

# Planning a Project

Mask-making is a 'way in' to the exploration of many different aspects of a subject. For example, if Native Americans are studied, it is possible to explore not only masks, but also their history, geography and culture. If children's books are used as a starting point, then half-masks can lend themselves to character work.

Once the project is decided upon, but before starting mask-making, it is important to consider the following questions:

## a) What is the mask going to represent?

Masks can represent the mask-maker's idea of a character, an animal or a creature from another planet. They can depict animals, fish, insects and all manner of natural forms. Rather than aim for verisimilitude, it is more productive to enjoy the process of making and allow ideas to grow. You might begin a project without a specific character in mind, allowing the mask to emerge during the process of making. Once made, you can then 'read' the character in the mask (*fig 40*).

## b) How is the mask going to be worn?

The manner in which the mask fits the wearer is extremely important. Comfort, lightness coupled with strength, ease of breathing and unobstructed vision are essential in a mask that needs to be worn for any length of time.

Masks do not have to be worn – they can be held in front of the face by means of a stick. Some masks are worn more like hats and do not touch the face at all. It depends on the preference of the wearer.

## Using Traditional Mask Models

Traditional mask forms can provide ideas as to the kind of mask best suited to your purposes.

### Full-face Masks

Full-face masks cover the face, using the performer's hair, a wig or the costume to complete the effect. These masks are used, for example, in Japanese Noh Theatre. Often the performer has to grip a 'bit' or ledge inside the mask with his teeth. This means that the mask can be held in place in front of the face and allows for more variations in head movement. The mask is secured by tapes round the

**Fig. 40** (*facing page*). Cola can mask made from recycled materials, designed and worn by an undergraduate student. Workshop led by Andy Earl, Hull School of Architecture, UK. September 1996.

**Fig. 41.** *Painting of a Noh play in performance. Japanese gallery, Kensington, London. Date unknown.*



head. The actor cannot speak and so mimes the part. The words are spoken by another performer on stage at the same time. Percussion sounds or instrumental music can form an accompaniment. Using performers on stage in this way can be a challenging drama exercise (fig. 41).

### Half-masks

Half-masks cover the face down to the upper lip. They can depict ears, eyes and noses. These are traditionally used in very energetic styles of acting such as the Italian commedia dell'arte. Some half-masks are smaller still and merely surround the eyes. These are often used in dance as, for example, in the masked ball in *Cinderella*

**Fig. 42.** *Aslan the Lion half-mask from The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C. S. Lewis (music and lyrics by Irita Kutchmy). Mask designed and made by the author out of cloth glued onto a paper construction base. Costume by Chris Lee. Hull Truck Theatre Company production. January 1987.*





**Fig. 43.** Mr and Mrs Beaver half-masks from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (music and lyrics by Irita Kutchny). Masks designed and made by the author out of cloth glued onto a paper construction base. Costumes by Chris Lee. Hull Truck Theatre Company production. January 1987.

with music by Prokofiev. They are secured by elastic loops round both ears, or elastic round the back of the head and allow the dancer freedom to move and breathe. Both types of half- masks are extremely useful and easy to use in dance or drama (figs. 42–43).

### **Helmet Masks**

Helmet masks cover the entire head. These are used in special effects for film and television, as well as by some contemporary live theatre groups. Huge helmet masks are often seen paraded at carnivals.

### **Crest-Headdress Masks**

Crest- headdress masks do not touch the face at all, being worn like hats on top of the head. Some Native American masks, resembling totem poles with more than one face, are constructed in this way. These masks pose a stimulating design problem involving tall

