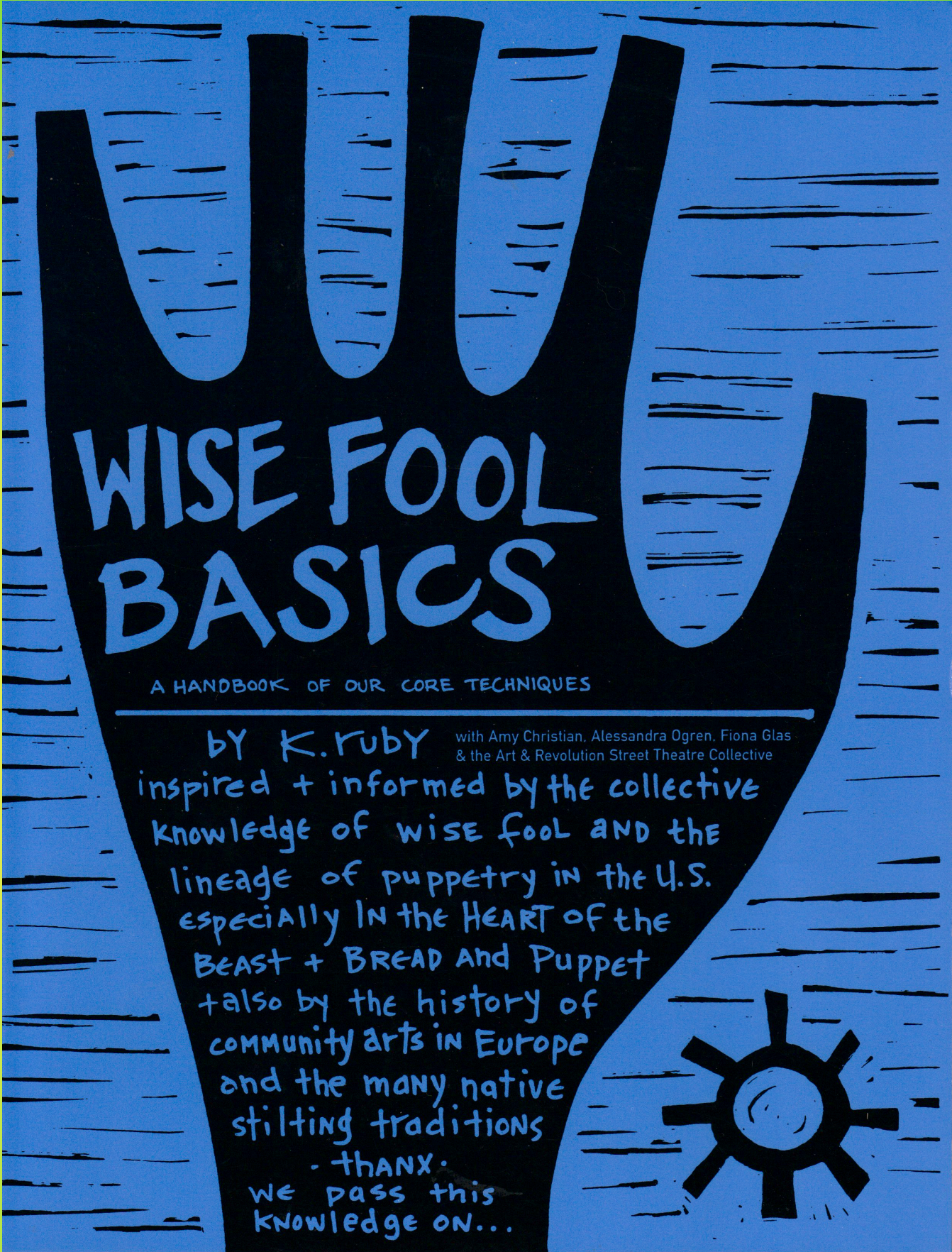




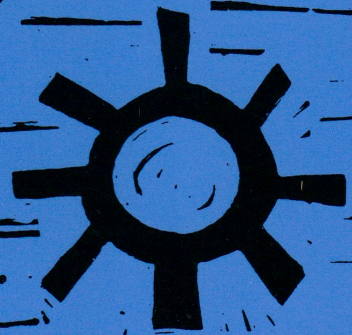
WISE FOOL BASICS

A HANDBOOK OF OUR CORE TECHNIQUES

BY K. RUBY

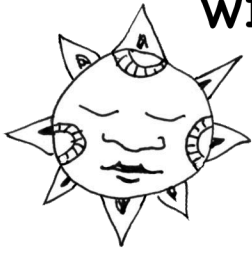
with Amy Christian, Alessandra Ogren, Fiona Glas
& the Art & Revolution Street Theatre Collective

inspired + informed by the collective
knowledge of WISE FOOL AND THE
lineage of puppetry in the U.S.
especially IN THE HEART OF THE
BEAST + BREAD AND PUPPET
+ also by the history of
community arts in Europe
and the many native
stilting traditions
- THANKS -
WE PASS THIS
KNOWLEDGE ON...



EXCERPT 2025

How To Build Giant Puppets!



WISE FOOL BASICS • The WISE FOOL HANDBOOK

25th Anniversary FREE EXCERPT 2025



A manifesto for making big visuals for social & environmental justice.

A call for unmediated live action: old-school, low-tech, IRL, by-hand.

Cardboard, matt knife, duct tape & wheatpaste techniques for rising up and speaking out.

May all people have the opportunity to realize their truth and potential, free from prejudice and oppression.

May we protect and preserve our precious natural world from the smallest soil bacteria to the largest tree.

May we cherish, listen, protect, connect and celebrate as our way of life.

May we live in wonder & beauty.



It's just a bit past the 25 year anniversary of the first offset printing of the Wise Fool Handbook (1999) as I sit down to digitize what has become a cult classic. We are delighted that our little book is still helping folks build giant puppets and other visuals for protest and performance after all these years. We need this now, more than ever.

The earliest editions of this book date back to 1992. I wrote the text on a computer that had a black and white screen and 2MB RAM (!) I was crazy about the wide selection of fonts and how easy it was to swap them out and change their size, which was not easy or elegant on a typewriter. Otherwise, these first editions were hand-drawn and pasted up with scissors and a glue stick, then copied in a copy shop and bound together on a sewing machine.

A lot has happened since then, including a digital revolution in printing and photography. This edition is a direct scan of the 1999 print book, with digital versions of the photos swapped in over the black & white halftones, which is all we had back then. We invite you to print use and share freely, our gift to the community. Please do not post on the web.



Wise Fool was founded at the Nevada Test Site in 1989-90 by K.Ruby, Jo (Amy) Christian and David Keyek. The puppet theatre was called Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, and the non-profit we created to support it was Wise Fool Community Arts. Wise Fool was a vital addition to the cultural & political fabric of San Francisco in the 1990s. We split into two companies at the end of this decade, when some core members relocated to New Mexico. At this writing, Wise Fool New Mexico and its partner, The Peñasco Theatre Collective, continue their offerings as vital contributors to the cultural landscape of Northern New Mexico. Wise Fool Puppet Intervention held its last public event in San Francisco in 2007.



To purchase additional digital or print-on-demand copies, plus updates, freebies, resources & more go to

WiseFoolHandBook.com

This excerpt is copyright commons.

Please credit K.Ruby/wisefoolhandbook.com when sharing.

If you have been passed a free copy and are moved to make a donation, we are deeply grateful.

Donations can be sent via Venmo at the following QR code.

Want to share a picture of your puppet or action?

Send a photo with caption & credit to wisefool@lmi.net

and we'll post it at wisefoolhandbook.com

Puppet related questions and requests for training can also be sent to this address.

Fine Print: The images in this book are intended for documentary, educational and artistic purposes. Most were taken at public events and gatherings where there was no reasonable expectation of privacy. However, if you are featured in a photograph and wish to be credited, anonymized, or removed, please contact us.



venmo

SUPPLIES FOR MAKING PUPPETS & PROPS

This list of supplies is by no means exhaustive, nor is every item required (build with what you have!).

CARDBOARD

Cardboard is used to create everything from puppet heads to props and backdrops. It is readily available at any recycling center and easily scavenged off the street. Furniture & bicycle stores are a good resource for large boxes. Look for single-ply cardboard with large surface areas without folds. See "Basic Techniques," p.42, for more information on types of cardboard.

PAPER

For paper mache', collect **brown paper bags** and **newspaper**. You can also use other types of paper like phone book pages for extra lightweight projects or photographic backdrop paper for a heavy-duty job. Butcher paper or newsprint can be useful for brainstorming and sketching.

ADHESIVES

White glue or **wood glue** can be used for strength when screwing wood together. (Don't use it if you want to take the wood apart and use it on something else later!) They are also useful as all-purpose adhesives for attaching cloth to paper mache' heads, cloth to cloth, paper to paper, yarn to paper mache, etc. The difference between the two is that white glue is water-soluble once dry and wood glue is not. Use in combination with staples for extra strength. For cloth projects, you can find "Tacky Glue" or other glue specifically designed for cloth at a fabric store. **Masking tape** is a good all-purpose tape for taping armatures to backboards, creating newspaper armatures and temporarily taping together cardboard pieces before applying paper mache'. **Duct tape** is another puppet catch-all supply, useful for binding and repairs. Don't fall into the trap of using duct tape for everything though; there are always many ways to approach a problem, and duct tape is one of the more expensive supplies. Finally, a **hot glue gun** and **glue gun sticks** for quick projects and last-minute decorating (white glue will work just as well in most cases, but doesn't dry as fast). Attach yarn, cloth, beads and baubles with hot glue. **CAUTION:** Hot glue is HOT. Children under 6 should not use it, and other kids should be supervised.

WHEATPASTE

We like the consistency of powdered commercial **wallpaper paste**, but, if money is an issue you can use white flour or cornstarch. See "Basic Techniques," p.42, for recipes.

