

# INTRODUCTION

Dear Educator:

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts' Division of Learning and Innovation is pleased to share with you teacher resources to accompany the exhibition *Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection*. This traveling exhibition, on view at the MIA from October 24, 2010, to January 9, 2011, features 110 objects of unrivaled beauty and artistry from The Thaw Collection at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York.

It is fortuitous that this exhibition is coming to the MIA at a moment when Minnesota educators are teaching more and more about Native American art, history, and cultures past and present. This seemed the perfect opportunity to develop resources that can be used in support of state and federal standards for visual arts and social studies/U.S. history.

*Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection*, like the MIA's permanent collection, is organized by geographic region. These teacher resources also follow a geographic organization, highlighting objects from the Thaw and MIA collections for each region. Each region's materials and resources are further focused around a broad theme (e.g. Art and Identity: Symbols of Status and Prestige) relevant to visual arts, humanities, social studies, and interdisciplinary lessons. The inclusion of MIA collection objects and resources gives these materials a life beyond the close of *Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection*.

The materials that follow include:

- Information about MIA and Thaw Collection objects from each of the six geographical regions covered by both collections (pdf)
- High-quality digital images of all the MIA and Thaw Collection objects featured on the CD (jpegs)
- Regional maps (jpegs)
- Regional photos (jpegs)

As you evaluate lesson plans, books, videos, and other resources to ensure they do not perpetuate stereotypes about Native peoples, we recommend you refer to the teacher guide *Erasing Native American Stereotypes*, developed by the National Museum of Natural History.

Let the art inspire you and your students! Rather than asking students to replicate or directly imitate Native American objects (e.g. making a Northwest Coast Transformation Mask), design art activities that are inspired by the style or content, but that engage students in creative thinking and problem solving as they create unique works of art. Past issues of our teacher e-newsletter *Teaching the Arts* and the Web site [www.artsmia.org](http://www.artsmia.org) offer some ideas to get you started and opportunities to share your ideas with other museum and classroom educators.

## WORDWISE

The MIA refers to the original inhabitants of this hemisphere as "Native Americans" because the permanent collection includes objects from North, Central, and South America. "American Indian" is sometimes used or understood to refer only to the Native peoples of North America. We use the term Native Americans throughout these materials. The Fenimore Art Museum, where the Thaw Collection is housed, does not collect Native arts outside of North America and uses the term American Indians.

The names of Native American tribes have complex and interesting histories. Native names were translated (often phonetically) into English, Spanish, and French. Sometimes Native enemies' names for other nations were adopted by Europeans, rather than the name the nations called themselves. The MIA uses the name that is indigenous to the people as primary, including the often historically more familiar European or other alternate name in parenthesis. For example: Anishinabe (Ojibwe).

The MIA's Department of Teacher Resources offers workshops on a variety of topics and is available for custom consultations. Visit [www.artsmia.org/teacher-resources](http://www.artsmia.org/teacher-resources) for more information.

Sincerely,

Department of Teacher Resources,  
Division of Learning and Innovation

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR TEACHING ABOUT NATIVE AMERICAN ART, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

*Surrounded by Beauty*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.artsmia.org/surrounded-by-beauty/>

This online resource features MIA objects from five geographical regions; they are different objects than those included in the *Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection* teacher resources and using the two resources together provides an abundance of information and ideas.

The Thaw Collection, Fenimore Art Museum

<http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/>

Teacher Resources, National Museum of the American Indian

<http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=education&second=pub>

Native American Teacher Resources,  
Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution

[http://anthropology.si.edu/outreach/Native\\_Americans.html](http://anthropology.si.edu/outreach/Native_Americans.html)

“Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection” is organized by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y. The exhibition is made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*.

Generous support for this exhibition is provided by Bob and Carol Nelson and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community.



## A MESSAGE FROM CURATOR JOE D. HORSE CAPTURE

Dear Educator:

Thank you for your interest in the exhibition, “Art of the Native Americans: The Thaw Collection,” organized by the Fenimore Art Museum and on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA). I hope you enjoy working with the material as much as we have. This exhibition provides teachers and students with a great opportunity to learn about the art and cultures of America’s first peoples. A group of dedicated people produced this teacher resources guide, and I thank them and acknowledge their hard work. Amanda Norman, Collection In Focus guide and Native American art intern worked on this project all summer and wrote much of the material. Other contributors include: Amanda Thompson Rundahl, associate educator, Collection In Focus guide program; Diana Johnson, consultant, Teacher Resources Department; Christine McKigney, coordinator, School Outreach program; Sheila McGuire, director of Museum Guide Programs; Laura Silver, editor; Heidi Miller, graphic designer; and Coral Moore, Native American art and education intern. This project was a true collaboration.

This guide will help teach the young people of Minnesota about Native American art, and I hope you can bring your students to see the exhibition. These materials can be used for many years to come in conjunction with the MIA’s permanent collection of Native American art.

Joe D. Horse Capture  
Associate Curator of Native American Art  
Arts of Africa and the Americas



## ARCTIC AND SUB-ARCTIC

*Art of Masquerade: Our Way of Making Prayer*

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The Arctic cultural area encompasses 5,000 miles along the shoreline of northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. Beyond the northern tree line is a land of rolling tundra with a few mountain peaks. Winters are long and severe, and the subsoil remains frozen even during the short summers. The western Sub-Arctic includes both the tundra and the northern evergreen forest. It is a land of freshwater lakes, bogs, and rivers. Even today, people depend on fishing and hunting for sustenance.



## FEATURED ARCTIC AND SUB-ARCTIC OBJECTS FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Yup'ik  
Arctic region  
*Nepcetai Mask*, c. 1840–60  
Wood, swan feathers, duck feathers, snowy owl feathers, fox teeth, sealskin thong, reed, blood, pigment, ocher, charcoal (feathers and teeth replaced)  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0231

## MIA COLLECTION CONNECTION



Yup'ik  
Arctic Region  
*Mask*, 19th–20th century  
Wood, feathers, pigment  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 81.14

The Yup'ik (YOO-pik) people (pl. Yupiit) live below the Arctic Circle on the tundra of western Alaska, where the waterways that crisscross the marshy plains are roadways for kayaks in the summer and sleds in the winter. Temperatures in the region are extreme, ranging from -80°F to +80°F. More moderate in the summer months than the icy, igloo-dotted Arctic of many people's imaginations, this region supports birch groves, a short growing season, and an abundance of wild game such as moose, caribou, seals, fish, and waterfowl. These resources provide food and shelter, and provide materials for artists who create objects during the cold winter months.

### ART OF MASQUERADE: OUR WAY OF MAKING PRAYER

Traditional Yup'ik culture is known for its complex cycle of six ceremonies that takes place during the winter months, from freeze-up to spring thaw, when the days are short and the weather inhospitable to fishing and hunting. Integral to this ceremonial cycle is masquerade. Masked dancers, accompanied by drumming, singing, and storytelling entertain and educate members of the community and communicate with the spirit world.

The word *agayu* means “to pray.”...In the old times that term seems to have been used during the dances, especially the mask ceremony. It is a time of praying, hoping for things to be. People honoring the person or the animal are praying for things to come. ...[Dancing, singing, and masking were] our way of making prayer. —Elise Mather, Yup'ik, 1994

Yup'ik masked dances recount history. They also honor and express gratitude to animals' spirits or souls (*yua* or *inua*), and petition animals to be plentiful and to offer themselves to human hunters during the coming year. Masked dances make the spirit world visible and serve as a reminder of the respect and reciprocity that bind humans and animals together in the Yup'ik worldview.

The variety of Yup'ik masks is extraordinary. While some general mask types are identifiable, masks were highly individualized to the wearer and the story they were designed to tell. For this reason, it is nearly impossible to ascribe specific meaning to individual masks.

Follow this link to watch videos of traditional Yup'ik dances:  
<http://www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/features/yupik/av.html>

Through masquerades during the winter ceremonies, Yup'ik *angalkut* (aan-gaul-kut) or shamans (sing. *angalkuq*) tell stories, predict the future, and ask for a restoration of balance between the human, animal, and spirit worlds for the year ahead. Decorations are hung from the rafters of the *qasgiq* (goss-gik) or men's house, and performers wearing masks interpret the shaman's songs in dance movements to help ensure the prayers and predictions he offers are received.

The creation of and performance with masks among the Yup'ik and other Arctic and Sub-Arctic peoples were greatly suppressed beginning in the nineteenth century with the introduction of Christianity. While some mask types and traditions are now things of the past, others are being actively preserved and revitalized in Yup'ik communities.

#### NEPCETAT: THE ONES THAT STICK TO THE FACE

“In all the classes of masks, the kind they call *nepcetaq* is the most important and powerful.”

—Andy Kinzy, 1993 (quoted in Ann Fienup-Riorden, *Agayuliyaraput: Our Way of Making Prayer*, University of Washington Press, 1996)

Yup'ik *angalkut* or shamans wore the spiritually powerful *nepcetaq* (nep-see-tak), (pl. *nepcetat*) or “the ones that stick to the face” masks. The most powerful *angalkut* were thought to be those with the ability to support the *nepcetat* mask without the aid of a handle or mouth grip. Most Yup'ik masks were discarded after use, but the *nepcetat*, were kept and used over and over. Especially powerful *nepcetat* were buried with shamans.

While it is impossible to know the specific significance of these two masks and their ornamentation, there are some consistencies to *nepcetat* that suggest possible meanings. The main wooden form of the mask, for example, may represent the Yup'ik universe.

Often, small animal effigies, furs, hair, intestine, feathers, porcupine quills, and teeth were used to enhance the qualities the shaman wished to convey through the mask. The shaman specified details when he commissioned the artist to make the mask, often to honor and call forth the animals these items represented. Both the Thaw Collection and MIA masks have halos of feathers. These may suggest the constellations of the dark Arctic winter skies.

