



A woman carved out of red-cedar

## 7. The Red-Cedar Sculpture of the Woman Who Died

### *A Story from Southeast Alaska*

A young man and a young woman on the Haida Gwaii, the Islands of the Haida People, married. The young man was a chief, and the couple were very happy together. But soon after they were married, the young woman fell ill. Her husband sent around everywhere for the very best shamans, to try to cure her of her illness. He heard about a very fine shaman from another village on the island, and sent a canoe there to bring that shaman. But that shaman could do nothing. The young chief heard about another fine shaman at another village on another island, and again sent a canoe; but neither could that shaman cure the young woman. The young man sent for several fine shamans, but none of them could help his wife, and after she had been sick for a very long time she died.

The young chief felt very badly after his wife had died. He went from village to village to find the best wood-carvers in order to have them carve a sculpture of his wife. But though he asked several fine carvers, no one could make a sculpture that looked like his wife.

All this time there was a wood-carver in his own village who could carve much better than all the others. This man met the young chief one day and said, "You are going from village to village to have wood carved like your wife's face, and you can not find anyone to do it, can you? I have seen your wife a great deal walking along with you. I have never studied her face with the idea that you might want some one to carve it, but I am going to try if you will allow me."

The young chief agreed to try. The wood-carver found a

very fine piece of red-cedar and began working upon it. When he had finished, the wood-carver had dressed the sculpture just as he used to see the young woman dressed. Then he went to the young chief and said, "Now you can come along and look."

The young chief came to the wood-carver's workshop, and when he got inside, he saw his dead wife sitting there just as she used to look. This made him very happy, and he said he would like to take this sculpture home. "What do I owe you for making this?" he asked the wood-carver.

The wood-carver had felt sorry to see how the young chief was mourning for his wife, so he said, "Do as you please about it. It is because I felt badly for you that I made that. So don't pay me too much for it." But the young chief paid the wood-carver very well, both in slaves and in goods.

The young chief dressed this sculpture in his wife's clothes and her marten-skin robe. When he finished, he felt that his wife had come back to him. He treated the sculpture just like her. One day, while he sat very close to the sculpture, mourning for his dead wife, he felt the sculpture move. He thought that the movement was only his imagination. Yet he knew his wife had been as fond of him as he was of her, and so each day as he ate his meals he sat close to the sculpture, thinking perhaps some time it would in fact come to life.

After a while the whole village learned the young chief had this sculpture of his wife. One by one, they all came to see it. It was so life-like that many people could not believe that it was not the woman herself until they had examined it closely and saw it was only made of wood.

One day, after the chief had had it for a long, long time, he sat down next to the sculpture, and saw that the body was just like the body of a human being. Now he was sure the sculpture was alive, and he began to treat it just as if it were his wife. Yet though he was sure the sculpture was alive, it could not move or speak.

Then one day the sculpture gave forth a sound like crackling wood. The man was sure something was wrong; perhaps the

sculpture was ill. He had some people come and move it away from the place where it had been sitting, and when they had moved the sculpture they found a small red-cedar tree growing there on top of the flooring. The man left the young red-cedar tree to grow there, until it grew to be very large.

For many years afterwards, when people on the Haida Gwaii went looking for red-cedars, if they found a good one they would say, "This looks like the baby of the chief's wife." And it is because of the young chief's wife that red-cedars on the Haida Gwaii provide the very best wood for carving.

But to return to the red-cedar sculpture of the young woman:—

The sculpture continued to grow more and more like a human being day after day. People from villages far and near heard the story, and came in canoes to look at the sculpture, and at the young red-cedar tree growing there, at which they were very much astonished.

The red-cedar sculpture of the woman moved around as much as a tree trunk might move in the wind, which is to say not much at all, and the sculpture was never able to talk. Yet the woman's husband had dreams in which she spoke to him, and even if the sculpture could not talk, it was through these dreams the husband knew his wife was talking to him.

.



## SESSION SEVEN

### The Red-Cedar Sculpture of the Woman Who Died

#### *Top-level educational goals:*

- (1) Have fun and build community;
- (2) Increase religious literacy;
- (3) Build skills associated with liberal religion, e.g., interpersonal skills, introspection, basic leadership, being in front of a group of people, etc.

#### *Educational objectives for this session:*

- (1) Get to know others in the class;
- (2) Hear a story from this tradition;
- (3) Be able to talk about one or more incidents or themes from the story, e.g., if parents ask what happened in Sunday school today.