CUTTERS

Mat knives and blades are an important tool for cutting cardboard. **Exacto knives** are smaller and useful for more delicate projects like shadow puppets. **Scissors** can be used to cut many things, but for cardboard, **craft scissors** work better. Designate a clearly marked pair of new scissors as **cloth scissors**. If the scissors have been used on paper, wire and other things, they will no longer cut cloth. **CAUTION:** Children under 12 should not be allowed to use mat knives or Exacto knives. Cut things out for them, let them use craft scissors or let them carve cardboard with a **serrated butter knife**.

PAINT

Latex house paint can be scavenged from people's basements and supplemented with a few bright colors from the store. Many paint stores sell their mis-mixes at a discount, and some will even give them to you if you ask. We prefer matte finish paints if you can afford to be choosy (see "Basic Techniques-painting," p. 45). **Tempera paint** is relatively inexpensive & great for projects with kids as it is water-soluble, even when dry. For the same reason, it is not good for puppets that must endure the elements and seasons.

PAINTING SUPPLIES

Paintbrushes, buckets, tarps, rags, aprons or painting shirts. We use the cheap wooden-handled paintbrushes you can get at a paint or hardware store. Get a variety of sizes. For painting shirts for kids, second-hand button-down shirts worn backwards work great.

HARDWARE

We use **wood screws (1-1/4" plus assortment)** for building puppet frames, floats and other structures. Other hardware you may end up needing are **nuts, bolts, washers, nails, eye screws** and **pulleys**. We have tried to develop other methods of attaching things than using nuts, bolts and other small hardware as these small parts seem to end up missing at crucial moments!

FABRIC & SEWING SUPPLIES

To find cloth for puppet costumes, look for **white and colored sheets, drapes & bedspreads** at the second-hand store. Most towns also have a discount fabric store where you can get inexpensive remnants and **large pieces of lightweight cloth**. While not absolutely necessary, if you know how to use one, a **sewing machine** can enhance your puppet-making project. Otherwise you may want to at least have **thread, needles** and **safety pins** on hand. Other items you might want are **Velcro** (myriad uses! We get the sticky-backed kind for attaching removable cardboard puppet parts), **elastic** (to hold masks on your head and for moving puppet parts), **cloth dye** (for dyeing white sheets), **yarn** (for puppet hair and other decorations).

WOOD

Most towns have a lumber recycler, and wood can also be scavenged from dumpsters and building sites. Lightweight straight-grain wood like fir, pine and cedar are best. If you have a table saw you can rip wide boards into narrower pieces suitable for puppet-building. The most useful sizes are **1 x 1"s, 1 x 2"s, 1 x 3"s, round poles, bamboo, lathe, plywood, dowels, rattan** (a flexible reed), **2 x 4"s** (for larger projects like floats).

ARMATURE MATERIALS

For puppet projects where you need to create a base to build upon, use **styrofoam blocks, bottles & cans** or **large and small plastic bags** stuffed with **styrofoam bubbles** or **newspaper**. **Ceramic clay** can also be used as part of creating an armature. See "Basic Techniques" for more information on where to get and how to use clay. You will also need some kind of thin plastic such as **dry-cleaning bags, Saran Wrap** or **garbage bags opened up flat** to use as a "release agent" between your finished armature and the wet paper mache.

TOOLS

At a minimum, you will need **hand saws** for cutting wood and a **drill** for screwing wood together. We like the little folding hand saws you can get in the gardening section at the hardware. The Makita brand or other cordless drill is best for puppet projects on the go. If you have access to them, other power tools that can be useful are a **jigsaw, table saw** and **circular saw**. Other handtools you might want to have around are **wire cutters, hammer, pliers, wrenches** and **screwdrivers**.

MISCELLANEOUS

Some other things that come in handy for puppet building: **wire, string, rope** and **bicycle inner tubes** for binding things together. **Plastic container lids** to create puppet washers for screwing paper mache to wood. Old **backpack frames** to enhance your puppet frames. **Foam rubber, PVC pipe, wheels, foam core** and other **assorted building materials**. People will create new uses for whatever you can scavenge! **Feathers, beads, raffia** (a decorative grass), **glitter** for making the masks and puppets beautiful. **Marking pens** for brainstorming, drawing things out on cardboard, etc.

STAPLERS & STAPLES

The one specialized tool we use is a **heavy duty plier stapler**, which we call a "creature" because it looks like one. It is extremely useful for cardboard construction, as it can attach two pieces of cardboard together, just as a desk stapler attaches two pieces of paper. The model we use is the Rapid-31, from Sweden, with a pointed tip for gouging through the cardboard. Arow also carries a model in this style (the P-22). Look under "fasteners" in the yellow pages to find a store specializing in staplers, or order from our supplier, ACO Staple & Abrasive (see "Puppet Resources" p.95). They will COD anywhere in North America. Be sure to mention our name for a friendly reception; they will know just what you are looking for. Order the compatible staples at the same time (3/8" & 1/2" work best with cardboard). The other kind of stapler, the **tacker stapler**, is the heavy-duty type you are probably more familiar with. They are available in most hardware stores and are useful for attaching cardboard or cloth to wood (the staples go straight down, rather than folding under in the back).

***IMPORTANT!!! When working with two or more kinds of staplers:**

Every stapler has its own size staples, designed for that particular brand and model. It is important that everyone using the staplers know the difference between the staples. The staples may be very close in size and **the wrong staples will jam the stapler**, which is inconvenient and frustrating. It is possible to learn to deconstruct the stapler and remove the guilty staples, but it is a tedious, time-consuming process.



★ SUPPLY CHECKLIST ★

Copy this list for use when preparing your build. The supplies we consider most necessary are in bold type.

PAPER SUPPLIES

cardboard
brown paper bags
newspaper
newsprint
butcher paper
photographic backdrop paper

ADHESIVES

white glue
wood glue
duct tape
masking tape
wheatpaste
hot glue gun
glue gun sticks
fabric glue

CUTTERS

mat knives
scissors
cloth scissors
Exacto knife
craft scissors

PAINT & PAINTING SUPPLIES

latex house paint
brushes
buckets
tarps
rags
tempera paint
aprons or painting shirts

WOOD

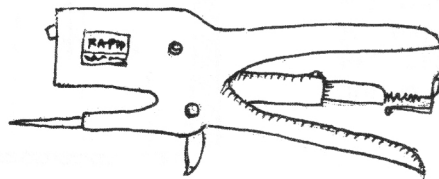
1" X 1"
1" x 2"
1" x 3"
2" x 4"
round poles
bamboo
lathe
plywood
dowels
rattan

ARMATURE MATERIALS

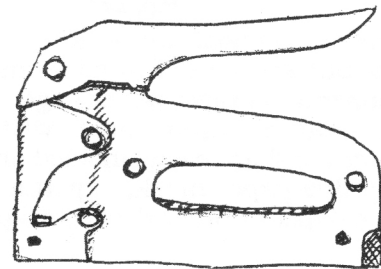
plastic garbage bags
small plastic bags
saran wrap or dry cleaning bags
styrofoam blocks
styrofoam bubbles
cans & bottles
newspaper
ceramic clay

HANDTOOLS

hand saw
plier stapler & staples
tacker stapler & staples
pliers
wire cutter
hammer
screwdriver
wrench



'creature' stapler



'tacker' stapler

POWER TOOL

drill
cordless drill
jigsaw
circular saw
table saw

HARDWARE

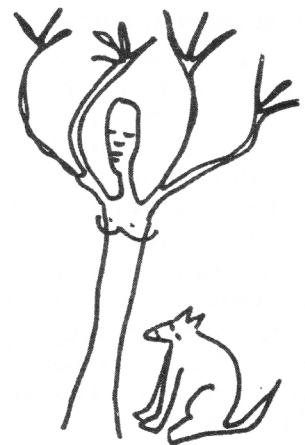
wood bullet screws
misc. nails,nuts,bolts,washers

FABRIC & SEWING SUPPLIES

sheets, drapes, bedspreads
needle & thread
safety pins
large pieces of colorful fabric
sewing machine
velcro
elastic
cloth dye
yarn

MISCELLANEOUS

wire
plastic container lids
bicycle inner tubes
marking pens
rope
string
yarn
backpack frames
PVC pipe
foam rubber
wheels
feathers
beads
glitter
raffia
pencils



BASIC TECHNIQUES

WORKING WITH PAPER MACHÉ

Paper is an incredible resource. It is a readily available re-use material, extremely versatile and amazingly durable when mixed with a binding agent such as glue or wheatpaste. True paper maché is mashed paper with a binding agent added. The method described here, used by puppeteers and maskmakers throughout the U.S., is paper coated with paste and layered in strips.

Here's what you will need:

Paper

You can use almost any kind of paper for paper maché, but the most available and versatile are **newspaper** and **brown paper bags**. They have less sizing (starch) than most writing paper or magazines and are easily molded and shaped. For a really fine paper mask, experiment with cotton rag, rice paper or other decorative paper.

Paste

We like commercial **wallpaper paste** in powder form. A common brand found in hardware stores is Golden Harvest, but any will do. The pre-mixed kind tends to be more expensive and stickier in texture, so we don't recommend it.

Mixing the Paste

Mix wallpaper paste by adding the powder to the water (not the other way around!). Add a little bit at a time. It expands in the water. If it is a cold day, use warm water so your hands don't get cold! Use a manual egg beater to avoid clumping, or mix with your hands, smoothing the lumps between your fingers. The ideal consistency is that of heavy cream or a light pea soup. Thinner than this will not adhere well, thicker is gloopy and won't soak into the paper.

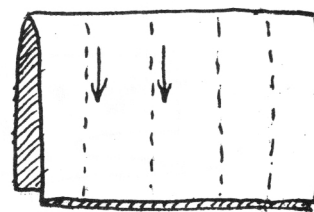
For a low-cost alternative, mix a paste of **white flour & water** or **cornstarch & water**.

