



Pre-Visit  
Lesson Plan

# Northwest Coast Indians: Masks



Autry National Center

## **Introduction**

This lesson plan is designed to support learning experiences about the history and culture of Northwest Coast Indians both in the classroom and as preparation for an in-depth visit to the Southwest Museum of the American Indian. These materials focus on shared aspects of daily life among Northwest Coast Indian tribal groups (including Chinook, Haida, Kwakiutl, Makah, Nootka, Squamish, Tlingit, and Tsimshian) prior to their first contact with non-Indian peoples in the late 1700s.

After learning about the tradition and uses of Kwakiutl transformation masks, students create their own transformation mask, based on Kwakiutl models.<sup>1</sup>

**Note:** This unit/activity makes use of the Internet as an informational and visual resource for both teachers and students. Without access to the Internet in the classroom or media center, the activity will need to be adapted. Print out relevant material from the Internet in advance to share with students, or find their own examples of the images described in books available at the school or local public library.

## **Objectives**

Students will:

- Respond to and discuss information related to the creation and use of transformation masks in Northwest Coast Indian culture
- Use the Internet and/or other resources to research masks in different cultural contexts, making observations about different styles and functions
- Express their understandings and interpretations of the information discussed through the individual creation of a transformation mask and accompanying description

## **Learners**

This unit is designed for upper-elementary grade students although they can be adapted for students in lower or higher grades. Pertinent academic content standards for third through fifth grade are listed in the California Academic Content Standards section below. The subject matter has the strongest links to the areas of Visual Arts and History-Social Studies.

1: The information and activity outline presented here are based on a Teacher Lesson and related pages developed by Richard Hunt, a contemporary Kwakiutl artist. The materials are educator resources at ArtsConnected and ArtsNet Minnesota, a joint project of the Walker Art Center, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, and the Minnesota Museum of American Art.

See:

[www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/inner/hunt.html](http://www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/inner/hunt.html)

and

[www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/teachers/schuld/schuldles.html](http://www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/teachers/schuld/schuldles.html)

## **Materials**

- White tagboard
- Colored construction paper
- Simple folder for each student (folded 12 x 18" paper) to store masks and mask parts in progress
- Scissors
- Glue, glue sticks and/or tape (a variety of choices is a good idea)
- Glue guns (These would be for adult use only – but come in handy when a student needs something to stay in place in a hurry.)
- Washable markers
- Washable tempera (traditional colors include: black, red, blue-green and sometimes red, white, and yellow)
- Brushes (variety of sizes)
- String
- Paper punch
- Rafia and feathers (optional)
- *Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design* worksheet

## **Approximate Time Needed: 5 class periods**

- Looking at masks from different cultures – one session
- Planning design of masks – one session
- Creating masks – three sessions

## **Content Standards**

### **Visual Arts**

**3.1.0** —Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

**3.3.0** —Students analyze the role and development of the visual arts in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting human diversity as it relates to the visual arts and artists.

**3.4.0** —Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art, including their own, according to the elements of art, the principles of design, and aesthetic qualities.

**3.5.0** —Students apply what they learned in the visual arts across subject areas. They develop competencies and creative skills in problem solving, communication, and management of time and resources that contribute to lifelong learning and career skills. They also learn about careers in and related to the visual arts.

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**5.1.0** —Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

**5.3.0** —Students analyze the role and development of the visual arts in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting human diversity as it relates to the visual arts and artists.

**5.4.0** —Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art, including their own, according to the elements of art, the principles of design, and aesthetic qualities.

**5.5.0** —Students apply what they learned in the visual arts across subject areas. They develop competencies and creative skills in problem solving, communication, and management of time and resources that contribute to lifelong learning and career skills. They also learn about careers in and related to the visual arts.

## **History-Social Science**

3.2 —Students describe the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

5.1 —Students describe the major pre-Columbian settlements, including the cliff dwellers and pueblo people of the desert Southwest, the American Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the nomadic nations of the Great Plains, and the woodland peoples east of the Mississippi River.

5.3 —Students describe the cooperation and conflict that existed among the American Indians and between the Indian nations and the new settlers.

## **English-Language Arts**

### **Grade 3**

#### **1.0 — Writing Strategies**

Students write clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows they consider the audience and purpose. Students progress through the stages of the writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing successive versions).

#### **1.0 — Listening and Speaking Strategies**

Students listen critically and respond appropriately to oral communication. They speak in a manner that guides the listener to understand important ideas by using proper phrasing, pitch, and modulation.

