Real People

The negative connotation associated with the name “Eskimo” was one factor behind its replacement with the word Inuit, meaning “people.” In Western Alaska, Yup’ik-speaking Eskimo cultures have designated themselves “Yup’ik,” meaning “real person.” This tribe is still present today, and its origins date back to 1400 CE. A tradition that has carried on throughout the centuries is the art of mask making.

The masks were used for many ceremonial purposes and they were said to have made the unseen world visible. It is impossible to know the exact meanings behind any one mask because the meanings were personal to their creator and related to the story he or she wished to tell, usually containing a moral or lesson based off of personal experience. Winters were especially harsh living conditions for the tribe, so during the long winters masks were often made as part of a complex spiritual life which honored the beings that made life possible in the Arctic environment. Elders often refer to mask-making as “our way of making prayer” - a metaphysical experience shared among the entire community that enables them to celebrate the good times and endure the bad.

Making the Unseen Visible

Masks were mainly made with whatever material was available: wood, red ocher, feathers, etc. They were sewn together and/or pierced and threaded rather than using adhesives or welding. It is also a commonality for the masks to be painted flesh toned, resembling a human face. Beyond just a use of line in the masks, many exuded a sense of volume/form with chubby cheeks projecting and convex noses. Mask making is something that everyone in the village participated in but unfortunately today it happens less in the newer generations.

http://www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/— Arctic Studies Center Website

Reflection Questions

1. How did the elders describe the art of mask making, what did they compare it to?

2. Who in the Yup’ik tribe made masks?

3. What does the word “Yup’ik” literally mean?

4. What features were typical of Yup’ik masks?

5. List three functions of the Yup’ik masks.