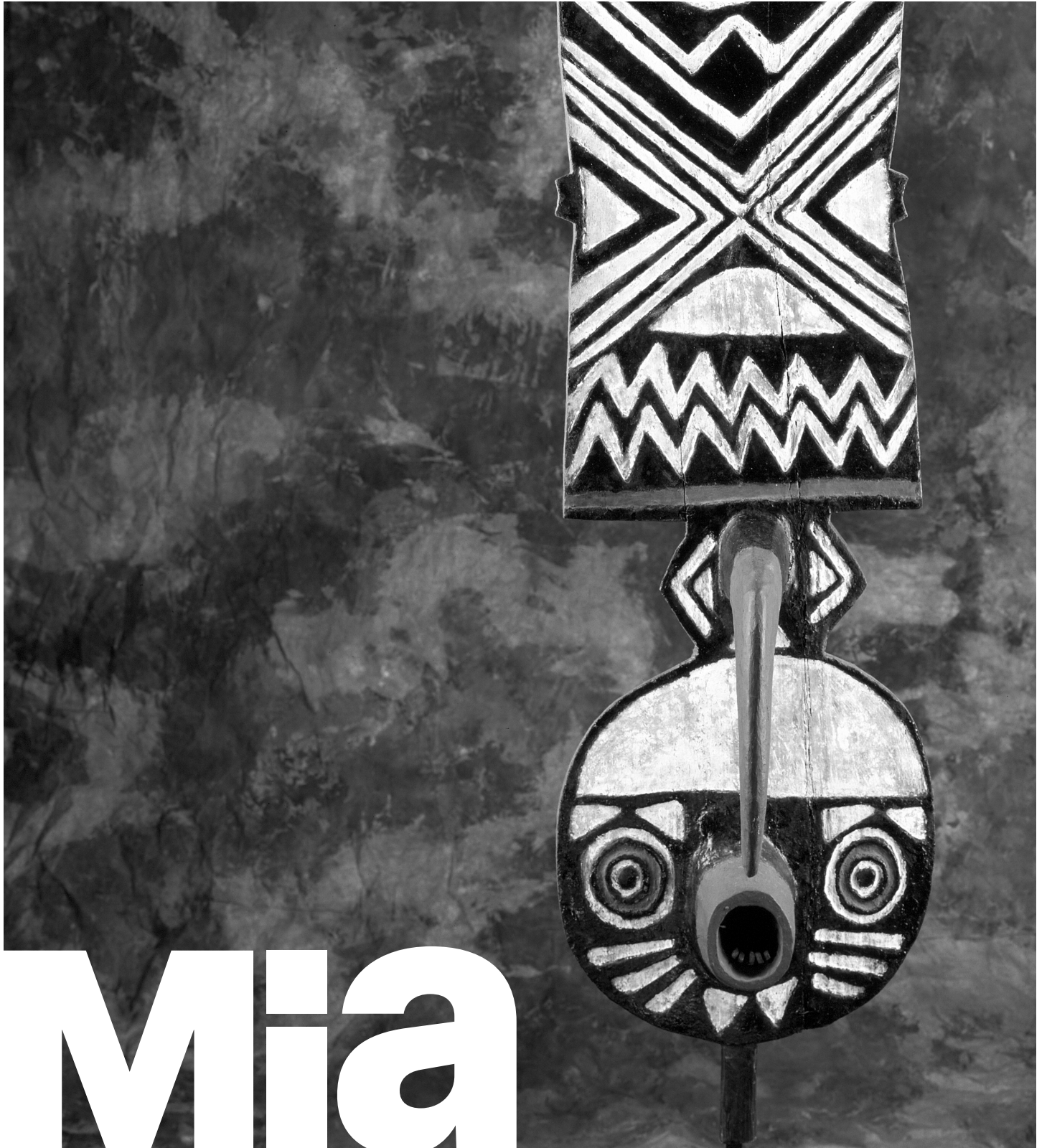


Minneapolis Institute of Art

Art Adventure

Let's Celebrate Life



Mia

Become a member of the museum today!

Thank you for participating in the Minneapolis Institute of Art's popular Art Adventure Program! By volunteering as a Picture Person, you build an important link between the museum and our region's schoolchildren. Membership at the Minneapolis Institute of Art now has a Pay What You Can option. Make a contribution or join for free, and become part of the member community! You'll enjoy access to special exhibitions, discounts, incentives, and insider news and information. If you choose to contribute, you'll be supporting the museum's free general admission every day. Donations also provide valuable resources that go to the museum's exhibitions, lectures, events, and classes offered for young and old alike.

For more information or to join, please call the Members' Hotline at (612) 870-6323 (toll-free (888) 642-2787), or visit our website at www.artsmia.org.

What are you doing next Family Day?

Family Days at the Minneapolis Institute of Art are free monthly events that highlight the museum's collection and special exhibitions for art lovers of all ages. The second Sunday each month, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., the museum is filled with hands-on art activities, live music, dance performances, artist demonstrations, family tours, and more. All activities are free and appropriate for children of all ages. Visit our website, www.artsmia.org, for specific Family Day dates, themes, and descriptions.

The Art Adventure Program

What's the Art Adventure Program?

Art Adventure is a program that engages students with artworks from the Minneapolis Institute of Art's collection. Through the support of thousands of trained volunteers, Art Adventure brings visual arts into K-6 classrooms across Minnesota and beyond. The program encourages creativity, critical thinking and global awareness through in-depth explorations of art across various cultures and time periods. Art Adventure is an opportunity for students to experience art up close and personal through reproductions, technology, and touch-and-feel props.

What's a Picture Person?

Picture People are the volunteers from the community who facilitate discussions of artworks using reproductions in the classrooms. They are the vital link between the original work of art in the museum and children in the schools. Before they visit any classrooms, Picture People come to the museum for a training session on the theme and artworks their school will be using that year. At training they receive printed background material, learn engagement techniques, and—most importantly—experience interacting with the original objects they will soon be introducing to students.

What does the Art Adventure Program do for students?

A recent evaluation of Art Adventure showed that, besides encouraging an interest in art, the program fosters five major critical thinking skills: describe what they see, notice details, understand how the parts form a whole idea or artwork, support interpretations with sufficient reasons, and support opinions or preferences with sound reasons. The skills and experiences students gain through Art Adventure will impact them for the rest of their lives.

Once You're in the Classroom

Relax!

The information provided in this booklet is intended as background material to help you feel confident when sharing the images with children. You are not expected to cover everything. Choose two or three key ideas you think will be compelling for the age group to which you are presenting. Kids love stories—what might you “spin” into a tale? What parallels can you draw with their lives?

Be sure everyone can see you and the reproduction.

Talk with the classroom teacher to find out what routines the class follows when gathering for a visitor. Aim for a setup that will get the students as close to the reproduction as possible. Keep the students' eyes on you, too, by making regular eye contact with everyone in the group.

Set up the students for successful exploration.

Have the children wear nametags so you can call them by name.
Set your own preferences aside to allow students to form their own opinions.
Encourage the students to take turns speaking.
Paraphrase what the students have said to let them know that you have been listening and help clarify each student's statement.

