



StoryFaces: Mask Arts Programs

Designing Tribal Masks — Project

The Goal: This project gives students an experiential understanding of a traditional approach to art in tribal cultures as they apply critical thinking to create an animal mask design using symbols to *signify* the animal.

This “mask-concept” approach moves the design process away from realism and illustration, into an exploration of communicating through symbolic art and abstraction, and can be a vehicle for creating original mask designs for students with any level of drawing skills.

For grade levels 4 and up, this application of a design approach based on symbols can expand students understanding of communicating narrative content and information through visual art.

For upper grade levels, this experiential analysis of mask design in traditional cultures can also be an introduction into synthesis and abstraction in modern art and the connection of early modern art to primitive art.

Beginning with an analysis of their animal to determine its key *attributes*, each student develops a set of *symbols* to represent those attributes, and then creates an original and *subjective* mask design for their animal — first by breaking down the human face into geometric shapes to remove identity, and then applying their key symbols to project the power and meaning of the new animal identity, *as they interpret it*.

In traditional mask-making cultures, the mask-maker was not trying to imitate the appearance of an animal but rather to *signify* its meaning through symbols telling its mythological role — its story. Students are encouraged to apply their own critical thinking to make their mask a secret, magic design, without concern for how recognizable the animal is, and to create their own original graphic language through the symbols they select.

Related Writing Projects:

- As in the examples from the StoryFaces assembly program, students could write stories starring their animal mask character, incorporating its significant attributes.
- Non-fiction writing assignments can include research into the animal subjects to determine their special qualities (“attributes”) for younger students — or research into the cultural traditions of specific mask-making cultures for older students.
- Students could select animal characters from traditional folktales as the basis for their mask, re-interpreting them in visual art as a vehicle for analyzing the stories.
- Students could write an explanation of the symbolic meaning of the mask design, to accompany the finished mask when presented in display.



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A Mask-Concept approach to an Animal Mask Design using colors, symbols and decorative elements to “signify” an animal. This process presents an experiential understanding of symbolic art — how to make a work of art that isn’t intended to look realistic but still communicates identity and narrative content through visual language.

STEP 1 — CHOOSE ATTRIBUTES: Each student should choose an animal. Then, rather than having them start from a drawing of the animal, begin by having each student choose 3-4 “attributes” or “animal powers” -- the animal’s unique qualities that make it an exciting animal, and different from other animals.

EXAMPLE: For a snake it might be *fangs, forked tongue, poisonous and sneaky*.

STEP 2 — CREATING A SYMBOL KEY: Next the student chooses two colors and two “signs” that will be the “symbols” for the attributes. The “signs” should be simple graphic elements such as a circle, or triangle, or straight line or spiral - avoid obvious modern symbols like hearts or peace signs. I tell students that any choice is valid if the student has a reason, an internal “story”, for why they choose that color or sign.

EXAMPLE: For a snake it might be *fangs = triangles, forked tongue = zigzag line, poisonous = red, and sneaky = white*.

With these invented signs they create a symbol key (like a map key) that explains their mask - before they design the mask.

STEP 3 — DESIGNING THE MASK: The goal is to get the student to now design the mask based on their invented symbols rather than on what the animal really looks like. Three steps, following traditional mask design concepts:

1st- Tribal Background — first use the two symbolic colors to break the face up -- using horizontal or vertical stripes, and/or strong geometric shapes (see the Tribal Backgrounds page for traditional examples). You create this unnatural, geometric background in order to disguise the human identity so that you can create the new, supernatural animal identity.

2nd- Add Significant Signs — Over that background, add the key graphic signs to signify the animal, in any combination and in any place on the mask — making critical choices to project the meaning behind the symbols. If it is a very poisonous snake, for example, you might choose the fangs as the primary element and you might make them larger than usual, or repeat them in several places on the mask. *Lévi-Strauss points out that it is also important not to put elements on a mask that may confuse it with other animals, so you wouldn’t put feet on a snake or fangs on a bird mask.*

3rd- Decorate — Finally, add decorative elements or linework to unify the face as a complete design. Decoration can be achieved by taking things like the pattern of the snake’s skin (spots, stripes, etc.) and repeating it, or adding additional line work in support of the imagery (like multiple fangs). *Boas points out that decoration and aesthetic appeal is as important as interpretation in primitive art, so the final step is to make the design look good. Overall, keep it simple so it communicates the animal identity clearly.*

Here are some examples of snake mask designs starting with a tribal background and adding significant symbols and decorative elements.



The Theory Behind the Concept:

The anthropological study of masks and tribal art by scholar’s such as Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss explains that in “primitive” art, the aim is not to imitate the appearance of an animal (in the way a photograph does) but rather to SIGNIFY the animal through symbology (in the manner of a visual language), especially to emphasize the key attributes that make this animal unique. The actual appearance of the animal is subservient to the imagery that signifies it. So to design a tribal animal face (or mask) you want to get the student past what the animal actually looks like and ask them instead to make critical choices as to what features or symbols will make the face “mean” that animal — the distinctive signs that make it that animal and no other. This approach leads to endless creative ways to make face/mask designs — without requiring complex painting or drawing skills. The same animal will generate many different designs depending on what attributes the individual student chooses to focus on, and the symbols they choose to represent those attributes.



"Basic Tribal" photos from *Transformations! The Story Behind the Painted Faces* by Christopher Agostino

TRIBAL BACKGROUNDS — breaking down the face into geometric shapes

These are re-creations in black and white of patterns you can find in traditional tribal facepainting.

The first four are from Amazon examples depicted in the book *Body Decoration* by Karl Gröning.

The next eight are basic patterns of the Southeast-Nuba of Sudan, Africa, from a set of analytical sketches in the book *Nuba Personal Art* by James C. Faris.

