

Why do People Make Masks?

Since prehistoric times, masks have been made to serve a variety of purposes or functions. Following are three of the major reasons why people make masks.



Masks worn during Mardi Gras in New Orleans, LA

The Mask as Transformer of Personality

The word “person” comes from the Latin word *persona* meaning mask. A mask allows the wearer to adopt a new personality or identity with its own unique mannerisms and behaviors. This use of the mask is evident in all parts of the world and can be seen in both ancient and modern cultures.

Try This: Using materials found around the home or classroom, create a mask that will change your personality when you wear it.



Welder's Mask

The Mask as a Protective Device

Some masks serve to protect the wearer against physical dangers. For example, doctors and surgeons sometimes wear masks to protect them from airborne germs. Can you think of other examples of masks that are intended as protective devices?

Try This: Design a mask to protect you from something you fear.



Gold Funeral mask known as the “Agamemnon Mask”

The Mask as Preserver of Personality

Nowadays we take millions of photographs and countless feet of video to preserve the memory of faces and places that give us pleasure. We do this, in part, because we believe that the personalities, places and emotions recorded in these images will continue to live with us. Historically, others have had this feeling too. People have long tried to preserve the personalities of the dead, especially if the deceased possessed great wisdom, physical strength, or power.

The creation of funerary masks in some cultures served this purpose. In ancient Egypt, people believed that immortality depended largely on the preservation of the personality of the honored dead. To do this, they preserved the body and created facial masks of the deceased modeled in wood, stone and precious metals. These masks were placed over the mummified remains. At first, the features of the dead were idealized and symbolic. As Greek influence grew in Egypt, the mummy mask tended to become simply a painted portrait of the deceased that was placed over the body.

Then, as Roman influence increased in Egypt, portraits in wax or tempera on wood (often made during life) were cut down and fit into place in the wrapping of the mummy to provide a perfect likeness. The use of masks to preserve the personality of the dead can be seen among other ancient cultures throughout the world (for example, in Pre-Columbian societies). Even in Western societies today, there exists a desire to preserve the body of the dead as long as possible and to invoke his/her memory in monuments, statues, pictures, and masks.

Try This: Create a *paper mâché* mask of a historical figure you admire.

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