



# Giinaruat – MASKS



*Nayurta – The Watchman.  
19th-century wooden mask from the Pinart Collection,  
Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.  
Photo by Will Anderson.*

Masking is an ancient Alutiiq/Sugpiaq 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. Some people 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 *maas'kaa* (borrowed from Russian) for mask.

## LEARN MORE:

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