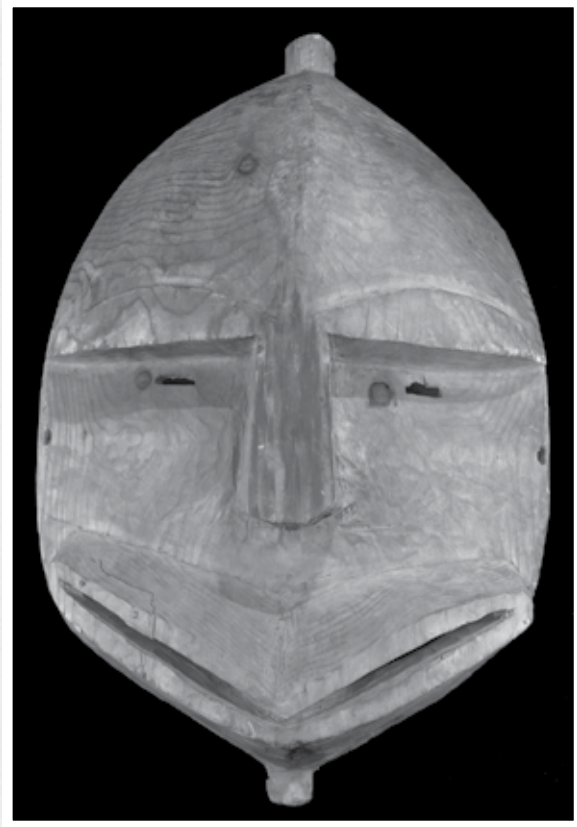
Giinaruat – Masks



Nayurta – The Watchman.
Nineteenth century wooden mask from the Pinart Collection,
Château-Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.
Photo by Will Anderson.

Masking is an ancient Alutiiq tradition. For centuries, Native artists carved images of powerful ancestors, animal spirits, and mythological beings into wood and bark. Masks were made in many sizes. Palm-sized miniatures may have been used to teach children traditional stories, attached to drums, or carried by adults as amulets. Dancers wore full-sized portrait masks and enormous plank masks during ceremonial performances.

Masks were often brightly painted and adorned with a variety of attachments. Feathers, fur, and small wooden carvings were tied to an encircling hoop. Some masks were held in the hands or teeth, others were tied to the dancer's head, and very large pieces may have been suspended over performance areas. A long-headed mask was a sign of power and authority. A whistling mask could conjure spirits.

Following ceremonies, masks were broken and discarded. This tradition reflects the spiritual power of the images they portrayed. Masks were part of the dangerous process of communicating with the spirit world. They were used in dances that ensured future hunting success by showing reverence to animal spirits and ancestors.

Masking continues in Alutiiq communities today, where it has been combined with Russian Orthodox and American traditions. During Russian New Year, Alutiiq people participate in an annual masquerade ball. Others disguised with masks and odd clothing, travel from house to house dancing. Hosts provide refreshments and try to guess the identity of their visitors, who must quit for the night if they are identified. This modern practice holds many elements of ancient winter ceremonies—visiting, performing, and feasting.

While Elders today remember the older word *giinaquq*, most today use the words *giinaruaq* (like a face) and *maaskaaq* (borrowed from Russian) for *mask*.

Learn More:

Giinaquq: Like A Face, Sugpiaq Masks from the Kodiak Archipelago, 2009, by Sven Haakanson and Amy Steffian. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

Center–Rock painting of a raven's footprint from Cook Inlet.

Saqullkanat Ikayusqat – Birds as Helpers

In addition to providing food and raw materials, birds were a source of information, inspiration, and spiritual support for Alutiiq people. Elders remember that each Alutiiq/Sugpiaq hunter had at least two helping animal spirits, one for land hunting and one for sea hunting. These spirits provided luck and guidance, and were often birds. The frequent use of bird imagery in Alutiiq art, particularly on bentwood hunting hats, symbolizes this relationship.

In addition to luck, birds provided mariners with critical environmental information. Travelers know that birds can help them predict bad weather, find schools of fish, mark currents, avoid rocks, and lead you to land in the fog. Modern fishermen still appreciate seabirds for these qualities.

Birds were also a symbol of prosperity. When migratory birds returned to Kodiak each spring, signaling the rebirth of the year, children were allowed to take their toys from storage and play on the beach. To beautify objects and honor their spirits, birds were also carved on household objects, particularly spoons and bowls.

The powerful relationship between people and birds also appears in Alutiiq shamanism. Alutiiq shamans were people who interacted with the spirit world to help cure illness, predict the future, and ensure prosperity. They were believed to fly like birds and hear the voice of their spirit helper in the cry of a bird. Owls, in particular, were believed to help shamans, and shamans' gear was often adorned with bird images. Birds also appear on ceremonial masks, illustrating their powerful qualities. Masks helped people communicate with the spirit world.

Qalngaaq – Raven

Like many peoples of the North Pacific coast, Alutiiq people admired the crafty raven (Latin: *Corvus corax*) for its intelligence. In Alutiiq stories Raven is both a creator and a hero. He appears as a bird, but possesses supernatural powers that assist him in great deeds. He can speak to people. He is strong enough to carry a whale. He can transform himself into other beings. One traditional legend tells how Raven brought light to the world. By tricking a stingy chief in a distant land, he obtained two boxes, one with the moon and stars, the other with the sun. For bringing these priceless possessions to his village, Raven was rewarded with marriage to the chief's two daughters.

A curious raven.
Photo courtesy of Sven Haakanson, Jr.