Shamans sometimes commissioned *nepcetat* in male-female pairs. The Thaw Collection *nepcetaq* appears to be grinning, while the MIA example is frowning. Often, the downturned mouth indicates the mask represents a female spirit, the upturned mouth a male spirit. The Thaw and MIA examples were not created as a set, but viewed together they provide examples of both male and female masks.

In the Thaw Collection mask, the artist has added three wooden seal effigies, each peering downward into a hole in the wooden surface of the mask. The holes represent sky holes or ice holes, through which the Yup'ik believed that the seals could offer themselves to human hunters and move from the underwater, spiritual realm into the physical, earthly realm. The MIA mask also has ice or sky holes. It is not known what effigies, if any, were once attached to these holes.

#### HOW WERE THEY MADE?

Each *Nepcetaq* is created according to the specifications of the shaman who commissions the mask from an artist who specializes in *nepcetat*.

Masks like those in the Thaw and MIA collections are created from organic “found materials.” The face of each mask is carved from spruce driftwood collected from along the abundant Alaskan shoreline. The artist enhances the forehead and nose forms by using the naturally deep, warm color variations of the wood, giving the spirit face dimension and adding to its dramatic appearance.

The artists for these two masks likely used beaver teeth, adzes, or knives to hollow out the main forms of the inside and outside of the main mask form and the three seal effigies on the Thaw Collection mask. The smooth surface of the mask may indicate that it was polished with a stone. The artists likely used hand tools such as a bow drill or caribou antler to bore the holes to attach feathers, animal effigies, and other spiritually powerful items that are now lost.

Natural pigments have been applied to both masks. Commonly used colors include red, which may sometimes symbolize life or blood, or give protection to the mask's wearer; black, which sometimes represents death or the afterlife; and white, which sometimes can mean living or winter. (MNH, Arctic Studies Center, <http://www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/features/yupik/intro.html>)

#### WORDWISE

The term “Eskimo” was used in the past to refer collectively to Inuit (Canada and Greenland), Yup'ik, Inupiat, and Unangan (Aleut) peoples (Alaska). There is controversy over the origin and meaning of this word (meanings vary from “snowshoe-netters” to “eaters of raw meat”). Eskimo is viewed as inaccurate and pejorative to some Arctic and Sub-Arctic groups and individuals, especially the Inuit peoples of Canada and Greenland, who prefer Inuit. The Yup'ik of Alaska are culturally and linguistically distinct from the Inuit and should be referred to as Yup'ik, not Inuit. There is no widely accepted term to replace Eskimo in referring to Native peoples of the Arctic and Sub-Arctic. It is best to avoid Eskimo and instead use the more specific name of the culture or community.



Yup'ik  
Arctic region  
*Dance Fans*, c. 1870  
Wood, snowy owl feathers, caribou fur, green and white pigments, pebbles, duck tail feathers (feathers, fur, and pebbles replaced)  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0229 a-b

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

These *tegumiak* (teg-OU-me-ack) or paired dance fans, are worn as finger masks, and embody aspects of Yup'ik life during Alaskan winters. The white snowy owl feathers and caribou fur acknowledge the Yup'ik reverence for these animals for the warmth and food they supply during frigid months.

As in other Yup'ik traditions, paired finger masks were complementary rather than identical. The opposing masks could express the dual nature of spirits, or the balance of opposites such as male and female or sky and sea. It is in the central face carvings that design variations are most apparent. An upward-turned mouth usually refers to the male gender, and the downward-turned mouth, the female and sea mammals. Some Yup'ik women believed to have a strong soul connection to sea mammals could call upon that connection to assist hunters in catching this prey.

A thick layer of green pigment helps to define a forehead and nose for each face. White pigment highlights the eyeholes and cheeks of both. Red oxide pigment encircles both faces and defines the chin area of the male. The slight irregularity of the female face and the extra line cut within the green circle distinguish it from its male counterpart. Otherwise, they are similar in terms of shape, color, material, and even the carved and polished wooden finger holes used to hold the masks on the dancer's fingers.

The personality of these finger masks is not limited to their human characteristics. Each face opens to reveal a cavity, within which pebbles are placed. The pebbles rattle and provide each mask with its own "voice" when used in a dance.

Vivid white tufts of caribou fur, mottled duck feathers, and snowy owl feathers attached to the perimeter of the wood give the masks a whimsical, theatrical quality. The duck tail feathers add structure and length to the snowy owl feathers attached to them. When danced in the dim light of the *gasgiq* (goss-gik), the fur and feathers created a rhythmic, white halo of movement.

## HOW WERE THEY MADE?

The artist likely used various small knives or adzes to carve the circular forms including the extra piece of wood used to make the removable faces. He may have used a small adze, claw, beaver tooth, or other gouging device to create the hollow for the pebbles.

The green pigment derived from mosses or fungi may have been applied to the wood surface with a squirrel-tail brush or fabric. A white clay pigment was applied around the eyeholes and cheeks.

The artist may have used sharp teeth, bone, claw, or a knife to puncture the holes into the perimeter of each wood base into which he inserted the snowy owl plumes, duck tail feathers and Caribou fur. The long white caribou hairs likely came from the animal's neck, underbelly, and under tail or the area above its hooves.

## MIA COLLECTION CONNECTION



Inuit  
Arctic region  
*Figures*, late 19th century  
Ivory, pigment, string  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2003.120.7

## THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

The Thaw Collection *Bear Hair Comb* by contemporary Mohawk artist Stan Hill (Woodlands), the Great Basin and California Region *Fern Basket* by Scees Bryant Possock (Thaw Collection), and these Arctic and Sub-Arctic Inuit *Figures* (MIA Collection) are all examples of artists adapting to the erosion of traditional culture and lifestyle that followed the arrival of Europeans, by creating work to meet the needs of an emerging commercial marketplace for Native American art.

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The Inuit (In-oo-it), a term used to refer to the Native peoples of Canada and Greenland, are believed to have constructed the original *qayak* (kayak) well over 4,000 years ago. Some date the origination of their pull sled, or komatik (coe-mat-ik), at around A.D. 900, when these sleds are thought to have been used in the migration of the Thule (too-lee) from Asia to Greenland across the frozen Bering Strait. Nevertheless, the Inupiaq (In-oo-pea-ack) people continue to use komatik and *qayaks* for their continued subsistence on the land and sea of what is now the Labrador area of Newfoundland.

For thousands of years, regardless of the season, groups of sea-mammal hunters have prayerfully boarded their *qayaks* in hopes of a successful hunt for seals or walrus. *Qayaqs* such as the piece seen here are traditionally closed skin boats for one or two people. They are used to navigate the strong and often-icy currents of the arctic river ways. They also provide hunters the ability to move quickly along vast stretches of quiet, slushy landscape to reach large herds of caribou or to return home from their endeavors.

They often risk their lives standing atop thick, yet shifting ice sheets in order to bring their final haul of game to shoreline. The heavy load of seal or halibut is then carried to their remote villages using lightweight dogsleds. The flat komatik style of sled continues to be used throughout the year for land travel, hauling food and materials, and pulling boats across ice.

For centuries the Inuit have made sculptures like these, similarly fashioned and used as toys, amulets, or shamanistic tools. Norse seamen had visited, hunted and traded with the Inuit at Labrador as early as the tenth century. When the Inuit came into contact with missionaries and settlers, they began to produce such sculptures as trade goods.

## WORDWISE

### Shaman:

Men and women who preside over spiritual life. Shamans often share close relationships with nature, and their duties as religious practitioners include such tasks as curing the sick, protecting the community, and influencing the weather.

### Adze:

A tool used for smoothing rough-cut wood in hand woodworking.

### Bow drill:

A tool usually used to make fire; it was also used for woodworking. It consists of a bearing block or handhold, a spindle or drill, a hearth or fireboard, and a simple bow.

### Effigy:

An image or representation of an animal or human.

### Gasgiq:

Yup'ik for meetinghouse.

## LESSON STARTERS

What natural resources, (such as forests for wood, mines for minerals, or metals) in your area might provide materials for creating an artwork or object for some special use? Are the resources you would use plentiful or scarce? How might you acquire these materials?

In many cultures, including among the Yup'ik, masks are used in performances to teach, tell stories, and express beliefs. Plan and perform a skit, song, or dance that communicates the values of your school (e.g. community, learning, respect) or expectations for good behavior in your school.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Alaska Native Web site  
<http://www.alaskanative.net/>

The Yup'ik peoples and their lifestyle  
<http://www.yupikscience.org/index.html>

Fowler, Allen, *Living in the Arctic (Rookie Read-About Geography)*, Children's Press, 2001.

Miller, Debbie and Jon Van Zyle, *Arctic Lights, Arctic Nights*, Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2003.

Video of male Yup'ik finger masks being danced  
<http://www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/features/yupik/av.html>

Video of the Yup'ik walrus dance  
<http://www.echospace.org/articles/129/sections/195>

# GREAT BASIN AND CALIFORNIA REGION

*Art of Adaptation: An Emerging Marketplace*

The neighboring Great Basin and California regions could not be more different from each other. The Great Basin is a harsh desert expanse encompassing Nevada, Utah, eastern California, and northern Arizona and New Mexico. The California cultural area, lush with vegetation and teeming with wildlife, spans the present-day state of California and the northern area of Mexico's Baja Peninsula. While Native peoples have lived in the Great Basin region for millennia, life in that hard climate has always depended upon an intimate understanding of natural rhythms. Survival in the California region, with its ample fruits, nuts, fish, and game, was much easier—so easy that farming did not develop in California until after European contact. The region has been home to the densest Native population on the continent, speaking over 100 languages.

