



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 art skills.

For grade levels 3 - 6, 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 totem 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 aim was not 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 — by applying traditional mask-making concepts, which can also connect to an understanding of modern art.

STEP 1 — CREATING A SYMBOL KEY: Each student should choose an animal. Then, rather than having them start from a drawing of the animal, begin by having each student choose 3-5 key simple images (“symbols”) to represent the animal’s unique qualities that make it an exciting animal (“attributes” or “animal powers”), plus 2 or 3 colors that relate to the animal, its attributes, or its environment. **EXAMPLE:** For a snake it might be triangles to represent fangs, an s-curve for the snake body, and a line that splits for the forked tongue, plus the colors red for poisonous and white for sneaky. *With these invented signs they create a symbol key (like a map key) that explains their mask.*

STEP 2 — 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:

1) **Tribal Background** — 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 (see the Tribal Background image for traditional examples); choosing the background colors for symbolic content (like red and white for a dangerous snake).

2) **Significant Symbols** — Over that background, add the key symbols 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.

3) **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.

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.