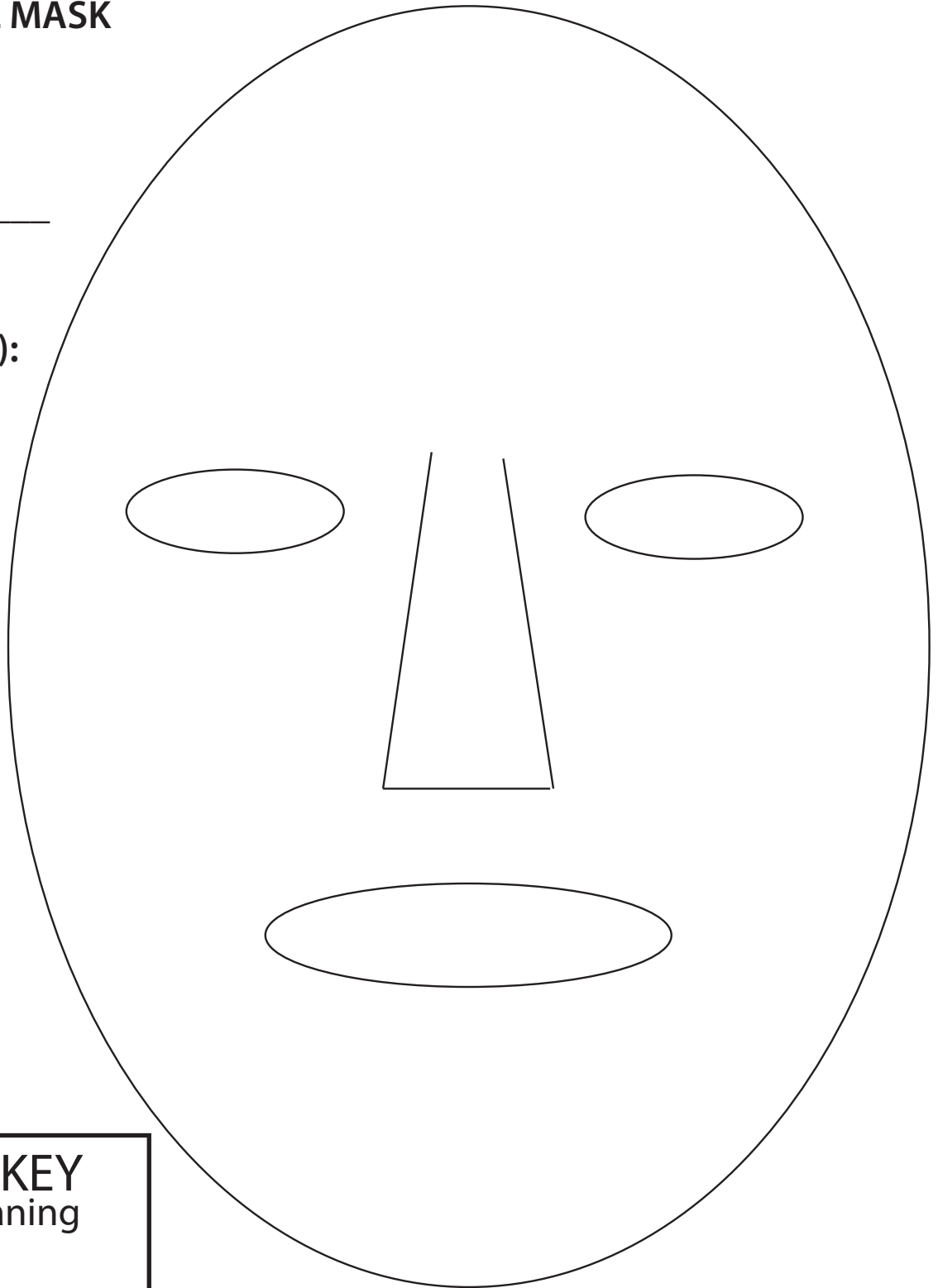


TOTEM ANIMAL MASK

Animal:

Attributes
(Animal Powers):



SYMBOL KEY

Sign = Meaning

To create a symbol key:

Start by thinking about what makes this animal special. What does it do that other animals don't do? What powers does it have? What parts of its appearance let you know it is this animal and no other?

Then, decide on at least three signs that are "symbols" for what makes 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.

Mask-Concept Approach to a Totem Animal Mask Design

Using colors, symbols, icons and design elements to “signify” an animal.

The anthropological study of masks and tribal art by writer'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 focus on 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 (or “animal powers”) the individual student focuses on.

This process presents an experiential understanding of abstract and symbolic art - how to make a work of art that isn't intended to look realistic - and that can connect to an understanding of modern art. We'll use a snake as an example.

1) **Begin by creating a symbol key for the totem animal.** Rather than having the student start from a drawing of the animal, have them begin by choosing 3-5 key simple images that define the animal's unique attributes, those special animal powers that make it an exciting animal. For a snake it might be fangs, forked tongue, snake eyes, scales, the s-curve of the snake body. With these simple signs they create a symbol key (like a map key) that explains their mask.

2) **To design the mask, the student should begin with a simple background that transforms and disguises the face by dividing it into areas of color** using horizontal or vertical stripes, and/or strong geometric shapes; choosing the background colors for symbolic content (like red and white for a dangerous snake).

3) **Over that background, add the key symbols to signify the animal - in any combination and in any place on the mask.** 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 mask or fangs on a bird mask.

4) **Finally, add decorative elements or linework to unify the face as a complete design.** 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. 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). Overall, keep it simple.

My goal in this process is to get each student to develop a subjective design which is powerful for them - a secret, magic design - without concern for how recognizable the animal is or how it will be understood by the viewer. They are the mask-maker, the shaman. They control the power and meaning of the totem animal through the design they make.

Here are some examples:

For these first two examples I created a background with geometric divisions based on the triangle. The first (A) began with a basic strong pattern of triangles over the eyes, the second (B) uses the triangular shape of a snake's head to create an “abstract” snake coming down over the eyes. Then I turned them into distinctive snakes by adding a graphic representation of fangs and eyes. For the next three I divided the face with vertical or horizontal stripes to start. Over that I added black line work or simplified imagery to indicate “snake”. One (C) is a sinuous line style loosely inspired by Maori face patterns that is meant to “feel” like a snake. On the other two (D + E) I used simple iconic representations of a snake body.



A

B

C

D

E



Unique Educational Programs to surprise and delight every audience.

AGOSTINO ARTS

(516) 771-8086

www.agostinoarts.com