In both the arid Great Basin and lush California, basketry has been among the most distinctive artistic creations. Baskets were necessary for gathering, storing, and preparing food, and were used in games and ceremonies. They were light and portable, unlike the heavy ceramic vessels produced by less-mobile cultures of the Southwest. So important were baskets to life, they played major roles in the traditional stories of these regions' peoples. In one widely shared creation story, the ancestors emerge from womblike baskets. Basket weavers developed countless different basketry forms and techniques, using materials as varied as bark, twigs, grasses, ferns, and feathers.

Traditional ways of life were shattered by the rapid changes that came with European contact. The brutality of the Spanish mission period at the end of the 1700s, the rush of fortune seekers following the discovery of gold in 1849, and the rise of industrial agriculture, mining, and timbering all served to upend Native people's relationship with their land and traditional culture. By the late 1800s, baskets were no longer needed for the practical purposes of the past. Basketry artists began to apply their skills to a new purpose—producing collectible items to sell to the miners, explorers, and tourists flooding the region.



## FEATURED GREAT BASIN OBJECT FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Scees Bryant Possock (1858–1918)  
Washoe  
Great Basin region  
The Ferns, c. 1904  
Willow, western redbud, bracken fern root  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0752

### THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

The Thaw Collection *Bear Hair Comb* by contemporary Mohawk artist Stan Hill (Woodlands), this Great Basin and California Region *Fern Basket* by Scees Bryant Possock (Thaw Collection) and the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Inuit *Figures* (MIA Collection) are all examples of artists adapting to the erosion of traditional culture and lifestyle that followed the arrival of Europeans, by creating work to meet the needs of an emerging commercial marketplace for Native American art.

### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

For more than 10,000 years, the Great Basin has been home to the Washoe people. The Washoe traveled with the seasons, spending the summer in the high mountains of the Sierra Nevada range, the fall in the lower ranges to the east, and the winter and spring in the valleys in between. Their summer camp was at the high mountain lake they called *Daowaga* (Dow-a-gah), or “the edge of the lake,” today known as Lake Tahoe. The fertile lake environment supplied the Washoe with bountiful harvests of berries, salmon, and pine nuts, as well as the plant material they used to build baskets.

The most exquisite Washoe baskets were traditionally given as gifts for special occasions such as weddings and births. In the ceremony marking a girl’s passage into womanhood, she would

place a basket on her head and dance alongside her community. These beautifully detailed baskets were also decorated with feathers, beads, wool, and shell pendants.

With the start of the Gold Rush in 1849, Washoe life abruptly changed. Commercialized mining, ranching, and logging industries were booming, disrupting the Washoe seasonal migrations. Intense commercial interests harmed the region’s indigenous plant life, making it difficult for the Washoe to harvest traditional food staples and essential basket-making materials. Thousands of miners and explorers came to Lake Tahoe and the surrounding area seeking their fortunes, and stories of Lake Tahoe’s pristine bounty drew the interest of tourists and wealthy elites. The influx of outsiders further eroded the traditional way of life and the local economy of the Washoe people. Many Washoe found what work they could as ranch hands and house help for the new population.

### ART OF ADAPTATION: AN EMERGING MARKETPLACE

The arrival of local merchants and art collectors prompted Washoe basket artists to adapt their work for a new purpose, the “curio” art market. One prominent dealer, Abe Cohn, of The Emporium Company in Carson City, Nevada, got his start when his wife, Amy, persuaded him to devote a corner of his men’s clothing store to the basketry made by their Washoe laundress and housekeeper in her spare time. Louisa Keyser (also known by her Washoe name, Dat So Lat Lee) was eventually able to give up her housekeeping work and make baskets exclusively, often working at the store as a way to spark customer interest. Keyser is still regarded as the most outstanding of all Washoe basketry artists.

The Cohns were responsible for the introduction of an invented term to describe the “fancy baskets” made for the curio trade, *digikup* (dee-gee-cup). Though the *digikup* form (round with a narrow opening at the top) derives from the ceremonial baskets traditionally made by the Washoe, the term itself is in fact meaningless.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

The Washoe woman who made this basket, Scees (sometimes Sis or Ceese) Bryant Possock lived from 1858 to 1918. She was the sister-in-law of Louisa Keyser, and her work is similar in style and quality. The Cohn Emporium also sold Possock’s work.

Possock died in the influenza pandemic of 1918, and her son Hugh went to live with Louisa. Not much more is known about Possock’s life.

### HOW WAS IT MADE?

Amy Cohn, known for flowery but unsubstantiated interpretations, was certainly the author of the “explanation” of the significance of

this basket (which Cohn dubbed *The Ferns*) provided on a certificate issued by The Emporium at its sale: “A growing living plant or fern, symbolizing life, growing, maturing. As all good comes from the earth, it means the uplifting of life, the living of a good life.”

Possock certainly has created a pattern reminiscent of a fern, playing the natural dark colors of western red bud and bracken fern off the pale coils of white willow that make up the body of the basket. Much of the work of making a basket actually goes into the gathering and preparation of the materials. Possock would have gathered willow shoots in the spring, just after the buds formed. Red bud reeds of the deep red color used here would have been gathered in the winter—harvest at other times of the year yields orange or brown fibers. Once gathered, the materials had to be split and trimmed or wrapped to a uniform thickness. Reeds were often stored after gathering until there was time to make baskets, and soaked or boiled in water to make them pliable again.

Possock’s remarkable skill is apparent in this basket, both in the consistency of the materials she prepared and in the perfect control she had over the shape of the finished basket. The thin strands wrapping the coils that form the body of the basket are exceptionally fine and regular, averaging eight stitches per centimeter—a rate bested only by the baskets of Louisa Keyser.

## LESSON STARTERS

Scenes Bryant Possock’s basket beautifully illustrates symmetry and balance. Using all the images provided, find examples of symmetrical and asymmetrical designs and patterns. Ask students to document bilateral and radial symmetry and asymmetry in the school using cameras or by making sketches.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Fulkerson, Mary Lee and Kathleen Curtis,  
*Weavers Of Tradition And Beauty: Basketmakers  
Of The Great Basin*, University of Nevada Press, 1995.

The Washoe Nation  
<http://www.washoetribe.us/>

*The Language of Native American Baskets from the  
Weavers View*, National Museum of the American Indian  
<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/baskets/subpage.cfm?subpage=intro>

## NORTHWEST COAST

*Art of Abundance:  
Gifts from Nature and Community*



The Northwest Coast region, which stretches along the Pacific Ocean from the Alaskan Panhandle to northern California, is one of the world's richest natural environments. More than 500,000 Native people reside in this region of dense forests, majestic snow-capped mountains, and rocky ocean inlets punctuated with islands. While the cultures of this region have much in common, there is an astonishing diversity of dialects, some as unlike each other as English and Chinese. These language groups are represented by tribes such as the Haida, Tlingit, Chinook, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl), and Aqokúlo (Chimakum).

The rich coastal areas, rivers, and streams of the region provided the Native people of the Northwest with abundant fish, nuts, berries and other plants in the summer months. They were able to preserve and store enough food to last through the winter, freeing them to spend the dark winter months preparing for or taking part in elaborate ceremonial clan gatherings known as potlatch.

A potlatch was an occasion for the lavish bestowal of gifts upon guests by the family group hosting the gathering. By giving away his wealth in the form of blankets, carved cedar boxes, food and fish, canoes, decorated coppers, and even slaves, a family leader shared with the community, strengthened his leadership, and gained the respect of others. A potlatch might be prompted by a variety of occasions, including births, deaths, weddings, or the naming of a new chief, but the central purpose was to reinforce the social order. Generous gift-giving showed support for other tribes and upheld claims to rank and reputation. A potlatch could last for days, and featured ceremonial dances and theatrical performances reenacting stories of the clan's origins.

Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) artists produced many kinds of decorated objects for these potlatches, including doorposts and totems for the house, carved boxes and figures to be presented as gifts, eating utensils, and countless masks and costumes for the theatrical performances and sacred ceremonies. Adorned with images of animal symbols or crests representing each clan, these objects called attention to the ancestry and wealth of the family group.

Canada outlawed potlatches in 1884, followed by the United States in the late nineteenth century. Though potlatches became legal again in 1934 in the United States and 1951 in Canada, the interruption of a tradition of such importance caused great harm to Native cultural continuity. Modern potlatches still occur, although transformed. Gifts include traditional carvings and contemporary goods such as cash, jewelry, and appliances.



## FEATURED NORTHWEST COAST OBJECT FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)  
Northwest Coast region  
Mask, c. 1870  
Red-cedar wood and bark, pigment, leather straps, iron nails  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0523

### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Like their Northwest Coast neighbors, the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwalk-walk-ya-walk) or Kwakiutl people of British Columbia performed elaborate ceremonies reenacting stories of animal ancestry.

According to Kwakwaka'wakw creation stories, there was once a time when birds, fish, animals, and humans differed only in skin covering and had the ability to transform at will. All living beings were unified and animals could take on human form, just as humans could become animals, birds, fish, and mythical creatures. These ideas of transformation between animal, human, and spirit forms still guide Kwakwaka'wakw religious traditions.

### TRANSMITTING FAMILY HISTORY AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The ceremonial performances of the prestigious Hamatsa Society, one of four Kwakwaka'wakw spiritual societies, were

an important means for transmitting spiritual knowledge. They performed a complex four-day dance ceremony marking the initiation of new members.

This mask of a raven would have represented one of three bird attendants to the great bird monster said to capture a new Hamatsa member at the start of the ceremony. Gradually the young man becomes “tamed” and is reintegrated into society. This transformation, accompanied by the bird attendants, is reserved for senior members of the Hamatsa Society. The dancers would jerk their heads from left to right, rapidly pulling strings attached to the mask to open and shut the movable jaw with a loud snapping noise.

### HOW WAS IT MADE?

Western red cedar, so plentiful in the Northwest, forms the body of this mask. Easy to carve because it is a soft wood, it could be made still more malleable by steaming. Kwakwaka'wakw carvers favored cedar for its clear and even grain, visible here in the raven's eye.

