Arupa for Foundation 2: Masks in clay

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Abstract:

Arupa for Foundation 2: Masks in Clay" presents a foundational design exercise introduced to Master of Design (MDes) students in 1985, focusing on creating masks in clay. Designed as a hands-on task, it challenges students—many of whom lack prior tactile and artistic exposure—to engage deeply with kinesthetic learning, cultural introspection, and imagination. The exercise demonstrates how physical manipulation of materials can stimulate creativity, cultural sensitivity, and reflective thinking, essential skills for future educators.

By integrating cultural narratives, multisensory perception, and intellectual dialogue, the task not only teaches design principles but also acts as a transformative tool for educators to explore innovative teaching methods. It underscores the pedagogical significance of fostering experiential learning environments and social interaction to build a foundation for collaborative and inclusive education. The author's reflections, coupled with longitudinal student feedback, reveal the exercise's enduring impact on both learners and educators.

Furthermore, the proposed integration of emerging technologies like AI and VR opens new avenues for reimagining this exercise, making it a strategic model for teaching in interdisciplinary and evolving contexts. This framework positions the "Masks in Clay" exercise as a blueprint for educators seeking to balance tradition, creativity, and modern pedagogy.

1.0 Back ground

'Masks in clay' was the task introduced to Mdes students in 1985. Experience of the clay task introduced in the previous year, gave us confidence to create another exercise for the next batch.

I started seeing a big potential in clay tasks as a beginning exercise for graduate engineers and architects in India. It ushered them into a kinesthetic experience which they were kept out of at early ages often. It also provided a challenge to me and Gaffoor(Abdul Gaffoor Shaik), to engage them intellectually in a dialogue mode. Here my innovation of introducing a semantic zone in Foundation tasks, helped in linking the tacit body learning to verbal mode.

I got a lucky break in finding IDC 85-87 whatsapp group with the help of Arvind Joshi and Girish Nalavade. I joined the group. To my pleasant surprise all of them showed positive response. It was amazing that after 39years many were able to connect to that task. I prepared a questionnaire(below) and sent to the group along with the article on Akshara devata (1). I got 5 full responses and several short replies. One student expressed that he could only remember his mask. Process often becomes dormant unless it gets referred again, during later years in some context, or get linked to personal narratives which get repeated and stays in memory.

1.1 Format for feedback

Feedback on task 'Masks'

Pl. reflect and recall ur experience. Any stories, anecdotes with ur friends in narrative form are welcome.

1. Clay work related
    - Was it a first time experience to work on clay?
    - Was the the theme 'mask' puzzling, were there discussions on it with AGR or Gaffoor, what kind?
    - Was it Just fun, Waste of time, or just part of the programme U had to do it.

2.Theme and Process

2.1 Did U feel surprised with the output ?
2.2 Did U get better idea as U saw others coming out with their mask?
2.3 Were architects doing better than engineers? Did U feel a difference?
2.4 Were their discussions with ur colleagues?
2.5 What was the general feedback from others?
2.6 Did it bring U closer to ur class mates as it was in the beginning of the programme
2.7 Did U feel some of ur colleagues brought out their local cultural experience?
2.8 Were U lost in the beginning, when and how, did u visualize and start making?
2.9 Did U feel ur 'mask' was unique, because of …
2.10 What happened when U started colouring them later
2.11 Did they all become more powerful?
2.12 Were U more satisfied after colouring?
2.13 Did U feel some of the lost the 'punch' which the had before colouring

Pl . give ur feedback on other's outputs as well.
Frank views even if they look negative, are appreciated as we are trying to look at objectively, 'subjective experiences and encoded memories'

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1.2 Checklist of Arupa the Implicate Order frame work, to look at Foundation programme in design given below acts as general reference to all articles in the series

Frame work of Arupa the implicate Order
Check list to screen

1.0 Aesthetic Order

1.1 Imagination

- *In Syntactic zone*
- *In Semantic zone*

1.2 Body Learning

- *Feeling Materials and processes*
- *Re-setting body memory as new knowledge*
- *Use of tools and technology*

2.0 Multisensory Perception

2.1 Sensitization, Senses as Orders

Senses:
Vision, Sound, Smell, Taste, Touch, Kinesthetic

- *Sense experience which dominated in the task*
- *Connections to other senses, Potentials*
- *Language connections to act as means to retain memories.*

3.Active Silence

- *Dialogues*
- *Eco system for Learning*

4. Addressing the Inner Order

- *Narratives remembered*
  By students and teacher
- *Formats to collect data from students*
  like asking them to write about their learning experience
- *Critical discussions with other faculty on the particular task*
  and student response

5. New digital Technologies-AI, VR,..:

6. Cross disciplinary Connections.

6.1 Techniques, tools, practices, procedures

6.2 Process Documentation

- *By student*
- *By teacher/pedagogue*

7.0 Reflections on strategic role of design

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2.0 Aesthetic Order:

Setting the problem initiates the operation of 'Aesthetic Order', in which preparation of the pedagogue becomes the first step.