Begin each discussion with a moment of silent looking.

Begin by introducing the lesson, yourself, and the reproductions. Review with the class what a museum is and what you'll be doing with them. Start by having the students observe the artwork in total silence. You might build the suspense by keeping each image hidden while you explain that you do not want them even to raise their hands until you ask them. Model your expectations by spending the time quietly looking too.

Give students time to talk about what they have observed.

Start with questions like “What’s going on here?” and “What do you see that makes you say that?” Be sure to use your finger to point to the part of the picture the child is talking about. Paraphrase his or her words to clarify the observation for others. You’ll be surprised how quickly students learn to justify their comments with evidence they can see in the picture! “What else can you find?” or introducing and linking historical content can help generate further comments.

Connect your key ideas to the students’ observations.

When the students’ observations begin to slow down, use what you have learned about their interests to steer the discussion towards key ideas which you have chosen to focus. Try to ask questions that will draw connections between what they have said and what you would like them to consider. If they pose questions you can’t answer, admit it! Brainstorm ways you might find out together.

Keep the age of your class in mind.

Don’t expect young children to be able to focus for more than twenty minutes. Plan your presentations accordingly. Consider your class’s ability to understand time—will students understand a date or phrase such as “colonial times” (fifth graders might) or should you stick with “a long time ago” or “about 100 years ago”? Keep in mind that younger children are more likely to accept the abstract than older students, who may want concrete content.

Talk to other Picture People.

Experienced Picture People have great ideas about how to capture the imagination of a class. Don’t hesitate to borrow and adapt their suggestions, but remember to bring your own creativity along too!

Talking about Art

These questions encourage close-looking and meaning-making to help students find their own relevance in works of art. Through this process they learn to value art as having something to do with their own lives.

What do you see in this artwork? What else can you find?

This is the best line of questioning to begin conversations with K-2 students. For students that seem ready to dive deeper, ask "What do you see that makes you say that?"

What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that?

You'll notice this question is different than, "What do you see?" "What's going on?" invites a consideration of relationships and interactions and taps into children's natural interest to find stories. "What do you see that makes you say that?" focuses comments on the evidence at hand and helps kids explain their assumptions.

How would you feel if you were "in" this work of art?

What would you hear? How would something feel to touch? What path would you take through the picture? What do you see that makes you say that?

What does this artwork remind you of?

What would you use this for? What do you see that makes you say that?

What person or object in this picture do you think was most important to the artist?

What are people in the picture looking at? Where are there bright colors? What is biggest?

How would the artwork seem different if you could make a change?

What would happen if you changed a color? Moved an object or person? Left something out?

How is this work of art like or different from another one you've seen in this set?

"Compare and contrast" encourages close looking and reinforces the theme. Get together with your fellow volunteers to coordinate some provocative pairs.

How does this work of art relate to the theme of the set?

Let the students pull it all together! What connections do they see between the theme and what they've noticed and learned about the work of art?

**What do you like most about this artwork? Why?
What do you like least about this artwork?**

If you could keep one artwork from this set, what artwork would you pick? Why?

Using Touch-and-Feel Props

Why props?

Students normally first encounter the Art Adventure artworks in their classrooms as reproductions. The works of art appear to be two-dimensional and similar in size. Props accompany many of the reproductions to help overcome this limitation. Touching a material similar to the work of art, seeing the technique used to create it, or looking at a photograph in which the object is being used adds another dimension to the experience. The use of props also helps engage learners who prefer hands-on learning styles, and reinforces the understanding of all learners.

How should you use props?

Without careful planning, props will do little but distract your group. Use these helpful tips to lead successful exploration:

- Present the prop alongside information about a work of art or to help answer a question about the work of art.
- There are a number of ways to use the prop:
 1. Pass the prop around to each student. Give the students a question to consider while they are waiting for the prop and one to consider after they have held the prop.
 2. Ask a single student to come forward and describe how it feels to the whole group.
 3. Hold the prop yourself and walk it around the group for the students to touch or look at closely.
 4. Hold the prop yourself to illustrate relevant parts of the discussion.
 5. Then give everyone a chance to examine it more closely at the end of your presentation.
- Clear communication of your expectations is essential to getting the students to stay focused on the activity. Let the students know that they will need to take turns, what they should do if it's not their turn, and how they should treat the props.
- After the students have explored the prop, refer to the experience as you continue the discussion.
- Don't forget to plan how you'll get the props back! Schools are charged significant fees for missing or badly damaged props and reproductions.

Let's Celebrate Life

Art Adventure Program
A program from the
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Revised 2015

GENEROUS SUPPORT FOR ART ADVENTURE PROVIDED BY:

UNITED HEALTH FOUNDATION*

THE HEARST FOUNDATIONS

Let's Celebrate Life

Prop Kit Contents

<u>Work of Art</u>	<u>Prop</u>	<u>Replacement Cost</u>
Lakota, <i>Dress</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sample of leather ● Container of glass beads 	\$15 \$10
Paul Signac, <i>Blessing of the Tuna Fleet at Groix</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sample painted canvas 	\$30
Iatmul, <i>Kundu (Hand Drum)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Photograph of men using kundu drums 	\$10
John Singer Sargent, <i>The Birthday Party</i>	No prop	
Bwa, <i>Plank Mask</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Photograph of plank masks in use 	\$10
India, <i>Shiva Nataraja</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Samples of bronze 	\$40
Artwork Reproductions (6)		\$50

Please make sure that you have enclosed all of the items on this list when you return the prop kit. You will be responsible for the cost of replacing any missing items. Thank you!

