

ARTS 2J Extra Credit Paper 1

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## **Alaska and Arctic Masks in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

I visited and “trapped inside” the MET (Metropolitan Museum of Art) for several days in May 2023 during my New York city museum tour. Their collection of Native American masks made from Alaska and the Arctic (Fig 1) just amazed me.

Two masks made around 1900 by Yup’ik artists from Alaska caught my eyes (“Mask: Yup’ik, Native American.”). Both are big, asymmetrical (Werness 149), with rendering of multiple faces, and a wooden loop to frame the “ringed center” (Fair 81). The first one (Fig 2-5) is light in color and the design represents faces inside a kayak shape mask body. There are two fish attached to the kayak on the top, their tails form an upside down triangle with the pointing tip of the front end of the kayak. The top face wears a triangle hat, with the pointed end almost touching the round loop on the top. The upper loop forms an upside down U shape arch on the top to frame the big mask. There are four detached “palms” asymmetrically extended from the kayak to represent the hands of both figures. There is also a small fish attached to the fish on the left. Both big fish are rendered upside down. Both figures have small round holes to represent their eyes. The top figure has big triangle shaped nose holes and a geometrical representation of the teeth. The lower figure has a round face and a downward turned mouth. The second mask (Fig 6-10) is darker, also clearly big and with an asymmetrical design. It was framed by a big loop, with two support stems. The design includes a big thumb on the top, four fingers holding a fish on the right side, a fish, a seal in the center, a bird on lower left, and half a face on the left

center. The fingernails are white and the fingers are dark colored. Both the fish and the seal are facing down and the bird is facing left. Both the fish and the bird are in profile view but the seal and the half face are in frontal view. The flippers of the seal are extended out. The artist extensively uses small circle dots with contrasting color on all elements. The asymmetrical design is strongly emphasized. Observed from both examples, it seems that Yup'ik mask artists love to include wooden loop arch, composite of several different animals and figures to create a big mask in asymmetrical design. I really love the boldness of this unique cultural representation. The top wooden loop arch also reminds me of the image of the traditional wooden snowshoes.

The exhibition of three expressive symmetrical shape masks also attracted me, one from Chugach artist around 1860 (Fig 10 & 13), and two from Alutiiq/Sugpiaq artists made around 1870 (Fig 11, 12 & 14). These three masks are all showing a long face and interesting expression of both eyeliner and lip shapes. The Chugach mask ("Mask: Chugach, Native American.") is outlined with an attached wood arch loop, which visually functions very differently from the wood arch loop observed from the Yup'ik mask. The forehead, the nose portion, the extended downward turning lips, and the chin are rendered by a bold dark orange color. The lips are long and extended to the full width of the face and form a wide '^' shape. His eyeline, in contrast, are extended in full width of the face to form a wide "v" shape. Visually the eyes and the lips form a 'X' on the lower half portion of this tall mask. Their eyes are represented by two small curved cuts. The upper portion of the mask seems to express a bald person. It expresses a serious "not joking", "how could this happen" emotion on the mask.

The two Alutiiq/Sugpiaq masks ("Mask: Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Native American.") share a similar tall design as the Chugach mask. They appear in a darker black and gray color tone. Their eyes are represented by a small curved cut, similar style as the Chugach one and are positioned

much higher and show minimal forehead. The masks show a triangle hairstyle on both and suggest these masks represent nice and clean hair, by simple geometric shapes. Their noses are big and noticeable, creating a big upward pointing arrow with the clear edge of ‘^’ shaped hairline. The shape of their mouths are very expressive, one showing a sense of whistling or an “o” sounding shape, while the other showing a “u...” sounding shape. It is fun for me to try to mimic their expressions by squeezing my eyes and mouth. It seems both groups enjoy expressing their emotion on their face.

There are many other Native American artworks in the MET. However, I feel these five masks are the highlight of their collection. By comparing the artistic representation and different emphasis of their mask making, it really helps us to enjoy the variety of Native American art. I believe these expressing devices also assisted us to understand their approach of facial communication in their culture better.

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## Illustrations

### Arctic

For Arctic peoples, the boundaries between the spiritual and human worlds are permeable, and artistic forms express the worldview that humans, animals, and spirits exist in a state of reciprocal exchange and potential transformation. Yup’ik, Chugach, and Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) makers produce elaborate masks used in community ceremonies. Shamans also employ masks in their rituals to communicate with the spirit world. In a tradition continuing from ancient times, the Inupiat and other coastal Alaskan artists create small-scale ivory sculptures and tools engraved with figural and geometric imagery.

*Starting with the arrival of Russian fur traders in 1741, Alaska became the site of colonial exploration and exploitation. Colonizing powers—Russian, French, Spanish, and British—brought deadly diseases as well as alterations to economic, political, and spiritual practices. Despite this legacy, the ideas, symbolism, and materials of the past are alive in Alaska’s contemporary arts—reflecting deep connections with the land, sacred traditions, and cultural protocols that have evolved over thousands of years.*

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Fig 1. Description about the art in the Arctic region.