White flour binds well, though the finished product will tend to be a little soft and will break down as time goes on, as it is an organic material. All our old masks made with flour wheatpaste are gone, as mice quite enjoy munching on them in the attic or basement. Add a little white glue to the flour and water mixture to strengthen it.

For cornstarch, pre-mix with a little cold water to a syrupy consistency. Add slowly to a pot of boiling water, mixing rapidly to avoid lumping. Use @1/2 cup dry cornstarch for each quart of boiling water. Let cool and adjust consistency by adding water.

Working with Newspaper

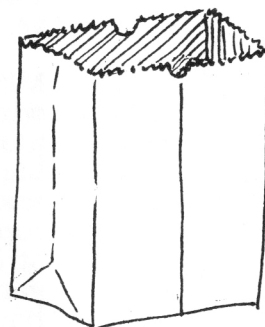
Newspaper has a grain, as does most paper. Rip it along the grain into wide strips. Don't dip the newspaper directly into the paste, it will disintegrate! Instead, dip your hand into the paste and coat both sides of the newspaper, squeezing off the excess paste between your fingers. Rip smaller pieces as you go along to lay flat on the surface you are covering. Smooth down the edges and sop up extra wheatpaste with your hands. With practice you will find the best size pieces for different curves and contours.



rip news paper
along the grain

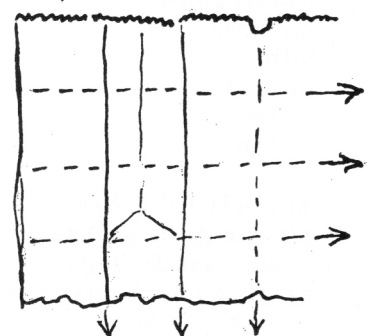
Working With Brown Paper.

Heavy-duty bags from the market are tougher than newspaper, and also more flexible. Open the bag along the seams and rip into squares about the size of your wheatpaste bucket. Plunge 5 or 6 sheets into the wheatpaste one at a time so they get covered on both sides. Reach into your bucket and pull the sheets out all at once, rolling them up to squeegee out the extra paste. You now have in your hand what we call the paper maché "cigar." Unroll the cigar and scrunch the paper a bit to get it good and soft. You now have a "packet" of ready to go paper maché. Take the sheets one by one and rip into smaller pieces as you go, adhering the paper so it lays flat to your working surface.



open along seams

rip into squares



IMPORTANT!

Never cut the paper, always rip it. The fibers in the ripped edges help bind the paper together and make a smoother surface when dry.

Layering the Paper

We use newspaper and brown paper alternately as we build up to distinguish one layer from the next. You can also sometimes find "colored sections" of the newspaper (yellow, green or pink) and use these to differentiate layers. We end with a layer of brown paper, because we find it nicer to paint on. The number of layers depends on the project (see individual projects).

Newspaper Laminate

By laminating newspaper together, you can apply multiple layers all at once. This is especially helpful for large puppet heads, where you may want as many as 10 layers.

Lay a sheet of newspaper out on your tarp. Cover the top surface entirely with a thin coat of wheatpaste. Lay another sheet of newspaper on top, and repeat until you have the desired number of layers. Leave the top of your stack dry. Then fold the newspaper and rip into wide strips along the grain. These strips may now be coated on both sides with paste and ripped into smaller pieces to apply to your mold, just as a single sheet of paper would be.

Paper Maché "Build-up"

Use newspaper to build up form, fill in gaps in cardboard construction or create fine details on the surface of a mask. Working dry on a dry surface, crumple the newspaper and tape it into place with masking tape before covering with two or more layers of paper maché. Working wet, slightly dampen the newspaper with wheatpaste. Crumple and mold it into the shape you want. Hold it in place with a bit of wheatpaste as you cover it with two or more layers of paper maché. For fine details, sculpt with damp newspaper on the surface of your project just before applying the final layer of paper maché.



The fish on the face of this water spirit puppet were made with the newspaper build-up method, just before the final layer of paper maché was added.

WORKING WITH CARDBOARD

the art of creating 3 dimensions from 2

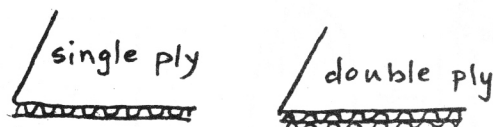
Like paper, cardboard is an optimal building material for low-budget, low-tech puppetry projects in the U.S. It is abundant as a re-use material, pliable, resilient and adaptable to many different kinds of projects. Though cardboard, as a paper product, does contain some toxins, it remains a low-impact material, recyclable and bio-degradable.

Types of cardboard

become a cardboard connoisseur!

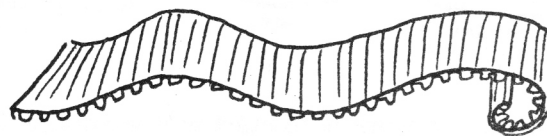
Single Ply

A puppeteer's dream is large sheets of unbroken single-ply. It is the most common cardboard and the most versatile. Most standard boxes and some bicycle & furniture boxes are made from single-ply. It can be used for large masks, puppet heads, hands and props. It is easy to sculpt and therefore well suited to detailed projects that require a fair amount of cutting, molding and stapling.



Double Ply

This industrial-strength cardboard is often used for refrigerator and furniture boxes. It is thick and rigid, unsuitable for projects which require much stapling and molding. Use it instead to construct large, simple, durable things with flat surfaces.



Roll Cardboard

Used for packaging furniture and knick-knacks, fresh, unused roll cardboard is hard to find but pleasant to work with. Use it on small work or for detail work on larger pieces. It is not suited for bearing weight or durability, as it is softer and more pliable than most cardboard. If you construct hands out of roll cardboard, for example, be prepared to add many layers of paper maché to strengthen them.

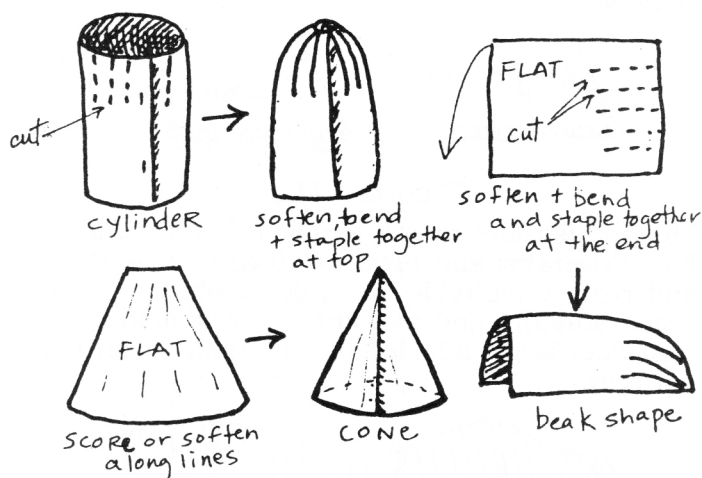
Paper Board

Tagboard, railroad board, manila folders, cereal boxes and other types of non-laminated, lightweight cardboard are useful for shadow puppets, kids' projects and building up form on small projects.

Sculpting with cardboard

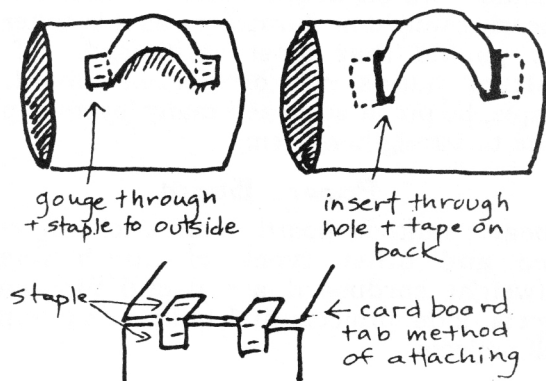
Think of cardboard as a sculptural material. Like any material, it has its strengths and limitations. Like paper, cardboard has a grain. It is easier to bend along the long lines of the inside waffling. So to start a curved surface, you can fold and soften along these lines. It is important to find a balance between softening enough to get the desired shape, but not so much that you lose the internal structure and strength of the cardboard. For the same reason, it's better not to kneel or stand on your cardboard (it's sacred!), as this will break down the internal structure and make it flimsy. Feel free to pull stuff apart if it's not working as you imagined, or build up form by adding more cardboard. The seams and punctures can be covered later with paper maché. If you aren't sure how to arrive at a certain 3D shape, start by making a miniature "mock up" out of paper or cardboard. Cut what you think might work and try it on a small scale, then adjust it to find a good starting shape.

Here are some shapes to start with:



Another way to work is to start with a square box and cut, staple and add 'til you find the appropriate shape.

To attach things in the middle of a large surface, use the gouge point of a creature stapler, or use a notch and tab system with tape.



PAINT & PAINTING TECHNIQUES

Wise Fool works almost exclusively with latex house paint. It is inexpensive, easily scavengable, water-soluble, comes in a wonderful range of colors and is the least toxic of commercially available waterproof paints. We prefer the matte finish, not only because it mixes easily, but because the finished look is more "alive." There is no glare on the surface of the mask or puppet so it is easier to see the image. We stay away from oil-based paints because they are messy and toxic and therefore not suitable for workshop situations or inexperienced painters.

Basic guidelines for working with paint:

- Work on a palette (see below).
- Wash your brush between each color.
- Let one layer dry before adding another, especially if you are trying to paint over something.
- Keep your brushes in water when not in use.
- Cover your paint cans, especially if you are working outside on a hot day.
- Dispose of your paint water responsibly (see "Cleaning Up," next page).

