

Behind the Mask

Ceramics (Abstract Self-Portrait Masks)

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade
Subject	Visual Arts
Course	Visual Arts

Essential Question

What messages can we convey through art, and how can abstract elements and color help us convey these messages?

Summary

In this lesson, students explore the concept of identity and the power of abstract visual expression by designing and sculpting ceramic masks that represent aspects of their inner selves. Using historical examples of masks, students examine how different cultures and artists use symbolism, abstraction, and design to convey meaning. Through guided reflection, color psychology, and exploration of abstract thought, students create original masks that communicate a personal theme or emotion. The final products are accompanied by artist statements and displayed in a gallery walk, culminating in a reflective discussion on identity, authenticity, and the metaphorical "masks" we wear.

Snapshot

Engage

Students look at images of masks from art history and take notes on when and where they came from, what they were made of, and what they were used for.

Explore

Students view works of abstract art and practice using visual thinking strategies as a tool for analyzing abstract art and complete a self-reflection practice.

Explain

Students review and discuss color psychology and begin working on a mask design plan that represents them through elements of abstract art.

Extend

Students begin to make their masks based on their design plan and create an artist statement to go with it.

Evaluate

Students display their work and view one another's masks. Then a whole class discusses the art, reflecting on the concepts of identity, masks, and abstract art.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Fine Arts: Visual Art (High School: Accomplished (III)))

III.VA.P.1.1 : Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create original, meaningful works of art or design.

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Fine Arts: Visual Art (High School: Accomplished (III)))

II.VA.CHP.1.1 : Analyze works of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

Attachments

- Art History Mask Cards - Behind the Mask.docx
- Art History Mask Cards - Behind the Mask.pdf
- Art History Mask Note Catcher - Behind the Mask.docx
- Art History Mask Note Catcher - Behind the Mask.pdf
- Artist Statement Guide - Behind the Mask.docx
- Artist Statement Guide - Behind the Mask.pdf
- Lesson Slides - Behind the Mask.pptx
- Mask Design Plan - Behind the Mask.docx
- Mask Design Plan - Behind the Mask.pdf
- Mask Project Rubric - Behind the Mask.docx
- Mask Project Rubric - Behind the Mask.pdf
- Reflection Practice - Behind the Mask.docx
- Reflection Practice - Behind the Mask.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides
- Art History Mask Note Catcher (attached; one per student)
- Art History Mask Cards (attached; one set per student)
- Mask Design Plan (attached; one per student)
- Mask Project Rubric (attached; one per student)
- Artist Statement Guide (attached; one per student)
- Reflection Practice (attached; one per student)
- Clay
- Oil Pastels
- India Ink (diluted with water 50-50)
- Face Forms
- Cling Wrap
- Newspaper to work on

30 minutes

Engage

Each student should receive an **Art History Mask Note Catcher** and an **Art History Mask Card**. You can hand these out, allow them to be drawn randomly, or lay them out ahead of time for students to choose one that calls to them. Each card contains an image of an historical mask and information about the mask. Display **slide 3** with instructions for this activity. Have students read their card individually and take notes on their Note Catcher, then share at their tables what they noted about their mask.

Note Catchers will ask students the following:

- To make a sketch of the mask;
- When it was made;
- Where it came from;
- What it's made out of;
- What it was used for;
- Their opinion of the mask.

Then have tables choose one person per table to share out for the whole class something notable about the similarities and differences between the masks at their table.

45 minutes

Explore

Lead as discussion on visual thinking strategies using **slides 4-10.** As you display each example image of abstract art, ask the following three questions, one at a time:

- What's going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

There is no need to introduce or explain anything about the artwork before the discussion other than a cursory "We are going to look at/discuss some artwork today." Students need to be the ones driving the discussion; simply ask the questions. After each students' comment, paraphrase what the student said, point at the aspects of the image that are connected to their observation.

Once all abstract art pieces have been discussed, ask "What do all of these pieces have in common?" You may hear a variety of answers but most likely one of them will be that all of these examples are abstract art.

Use **slide 11** to define abstract art and then **slide 12** to connect between abstract art and abstract thinking. You could say something like, "This ability to make your own interpretation of something is an example of **abstract thinking**," to bridge this connection.

Display **slide 13** and revisit the opening activity. "How was abstract thinking demonstrated in the masks you viewed from art history?" Then transition to **slide 14** and introduce the assignment. Inform students that they will be creating a ceramic mask that is an abstract representation of themselves.