Yup'ik artist

## Mask

Alaska, ca. 1900

Wood, pigment, vegetal fiber, iron nails, and feathers

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of Native American Art, Gift of Valerie-Charles Diker Fund, 2017 (2017.718.3)

Within the bentwood border of this mask, a hunter's kayak searches for quarry. Near the center of the boat, the face of a humanoid seal spirit emerges, with an unidentified visage above. The tiny bird head at the bow may portray the hunter as seen through the eyes of his prey. Fish and flippers surround the vessel, likely representing the animals that slip through the symbolic hands and into the physical world to be hunted.

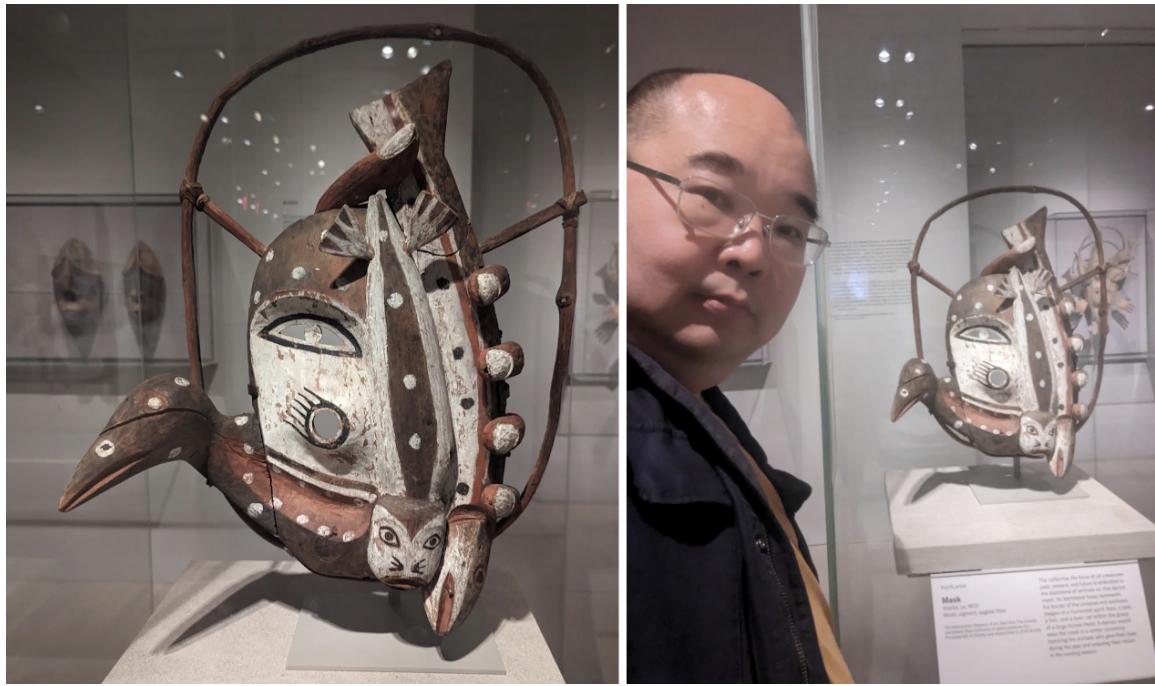
*Left:* Fig 2. Frontal view of the lighter Yup'ik mask.

*Right:* Fig 3. Label for the lighter Yup'ik mask.



*Left:* Fig 4. Right three quarter view of the lighter Yup'ik mask.

*Right:* Fig 5. The author photographed with the lighter Yup'ik mask.



*Left:* Fig 6. Frontal view of the darker Yup'ik mask.

*Right:* Fig 7. The author photographed with the darker Yup'ik mask.



*Left:* Fig 8. Right two third view of the darker Yup'ik mask.

*Right:* Fig 9. Right three quarter view of the darker Yup'ik mask.

Yup'ik artist

## Mask

Alaska, ca. 1900

Wood, pigment, vegetal fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of Native American Art, Promised Gift of Charles and Valerie Diker (L.2018.35.100)

The collective life force of all creatures past, present, and future is embodied in the depictions of animals on this dance mask. Its bentwood hoop represents the border of the universe and encloses images of a humanoid spirit face, a seal, a fish, and a loon—all within the grasp of a large human hand. A dancer would wear the mask in a winter ceremony honoring the animals who gave their lives during the year and ensuring their return in the coming season.

Fig 10. Label for the darker Yup'ik mask.



*Left:* Fig 11. Right three quarter view of the Chugach mask.

*Center & Right:* Fig 12-13. Right three quarter view of two Alutiiq/Sugpiaq masks.



*Left:* Fig 11. The author, attempting to express the facial expression and emotion depicted on the mask, photographed with the frontal view of the Chugach mask.

*Right:* Fig 12-13. The author, attempting to express the facial expression and emotion depicted on the masks, photographed with the frontal view of two Alutiiq/Sugpiaq masks.