



Mask images can become face designs through a more graphic approach as in the two at the top, or stories like this portrait mask re-invented to depict the Raven stealing the Sun. The bottom photo features face markings from a Haida portrait mask that is in the Museum of Natural History collection.

"For the spectator at initiation rites, the dance masks (which opened suddenly like two shutters to reveal a second face, and sometimes a third...) were proofs of the omnipresence of the supernatural and the proliferation of myths." — Claude Lévi-Strauss

Northwest Coast Masks

The interconnected Indian cultures of the northern Pacific coast of North America (Northwest Coast Indians) developed a tradition of art as great and as varied as any modern art. It is especially evident in their incredible transformation dance masks. In our modern culture we separate the spiritual and the spectacular between the cathedral and the circus. In Northwest Coast ritual arts these two traditions "reign in their primeval unity".

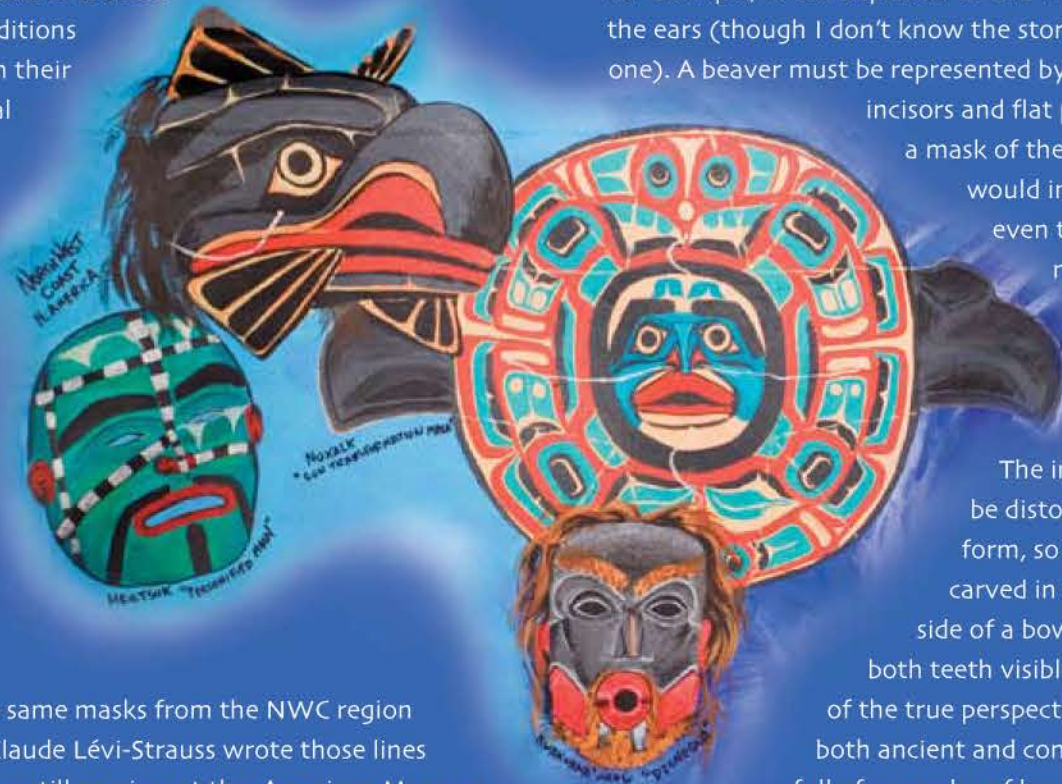
The same masks from the NWC region which Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote those lines about are still on view at the American Museum of Natural History to inspire a facepainter, along with recent exhibits of the contemporary work from that region at the Museum of Art and Design.

The anthropological analysis of their mask art by people such as Claude and his predecessor, Franz Boas, explains the NWC mask maker's reliance on symbolic design elements to communicate meaning. Their aim is not to imitate an animal in a mask, but to represent it.

Franz Boas writes that in symbolic art, the actual appearance of the animal is subservient to the imagery that *signifies* the animal. A significant feature of this bear mask, for example, is the depiction of the human faces in the ears (though I don't know the story behind that one). A beaver must be represented by its two large incisors and flat paddle tail, so a mask of the beaver's face would include the tail even though that is not how a real beaver looks.

The image can also be distorted to fit the form, so that a beaver carved in profile on the side of a bowl would have both teeth visible, in violation of the true perspective. NWC art, both ancient and contemporary, is full of examples of how animal body parts are moved, distorted and changed in size in order to fit the form of the object and to be clearly visible.

Whereas the masks have a complexity that does not directly translate into facepainting designs, examples of their traditional body painting show a simplification of imagery. A single symbol, such as a hooked beak painted over one eye, could be enough to associate the wearer with their totem animal, a hawk. In the Museum of Natural History you can also find stamps for body art used to reproduce important symbols such as the eye-shape that means "eagle".



In his structuralist approach to masks, Claude Lévi-Strauss says that every mask is a transformation of another mask in that cultural system. To analyze any mask, one needs to place it within a total range of meanings of all masks. Visual symbols are used in the same way we use words in a language. Each word "does not contain within itself its entire meaning. [Meaning] is the result of two things: the sense included in the particular term chosen, and the senses (which have been excluded by this very choice) of all the other terms that could be substituted for it."

By approaching facepainting as a form of mask making, these concepts become tools for analyzing and inventing face designs. The goal is not to imitate but to signify—therefore the face doesn't need to look "real." You can create an animal face by using imagery or symbols to represent the animal, rather than the realistic appearance of the animal. (If it has two fangs and a forked tongue it's a snake). A mask is also defined as much by what it doesn't have as what it has. (So don't put fangs on your lizard face, or people will think it's a snake). Like a mask maker, take advantage of the shape and features of the face to move and distort the imagery so it looks good. If every face is a transformation of another face you paint it puts you on a path of continuous creativity.

Within the general NWC cultural tradition masks are not just made as objects of art by man. The archetypes of ritual masks have mythic origins in which they are discovered or are given to man by supernatural beings. To own or dance with certain masks brings wealth and prestige, and these rights are generally passed down through inheritance.

In *Down from the Shimmering Sky*, Peter Macnair describes a fundamental cosmology that underlies much of NWC mask culture, as originated in the "Returned-From-Heavens" dance series of the Heiltsuk: "ancestral beings depart this world and are transported to the heavens, from whence they return to materialize in recognizable form." In the Pacific Northwest, masks may depict these celestial/ancestral beings, and also these beings in their human form. This is articulated by the transformation masks, which might open to transform an ancestral being to inner human, as a way of bringing to life the origin myth of the mask.

According to one such legend, the Thunderbird mask of the 'Namgis people originated when the bird flew out of the heavens to help a man. Then it transformed to human form and sent its Thunderbird headdress and cape back into the sky. The mask representing this myth may be worn covering the face completely to depict the celestial Thunderbird or on the forehead, revealing the dancer's face, to become the bird in human form.



"Family Crest Mask, Kwakiutl, late 1800s... Transformation mask: this is a superb example of the lengths patron and artist will reach in order to capture the awe-inspiring theatrical qualities of a supernatural benefactor. The great mask represents Kwikwis, the eagle of the undersea. The outer face breaks into several parts at the beak. The inner face has an explosive effect upon the viewer..."

— Edward Malin