#### **Optional advance preparation**

If you're stuck for time, you can teach this class with only a few minutes preparation. But if you have time to do advance preparation so you can make masks:

a. Photocopy the mask outlines onto card stock or heavy paper. Note that there are two types of mask outlines: (1) mask outlines with designs already drawn on them; (2) mask outlines that are blank. You choose whether you want the children to draw their own designs, or whether you want them to color in existing designs.

b. If you are making the masks that are attached to sticks (recommended), you will need the following tools and materials:

- mask outlines on card stock (see a.)
- scissors
- ruler
- masking tape
- 2 to 3 pieces of corrugated cardboard at least 12 inches square
- crayons or markers to color the masks
- pencils or pens (to draw your own

designs on blank mask outlines)

c. If you are making the masks that are tied on with string (harder to make), you will need:

- mask outlines on card stock (see a.)
- scissors
- hole punch
- masking tape
- string
- (optional) Xacto knife to cut out eye holes, along with a cutting mat

#### **I/ Opening**

Take attendance.

Light chalice with these words and the associated hand motions: "We light this chalice to celebrate Unitarian Universalism: the church of the open mind, the helping hands, and the loving heart."

Check-in: Go around circle. Each child and adult says his or her name, and then may say one good thing and one bad thing that has happened in the past week (anyone may pass).

#### **II/ Read the story**

Read "The Red-Cedar Sculpture of the Woman Who Died" to the children.

#### **III/ Make masks**

This activity has the children make masks based on Tlingit mask designs.

You can make masks that are mounted on sticks that allow you to hold the mask in front of your face, or you can make masks that tie on with string. The masks that are mounted on sticks are easier to make, and are recommended if you have limited class time, or if you are not entirely confident in your ability to make crafts. The masks that are tied on with string are more challenging to make, mostly because it's hard to cut out the eye holes, and to a lesser extent because tying the string behind the children's heads can be finicky.



*Above:* A mask mounted on a stick made of folded-up corrugated cardboard. (This mask has not been colored in, so you can focus on how it's made.)



*Above:* A mask tied on with string. (Yes, you can see out the eyeholes, though not very well.)



#### *A/ Making a mask mounted on a stick*

Have the children choose a mask shape, and cut it out.

—If you are using the blank mask outlines, have the children draw in a design based on one of the photos of Tlingit masks included in this curriculum.

—If you are using the mask outlines with designs, have the children color them in. Suggest they use a color palette like the colors on of the photos of Tlingit masks.

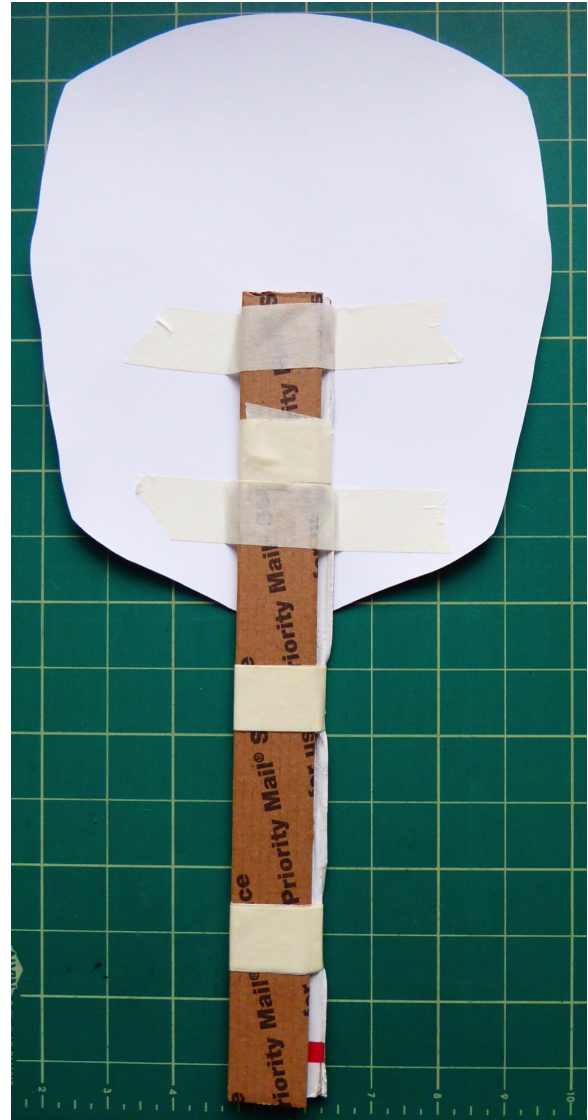
While the children are coloring in their masks, cut out a piece of 12 inch by 4 inch corrugated cardboard for each mask. Make

sure to cut the cardboard so the corrugations stretch along the long dimension; this is because you are going to fold the cardboard roughly in thirds the long way, so that you wind up with a “stick” that’s 12 inches long by about an inch and a half wide.

To fold the corrugated cardboard, use the back of the scissors to score a line about a third of the way across the width, like this:



Score another line about a third of the way from the other edge. Fold along both score lines, and wrap masking tape around the “stick.” When the children have finished coloring, you can tape the “sticks” on the back of the mask, like this:







*B/ Making a mask that ties on with string*

Have the children choose a mask shape, and cut it out.