Shredded cedar bark forms the tuft on top of the raven's head and a fringe that would have hung down the dancer's back, helping obscure his body. A segment of cedar thread allows the dancer to control the bottom half of the beak, snapping it open and shut for dramatic effect.

### MIA COLLECTION CONNECTIONS



Richard Hunt, born 1951  
Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)  
Northwest Coast region  
Transformation Mask, 1993  
Cedar, pigment, cloth, string, wood  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 93.42

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Richard Hunt is a contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw artist who comes from a family of internationally respected artists. He was born in 1951 in Alert Bay, British Columbia, but has lived most of his life in Victoria. Hunt began carving when he was 13 years old, receiving lessons from his father, who was taught by Richard's grandfather. Kwakwaka'wakw art forms have been

transmitted from generation to generation. This has occurred despite attempts by the Canadian government to assimilate the Northwest Coast peoples into the predominant white culture. A government ban of the potlatch ceremony existed from 1884 to 1951, but many artists, like Hunt's grandfather, continued to make traditional ceremonial items, keeping these art forms alive for future generations. Today Kwakwaka'wakw art is undergoing a great revival, and Richard Hunt is part of it.

In 1973, Hunt began work at the Royal British Columbia Museum, first as an apprentice carver under his father and then as chief carver, a position he held for twelve years. In 1986, he began a career as a free-lance artist, working in diverse media in both two and three dimensions. He is highly acclaimed for his wood sculpture, particularly traditional ceremonial items such as masks, rattles, and bowls. His work has been widely exhibited and is represented in collections around the world.

In addition to his accomplishments as an artist, Hunt is an experienced ritualist and dancer, performing at many potlatches, feasts, and public displays. In 1991 he became the first Native artist to be awarded the prestigious Order of British Columbia by the Canadian government. A pivotal figure in preserving the traditions of his people, Hunt lives up to his Native American name, Gwe-la-yo-gwe-la-gya-les, which means, "a man that travels around the world giving." Living both in the traditional and modern worlds, he enjoys golf in his leisure time, as well as competitive sports such as football, soccer and basketball.

#### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Raven, portrayed on this mask's exterior, is a central character in Northwest Coast traditional beliefs. In many stories, he is the creator of the physical world and the bringer of light. Raven has supernatural powers, and is also a trickster who can transform himself into anything at anytime, often playing mischievous tricks on others.

The mask opens to display an image of Sisuitl (See-shoe), a two-headed serpent often associated with the protection of warriors. Sisuitl is a strong, invincible character whose glance alone can kill. The serpent is believed to occasionally eat those who see him, which may explain why Sisuitl is often represented with a human head between two profile serpent heads, as it is here. Other human features are the upraised hands painted on the interior wings of the mask next to the serpent heads. Together the images on the mask refer to the transformations of human to raven, raven to human, human to Sisuitl, and Sisuitl to human.

Although Raven and Sisuitl are traditional Kwakwaka'wakw images, they also are personally significant to the artist, Richard Hunt. Raven is the special animal and main crest of his father's clan. Sisuitl is the special animal and main crest of his mother's clan.

This mask combines two- and three-dimensional techniques, using both relief carving and painted design. The distinctive Northwest Coast style of decoration is displayed here in the bold linear designs and forms. The painted images do not attempt to represent subjects as they appear in nature. Rather, they are stylized, using simplified geometric and organic forms and abstract design using two basic shapes—the ovoid and the U-form. In painting the designs, Hunt used traditional Kwakwaka'wakw colors of black, red-brown, and green, which are applied to emphasize important features such as eyes, nostrils, hands, and teeth.

#### HOW WAS IT MADE?

Richard Hunt used traditional Kwakwaka'wakw techniques. Woodcarving is a form of subtractive sculpture, in which the form is created by carving away wood from the log. Hunt used traditional hand tools such as an adze, chisel, and curved knife. When the carving was completed, holes were drilled along the sides of the hollow shell to insert pegs and strings used to maneuver the mask when it was worn. Hunt then painted the mask with acrylic paints. Before these commercial paints were available, Kwakwaka'wakw artists used natural earth pigments such as red ocher, charcoal, and blue-green clay. Hunt, however, like many contemporary artists, now prefers to use acrylic paints because they dry more quickly.



Bella Coola (Nuxalk)  
Northwest Coast region  
*Frontlet*, c. 1850  
Wood, pigments, abalone shell, copper, ermine pelts,  
cotton, plant fibers, wool, buttons, sea lion whiskers  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2008.61

The Bella Coola (Nuxalk) *Frontlet* is featured in the September 2010 Issue of *Teaching the Arts*, the MIA's e-newsletter for educators. <http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/objectinfocus.cfm?v=169>

## LESSON STARTERS

Choose an animal to represent your family. Take into consideration the animal's typical characteristics and behaviors in making your choice. Design a family crest that incorporates the animal you selected.

Potlatch is a Northwest Coast tradition of clans redistributing or sharing their resources with others. Design a class or school project to gather and redistribute surplus food, clothing, or other items within your community.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

U'mista Cultural Society, dedicated to the survival of Kwakwa'ka'wakw cultural traditions  
<http://www.umista.ca/>

Northwest Coast Teacher Resources from the Burke Museum of Natural History, University of Washington  
<http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/education/resources.php>

Potlatch, Peabody Museum, Harvard University  
<http://140.247.102.177/potlatch/page2.html>

# PLAINS, PRAIRIE AND PLATEAU REGION

*Art on the Move: Getting from Here to There*

The Plains, Prairie, and Plateau region is an area of more than one million square miles. It is defined by the Mississippi Valley to the east, the Rocky Mountains to the west, Manitoba and Saskatchewan to the north, and the Mexican border of Texas to the south. The Plains are vast grasslands with occasional hills and forested enclaves in the river valleys.

From the 1200s to 1600s, the Plains acted as a multinational network with most trade, hunting, and other travels conducted on foot. Life was semi-nomadic for some and more settled for others who lived in villages of earthen-covered lodges that dotted the riverbanks. Unique materials and supplies were traded throughout the vast region, initially among Native peoples and later also with European traders. Plains peoples farmed and hunted in and around their villages until Europeans displaced them from their ancestral lands beginning in the 1600s.

With this displacement and the introduction of horses by the Spanish, Plains peoples entered into a brief nomadic period that lasted from about 1750 to 1880. The buffalo hunt was of central importance during this time. The image of the Plains warrior mounted on horseback, wearing braids and a war bonnet comes from this period and has since been adopted as a stereotypical Native American image by Hollywood films, advertising, and other popular media. In the arts, the nomadic period led to a flourishing of richly decorated clothing and other everyday objects such as tipi bags, pipe bags, and baby cradles that could be easily transported from camp to camp along with the family tipi, horses, and other belongings.

By the 1870s on the Plains, the U.S. government had begun to forcibly confine Native Americans to reservations, internment camps, and boarding schools. The reservation period between 1880 and 1960 was marked by social and economic hardship for Plains and other Native peoples. Artistically, many forms and designs from the nomadic period continued and artists experimented with new materials, images, and ideas.



## FEATURED PLAINS, PRAIRIE, AND PLATEAU OBJECT FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Gaigwa (Kiowa)  
Plains region  
Cradle, c. 1880-1900  
Hide, glass beads, wood, German silver tacks, woolen cloth, cotton  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0077

### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

As in most cultures worldwide, a great deal of energy was spent nurturing and protecting children. Female relatives of an expectant mother created gifts like cradle covers decorated with porcupine quills or glass beads, to celebrate the arrival of a new family member.

Cradles like this Gaigwa (GAH-i-gwuh) example from 1880 to 1900 were a hands-free way of carrying infants. They ensured the child was close and safe while the mother went about her daily tasks. Cradleboards could be propped up against a tree or other hard surface or attached to a mother's back with straps. The straps could also be used to hang the cradle from a saddle horn or a tree branch, where their gentle movements might rock the baby to sleep.

Parents often hung brightly colored or reflective pendants of beadwork, seeds, and small metal objects above the child's head, much like mobiles are attached to babies' cribs and strollers today.

Cradleboards were used until a baby could walk. If the baby outgrew the original cradle, it could be enlarged. Beautifully decorated cradle covers could be removed from their rawhide forms and tucked away as an heirloom or brought out for a new baby. Today, cradleboards are not nearly as commonly used, although they are sometimes still made or handed down as special gifts to honor newborn children.

### WORD WISE

The term "papoose" is not a word used in Plains, Prairie and Plateau nations' languages. The Narragansett of New England used the word *papoos* to mean infant, as recorded by European settlers in the 1600s. The word became incorporated into English to mean a child of Native American parents. Over time, it has come to represent a stereotypical and static image of Native Americans. It is an inaccurate term that is offensive to some and should be avoided in teaching about Native American art and culture.

### ART ON THE MOVE: GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

During the nomadic period, Plains peoples adapted to their new, highly mobile lifestyle, for instance by enlarging tipis because horses could be used to transport them using travois poles. Portable cradles were another outgrowth of nomadic life. The beaded cover for this cradle was made as nomadic life was ending and the reservation period was beginning. While life changed again dramatically with confinement to reservations and government bans on many traditional activities, artists continued to make some of the objects of earlier times, often for sale or honor gifts, rather than local use.

### HOW WAS IT MADE?

Native artists of the Plains, Prairie, and Plateau historically decorated clothing and containers, embroidering them with porcupine quills or glass trade beads. Guilds of initiated women created sacred quillwork and beadwork designs on cradles and clothing. Membership in these guilds was limited and strictly regulated, indicating great expertise and conferring high status. Plains artists continue this tradition today and innovate with new designs, materials, and forms. The traditional roles of male and female artists are changing, and both women and men do beadwork today.

