

# Mystic Paper Beasts: *Sky Tales* Educational Guide, Grades PreK-5



## About the Performance

*Sky Tales* presents a constellation of folktales from seven different Native American nations – tales of the sky gathered like stars from a variety of traditional narratives, magically revealing, and transformative. Characters are distinguishable by the hand-made masks worn by the Beast player Marya Ursin. *Sky Tales* teaches students about myth, grounding them in some fundamental stories from Native American traditions and inspires them with a Do-It-Yourself approach to multidisciplinary art-making.



## About the Artists

Originally founded in 1976, The Mystic Paper Beasts perform myths of transformation in the whimsical masks for which they have gained international renown. **Marya Ursin** and **Dan Potter** have been collaborating as performing and visual artists since 1989 and have presented in over 700 venues together. Notable performances include museums (British Museum of Art at Yale, Brooklyn Children’s Museum (NYC), Williams College Museum of Art, Discovery Museum (Bridgeport), New Britain Museum of Modern Art, among others); First Nights Boston, Hartford, New Haven, and more; festivals as various as the Ct. Eagle Festival to the Westport Art Festival; parades ranging from the Halloween Parade in NYC to Veterans’ Day parades in Westerly, RI; and for multiple libraries, schools, and private celebrations throughout New England, Washington D.C. area, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Scotland, Wales, and England.

## Program Learning Goals

1. To explore many forms of storytelling including mask, puppet, dance, mime, narrative, scroll, and music.
2. To create links between sky and earth, self and other.
3. To appreciate the natural world and embody the greeting with which the program begins: “Mitakuye Oyasin” which means “we are all related.”

## Essential Questions

1. Why are stories an important part of Native American cultures?
2. What can learning about other cultures teach us?
3. How is hearing a story told out loud with masks different from reading a book or watching a movie?

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## Vocabulary

- **Storytelling:** the art of telling a story about real or imagined events using gestures and words to bring the events and characters of the story to life in the minds of those listening.
- **Oral Tradition:** stories, memories, and knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation, person to person, by word of mouth. Stories passed down through oral tradition can be real or made up and can be an important way to learn about the past.
- **Folktales:** stories that are passed from generation to generation through song, dance and storytelling.
- **Myth:** a tale that explains natural, cultural, or historical phenomena, often involving supernatural characters or events.
- **Legend:** a traditional story about a person or place that is based in truth but may have developed fictional elements.

## Key Facts and Cultural Context for Students

### The People of Native America

The first people to live in a land are called Indigenous people. The land is connected to their identities, cultures, and livelihoods. The Indigenous peoples in what is now the United States are also called Native Americans, American Indians, or by their nation's name. Indigenous people continue to live and thrive all over the world today.

### Native American Heritage Month

November was declared Native American Heritage Month by President George H. W. Bush in 1990 to give a platform to Indigenous people in the United States and highlight their cultures, traditions, music, dance,



*Screenshot from Native Land Digital*



crafts, and ways of life. It is also a time to reflect on the history of Native Americans, the difficult relationship with European settlers, and their place and contributions to our homeland and the earth.

### Masks and Storytelling

Each mask featured in this performance was made by hand. It takes many hours to make a mask with enough detail to show a character's personality and emotions. Performers must practice how to move with them in order to create the characters in their stories.

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**Pre-Performance Discussion Questions**

- What do you know about the history of Indigenous peoples in the United States? What would you like to know? How could you find out more?
- What might a story teach us about history that we might not get from a history book?
- Who tells stories in your family? What are those stories about? Do the older people in your family tell stories that were told to them by their parents? Will you tell those stories to others?

**Pre-Performance Activity: Exploring Native America**

**Learning Goal:**

To introduce students to the geography and cultures of Native American nations featured in the performance.

**Materials:**

Map of North America, vetted books and websites about Native Americans (*see resources on page 6*), “Exploring Native America” worksheet (*see page 4*)

**Directions:**

1. Discuss Native Americans. What do students know about different nations? What do they know about the history of Native Americans? What about contemporary Native Americans?
2. Identify the Native nations featured in this performance: Miwok, Onondaga, Muscogee, Cherokee, Menomonee, and Lakota. Talk about how each nation has a different history and culture.
3. Divide the class into 6 groups, one for each featured nation. Have each group research its nation and fill out the “Exploring Native America” worksheet. (*Note for younger students: questions on worksheet could be used to spark large-group discussions.*)
4. Have each group present their findings to the class.

