



Birds

Plague doctor bird masks

Age: 7-14

Topic: History

Time: 1 hour



What should learners already know?

- Humans have used birds as inspiration for centuries.

What equipment will I need?

- History workbooks
- Pens and pencils

How will learners explore this?

1. Go online to find some contemporary sources about the plague. There are lots to choose from. Either print out sources for children to read in groups, or read them as a class.
2. At the time, the bacterial cause of the disease was not known. Doctors believed that the plague was caused by 'miasma'; bad smells in the air. This was a time before microscopes, so no-one could see or detect what was causing disease.
3. Now, explore contemporary drawings of plague doctors, and discuss with children why the doctors wore this costume. To reinforce, get children to draw pictures of plague doctors in their history books, labelling each part of the costume with its intended purpose.
4. Have a discussion as a class about how useful this costume would have been, knowing what we know now about the pandemic.
5. While the mask would be useful for airborne diseases (transmitted through the air), we now know that it would not be useful to prevent flea bites. However, the costume did involve covering all of the body; while they didn't know this, this would have been very useful in avoiding flea bites! The cane, for preventing touching infected people, would also have been useful in limiting infections.

How can we show the learning?

- Raging from 1347 to 1352, the Bubonic plague was a highly contagious bacterial disease which is estimated to have killed between 25 to 50 million people in Europe. We now know that the plague was spread from person to person mostly by fleas; a flea would bite an infected person, become infected by the plague bacteria itself, then pass the plague onto the next person that it bit.
- Can children name which part of the bird costume was used for what?
- Hat: A wide-brimmed hat, to be easily recognisable as a doctor.
- Mask: A mask with a large bird beak. This was to keep out the 'bad smells'; small holes in the mask for allowing air in were filled with strong smelling substances, such as herbs or a vinegar-soaked sponge, to keep the bad smells out.
- Cane: A long wooden cane was used to keep a distance between the doctor and the patient. The cane meant that the doctor could tend to the patient without physically touching them.
- Over-coat or cloak: Protected the body from direct contact with patients.
- Gloves: Prevented direct contact with patients.
- Why do children think that the plague is important to learn about?
- Because it killed so many people, we want to ensure that we never allow another plague to spread as quickly. The plague also caused fundamental sociological and economic changes; people had previously been living under an oppressive feudal system, working for very little wages. Now peasants (farm workers) could demand better pay and living conditions.



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