While the materials and construction may vary, cradleboards generally consist of a wooden frame to which is attached a basket or hide pouch to hold the infant. Gaigwa cradleboards can be identified by their V-shaped plank construction, narrower at the bottom than the top, with the hide pouch decorated with glass beads arranged in bold geometric designs.

Traditionally, Gaigwa and other Plains cradleboard covers were decorated with porcupine-quill embroidery, which likely originated in the Woodlands and gradually spread west to the Plains region. Quillwork is a laborious technique. Porcupine quills have to be harvested, soaked, dyed, and flattened before they are applied to the hide cover. Glass trade beads come in a wide range of colors and sizes, need no preparation, and are more easily sewn onto hide or fabric in a nearly endless variety of geometric and organic patterns.

The decoration of each cradleboard is unique and reflects an artist's personal aesthetic, but can also reveal a melding of families through marriage, and the influence of individual or regional styles. In some instances, the women of each side of the family provided half of the cradleboard beadwork to be sewn together as a fully beaded cover, symbolic of the blending of the families through offspring. Although the exact meaning, if any, of these patterns and motifs is unknown, the expression of individual identity through adornment is one of the most important functions of Native art.

Traditional fur or hide linings, some of which were removable, were gradually replaced with fabrics such as cotton, flour sacks, and velvets. In this example, woolen cloth was used as a liner. The edges of the hide bundle here have been finished with black and white cotton calico fabric. The leather lacings, which tightly secure the baby to the cradle, are often laced in a unique manner, making it possible to identify the artist by the lacing style.

## MIA COLLECTION CONNECTIONS



Dakota  
Plains region  
*Cradle Cover*, c. 1880  
Animal hide, quills, beads,  
ribbon, sequins, cloth  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts,  
2003.162.2

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The exchange of quilled and beaded objects was central to maintaining relations among neighboring groups. Through this exchange, artistic styles spread and mingled across the North American continent.

Contact with European traders and the loss of the great herds of buffalo modified traditional objects. Fabrics such as cotton, flour sacks, velvets, and woolen cloth gradually replaced the traditional fur and plain hide. Artists began to incorporate trade goods such as glass beads that make up the cradle cover's blue, black, and green beaded strip at its seams. By the nineteenth century, beads were fully integrated into the Plains cultures. Ribbons gradually replaced leather strings and lacings. The sequins found in this example are current interpretations; historic sequins were made of other materials, such as copper.

Traditionally only women did decorative quillwork. For many Plains peoples this work was considered of great importance, requiring technical skill and artistry. Today, both men and women do quillwork and pass their expertise from one generation to the next.

Cradle covers were usually made by the relatives of the child, and given to the mother to use when the baby arrived. The cradle could be worn on the mother's back or put on the side of a horse. A highly decorated cradle was especially prized because it symbolized pride and love for the child, and illustrated the skill of the artist. This porcupine-quilled cradle cover is an excellent example of Dakota work. It features elaborate floral designs and animals, including elk, buffalo, dragonflies, and butterflies. The artist who made this cradle was a skillful quill worker, illustrated by the graceful portrayal of the birds.

## HOW WAS IT MADE?

Before a quill worker could decorate a hide with her stitching, it first had to be softened by a process called tanning. A hide was rubbed with an oily mixture of fat and brain from the animal carcass. It was dried in the sun again, and stretched back to its original size. The surface was smoothed by rubbing it with a rough-edged stone, and the skin was made soft and pliable by running it back and forth through a loop of sinew attached to a pole. The softened hide was often smoked to make it waterproof.

Porcupine quills were used for the flowers, butterflies, birds and stars on the sides of this Dakota cradle cover. A quill is a stiff hollow tube up to three inches long, with a tiny barb at its end. A single porcupine can yield 30,000 to 40,000 quills. Quills are naturally white with brown tips, but can also be dyed a variety of colors. Originally, the dyes were made from natural sources, such as barks, roots, mosses, berries, nuts, and flower petals, but the introduction of commercial dyes during the late nineteenth century increased the variety and intensity of available colors.

Quillwork requires a needle and thread (traditionally a sinew was used) to attach the quills to hide, bark, or another sturdy backing. The quills are first soaked in warm water to soften them. The moist quills stiffen as they dry and must be worked quickly. An awl may be used to make holes in the hide or other backing material. The ends of the quill that poke through the back of the hide are folded in toward the center, much like a staple. The linear form of the quills lends itself to geometric or rectilinear patterns. Stencils may be used for repeated forms.



Ida (?) Claymore (date unknown)  
Probably Minneconjou Lakota  
Plains region  
*Suitcase*, 1880–1910  
Beads, hide, metal, oilcloth, thread  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2010.19

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Pictographs, pictures that serve as visual prompts for the retelling of a longer story, have long played an important role in the preservation of Native history. Usually the work of men, pictographs were drawn or painted on hide (and later paper) to record stories of battle, visionary experiences, hunting, and courting. In the Lakota tradition of maintaining “winter counts,” for example, a hide is painted with images based on a memorable event from each year to support the oral retelling of the tribe’s history. (See the MIA’s Lakota Winter Count; Teaching the Arts feature: <http://artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/objectinfocus.cfm?v=48>)

Plains women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century extended the tradition by creating their own beaded pictographs. The designs they beaded were usually geometric, the meanings of which have been lost. On rare occasion, they produced pictographs depicting domestic scenes and courting, as is the case in this beaded suitcase.

**ART ON THE MOVE: GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE**  
Bags were a common format for beadwork in the Plains tradition, especially during the highly nomadic period following the arrival of the Spanish in North America. Decorative items needed to be portable, and bags were essential for moving camp. This bag, a factory-produced hard-sided suitcase, updates the tradition into the reservation era. Very few beaded suitcases exist. All known examples were produced by Lakota artists from either Cheyenne River or Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota. The beaded signature is a bit difficult to read, but it suggests the artist’s name is Ida Claymore.

Claymore drew on Plains artistic conventions to decorate the suitcase. One side of the case presents a scene of courtship in two phases. The top half shows the suitor in blue, wearing a distinctive pipe bag, presenting a herd of horses (represented by rows of horse heads) to his prospective wife, who stands in a fine red robe beside a row of cooking kettles. The second part of the story appears in the bottom half, as a girl in blue leads a gift horse bearing the man’s pipe bag to the bride in her camp. The woman now stands beside a rack laden with her handiwork—quilled hides, pipe bags, and beaded blankets. We see the story of a union between an accomplished horseman and a highly skilled camp keeper and artisan.

The other side of the suitcase features two cowboys roping cattle. Claymore left no record of the connection she had in mind between the two sides of the suitcase, but it seems plausible that she was showing the first scene to illustrate the traditional ways alive in her memory, and the second to reflect the realities of contemporary life on the reservation.

## HOW WAS IT MADE?

There is a long tradition of Plains and Woodlands artists decorating bags, pouches, and other containers with porcupine quills, pigments, and glass beads. This beaded suitcase illustrates an update to this tradition; Ida Claymore applied beads to deer hide and then attached the hide to a commercially made leather and metal suitcase.

To create the design, glass beads are attached to buffalo or deer hide several at a time by a technique called the lane stitch. An illustration of the technique can be found here: <http://www.nativetech.org/glasbead/glaslane.html>

## WORDWISE

### **Cradleboard:**

A Native American baby carrier consisting of a frame made of natural materials and sometimes embellished with a beaded cover; construction and decoration varies from culture to culture.

**Sinew:**

A tendon. A tough band of fibrous connective tissue that usually connects muscle to bone and is capable of withstanding tension. Its durability makes it ideal as a thread for sewing and is a traditional material used by many Native American artists. Today, cotton thread is often used instead of sinew.

**LESSON STARTERS**

Discuss geometric and organic shapes. Using the images provided, compare and contrast the Gaigwa and Dakota cradle covers. How are they similar? Different? Where have the artists used geometric shapes? Organic?

From ancient times until the reservation period, Native Americans followed long trade and social networks, traveling great distances to hold ceremonies and to come to the marketplace. Research or explore the topography and climate of one or more of the six regions included in this curriculum. How do traditional modes of transportation used by the Native peoples of the region(s) respond to the environmental needs of the people? What sort of adaptations might you add to the traditional modes of transportation to suit the needs of today? Draw and/or construct a scale model of an updated version of these modes of transportation.

Using the images in this section or others of relevance from throughout these resources (e.g. Arctic figures with kayak and sled), discuss the modes of transportation used by Native Americans before and after contact with Europeans. How were these modes of transportation customized to suit the ways of life of the people who made and used them? Choose an environment (e.g. outer space, desert, city, or ocean) and design a dream vehicle that would operate in that environment. Include features that make it well suited to that environment's climate and way of life (real or imagined).

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

MAP: Nations of the Plains and Prairie.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/1357826/330/Distribution-of-North-American-Plains-Indians>

MAP: Nations of the Plateau.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/1357826/327/Distribution-of-North-American-Plateau-Indians>

Ahtone et.al, *Gifts of Pride and Love Kiowa and Comanche Cradles*, Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 2000.

*History of Beads and Trade Beads*, Illinois State Museum

[http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/anthro/beads/beads\\_trade.html](http://www.museum.state.il.us/ismdepts/anthro/beads/beads_trade.html)

South Dakota State Historical Society, Education Kits (downloadable pdfs) on a variety of topics including *Buffalo and the Plains Indians* and *Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota Life*  
<http://history.sd.gov/Museum/Education/edkits.aspx>

“Lakota Winter Count,” *Teaching the Arts*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/objectinfocus.cfm?v=48>

## SOUTHWEST REGION

### *Artistic Legacy: Tradition and Innovation*

“Greet your Mother Earth, when you pass us on the road of life. Then you give her food and cornmeal, and then in return, she gives you her flesh, the pieces of clay as her flesh, in order for you to reproduce something of use, a blessing.”