Working with a Palette

Rather than distributing and mixing paint in cups, we work with a piece of cardboard as a palette. This conserves paint and is more effective for mixing colors. If you are unfamiliar with the intricacies of paint mixing, or you are using paint you are unfamiliar with, this can save you from ending up with large amounts of yucky green or brown, as you try to get the right color in the mixing cup. Scoop a small amount of paint onto the palette with your brush. For mixing colors, count the number of scoops or dabs of each color you use as you go along so that you can recreate that color. If you need to mix a large amount, mix it on a palette first to get the right proportions and then mix into a cup.

For kids we pre-mix colors and give them small amounts in muffin tins, juice cans or ice cream containers (especially with lids!). You can put one brush with each color and refill the containers as the paint gets used up.

Basecoats

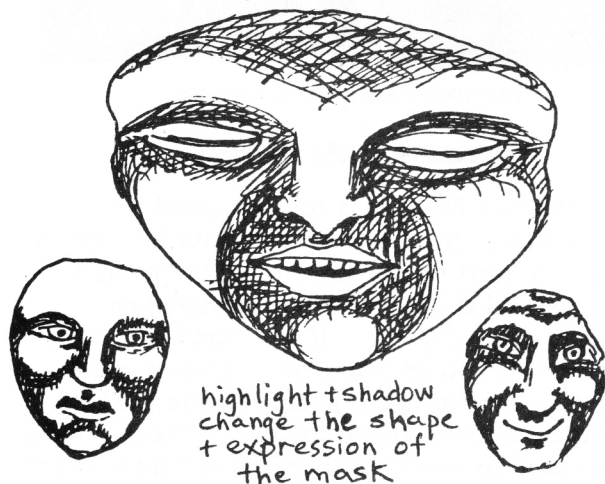
For a puppet that is a bit more waterproof and vibrantly colored, start by coating your entire piece with a basecoat of white or off-white matte paint. For a rich dark effect, try basecoating with black or dark brown and adding highlights over this to bring the mask alive.

We also work with washes as our initial coat of paint. This utilizes the brown of the paper and the result is earthy and alive. Mix your color on a palette. Apply it to the puppet with a wet brush

or wet rag and then wipe it off as you go, smearing the paint in a thin wash over the entire surface.

Shading & Highlights

Look at your face in the mirror and notice where there is light and shadow. By applying a base coat, you have taken away most of the highlight & shadow in the puppet face, so it appears blank. To bring the mask to life, use a lighter color on all the high points (forehead, eyebrows, bridge of the nose, cheeks, chin, lips) and a darker color on all the low points (hollows of the eyes, under the eyes, around the nostrils, under the nose, under the lip, under the chin). Add yellow or white to the basecoat for highlights, black or brown for shadows. Later you can experiment with using complementary or contrasting colors for shadow and highlight. Blend with a drybrush, wash or stippling technique.



Drybrush & Stippling Techniques

For blending and subtle color changes, take a dry brush and dip it just barely into the paint. Brush off excess paint and then brush lightly over the surface. The surface texture will catch the paint. Continue to blend lightly. A sponge can be used for a stippled texture. Get a small amount of paint on the sponge and sponge off excess on a palette. Dab the sponge onto the puppet. Experiment with different sizes and types of sponges.

"Aliveness"

Whether your painting style is naturalistic, whimsical or fantastical, look for what makes your puppet come alive. Look for ways that the features and expression read clearly. Give particular attention to the eyes and the corners of the mouth. Refer to a mirror or photographs to see how light plays on the face. We put a little dot of white in the irises which brings the eyes alive.

Stepping Back

Every once in awhile, stand back from your puppet. If it is a giant puppet, stand back at least 10 feet. It will look very different than it does when you are working on it up close. It is important that the puppet read well from a distance, as it will probably be seen from a distance. As a general guide, give highlights and shadows more contrast than looks natural close up. Keep working until you are satisfied. Ask other people for input. The paint is quite forgiving. If you get completely frustrated, you can re-basecoat and start again (it's been known to happen).

Cleaning up

Dispose of your paint responsibly! Don't dump it on the ground or in a drain that goes to ground water or other natural water systems. One way to tread lightly with paint is to do your initial rinsing into one bucket. The paint will settle to the bottom. Eventually you can pour off the cleaner water on the top (into sewage water where it will be sanitized) and let the paint at the bottom dry up so it can be safely disposed of. Bring your excess paint and used paint tins to the local Hazardous Waste Center. These centers are set up to deal with paint safely. They are also sometimes a source for free paint. Ask them.



Painting with a palette in a maskmaking workshop.

GIANT PUPPET BASICS

Giant puppets are as individual as people, and puppet construction techniques vary greatly around the globe as puppeteers work in traditional methods, share techniques, pick up ideas here & there and develop their own "puppet technologies."

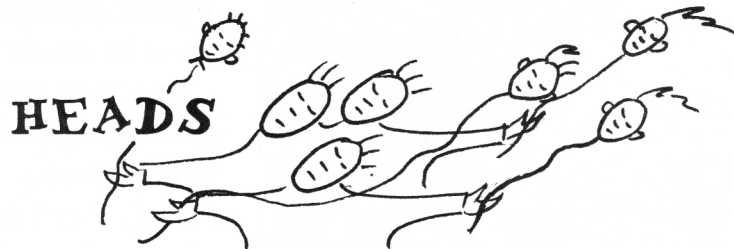
How you construct your puppets will depend on available materials, needs & limitations and your own unique genius. Our basic building materials are paper and cardboard, but when we were in the Czech Republic these things were scarce, so we built with wood, twigs and burlap. The limitation fed and enhanced our creativity and resourcefulness.

Our construction techniques have been shaped by the need to make lightweight, durable puppets that easily disassemble for transportation and storage. Because of this, our puppets tend to be constructed without much cladding (built-up bulk in the torsos and arms) or articulated parts. We focus instead on sculpting and painting the faces and hands and creating beautiful costumes. Just as in mask work, we look for what makes the puppet "come alive."

In the following pages, we outline several methods of creating heads, hands, frames and costumes. None of these methods is definitive: there is no "right" way to build a puppet. Instead, we hope you see this as a starting point for you to create your own solutions and technologies. The methods you choose will evolve as your skill and aesthetic evolves.

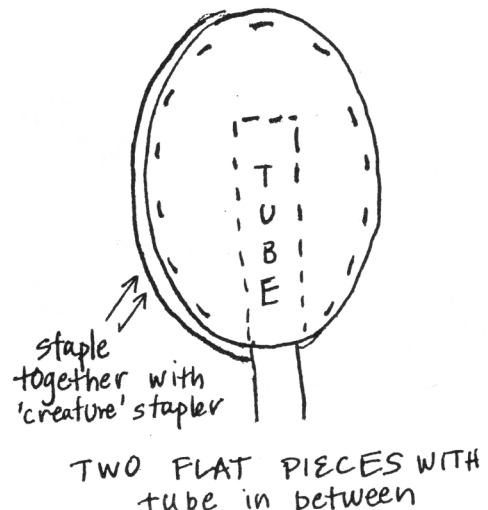
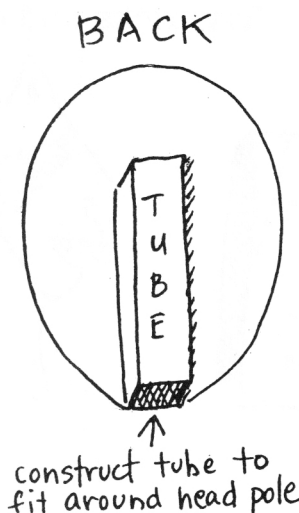
One of our puppet mottoes is "If you didn't do it three times, you didn't get it right." Puppetry is a process of trial and error. The more you can think ahead about how it's all going to work, however, the less time you will spend backtracking. At a minimum, think about how your head and hands will attach to the frame before you paint. Otherwise, you may find yourself gouging into your newly finished puppet head. Think through other limitations: Will it fit out the door? Will it fit in the car? Are there low-hanging trees or wires or wind or rain where you will be performing? Who will carry the puppet and will that make a difference in construction? What actions does the puppet need to perform?

Please note that different construction methods have different drying times which vary with the climate and the season. This may greatly affect the timing of your project. You can speed up your drying time by putting your work outside if it is warm and sunny, placing it by a fan or heater or in a room with good cross-ventilation.



flat cardboard

In a rush? Cut a puppet head out of a flat piece of cardboard and staple it onto a pole. Create the illusion of 3D with a good paint job. For flat heads with more transportability and longevity, paper mache a tube to the back for a pole to slide into or sandwich the tube between two identical pieces of flat cardboard. See "2D Effigies" p.64 for info on making flat heads that look like real people.



flat cardboard with build-up

If you have a bit more time, build up features on a flat cardboard head with cardboard or crumpled newspaper and tape. For cardboard build up, cover the seams with a layer of brown paper bag maché. Drying time: overnight.

For newspaper build-up cover with a layer of newspaper and a layer of brown bag.

Drying time: 1-2 days.

As with the simple flat head, you can attach the head to the frame with staples, create a tube and/or cut a second piece of cardboard for the back of the head. If stapling together, do so before maché.