2.1 Preparation of Pedagogue

To frame the problem, teacher needs to research into the task zone to know the 'Arupa' the implicate Order' with its deeper 'enfolding's.

For us Indians, Gods and Myths are very real. They are live symbols in the present day culture; not foreign, esoteric, myths. In this context, a quote by Gideon became my Inspiration:

"Pre-mythological "man was completely embedded in the world which surrounded him. He became one with it, he did not stand above it, he did not feel himself to be the centre, but a humble element in it. His fate was ruled by powers he could not comprehend. To him the animal was a superior being, a greater than he, and at the same time a personification of invisible powers. All primitive symbols are rooted in this zoomorphic age. However simple or complex these symbols, they all represent invisible forces in a universe not yet reduced to a battle ground between man and man". (2) taken from (3)

It was a beginning of a 'deeper probe' for me! I thought that the theme needed in depth study! I was hesitant to jump into it to the unfamiliar area. It was not a safe zone like modifying incrementally an Ulm task! This is where interaction with the Ulm legend, Sugiura Kohei, helped me! Sugi, short name by which we addressed him (it was a special privilege, I came to know later). Of course we were following our leader, prof. Nadkarni, another Ulmer who gave the shot name. He was close to 'Sugi'!

During Sugi's visit, long discussions over a beer, used to take place in my staff hostel apartment. Since there was no furniture, we all sat on grass mats and improvised bed spreads and cushions! It was a marvellous set up like in a 'Gurukula' of olden times! I expressed my doubt to 'Sugi' about our lack of knowledge of 'Indian tradition' to bring into design. I said, "We are already quite western in our thinking and learning under British influenced education. We don't our tradition enough". Sugi, an excellent 'Teacher' he has been, made the difficult task very simple, ☺, when he said:

'*the task is not that complex;*
You have grown up in this tradition.
It has a 'presence' in the products you use, the way you eat, the way you squat on the floor, the loose clothes you ware and your behaviour with each other, etc.,

This was like a 'Guru's message' which burning torch. It rekindled what Charles Eames had told us at NID when we were students, to study our declining Traditions. A new 'course of thinking' started for me. I soon started seeing with an x-ray eye for 'Indian tradition around' in our daily life and discovered 'Sahasra Kamala', the thousand petal lotus symbolising the last stage of yogic enlightenment in my daily used steel bowl.

Sahasra Kamala on Steel bowl

I had seen earlier serrations on a steel bowl, which we used every day. I had initially deciphered them, with my mechanical engineering background, that these were (obviously) for strengthening. Then after considering the size and thickness of plate used to shape it, I concluded it was over designed. These serrations were *not very convenient* to clean. In fact, I was thinking it should be redesigned with a smooth surface to make it *easy to clean*.

After the dialogue with 'Sugi', to my great surprise the serrations revealed the root image of 'Sahasra Kamala' the thousand petal lotus symbolising the last stage of yogic enlightenment. (see the picture below of the vessel). And how it was designed can only be a guess work! There were no trained or practicing designers in India at that time. Many mould makers were from Gujarath, who used to make blocks for textile printing. They were good in geometric constructions for 'design patterns' using compass! Many of them had migrated to Bombay and got employed as steel die-makers! They were rooted in tradition, in their social and cultural life.

Outside shape inside shape

Whatever might have been its origin, it is unmistakably a 'Kamal' the famous lotus symbol of enlightenment! We had almost become blind to it.

- *I also realised that 'Problem Setting' also has the power to influence the 'Inner Order' of the 'Pedagogue'. Above episode brings out how it became a part of my journey into the design discovery of Indian tradition.*

As for the Clay Task, each student chose an animal, bird or insect to make a mask of god in clay. Some chose human faces. Various expressions of gods like powerful, ferocious, peaceful and deathly were brought out by students after initial discussions. We thought of colouring the 'mask' as colours were dominating factor in many traditions. Colouring was done on another day so that the clay gets dried.

The task, though strange, provided a 'meaningful challenge'. Students played with forms and colours to create Gods. Various expressions of gods like powerful, ferocious, peaceful deathly were brought out by students after personal dialogues with me and Gaffoor. Students with engineering background had no prior exposure to colour as a subject. Students used typical Indian colours in uninhibited fashion.