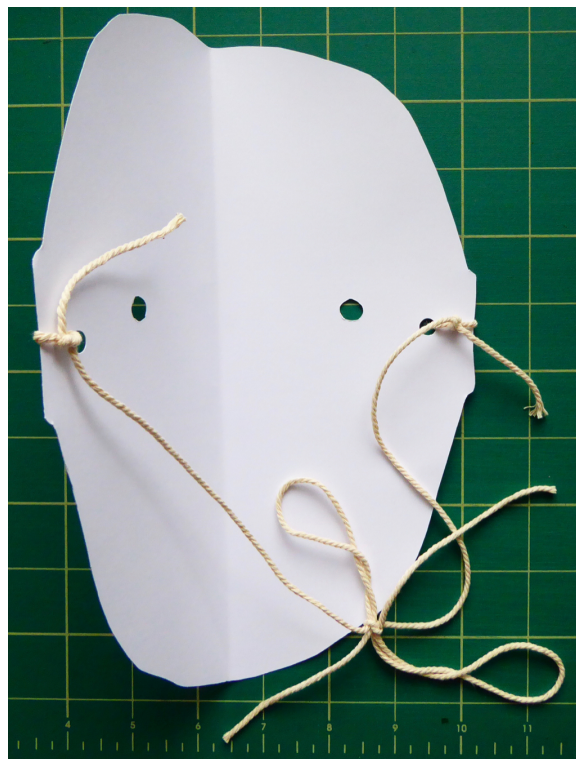
—If you are using the blank mask outlines, have the children draw in a design based on one of the photos of Tlingit masks included in this curriculum.

—If you are using the mask outlines with designs, have the children color them in. Suggest they use a color palette like the colors on of the photos of Tlingit masks.

While the children are coloring in their masks, cut two 30 inch lengths of string for each mask (this may seem too long, but longer pieces of string make it easier to tie the masks on).

When the children have finished coloring in their mask, fold the mask in half lengthwise. Use the hold punch to put a hole on each side at about ear level. Tie the string onto the mask using those holes.

Now comes the hard part: cutting out the eye holes. You can do this with scissors, if you resign yourself to mangling the mask a little. Or if you have an Xacto knife and cutting mat, it will go pretty quickly.



It's fairly difficult to line up the eye-holes. I find the best thing to do is to cut out the eyeholes where they're shown on the mask outline, then pinch the fold of the mask at the bridge of the nose to bring the eyeholes closer together so you can (sort of) see through them.

Finally, tie the masks on the children. The hard part here is not catching the child's hair in the string as you tie (as someone who has long hair, I assure you that getting your hair caught in the string can hurt). Ideally, children with long hair will be able to put their hair into a pony tail; alternatively, ask the child to hold their hair while you tie the string behind their head.

#### **IV/ Act out the story with masks**

Now that you've made the masks, you'll want to do something with them. So have the children act out the story while wearing the masks. (Some children will probably not want to wear their mask, and that's fine.) Note that one of the mask outlines is based on a Tlingit shaman's mask, and if one of the children made that mask, perhaps they could be the shaman(s).

As usual, begin by asking: "Who are the characters in this story?" The characters include: the young woman and young man; one or more shamans; the woodcarver; villagers.

Determine where the stage area will be (if you are using masks that tie on with string, don't make the children walk very far, because it's hard for them to see where they're going with those masks on). The lead teacher sits facing the stage. Provide a chair for the young woman to sit in after she "dies." As usual, the lead teacher reads the story, prompting actors as needed to act out their parts.

It could be fun to take photos of this story—both to show the children so they can see how they look in their masks, and then to print out later and post on the class bulletin board.

#### **V/ Conversation about the story**

If you don't have time for a conversation about the story, you can simply tell the children that this is a story about how people feel after someone they love has died.

Otherwise, take your masks off and sit back down in a group. Go over the story to make sure that the children understand it.

Now ask some general questions: "What was the best part of the story? Who was your favorite character? Who was your least favorite character?" — or questions you come up with on your own.

Ask some questions specific to the story:

"Why did the young man want the woodcarver to carve a statue of his dead wife?"

(You can remind them that this culture had no cameras or photographs.) Although the obvious answer to this question is that he was sad, children might also respond that he wanted to remember her, that he wanted to pretend she was still alive, etc.—grief can be a complex emotion, and children often understand more of its nuances than we give them credit for.

"Do you think the sculpture of the woman was actually alive?" Here you might want to talk about what kind of truth there is in this story: is it a scientific story, is it a fairy tale, is it a story that isn't actually true but gets at bigger truth?

"Do you think the young man in the story thought the sculpture of the woman was actually alive? Or was he just pretending that she might be alive?"

You can add any questions that you think are interesting or relevant.

#### **VI/ Free play**

If you decide not to make the masks, you will probably need to fill the remainder of the class with free play time. Free play can help the class meet the first educational goal, having fun and building community. Ideas for free play: free drawing; "Duck, Duck, Goose"; play with Legos; walk to labyrinth (if time); etc.