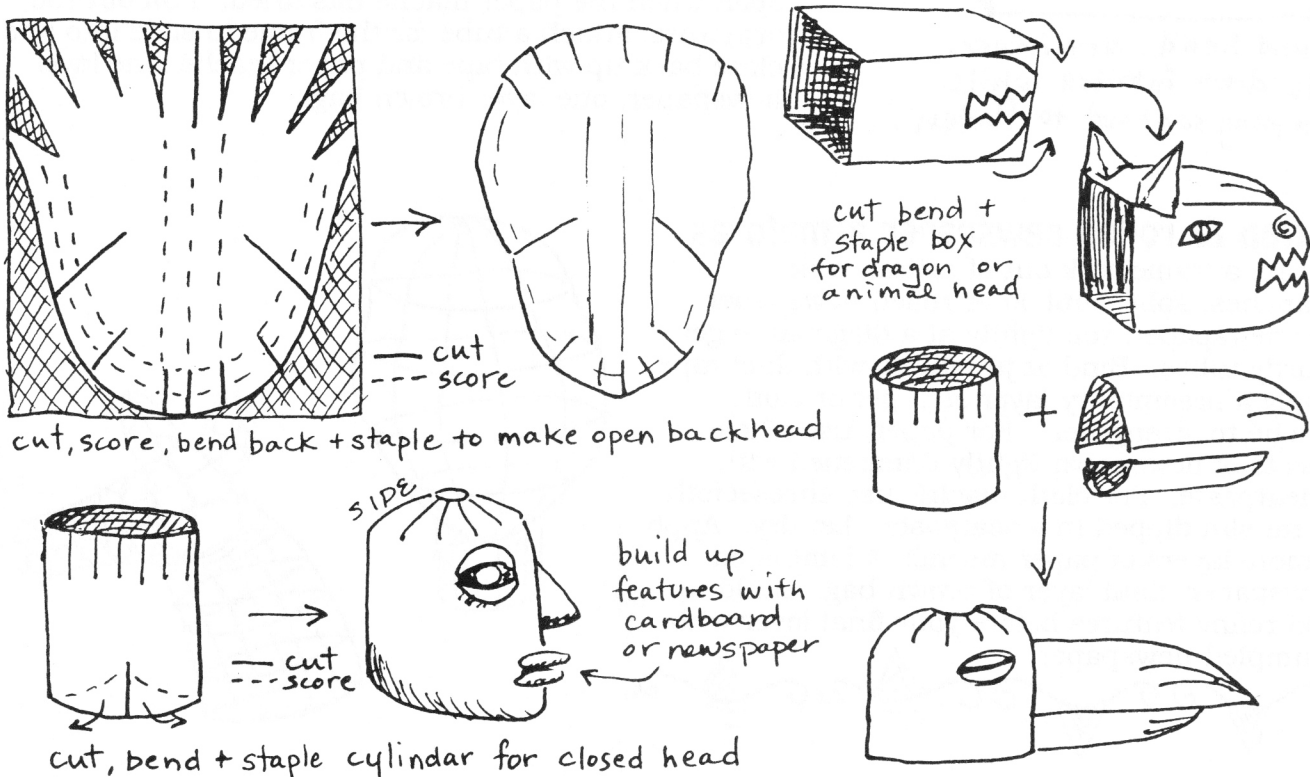


"Fight Back" Tiger, created at the Michigan Womyn's Festival. Tiger is flat cardboard with build-up and a great paint job.

3-D cardboard

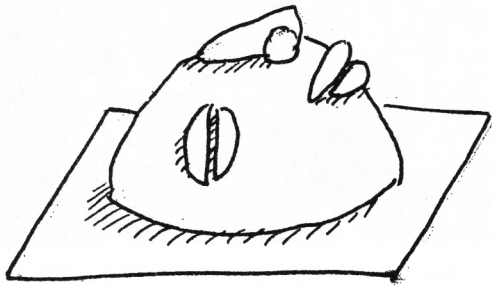
Construct a head out of cardboard. Start with a box, cylinder or flat piece of single-ply cardboard. Use a mat knife, a stapler and much trial and error until you get the shape you want. To get curves, make cuts and overlap, working the cardboard with your hands to soften and shape.

Add noses, beaks, snouts, ears, etc. by cutting a slit into the basic shape and inserting other pieces of cardboard, use your gouge point stapler (see notes on staplers in "Supplies" p.40) or build up the form by crumpling newspaper and taping it on. Paper mache the seams with a layer of newspaper, then paper mache the entire form with a layer of brown paper bag. Drying time: 1 to 2 days.

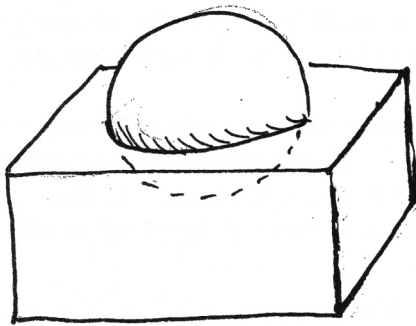


clay armatures

Sculpt head out of ceramic clay. For big heads create an "armature" out of cans, bottles, wood or old styrofoam to support the clay and add depth to the head. Cover the armature with sheet plastic, and staple or tape the plastic down to a plywood or cardboard baseboard. Sculpt the clay over this base. Cover the entire armature with 1/2" to 1" of clay and then build up the features. Once the head is sculpted cover the clay while still wet with a layer of plastic wrap or recycled plastic bags, working them into and around form, so they lay smooth on the surface. Paper maché 5 to 8 layers over this as follows: 1 layer brown paper bag, 3 to 6 layers of newspaper laminate, final layer of brown paper bag. Drying time: 3-7 days. When dry, turn over and pull out clay and armature. Break up clay and put in buckets for reuse.



open back head
armature taped to board



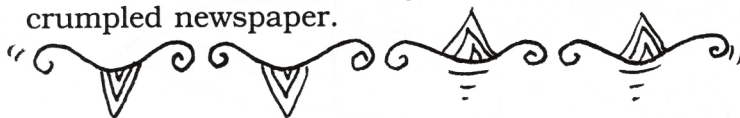
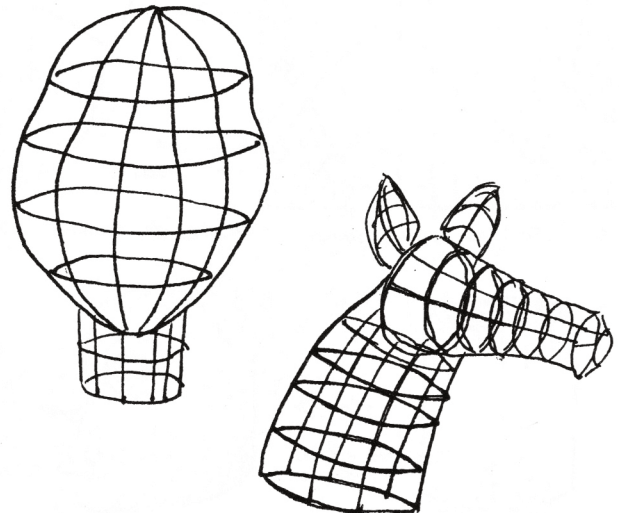
round head. armature
sits down into box while
working so as not to flatten

stuffed bag armature

Make an armature by stuffing a large plastic garbage bag with styrofoam bubbles, newspaper or broken styrofoam. Use tape to mold the armature into the shape you want for your puppet head. The form should be fairly firm. For an open-back head, tape the armature to a piece of cardboard, leaving the bottom open when you paper maché (like a commoner head-style mask). For a round head, cut a hole in a box to support the head while you are working and cover the entire surface of the armature with paper maché. Paper maché 5 layers as follows: 1 layer brown bag, 4 layers laminated newspaper. Build up facial features with crumpled newspaper dampened with wheatpaste. Don't use much paste or the puppet will be very heavy. Hold the features in place with newspaper maché. Cover the finished face with a layer of brown bag. Drying time: 3-7 days. For round heads, cut the head open when the paper maché has dried. Pull out the armature, attach a tube for the frame to slide into and close back up with tape and paper maché (one layer newspaper, one layer brown bag).

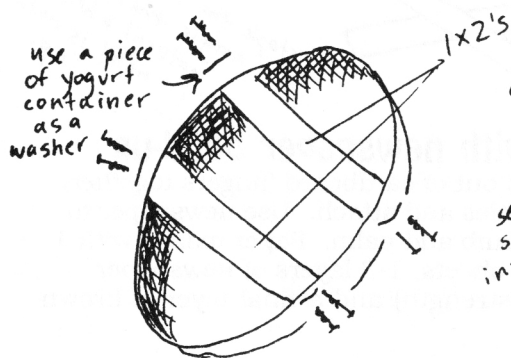
rattan & rolled newspaper armatures

Create a framework out of rattan, willow branches, split bamboo or rolled newspaper. For newspaper, roll tightly at a diagonal to get sturdy tubes. Bind at junctures with duct tape. Apply a preliminary layer of paper or cloth maché to strengthen. For paper, use whole sheets of newspaper lightly dampened with wheatpaste. For cloth maché, use cheesecloth or muslin dipped in wheatpaste. Let dry. Apply 5 more layers of paper maché: 4 laminated newspaper, final layer of brown bag. Build up and refine features before your final layer with crumpled newspaper.



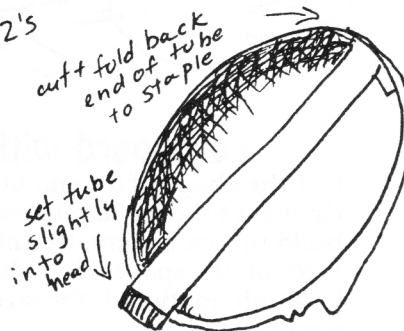
finishing touches for heads

1. Trim edges and bind with paper maché for strength & durability.
2. Create a way for the head to attach to the frame using a cross-piece or "tube technology."



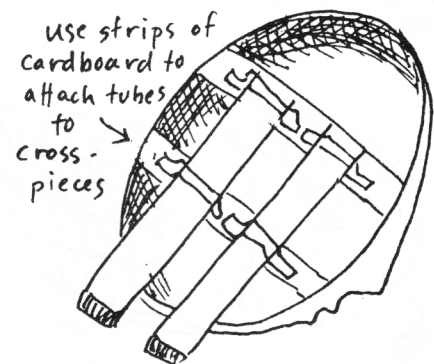
Cross-piece method:

Measure wood and cut at angles if necessary. Attach to head with screws and plastic washers. Washers prevent the screws from pulling through the cardboard. Paper maché over joints. Bolt or tie on to the frame with bicycle inner tube.