### **Grade 4**

#### **1.0 — Writing Strategies**

Students write clear, coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea.

#### **1.0 — Listening and Speaking Strategies**

Students listen critically and respond appropriately to oral communication. They speak in a manner that guides the listener to understand important ideas by using proper phrasing, pitch, and modulation.

### **Grade 5**

#### **1.0 — Writing Strategies**

Students write clear, coherent, and focused essays. The writing exhibits the students' awareness of the audience and purpose. Essays contain formal introductions, supporting evidence, and conclusions. Students progress through the stages of the writing process as needed.

#### **1.0 — Listening and Speaking Strategies**

Students deliver focused, coherent presentations that convey ideas clearly and relate to the background and interests of the audience. They evaluate the content of oral communication.

## Preparation

- Become familiar with the Overview of the Northwest Coast Indians and the Background Information for Northwest Coast Indians: Mask Activity provided at the end of this lesson plan.
- Read through the lesson and activity below and think about how to integrate it into the schedule. For example, the lesson can be completed in consecutive class periods or on alternating days.
- Consider how to tie the activities to existing curricula.
- Once a schedule has been determined, consider where and when the help of teacher assistants or parents will be needed. Make the necessary arrangements.
- Try this activity yourself, before making masks with your students. Use the materials listed below. This is an important step. It will reveal any difficulties students may have in constructing their masks and allow you to develop solutions for the challenges. The process may also provide additional ideas for the materials list, and students will surely enjoy seeing the creative production of their own teacher as well!
- For extensive notes and drawings about using corrugated cardboard in this project, see: [www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/teachers/schuld/scnote5.html](http://www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/teachers/schuld/scnote5.html).
- Type out the list of sites included below in Session 1 to distribute to students.
- Make copies of the *Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design* worksheet for students to use as they're looking through images.

## Procedure

The activity is divided into five sessions including time devoted to: (1) looking at masks from different cultures to ascertain the different appearances and functions of masks, (2) planning their masks, and (3) creating their masks.

### Session 1: Research

- Describe the overall unit and activity to students, including how many class periods will be devoted to the project.
- Using some of the books gathered about Northwest Coast Indians, share introductory information with students about the Northwest Coast, its location, Native peoples, and climate. Also share information about the creation of masks as important cultural objects.
- Discuss with students what they may already know about the Northwest Coast, and discover what information is new.
- Explain to students that they'll be learning more about transformation masks using computers and books. They'll use the information to create their own transformation mask.
- Divide the students into groups of two or three to work on computers. Distribute the list of internet sites outlined below so students know where they are going.
- Start with the Richard Hunt site:  
[www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/inner/hunt.html](http://www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/inner/hunt.html)

At this site students will see Richard Hunt's "Transformation Mask." Together, read about the art and then the artist. Discuss any new vocabulary, as new words will be useful later when students are creating their own masks.

While looking together at this mask, ask students:

- Look at the mask when it is closed. *What kind of animal does this look like?* (Raven)
- *What tells you it is a bird?*
- *What kinds of lines and shapes has the artist used?*
- *Where do you see geometric forms?* (circles, triangles, etc.)
- *Where do you see organic forms?* (other kinds of shapes, usually with fewer corners and/or straight lines)
- *How do the colors help emphasize the bird's features?*
- *What human features do you see?*
- Look at the mask when it is open. *How is the mask different now?*
- *Tell me about the face in the middle. What kind of face is it?*
- The artist also has shown a snake/serpent on either side of the human face. *How can you tell which animal is the serpent? Where is the serpent's body? Where is its head? How has the artist represented the serpent's scales? What shapes did he use?*

This mask is called a "Transformation Mask." *Why do you think it is called this?* Discuss.

Northwest Coast Indian art is very distinct. Use the *Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design* worksheet to provide visual references when discussing the artist's use of the ovoid, S-form, U-form, and Split U-form—the basic shapes used in the artwork of Northwest Coast Indians. Have students point to the elements as they are recognized.

