

Junkanoo Headdress (art + social studies)

In the 16th century, an African tribal chief, John Canoe, who had become a slave in the Bahamas, started a tradition that became “Junkanoo” — derived from the name “John Canoe” spoken quickly! The slaves were given several days of freedom between December 26th and January 1st to leave the plantations and visit friends and relatives who were also slaves on the islands. When slavery was abolished, the festival became less popular, but over successive years has become a huge celebration of freedom. Prize-winning costumes are now housed in the Junkanoo Museum in Nassau.

Today in the Bahamas, Junkanoo occurs on December 26th and January 1st, between 2 a.m. and 8 a.m. on both days, and it’s never missed by the locals. Groups ranging from 500 to 1,000 people work together for a year, then compete for prizes for best costume, best music and best group presentation. The large groups and the larger-than-life sculptural figures include everything from black-and-brown African masks to light-colored pastel headdresses and clothing.

Traditional Junkanoo clothing consists of a headdress, shoulder piece and a skirt that is worn by both men and women. Often the figures are augmented by masks placed on top of a person’s head — and even the height of the body is sometimes extended by the use of stilts. Costumes are made of cardboard, felt and paper, and embellished with feathers, sequins and anything that is bright and shiny. Colors used are soft pinks, orange, yellow, turquoise, lime and white — a very lighthearted approach to match the music of the drums, bells and whistles.

Grade Levels 6-12

Note: instructions and materials based on a class of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Process

1. Make the face mask first. Since Junkanoo masks are made of paper, the bottom of a brown grocery bag is ideal for the face. Blow up a standard-sized balloon to the size of a person’s head. Open the grocery bag and trim it so that the walls of the bag are approximately 6” high. Place the bag on the balloon. Gather the neck area of the bag at the bottom and use masking tape to gather and secure it to the balloon. Paint the face a darker brown or black or leave it its original color. Use white acrylic paint to draw teeth and eyes; add the red and pink (white + red) for the mouth. Mix brown and white to create tan for highlighting features. Set aside.



Materials

Blick® Economy White Posterboard, 6-ply (13109-1202) 22" x 28"; one sheet per student

Blick® Construction Card, assorted colors, including Gold (11408-4079); need one-half 18" x 24" sheet per student

Crepe Paper Folds, assorted colors, including Bright Orange (11208-4516); share four packages across class

Blickrylic® Student Acrylics; share one pint each across classroom:
 Burnt Sienna (00711-8046)
 Mars Black (00711-2046)
 White (00711-1116)
 Bright Red (00711-3076)

Royal Langnickel® Aqua-Flo™ Brushes, 36-brush set (06046-1036); need one brush per student

Tonic Studios® Plus Scissors, (57079-1008); share four pair across class

Snippy® Scissors, pointed, package of 12 (57040-2009); need one per student

Weldbond® Universal Adhesive, 8-oz (23819-1105) share eight bottles across class

Screen Tape, silver, 50-yd roll (44902-1003); share one roll across class

Folia Color Corrugated Paper, fluorescent colors, package of 10 sheets (12231-1020); share three packages across class

Excel® Plastic Handle Utility Knife (57463-1000); need two

Package of 5 Extra Blades (57462-1005)

Acrylic Felt Swatches, assorted colors, including Orange (63201-4503); share 12 9" x 12" swatches across class

3M® Tartan™ Masking Tape .94" wide (24113-1094); share two rolls across class

Acrylic Felt, assorted colors, including Lime (63201-7736); share approximately 7-yds across class

Creativity Street® Rhinestones (61762-1001); share one 375-piece bag across class

Creativity Street® Craft Hair, Black (61760-2054) or Red (61760-3014); share two 4-oz packages each color across classroom

Crafty's® Plumage, 145-feather bag (60909-1003); share 10 bags across class

Natural Feathers, Bronze Schoppen, 45-feather bag (60910-1109); share four bags across class

Optional:

Large brown paper grocery bag, one per student

Large balloon, approximately 10-12" diameter

Process, continued

2. Use large scissors or a utility knife to create a basic headdress using a half-sheet of 14" x 22" posterboard. Cut out an arch the height of the balloon at one short end so the headdress will fit over the face. Cut out areas of the top and sides to create a large crown-like design.
3. Use the other half of the posterboard to create flowing feather-like parts parts for the headdress. Cut several "C-shaped" pieces for each side of the headdress, trace them on felt and glue the felt pieces to the posterboard. Decorate others with scrap felt and silver tape. The more outrageous, the better.
4. Use a half-sheet of the gold cardstock for the shoulder piece, or collar. Cut out a small semi-circle for the neck and a curve around the outside edge. Decorate the shoulder piece with silver tape, felt and rhinestones. Cut fringe from crepe paper, and glue it to the outside edge in two layers.
5. Embellish like crazy! Add jewels, fringe, feathers and crepe paper tassels to the mask.

Hint: To keep the paper mask intact, stuff it with paper when it's wearing the headdress, or store each separately on Styrofoam heads.

National Standards

Content Standard # 1—Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes

Content Standard # 4—Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Content Standard # 6—Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines