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African masks- Courtesy of Goodwill of Greater Washington-Washington, DC

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African Masks

In the United States, masks are most often associated with Halloween or costume parties. However, masks aren't considered toys or fun costumes everywhere. In many countries, masks are an appreciated and important art form. Masks have particular significance throughout the African continent, where they are important objects in rituals.

Ritual masks depict entities that are believed to have power over people, such as mythological beings, spirits, and deities. They are often worn during celebrations, during religious ceremonies, in school by teachers, and by government officials. The masks can be worn in three different ways: as a helmet, as a crest (on top of the head), or vertically covering the face.

These masks are not made of plastic or cardboard like your Halloween costume either. They are generally made of leather, metal, fabric, or wood, that is sculpted and then painted into a detailed work of art. Because of the importance of masks and the skills that go into their design, mask artists are highly respected in Africa .

If Africa doesn't figure into your upcoming travel plans, this doesn't mean that you'll never see an African mask. On the contrary, African masks can now be found decorating households all over the world as more and more people have grown to appreciate them for their beauty. They are also displayed at numerous museums and art galleries worldwide.

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