Tube method:

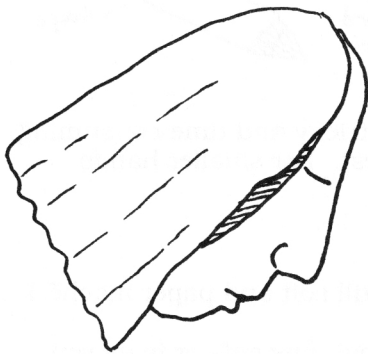
Measure the tube around the wood you will be using. Staple into the head and paper maché joints. The elegance of the tubes is that there are no small parts to keep track of.



Combination method:

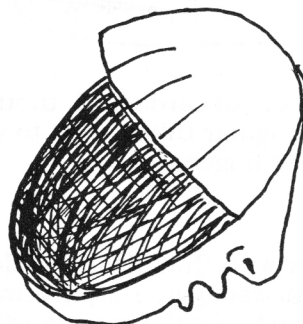
Attach crosspieces for strength and affix tubes to the crosspieces. Add a cardboard neck if you desire, or create the illusion of a neck later when you create the costume.

3. Create the back of the head, completing the illusion. Depending on how much time you have, you can use one of the following methods:



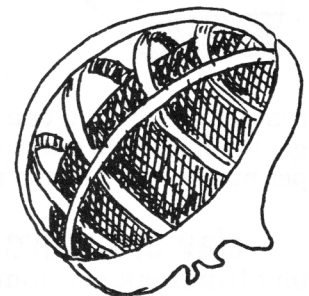
Flat head:

Cover the back of the head with cloth, yarn or raffia for hair.



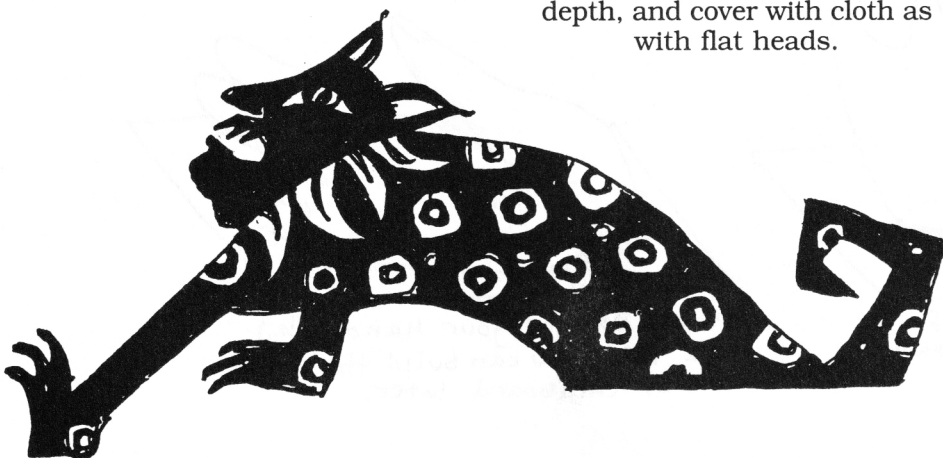
Round open-back head

Build up cardboard on the back of the head to create a bit more depth, and cover with cloth as with flat heads.



Round closed head:

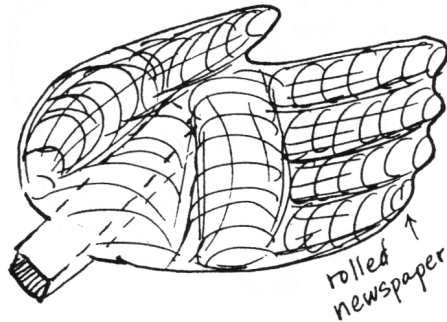
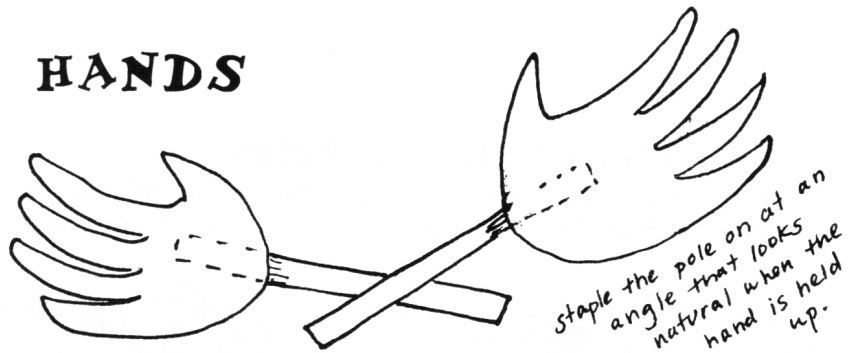
Create a framework by rolling newspaper tubes and attaching into the back of the head with masking tape. Paper maché the form with 6 layers of paper maché: Start with one layer of full sheets of newspaper and allow to dry. Then add 4 layers laminated newspaper and one layer brown paper bag. When dry, cut open and remove framework. Affix tube inside head for frame attachment. Tape back together and paper maché the seam.



HANDS

flat cardboard

Cut hands out of double-ply cardboard. Create the illusion of 3D with a good paint job. Staple onto handpoles.

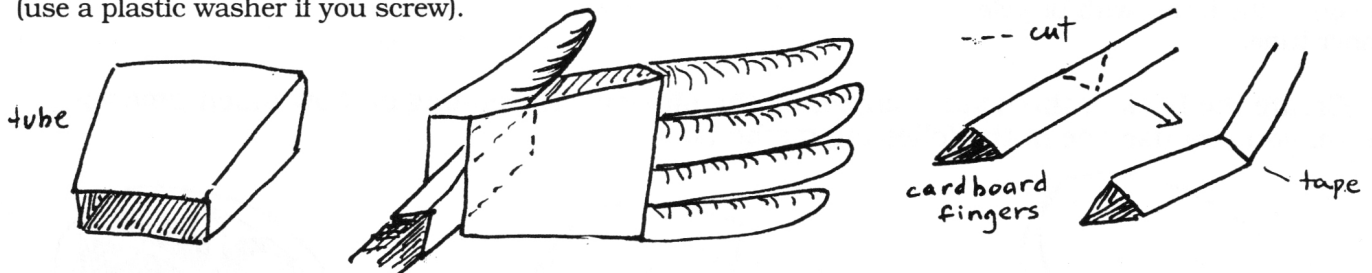


cardboard with newspaper build-up

Cut the shape of a hand out of cardboard (fingers together). Create a tube for handpoles and attach. Use newspaper to build up the fingers, thumb and palm. Paper maché with 1 layer of newspaper, full sheets, 1-3 layers of newspaper laminate (optional, for strength) and a final layer of brown paper bag.

cardboard & newspaper

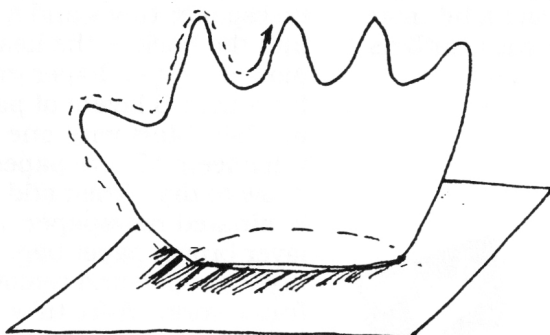
Start with a cardboard tube (see picture). Crunch and roll newspaper into cigar shapes for fingers and tape into palm. Tape wire onto the fingers to bend into gestures. Build up palm and thumb with crumpled newspaper. Paper maché with 1-3 layers of newspaper and a final layer of brown paper bag. Create a tube for the handpoles to slide into, and affix inside the hand with a stapler. For quick projects, you can also staple or screw the poles onto the hands after painting (use a plastic washer if you screw).



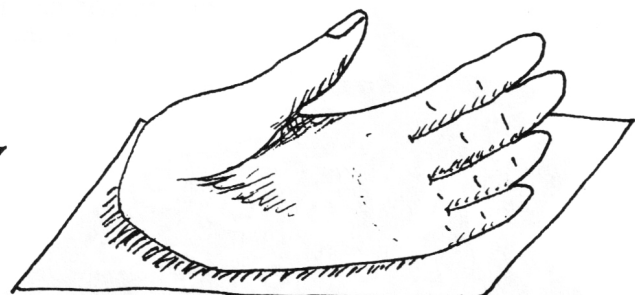
For larger hands, you can sculpt fingers out of cardboard, though it is more tricky and time-consuming to get the fingers to curve naturally. Triangular tubes seem to work the easiest. For smaller hands, paper maché wood sticks into place as the fingers.

clay armature

Sculpt hands out of ceramic clay. Cover with thin plastic while the clay is still soft and paper maché 1 layer brown bag, 3-4 layers of laminate newspaper, 1 layer brown bag. When dry, pull out the clay. You may have to cut the paper shell to do so. Repair any cuts or tears you have made with tape and paper maché. Create tubes for handpoles and affix inside. Trim and paper maché edges, and repair punctures from attaching tubes.



cut along dotted line if necessary to release paper from mold.