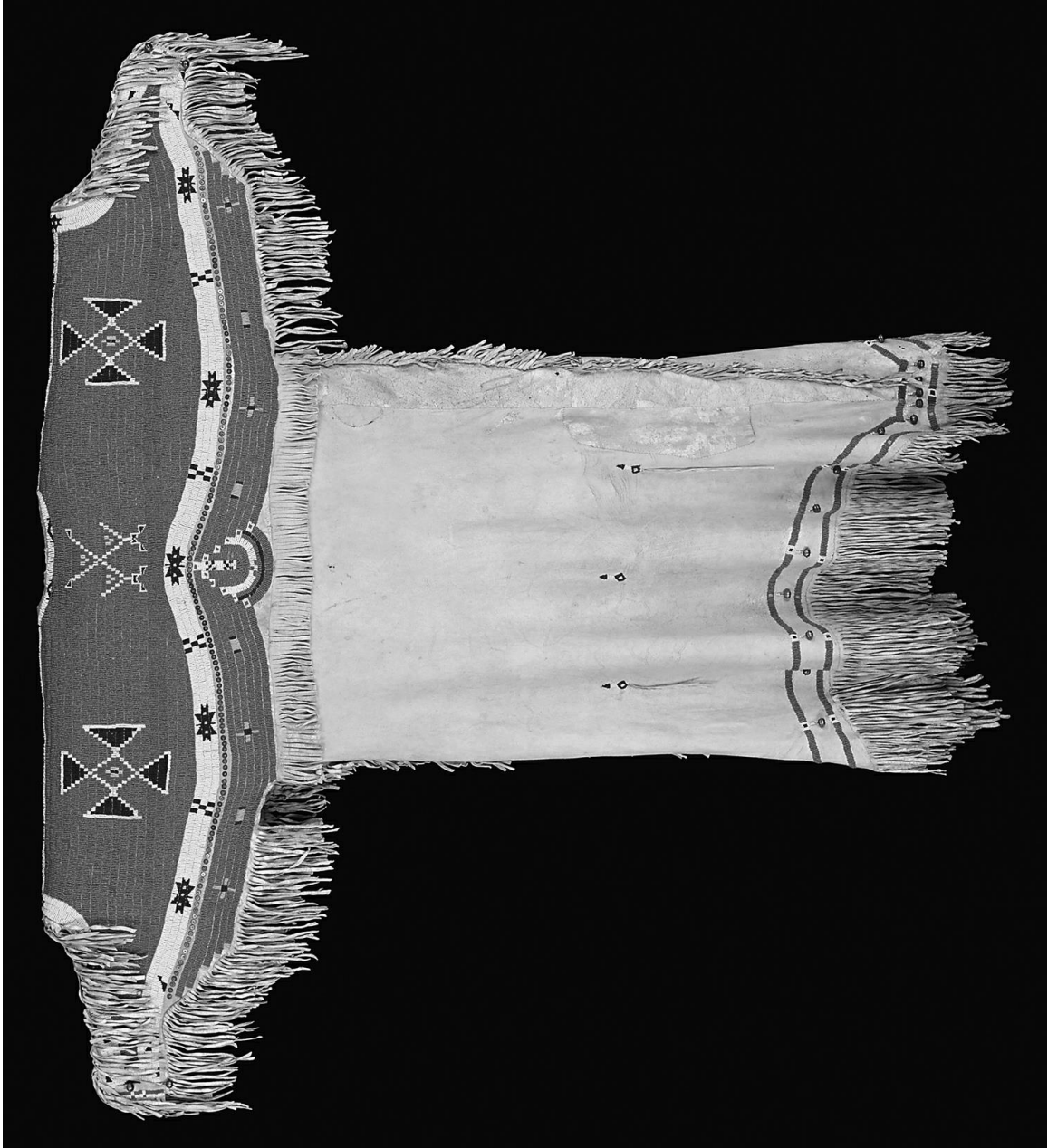
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Introduction

Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, seasons and transitions—occasions for celebration! *Let's Celebrate Life* looks at six objects from around the world to explore the ways in which people commemorate the special times in their lives. Whether it is the festive atmosphere of a communal holiday, the solemn ceremony of a sacred ritual, or a private moment to mark a personal milestone, celebrations bring people together. The artworks represented in this set illustrate the similarities and differences in how and why humans celebrate. *Let's Celebrate Life* examines each object as a unique work of art, reflecting the character of the time and place in which it was produced.



Lakota (North American, United States, Great Plains region)

Dress, c. 1880–1900

Leather, cotton, copper disks, bells, glass beads

51 inches long

Gift of James David and John David, 74.64.5

Key Ideas

A Lakota [Lah-**ko**-tah] woman once wore this beaded animal-hide dress for special occasions. Like many traditional Lakota dresses, this one is decorated with the turtle-by-the-shore-of-the-lake design. The Lakota consider the turtle a sacred animal because of its role in their creation story.

The Lakota Creation Story

The story of sacred turtle is shared by many Native Americans from the Great Plains. The story is told like this:

There was another world before this one, but the people of that world did not behave. Displeased, Creator set out to make a new world. He sang several ceremonial songs to bring rain, which poured stronger with each song. By the time the rain stopped, all the people and nearly all the animals had drowned. Only Kangi the crow survived.

Kangi pleaded with Creator to make a new place to rest. From his huge, sacred pipe bag, which also contained all types of animals and birds, Creator selected four animals known for their ability to remain under the water for a long time. He sent each in turn to retrieve a lump of mud from beneath the floodwaters.

First the loon dove deep into the dark waters, but was unable to reach the bottom. The otter, even with its strong webbed feet, also failed. Next, the beaver used its large flat tail to propel itself deep under the water, but it too was unsuccessful. Finally Creator took turtle from his pipe bag and urged it to bring back some mud. Turtle stayed under the water for so long that everyone was sure it had drowned. Then, with a splash, turtle broke the water's surface! Mud filled its feet and claws and the cracks between its upper and lower shells.

Singing, Creator shaped the mud in his hands and spread it on the water where it was just big enough for him and the crow. He then shook two long, powerful eagle feathers over the mud until the earth spread, overcoming the waters. Feeling sadness for the dry land, Creator cried tears that became oceans, streams, and lakes. He named the new land Turtle Continent.

Creator then took many animals and birds from the great pipe bag and spread them across the earth. From the earth he made men and women. Creator gave the people his sacred pipe and instructed them to live a good life with a good heart. He warned them about the fate of the people who came before them. He promised all would be well if all beings lived in harmony. But the world would be destroyed again if they made it bad and ugly.

The Meaning of the Turtle Symbol

For many peoples of the Great Plains, the turtle's central role in the creation story made it a powerful symbol with spiritual significance. Women often wore turtle images for protection and help with childbirth and to remain healthy. Turtle symbols decorated women's dresses, leggings, and bags.

The turtle-by-the-shore-of-the-lake design appears on the beaded yoke, the part of the dress that drapes over the shoulders (see illustration). At the center of the yoke, resting over the wearer's heart, is a U-shaped motif that symbolizes the breast of sacred turtle. The broad blue area on the yoke symbolizes the sky reflected in a prairie lake, turtle's home. The narrow white strip below symbolizes the lakeshore. Some designs used by Lakota women were regarded merely as designs to delight the eye, with no spiritual significance. However, the two large diamond shapes may represent stars reflected in the water at twilight. The three triangular shapes directly above turtle may reflect the tipis of a distant camp reflected across the water.

Many of the complex Lakota designs appeared to the women who produced them in a vision or dream. The women who received the dreams were thought to have special powers. Some women dreamed entire finished designs.

Lakota *Dress Worn for Celebration*

By the late 1800s, the people of the Great Plains had adopted Euro-American clothing styles for daily use, but they often wore traditional garments for formal occasions. This traditional Lakota dress was "Sunday best."

A Lakota woman may have worn this dress for traditional dancing. When women danced in dresses like this they often moved in a slow, steady rhythm causing the fringe to sway and the bells to jingle. Traditional Plains dances performed by women emphasize control, continuity, and beauty. Many Lakota women still wear traditional dresses for dancing and special occasions.

The Spirit of the *Dress*

To the Lakota, animal hides provide more than just material for clothing. They believe the hides embody the spirit power of the animals from which they came. Wearing the hide symbolizes the powerful spiritual bond between animals and people. Embellishing a hide with decoration honors the spirit of the animal and thanks it for giving its life. Characteristics of the animal are highlighted to show respect and to help us remember the animal that provided the hide. For example, the sleeves are cut and beaded in such a way as to emphasize the shape of the hind legs. The U-shape, which represents turtle, is also likely a reference to the animal's tail (see illustration). Traditionally men hunted the animals and women tanned the hides, cut and sewed the skins, and crafted the beadwork.