**Extensions:**

- Two of the stories in this performance are attributed to the Sioux, or Očhéthi Šakówinj which means “Seven Council Fires”. What nations are part of this group? Where are they from? What do the seven fires represent?
- Many Native nations have multiple names. Why? What makes one name preferred over another?
- Research the Indigenous people to where your school is located. How can you connect to and with these people?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Native Nation: \_\_\_\_\_

### Exploring Native America

Where is this nation located?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the climate of this location?

\_\_\_\_\_

What traditional clothes help people survive in this climate?

\_\_\_\_\_

What are traditional houses made from?

\_\_\_\_\_

What are this nation's traditional foods?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the traditional language of this nation? \_\_\_\_\_

How do you say "hello" in this language? \_\_\_\_\_

How many people speak this language today? \_\_\_\_\_

What is something interesting that you learned about this nation?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



### Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- What was your favorite story from the performance? What did it teach you?
- What did you learn about Native American nations and cultures?
- In what ways did you think about history from a new perspective?
- How do your stories and your families stories connect to United States history? How do they connect to world history? How will future generations know your story?

### Post-Performance Activity: Bringing Stories to Life with Masks

#### Learning Goal:

To understand different points of view by portraying a character through wearing a mask.

#### Materials:

Plain white paper, drawing supplies, craft supplies (e.g. yarn for hair, large paper bags for structure, pipe cleaners for whiskers, etc.)

#### Directions:

1. Ask every student to name a favorite book, folktale, or fairytale. Name a favorite character from the story (e.g. Goldilocks - baby bear) and share with the class.
2. Have students draw the face of that character on plain white paper and cut it out. Decorate with craft supplies to bring it to life!
3. Divide the class into groups of four. Have students hold up the masks they made, then walk, talk, and act like the character they chose within their groups.
4. Have each group create a short skit featuring their characters. Think about where they could meet (a restaurant, the zoo, at school, etc.) and what they could talk about.
5. Present the short skits to the class.
6. Discuss with students how they felt when they were pretending they were somebody else. Was it easy or difficult for them to feel like a different person?



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### Further Resources

- [Mystic Paper Beasts Artist Website](#)
- [National Museum of the American Indian](#)
- [Native Land Digital Interactive Map and Resources](#)
- [“Native America” on PBS](#)
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne with Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese: *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People*, Beacon Press (2019)
- Leitch Smith, Cynthia: *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids*, Heartdrum (2021)
- Littlechild, George: *This Land is My Land*, Children's Book Press (2014)
- Ortiz, Simon: *The People Shall Continue*, Children's Book Press (2017)
- Sorell, Traci: *We Are Still Here!: Native American Truths Everyone Should Know*, Charlesbridge Publishing (2021)

### Curricular Connections

#### Arts Standards: Theatre and Visual Arts

##### Creating

- Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (T.Cr.01, V.Cr.01)
- Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (T.Cr.02, V.Cr.02)

##### Performing

- Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work. (T.P.06, V.P.06)

##### Responding

- Perceive and analyze artistic work. (T.R.07, V.P.07)
- Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. (T.R.08, V.P.08)
- Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. (T.R.09, V.R.09)

##### Connecting

- Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. (T.Co.10, V.Co.10)
- Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. (T.Co.11, V.Co.11)

#### English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standards

##### Speaking and Listening

- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. (SL.PK-12.2)
- Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. (SL.PK-12.3)

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## Curricular Connections, continued

### History and Social Science

#### Pre-K

- Topic 1: Civics: fairness, friendship, responsibility, and respect (HSS.Pre-K.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: maps and places (HSS.Pre-K.T2)
- Topic 3: History: personal experiences and memories (HSS.Pre-K.T3)

#### K

- Topic 1: Civics: classroom citizenship (HSS.K.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: connections among places (HSS.K.T2)
- Topic 3: History: shared traditions (HSS.K.T3)

#### Grade 1

- Topic 1: Civics: communities, elections, and leadership (HSS.1.T1)
- Topic 2: Geography: places to explore (HSS.1.T2)
- Topic 3: History: unity and diversity in the United States (HSS.1.T3)

#### Grade 2

- Topic 3: History: migrations and cultures (HSS.2.T3)

#### Grade 3

- Topic 2: The geography and Native Peoples of Massachusetts (HSS.3.T2)
- Topic 3: European explorers' first contacts with Native People in the Northeast (HSS.3.T3)

#### Grade 4

- Topic 1: North America: geography and map skills (HSS.4.T1)
- Topic 2: Ancient civilizations of North America (HSS.4.T2)
- Topic 4: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today (HSS.4.T4)
- Topic 4c: The expansion of the United States over time and its regions today: The Midwest (HSS.4.T4c)

#### Grade 5

- Topic 1: Early colonization and growth of colonies (HSS.5.T1)
- Topic 4: The growth of the Republic (HSS.5.T4)

