



Lesson Plan #49

# CLAY FACE MASKS

by David L. Gamble

*David Gamble is a studio potter working and teaching in Plainfield, Indiana*



We've all worn a mask at one time or another. Masks can represent so many things. Good and bad emotions, fear, love, power and many other things can be represented. The Greek masks we all know, comedy and tragedy, are just the edge of mask history. Early death masks, from the Egyptians, influenced the Romans in creating similar masks for their own departed. Masks we've seen in museums can include; a god, an animal or even a past king. I think of the simple gold mask of Midas, 8th century B.C., and that leads me to remember King Tut's 1343 B.C. death mask. African tribal masks can distinguish different tribes, areas and animals, fertility and social place. The wooden masks of Mexico have always intrigued me. El Diablo's red face and horns are sculptured with so much expression. Anywhere you look in the world you can find masks in people's past and present day lives.

## Tools & Materials

- AMACO® Terra Cotta Clay No. 77 (45143N)– Mid/High Fire Cone 05-5
- AMACO® Off-White Sculpture/Raku Clay No. 27 (45029P)–Mid/High Fire Cone 05-5
- AMACO® Velvet Underglazes
- AMACO® Low Fire White Casting Slip No. 15-S (45151W)
- AMACO® Clear Glaze LG-10 (39173Y)
- AMACO® Underglaze 2 oz. applicators (11263K)
- Wire clay cutter (11017N)
- Canvas covered boards (32349G)
- Several empty pint jars
- Newspaper to use as a hump mold
- Various brushes
- Scratch tools
- Fettling Knife (11192H)
- Masking Tape



## Lesson Plan Goals and Objectives

- Students will create a 3-D mask using very few tools and sgraffito techniques for decorating.
- Students will learn to create and decorate with vitreous engobes made from commercial slip and underglaze.
- The lesson integrates the history of many cultures and art. This lesson is suitable for 2nd graders to adult.

## National Visual Arts Standards

- Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures.
- Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts.
- Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times, and places.
- Students analyze relationships of works of art to one another in terms of history, aesthetics, and culture, justifying conclusions made in the analysis and using such conclusions to inform their own art making.

## Technique



1. Make a ball of newspaper to use as a hump mold (about the size of a grapefruit).



2. Cut generous pieces of the Terra Cotta clay off the clay block for each participant.
3. Make a mask! No tools! Your fingers and hands are your greatest tools.  
Do not put eyes or a mouth on your mask.  
You have 5 minutes to make this mask.
4. The mask needs to be the same thickness everywhere, about 1/2" thick.
5. No water – push the clay together if you need to add something.
6. At five minutes STOP! Then ask the participant to pass their mask on their board to the person on their right. They have 5 minutes to work on their mask in front of them. Don't forget ears and hair!
7. At five minutes STOP! Ask them to pass it one to their right once more. Then announce they have 5 minutes to work on their mask.
8. At five minutes STOP. Ask them to pass their mask two people to the left, which brings back their original mask which you may or may not recognize.
9. Give them 10 minutes to work on their mask.



**10.** Take a fettling knife to cut straight lines through the clay horizontally across the middle of the eyes the size of an eyeball. At the middle of where the mouth should be, cut a horizontal line through the clay the length of the mouth.



**11.** Once the lines are cut, turn the mask over and push out from behind in the middle of the cuts making space for the eyes and opening the mouth. The mouth may need some shaping and the lips may need some smoothing depending on the thickness of the clay.



**12.** Wash the red clay from your hands.

**13.** Take white clay and roll two matching eyeballs the appropriate size for your mask.

**14.** Fashion teeth (out of white clay) with a wide gum line so you can attach them from behind. A long tongue (out of white clay) can also be made at this time.



**15.** Take the white eyeballs and insert them one at a time into the opening of the eye from behind, pushing them into place and smoothing/attaching them on the back side of the mask into the red clay.



**16.** To finish the eyes use a round piece of plastic (top of a Sharpie marker works well) to define the iris. The pupil can be either carved out or another small round circle made with a pen part can be pressed into the clay.



**17.** The teeth can be put in from behind and attached, making them as realistic or funny as you want. Tongues – cigars – pipes, etc. can add to the character of the piece.



**18.** Add clay loops or holes to the back so you can run a wire across the back of the mask so it will hang on the wall.



**19.** Add finishing details to mask.

**20.** Mix your vitreous engobe.

- Mixing a vitreous engobe **to be used only on wet clay**
- One part low fire white casting slip
- One part underglaze
- One part clear low fire glaze

**TIP:** Mark the outside of the container to identify color because the grey color of the casting slip tends to dominate the color.

**21.** Add color while the masks are still wet. Underglazes and vitreous engobes work perfectly for this. They are made mostly of clay and enable brushing onto the wet clay. They shrink with the clay as it dries without popping off. Use underglazes right out the container. Once the underglaze is on, do sgraffito work on the surface by cutting through the colored underglaze back to the red clay. Let the underglaze or engobe set up a bit and stiffen before cutting through it.

**22.** Bisque fire to Cone 04 when totally dry.



**23.** To distinguish mask even more, brush clear glaze on the eyes, lips, teeth and tongue and do a glaze fire to cone 05.



**24.** Attach wire to hang.

## Glossary

**Underglaze:** AMACO® Underglazes are specially formulated so they can be applied to wet, leather-hard, bone-dry, and bisque-fired clay.

**Fire:** To heat the clay in a kiln at a very high temperature until it is hard and it becomes ceramic.

**Greenware:** Clay before it has been fired.

**Vitreous Engobe:** An engobe containing sufficient flux to form to a vitreous clay coating. For use only on wet clay.

**Sgraffito:** Decorating technique achieved by scratching or carving through a layer of slip or glaze before firing to expose contrasting clay body beneath.



*Mask in Lesson Plan by Tracy P. Gamble  
Photography by David L. Gamble*