- Move on to the next site:  
[www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/identity/africa.html](http://www.artsconnected.org/artsnetmn/identity/africa.html)

Here is another kind of mask. Read about it together with students and ask the following questions:

- *What differences do you see between the Transformation Mask and the Sande Society Mask?* (Show students how to go "Back" to look again at the transformation mask, if needed.)
- *What kind of designs do you see? How are the masks different? How are they the same?*
- *How is this mask used? How is the Transformation Mask used?*
- *How/when do we use masks today?*
- Continue the search to: [www.artsconnected.org](http://www.artsconnected.org)

In ArtsConnected, click on "art gallery." Type in the keyword "masks" and click on "go." There will be several masks to look at or read about together. Allow time for the students to browse and share with each other.

- *Where do you think these masks might have been made?*
- *How are they different from those we've already seen?*
- *How are they alike?*
- *How are they used?*
- Conclude the unit by transitioning to the next session:  
Take some time to think about the masks you have seen. All the masks you've looked at today are in museums and are available for people to see. They have been found in many different parts of the world. You can do your own search for more masks on the internet, also. Next time we will take a closer look at the masks and art of the Northwest Coast Indians.

Have students start thinking about what your mask might look like. Allow them to spend time drawing and writing about their mask.

- *If you could transform into another creature what would it be?*
- *How would it look?*
- *What colors and shapes will you use?*
- Preview next session by telling the students they need to think about what animal they'd like to use in their own Transformation Mask.



## Session 2: Planning the Masks

- Remind the students of the masks they viewed during the last session. Gather them around the books assembled, showing examples of Northwest Coast Indian masks and other carved pieces.
- Use the *Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design* worksheet to talk about basic shapes in Northwest Coast Indian art to discuss the pieces students are looking at in the books.
  - Find some of these shapes. (Take time to identify the different shapes and have students point out these elements.)
- Ask students if they've thought about what kind of animal they might like to become, or if they can imagine what kind of animal might help them in some way. For the remainder of the class time have students draw the animal/creature that they would like to be able to transform into. Ask them to list the traits, skills, and qualities of their chosen animal.
  - *Where/when would they use your mask?*
  - *Would it be used in a ceremony of some kind or at a special time and place?*
- Have students write or draw their ideas. This is their planning time. Allow students to use markers to color their drawing and/or mask design. Traditional Kwakiutl colors are black, red-brown, and green. (If time allows, discuss how colors usually are symbolic in Native American art and that different groups do not use the same colors to mean the same things.)
  - *What colors will you use?*
- Save these drawings/writings for the next session and for assessment later. Preview next class session by describing to students what kinds of materials they'll be able to use in the creation of their own mask.

## Session 3: The Creation of the Masks Begins

The students have now researched, discussed, viewed, and planned. Today the mask making begins! Here are some suggested ground rules:

- When opened, the mask must reveal a face in the center.
- It must have two sides that fold shut across the front hiding the inside face.
- It must be designed and decorated/colored in all areas that will be seen when either opened or closed.
- Giving the students set "musts" is a good way to challenge their creative problem solving skills. Discuss how the elements of art (line, shape, space, color and texture) will all be used in this project. Use the terms when discussing their progress and ask them to use the terms (to the best of their abilities) when they ask for help. Also, discuss the principles of balance and unity. Their mask must be physically balanced to fold together well. There needs to be visual unity in their design so the human element and animal element can work together as a transformation from one to the other. For instance, discuss with students how they could use repeated designs or colors to create feelings of balance and unity.
- Explain that they won't be stringing the mask to stay shut and that it will be displayed with the side sections open to see the center—but the side sections will be free to fold together to show people how it looks closed.

- Creating a sculptural mask from paper uses five basic techniques that can be easily demonstrated and learned:
  1. Cutting – Using scissors, cut the desired shapes to fit together on the mask. Tell the students they may overlap and layer shapes.
  2. Curling – Demonstrate how to curl paper by rolling it on a pencil or by gently pulling it over the edge of a table to put a curve into the paper.
  3. Folding – Putting fold marks in paper adds to the texture of the shapes and helps in molding the mask pieces.
  4. Controlled Tearing – Demonstrate how to tear paper to achieve a textured edge.
  5. Scoring – Demonstrate how to run the tip of a scissors over a pre-cut piece of paper to "score" or mark an area that will be folded or creased. This also adds a texture and a look of depth to a shape.
- If students are encouraged to use some of these sculptural techniques, they will discover more complex and unique ways of creating their mask. Allow students to help each other and share their ideas.
- Ask students:
  - *What shape would you like to use for your center face?*
  - *How large should it be?*
  - *Will it be a "life size" mask that can actually cover your face, or will you work in a smaller size?*
  - *How can you get the two side pieces to end up exactly alike so they come together in the center when folded in?*
  - *How will you connect the side pieces to the center face?*
  - *Do you think you might need to reinforce any areas of the mask for strength?*
  - *Where will you attach the strings to tie it onto your face?*
  - *If you would like to, how can you make the two side pieces come together and stay shut?*
- Students begin to work cutting out shapes based on their initial drawings. Suggest that they not glue anything today, as their work time will be limited. Store all cut/torn pieces into a folder with their name on it (fold a 12 x 18" sheet of paper in half to make a folder).
- Conclude the session by previewing the final sessions devoted to gluing and coloring.