—Josephine Nahohai, A’Shiwi (Zuni), recounting a prayer that her aunt taught her for gathering clay, 1990s.

The Southwest cultural region incorporates the lower parts of Utah and Colorado, all of Arizona and New Mexico, and the northern deserts of Mexico. The land is a semi-arid mix of deserts, canyons, mesas, and mountains.

Today’s Pueblo (pw-EH-blow) potters descend from ancestors who, more than 2,000 years ago, invented ceramics and went on to create styles that still provide inspiration today. Their Ancient Puebloan (Anasazi [ah-nah-SAH-zee]) ancestors built high-rise homes adjacent to cliffs, which required long ladders to reach them. Pueblo, the Spanish word for town, is often used to describe this style of house and the people who live in them (Puebloan).

The Pueblo peoples have successfully maintained spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and artistic traditions over many generations. Today, about twenty five pueblos continue to thrive in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and Colorado, each with a distinct cultural heritage, language, and/or dialect.

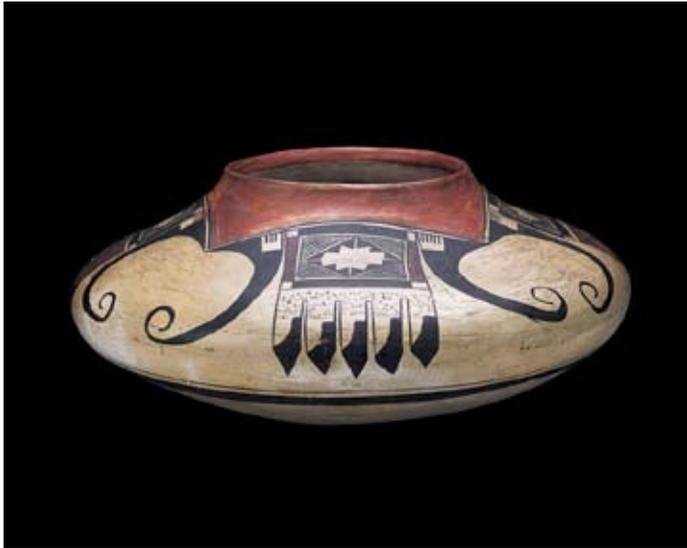
The Pueblo peoples’ strong ties to traditional culture are evident in their extensive, rich pottery traditions. The oldest Southwest pottery in the United States dates to 2500 B.C. Ancestral Puebloans made pottery for use in two primary ways: to be buried with the dead and for daily uses such as cooking and storing grains and water. When the Spanish settled in the Southwest beginning in the seventeenth century, church authorities prevented the Puebloans from burying their dead in the traditional fashion, instead insisting on Christian burial practices. As a result, Pueblo people were forced to concentrate on making utilitarian pottery, only creating a small number of ceremonial vessels in secret.

When the transcontinental railroad reached New Mexico in 1880, Pueblo potters again adapted their production and styles, this time to meet the demands of a new marketplace. Pottery and other traditional art forms were made for commercial sale in addition to local use. Ethnologists, zoologists, archeologists, and anthropologists who came to the Southwest to study its peoples came to believe the traditional way of life would become extinct with time. This belief further fueled the commoditization of Pueblo artwork. Ethnologists traveled to the Southwest to



document annual ceremonies and to collect objects for future study. Many pueblos became centers for study and cultural tourism. In some instances, scholars and artists collaborated. For example, potters at Hano and San Ildefonso Pueblos took inspiration for their own work from the fragments of ancient pots uncovered and documented by outside scholars.

## FEATURED SOUTHWEST REGION OBJECTS FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Nampeyo (c. 1860–1942)  
Hopituh Shi-nu-mu (Hopi)-Tewa  
Hano, First Mesa  
Southwest region  
Jar, c. 1905  
Clay, pigment  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0810

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Two individual artists in particular, Nampeyo (nam-PAY-oh, meaning “snake that does not bite”) who lived at Hano Pueblo, Hopi First Mesa and is Tewa (TAY-wah) in her heritage (see WordWise below), and Maria Martinez of San Ildefonso (SAN ill-duh-FAHN-soh) Pueblo, were recognized within their own communities and lifetimes as the makers of the most exquisite and highest quality Pueblo pottery. As outsiders became increasingly interested in the Native Southwest, Nampeyo’s and Martinez’s status as individual artists grew in the commercial art world. Today their work, and that of many others who precede and follow them, is highly collectible.

Customarily, Pueblo potters are women, and the pottery techniques and traditions are passed from generation to generation. Nampeyo, who had learned from her own grandmother to patiently form and smooth her vessels, modeled her own techniques for her children and often collaborated with them. Her aesthetic and legacy live on

in the artwork of her daughter Fannie, granddaughter Elva, and great-granddaughter Dextra Nampeyo Quotskuyva (coat-SKWEE-va), all accomplished artists in their own right. Their work is in museums and collections all over the world and their techniques have been passed down to new generations of artists in the family.

## ARTISTIC LEGACY: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

A sense of freedom, flow and open space characterize the art of Nampeyo, who is also sometimes referred to as Iris Nampeyo, the English name she was given as an infant. She was especially interested in traditional pottery techniques, and with her husband, spent much time examining the ancient pottery found at the Sikyatki (sik-YAT-kee) site in Arizona. Inspired by the beauty of the objects and potsherd she saw, Nampeyo replicated the high-quality clays and pigments of Sikyatki, and developed new aesthetic touches inspired by Sikyakti designs. She is now credited for defining the Sikyatki revival movement.

As seen in this jar, an unconventional flare at the mouth, a stylistic bear paw (a favorite design of Nampeyo’s), abstracted feathers and birds, a polychromatic palette, fine-line and black patterns often characterize her vessels. Her experience manipulating clay and temper are evidenced by the strikingly broad middle of this jar, likely from her second period of vessels. With its sharply angled upper and lower walls, the entire jar appears unearthly and begs us to wonder if it also makes the characteristic “woody” sound that characterizes this region’s pottery.

Though Nampeyo’s intended meaning may not be entirely known, designs on this pot reflect certain culturally consistent visual themes. This particular vessel features Nampeyo’s eagle-tail design in her distinct scrolling black lines and abstracted images of eagle feathers. A red square, often described as representing the four corners of the world or the four sacred directions, delineates the mouth of the vessel.

## HOW WAS IT MADE?

Nampeyo followed in the footsteps of her grandmother in her commitment to the highly physical process of digging her own clays, and to the processing of them according to traditional methods. She learned from her grandmother how to choose the clay, and to pulverize it on a large rock. She then mixed the clay with water to soften it and worked out the small pebbles with her toes. She kneaded and pounded the clay with her hands upon a flat stone to remove any unwanted organic material. She rubbed two pieces of sandstone together to produce a fine sand temper, which was kneaded into the wet clay. Finally, she pounded the clay to remove air.

She created the jar by piecing together the bottom and the long coils that make up the body with her thumbs. As she added coils to the body she pressed and smoothed them to become one with

the coils below. With long strokes of a gourd or squash rind, she smoothed the inside and outside surfaces.

Occasionally, as in this jar, Nampeyo used a wool swab to apply a thin white slip to the vessel surface. This produced a rich and creamy white-colored surface, which she then burnished with a smooth wet stone.

Using traditional yucca brushes made from a chewed yucca leaf, Nampeyo painted the decorative elements on the surface of the vessel. Red, white, and dark browns are all mineral colors taken from the regional landscape. Black paint was derived from beeweed or mustard plant boiled to the right thickness and dried.

A kiln or oven was built to fire the pots. Nampeyo's outdoor kiln consisted of a bed of dried sheep dung that was lit within a circular ridge of sand. Rocks were placed on top of the dung to hold the vessels in place before being covered with potsherds (ceramic fragments). After the kiln self-extinguished, the vessels were gently removed from the kiln with a stick.

#### WORDWISE

“Nampeyo and her Hopi neighbors descended from Tewas living in New Mexico who had migrated [to Hopi First Mesa, Arizona] around 1702 at the request of Hopi elders, to protect the Hopis from marauding Utes. The initial refusal by the Hopis to receive them when they arrived produced a long-standing antagonism between the two. Even now, though generally called “Hopi,” her people remain “Hopi-Tewas...” (f.n. Barbara Kramer, *Nampeyo and Her Pottery*, University of Arizona Press, 1996.)



Sikyatki  
Southwest region  
Jar, c. 1450–1500  
Clay, pigment  
Fenimore Art museum, The Thaw Collection, T0770

#### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Sikyatki (1300–1625) ceramics feature a range of warm hues from pale cream to golden ocher to orange depending upon the clay's iron content and the organic material used to fire the kiln. The rich, honey colors in this jar are created from the combination of gray clay fired with sheep dung and soft coal. A white slip applied to this jar created the creamy white surface.

Geometric and organic forms in orange, brown, red, and yellow create the asymmetrical designs on the outside shoulder of the jar. The paired yellow and red parallel bars placed between the two black curled forms represent eagle tail feathers. The black curled designs represent eagle wings. The red geometric stepped form extending left from the tail suggests the eagle's head. This design is repeated four times around the shoulder of the jar. The yellow and red stepped designs may also represent rain clouds.

Since before 1900, the techniques and designs of ancient Sityatki pottery have influenced Nampeyo family potters.

#### HOW WAS IT MADE?

The Sikyatki potters followed a process of gathering and processing Clay and then forming and firing pots similar to that described above for Nampeyo.

For an illustrated description of Pueblo pottery techniques, visit: [http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/hopi\\_seedjar/made.html](http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/hopi_seedjar/made.html)

#### MIA COLLECTION CONNECTIONS



Elva Nampeyo (1926–1985)  
Hopituh Shi-nu-mu (Hopi)-Tewa  
Southwest region  
Vessel, 20th century  
Clay, pigment  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 96.73.2

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

When Elva Nampeyo was a child she would watch her grandmother (Iris) Nampeyo create her beautiful and exquisitely constructed pottery. When Elva was ready to create her own, her mother, Fannie, also a world-renowned potter, began to teach her. Elva came to model the traditional Hopi-Tewa aesthetic of red and black design work on creamy yellow bowls and jars.