The woman who made this dress used the skins of three animals, probably elk, in a specific Lakota style. Two skins were used to make the skirt and a third to make the yoke. It is likely that the finely worked yoke once belonged to another dress. When it was time to replace the skirt, the yolk was re-used, which is proof of its importance.

Traditions and Change

Great Plains women used seed beads to decorate clothing and other personal items. On this dress, the yoke, blue bands around the bottom, and small diamond-shaped designs on the front are all made of tiny, colored glass beads. Euro-American traders called them seed beads because they resembled beads made from real seeds. Seed beads, along with hundreds of other types of glass beads, were used for trade throughout North America since the 1600s.

Since about 1860, dresses with beaded yokes were popular among the Lakota women who readily incorporated the European trade beads into their traditional designs. The tiny beads soon replaced quill embroidery as applied decoration. Quill embroidery, done with porcupine quills, was difficult and time consuming. Quills first had to be removed from the porcupine, softened in water, dyed, and flattened.

Beads, in contrast, were durable, available in many colors and needed no preparation. Women applied seed beads by sewing them directly onto the hide or fabric. As on this dress, several glass beads were strung on a string and then stitched down at marked intervals with cotton thread. Small bells around the hem and cuffs and a row of tiny copper discs sewn on the yoke also decorate this dress. Finely-worked beading and quill embroidery remain highly admired Lakota skills.

The Lakota Traditions Endure

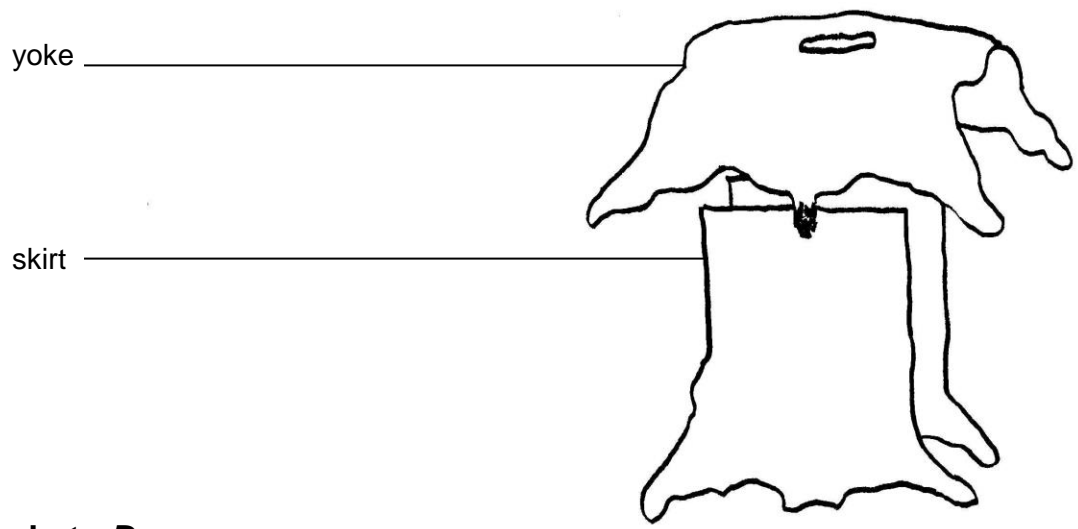
The Lakota once inhabited the northern woodlands, but were forced westward to the plains by European settlers and other native groups. By the 1800s, Euro-American settlers had overrun the plains, killing the buffalo herds, and disrupting the nomadic way of life for the Lakota. Many of the Plains groups were forced into living life on the reservations.

This new lifestyle of staying in one place for a long amount of time spurred a golden age in Lakota beadwork. Beaded objects soon became highly valued in the tourist market. Creations like this dress demonstrate the Lakota people's ability to embrace and reshape the materials of another culture to reflect their own artistic and cultural identity.

Suggested Questions

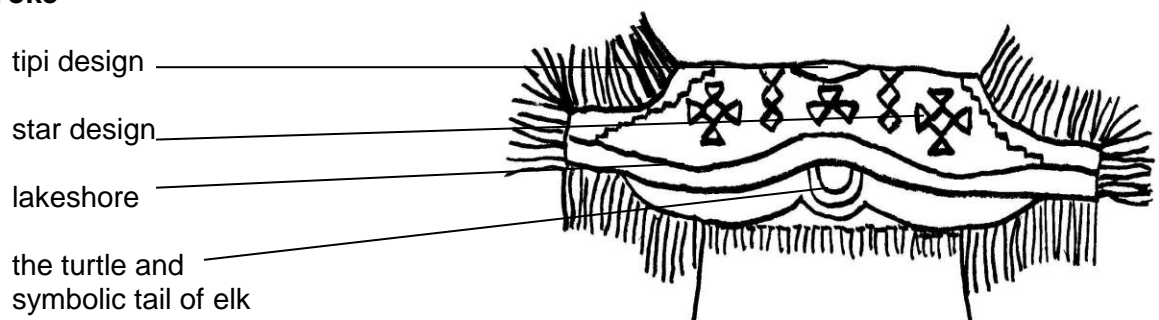
1. What do you think is the most important part of this dress? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. A Lakota woman would have worn this dress on special occasions. What kind of clothes do you wear for special occasions? How are they similar to or different from this dress?

