Art and design

Understanding masks from Africa
Why do people wear and use masks?

- to celebrate
- to transform
- to conceal
- to scare
- to disguise

Have you ever worn a mask? On what occasions and why?
A masquerade is any occasion where masks are worn. Masquerade ceremonies protect and give good fortune to communities, commemorate ancestors and bring prosperity.

Compare these two masks – look for similarities and differences.

Imagine what it might be like to wear these masks.
These masks would be worn with other costume and jewellery. What would the whole masquerade have looked like?

Wooden mask for Gelede masquerade
Yoruba people, Nigeria
probably late 19th century

Carved wooden mask for Epa masquerade
Yoruba people, Nigeria
probably late 19th century
Symbols and meanings
What are the similarities between these masks in their form and material?
What are the differences? How might they be worn?
Symbols and meanings

The antelope is a symbol of cultivation and success in agriculture.

Although worn by men, Bamana masks have genders.

The number of spikes or horns on a mask indicates if it is masculine (3, 6 or 9 spikes), feminine (4 or 8) or cross-gender (2, 5 or 7).

Which is this?

Carved wooden mask
Bamana people, Mali, West Africa
probably early 20th century

A chameleon rests on a cockerel’s comb. The chameleon is an important symbol, which can mean many things.

Why do you think that is?

The chameleon can bring long life or death, abundance or infertility, depending on its colour.

The cockerel is a messenger of God and symbolises fertility.

Carved wooden headdress decorated with seeds
Afo people, northern Nigeria
20th century
Materials

Examine these two masks from different regions of Africa.

Identify all the different materials they are made from.

What different processes have been used to create these masks?

How would it feel to wear each of these masks? Imagine the weight and sound.
Materials

The two masks are made of a variety of natural materials, including seeds, vegetable fibres, skins and wood.

What effect using natural materials have on the texture and the colour?

Mask (kifwebe)
Songye people, Democratic Republic of Congo
19th century

Mask of vegetable fibre, hair and red abrus seeds
Angas people, northern Nigeria
mid-20th century
Masks for display

Read the captions. What suggests that these masks were not made to be worn?

Who do you think they depict? Man or woman? High or low status? Why do you think this?

So how do you think they might have been used?

Helmet mask for the Ododua ritual
Made of brass
Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria
18\textsuperscript{th} century
Height 33cm

Ivory mask
Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria
probably 16\textsuperscript{th} century
Height 24cm
Portraits for the afterlife

Both these masks are from Egypt and were placed over the face of the mummy of a dead person.

Who would ever see these masks?

Do death masks conceal anything?

Mummy mask of Satdjehuty
Egypt
Early 1500 BC

Mummy portrait mask from the Roman period
Egypt
about AD 120
Gender

Most masks were worn and made by men.

The mask on the left was worn by women at an initiation ceremony.

The sculpture on the right is of a figure from a male masquerade.

It was made by a female Nigerian artist who lives in London.

Wooden helmet mask
Mende people, Sierra Leone
Early 20th century

Sokari Douglas Camp
*Big Masquerade with boat and household on his head*
Nigeria,
1995
Questions to consider when looking at objects ...

- How old do you think it is?
- What does it appear to be made from?
- How do you think it was made?
- How do you think it was used? What was it for?
- Who or what sort of person do you think may have used it?
- What does it tell you about the culture it comes from?
Visit the main Museum website
www.britishmuseum.org

Explore contains over 4000 highlight objects from the Museum’s collection.
You can use Explore to search for more masks from Africa.
www.britishmuseum.org/explore/explore_introduction.aspx