



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume II: Art, Artifacts, and Material Culture

The Native American: Through the Eyes of His Mask With a Special Focus on the Indians of Connecticut

Curriculum Unit 80.02.02
by Annette Chittenden

This unit was written primarily for use in the artroom on the middle school level (grades 5 through 8), but may prove helpful in a number of classroom settings: English, Creative Writing, Social Studies, Geography. Parts of this unit may also work on the elementary school level or high school level. The unit has two major parts. The first deals with the artistic contribution of the Indians of Connecticut. The second part concerns the masks of the North American Indian. Lesson plans at the end of each portion will demonstrate how the material may be used in the classroom. A slide collection has also been developed, as a supplement, to show examples of the artistic and utilitarian objects of the Connecticut Indian as well as those in the New England area and the North American Indian Mask. An explanatory text accompanies the slides which includes specific information about the material and a series of questions to help the student understand the significance of what he is viewing.

Why Indians ? Why Connecticut ?

Many friends have asked why I chose to study and write about the Native American. I am not of Indian blood, to my knowledge, nor do I have close friends who are. Having been so caught up in the technicalities of writing this unit, I was caught off guard by the simple question about my choice of topic. Gradually I have remembered some of the first experiences that eventually led to this essay. Three years ago I found myself involved with two local theater groups who were making masks for their performances. My last memories of a mask had been as a child on Halloween night and these memories were still alive: prancing about as anyone I cared or dared to be and scaring the daylights out of my victims (or vice versa). As I learned more about masking I shared the experience with my students. The reactions were lively. The time was right to learn more about the mask. The American Indian had left a rich legacy.

No masks had been discovered that had been used by the Indians of Connecticut. I was facing the sad fact that the students might not have the opportunity to understand the changing relationships between themselves and their environment and the Indian and his environment. But further study revealed that the Connecticut Indian did leave artifacts that would enable the student to share the experience of responding to their physical environment as the Indian had to his, in the same geographical area. Also the student would be experiencing a part of Connecticut history that rarely got the attention it deserved. We begin the first part of this unit in the students own territory: Connecticut.

The Artistic Contribution of the Indians of Connecticut

To appreciate fully the art and artifacts of this group one at least should have a general knowledge of their history. Readings are suggested in the bibliography and Maxine Richardson has developed a unit for the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute which sheds some light on the relationship of one group, the Pequots, to the African and Puritan. It is entitled *The African and the Pequot in Colonial America*.¹ The Indian was basically friendly and helpful to the white man in the beginning. But gradually misunderstandings were compounded as the English, generally, never respected the Indian enough to thoroughly understand him. In 1837 a large group of Pequots were slaughtered by the English in the area of Groton. The concept of violence was not new to the Pequots or the other Indian groups that participated in the battle, the Mohegans of Connecticut and the Narragansetts of Rhode Island. What was important in this massacre was the conflict in philosophy between the English and the Indians. The English were bent on total annihilation in their wars. Human life was taken relatively quickly and in staggering amounts by their guns and cannons. In contrast, the Indians fought in small groups with simple weapons that, although deadly, were not intended for wholesale destruction. Captain John Underhill, one of the leaders in the destruction, described the fighting style of the Indian, "in such a manner (these Indians fought) that in seven years they would not kill seven men. They stood at a distance from each other, and aimed their arrows at an elevation; watched the course of each one, and never shot a second until they saw the effect of the first."² He added that the Indians were greatly astonished at the English mode of fighting, calling it *matchit* or evil because it was too furious and destructive of too many lives.³ After the destruction of the Pequots, survivors were absorbed into other tribes, as was custom, and life as the Indians had lived it began to fade.