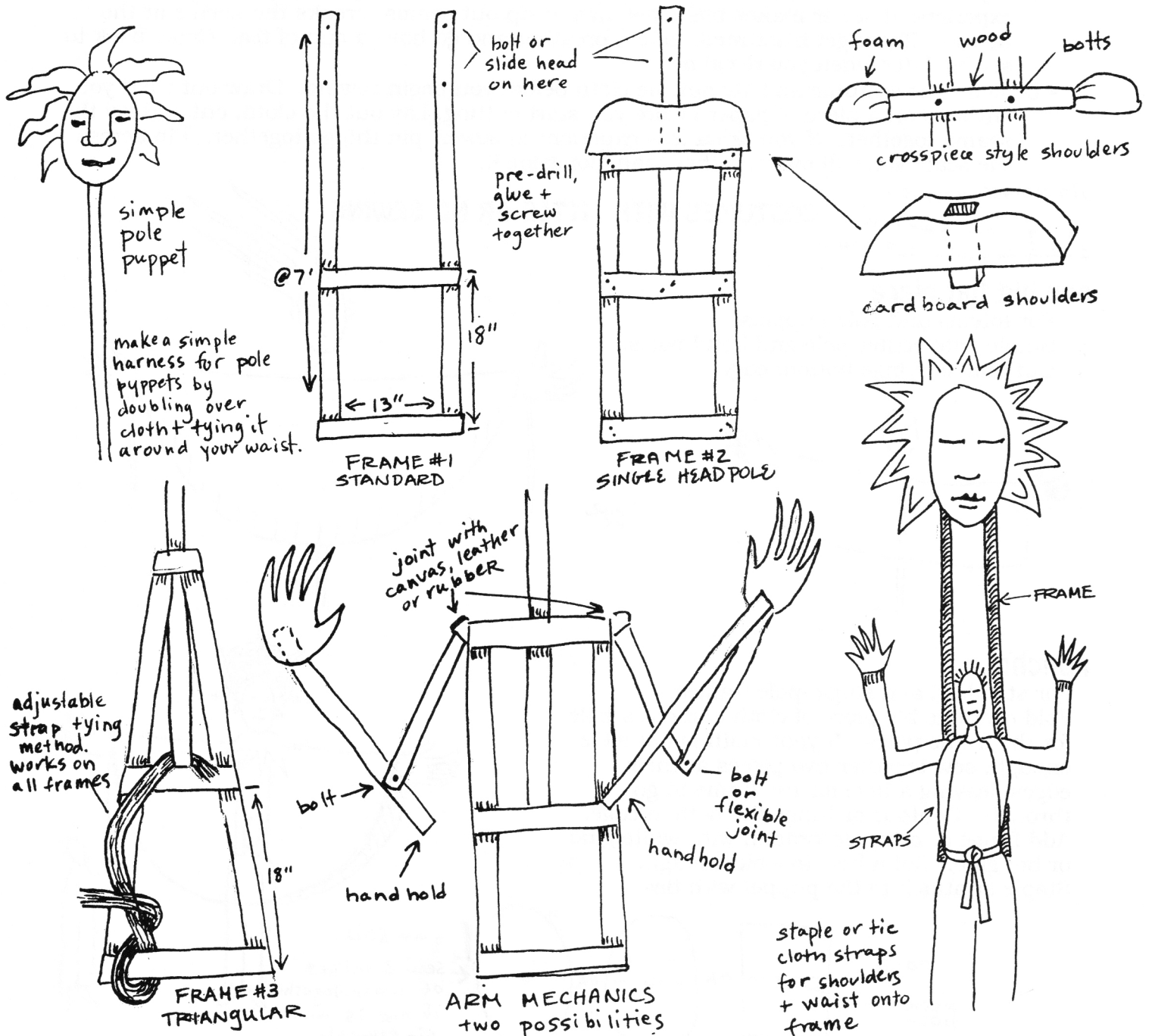


if you sculpt your hand flat like this, you can build the back out of cardboard later.

FRAMES AND ATTACHMENTS

We build our frames out of 1" x 2"s in three basic styles. For puppets operated by only one person, we sometimes create jointed arms to support the hands. For puppets operated by three people, the arms are the cloth of the costume without any extra hard structure. Shoulders, as shown below, can be made from wood or cardboard and bolt or slide onto the frame. Waist and shoulder straps can be made from cloth and stapled or tied onto the frame (see picture for a tying method that makes straps adjustable). If you have old backpack frames, you can attach them to the wooden frame with U-clips or bind them on with rubber inner tube.

Handpoles slide up into hands. Hands can tie on with cloth ties or be permanently attached to the costume with glue and staples. Joints can be made from rubber inner tube, canvas or leather, stapled onto each side.



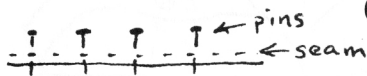
COSTUMES

Creating the puppet costume is for some people the most challenging part of the process. Here are some general tips and costume designs for sewers and non-sewers.

TIPS

- Invest in a good pair of sharp cloth scissors and mark them clearly. Don't cut anything but cloth with them or they will get dull.
- Work with light to medium weight cloth. It's easier to work with and lighter to carry.
- Stay simple and think it through. Sewing is actually very logical. If you are trying a design for the first time, try it small from a piece of scrap cloth first. Another way to learn how things fit together is to carefully deconstruct some old clothes at the seams. This will help you to see how different shapes fit together.
- Always sew in a Zen state of mind. Prepare yourself to be very, very patient. Even an experienced sewer makes mistakes, has to rip out seams, breaks the needle or the thread. If you get frustrated, take a breather and go have a cup of tea. Come back to sewing later when you're calm.
- Design your costume and lay out the cloth before you begin sewing. Draw out what you envision on a piece of paper before you start cutting. Lay out the cloth, cut and lay the seams together. If you are a less experienced sewer, pin things together. Pin across the seam you will make, rather than alongside it.

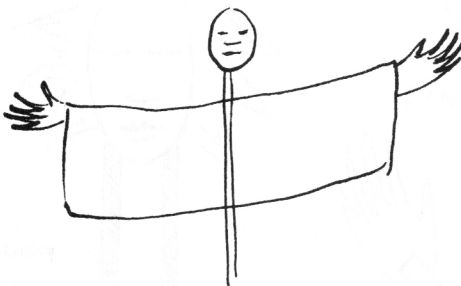
pin across seams:



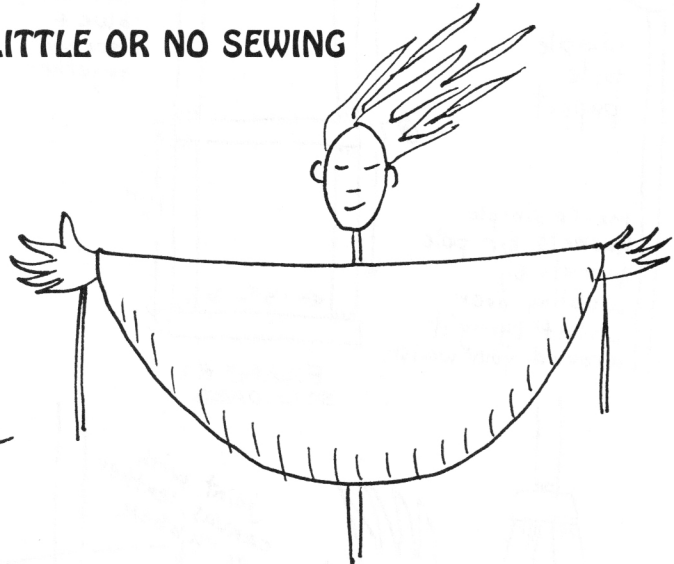
COSTUMES WITH LITTLE OR NO SEWING

one big flat piece

For totems and pole puppets.
Staple onto center pole and hand poles.
Cut and/or fringe bottom edge.
Type to enter text

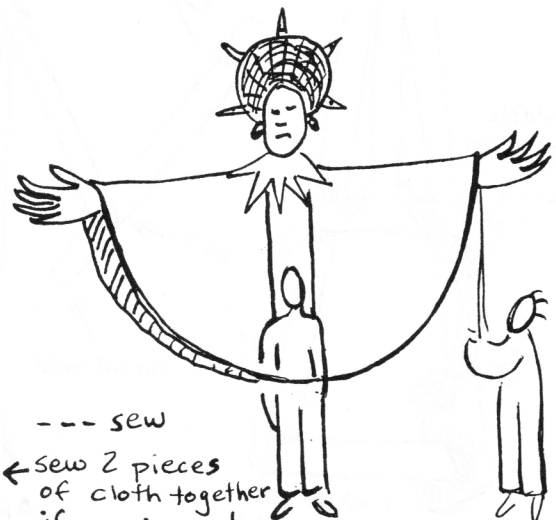
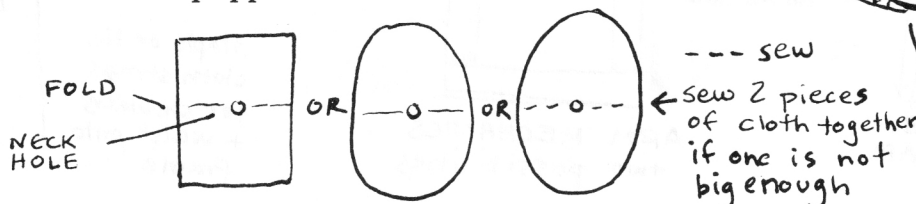


OR



poncho

For standard and single-pole frames.
Fold over one big piece of cloth and cut a hole for the frame poles. If your cloth is not wide enough, sew together two pieces at their edges, leaving a hole for the frame to go through. Contour or fringe the bottom edge. Add fringe or other decoration with white glue or hot glue. Cut a hole to look through. Staple or attach to the puppet with ties.



COSTUMES WITH MORE SEWING

basic tunic costume

1. Determine the dimensions of the costume. For the length, measure the puppet from the bottom of the head to the bottom of the frame and add 2-3 feet (to cover the puppeteer's legs). The length of the arms is determined by what "looks right," but don't be surprised if the arms are almost as long as the costume itself. Make the bottom of the costume wider than the top, or it will be very tight around the puppeteer.

2. Cut out pieces for the front and the back of the costume and two arms. You can piece together more than one kind of cloth if your pieces are too small, or as decoration. If you want fringe on your costume, sew strips of cloth on where you want the fringe now. Wait until the costume is done to rip or tear into fringes.