1.2 Physical outputs below provide us the reference for further deliberations.

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Students work of M Des 85-87 batch: Mask in Clay

1.0 Theme:Tiger head:
Student: Chandran K P

2.0 Theme: Wolf

Student: Pradip Save

2.1

2.2

3.0 Theme: Cow

Student: Milind Tamhane

3.1

3.2

4.0 Theme: Elephant head
Student: Ravindra Rajhans

4.1

4.2

5.Theme: Owl

Student: Nabajyoti Bora(late)

5.1

5.2

6.0 Theme: Lobster

Aloysius Lincoln Gomes

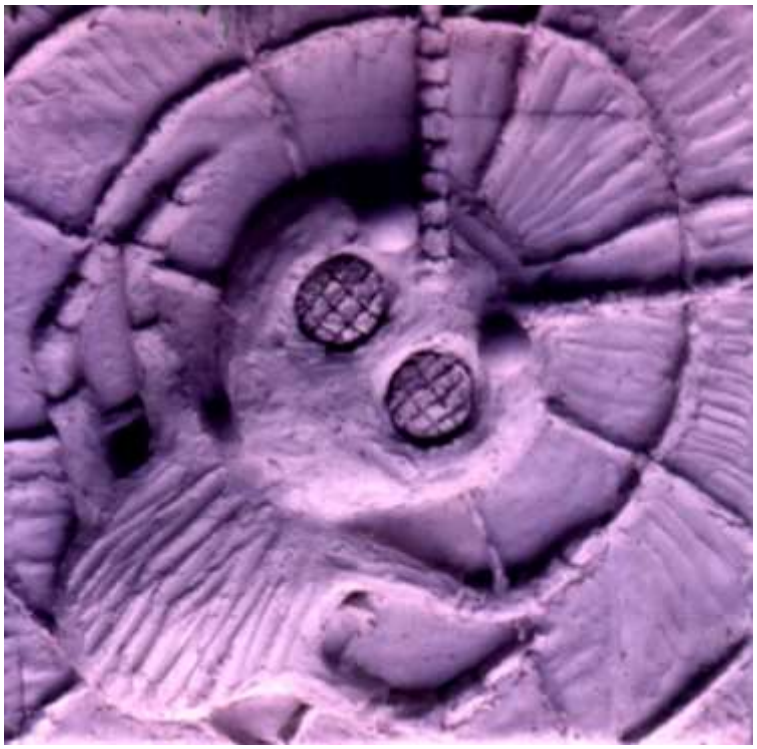
6.1

6.2

7.0 Theme: Spider

Student: Anuradha

7.1



7.2

8.0 Theme: Death, Face

Student: Nagarajan .G

8.1

8.2

9.0 Theme: Peace, Buddha
Student: Kiran Bidwai

9.1

9.2

9.3

10.0 Theme: Jungle god
Student: Aravind Joshi

10.1

10.2

11.0 Theme: crocodile

Student: Sunil Kolhe

11.1

11.2

12.0 Theme: Horse

Student: Girish Nalavade

12.1

12.2

13.0 Theme: Bat, face

Student: Rajan Vernerkar

13.1

13.2

14.Theme: Fractal Face

Student : Sanjay Prasade

1.3 Creating Space for Imagination

Problem Setting provides the 'Space for Imagination' in syntactic and semantic zones**.** In this case 'Semantic zone' dominated, shrinking the 'imagination space' for syntactic zone, that is working with clay physically as compared to the earlier task, Akashara devata', in which 2D letters had no visual 3D forms to fall back on. In this task 'Mask' had a large intellectual space (in verbal and visual modes) to explore for imagination. Short span of one day and ready access to information forced students to fall back on their cultural backgrounds and exposures. Discussion among themselves on the topic of 'Masks' did not happen to a large extent as they were new to each other as well as to design culture, it being the beginning task.

Working in Clay had the intended effect. Some who were familiar earlier chose conducive themes. We can see some themes like Tiger, Lobster, Owl, Wolf, Cow and Horse got 'built in' advantage. Theme of crocodile seemed to have run into difficult terrain. Abstraction overtook 'Metaphoric Imagination'. Faces seemed to have a restricted 'scope in syntactic' zone, ie in shaping 3D form.

Colouring provided a powerful 'space' for Imagination. Theme with 'Tiger head' gathered inspiration from local tradition, after a dialogue with instructors. The theme 'spider with its web' faced a challenge of depiction in Clay. *Such an adventure by one student can become a learning advantage for the entire class.*

Reflecting back, it seems we missed the 'opportunity' for a class room discussion and recording it at that time!