#### **VII/ Closing circle**

Before leaving, have the children stand in a circle.

When the children are in a circle, ask them what they did today, and prompt them with questions and answers, e.g.: "What did we do today? We heard a story, right? Anyone remember what the story was about? It was about an Enchanted Pool, right?" As always, you're not trying to put any one child on the spot, but rather drawing on the wisdom of the group as a whole. If you're sending puppets home with children, remind them what each character did in the story.

If any parents have come to pick up their

children, invite them to join the circle (so they can know what it is their children learned about this week).

Say the closing words together:

Go out into the world in peace  
Be of good courage  
Hold fast to what is good  
Return no one evil for evil  
Strengthen the fainthearted  
Support the weak  
Help the suffering  
Rejoice in beauty  
Speak love with word and deed  
Honor all beings.

Then tell the children how you enjoyed seeing them (if that's true), and that you look forward to seeing them again next week.



If there are any completed masks left at the end of class, put them on the bulletin board before you go.

## LEADER RESOURCES

### The Red-Cedar Sculpture of the Woman Who Died

#### 1. Sources

A Tlingit myth from Wrangell, Alaska. Adapted from *Tlingit Myths and Texts*, John R. Swanton, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 39, (1909), pp. 181-182.

The illustration is a digitally edited version of a public domain photograph of the Centennial Pole, dedicated in 2011 at the Sitka National Historical Park, Sitka, Alaska, showing the woman carved at the bottom of the pole. This pole is carved from red-cedar. “The bottom figure...is a fascinating female portrait by Donnie Varnell, a Haida carver from...Ketchikan (Alaska). Flanked by male and female salmon, she represents Mother Earth.” (Mike Dunham, “Sitka’s Centennial Pole a showpiece of modern totemry,” *Anchorage Daily News*, June 6, 2014.) Since this story is a Tlingit tale of the Haida Gwaii, the islands of the Haida people, it seemed appropriate to use a Haida sculpture to illustrate the story.

#### 2. Tlingit religion

Anthropologist Sergei Kan provides a brief description of shamanism, a central part of nineteenth century Tlingit religion:

“Nineteenth century shamanism, as we understand it from the existing historical and ethnographic sources, was a classical circum-polar type.... The shaman (*ixt'*) was the key intermediary between humans and other-than-human persons and powers of the world. He cured the sick, controlled the weather, brought success in war and in fishing and hunting, foretold the future, communicated

with other shamans at a distance, received news about faraway people and places, found and brought back to their families those who were lost or captured by the anthropomorphic land otter people (sing., *kóoshdaa káa*), revealed and neutralized the evil actions of witches, and made public demonstrations of his power in various awe-inspiring ways. The shamans could do all these things because he was inspired by and controlled one, or more often, several acquired or inherited superhuman spirits (sin. *yéik*). ... Every localized clan had at least one *ixt'*, so that larger villages composed of several clans usually had several resident shamans.” —Sergei Kan, “Shamanism and Christianity: Modern-Day Tlingit Elders Look at the Past,” in Morton Klass, ed., *Across the Boundaries of Belief: Contemporary Issues in the Anthropology of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

In his essay, Kan makes the point that nineteenth century Tlingit shamanism was essentially eradicated as Tlingit people converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity: “A relentless campaign waged against the shamans by the missionaries, with the help of military and civil authorities, succeeded: by the final decades of the nineteenth century, the Tlingit had converted to [Russian Orthodox] Christianity, and by the 1930s most of the shamans had disappeared.”

Today, according to Kan, the Tlingit people are re-evaluating the relationship between earlier shamanism and their current religion of Russian Orthodox Christianity. Kan says that “modern-day Tlingit elders construct various interpretations of shamanism.”

The story in this curriculum comes from the waning years of nineteenth century Tlingit shamanism.







Tlingit mask  
(c. 1850?)

Museum of Cultures, Helsinki, Finland  
*Public domain image, digitally edited by Dan Harper*



Tlingit mask  
(c. 1850?)

Museum of Cultures, Helsinki, Finland  
*Public domain image, digitally edited by Dan Harper*



