

CHAPTER 9 —Native American Paper Bag 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 were constructed to open and display another face inside to 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 their family legends.

For this exercise, the students will make a mask from a paper bag.



Materials

- Large brown or white-paper bags, without printing on them, if possible
- White glue, preferably Tacky or other craft glue
- Staplers
- Scissors
- Colored paper
- Light cardboard to reinforce inside of bag
- Raffia or other materials that can be attached as streamers

Planning

- Obtain pictures of Northwest Indian masks. Be prepared to explain that the masks are stylized and how the Indians use different shapes, colors, and raised portions to make a mask look like an animal, for example.
- 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.

Procedure

Initial preparation

- Explain that the students' masks will be made all of paper. They will not apply ink or paint to these masks.
- Have the students try on the bags and mark where the eye holes should be cut. If the bags need to be shortened or otherwise fitted to the students, show them how to customize the fit.
- Reinforce the undersides of the bag with the cardboard.

After the bags have been fitted

Tell the students to

- Look at the pictures of Indian 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 on a piece of paper. Refer to the drawing while constructing the mask.
- Add raised or three-dimensional portions, such as a beak, to the bag.
 - Cut a beak shape, such as a large triangle, from a piece of paper.
 - Fold the paper in half.
 - Attach the paper to the bag with glue.
- Add layers of paper around the eye holes.
 - Draw an outline of the eye hole.
 - Cut successively larger pieces of paper to layer around and over the eye hole opening. Each piece of paper will have the eye hole cut in it.
 - Starting with the largest piece, paste each piece of paper to the mask, one piece on top of the other. Center the eyehole as each layer of paper is applied.
- Add other decorations to the mask.
 - Add pieces of white or black paper to the mask. These colors help other decorations that are added to the mask stand out.
 - Cut feathers from colored paper or tag board and glue them to the mask.
 - Cut designs from colored paper and add them. Stack layers of paper to make the decoration stand out.
 - Add streamers of raffia or curled paper. When you are wearing the mask and shake your head, these streamers will make a swishing noise.

Extensions

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.