Three-skin dress construction

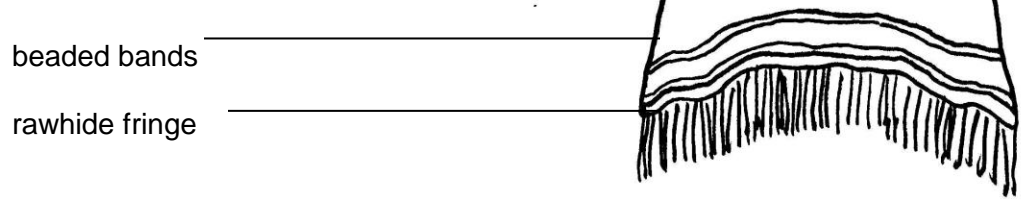


Lakota Dress

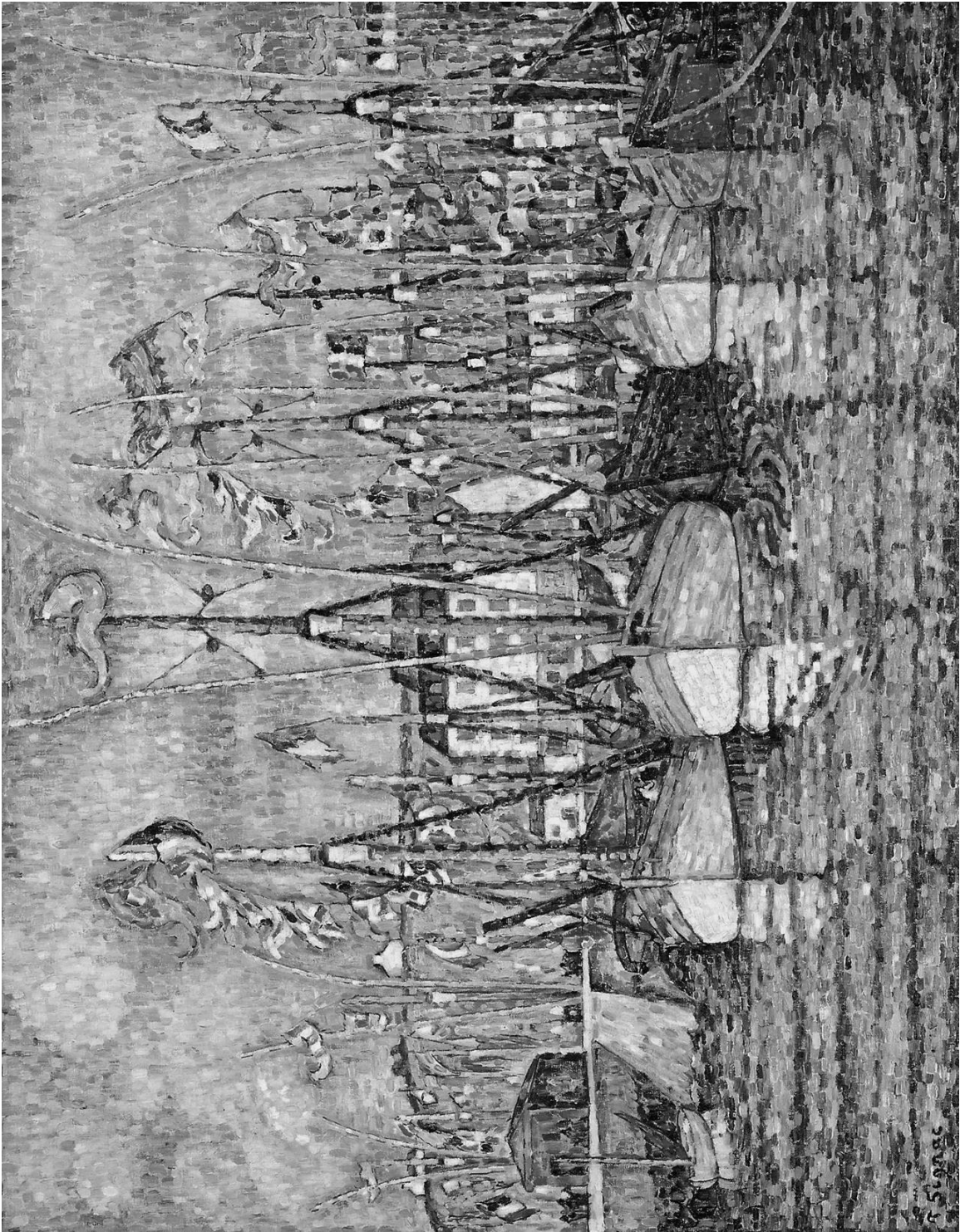
Yoke



Skirt



Illustrations adapted from *Hau, Kola!* by Barbara A. Hail, Plains Indian Collection, The Haffenraffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 1980.



Paul Signac, French, 1863–1935

***Blessing of the Tuna Fleet at Groix*, 1923**

Oil on canvas

H.28¼ x W.35½ inches

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, The John R. Van Derlip Fund, and Gift of funds from Bernice Dalrymple, 62.36

Key Ideas

This early 1900s painting by Paul Signac [See-nyak] depicts the traditional blessing of the tuna boats at Groix [Gwah] in northwestern France. The fishermen and townspeople hold this colorful seaside ceremony to ask blessings for a safe journey and a bountiful catch. Signac captures the atmosphere of celebration in this festive scene by filling his canvas with carefully placed strokes of brightly colored paint.

A Fishing Community

The tuna boats of Groix wait in the quay (wharf) for the procession and religious ceremony to mark the beginning of the fishing season. The townspeople gather on the pier as the fishermen, already in their boats, prepare to depart for the coast of Ireland. The centuries-old tradition of the blessing began out of respect for the dangers of the sea and to ensure that the fishermen have a safe and prosperous journey. A plentiful catch was important to the community of Groix, where most inhabitants made their living through fishing.

A Celebration of the Sea

Signac loved the sea and frequently sailed the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, painting as he went. In this painting Signac has focused on the sea, sky, and sailboats. The five boats lining the quay dominate the scene, their tall masts and thin fishing poles extending into the cloud-filled sky. Their colorful bodies are reflected down into the sea. The boats face out to sea, decorated with brightly colored flags that flap in the wind. The buildings of Groix and distant hills appear in the background. The townspeople at the pier and the sailors readying their boats are almost invisible. Signac has simplified them into small dots of color that blend into the scene.

A Celebration of Color

Signac painted the entire canvas with a series of uniform rectangular strokes of pure color. He applied the paint in small divided patches of color, similar to a mosaic. Each brush stroke appears separate and distinct; dabs of color cooperate or contend with one another.

The eye separates and groups the different color patterns to create recognizable shapes and forms. The result is a painting of carefully controlled color contrasts in which the viewer is transported to the seaside where the wind blows, the water shimmers, and the sky illuminates. Signac sought to achieve the greatest color intensity, brightness, and purity in his work.

The Interaction of Colors

Signac's ideas were based on opponent-color theory. Opponent colors, better known as complementary colors, intensify when placed directly next to one another. In his placement of complementary colors—violet and yellow, orange and blue, red and green—Signac created the most brilliant and colorful effects. As in this work, complementary dabs of yellow, orange, and red heighten the blues and greens of the sea. The interaction of complementary colors produces a sense of tension and movement that enlivens this painting.

The Language of Emotion

In addition to his use of color, Signac conveyed a mood by manipulating the direction and angle of the lines—vertical, diagonal, and horizontal. He believed vertical lines, as in the masts, produce a feeling of joy. The horizontal lines of the quay, distant hillside, and gentle ripples of the sea create a sense of calm. The triangular shapes of the boats and diagonal lines of the fishing poles give a sense of movement.

Paul Signac and Neo-Impressionism

Signac was a self-taught painter, but received informal training from other artists. Like other Neo-Impressionists, Signac greatly admired the Impressionists and was drawn to their passion for color and light. However, Neo-Impressionism focused more on the physiological and scientific theories of color and light than the Impressionists. Their work, based on technical methods and formalized scientific principles, was anything but spontaneous. Signac remained a supporter and advocate for the Neo-Impressionist movement until the day he died.

Suggested Questions

1. Look closely at the picture. Just by looking at the strokes of paint and imagine how the artist put the paint on the canvas. Act it out. Do you think this is a good way to paint? Why or why not?
2. Imagine you are here in this scene. What sounds do you hear? What are you doing? What are you feeling?



latmul (Melanesia, Papua New Guinea)

Kundu (Hand Drum), 1900s

Wood, rope

H.8½ x W.26¾ x D.6½ inches

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 98.37.3

Key Ideas

This hand drum with a crocodile-shaped handle was used in important ceremonies by the latmul [**yaht**-mool] people of Papua New Guinea. The symbolism of the crocodile is rooted in latmul mythology, which traces the latmul ancestry back to a great crocodile. The crocodile imagery is connected to ancestral devotion and the initiation of young boys into the men's secret society. The drum's sound represents voices from the spirit world.