## Sessions 4 & 5: Building and Coloring the Masks

Be ready to assist students with structural challenges they're trying to overcome in order to realize the designs they've envisioned. (These sessions might benefit from having a couple of extra adult helpers on hand.)

- While they are working, ask students:
  - *Is your design looking like the animal/creature you first planned?* (It's certainly all right if designs undergo radical changes!)
  - *What can you do to make it look more like your chosen animal/creature?* (If the student desires it.)
  - *Do you feel like your mask is balanced?* (Each side is similar – symmetrical.)
  - *What do you like most about your mask?*
  - *What colors have you chosen and why?*
- Take time at the end of the last session to show each other the finished products and encourage students to describe their processes. Congratulate them on their work! If appropriate, have students compose a brief explanatory "label" for their masks describing the animal chosen and its relationship to the student. Exhibit the masks in the classroom or in another more public part of the school before students take them home.

## Extensions

Instead of investigating masks, students could research different kinds of Northwest Coast Indian art such as totem poles, weavings, baskets, or boxes. Teams could be assigned to investigate and create an example of each of these media to display and describe to classmates.

## Evaluation

You will most likely integrate these activities into the overarching class plan for the year, and in doing so, you can merge these experiences and results into each student's growing portfolio. The success of these materials can be measured by: (1) your opinion of the effectiveness and use-ability of the lesson plan and (2) the students' achievements and demonstrations of the learning goals identified. Learning goals are based on academic content standards as well as indications of individual and group collaboration/cooperation, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Students excel when given opportunity and reason to do so. These materials have been designed to provide educators with ways to connect their students to opportunities and reasons by exploring aspects of cultural information with which they may not be familiar. Learning more about Northwest Coast Indians, or any group of people unfamiliar to students, is a rich and rewarding endeavor that can help them understand the importance of cultural diversity and the uniqueness of their own learning style. The classroom is clearly an important place for this kind of process to occur, and it can be an effective springboard for an eventual visit to a museum where students can come face to face with authentic pieces of cultural history. Research has shown that true learning takes place when the learner can make connections between intellectual, emotional and tactile facets of a subject.

## Resources

- The Autry National Center – schedule a field trip for the class to learn more about the collection of Northwest Coast Indian objects. Call the Education Department at 323.667.2000, ext. 336 for more information.
- Native American History/Culture DVDs designed for classroom use (and appropriate hardware – if not in classroom, perhaps in the library/media center).
- Beal, Nancy. The Art of Teaching Art to Children in School and at Home. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. [Chapters on Collage and Construction might be particularly useful.]
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. Potlatch: A Tsimshian Celebration. New York: Holiday House), 1997. Can be found used and inexpensively at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
- McDermott, Gerald. Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest. New York: Viking Press, 1993.
- McNutt, Nan. The Cedar Plank Mask. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1997. (Book contains background information from a child's point of view, as well as several mask-making activities and reproducible pages.)
- Stewart, Hillary. Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979.
- Library of Congress Website  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/wauhtml/aipnhome.html>
- EDSITEment is the best of the Humanities on the Web from the National Endowment for the Humanities in partnership with the National Trust for the Humanities, and the Marco Polo Education Foundation.  
[http://edsitement.neh.gov/view\\_lesson\\_plan.asp?id=324](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=324)
- ArtsConnectEd is the product of a partnership between The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Walker Art Center.  
[www.artsconnected.org/index.cfm](http://www.artsconnected.org/index.cfm)

## Credits & References

The following publications and Internet sites were used in the preparation and development of these materials.

- ArtsConnectEd (see Resources above)  
[www.ArtsConnectEd.org/index.cfm](http://www.ArtsConnectEd.org/index.cfm)
- Boyd Jones, Veda. Native Americans of the Northwest Coast: Indigenous Peoples of North America. San Diego: Lucent Books, 2001.
- Murdoch, David. North American Indian: Eyewitness Books. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life Milwaukee. Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000.
- Waldman, Carl. Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999.

