

Touch Art Tours-Information on Study Collection Objects

African Masks

Art is an essential part of many African cultures. It is used to reveal social, religious, political, and economic messages to tribal members and future generations. Symbolic representations are used in abstract ways to connect groups and communicate history, values, and wisdom. Masks are just one example of many African art forms. The mask plays an important role in the religious and ceremonial life of African tribes. They are worn during ritual practices or to influence the forces of nature in crop production, livestock, and the well-being of the tribe. The mask represents supernatural forces and is believed to connect the visible world of the human experience with the invisible world of the spirits. These forces are activated through drumming, chanting, and dancing in ritual ceremonies called masquerades or masking.

Men and women from a special group of society are allowed to wear a mask. The finished masks can be very large, weighing up to 150 pounds and standing over 4 feet tall. The style of the mask is different depending on the tribe but they are all created for specific purposes. Some are purely ornamental while other are used for religious purposes or elaborate rituals. Masks are commonly worn during initiation ceremonies, while making contact with ancestors, and during social regulations. Initiation ceremonies celebrate the coming of age, in which adolescents become full members of a tribe or society. If tribal members are trying to connect with their ancestors, masks are used to embody the spirits of the deceased. In social regulations, masks are used to resolve conflicts or confront forces and activities that threaten the well-being of the community.

The artists who construct these masks are highly respected members of the community. Their knowledge of the supernatural allows them to create masks that will house the spiritual forces. The artists use bold patterns which are either painted or carved onto the masks. The patterns are usually symmetrical and are used in a variety of ways. Geometric shapes and lines are used to show energy and rhythm. Masks are constructed with a variety of materials, depending on what is available. Wood, ivory, bone, and metal are all used to make masks and they are embellished with shells, fibers, feathers, and seeds.

The abstract masks are used to embody the unseen forces in symbolic ways. Realistic interpretations would limit the power of the spiritual world. Senufo masks, along with many other cultural masks, combine human and animal features into a single design. Such masks are typically used for social functions and symbolize the forces of change. Animals are frequently depicted in African art and folklore. People look to animals as models of desirable human qualities, as spiritual ancestors, supernatural forces, celebrated teachers, or mythical characters. Each animal portrayed on the mask has a skill that is useful to humans and the various adornments add to the animal's power.

African art has long been used to serve a cultural function. The influence of African techniques can be seen in works of artists around the world. An example would be Pablo Picasso, who utilized the simple forms and exaggerated facial expressions found in African art.



Pacific Northwest Coast Masks



The natives of the Pacific Northwest have a long tradition of artistic creativity. Winter was a time of relaxation for the natives of the Pacific Northwest. The cold season was a time for dance and creative performances and masks were an essential part of the ceremonies. Specially trained dancers wore the masks and acted out legends to the rhythm of music. The ritual dances were passed down for generations and were treasured by those who acted out the stories. Masks were not only used for folklore, they were also worn during initiations, funerals, religious services, and war rituals. Ceremonies were complex and varied from region to region, but they all shared a common theme. Some of these time-honored traditions are still in practice today and masks continue to be an integral part of native Northwest culture.



Traditionally, the masks are carved from alder wood or red cedar, painted with vibrant colors, and decorated with shells and fibers. A number of the masks resemble a human face but are meant to characterize mythical characters from folktales. There are three specific types of masks used in the Northwest Coast. The single face mask is the most simple in form and is carved from a single chunk of wood. The mechanical masks have moveable parts, allowing eyes and mouths to open and close. Finally, the transformation masks resemble an animal when close but can be opened to reveal the man wearing the mask. Although the design of the mask varies, they are all meant to act as mediators between people and spirits. The wearers become the animal featured on the mask and bring that character's wisdom, protection, and affluence to the tribal members.

Kirk Newman

Kirk Newman wanted to depict the human figure in a way that revealed the complexities of the modern world. He began his exploration of the human form by creating small bronze sculptures of business professionals. Their suits identified them as figures of power and authority, but their awkward and whimsical postures revealed a hidden vulnerability. Kirk Newman, talking about his work, stated, "I'm beginning to realize that each culture back through the centuries had an image of mankind by which they are known today. In other words, there is the Greek man, the Egyptian man, and so forth. As I began to look around in our own time, I decided that there is a type, a special entity that makes our world go. And it is probably best represented by those who sit in most high corporate and/or bureaucratic seats." Newman didn't want to just observe modern human nature; he wanted to find connections with past human life. He believed the ancient connections were disguised by business attire and argued that a common history is at the core of every individual. As Newman's career progressed, the figures became flatter and larger in size. Their shadow-like appearance echoed the idea of a fast paced world where people are constantly in motion. Newman realized that we live in a fast age where people are constantly trying to catch up or get ahead.



Inuit Art

Art is an important part of Inuit customs. Their creative designs are made for decorative, religious, or functional uses. The harsh landscape provides a limited amount of natural materials so the sculptors usually work with bone, ivory, fur, and stone. The stone most commonly used for carving is often referred to as soapstone. However, many varieties of stone are used including sedimentary rock, volcanic rock, and altered serpentine. The domestic and hunting scenes so often depicted in Inuit art reflect an awareness of the world around them. Wildlife is an important part of Inuit culture and is essential for survival. Birds, bears, and sea mammals are artistically carved to represent their distinct qualities and importance in nature. Figures are also common in stone carving, especially of mothers and children, reflecting the importance of family. Despite the harsh conditions of the Arctic landscape, Inuit artists have gained international attention for their unique and simple art forms. The artists embrace modernity but stay true to their traditional foundation.



Martha Tickie (Tickiq)