Alutiit Kraas'kait – Alutiiq Colors

The world's societies interpret colors in different ways. The Alutiiq language has just four basic color terms—*Kawirtuq* (it is red), *Tan'ertuq / Tamlertuq* (it is black), *Qatertuq* (it is white), and *Cungartuq* (it is blue). Each of these color terms is a verb root (i.e., *kawirtuq* means "it is red"). Alutiiq people recognized a broader range of colors, but their traditional language describes most hues with these four terms. For example, green is a shade of blue. Alutiiq speakers also describe colors by their similarity to common things. For example, an Alutiiq speaker might say that a brown object is the color of dirt.

It Is Red – *Kawirtuq*

Alutiiq people manufactures red pigments from minerals and plants. They ground ochre, a soft, naturally occurring iron oxide, into a fine powder and mixed it with oil to make paint. On Kodiak, people produced a reddish-brown dye by boiling alder bark. In Prince William Sound, people boiled hemlock bark or a mixture of cranberry and blueberry juices to produce a dark red dye. Widely used in body painting and to decorate objects, the color red may represent ancestral blood.

It Is Black – *Tan'ertuq / Tamlertuq*

Historic sources indicate that Alutiiq people collected a specific stone to make black pigment. They also produced black pigment from a copper ore and from wood charcoal. With black paint Alutiiq people painted faces, particularly of people in mourning. Black paint also adorned masks, both as a background color and as a design component. Black paint often outlines facial features or illustrates brows and eyes.

It Is White – *Qatertuq*

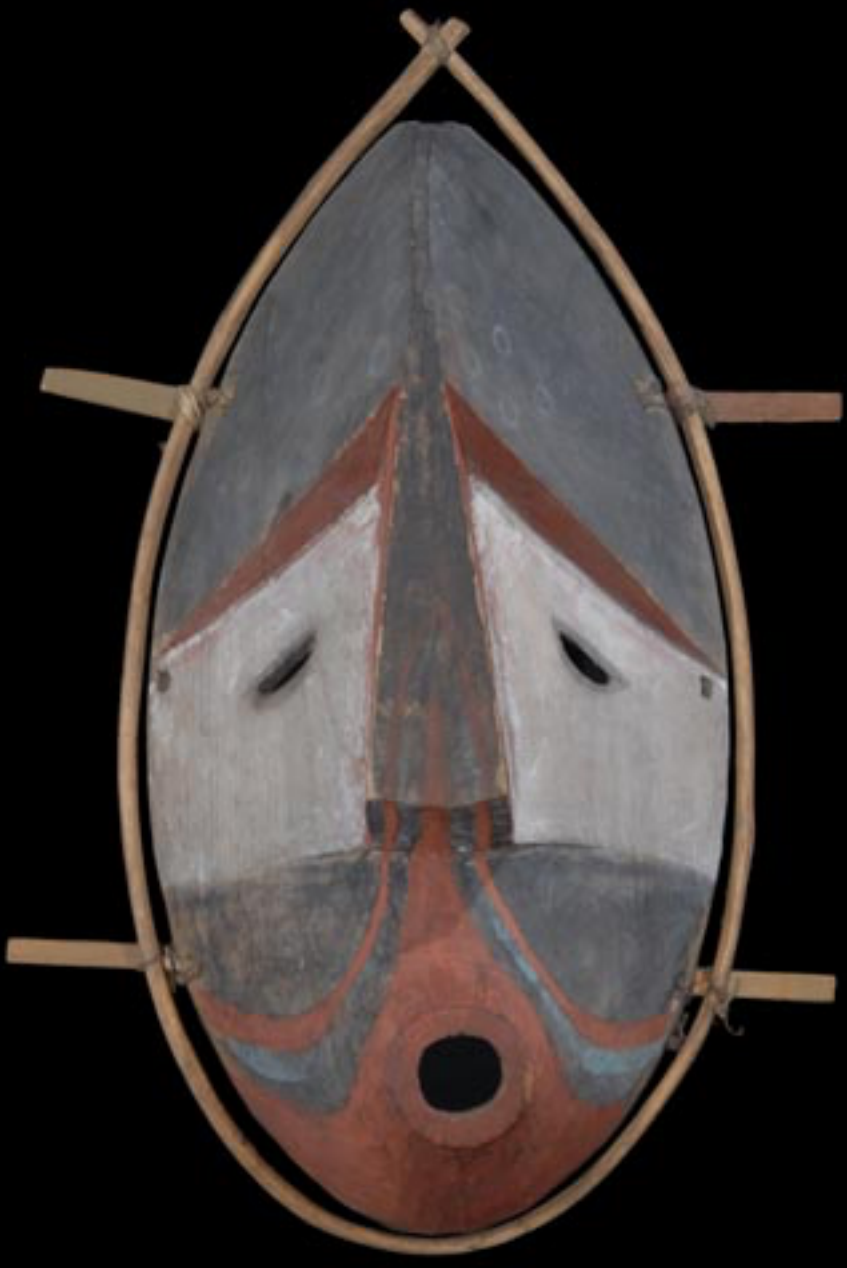
Alutiiq people made white pigment from limestone obtained in trade with the Alaska mainland, grinding this soft rock into a powder and mixing it with oil to create paint. At winter hunting festivals, the faces of the first two dance performers were often painted white and red, and masks were often decorated with white.

It Is Blue – *Cungartuq*

To the Alutiiq, blue is a powerful color. It is associated with the supernatural, particularly the worlds below the sea. Blue pigment was never used in body painting. However, a blue-green paint adorned hunting hats, and whalers, the magical hunters who pursued giant sea mammals, carried blue or green stones.

Payulik – Bringer of Food, painted wood and leather mask, Pinart Collection, Château-Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. Photo by Will Anderson.

Chumliiq
First One



Ingillagayak
Weatherman