

art people

Lea Chiara / mask maker and painter

In the Arts and Industry building in Florence, Lea Chiara shares a studio with several artists — and with a large, papier-mache mask of Khangard, a Buddhist deity.

Chiara, 25, made the mask when she spent a semester in Mongolia as an undergraduate studio art major at Skidmore College.

It may not be alive, but — with its wide-open bulging eyes and menacing gaze — the mask is far from lifeless.

“There is something about them,” said Chiara, of Northampton. “People say they can almost imagine them being alive.”

In Mongolia, Chiara studied under Kavaasambuu Bukhshandas, a master in the ancient practice of mask making who had, in turn, studied with a Buddhist elder. Monks channel the deities the masks represent during annual rites that involve meditation, dance and other rituals.

Khangard is a protector deity, Chiara said. Two evil snakes — fashioned from blue silk and sheep’s wool — are attached to the mask to show that Khangard will eat them, destroying evil and creating good.

From her mentor, Chiara learned how to make a detailed clay model, and then a plaster-of-paris mold, which she layered with wet papier-mache. After the papier-mache had dried, she added a final plaster-like layer. Then she decorated and painted the mask, following instructions laid down by Buddhist monks long ago that govern exactly how the deities should look.

After returning from Mongolia, Chiara began making masks for herself and on commission. She also incorporates them into after-school art programs



Jerrey Roberts

at Leeds Elementary School, where she works as a paraprofessional with special needs students.

“I love to do papier-mache with kids because it’s so malleable in every sense,” she said. “You can make pretty much anything you can imagine. With kids, animals are always a big thing — elephants and polar bears and dogs.” Chiara says that by letting their imaginations roam, and adding paper and water and

glue and paint, children “can make their own magic.”

— Suzanne Wilson

Lea Chiara is offering art workshops for children ages 6 to 12 this summer in Florence that will include mask making, drawing, painting, printmaking and performance. For information, fees and schedules, visit www.leachiara.com.