Be clear with students that what they show in their mas MUST BE ABSTRACT. There should be NO literal representations (ex., do not put basketballs on your mask if you play basketball). However, they may put a literal object on their mask IF it is symbolic of something else.

Display **slide 15** tell students they will be spending time doing a Self-Reflection practice. It may help here to explain why this step is important, "Self-Reflection is HARD. Figuring out who you are at your core is not easy and requires a lot of thought and discipline. Not many attempt to do it, but those who are able to find their reasons and motivations have more insight into and control over their life."

Move to **slide 16** and hand out the **Reflection Practice** worksheet and tell students that this will guide them in finding the essence of who they are as a person. Once they find an essence to work with, then they can begin to figure out a way to abstract and demonstrate that visually.

60 minutes

Explain

Now students have had an introduction to what abstract thinking is and they have done a reflection practice, soon they will begin to work on designing their masks.

Next, use **slides 17-23** to review color psychology. It will help to preface with why you are reviewing. Color is a powerful way to abstractly represent emotions. As you show each slide with the color and word associations, point out that it's the imagery and other elements of art and design that bring these associations to life. Ask for students to volunteer visual information that clarifies when red represents love compared to when it represents anger. For example, red with curvy lines would signal a romantic feeling, but harsh jagged lines would signal anger. Do this sort of discussion and brainstorm about color and imagery pairings for each slide.

Transition from the color and psychology conversation to **slide 24**. Ask students to consider how this color discussion can help them figure out how to show visually what they discovered about themselves during the reflection practice. Have them take an emotion they feel and describe an image that represents how it feels. For example: When embarrassed often, our faces flush: What does the heat of that feel like? Is it a melting sensation? Or something more violent like an explosion? Melting and exploding are things you can show visually-- whereas embarrassment is much harder to.

Distribute the **Mask Design Plan** handout and display **slide 25**. Provide time for students to sketch their ideas.

120 minutes

Extend

Describe the mask-making process that will be used on this assignment. Steps are outlined on **slides 26-28**. After describing the coloring process that will be used display the examples of the effect this will have shown on **slide 29** and show the Rubric that will be used to grade their mask project on **slide 30.**

Provide time for students to make their actual masks. Check in with each student on their design plan and help them identify the clay working techniques that will help them achieve the 3D effects they are aiming for.

After their mask is complete, have students make an artist statement that will go with the mask creation process like a museum card to go with the mask display. Use **slide 31** and the **Artist Statement Guide** to help them with this process.

Differentiate art technique—draw, clay, etc. oil pastel on the clay with india ink over the top, “hide parts of yourself and they are revealed.”

30 minutes

Evaluate

Once all masks and artist statements are complete, display the masks and hold a Gallery Walk of the finished masks.

Have students write down their biggest take away from the Gallery Walk. What did they learn about themselves and or others in the class through these works of art?

Finally use **slide 32-43** to hold a whole class discussion on masks as an expression identity, authenticity, and visual representation of these concepts.

For each of the slides and the statements provided on it, have students choose if they believe it is Always, Sometimes, or Never True and to think about why. You can give the students cards to hold up to show their choice or designate walls in the classroom where they can go stand to indicate their choice. Ask for volunteers from each category representing (always, sometimes, or never) to share the reason why they chose the answer they did.

1. Our identities are fixed and unchanging.
2. People wear 'masks' to protect parts of themselves.
3. We only show parts of our true selves in different situations.
4. Everyone wears a metaphorical mask at some point.
5. Wearing a mask can help someone feel more powerful or safe.
6. Taking off a mask is the same as being your real self.
7. We choose our masks as carefully as we choose our clothes.
8. Art should look like the thing it represents.
9. Abstract art can express personal identity more clearly than realistic art.
10. Art helps us discover things about ourselves that we didn't know.

Go through as many of the statements as you have time for. Only use the ones that you feel will resonate best with your class. Be sure to include at least one of the last three about art and identity.

Resources

- Brognano, A. (2022). Abstract thinking: Definition, benefits, & how to improve it. https://www.choosingtherapy.com/abstract-thinking/
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Always, sometimes, never true. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/145
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- Shatz, I. (n.d.). Reflective learning: Thinking about the way you learn. https://effectiviology.com/reflective-learning/
- V isual Thinking Strategies. (n.d.). *Home*. https://vtshome.org/