## Overview of the Northwest Coast Indians

The region defined as the Northwest Coast Culture Area is elongated, extending from north to south about 2,000 miles, but from east to west only about 150 miles at its widest. At its northern limits, it touches on territory that is now southern Alaska. At its southern limits, it touches on northern California. In between, it includes the western parts of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. A large part of the Northwest Coast Culture Area consists of islands, including Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the Alexander Archipelago, plus numerous smaller chains.<sup>2</sup>

By the 14th century, the Northwest Coast had between sixty thousand and seventy thousand inhabitants, making it the most densely populated area in North America at that time. There were several main language groups, but because many villages became isolated, a number of tribes within those groups developed their own dialects. While almost all shared certain beliefs and ways of living, each also had its own distinctive myths and ways of dressing, socializing, and waging war.<sup>3</sup>

The climate of the Northwest Coast is surprisingly warm for the northern latitudes because an ocean current warms the ocean as well as winds blowing inland. The westerly winds also carry abundant moisture. The mountains block the moisture, which turns to rainfall, as much as 100 inches or more a year, more than in any other part of North America. Abundant springs and streams run from the mountains to the ocean.

Travel over the mountains was difficult, so Northwest Coast peoples moved about by sea, traveling up and down the coast in giant dugout canoes for purposes of trade and hunting. They usually lived right at the ocean's edge on narrow sand and gravel beaches, situating their houses to face the sea. These houses were normally built of cedar – a key natural resource for these people – with giant timbers for the frame and hand-split planks lashed together for the walls. Giant totem poles were often erected outside their homes featuring faces dictated by shamans (men with special spiritual powers to diagnose and heal the sick, among other important abilities) and members of secret societies.<sup>4</sup>

Summer was the season during which people of the Northwest Coast caught and collected most of the year's food. They left their villages on the narrow beaches and traveled in small family groups to fishing spots along rivers and at river mouths. Fishing was so important to Northwest Coast peoples that other tribes that occasionally came into contact with them called them the "Fish-Eaters." They fished for herring, halibut, cod, smelt, trout, perch, and sturgeon, but by far their most important catch was salmon.<sup>5</sup>

In late autumn, when the rains began, villagers pulled the roof mats off their summer shelters, or unlashed the wall planks from the summer frameworks, and started packing their stores of food for the canoe ride back home, where they would spend the winter in their large, cedar plank houses. Families stockpiled such a tremendous amount of dried food and fish oil over the summer that they would not have to leave the house in winter for weeks or even months at a time. They spent enjoyable winter days gathered around their blazing indoor fires telling stories, feasting, and creating art. While the women wove baskets and cloth, men carved wood and bone tools, utensils, and boxes. Families and sometimes whole villages, had time in winter to throw potlatches, elaborate parties where the host gave presents to all his guests.<sup>6</sup>

2: Waldman, Carl. Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999, 169.

3: Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000, 10.

4: Waldman, Carl. Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999, 169.

5: Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000, 15.

6: Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000, 21.

As described in Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life by Petra Press, the Northwest Coast Cultures are considered extraordinary for several reasons.

- First, they produced a high culture equal to or surpassing that of the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest and the Mound Builders of the Northeast Woodlands – though they had neither agriculture nor pottery, two features usually associated with higher cultures. The tremendous abundance of available food meant that Northwest Coast people never had to learn to farm. Moreover, it gave them much more leisure time than any other early American culture had. By gathering and storing their food supply in summer, they had their entire winter free to hold elaborate dances and ceremonials, through huge, weeklong parties, build houses, carve out canoes, tell stories, wage war, and create wonderful works of art.
- Second, instead of being influenced by cultures from the area now known as Mexico, as many North American cultures were before the arrival of Europeans, many anthropologists believe that the people of the Northwest Coast may have interacted with inhabitants of Northeast Asia. According to those anthropologists, there are many similarities between the mythology and art of the two areas that tend to substantiate the theory.
- Third, Northwest Coast peoples were among the few New World cultures to place value on the acquisition of property. Wealth meant social status, and a person's social status, in turn, determined his – and his family's – worth. Unlike most other Native American cultures, the tribes of the Northwest Coast had complex social class systems that divided village populations into various levels of nobility and commoners. Slavery was also common.<sup>7</sup>

## **Background for Northwest Coast Indians:**

### **Mask Activity**

In addition to hunting and fishing, men were responsible for all the woodwork, from building houses and canoes to carving finely decorated tools, pipes, ceremonial masks, chests, and cooking utensils. The wood of choice for these projects was cedar. They carved canoes out of fifty-foot cedar trunks on the beach in the summer, saving most of the smaller projects for winter, when they spent long hours sitting around the indoor family fire or carving tools in their work sheds.