The Connecticut Indian lived in a wigwam or longhouse (a bigger version of the wigwam) made of a sapling skeleton with sheets of bark covering the entire structure. They cooked in bark containers, boiling the water by dropping hot stones in side. Some simple bead work was done. There are rumors that simple bark masks were used, but because of the perishable nature of much of the material they used in the humid climate, many of their artifacts are lost to us. Their most important surviving artistic contributions are in the form of basketry and decorative wood-carving on household utensils and wood implements.⁴ To make a basket, a sapling, usually brown ash, white oak or maple, was cut and pounded to loosen the fibers. These were then peeled off in splints of different widths and lengths and were woven, as a rule, in to circular or rectangular forms. The tools used for preparing the splints and the crooked knife, an important tool of the Mohegan, used in practically all endeavors where cutting was necessary (whittling points for saplings used in the frame of the wigwam, carving utensils, skinning) as well as various basket forms, can be seen in figures 1-4. According to Gladys Tantaquidgeon, a Mohegan now living in Uncasville, Connecticut, the symbols used to decorate the splint baskets had individual meanings which can be seen in figure 5. In figures 8-14 additional decorative patterns are shown, as well as an example of interesting weaving variations in figure 15.⁶ If we look at the wooden utensils in figure 18, we can see two interesting traits.⁷ First, the end of some handles have a round protuberance. This clever feature prevented utensils from falling into simmering pots of corn and beans. Secondly, carvings are sometimes found on utensils. In one case here it is a human head, but usually carvings depicted animals common to the area—deer, birds or fish.

A rather unusual art that seems unique to the Woodland Indian (of which the Connecticut Indian is a part) was that of bitten patterns. These designs were made by folding thin strips of bark in specific ways and then biting along different edges. When the bark was unfolded the teeth marks made a very appealing pattern. Many of the decorative designs shown at the end of this unit were painted onto woven baskets. A paint brush was made from a stick of appropriate length and diameter for the job at hand and then frayed at one end until soft and pliable. Thus a simple tool reflects the manipulation of natural resources whereby the Indian was directly

connected to his environment, respectful and responsible for it. That he went beyond a simple utilitarian response to his environment to a celebration of his interconnectedness with nature in an artistic way points to the usefulness of considering the Connecticut Indians' contribution in the artroom.

The following lesson plans are meant to be manipulated to fit the needs of each teacher's classroom. They should be used only after students have had a chance to flesh out their understanding of the Connecticut Indian by viewing the slides that supplement this unit. In these slides students will see the bitten patterns discussed, a carved cup meant to be carried on a belt loop, a rattle made of a single strip of birch bark, a Woodland longhouse and other artifacts representing the art of the Connecticut Indian.

Lesson Plan I —“Creating a Work of Art Using Only Materials Found in the Immediate Environment”

Objectives : To respond to the environment in an artistic way. To assemble a work using found materials.

Length of time : Two or three class periods.

Notes for the teacher : This project may be done in class after having material brought in by you and the student. Another way to approach the project would be to go on a simple field trip outside the school building. This trip may not yield grasses for simple weaving, berries and other plants for painting, sticks for brushes, pieces of wood for sculpture. What you may find is a forlorn brick, an empty beer can, a piece of metal, glass, or wire, or (if you are lucky) a discarded tire or bicycle part. The point and the challenge is, to take what is found in the environment, as the Indians did, and make something. It might help to show a picture of Picasso's sculpture the “Baboon” made out of a toy Volkswagen. The outcome may be a useful product, aesthetic piece or a just-for-fun object.

Lesson Plan II —“Creating a Useful Item From One or Two Natural Materials”

Objective : To understand and appreciate the variety of ways a material may be used.

Length of time : Two class periods.

Notes for the teacher : Bring in a huge bag of leaves, toss them in a pile in a central area, sit down around it with students and discuss what might be done with them. Some ideas may have to remain as ideas, others may be demonstrated in the room. To get the class started you might have a student lay on the floor and imagine he/she had to sleep there all night. Now pile the leaves in some kind of arrangement (the student should do this) and have the same student lie on these. Discuss sensory awareness in both experiences.

Another idea would be to bring in a pile of sticks and branches of varying lengths, deposit in a central area and proceed as above. Give each student some twine or strong string. By lashing the sticks and branches in a criss-cross fashion or side by side construct a unit that would be big enough to shelter one student. The units can be as sophisticated as the arrangement of sticks will allow but be careful of cave-ins!

Bring in or collect with students a variety of long and short grasses and reeds. Proceed as above. Simple weaving techniques may be demonstrated (helpful reading material on this subject will be found in the bibliography) including a variety of ways to add handles, with each student then asked to make a container. The test of usefulness would be to prove the container could hold a desired item (be it pencil, book, paper, shoes, ball, etc.).