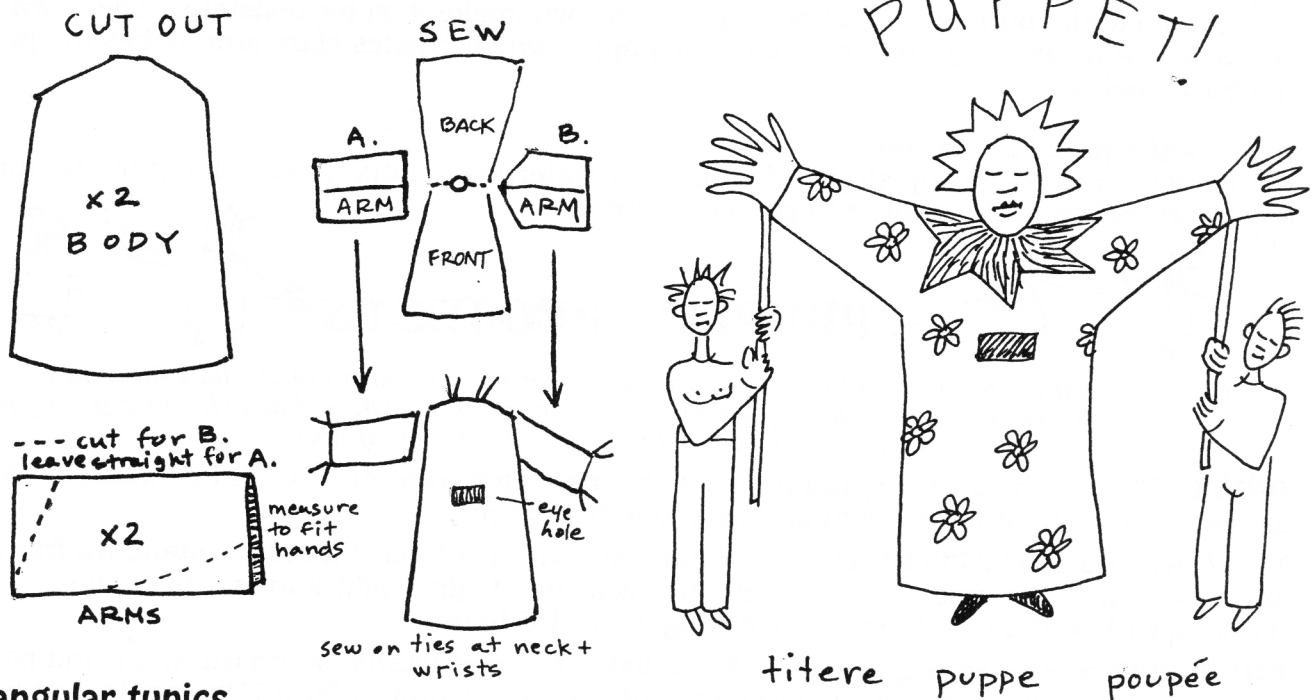
3. Sew the front and back of the costume together at the shoulders. Sew inside out!

4. Sew arms on perpendicular or at an angle.

5. Fold and sew together arms and down the sides. Then turn right-side-out.

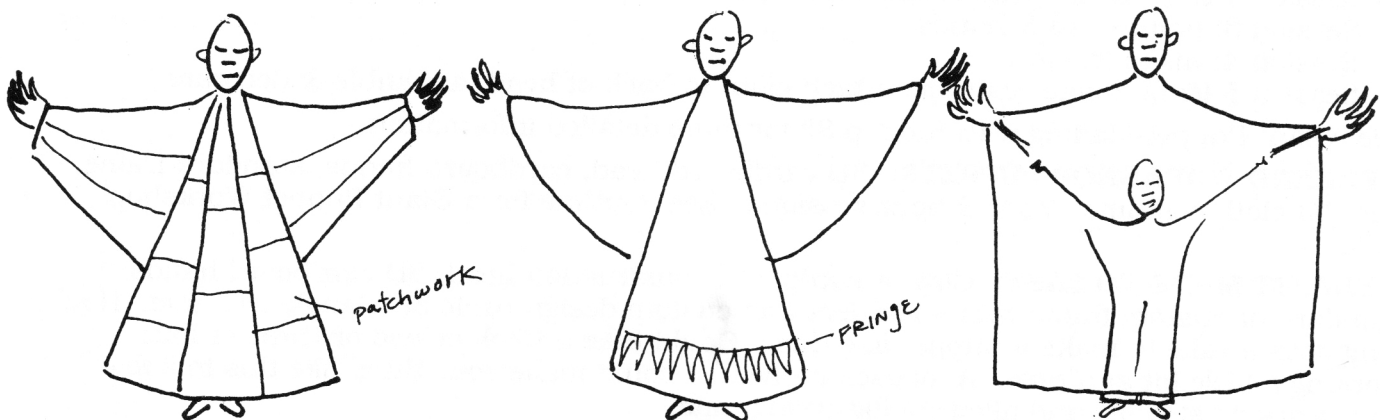
6. Cut a hole where the puppeteer's face goes and sew in a piece of lace or transparent material.

7. Add ties to attach costume to head and hands.



triangular tunics

Several variations on the shape of the basic tunic design.



these also all work for puppets with poles inside

PUPPET RESOURCES

Updated 2025! If you have a great resource to share, please email us at wisefool@lmi.net.

“How-To” Handbooks & Pages

- *68 Ways to Make Really Big Puppets* by Sara Peattie and the Puppeteers Collective
Full color booklet with drawings of any different styles of puppets and brief technical information.
Download Free! <https://puppetco-op.org/>

- *Simple & Cheap Recipes for Puppet Making* by Antonette Martens
K.Ruby/WiseFoolHandbook.com
Breadandpuppetpress.org

- *Drums & Demonstrations Handbook* by the Super Sonic Samba School FREE
<http://puppetista.org/drums/>

- *The Activist Cookbook* by Andrew Boyd ~ OP can be found used at Bookfinder.com
- *Beautiful Trouble* by Andrew Boyd ~ Follow up to the Activist Cookbook

- *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook* by Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw
Seminal why-to and how-to for puppet-building and Street Theatre. Must-have.

Cattywampus [Giant Puppet Making Manual](#) & [Processional Arts Manuals](#)

Instructables ~ [Creating a Giant Pageant Puppet](#)



Inspiration

Paperhand: Puppet Interventions with Cardboard Cloth & Clay by Jan & Donovan Paperhandpuppet.org

Theater of Wonder: 25 years in the Heart of the Beast by Colleen Sheehy

K.Ruby's History of Radical Puppetry <https://www.rogueruby.com/radpup.html>

Miscellaneous

Puppetista.Org Protest Puppet Resource Page

Creature Staplers ~ These staplers which are excellent for sculpting in cardboard are called the *Rapid 31 Plier Stapler with sword point*. I've never seen them in a store but they are readily available online. Currently run around \$60.

Giant Puppets & Puppetista Projects in the USA (not exhaustive!)

Wise Fool New Mexico (Santa Fe NM) wisefoolnewmexico.org

Penasco Theatre Collective (Penasco NM) penascotheatre.com

Giant Puppets Save the World (SF, CA) houses some original WF puppets, giantpuppetssavetheworld.com

New Orleans Giant Puppet Festival (New Orleans LA) neworleansgiantpuppetfest.com

String & Shadow (Olympia WA) stringandshadow.com

Stonelion Puppets (Kansas City, KS) stonelionpuppets.org

Bread & Puppet Theatre (Glover, VT) breadandpuppet.org

In the Heart of the Beast (Minneapolis MN) hobt.org

Paperhand Puppet Intervention (Saxapahaw, NC) paperhandpuppet.org

Processional Arts Workshop (NY NY) processionalarts.org

Spiral Q (Philadelphia, PA) spiralq.org

Dragon Dance Theatre (Quebec) dragondancetheatre.org

Kitchen Table Puppets & Press (TX) IG@kitchentable.puppetspress





A LITTLE PUPPET GALLERY

clockwise from top
 Yellow Flying Ancestor puppet, SF Chasky '92 • Puppets lined up for procession: Autumn, Little Fool, Sprout, Medusa, In the Street Festival, San Francisco Tenderloin District • MLK puppet built by homeless seniors, Oakland CA • Bird People Puppets, plastic bag armature and newspaper build up method • Eyes and Ears of the State, Berlin '92 • Fire Puppet at the Nevada Test Site actions • People of the world masks, from Tarnival! an anti-tobacco play



This excerpt is part of a much longer handbook that includes information on brainstorming, collective process, stilt walking, image development, theatre games, storyboarding, kids projects and more. With dozens of color photos to inspire you and 20 pages of new material to inform and inspire, it's got everything you need to know to start your own protest puppet project.

To get your copy, add your story and more, go to

WiseFoolHandbook.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction & Thanks	4
Beginning & Continuing	5
Reclaiming the Streets: On Street Theatre & Art for Social Change	12
WORKING TOGETHER	
Thoughts on Structure & Process	20
Consensus Decision-Making	23
The Brainstorm & Design Process	24
Sample Storyboards	27
Theatre Games for Everyone	30
GETTING STARTED	
Preparing For Your Build	
People, Ideas, Space & Supplies	38
Basic Techniques	
Working with Paper Mache, Cardboard, Paint & Clay	42
PROJECTS	
Four Easy Ways to Make a Mask	48
Turning Masks into Puppets	50
Giant Puppet Construction	52
Waterproofing & Sample Puppet Projects	60
2D Effigies	61
Tips & Tricks for Organizing Street Theatre & Actions	63
Outline for a Giant Puppet Workshop	66
How to Build Stilts	68
How to Build Arm Stilts	69
About Stiltwalking	70
How to Make Stilt Pants	72
How to Make Fringe Pants	73
How to Make Shadow Puppets	74
Low Tech Instrument Building	76
Lanterns	78
Kids Projects	79
Giant Puppet making for Kids	82
DOCUMENTS & RESOURCES	
Wise Fool Selected Chronology 1989-1999	86
Wise Fool Community Arts, Mission Statement	90
Wise Fool New Mexico, Mission and History	91
Do-It-Yourself Fundraising	92
Grantwriting Basics	93
Radical Theatre & Puppetry Bibliography	94
Puppet Resources: handbooks, supplies & contacts	95
Credits	96