

What Are African Masks?

Curated by TheCollector



African masks are an important part of Africa's [ancient tribal traditions](#), and they are still being made and used today. African tribes believe these masks can provide a vital gateway into the spiritual world when worn during rituals and ceremonies, so they hold a special sacred significance. With so many of these masks now in museums collections around the world, and [collected as works of art](#), it's easy to forget the great cultural significance they have within the communities that make them. So, let's take a closer look at some of the most fascinating facts surrounding the symbolism and creation of African masks.

1. African Masks Are Deeply Connected to the Spirit World

African mask from Ghana, image courtesy of UNICEF



Although in the Western world we might look at African masks as works of art to be [admired on the wall](#), it's important to remember that within the communities that make them, these masks are primarily [spiritual objects](#) that are made to be used. Africans believe that wearing masks and using them during ritualized performances such as weddings, funerals and [secret society initiations](#) can connect them with spirits beyond the real world. During such performances, the wearer of the mask enters a trance-like state that tribes believe will

allow them to communicate with ancestors, or to control the forces of good and evil.

2. African Masks Are a Living Tradition



Funeral ceremony of a Senufo hunter in Burkina Faso, Africa, image courtesy of Soul of Africa Museum

Mask making is a living tradition that continues today. Amazingly, this tradition dates back many millennia, and the specific skills needed to create these objects have been passed on through many different generations. [African tribal artists](#) are always men, and they are trained for several years, either as an apprentice to a master carver.

Sometimes a father shares his skills with his son, continuing their craft through the family line. These artists hold a respectable role in African tribal society, as the creator of such spiritually significant objects.

3. African Masks Are Carved in Wood (And Include Other Natural Materials)



Baule / Yaure Lomane Mask made from carved wood, image courtesy of African Arts

Gallery

Most African masks are carved out of wood, although some have been made out of bronze, brass, copper ivory, pottery and textile. Wood is usually chosen partly because it is readily available for African communities. It also has a deeper symbolic meaning – carvers believe the tree has a soul that is carried through into the mask. In some tribes, the mask makers must ask permission from the tree spirit before cutting it down, and make an animal sacrifice in honor of the tree. Some masks are adorned with intricate detail and decoration, including elements of textile, shells, feathers, fur and paint. Occasionally masks are even splashed with sacrificial blood to enhance their spiritual force. The tools used to carve the wooden mask are also embedded with symbolic meaning and tribes believe the tools carry with them the skills and expertise of their previous owners.

4. Masks Are Designed to be Worn by a Select Few



Gelede secret society dancer wearing a traditional African mask, image courtesy of the Soul of Africa Museum

Masks are reserved for specific members of the African community. Only a select few tribe leaders are endowed with the honor of being a mask wearer. They are almost always men, and often elders within the tribe, who have earned wisdom and respect over the years. When they wear the mask, tribes believe they become the spirit they wish to invoke. Women often help to decorate masks and their accompanying

costumes, and sometimes they even [dance](#) alongside the mask wearer.

5. Masks Represent the Cultural Values of the Tribe



[Punu Mask, Gabon](#), image courtesy of Christie's

Different tribes have their own stylistic traditions for making masks, and these often reflect the values of the group. For example, [Gabon tribes](#) create masks with large mouths and long chins to symbolize authority and strength, while [Ligbi masks](#) are elongated, with wings on either side, combining both animal and human forms to celebrate a communion with nature.

6. Masks Take Different Forms



A variety of African masks from different tribes across the nation, image courtesy of How Africa

Not all African masks cover the head in the same way. Some are designed to cover the face only, tied with a band or string, while others have a [helmet-like appearance](#) that covers the whole head. Some of these helmet-like masks are carved out of an entire tree trunk! Other masks can cover the whole head and shoulder area, with a heavy base that sits upon the wearer's shoulders, giving them a commanding and even terrifying air of authority.