Because Elva used traditional designs and techniques, her work resembles the work of her mother and grandmother in many ways. For this particular pot she employs her grandmother's migration design of fastidiously painted lines and rounded forms. Yet, in this vessel Elva demonstrates her own artistic skill and patience by painting the intricate design in full around the outside of the pot. Designs are customarily applied free-hand, and (Iris) Nampeyo herself rarely used this design in its complete form because of its complexity. This design creates the illusion of movement whether viewed from its side or the top.

Elva signed her pottery with her name as well as her family clan symbol of corn.

## HOW WAS IT MADE?

Elva learned about materials from her mother, Fannie, and her grandmother (Iris) Nampeyo, who worked materials according to the methods and techniques she had learned from her own grandmother. The technique and materials for her pottery are therefore, similar to those described above for Nampeyo's jar.



Dextra Quotskuyva  
Hopituh Shi-nu-mu (Hopi)-Tewa  
Southwest Region  
*Awatovi Birds*, 1990  
Ceramic, pigment  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 91.3

Nampeyo's -great-granddaughter Dextra Quotskuyva's *Awatovi Birds* vessel in the MIA's collection is featured in the online resource *World Ceramics*: [http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/hopi\\_seedjar/key\\_ideas.html](http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/hopi_seedjar/key_ideas.html)

## WORDWISE

Online glossary for ceramic methods: <http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/glossary/>

### **Kiln:**

A furnace or oven for baking, burning, or drying, especially pottery.

### **Polychrome:**

A painted or slipped surface of three or more colors.

### **Potsherd:**

A fragment of pottery.

### **Slip:**

A fine, liquid form of clay applied to the surface of a vessel prior to firing. Slip fills in pores and gives a uniform color.

### **Temper:**

Sand, crushed rock, or ground-up potsherds added to clay to reduce shrinkage and cracking during drying and firing.

### **Yucca:**

A desert plant species from the agave family, known for its tough, sword-shaped leaves.

## LESSON STARTERS

These four vessels represent an artistic legacy, a continuity of tradition and innovation. Using the images provided, compare and contrast two or more of the vessels. What do you see among them that is similar? What do you see that is different? What do you see that makes you say that? What seem to be the most consistent features (shape, colors, designs, etc.) among the vessels? Where do the Nampeyo family artists seem to have taken the greatest individual artistic liberties?

Interview family members about a tradition or special item(s) passed down in your own family. Share what you learned with others. How long has the tradition or item been in the family? How has it changed over time? What does it mean to you and your family?

Research the impacts the Santa Fe Railroad had on the art, culture, environment, and economy of Native peoples of the Southwest. Write or present about an impact you find compelling.

Create an artwork inspired by another artist's style, medium, and/or subject matter. Discuss with students the difference between copying a work of art and being inspired or influenced by another artist.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*World Ceramics*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.artsmia.org/world-ceramics/chooser.html>

Barbara Kramer, *Nampeyo and Her Pottery*,  
The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1996.

*Through the Eyes of the Pot: A Study of Southwest Pueblo  
Pottery and Culture.*

[http://www.holmes.anthropology.museum/southwestpottery/  
index.html](http://www.holmes.anthropology.museum/southwestpottery/index.html)

Teacher Resources from the Heard Museum of Fine Art, Phoenix

<http://www.heard.org/education/curriculummaterials.html>

## WOODLANDS REGION

*Art of Identity: Symbols of Status and Prestige*

### AN ABUNDANCE OF FORESTS AND WATERWAYS

The Woodlands cultural area stretches along the Atlantic seaboard, from the polar coast of Canada in the north to the tropical swamps of Florida in the south, and sprawls westward through the Great Lakes region to the Mississippi Valley. The great deciduous forests of eastern North America have long inspired the exceptional creations of the Woodlands people, both in the materials they provided and the imagery they suggested.

Centuries before Europeans arrived in North America, Native American cultures developed thriving societies, complete with traders, warriors, artists, athletes, and political and religious figures. Hunting, gathering, and fishing were major activities for those who inhabited the region as long as 15,000 years ago. The first towns and ceremonial centers developed sometime after 6000 B.C., and with them came the earliest known artistic creations. (For example, the birdstone from 2500 B.C. in the MIA's collection discussed below.)

Beginning in the sixteenth century, Woodlands peoples came into contact with European explorers, traders, and missionaries. European encroachment on Native lands and resources pressed Native peoples of the Woodlands north, south, and westward. The tremendous upheavals and migration caused by disease and warfare in this period loosened the ties of modern Woodlands people to their ancient predecessors.

Contact with Europeans also had an impact on artistic expression. Woodlands cultures incorporated highly valued and sought-after trade goods such as glass beads, silk ribbons, and cloth into traditional clothing and objects. (For example, the Wendat (Huron) moccasins from the Thaw Collection discussed below.)



## FEATURED WOODLANDS OBJECTS FROM THE THAW COLLECTION



Caddoan  
Mississippi Valley region  
*Gorget*, 1200–1350  
Busycon whelk shell  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0001

### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The ancient cultures of the Woodlands region, dating from A.D. 900 to 1500, are broadly referred to as Mississippian because their settlements arose in the valleys of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. While Mississippian peoples hunted and cultivated the fertile lands of the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast, the period is most distinctive for its large urban centers and elaborate burial mounds. For example, Cahokia, an ancient city near present-day St. Louis, was home to tens of thousands of people at its height.

Ancient Mississippian peoples maintained a complex political system and trade network. They traded raw materials, such as salts, shells, beads, fabrics, furs, and copper, as well as objects fashioned from those materials, across trade networks extending from the coasts through the eastern Woodlands region as far north and west as Minnesota and Lake Superior.

This gorget is similar to many items known to have been created near Spiro, Oklahoma. Ancient Spiro, the westernmost site of ancient Mississippian culture, flourished between 800 and 1450. Archaeologists have uncovered large earthen burial mounds, a ceremonial complex, and residential areas in the region. Spiro was part of a wide trade and ceremonial network that connected it to other Mississippian cultures as well as Mesoamerican cultures to the south. Indeed, the whelk shell (a kind of sea snail) used to create this gorget must have come hundreds of miles inland from the Atlantic or Gulf coast. And it traveled further

even after being shaped into a decoration in Spiro—it was unearthed in a plowed field in Chickasha, Oklahoma, more than two hundred miles to the west of Spiro.

### ART OF IDENTITY: SYMBOLS OF STATUS AND PRESTIGE

The winged figure on this gorget is Birdman, one of the most common images in ancient Mississippian art. The fine detail on this well-preserved gorget shows him to be wearing a kilt and holding a raccoon pelt and a rattle, possibly references to a ritual of transformation between human and animal that scholars have identified on similar gorgets. Birdman is a symbolic supernatural being embodying the virtues of high-stakes competition, athleticism, and warfare. Today, the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) oral tradition includes the great leader and hero He-u-ka (Red-Horn), whom experts believe may have evolved from the ancient Mississippian Birdman. (f.n. Richard Dieterle [http://www.hotcakencyclopedia.com/ho.Redhorn.html#cite\\_note-o](http://www.hotcakencyclopedia.com/ho.Redhorn.html#cite_note-o))

The rattle and raccoon pelt held by the figure may also suggest something about the individual who once wore the gorget around his neck. Images of raccoons, bears, otters, and other local animals were commonly depicted in Mississippian art. The raccoon pelt may refer to the gorget owner's skill as a hunter and his status, as high-ranking individuals would have likely owned raccoon and other valued animal pelts. The raccoon pelt may have been a prized personal possession or a presentation gift for a leader or guest of high status. Its inclusion in this design may signal that the gorget itself was a diplomatic gift or token of reciprocity with other confederacies throughout the region.

### HOW WAS IT MADE?

The artist drilled holes in the shell in nine areas, possibly using a bow drill and stone bit, allowing the resulting negative space to define the main figure. Two other drilled holes create a way to string a lace through the top of the gorget, permitting the owner to hang it around the neck as ornamentation and protection for the throat.

The artist added details, like the pattern on the kilt and the texture of the wings, by incising them into the shell with a sharp tool. The surface appears to have been polished and may also have been rubbed with a pigment that has settled into its crevices.



Wendat (Huron)  
Woodlands region  
*Moccasins*, 1838–1853  
Black-dyed hide, moose hair, silk, cotton thread  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0038a-b

## HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The Wendat people, creators of this pair of moccasins, lived in southeastern Ontario in the flat terrain between the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Huron. When Europeans first entered Wendat territory in 1615, they described seeing villages of bark-covered longhouses surrounded by cornfields. Diseases introduced by the Europeans soon weakened the Wendat. Unable to trade for as many firearms as their long-standing enemies to the south, the Iroquois Confederacy, they were overrun by them between 1648 and 1650. They fled to the regions of central Ontario and Quebec where their descendents still live today.

In 1639, French nuns, members of the order of Ursuline devoted to the education of young girls, came to Canada to train Native American girls in the habits of Christian life. They settled in what is now Quebec, neighboring the Wendat nation. They mastered four Native languages in their efforts to convert the Native inhabitants to Catholicism. The arts were an important part of their teaching, and the materials and techniques of their European needlework traditions soon merged with traditional Wendat formats, like these moccasins produced in the mid-1800s.

## WORDWISE

The word “Ontario” comes from the Iroquoian word meaning “beautiful lake.” The Wendat (Huron) language is in the Iroquoian family of languages. The word “Toronto” is also based on an Iroquoian word, *tkaronto*, which means “where there are trees standing in the water,” a well-known landmark for Native people.