Northwest Coast peoples used various tools for carving. A chisel was fashioned by lashing an animal's horn to a shaft of wood with cedar bark twine. A hammer was made out of a hard stone called dolerite. Northwest Coast peoples also used an adze, which consisted of a D-shaped handle and horn or stone blade.

Northwest Coast craftsmen could make the most amazing boxes and chests out of wood—without using either nails or a saw. They developed two totally unique methods: bending wood and sewing it. To bend a wood plank for a square box or chest, craftsmen steamed the wood until it was pliable and then used hot rocks to bend four corners into it. To join the two sides in the fourth corner, they bored holes in the edges of both sides and used cedar rope to sew or lace them together. Sometimes wood pegs were used instead of the lacing cord. After the four sides of the box were finished, grooves were chiseled into a bottom piece so that it could be snugly fitted into the box without sewing. Lids were made in the same way. These boxes were so well constructed that water could be boiled in them without leaking.<sup>8</sup>

7: Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000, 12-13.

8: Press, Petra. Indians of the Northwest: Traditions, History, Legends and Life. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2000, 29-30.

## Transformation Masks

Craftsmen created elaborate masks, such as transformation masks. A transformation mask is a large mask with movable parts that can be opened and closed. Kwakiutl dancers in special ceremonies, and at potlatches wore these complex masks.

The use of transformation masks is rooted in ancient Kwakiutl traditions. According to Kwakiutl creation stories, there was once a time when birds, fish, animals, and humans differed only in skin covering and had the ability to transform themselves at will. All living beings were unified and animals could take on human form, just as humans could become animals, birds, fish, and mythical creatures. According to Kwakiutl belief, when dancers are wearing these masks, they are transformed into the spirits represented on the mask.

At the beginning of the dance, this mask would be closed, showing the image of the raven that is represented on the outside of the mask. The Raven is a central character in Northwest Coast stories. He is believed to be the creator of the physical world and the bringer of light. Raven has supernatural powers, and is also a "trickster" who gets what he wants by playing mischievous tricks on others, changing his shape at will.

During key moments of the dance the dancer pulls hidden strings to open the mask, revealing a human face inside flanked by a two-headed serpent. The serpent is called Sisuitl (SEE-shoe) and is associated with the protection of warriors. Sisuitl is often represented with a human head between two serpent heads, as it is here. Together the images on the mask refer to the transformations of human to raven, raven to human, human to Sisuitl, and Sisuitl to human.

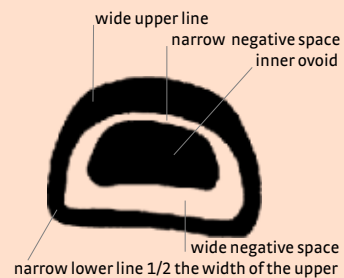
Raven and Sisuitl also are personally significant to the artist. Raven is the special animal and main crest of his father's clan. (A crest is a symbol representing families or clans, groups of people who share the same ancestors.) Sisuitl is the special animal and main crest of his mother's clan. Worn at family dances, a mask like this one represents Hunt's family history by showing his ancestry.

The bold designs and forms used on this mask are distinctive of the Northwest Coast style of decoration. The painted images on this mask use abstract designs to represent animal and human images. The artist created a complex design using two basic shapes--the ovoid and the U-form. (See *Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design* worksheet.)

The artist uses traditional Kwakiutl techniques when carving and painting masks. This mask is made from red cedar, a soft wood favored by Kwakiutl artists for its clear and even grain. Hunt used traditional hand tools, and adheres to traditional colors: black, red-brown, and green. Before commercial paints were available, Kwakiutl artists used natural earth pigments, such as red ochre, charcoal, and blue-green clay. Hunt, however, prefers to use acrylic paints because they dry more quickly.

# Northwest Coast Indian Elements of Design

## • Ovoid – Rounded Rectangle



nearly solid ovoid



double-eye motif



salmon-trout motif

## • U-Form



## • Split U-Form



## • S-Form