Wagen, Crocodile Ancestor

The latmul believe they were created by Wagen, a great mythological giant in the form of a crocodile. They believe the world floats on Wagen's enormous back and the earthquakes and rivers are created by the movements of its giant swishing tail. Musical instruments, such as this hand drum, are used to accompany the songs that tell the creation story of the great crocodile.

Ornamentation of the Drum

Like most hand drums from Melanesia, this latmul drum was carved from a single piece of wood. The drum has an hourglass shape with patterns of arcs, dots, and zigzag bands lightly carved into the surface and painted black and white. These designs depict the gaping jaws of two crocodiles, their open mouths directed toward either end of the drum.

One end of the drum was once covered with animal skin, possibly from a lizard. A recessed lip indicates where the skin was stretched and secured to create the drum. The other end, with intricately carved geometric designs, is left open. For the latmul these two sound chambers—one open and one closed—symbolize the earth and sky, the two major components of the cosmos.

The drum's handle, in the center position, links the two worlds represented by the sound chambers. The three-dimensional handle represents the ancestral crocodile with patterned skin, a long narrow snout, and dangerous looking teeth. Rows of small spikes carved along the drum represent the crocodile's being, such as its knobby, spiked skin and sharp teeth.

Spiritual Connections

Every object the latmul use is decorated in some way. Tools, weapons, masks, and musical instruments become spiritually charged when elaborately decorated. The surface designs express the spiritual power within the object and ultimately have the ability to affect the welfare of the whole village. Decoration often includes animal figures which are associated with the ancestors.

latmul Totems: Paying Homage to Ancestors

Each kinship group within a village takes a totem from the birds and animals of the Sepik River region. A totem serves as the group's symbol and signifies their ancestral heritage. The latmul use hand drums and flutes to play song cycles which honor the totems. The songs can recall up to 20,000 names. Representations of the animal totems, such as the crocodile, are important in honoring and nurturing relationships with the ancestors. If the ancestors are pleased, they will help the living from the spirit world. If upset, ancestor spirits can cause sickness, death, failed crops, and other natural disasters.

The Men's House

latmul groups are based on descent from their male ancestor. Men from various groups come together to form secret societies. Their meeting place, the men's house, is where they gather to talk, eat, relax, and discuss problems in the community. Important ceremonies and celebrations of the village take place in the area around the men's house. Ceremonial objects, such as this hand drum, are stored inside the house.

Initiation into Adulthood

One of the most important events to take place at the men's house is the initiation of young boys to mark their transition from boyhood into manhood. During initiation the boys display feats of physical and mental endurance and are taught the sacred ritual knowledge of the latmul ancestral heritage. When the rites are completed, the young initiates earn the privilege to enter the men's house, and are ready to marry and have children. Drums provide rhythmic accompaniment for the dances and songs performed during initiation. Sounds from musical instruments, such as the hand drum, are said to represent the voices of the spirit world.

During the initiation, the men form a long line representing Wagen, the returning ancestral crocodile from which all latmul people descended. Some latmul groups create huge basketry masks representing the great crocodile in which young initiates are symbolically devoured. This act marks the death of childhood and the beginning of adult life. The initiates are decorated with small lines suggesting teeth marks on their chests and shoulders.

The latmul Today

Today the latmul number about 10,000. They live in large villages located along a 100-mile stretch of the banks of the Middle Sepik River. The Sepik River region is located in the northwest corner of mainland Papua New Guinea (see maps on pages 28-29). New Guinea, the largest of the Melanesian islands, is divided between two countries. The eastern half is part of the nation of Papua New Guinea and the western half is a province of Indonesia, Irian Jaya. Although pieces of the modern world have reached much of Papua New Guinea, many native religious and social traditions are still practiced today.

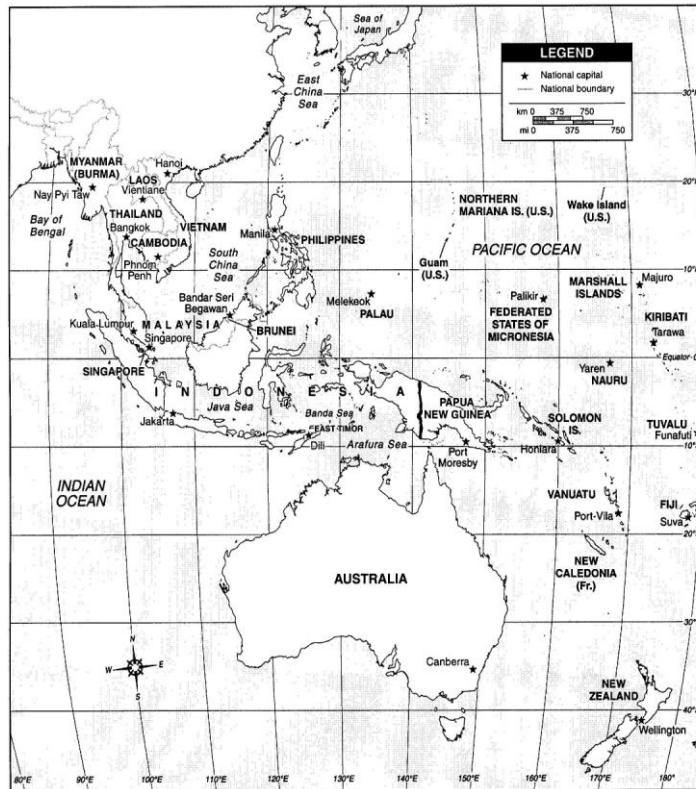
Suggested Questions

1. Imagine that you came across this object at the museum. What clues can you see to help you figure out what it is? What questions do you have?
2. What things do you recognize? What things surprise you?
3. The latmul played drums like this on special occasions. Do you have music for special occasions? If so, when and what kind of music?



Name _____ Date _____

Southeast Asia and the South Pacific: Political



Outline Maps
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John Singer Sargent, American 1856–1925

***The Birthday Party*, 1887**

Oil on canvas

H.24 x W.29 inches x $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 62.84

Key Ideas

Many cultures celebrate birthdays with a special party. At the turn of the century in Europe, John Singer Sargent recorded this intimate family celebration of Robert Besnard's [Bay-nar] sixth birthday. Sargent vividly captured the event as he perceived it, not just as a family portrait, but also as a canvas filled with color and light.

Memories of a Family Celebration

The Birthday Party is a family portrait of the French artists, Albert and Charlotte Besnard, with their young son, Robert, on his sixth birthday. The Besnards, who lived in Paris, were close friends of Sargent. Sargent gave *The Birthday Party* to the Besnards in exchange for a painting by Albert Besnard.

