east and north of the tundra region. These were used in special winter ceremonies in underground buildings known as Qasgiqs (cuz-e-giks).
- Most masks were carved to look like native animals from the region – ravens, walrus, caribou – although some resembled humans or forces of nature (Windmaker mask, Night and Day mask).
- Masks were danced with to show respect to the *inua*, or animal spirits. It was believed by the Yup'ik that when an animal died or was killed, its *inua* (sometimes called *yua* as well) drifted up into the heavens and then returned to earth by inhabiting a newborn animal.
- A winter celebration of the *inua* was important because it was meant to provide for a good hunt in the summer. By showing respect to the animal spirits, the Yup'ik believed that the animals would then allow themselves to be hunted.
- During the dances, women would dance from a standing position, while the men would dance in a kneeling position in front of the women. Both men and women would dance with dance fans on their hands, but only the men would dance with large masks over their faces.
- Masks also represented Yup'ik cosmology. Eyes may be in the shape of the sun and moon, and reed hoops may surround the faces. These hoops represent the bodies in the sky – the sun, moon, and stars – making their transit across the sky on a daily basis.
- The idea of duality was important to the Yup'ik. Day and night, man and woman, human and animal – these were themes that repeat themselves in the culture's masks and celebrations.
- All Yup'ik masks – except for the Nepcetat masks – were used once and then were discarded. Some were burned, others were just abandoned in the tundra. These were sometimes recovered by Russian and American sailors on whaling expeditions.

Key Vocabulary:

Arctic: *n.* A region between the North Pole and the northern timberlines of North America and Eurasia.

Arctic Sea Grass: *n.* A long, tough type of grass found near the ocean in far northern sections of North America and Eurasia.

Cosmology: *n.* Ways of explaining the history of the universe through methods other than science.

Culture: *n.* Patterns of symbols and human activity that identify a particular group of people.

Custom: *n.* Also called *tradition*, the customs and ways of life that are passed down from generation to generation.

Duality: *n.* The existence of two fundamental principles, often opposites from each other.

Indigenous: *adj.* Refers to objects and people with origins in particular locations.

Inua: *n.* The Yup'ik term for “animal spirit.”

Qasgiq: *n.* An underground Yup'ik building used for living and for special ceremonies.

Shaman: *n.* People of a native village who were the “healers,” who contacted the spirit world.

Symbol: *n.* Objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent ideas.

Subsistence: *n.* Hunting and gathering for the sole purpose of one's own survival.

New York State Education Standards Addressed:

Social Studies

- Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live—local, national, and global—including the distribution of people, places, and environments over the Earth's surface.
- Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States.

Mathematics, Science, & Technology

- Students will use mathematical analysis, scientific inquiry, and engineering design, as appropriate, to pose questions, seek answers, and develop solutions.
- Students will apply technological knowledge and skills to design, construct, use, and evaluate products and systems to satisfy human and environmental needs.

English Language Arts

- Students will listen, speak, read, and write for information and understanding.
- Students will listen, speak, read, and write for critical analysis and evaluation.
- Students will listen, speak, read, and write for social interaction.

The Arts

- Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.
- Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.
- Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

Meanings of the Mask

Pre-visit Project Ideas for Teachers

The following are project ideas that can be done in the classroom before the students' visit to Fenimore Art Museum. Feel free to use any and all of these ideas.

1. Give the students five minutes to write down all of the reasons they can think of for which a mask might be worn. Collect these lists and write on the blackboard all of the different reasons listed by the class. Discuss how these reasons are similar, how they are different, and why.
2. Students will think about the natural resources found in their environment in this project. Ask the students to imagine their town without stores, automobiles, modern appliances like refrigerators or anything else made of glass, plastic or metal (Native Americans would not have had these materials before European contact). Then, have the students write down a list of ten things they could find in nature around them that they could use for food. Next, have them write down five different things they could make into clothing, five materials that could be used as tools, and one method of making a shelter or home. These will be discussed in class.
3. Ask students to name one type of dancing that they know or have heard of (waltz, tap, Hokey Pokey, etc.). Ask them a.) what age or what gender/group/culture of people most performs this dance, b.) when this dance is done (special events like weddings, etc.), and c.) why people might do this type of dance. Is it important? Is it fun? What are the origins of these dances?

Meanings of the Mask Activity Page

Really Good Material!

Which of the following items do you think Alaskan Indians did **NOT** have until European settlers began trading with them in the 1800s? Circle these items below.

Caribou Skin Coats	Glass Beads
Metal Pots	Seal Gut Parkas
Bone Harpoons	Guns
Sea Grass Baskets	Whale Oil

Yup'ik Word Search!

Can you find the following words in the word search below?

arctic sea grass whale blubber
 cosmology tundra caribou
 subsistence symbol indigenous culture

W L C D F W H A L E G F U C X I
 T L U Y Q C S Z K D G L I C N G
 S R S U B S I S T E N C E A M C
 U W G H C O X Q C O L M N R Y N
 O W W R S S A R G A E S K I N P
 N I S E Q P Z E C X P F N B H S
 E B R D K H A X M H D R I O B R
 G H E C C C B T Z O I T F U G Y
 I C B U O A Q M Y M B S N P V W
 D R B L S R J B S X Q T L X N O
 N B U T M C R A C K Q N Z Z P A
 I I L U O T F V K R A W O V D E
 X Y B R L I U A R D N U T V G U
 T Z O E O C D S R J Z F Q A H C
 G L J N G M P G L O B M Y S V U
 F C O Z Y A H D Q E I F D Z H D

Match the Mask!

Yup'ik masks represent many different animals and things found in nature. Can you match each mask on the left to its correct name on the right?

1.



A. Windmaker Mask

2.



B. Walrus Mask

3.



C. Crane Mask

4.



D. Raven Mask

5.



E. Night and Day Mask

Answer Sheet for Meanings of the Mask Activity Page

Really Good Material!

Before European contact, Indians did NOT have

- Glass Beads
- Guns
- Metal Pots

Match the Mask!

- 1—B
- 2—D
- 3—A
- 4—E
- 5—C

Yup'ik Word Search!

W L C D F **W H A L E** G F U C X I
T L U Y Q C S Z K D G L I C N G
S R S **U B S I S T E N C E** A M C
U W G H C O X Q C O L M N R Y N
O W W R S S A R G A E S K I N P
N I S E Q P Z E C X P F N **B H S**
E B R D K H A X M H D R I O B R
G H E C C C B T Z O I T F U G Y
I C B U O A Q M Y M B S N P V W
D R B L S R J B S X Q T L X N O
N B U T M C R A C K Q N Z Z P A
I I L U O T F V K R A W O V D E
X Y **B R L I U A R D N U T V G U**
T Z O E **O C D S R J Z F Q A H C**
G L J N G M P G L **O B M Y S V U**
F C O Z Y A H D Q E I F D Z H D