

MASK

American, Alaska, Eskimo, ca. 1880
Wood; 9½ × 8 in. (24.1 × 20.3 cm.)
Gift of Irma Fulwider, 1946 (367.1)

MASK

American, Alaska, Eskimo, 20th century
Wood with beads; 7½ × 3⅞ in. (19.1 × 9.2 cm.)
Gift of Mrs. W. Thomas Davis, 1989 (5864.1)



Eskimo groups live in the challenging environments of Greenland and the extreme northwestern parts of Canada and Alaska. According to traditional Eskimo religion and mythology, all living things and all natural and man-made objects possess a spirit, or *inua*, in different forms. The Eskimo shaman acts as a conduit between the spirit and the three-dimensional world during ritual performance, reenacting dreams or visions of the spirit world. He uses wooden carved objects such as staffs, figures, and masks, which are based on the shaman's vision and carved either by the shaman himself or by another man according to his instructions. The most imaginative and artistically rendered masks come from the Yupik-speaking Eskimo of the lower section of the Canadian and Alaskan range, bordering on the Bering Sea.

Masks such as these are said to represent the *inua* of animals. The larger mask comes from the Kuskokwim River region and is said to represent a seal. Upright ears are carved in low relief on a panel rising behind the round

head. The swirling grain of the wood matches the carved forms on the mask, especially around the eyes and the nose, although the piece originally may have been painted. Shallow incisions were made for the mouth and nostrils; the eye holes were drilled. The smaller mask has tiny beads for eyes and a string of beads of the same size for the bow-shaped mouth. A small drill hole on either side of the mask just below the eye was most likely threaded with a thong that held the mask to the head. The erect ears and long snout rendered as one continuous element indicate that the spirit represented might be a wolf, fox, or wolverine. Bering Sea Eskimo masks are meant to be understood within a complex ensemble involving dance, song, and testimony. Eskimo carvers were encouraged to reinterpret the myriad symbols and forms found in their religion. This practice, and the theatrical setting in which the masks were viewed, makes secure identification difficult, but imbues the works with unusual artistic strength and creates an impressive diversity. RAD

MASK

Eskimo; Alaska, 20th century
wood with beads

Gift of Mrs. W. Thomas Davis, 1989 (5864.i)

According to traditional Eskimo religion and mythology, all living things and all natural and man-made objects possess a spirit, or *inua* in different forms. These two masks are said to represent the *inua* of animals, and were carved based on the vision of a shaman. The larger mask, on the right, represents a seal. The features of the smaller mask suggest a wolf, a fox or a wolverine. The shaman uses wooden carved masks, staffs, rattles and figures to contact the spirits or to reenact dreams and visions from the spirit world. The masks are traditionally viewed in a complex ritual performance that involves dance, song and testimony.

MASK

Eskimo; Kuskokwim River region, Alaska, ca. 1880
wood

Gift of Irma Fulwider, 1946 (367.1)