Seeing Color and Light

Sargent was known for his portraits. However, painting the likeness of the subject came second to his attention towards light, color, and shape. In this painting, Sargent suggests the warmth of a quiet evening with deep, rich red tones. The walls, carpet, mother's dress, and even the child's napkin are red, creating a sense of elegance. Although the scene is peaceful, there is a tension created between complementary qualities—dark and light, shadow and illumination, subtlety and drama.

The large amount of red is boldly used against the bright, cool whites of the table and lamp. Sargent painted color on color—red on red and white on white—with little variation. The mother's red dress melts into the floor and the opaque objects on the table blend and merge into the circular white mass of the tablecloth. Sargent used color to define and emphasize, but also to obscure. Through color, he directs the way in which this scene reveals itself to the viewer.

Sargent also used light to define and direct the viewer's eye. Robert's face is completely illuminated from below by the golden glow of the candles. The lamp light offers a clear view of Robert's proud and composed mother. The outlines that define the shape of things become blurred within shadows and reflections. Details such as the items on table and the father's facial features are minimized. His face, lacking detail, becomes a mystery revealing only a hint of expression through his gesture. His dark torso is painted as a flat plain of color—almost a silhouette.

Capturing the Essence

Sargent was not interested in describing the event with precise details, but rather in giving the viewer the essence of things. Blue-and-white flashes of paint flickering across the surface of the table depict the reflective and translucent qualities of glass and silver. Small, intense dots of white flame are immediately understood as the reflection of the candles on the dark glass of the window. Long, broad strokes of white paint create the pattern and sheerness of curtains. There is weight and texture within the folds of the mother's dress, as well as lightness to its ribbons and lace.

A Modern Composition

There is a sense of arrested motion and informality in *The Birthday Party*, as if the painting were composed with a camera rather than paint and brush. The table, lamp, and window in the corners are not neatly confined within dimensions of the canvas, but are cut off by the frame.

Sargent has not arranged the Besnards for a traditional family portrait. The figures are casually posed. The action of the mother's arms, the father's turned head, and Robert's gaze all lead to the birthday cake. The cake is also the viewer's focus, resulting in a composition that is off-center, or asymmetrical. This style of composition was a modern innovation inspired by both the camera and the newly popular Japanese wood block prints. These innovations in painting moved painters like Sargent away from the formal styles of the past and into the future.

John Singer Sargent

Sargent is known as an international artist, famous for his society portraits. During the 1880s, he also did a series of paintings, like *The Birthday Party*, of interior domestic scenes depicting his friends. Like many artists at the turn of century, Sargent was beginning to see art not just as a way to record nature, but also as a means to personal expression. Sargent was born to American parents living in Florence and was a seasoned traveler of Europe by age eight. He did not visit America until he was 20 years old, but was always proud to be an American.

Suggested Questions

1. What details in the painting are easy to see? What details are difficult to see? Why might the artist have painted the picture this way?
2. Who do you think is the most important person in this painting? Why? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. How is this painting similar to a picture you might take at a friend's birthday party? How is it different?
4. Would you like to be invited to this party? Why or why not?



Bwa (Africa, Burkina Faso, West Africa region)

Plank Mask, c. 1960

Wood, pigment

H.82½ x W.18 x D.9½ inches

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 98.2

Key Ideas

This wooden plank mask from Burkina Faso in West Africa was once used in important events in the village life of the southern Bwa people. The plank mask embodied a supernatural force that acted on behalf of the Bwa community. Among its many significant roles, the mask played a vital part in the initiation of young men and women into Bwa adult society.

Celebrating with a Masquerade

Masquerades with masks and dancing are performed at all important village ceremonies to ensure good relationships with the spirits that the Bwa believe inhabit the natural world. These ceremonies include initiation rites, market days, harvest festivals, and the consecration of newly carved masks. Masks also appear at burials and memorial services to honor the dead. These different ceremonies are organized by individual groups within the village. These groups compete to give the most innovative performances.

Calling Upon the Spirit of the Mask

Each mask represents a specific spirit. The mask controls the powers of that spirit through masquerades. The plank mask known as *Nwantantay* [[n]wahn-tahn-tay], gives the spirit force a physical form that is neither human nor animal.

Plank masks, like other Bwa performance masks, are kept in a special storehouse to be brought out for important events. The plank masks are often used together with other Bwa mask forms. Masked performers often dance before spectators accompanied by drumming and singing. The masks, worn only by men, are part of a complete costume made of long hibiscus fibers dyed red, black, or white. The costume covers and protects the dancer from the powerful spirit forces that inhabit the mask. The dancer does not become the spirit but temporarily gives up his own persona to allow the spirit to enter the mask. However, the Bwa believe that outside of its intended environment the mask contains no spiritual force or meaning.

Transition to Adulthood

Bwa initiation is a rite of passage for young men and women as they transition from childhood into adult society with all its privileges and responsibilities. Unlike most West African peoples, the Bwa initiate young men and women together. The initiates are taken from the village for approximately 15 days, during which time they receive instruction from the elders. They are taught how to behave as respectful community members and warned of the dangers of straying from proper Bwa behavior. Their lessons include hearing the stories about the founding ancestors, the world of spirits, and the wooden masks that represent them.

The initiates also learn how to construct the fiber costumes that are worn with the masks. The young men wear the costumes and learn the dances, while the young women learn the accompanying songs. When the initiates are ready, they return to the village to demonstrate their new knowledge of the masks in a public ceremony. Afterwards, the young men and women rejoin their families as adults. They are now ready to marry and form their own families.

Learning from the *Plank Mask*

During initiation, young men and women learn the many meanings of the geometric symbols that appear on the plank masks. For example, each symbol has a specific meaning by itself. These same symbols take on other meanings when combined with other patterns. The symbols communicate the moral, spiritual, and historic lessons the initiates must learn.

Bwa wooden plank masks are carved and painted with natural pigments of black, white, and sometimes red. The masks are often repainted before each performance. The black and white on this mask stands for the symbiotic relationship between the elders and the young. When the young initiates complete their instruction they each receive a new white goat hide to sit on during ceremonies. They are reminded that as the years pass, they will become the elders and their goat hides will have aged to a deep, dark color.

The Symbolism of the *Plank Mask*

Most plank masks consist of an oval face connected to a large, flat plank that is topped with a turned-up crescent (see illustration). A round mouth with small teeth protrudes from the face. The performer wearing the mask can see through the mouth opening. Below the mouth, white triangles radiate downward. The triangles may symbolize the tears that fall with the death of an elder. The face is connected to the plank by a diamond shape. Bwa say the large hook coming out of the diamond may depict the bill of the hornbill, a bird associated with the supernatural world and believed to be an intermediary between the living and dead.

The plank consists of a vertical rectangle marked with geometric patterns. The most prominent is the X, or cross, in the center. The X, called the *bidayuhe* [bah-dah-whay], represents the scar that each initiate receives as a mark of devotion. The horizontal zigzag lines below the X represent the path of the ancestors to the sacred grove where offerings are made to the spirits of the masks. It may also depict the path of proper behavior—a difficult path to follow.