I realized while teaching at DJ Academy (2019), need for creating social bonds among the students if they are new to each other. I started creativity exercises for students to know each other. This greatly facilitated working in groups as well as creating a conducive eco-system for learning as 'fun'. With increasing number of students in present day classes this becomes important feature to address 'Active Silence' or 'collective motivation' in students.

Colouring also became a challenge as there was little scope for redoing or changing, other than overlaying with a stronger shade! Use of less colours seems to have given an advantage to some Masks: 3,5,8,9. Colouring actually reduced the initial expression like ferociousness in many: 3,5,6,10,11, 12,13. Interestingly theme 9, face of Buddha, retained the expression to a great extent after colouring. Influence of 'Comic books' is also visible in some face masks. One Mask was not done in clay. Perhaps it was not on the day of clay class.

2.0 Body Learning and Multisensory Perception

As working in clay was new to many, it gave a new input in to 'body learning' and 'knowing materials by feel' through kinesthetic sense. Those who had earlier exposure to clay work seem to have furthered their skill in 'shaping their 'Imagination'. When we work in 'Clay', we use both hands. This is positive feature in body learning. Importance of 'Seeing sense perceptions as 'aesthetic orders' is dealt in some detail in my article on *Form of Touch and Kinaesthetic senses*: Arupa in Pedagogy of Design-4 (4)

We did not pay any special attention to multisensory perceptions as we were not aware of the potentials. Conventional Kinesthetic and Visual modes of perceptions prevailed

3.0 Feed backs after 39 years indicate 'active Silence' prevailed during the 'Mask Task'.

- Dialogues and eco system for learning gets referred to in a feedback by Milind Tamhane:

  As had been my experience with AGR, he never had spoon fed the student, hence there were sketchy starting explanations on one paragraph Exercise task, this lets student explore his/ her own ideas, that I learnt over the period. Gaffoor, as delight to the student, made the resources- excellent clay, turn table, work bench, basic tools available

to the batch… no spoon feeding, assistance… and fun atmosphere. Turned out to be Ceramic lab was one of the most creative hangout for the batch…

4.0 For Students, Bout with 'Inner Order' might have happened at individual level as a part of overall IDC Learning experience.

4.1 Practice of Mindfulness, Imagery sessions or Theatre sessions were not part of the clay task at that time.

4.2 Preparation of Pedagogue dealt in 2.1 describes my involvement.

4.3 Reflections and feedback from my end

Over the period of 39years after the task my active engagement with Education led to the present framework 'Arupa the Implicate Order' (5)
A question If the same task were to be done now, what would it be came to my mind.
Several ideas sprang up.
New Ide

- Plan in workshop-mode with short sessions in Mindfulness, Social Interactions, Theatric Actions, Multi sense engagement, etc.,

- Skill learning with refinement and use of new tools. The class may be posed with a problem of 'inventing a new tool' to generate new shapes. For example, clay can be extruded by adopting hand extruders, used in 'Cooking'.
Such short problems were not explored at that time!

- Semantic zone, strategic thinking
Objective self-assessment after the task is done.
I used a technique of asking students to evaluate other's work with 1 to 10 marks in skill, theme etc,. The very process of evaluating other's work takes one into a *strategic zone* of 'measuring' of imagination by comparison which is an important aspect of design thinking skill as compared to art/craft thinking skill.

However, moving further to next topic in the checklist brought in a fresh winds of change!

5.0 AI and VR technologies
AI is throwing a new challenge to design to transform its pedagogy and practice as well as to connect and lead other fields.

5.1 At conceptual, planning level of the task:

A quick check on chat GPT gave me multiple dimensions of 'Masks' in the semantic zone.

- It brought memories of NID, which instilled 'Culture sensitivity' as a 'part of design', when I saw the shadow puppet show called 'Tolu Bommalata' in Telugu, which hails from my town, Anantapur, for the first time.

- It gave Information on number of 'Mask traditions with fascinating practices' prevailing in India and other countries which can be part of clay task.

5.2 At execution level of the task:
For two Questions (below) I put to incorporate 'multisensory perception in Aruapa frame work, chat gpt gave detailed plans for execution. (boxes in next page).

5.2.1 How can smells/ aromatic substances be introduced to students of design in a day task, if making a mask in clay with animal, bird or insects is their theme?

