

## CHAPTER 2 — Native American Papier-Mâché Masks

**Background:** The extensive and beautiful artwork of Native Americans was often used in religious ceremonies. An example of such artwork is the mask, which was made from natural materials.

The Indians would wear these masks to tell a story. Huge masks could be opened to display another face inside and give the impression that the wearer was transforming from one character to another.

The sometimes frightening but always expressive mask often represented what its maker had seen in a dream or vision. The faces on the mask were stylized, simplified, and distorted. The colors were bright and unnatural. The masks were decorated with repeating lines and shapes, often depicting portions of an animal or mythical being that was part of the maker's family legends.

For this exercise, the students will make a papier-mâché mask. Time must be allowed for the masks to dry.



### Materials

- Mylar balloons that are head-sized when inflated.
  - Petroleum jelly
  - Paper for making papier-mâché, such as newspaper or paper towels
  - Wallpaper paste or flour paste.
  - Poster board
  - Collection of various other items to help support raised portions added to the mask, like cardboard tubes, cereal boxes, or bottles
  - White glue
  - Tape
  - Poster paint or acrylic paint (white and red, black, and blue plus other colors). If each student will take paint to his or her desk, provide small containers such as baby food jars.
- Note: Acrylic paint won't drip as much as poster paint. However, if poster paint and Elmer's glue are mixed, the poster paint won't drip.
- Brushes
  - Sharp knife for cutting eyeholes in the masks. An adult must supervise the student when the eyeholes are cut.
  - Varnish
  - Solvent and containers in which to soak the brushes

### Flour paste

6 cups of water

3 cups of flour

Mix the flour and water.

Heat the mixture in a pan over medium heat.

Stir the mixture until it is the consistency of thick cream.

Let the mixture cool.

## Planning

- Obtain pictures of Northwest Indian masks. Be prepared to explain that the masks are stylized and how the Indians employ shapes, colors, and raised portions to make a mask look, for example, like an animal.
- Practice adding raised portions to a mask. Instructions for a beak are given in the “After the mask has dried” list.
- Set up all the supplies the students will need in one central location, such as on a long table or a couple desks in the classroom.
- Set aside a space where the masks can dry.
- Inflate the number of balloons you’ll need for the class.

## Procedure

### *Initial preparation*

When you are ready to begin this exercise, tell the students to

- Tear strips of paper no longer or wider than their thumbs, and set the paper aside.
- Coat half the inflated balloon with a layer of petroleum jelly.
- Dip one paper strip at a time into the wallpaper or flour paste, and apply the strip to the half of the balloon coated with jelly.
- Use their fingers to carefully smooth each piece of paper over the balloon.
- Paste five layers of paper strips to the balloon.
- Set the balloon in a warm place and let the papier-mâché dry until it is hard. Drying will take at least two days.

### *After the mask has dried*

When the masks are dry, tell the students to

- Look at the pictures of Indian masks and select one they like.
- Add raised features, such as a beak or mouth or ears and eyebrows, to the mask. The following instructions are for a beak:
  - Cut a piece of tag board into a triangle—a small triangle for a small beak or a large triangle for a big beak.
  - Gently curve the triangle into a beak shape.
  - Put the big end of the beak where you want it on the mask.
  - Attach the beak to the mask with tape.
  - Carefully apply wet paper strips all around and over the beak. You may have to support the beak with a cardboard tube placed inside the curve.
  - Add other raised portions if you wish and support them if necessary.
  - Let the mask dry until the paper is hard.

### *After the mask has dried the second time*

The students can now prepare to paint their masks.

- Look at the examples of masks.
- Observe the oblong eyes and other shapes that many Native American artists apply to their masks.
- Note what colors most often adorn the masks—black, white, red, and blue.





- Sketch a design you like on a piece of paper. Refer to your drawing while you paint your mask.

#### ***Paint the mask***

- Carefully remove the mask from the balloon
- Apply a coat of white paint to the hard papier-mâché. Let the white paint dry completely.
- Use a pencil to lightly sketch a design on the painted surface.
- Paint your design with the colors you have chosen. Let each color dry before you apply the next color.
- Cut eyes in the mask. Be careful because the knife is sharp. Or ask an adult to cut the eyes for you.
- Varnish the mask to make it sturdy and shiny.

#### **Extensions**

Display the masks by mounting them on colored poster board and hanging them in the classroom or hallway.

Organize a potlatch.

Show a film featuring Native Americans and their masks.

Write a legend or ask the students to write a legend act it out using their masks.