

# Celebrating the Cultures of Africa



## Caroline Long

In West Africa, masks are created for a number of reasons. The most important relate to religious or magical rites, often in response to ceremonial cycles or seasons. We often think of wearing a mask for a disguise or a chance to roleplay. In Africa, masks are often viewed as a link to the supernatural. African masks are part of more complete and elaborate costumes that are accompanied in special ceremonies with equally important music and dance.

### Mask Traditions

When a dancer puts on a mask, the mask becomes the spirit he or she is portraying. Masks are used to administer justice and teach young people laws, history, and traditions of their society. Some masks are meant to influence the course of nature. The Bambara people of Mali believe the Creator sent an antelope, *Chi Wara*, to earth to teach the people how to raise corn. The Ashanti women of Ghana make small masks to ensure good health. Specially trained artists carve masks after a long apprenticeship in the art with tools considered to be sacred. The artist works alone in a special hut, with simple tools—an *adze*, a curved knife, and perhaps a chisel and hammer—carving new wood.

African masks vary in shape, size, and style. Some go over the head,

some rest on the shoulders, and others are worn as headdresses. Natural materials such as shells, seeds, beads, and metal are added to the wood. Straw and raffia are attached to hide the identity of the person wearing the mask. Most masks are highly stylized and symbolic. Forms and shapes are exaggerated to emphasize strength and awesome powers. The human and animal forms are translated into geometric and metamorphic shapes and are symbolic of the qualities of the animal or spirit portrayed.

### African Helmet Masks

To begin this lesson, students viewed visuals of African helmet masks including teacher and student examples from previous lessons. They helped each other measure the circumference of their heads and used 3–4"

(7–10 cm) cardboard strips as the "crown."

Balloons were blown up and inserted into the cardboard crown and taped. Plaster gauze strips were crisscrossed in several layers to build up the body of the helmet mask.

Meanwhile, students made decisions about the combination animals they wanted to create as part of their helmets. I asked them to make composite drawings of three different animals, one of which had to be

African in origin, to create a new "art" animal and to give the animal a name. After teacher consultation, students used more cardboard and tape to build up the individual features. The cardboard extensions that represent horns, ears, noses, and any other defining features were oversized and exaggerated for more visual impact. Students used bright or natural colors and patterns with geometric planes, and created texture on their helmets by adding natural materials such as mud, sand, pine bark, raffia, baling wire, feathers, jewels, shells, and copper metal.

### Writing a Story

Animals occupy an important place in African belief, art, and folklore, and are looked to as models of desirable human qualities, spiritual ancestors, the embodiment of spiritual forces, legendary teachers, and entertaining characters in folktales. The spider, bird, leopard, and chameleon are four examples of animals that provide sources of power, inspiration, and guidance.

Students continued the process of immersion into the African cultures by writing a short, one-page story about their masks and having the animals become the main characters.

**African masks are part of elaborate costumes that are worn in special ceremonies with equally important music and dance.**



### Story Development Guide

1. What animal or animals does your headdress represent?
2. For what purpose was it created?
3. Explain the symbolism of the materials you used for your headdress.
4. Name your headdress.



Left to right: Nathan wearing his headdress, Jared's African helmet mask, Justin and Jared wearing their ceremonial costumes.

Examples of African myths were provided and a conflict and a moral to each story was required.

### Costuming

African culture greatly utilizes cloth and textiles. The Ashanti crafts-person weaves Kente cloth, traditionally worn by royal family and advisors. Strips are sewn together to create lively compositions. Adinkra cloth, also made by the Ashanti, is traditionally worn to indicate personal or national mourning. It is made of strips of cloth sewn together, embroidered heavily at the seams, and printed using calabash shell tools with symbols expressing ideas such as unity, good luck, humility, and service.

Students completed this unit by creating their own caftan, mimicking their story details in cloth. Background material was provided that

was large enough for them to create a poncho effect. Wallpaper samples and fabric swatches were made available to cut, arrange, and glue on top of the caftan to create a pattern. Students also looked at examples of African symbols and their meanings. They chose one they liked and created a stamp from linoleum to print directly onto the surface of the caftan using repetition and pattern as the unifying structure.

### Performance and Evaluation

Students donned their helmet masks and caftans and performed original dances in small groups. The dances, accompanied by the beat of homemade drums and other instruments, brought their stories to life. A celebration was held in which students shared African foods such as Kachumbari and mint tea. Finally, students completed an evaluation

sheet reflecting on their experience. Students were asked what challenges they had in the creation of their work, what was the most rewarding experience during this unit, and how their knowledge of African cultures impacted their daily lives. ☺

*Caroline Long is studio visual arts instructor at Goochland High School in Goochland, Virginia. clon@gln.k12.va.us*

### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use.*

### WEB LINK

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