They illustrate the first step to creating a tribal face or mask: divide the face into areas of color with bars, stripes or strong shapes like triangles to disguise the individual human features. You remove the personal identity so that you can create a new social identity with the symbolic mask design.

The quickest way to alter a human face is to put a hard line on it. Human faces have no inherent hard lines or edges, so lines or strong geometric shapes immediately make the face "nonhuman" and ready to become "other". They disguise the face. They change the shape of the face. They turn the face into a mask. In his analysis of the "underlying *raison d'être*" for all tribal body painting, Michel Thévoz in *The Painted Body* states:

"the skin decoration is functionally designed to dehumanize, depersonalize,...to baffle identification. That is why...it makes play with anti-natural elements such as straight lines, triangles, circles and all rigid geometric figures which stand in conspicuous contrast with the mobility of facial features [and] the organic curves of muscles."

ANIMAL MASK DESIGN

3— **Design the Mask** Use your symbolic colors to break up the face into shapes, and then put your signs on to create an exciting mask design that signifies the powers and attributes of the animal

your name: _____

Animal: _____

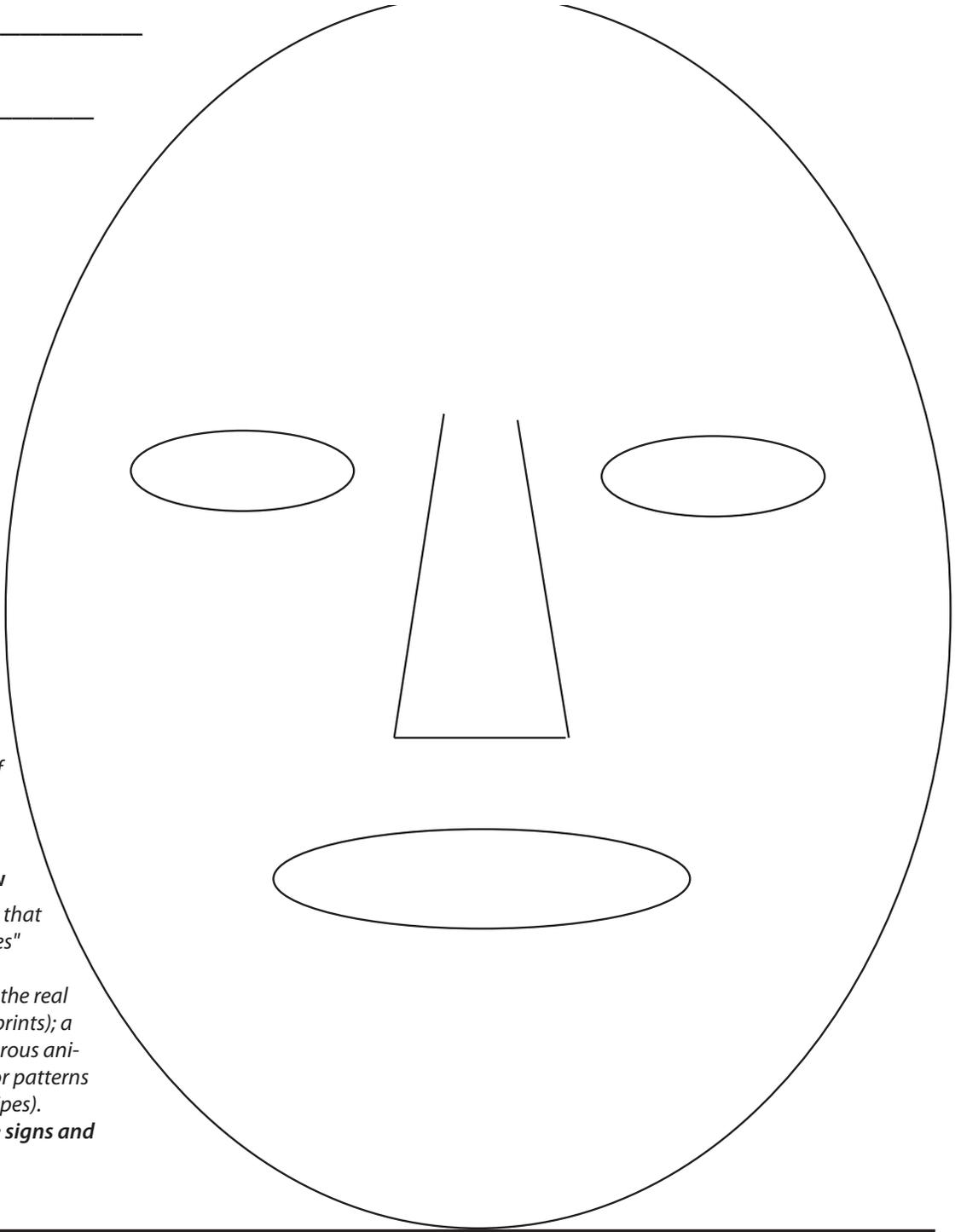
**Attributes
(Animal Powers):**

1— **Choose Attributes**

Choose 4 animal "attributes", 4 things that make this animal special. What does it do that other animals don't do? What powers does it have? Where does it live? What parts of its appearance let you know it is this animal and no other?

2— **Create Symbol Key Below**

Choose two colors and two signs that we be "symbols" for the "attributes" that make this animal special. They can be simple designs from the real animal (like claws, teeth or paw prints); a special color (like red for a dangerous animal or blue for water for a fish); or patterns from the animal (like spots or stripes). **Fill in the symbol key with these signs and what they mean to you.**



SYMBOL KEY 4 Attributes = 2 Colors + 2 Signs