5.2.2 Have Masks any association with smells, perfumes?

5.2.1

Me: How can smells/ aromatic substances be introduced to students of design in a day task, if making a mask in clay with animal, bird or insects is their theme?

chatgpt

1. Begin with a Sensory Exploration Session

• Set Up an Aroma Station: Create a station with natural aromatic substances such as sandalwood, eucalyptus, mint, lavender, dried flowers, or spices (e.g., cinnamon, cloves). Include a few animal-related scents, like leather for mammals or earthy tones for insects.

• Link Scents to Themes: Guide students to associate specific smells with the characteristics of their chosen animal, bird, or insect. For example:

• Animals: Earthy or musky smells like leather or wet soil.

• Birds: Fresh, airy scents like floral or citrus tones.

• Insects: Sharp or herbal scents like mint or lemongrass.

2. Integrating Aromas into the Mask-Making Process

• Mix Aromas into the Clay: Provide essential oils or powdered aromatic materials (like sandalwood powder) for students to knead into the clay before sculpting their masks.

• Incorporate Aromatic Elements:

• Use dried herbs, petals, or aromatic fibers as embellishments for the mask.

• Create perforations or patterns in the mask to diffuse scent if the mask is displayed or worn.

• Use Aromatic Glazes (Optional): Offer water-based finishes infused with scents to coat the final product.

3. Connecting Themes to Emotions

• Storytelling through Smell: Ask students to write a short note about how their chosen aroma complements the mask's form and the personality of their chosen animal, bird, or insect.

• Discuss Emotional Responses: Facilitate a group discussion to explore how different smells affect perception, memory, and design interpretation.

4. Final Presentation

• Have students present their masks while describing the interplay between form and smell. Encourage peers to guess the theme based on the scent and visual cues.

Here comes the role of New age design pedagogue: how to ‘integrate and execute’ the vision with the available resources and objectives of the management of the School.

5.2.2

Me: Have Masks any association with smells, perfumes?

Masks and smells or perfumes have historical and cultural associations across various traditions and practices. Here are some notable connections:

1. Ritualistic and Ceremonial Uses
    - In many cultures, masks are part of sacred rituals where the use of incense or aromatic substances is integral. For example:
    - In Tibetan Buddhist Cham dances, masks worn by performers are often accompanied by the burning of incense, which purifies the space and sets a spiritual tone.
    - In Indian and African rituals, masks are sometimes anointed or surrounded by aromatic substances to invoke deities or spirits.
2. Materials Used in Mask-Making
    - Natural materials used in masks, such as wood, clay, and leather, often carry their own smells. In some traditions, masks are deliberately infused with specific aromatic oils, herbs, or resins during or after crafting to enhance their spiritual or symbolic significance.
    - For instance, sandalwood masks in South India retain a natural fragrance that adds a sensory layer to their use.
3. Theatrical Masks and Sensory Immersion
    - In theater, particularly in traditions like Noh in Japan or Indian classical dance, aromatic substances may be used in preparation spaces. These scents create an immersive atmosphere for performers and audiences, enhancing the emotional and sensory experience.
4. Modern Interpretations
    - Contemporary artists and designers have explored the intersection of masks and olfactory experiences. Masks in modern art installations or performances sometimes include scent as a medium to evoke emotions or memories
5. Perfumed Masks in History
    - Historical records indicate that during the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe, perfumed masks were used by the elite, particularly during masquerade balls. These masks not only served aesthetic purposes but also acted as a means of masking unpleasant odors.

5.3 AI, VR technologies also will facilitate adding new imaginative inputs in pedagogy.
To mention few

- Students may be in VR with craft groups in remote parts of World who make traditional masks
- Digital graphic tools can be used to create clay masks, after working with hands initially,

One can say sky is the limit

6.0 **Cross disciplinary Connections**,
Arupa frame work brings in a Future perspective for design pedagogy as it can induct its spirit to other disciplines. For example, Disciplines like Surgery and Dentistry do not have open ended 'Imagination development courses in Body Learning'. They tend to overlook 'Imagination in tacit zone of Kinesthetic and tactile senses. An exercise like 'Mask in Clay' can very well transform the learnings in these disciplines as 'kinesthetic and tactile sense-skills' have a common ground.
In fact, AI identified 9 more disciplines which could adopt such a task in their foundation courses.

7.0 **Reflections on strategic role of design**

Design has a major strategic role to play especially in pedagogy and related policies in area of Education.

- Design has a holistic approach in foundation which can spread to other professional disciplines with engagement in multiple senses.
- Design with its Vision of 'Arupa implicate order frame work' can bring a major change in learning in schools and Govt. policies in Education especially in developing countries.

A major role and opportunity for senior design pedagogues and established design schools are waiting in the new framework.

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