Lesson Plan III —“Make a Clay Pot Using the Decorative Symbols in this Unit”

Objectives : To make a pot using the coil or pinch pot method. To develop a meaningful decoration and/or design on the inner or outer surface of the pot.

Length of time : Two or three class periods.

Notes for the teacher : Homemade clay can be used in this project (recipes will be found in books noted in the bibliography) or commercial clay suitable for firing in the kiln. Both the pinch pot and coil method of making a pot were used by most North American Indians. Both methods should be demonstrated a number of times throughout the duration of the project to reinforce this skill. Designs may be added to the pot after it has firmed up enough to allow the pressure of marking the surface. Designs may be carved in with a pencil or better yet, a tool made or found by the student. Designs may also be printed using a stamp made out of a carved piece of wood, eraser, plaster or baked clay.

The Mask of the American Indian

Before speaking of the mask of the American Indian, I would like to discuss the merit of using the mask as a tool for learning by children. At a young age, children delight in creating faces of themselves and the important people around them. As they progress they grow especially concerned with their own likeness. Clark Wissler, an authority on masks says, “. . . it is the face that is important since there one reads the tensions and relaxations which reveal something of the motives and feelings within.”⁸ We can think of the mask as a non-intimidating tool to get at those sometimes anxious emotions a growing child feels about himself/ herself. As the student understands these anxious feelings he/she can share and express them with others through the mask.

Before direct study of the mask, students should discuss the relevance of the study. Discussion may be initiated with a number of questions. Are masks important today? Students may think not, at first. But masks are still being used in a variety of ways. They are used during Halloween of course, but also in the operating room to prevent the spread of infection; in the theater; in the building trades to protect against dust particles, noxious fumes and arc welding sparks; during traditional festivals such as Mardi Gras, and also during burglaries or other nefarious crimes. Can face make-up be considered a mask? Are a hat or sunglasses part of a mask? What expression does one wear in the middle of a crowded city when one is alone? Is that expression different when one is with someone? Can expression be considered a mask of sorts? What do masks of other cultures express to us? After this kind of discussion students are more apt to want to know more about the mask. They can discover much about the masks in the slide collection on their own without any information as to the original meaning of the mask. To discover for themselves what the mask represents creates a deeper, long lasting awareness of what the Indian intended in his creation. Studying the expression of the mask and what animal or creature was being represented could lead the student to discover powers the mask controlled also. To enhance this process of self-discovery the following information is given as a general overview to the study of the mask.

The masks in the slide collection represent two broad groups of Native Americans: The six nations of the Iroquois and the natives of the Northwest Coast. Noticeably absent will be a discussion of the masks of the southwest. This is not due to a paucity of material, but to the sacredness of the images which prohibit photographs of many masks of the Zuni and Hopi. We could examine the Kachina dolls (the instructional toys of many southwestern Indian children), but they are so numerous and the mythology so complex that they would be better left to a separate paper. I also recommend a reading of some of the myths and legends of the

Iroquois and Northwest Coast Indians as they will enhance the understanding of the masks and provide clear replies to the questions student invariably ask when confronted by a different culture. Suggested readings for both teacher and student will be found in the bibliography.

Let us briefly discuss the False Faces of the Iroquois. The Go-Gon-Sa-So-Oh, as the False Faces are called, fell into four categories: the treating of the sick faces, the beggar masks, the doorkeeper faces and the secret masks. ⁹ Viewed by the early Indians in dark lodges only illuminated by a fire within, the masks cast long, flickering, ghostly shadows on the faces of the viewers as well as the walls of the lodge. Members of the False Face Society usually crawled or hobbled into the lodge in grotesque postures making fearful noises. ¹⁰ By donning the mask, the performer not only was allowed to behave worthodoxly, but to assume the role of the supernatural being he impersonated. "He obtained the mask by carving in the trunk of a living tree the vision he had of a False Face, and then cut the mask free." ¹¹ The society's' members always functioned as a group, and would put on a frightening performance for a sick person. ¹² Another less talked about society among the Iroquois was the Husk Face Society. The Huskers, a mutual aid club, represented thirty strange beings with corn husk faces. ¹³ The lack of information on these delicate masks reflects, to a certain extent, the fact that they are still used in certain sacred ceremonies.

