
African Personality Masks

The Function of an African Mask

In the early 20th Century, artists like [Pablo Picasso](#) and [Andre Derain](#) were inspired by the bold abstract designs that they discovered in African tribal masks. They collected and used these works of art to influence their own style. In effect, they used African culture to refresh the tired tradition of figure painting in European art. As a result, we now tend to admire the bold design and abstract patterns of African masks through European eyes. We appreciate them as exhibits on museum walls, cut off from their original meaning and magical power. However, this is not how they were designed to be viewed.

African masks should be seen as part of a ceremonial costume. They are used in religious and social events to represent the spirits of ancestors or to control the good and evil forces in the community. They come to life, possessed by their spirit in the performance of the dance, and are enhanced by both the music and atmosphere of the occasion. Some combine human and animal features to unite man with his natural environment. This bond with nature is of great importance to the African and through the ages masks have always been used to express this relationship.

The Elements and Styles in the African Mask

African tribal artists do not try to create a perfect representation of their subject. Although some realistic portraits are made, others celebrate more abstract qualities like nobility, beauty, courage, mischief and humor. They create an idealized version, emphasizing those elements that they consider most important.

COMPOSITION - Formal symmetrical arrangements of line, shape and form in figures and masks evoke integrity and dignity.

TEXTURE - Skilled craftsmanship, fine detail and quality of finish are of great importance to the African tribal artist. Highly polished surfaces which represent a youthful healthy skin reflect the idea of beauty and virtue, while rough dirty surfaces suggest fear and evil. Many African carvings portray the idealized human figure in its prime, brimming with health, strength, and celebrating fertility or virility.

SHAPE - African masks take on many forms. They can be oval, circular, rectangular, elongated, heart-shaped, animal or human, or any combination of these.

The use of Pattern in African Masks

Bold pattern, either painted or carved, is a powerful and expressive element in African mask design. Most patterns tend to be geometrical and symmetrical and are used in a variety of ways:

Pattern is often used as a form of coded information. Parallel, zigzag, curved and spiral lines, representing scarification marks or tattoos, are frequently used to adorn the planes of the mask face. These can denote social status or have magical or religious powers. Different geometric patterns are sometimes used to distinguish between male and female masks. Square and triangular checkerboard grids are often carved to decorate sections of a design. A variety of complex braided hairstyles adorn the top of the head.

Interlacing crosses and geometric forms are often seen as details on African masks. With the spread of the Moslem faith in Africa, some of these designs show an influence of the decorative ideals of Islamic Art.

Process:

1. Using the personality tests from class, Make a list of the top 8 traits that best describe you.
2. Using the Animal Meaning worksheet find **one** animal that best describes your personality.
3. Using the Symbolism worksheet find **two** symbols that best describe your personality.
4. Research different African mask shapes from the following website and **print** your examples. <http://www.artyfactory.com>.
5. Use these shapes to help you abstract your animal. **Abstract art is art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead use shapes, colors, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect.**
6. Using the information you have gathered, combine your animal, shapes and African mask pattern into a **rough sketch** in your sketchbook.
7. There are no wrong or right masks. This is a reflection of your own personality! Be creative! These are just guidelines to help you in the creation of a unique design.

Grading Requirements:

1. Your mask must resemble an animal in an **Abstract** way.
2. **Two** areas of the design need to be **3 dimensional**. For example; horns, ears, eyes, chin.
3. **Claycrete** must be used in a creative way to add texture and shape to the surface of the mask.
4. **Raffia may** be used to accent facial hair or a head dress.
5. Use at least **one** of the **shapes** from the symbolism worksheet and incorporate it into the mask using either claycrete or painted tattoos.
6. Final mask must be **painted front and back** and be ready to **hang** on the wall.