Shaman's Mask

Southeast Alaska

Tlingit, c. 1830

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

*Public domain image, digitally edited by Dan Harper*





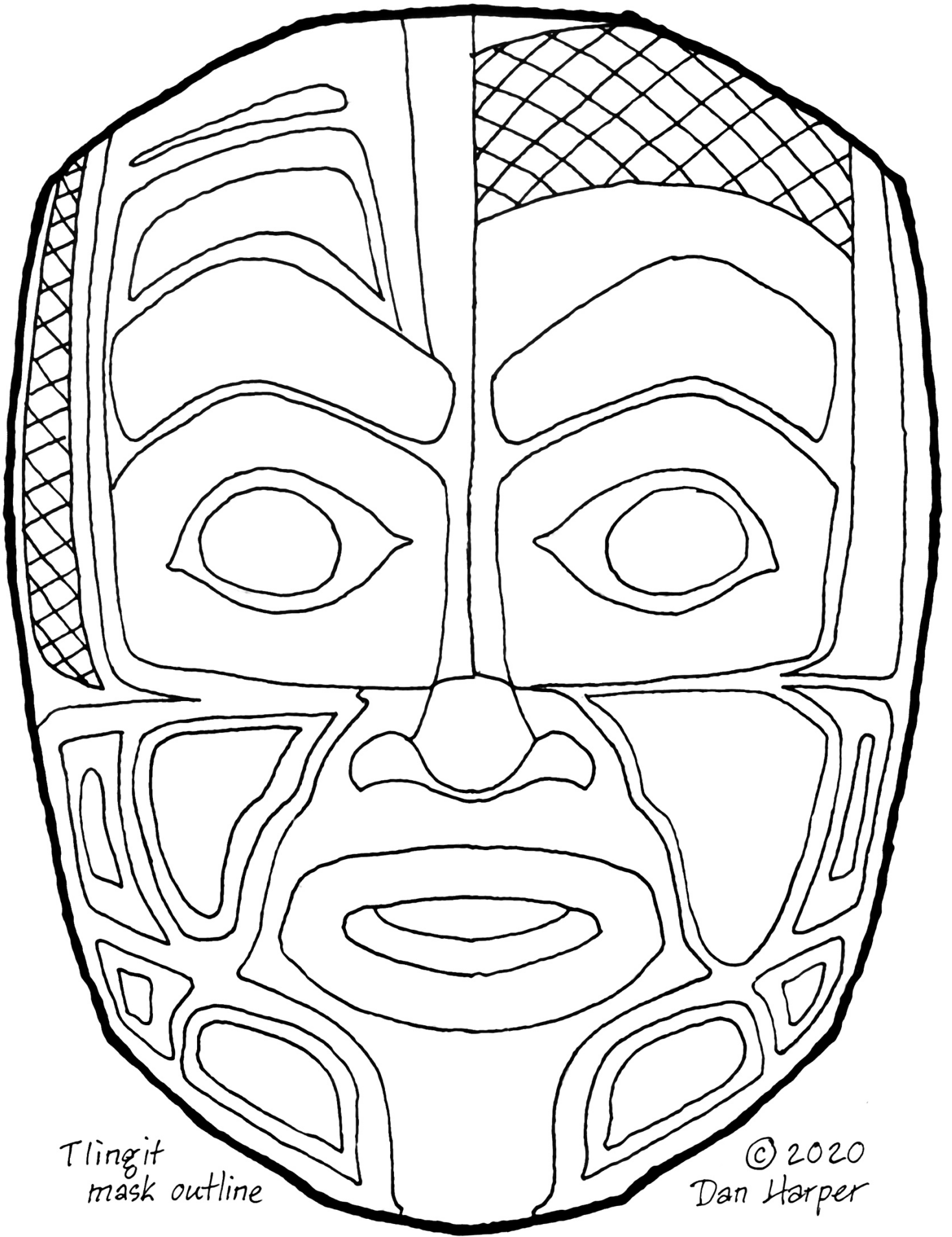