The masks of the Iroquois generally consisted of distorted human visages and each had a story to go along with the peculiar distortion. The Northwest Coast Indians, however, had an opportunity to develop a larger array of masks, as food and natural resources were more abundant and easier to obtain, freeing them for more artistic activity.

The Kwakiutl, Eskimo, Tlingit, Tsimshyan and Bella Coola combined human, animal and bird features in their masks. Double and triple masks opened and closed to reveal mythical characters in the Northwest Coast legends. The viewer was brought face to face with the powers of the supernatural and mythical beings through the performances of the mask wearers in many ceremonies. One of the most important ceremonies of many of the Northwest Coast groups was the potlatch. This term derives from Chinook jargon and means simply to give". ¹⁴ But behind this simple meaning stood a complex historical structure. The potlatch, the giving away of many gifts to the participators, identified the position and status of the participators, identified an individual as a member of a certain family and tribe and preserved the myths and legends of the culture through performances. The potlatch was outlawed in 1876 in Canada as it was deemed an impediment to the progress of the Indian in assimilating prevailing white customs, but even subsequent stiffening of penalties could not snuff out what years and years of cultural and religious activity had created. ¹⁵

Some of the masks exhibit small round cylinders piled on top of the mask or carved into it. These cylinders symbolize the number of potlatches given by an individual and indirectly, the success and status of the person in the community.

The various myths and legends of the Northwest Coast Indian explain the character and power of the masks. Many books have been written on the subject and some are included in the bibliography. There is Raven, the incorrigible trickster, who despite his tricks usually accomplishes his mission. Many tales revolve around a character who obtains coveted power or a valued ceremonial. ¹⁶ The Transformer tales make use of the double and triple masks mentioned earlier; in them the hero (of supernatural origin) travels through the world, transforming malevolent people into animals, giving others proper human form, instructing yet others in the arts of living, and transforming mythical ancestors according to their desire into prominent local features, such as rocks, islands and rivers. ¹⁷ Many animals, including salmon, birds, mink, sea bears and raccoons are

used in tales to teach values to children and as aids to warriors in time of need.

To understand better the vast mythology inherent in the Northwest groups the reader is especially referred to the work of Franz Boas, a world renowned ethnographer, who has written comprehensive volumes based on twenty years of research. Although detailed, it is highly recommended.

Lesson Plan IV —“How Does a Mask Affect the Wearer?” (this lesson should precede all others)

Objective : To personalize the effect of the mask by wearing one and observing behavior.

Length of time : One class period.

Notes for the teacher : Bring in a number of masks; Halloween, oversized, half, theater, Indian and have volunteers try them on. Make sure a mirror is available so that the volunteer may see himself too. Discuss the following questions with the students. Describe the personality of the mask and the volunteer. Did he/she change his/her normal behavior in response to the mask? Did the volunteer's posture change? Are movements the same as they were before the mask was tried on or are they different? Allow plenty of time for each student to “play” with the mask for this will add meaning and energy to subsequent lessons.

Lesson Plan V —“Making a Mask”

Objective : To express an idea of the student's in an original mask which will be used in a way that will have meaning for the student be it simply worn in a play, dance or other event or displayed in an appropriate space.

Length of time : Four class periods or more.

Notes for the teacher : Go over the thoughts and questions raised in the beginning of this part of the unit on masks. Expand on those ideas by asking the student to think about the “big” questions: What do I know about the creation of my world? What are my religious beliefs? How does man behave toward others today on personal and global terms (to light a spark here specific contemporary events may be mentioned)? Once students have pondered these ideas they should have a clearer idea about what they wish to express in their mask. Show a cross section of the slides that represent different types of masks (the finger masks of the female Eskimos, the double masks of the Kwakiutl, the helmet of the Tsimshian, the False Face of the Iroquois) so that students will have a range of possibilities in the physical workings of their mask. The art room now becomes a laboratory where ideas are tested and refined. Attention should be drawn to good design and the effective use of color. A variety of materials should be present to create the mask: plaster cloth, clay, sand and plaster for possible sandcasting, grasses, feathers, hair, shells, pebbles, paper mache, yarn, beads, cloth and bits of wood and metal. Specific readings in the bibliography will explain the various methods of mask making.