On top of the plank is a large crescent shape turned upward which representing the quarter moon, under which the initiation takes place. The two white triangular shapes underneath the crescent may represent “bull roarers,” which are sacred sound-makers. Performers swing the bull roarers on long cords during the masquerades to recreate the voices of the spirits.

The Bwa Today

There are approximately 300,000 Bwa living in Burkina Faso and Mali today. The Bwa are primarily cotton farmers. These people live in independent villages with no central political authority; they are governed internally by a council of male elders. In Burkina Faso, more

than 80 percent of the country's population continue traditional religious practices in which masking is still very important. The spiritual forces evoked by the masks are summoned for the good of the community.

Suggested Questions

1. What part of this mask do you think is most important? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. The Bwa use masks to communicate with spirits who can help and guide them in their lives. Have you ever worn a mask or costume? Why? How does it feel to wear a mask? How might it feel to wear this mask? What makes you think so?

Plank Mask, c 1960, Africa, Burkina Faso, West Africa region (Bwa)

Crescent

Represents dark side of the moon.

The crescent moon turned upward.

Triangles represent bull roarers (noise-makers), voices of the spirits.

Plank

Bwa X, mark of devotion received during initiation rite.

Horizontal zigzag indicates path of proper behavior.

Bill of the Hornbill

The hornbill is connected to the supernatural world.

Face

White semi-circle represents the field in which the initiates first dance with the masks.

Large target-like eyes are those of the owl, a bird believed to have power.

Protuberant mouth represents a sacred well.

White triangles indicate leaves of *kenaf* and tears shed for ancestors.



The colors of black and white symbolize the goat hides of the young and old, and the symbiotic relationship between generations.



India (Asia, Tamil Nadu)

Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), Chola period

Bronze

H.28 inches

Gift of Mrs. E. C. Gale 29.2

Key Ideas

This bronze figure of Shiva, a Hindu deity, comes from India and was used in Hindu festival processions more than 1,000 years ago. Shiva takes many forms, but when he is dancing he is known as Shiva Nataraja [Nah-tah-rahj-ah], Lord of the Dance. Shiva's dance represents the cycles of destruction and creation, a continual process in the universe.

The Attributes of Shiva Nataraja

People of Hindu faith easily recognize Shiva by his appearance. Most obvious are Shiva's four arms, symbolic of the four directions: north, south, east, and west. In his rear left hand, Shiva grips the flame of destruction. His rear right hand holds a double-sided kettle drum whose beat summons up creation. A small, vertical third eye on Shiva's forehead is his principal weapon of destruction and symbolizes his awesome power. This bronze image of Shiva Nataraja was originally depicted dancing within a ring of flames, now missing. The ring also symbolizes the continuing cycle of creation and destruction. Shiva's expressive hand gestures, called *mudras*, identify him as a Hindu deity. His right front hand displays the *mudra* of reassurance. This *mudra*, with palm facing the viewer, means "have no fear." The front left hand, in downward position, gestures the promise of spiritual liberation. This hand points to the deity's left foot, a source of grace and refuge.

Shiva the Divine

Although depicted in human form, Shiva is distinguished from mortals by his perfect form. His broad shoulders, narrow waist, and smooth, elegant limbs are the personification of eternal youth. His lack of clothing reveals the beauty of his idealized form. His round, tranquil face and large almond-shaped eyes, elegantly arched brows, and full lips reflect his spiritual nature. Shiva dances atop the demon of ignorance, *Apasmara* [Ah-pas-mare-rah]. As Shiva dances, he crushes *Apasmara* under his right foot. Despite his dangerous situation, *Apasmara* shows little concern as he looks up at Shiva in admiration.

The Cosmic Cycle

Shiva Nataraja continually dances his dance of destruction and creation. The dynamic gestures of his graceful limbs express effortless perpetual motion, whereas his torso and head appear still. As Shiva performs, matted cords of hair fly out from either side of his head in the frenzied destructive force of the cosmic process. The remainder of his elaborate hairstyle is held perfectly in place upon his bejeweled head. His earrings, male on the right and female on the left, emphasize the duality of his nature. Shiva is able to reconcile these opposing actions, reinforcing his supernatural powers.

Shiva Nataraja in Hindu Festival Celebrations

This bronze figure of Shiva Nataraja is meant to be seen from all sides. Bronze images, like this one, are carried in daily processions in the temple courtyard for special ceremonies and festive celebrations. Each Hindu temple is dedicated to a particular deity. Traditionally, each temple has a fixed image, which always remains in the sanctum, or temple interior, and a smaller replica, which is the processional image.

Communal processions are important in Hindu festivals. In the past, low-caste members of the community were not allowed to enter the inner temple. Public processions, however, allowed everyone to make offerings of devotion. Hindu festival processions are still practiced today. As part of the festival ritual, the image is bathed; anointed with milk, clarified butter, honey, and sugar; perfumed with sandalwood paste; and attired with silks, garlands, and jewels. Statues such as this one are carried either on wooden poles high above the crowds or on colorfully festooned wooden chariots. These chariots serve as a type of mobile temple for the duration of the festival.

Hindu sculptures encourage the devotee to acknowledge the presence of the deity. The image itself is not the deity, but a temporary place for divine energy to go. The spiritual connection between the image and the deity is established during a special ceremony. During this ritual, the deity's eyes, the last detail to be added, are chiseled or sculpted to symbolically open them.

The Chola Dynasty

This sculpture of Shiva Nataraja dates from the Chola Dynasty of South India. The Cholas were a dominant political and cultural force from the 800s to the 1400s, when bronze casting reached its most brilliant achievement in India. The sculptors from the province of Tamil Nadu, where this image was made, produced bronzes of exceptional beauty and the highest technical skill. The Cholas adopted Shiva, Lord of Dance as their patron deity, which accounts for the increased popularity of the image during this time.

The Lost-wax Technique

This sculpture was created through the process of lost-wax casting. Lost-wax is a process in which the image is first made of wax and then covered in a material, such as clay, that hardens around the wax form. The wax form and clay covering are heated to melt the wax. The melted wax is poured out, leaving a clay mold into which molten bronze is poured. When the bronze has cooled and hardened, the clay mold is broken away to reveal the bronze image.

This bronze sculpture was likely cast in a single piece, including the now-missing ring of flames. Only the flying hair was cast separately and attached onto the back. To cast this object in one piece requires astonishing technical skill when you consider the complicated extensions of the limbs and intricate detailing.

Artistic Traditions in Hinduism

The basis of Hindu sculptural forms is deeply rooted in tradition. Artists adhered closely to written guidelines of proportions and iconography. The gestures, attributes, and costume

seen here were all prescribed by such manuals. Many of the postures found in Indian sculpture are derived from traditional dance, an integral part of Hindu ritual ceremony. These prescribed principles did not, however, inhibit individual artists from creating their own distinct style. Both the prescribed similarities and individual differences can be seen when comparing images of Shiva Nataraja in other collections.

Suggested Questions

1. What parts of Shiva look human to you? What parts do not?
2. Shiva's dance represents the cycles of destruction and creation, a continual process in the universe. How many opposites can you come up with?
3. What questions would you like to ask the artist about this work if he were here?