## Sun mask

Alaska, near Port Mulgrave (Yakutat) or Dry Bay

Tlingit, late 18th or early 19th century

Museum Rietberg, Zurich

*Public domain image, digitally edited by Dan Harper*



Tlingit  
mask outline

© 2020  
Dan Harper





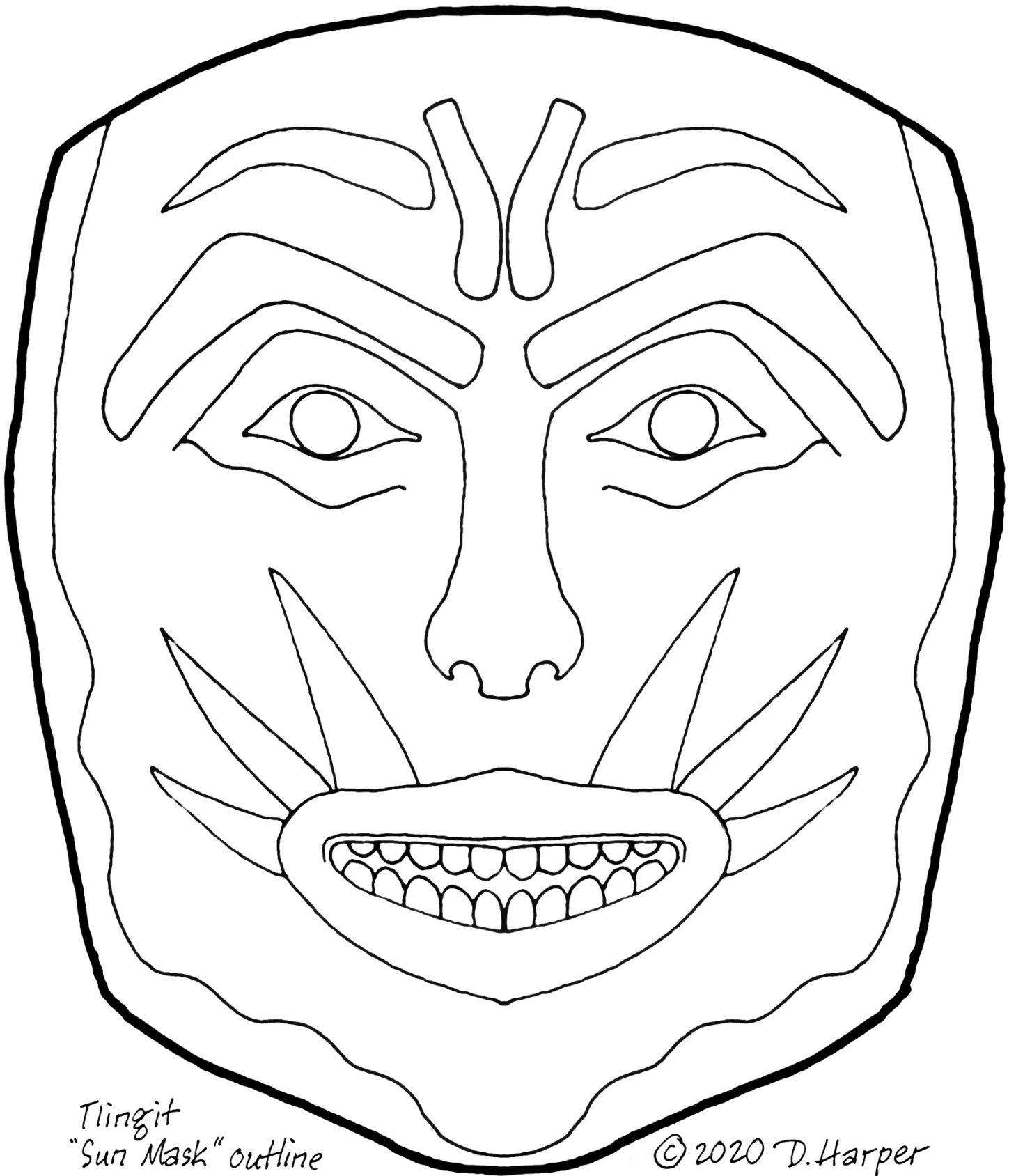
Tlingit  
mask outline

© 2020  
Dan Harper



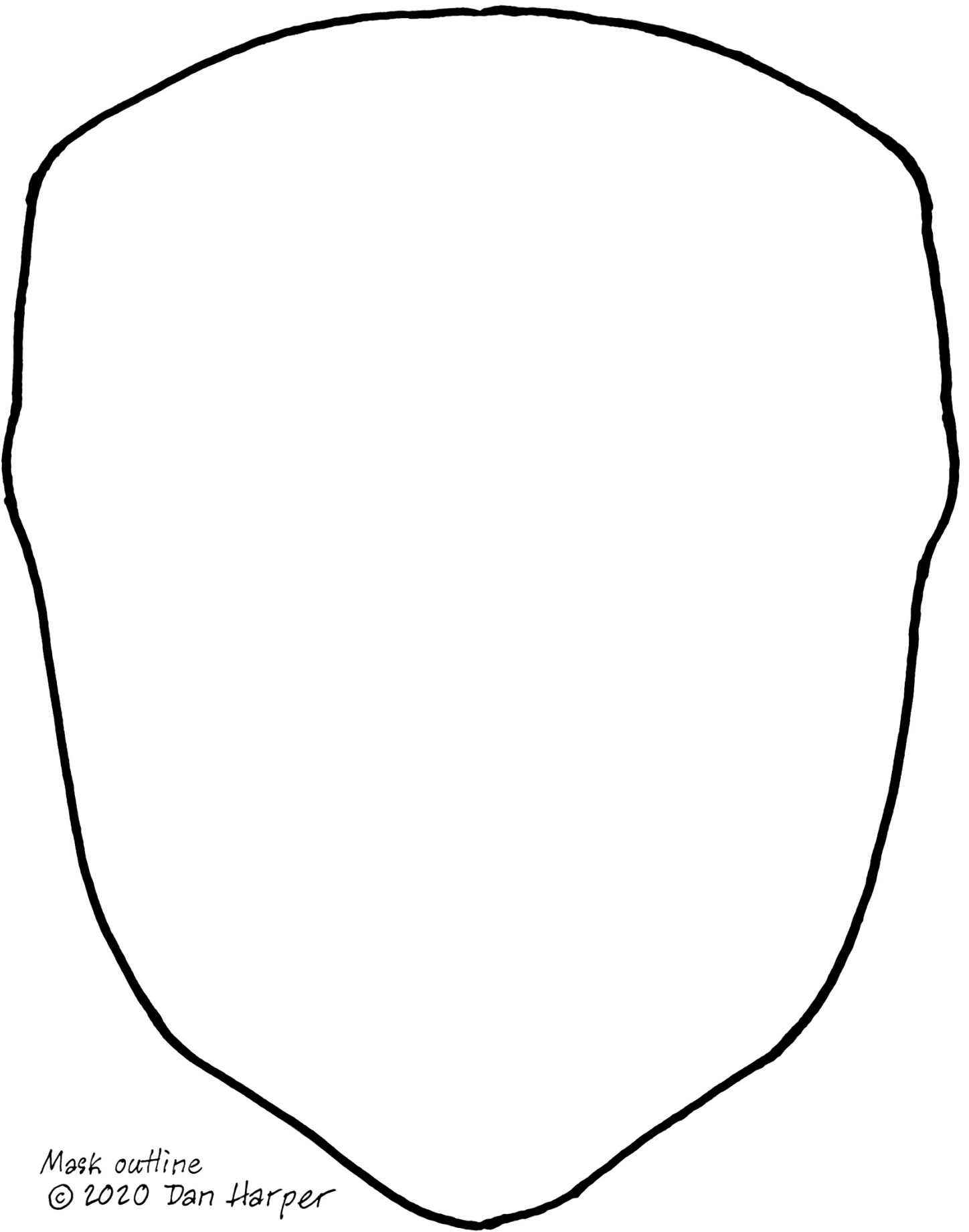
Tlingit "Shaman  
Mask" outline

© 2020 Dan Harper

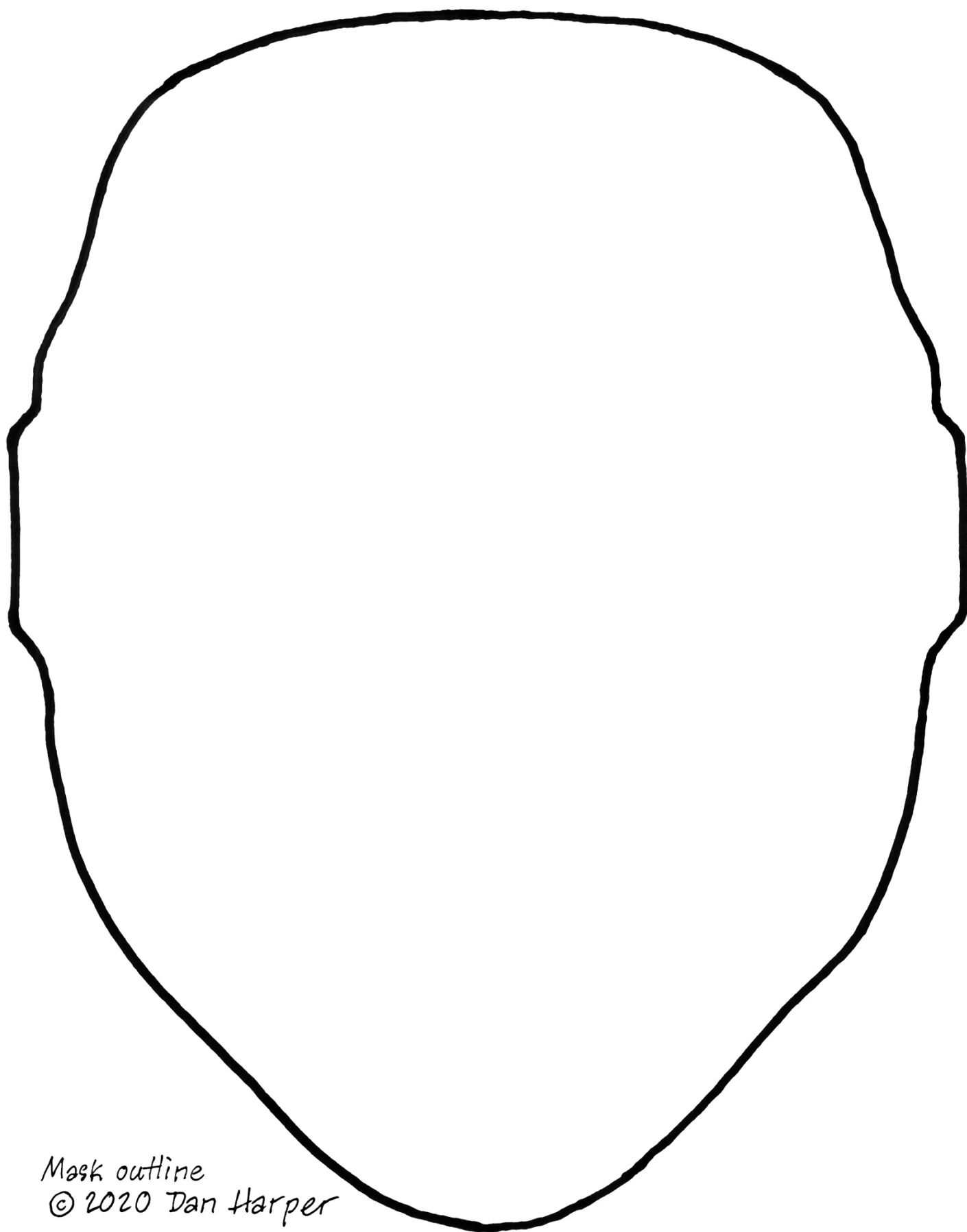