Lesson Plan VI —“A Self Portrait Mask”

Objective : To create a mask using one's own face as a model. *Length of time* : Two class periods or more.

Notes for the teacher : Vaseline and plaster cloth are all that is needed to get started and a willing volunteer of course. A thin coat of vaseline is spread over the entire face so that the hardened plaster cloth will not stick to the face. The plaster cloth is then dipped into water and draped over the face, beginning with a thin strip which is laid down the middle of the face from forehead to chin, going between the nostrils. The next strips

are layed down horizontally from ear to ear, overlapping each preceding strip until the face is covered. A second layer of strips is layed down vertically to add strength to the mask. The mouth may be covered up but leave breathing spaces in the nose area. A third layer is recommended for firmness. In twenty minutes the mask should be firm enough to take off. Have the student wrinkle up his face to loosen the mask and gently lift off. Set the mask aside until the next class to allow it to dry thoroughly. The mask can be completed imaginatively or realistically, depending on the students reaction to the material and the demands of the project.

Conclusion

This unit has discussed the artifacts of the Connecticut Indian and the masks of the North American Indian. It is not a thorough discussion of Indian art by any means and is not intended as such. Instead I would hope it gives the student and teacher some information about man at an earlier time in a simpler environment. By exploring myth, artifact and mask one can understand somewhat the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of a group of people that used the materials at hand in a wise, practical and moderate way. Through the activities presented the student should be encouraged to express his/her own thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the material and its meaning in our present environment.

There are many areas of Indian art that can still be explored. These include the Hopi Kachinas, the Navaho sandpaintings and the sculpture of the early mound builders. Other places that provide us with a variety of fine masks for observation are Central and South America (the Maya and Inca), Japan (the realistic masks of Kabuki and No drama) and Africa (Nigeria, Guinea and Liberia to name a few countries).

Figure 1

(figure available in print form)

Figure 2

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Figure 3

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Figure 4

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Figure 5

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Figure 6

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Figure 7

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Figure 8

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Figure 9

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Figure 10

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Figure 11

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Figure 12

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Figure 13

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Figure 14

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Figure 15

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Figure 16

(figure available in print form)

Notes

1. Maxine Richardson, *The African and Pequot in Colonial America in Themes in Twentieth Century American Culture*, Volume II (New Haven: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 1979), pp. 70-89.
2. John W. DeForeat, *History of the Indians of Connecticut* (Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc. Archon Books, 1964), p. 136.
3. DeForest, pp. 136-7.
4. Frank G. Speck, *Canada Geological Survey Memoir 75 , Decorative Art of Indian Tribes of Connecticut* (Ottawa: Government Printing Burequ, 1915), p. 1.
5. Speck, pp. 11, 13, 53.
6. Speck, pp. 17, 19, 21, 23, 27, 29, 31, 35.
7. Speck, p. 73.
8. Clark Wissler, *The American Museum of Natural History New York Science Guide Number 96, Masks* (New York, 1938), p. 30.
9. Wissler, p. 9.
10. Wissler, p. 2.
11. Peter Farb, *Man' s Rise to Civilization, The Cultural Ascent of the Indians of North America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 113.
12. Farb, p. 112.
13. *The American Museum of Natural History New York Science Guide Number 128, Masks and Men)* New York, 1945), p. 2.
14. Philip Drucker and Robert F. Heizer, *To Make My Name Good* (California: University of California Press, 1967), p. 8.
15. Drucker and Heizer, pp. 27,8.
16. Franz Boas, *Kwakintl Ethnography* , edited by Helen Codere (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 309.
17. Boas, pp. 308,9.

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Field Trips

American Indian Archaeology Institute . Located in Washington Connecticut. Offers workshops, demonstrations, films, up to date reading material, a full-size Woodland Indian longhouse, authentic Indian crafts for sale and a pleasant, helpful staff.

Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum . Located in Uncasville Connecticut. Contains a large variety of objects made by Indians all over North America. Staffed by Gladys and Harold Tantaquidgeon.

Movies

North American Indian Films . Available in New Haven Library.

Titles Include: Loon's Necklace, How Beaver

Stole Fire, and One Special Dog.

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