## ART OF IDENTITY: SYMBOLS OF STATUS AND PRESTIGE

Clothing is a statement of identity and prestige among most cultures. Native people across the continent commonly applied decoration to the fringes and seams of their garments, moccasins, bags and pouches. These moccasins, which may have been a gift to the wife of the British governor of Canada, were never actually used and so remain in unusually good condition.

The floral imagery favored by Wendat artists originated in the abundant plant life in their natural surroundings, and was characteristic of their graphic style long before contact with Europeans. Their patterns possibly took a somewhat more geometric form when they were working with less flexible traditional materials, such as porcupine quills, but the techniques of European embroidery, another floral tradition, were easily adapted to their traditional imagery.

## HOW WERE THEY MADE?

Moccasins, needed in the Woodlands environment more for warmth than protection from hazards on the soft forest floor, are typically soft-soled shoes constructed from a single layer of hide. The hide is gathered up around the sides of the foot and fastened to a u-shaped vamp covering the top of the foot. The vamp offered a flat surface for decoration, as did cuffs added along the sides of the feet. The hide used to create these particular moccasins appears to have been cut from one seamless piece.

Before a hide could be made into a moccasin, it had to be softened by a process called tanning. An unprocessed hide was rubbed with an oily mixture of fat and brain from the animal carcass. It was dried in the sun again, and stretched back to its original size. The surface was smoothed by rubbing it with a rough-edged stone, and the skin was made soft and pliable by running it back and forth through a loop of sinew attached to a pole. The softened hide was often smoked to make it waterproof. It could be colored with dyes, as this one was with a dye made from black walnuts. It was then dried and buffed with an abrasive material to create the smooth nap appearance common to nubuck or suede.

The decoration combines traditional and imported materials and techniques. Embroidered flowers cover both the vamp and the cuff of the shoes, stitched in red, yellow, blue, and green moose hair. Moose hair, stitched down in bundles in a manner similar to quilling, was also used to make the blue and white border. A vivid red ribbon—unavailable to artists before contact with the Europeans—trims the edge of the cuff. Traditionally, the vamp was sewn to the moccasin sole using sinew, but in this example, cotton thread was used. These stitches are carefully hidden so as not to distract from the unity of the overall design.

Many Native peoples customized their moccasins to fit an intended wearer. These moccasins, however, were symbolic trade items, likely never intended to be worn.

## WORDWISE

“Moccasin” is an English transcription of a Native word of Powhatan (Algonquin) origin. Of course, it is widely used today to describe Native American shoes made from hide and often decorated with patterned quillwork or beadwork. Captain John Smith lists “Mockasins: shoes” in his 1612 glossary of Native words at Jamestown. Each Native language, however, has its own word or words for shoes. Other Native words in Smith’s glossary and incorporated into the English language include raccoon and possum.

Canadian Museum of Civilization (list of Native words for moccasin and images of moccasins from the Plains, Prairie, and Plateau Region and the Woodlands Region)

<http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/aborig/mocasin/mocmaine.shtml>

NativeWeb (maps and diagrams showing regional variation of moccasin construction)

<http://www.nativetech.org/clothing/moccasin/moctext.html>

## MIA COLLECTION CONNECTIONS



Spiro  
Mississippi Valley region  
Pair of Gorgets, c. 1200–1350  
Shell  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 91.37.1

Like the gorget in the Thaw Collection discussed above, this pair of gorgets in the MIA collection comes from the ancient urban center at Spiro, located in what is today Oklahoma.

Gorgets depicting various themes related to daily and spiritual life exist from ancient Mississippian cultures throughout the Woodlands

region. They were worn as ornamentation and to protect the throat. They were also a marker of influence and standing.

Each of these finely carved whelk-shell gorgets depicts celestial imagery. The gorget on the right emphasizes the sun, the chief divinity in ancient Mississippian spiritual belief. The sun is manifested in the earthly realm by fire. The hand-and-eye motif on the gorget on the left represents the constellation that marks the entrance to the Path of Souls in the night sky, the Milky Way.

Each gorget was considered to have significant supernatural power, power that was extended to the individual who wore it. Whether they indicated rank, membership in a special society, warrior status, or something else is uncertain, but the precious material and the fine quality of the carvings confirm their role as prestige objects.

## WORDWISE

“Gorget” is not what the Ancient Mississippian people who made and wore this pair would have called them—that term is lost to us today. Gorget is derived from the French *gorgete*. It is used today across many cultures to mean armor for the neck.



Mississippian  
Mississippi Valley region  
Birdstone, c. 2500 B.C.  
Slate  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2001.63

## ART OF IDENTITY: SYMBOLS OF POWER AND PRESTIGE

Polished bannerstones and birdstones like this one are found throughout the Woodlands region, from the eastern seaboard inland to the Midwest. Practically speaking, they were used as weights attached to atlatl (AHT-laht-l) or spear-throwers, to increase the velocity of the spear. (Atlatl comes from Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, and is used today to describe spear-throwers used in many ancient cultures throughout the Americas and Europe.)

However, the fine craftsmanship and clear aesthetic consideration for the material and how it is used in this birdstone suggest that it may have been a prestige item, perhaps a talisman for success in hunting.

#### HOW WAS IT MADE?

This birdstone appears to have been carved from slate, likely obtained from the northeastern area of the Great Lakes and Woodland region.

The artist likely used stone chisels to rough out the bird shape, and then smoothed its surfaces with fragments of an abrasive stone. Small holes at the bottom of the carving may have been created with a bow drill or other sharp implement made of bone or stone. These small holes would be used to attach the birdstone to the atlatl.

The abstracted seated bird form has been carved from a beautifully banded greenish-grey stone. The striations in the stone appear to define the bird's elegant form.



Stan Hill (1921–2003)  
Mohawk (Turtle Clan), Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)  
Woodlands region  
*Bear Hair Comb*, 1988  
Antler  
Fenimore Art Museum, The Thaw Collection, T0756

#### THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

This Thaw Collection *Bear Hair Comb* by contemporary Mohawk artist Stan Hill, the Great Basin and California Region *Fern Basket* by Scees Bryant Possock (Thaw Collection), and the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Inuit *Figures* (MIA Collection) are all examples of artists adapting to the erosion of traditional culture and lifestyle that followed the arrival of Europeans, by creating work to meet the needs of an emerging commercial marketplace for Native American art.

#### HISTORICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The revival of Native art traditions got its early momentum at the start of the twentieth century, propelled in part by a general interest in handcrafts accompanying the Arts and Crafts movement. (The basketry of the Great Basin people is one such example.) The revival continues today throughout Native cultures, and provides an avenue for Native people to reconnect with traditions.

#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Canadian carver Stan Hill is an example of that revival. Born in 1921, he grew up on the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, Canada. He considered himself a Mohawk (his mother's tribe, following matrilineal descent), but his father was Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) (Ho-den-o-sho-knee). He left the reservation as a young man to work with Bethlehem Steel. He later owned his own business, Consolidated Steel Erectors.

In 1971, Hill's life was shaken by the death of his twenty-one-year-old son in a car accident. On a trip to Alaska to ease his grief, he saw an eagle for the first time. The experience changed him. He soon lost interest in ironwork and at age 55, started to carve antler bones found in the woods by friends, doubtless influenced by his own father's hobby of carving wooden boxes and clocks.

Hill described the act of carving as a connection to the spirit world, home of his ancestors and dead son. As illustrated in this hair comb adorned with two bears, his carvings feature the animals, trees and female spirits that animate traditional Mohawk and Haudenosaunee stories. Hill died in 2003, with more than fifty awards to his name and carvings in museum collections in the United States and Canada.

#### HOW IT WAS MADE

Carved hair combs have a long history among Hill's ancestors, but he applied very contemporary techniques to shaping the material. The drills in his home workshop had foot pedals that allowed him to hold the piece with two hands for better control. A wide range of drill bits allowed him to achieve intricate detail.

## LESSON STARTERS

The featured Woodlands objects served as personal symbols of identity and prestige. They reflect things that were important to the individual and/or the culture. Design your own personal coat of arms or logo. Include symbols that represent the most important and unique aspects of your personal identity.

As a class, research the westward migration of the Anishinaabe peoples. When did the migration take place? What were the factors that led to this migration? Where do large groups of Anishinaabe people live today? What similarities or differences are there between the natural environments of the ancestral Anishinaabe lands in the Northeast and the current Upper Midwest Anishinaabe heartland today?

Visit [www.artsconnected.org](http://www.artsconnected.org) and use ArtFinder to search for Native American art in the MIA's collection that was made to be worn by men, women, and children. What kinds of objects did you find? What purposes were they made to serve? What types of personal adornment of clothing did you find? What local materials were used? What trade materials?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Ancient Mississippian Cultures

Spiro Mounds, Oklahoma

<http://www.okhistory.org/outreach/museums/spiromounds.html>

Cahokia Mounds, Illinois

<http://cahokiamounds.org/>

*Hero, Hawk and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2004

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/herohawk/home.html>

### Iroquois Law of Great Peace and U.S. Constitution

Curriculum for the comparative study of the Iroquois Confederacy's Great Law of Peace and the U.S. Constitution, Portland State University

<http://www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/>

### Kids' Site of Canadian Settlement

Library and Archives of Canada, designed for grades 4-6

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/settlement/kids/index-e.html>

### Anishinabe (Ojibwe) History and Language

Minnesota State University Mankato

<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/history/mncultures/anishinabe.html>

Treuer, Anton, *Ojibwe in Minnesota (People in Minnesota)*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010.

Treuer, Anton, *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales & Oral Histories*, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001.

### Art of Identity: Symbols of Status and Prestige

"You Are What You Wear," *Teaching the Arts*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/fivefacts.cfm?v=144>

"Asante Kente Cloth: Colors, Symbols and Status," *Teaching the Arts*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

<http://www.artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/objectinfofocus.cfm?v=69>