

Simple Materials and Big Ideas



VISIT THE BMA

and see how the sun's hands are attached to bird quills so that they jiggle when the mask is moved.

Mask Representing the Sun Yup'ik people, Alaska

In the land of ice where no crops grow, food doesn't fall into one's lap. How can pieces of driftwood, bits of string, and eleven white feathers help to feed the people of the far north?

One hundred years ago, even the most skillful and self-reliant hunters depended on nature spirits such as the sun to assist with their search for food. A Yup'ik carver from Alaska hoped this mask would encourage the spirit of the sun to lead the migrating caribou toward the Yup'ik hunters' camp, or cause the icy sea to thaw so that fish would be easy to catch.

According to Yup'ik belief, the spirit of the sun lived at the outer reaches of the universe. When food was scarce on earth, the village spiritual leader or shaman would journey "out-of body," past the land of earth, sea, and ice, through several layers of sky, and into the celestial realm inhabited by spirits, wind, sun, snow, and stars in order to appeal directly to the sun for help. The mask's wooden hoops represent the layers of the "skyland" while eleven feathers suggest the snow and stars of the outermost realm.

Two hands attached to the mask have very small thumbs. This pleases Yup'ik hunters, for it shows that the sun has a weak grasp and will not be able to hold onto all the animals that live in the spirit world. Some will be able to slip away and return to earth to provide food for the Yup'ik people.

Challenge for Students

The Yup'ik people used everyday sticks and feathers to illustrate the structure of the universe. Think of a "big idea" of your own and express it with simple materials that you find outdoors or in your classroom or home.

Print the image on page 2 for your students.

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART



Yup'ik people, Kuskokwim River, Alaska. *Mask Representing the Sun*. c.1850-1900. Wood, feathers, string. 15 cm. diameter. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1959.9