

Understanding masks from Africa

Aims

To highlight the varied forms of masks across Africa and learn more about the different cultures from which they came.

To consider masks within the context of their use – as moving, rather than static objects - that should be seen in motion with music and sound.

To examine the meanings behind the masks and masquerades,

To encourage research and enquiry skills and critical examination of objects.

Description

- There are 13 slides in this slideshow, beginning with 2 introductory question slides asking students to think about masks generally.
- The image slides follow which explore six themes.
- The first three themes are examined in pairs of slides with the same objects on each pair: the first slide asks pupils questions based on solely on observation, the second gives more information on the same masks and asks students to find out more based on this extra information.
- The final three themes are examined with 1 slide each.
- The final slide is a checklist of questions for students to ask when examining any museum object.

Teaching ideas

Before using the slideshow

- Find a physical map of the African continent. Examine what makes up the African continent – look at contrasting geographical features (deserts, rainforest, mountains, rivers) – what does this mean about available materials for making masks?

After the slideshow

- This is the ideal starting point for a masks project. Students might choose one of the cultures to explore in greater detail.
- Students can create their own masks either for display or to be worn. They should consider the form and materials required for each. This can extend into a photography and film project which documents the students' wearing the masks and moving.

Notes on the pictures

Links in these notes take you to the British Museum website for further information about the object.

For all the slides with images of masks, the students should be encouraged to research these particular regions and mask traditions, finding out whether these examples are typical and if they can find common or contrasting symbols and styles.

Slide 2: Discussion question: ask students for their responses, then reveal the suggested words – did you get them all? What others can you think of?

Slide 3: Discussion questions: what do we mean by 'mask'?

Slides 4 and 5: Masquerade

Carved wooden mask of the Epa masquerade

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/c/carved_wooden_mask_of_the_epa.aspx

Wooden mask for Gelede masquerade

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/w/wooden_mask_for_gelede_masquer.aspx

Slides 6 and 7: Symbols and Meanings

Bamana carved wooden mask

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/c/carved_wooden_mask.aspx

Afo carved wooden headdress decorated with seeds

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/c/carved_wooden_headdress_decora.aspx

Slide 8 and 9: Materials

Mask of vegetable fibre, hair and red abrus seeds

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/m/mask_of_vegetable_fibre_hair.aspx

Mask from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/m/mask_kifwebe.aspx

Slide 10: Masks for display

Bronze helmet mask

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/b/bronze_helmet_mask_for_the_odod.aspx

Ivory mask

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/i/ivory_mask.aspx

Slide 11: Mask for the afterlife

Mummy mask

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aes/g/gilded_cartonnage_mummy_mask.aspx

Slide 12: Masks and gender

Mende wooden mask

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/w/wooden_helmet_mask.aspx

Big masquerade sculpture

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/s/sokari_douglas_camp_big_masqu.aspx

Slide 13: Things to remember when examining museum objects.

Background information

- In museums, African masks and headdresses are displayed as objects as examples of African aesthetics and creativity. As such, it remains a challenge for people to appreciate how masks are worn and used in their various ceremonies. The mask is only one element, along with the costume, music and dance, of the masquerader's performance.
- When carving a headdress or mask, the carver does not attempt to recreate the features of an individual, but to reproduce an idea of the qualities or character of the mask.
- This enables the addition of other features, often animals, which are not actual representations, but stylized forms intended to convey the spirit of the animal in relation to the spirit of the mask.
- Certain forms have been passed on from generation to generation as certain groups request masks familiar to them. The carver's requirement to work to particular aesthetic conventions does allow for creative innovation. Many changes have occurred in African societies and the carver is able to respond to change while retaining a continuity of tradition.
- For further reading, we can recommend the following:

Mack, John, *Africa: Arts and Cultures*, British Museum Press, 2000

Mack, John (ed), *Masks: The Art of Expression*, British Museum Press, 1996

Gillows, John, *Printed and Dyed Textiles from Africa*, British Museum Press, 2001

Spring, Chris & Julie Hudson, *Silk in Africa*, British Museum Press, 2002

Jewell, Rebecca, *African Designs: British Museum Pattern Book*, British Museum Press, 1994