Tlingit  
"Sun Mask" outline

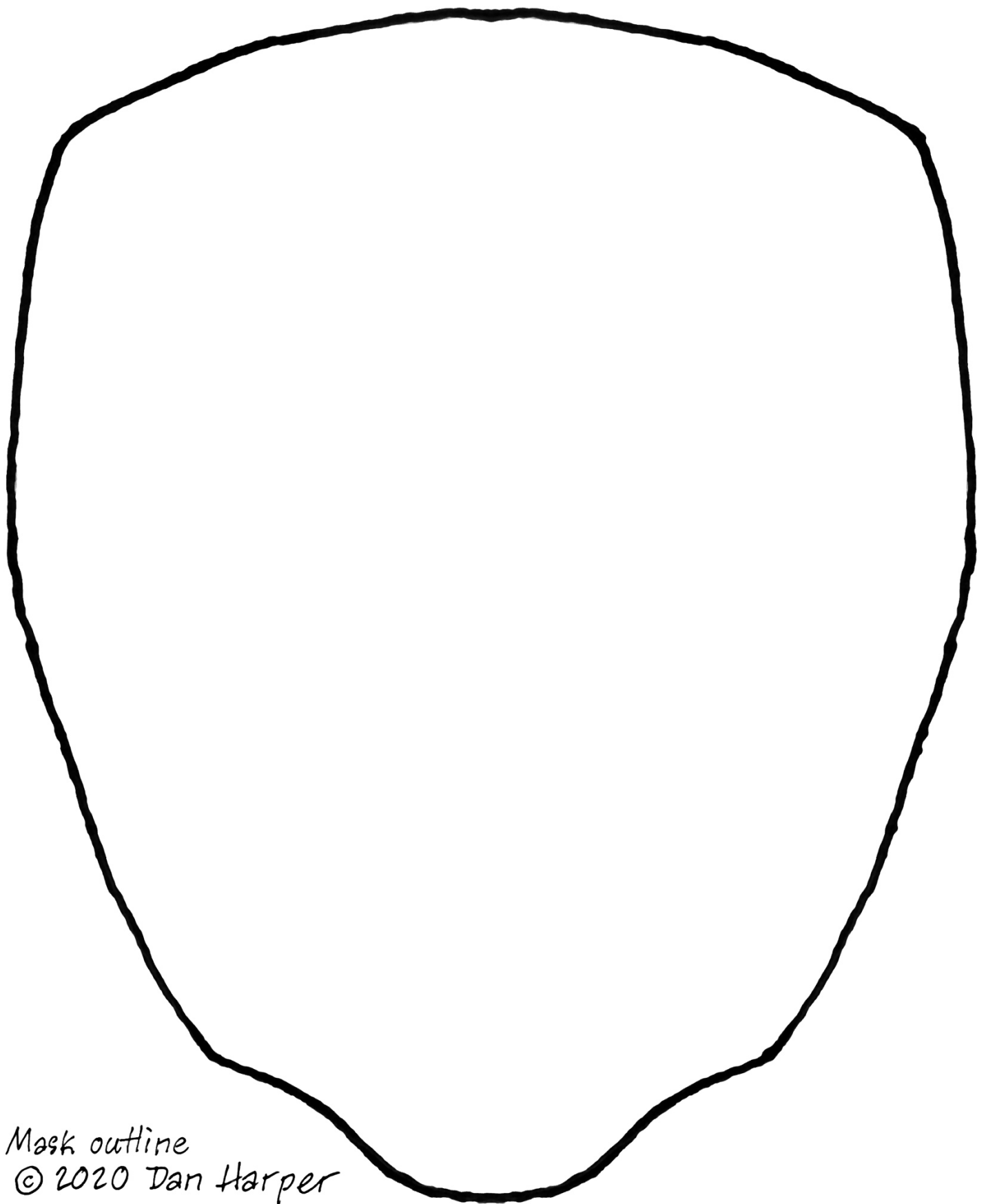
© 2020 D. Harper



Mask outline  
© 2020 Dan Harper



Mask outline  
© 2020 Dan Harper



Mask outline  
© 2020 Dan Harper