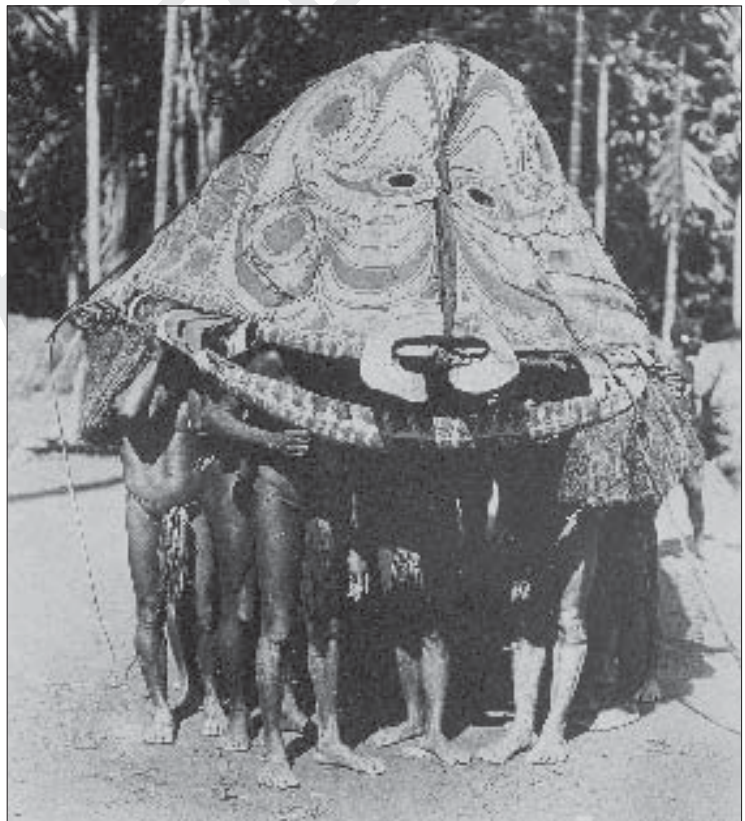
constructions, supports and scaffolding techniques. All these can be carried out in paper- construction. The finished masks can be spectacular and because the face remains uncovered they are easy to use.

### **Masks for Groups**

Some masks are worn by more than one person. The magnificent Chinese Lion Mask is held by two dancers, while others support its long undulating body. A lightweight cane- and- barkcloth 'iguana' mask used in New Guinea covers four dancers, giving the effect of eight legs. These are great fun to make and a lively challenge to try and move underneath as a group (*fig. 44*).

### **Stick Masks**

Stick masks do not have to touch the face at all. Half- or full- face, they can be attached to sticks and held in front of the face for teasing effect. These masks are ideally suited to dance, ritual and carnival. They are invaluable when used to encourage formal movements and gestures (*fig. 45*).



**Fig. 44.** *Iguana cane-and-bark cloth mask with a group of dancers. Papua New Guinea. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. 1912.*



**Fig. 45.** *Stick masks seen in an artist's studio window. Tufnell Park, London. 1995.*

### **The Mask and Costume.**

Traditionally a mask is always seen in combination with a costume so as to present a complete character. The costumes are often made from materials that are ready to hand in the area or culture in which the mask is found. Often feathers, bark, beads and paper are used as well as cloth, skins and raffia (*fig. 46*).

### **Other Activities.**

If the mask is to be used in dance or mime, and particularly if its wearer needs to speak or sing, a half- mask may be more appropriate than a full mask. If it is to be a large structure, masking more than one person, or to be paraded outside, it needs to be lightweight but well made. Durability may be a prime consideration for masks used in theatrical or carnival events.

### **Organizing the Working Space**

Broadly speaking, space – or the lack of it – is not a limitation to mask- making. Having organized mask- making workshops in village halls, canteens, gymnasias and in the open air at festivals and fêtes, I have narrowed down certain basic requirements:

- Tables to work on (or desks that can be pushed together) and chairs;

- A large plastic rubbish bag;

- A separate table for all your materials;

### **Preparation**

Plan well in advance, as you may have to order some materials. Mask- making should be taken in stages and the projects in the following chapters give a guide to the stages that might be followed.

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**Fig. 46.** Basketry, cloth, beadwork and cowrie-shell elephant mask. A typical elephant mask has two large circular ears and a long flap as a trunk at the front. Maskers wear complete costumes and beaded hats and they sway and gyrate as they dance. Cameroon. Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Date unknown.



### Social skills

The key social skills developed through maskwork are co- operation, clarity in communication of ideas and instructions, as well as trust in a partner. A mask- making session with a whole group of young children can work particularly well if older students or parents are invited into the classroom to help. It can also prove to be a successful way of bringing together special- needs and able- bodied students, or of encouraging a community spirit (*fig. 47*).

## Is the mask successful?

As with any process, mask-making has its ups and downs. Failures become opportunities and ways have to be found to make changes. Students and workshop leaders can develop their own assessment criteria depending on the project. If formal assessment is required then a notebook can be kept. Questions can be put to the group as part of the design and problem-solving process. The most telling assessment is if, in the end, the mask 'works'. Can it be worn comfortably? Can the wearer still see? Hear? Breathe? Then we can ask the audience to evaluate the mask. Does it convey character? Do the movements bring that character to life?

**Fig. 47.** Children and adults at an open-air paper mask-making workshop, led by the author, York Early Music Festival, Summer 1987.

