



Kwakwaka'wakw Sun and Moon Masks

What did Native Americans use masks for?

Native American masks were an important part of the Native American culture. They were used during ceremonies, given as gifts, and each one was hand crafted. They have a special charm that comes from the significance behind the art; the significance of the Native American way of life. Native American masks were usually created in the likeness of an animal. These animals represented certain Native American ideas such as spirits, status, and characteristics. In addition, some Native Americans believed that each clan was descended from a different animal. This meant that some Native American masks related to the clan the Indians were from.

In addition to creating Native American masks with animal characteristics, they also created portrait masks. These masks were modeled after a certain person. This type of mask would depict the status of the person who the mask was modeled after.

What types of masks are there?

There are three different types of Native American masks. One is a single face mask which is just a simple mask. Then there is a mechanical mask that can contain moving parts. For example, this can be eyes that open and shut. The last type is a transformation mask. This is more like two or more masks in one. The outer mask opens up to reveal another mask. The second mask may open up to reveal a third and so on.

What are they made of?

Native American masks were constructed out of the materials they had on hand. This means many of the masks were made out of wood. Paint would be formed out of materials that were readily available. Also, items such as feathers, hair, straw and other elements may be added for further decoration.

Who are the Kwakwaka'wakw?

The Kwakwaka'wakw are an indigenous people who live in British Columbia on northern Vancouver Island and the adjoining mainland. They have historically been named after the Kwakiutl.

The Kwakwaka'wakw believe that their ancestors came in the forms of animals by way of land, sea or underground. When one of these ancestral animals arrived at the given spot, it would discard its animal appearance and become human. Some animals that figure in these origin myths include the Thunderbird, his brother Kolus, the seagull, orca, grizzly bear or chief ghost. Some ancestors have human origins and are said to come from distant places.

Historically, the Kwakwaka'wakw economy was based primarily on fishing, with the men also engaging in some hunting, and the women gathering wild fruits and berries. Ornate weaving and woodwork were important crafts, and wealth, defined by slaves and material goods, was prominently displayed and traded at potlatch ceremonies. These customs were the subject of extensive study by the anthropologist Franz Boas. In contrast to most other societies, wealth and status were not determined by how much you had, but by how much you had to give away. This act of giving away your

The Sun Mask

~ḫisala lives in the upper world (or the sky) and "walks across the heavens" daily from east to west. ~ḫisala is the ancestor and family crest of some Kwakwaka'wakw. As a family crest, the image of ~ḫisala would often be seen on the front of houses, or today on the top of the world's tallest totem pole, located in Alert Bay.

Dance and Regalia:

~ḫisala dancer uses a blanket covered in iridescent abalone shells to imply the movements of the sun traveling from east to west. The mask is carved as an anthropomorphic face with a hooked nose and ten short rays emanating from the sides and top of the mask.

Song:

~ḫisala Song of 'Lala,,anx'idi, Chief Peter Cook, Tḫa'sala

We are all going to watch the supernatural one who causes the daylight to break down upon our world, you are truly supernatural. We will watch the one who causes great reflections of light from it's body, the supernatural killer whale, this is a heavy dance right. You will now watch, the great hunter of the seat that has the greatest aim when it strikes, the killer whale, a powerful dance to have, it is treasured.

Legend:

In one well-known story, Mink is the child of ~ḫisala. Mink was born after the rays of the sun impregnated his mother as they fell upon her back. Mink travels to visit his father, ~ḫisala in the upper world by climbing a chain of arrows. In the sky family, clouds are the aunts of Mink, and, therefore the sisters of ~ḫisala. Mink's father allows him to wear the abalone blanket and become ~ḫisala. Mink gets home and does a bad job. In the end his father throws him back down to Earth.

The Moon Mask

The moon masks always appear as a pair, each differentiated by the phase of the moon on top of the mask. The features of a moon mask are often carved in such a way that the face appears flatter than is typical of other masks, reduced in prominence to suggest a face in the moon. The moon is responsible for controlling the tides. This moon mask shows the halo constructed from wood and is painted red.

Dance and Regalia:

When the moon masks are shown during a potlatch, they enter the Big House separately. Once they discover each other they try to get the other to leave, as each believes they are the better phase of the moon. They decide to settle the often-heated argument by dancing and the audience decides which one is the better moon. The winner continues to dance while the loser sulks away, gesturing angrily as he goes. Although the dance is quite humorous it is a high-ranking privilege.