

AFRICAN MASKS

ART AND LANGUAGE ARTS

GRADE LEVEL: 5–8

BASED ON

Cameroon, western grasslands region (Unidentified culture group), *Mask*, late 19th century, Museum
Purchase: Gift of AlVontz, 1991.133

VOCABULARY

Africa
mask
clay
sculpture
symbolic

MATERIALS

examples of African Masks: image of Cameroon *Mask*
examples of symbolism in African art
journals
pencils
clay, red or white
clay tools
newspaper
glazes

NATIONAL STANDARDS

Language Arts: Writing

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Visual Art

Standard 1: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes

OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the artwork of Africa, focusing on masks.
- Students will create an original mask inspired by African masks they have studied.
- Students will learn to manipulate clay by using coil, slab, pinch, slip and score, appliqué, and carving techniques.
- Students will learn to glaze their clay mask.
- Students will use their journals to write symbolic stories based on their mask and how it would relate to African society.

CONCEPT

Mask-making in Africa is a tradition that dates back to the beginning of time. Masks are used in ceremonial or religious gatherings in African tribal groups. The function of a mask is to create a new identity for the person wearing the mask. The new identity is one from the “spirit world”. Stylized symbols are characteristic of these masks.

The Museum mask has stylized spiders on the top. The artist connected the legs to create an elaborate headdress. The spider is an icon to this region in Africa. “A nocturnal creature that lives in the ground and emerges after sunset, it inhabits two worlds—the realm of the living and of the dead. The living depend on communication with the wise and powerful ancestors; thus the spider, who travels between the two worlds, functions as the mediator and an animal of divination.”

PROCEDURE

1. The students look at and discuss African masks and the Museum’s Cameroon Mask.
2. Students will sketch different designs for their final project.
3. Show students how to make a newspaper mold for the rounded shape of a face.
4. Demonstrate clay techniques: slab, coil, pinch, slip and score, carving, and appliqué.
5. Start with a slab and place it on the newspaper mold. Have the students create their details while the slab is on the mold.
6. Once the students finish with the clay mask, allow it to dry completely and then fire them in the kiln.
7. As the masks dry, the students will write symbolic stories based on their masks in their journals.
8. The students will then select areas to glaze. The object is to leave some areas the color of the clay giving the mask a more natural look.

CLASS EXPERIENCE