

False Face Society Masks

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alfred L. Ostheimer, 1982
#5057.3 and #5057.1

North American Indians

Iroquois, Seneca

c.1900-1910

Kinau Court case

Subject: Members of the False Face Society traditionally wore these types of masks in healing ceremonies. The person who carved them, is said to have seen them in dreams. They are used to cure an illness (or scare it away).

Story: The False Face (or Great Defender) came upon the Creator of the World on the road. The Great Defender bragged that he could move a mountain in a contest over who should rule the world. They decided to have the contest. The Creator moved the mountain easily, but the Great Defender (or First Doctor) ran into it. So now his face is permanently ugly.

It is said. ... that if the mask is carved in the a. m., the color must be red...for the sunrise. If the mask is carved in the p.m., the color is black, for the sunset. If the mask is carved at noon, both red and black is used. It is also said that you have to feed the mask tobacco and corn mush every day. If you want to sell it, you have to wake it up and feed it and tell it what you are planning to do. It is also said...that a New York museum burned down because the false face mask was not talked to and feed.

Medium and Technique: Basswood, horsehair on the bigger mask/human hair on the smaller white haired mask (the mask called Whistling Spirit), feathers, leather.

Instructional Aids: 1. Share the stories and allow the students to respond or ask questions. 2. Compare the purpose of this mask with masks from Oceania, Africa, Central America and/or Indonesia. 3. Do the students have particular feelings about this mask? Are they afraid of the mask? Find it humorous? Do they feel sorry for the Great Defender? 4. Why should the mask be carved out of a living tree? Does the tree have something like a soul or a spirit that might be transformed into healing powers?